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## ‘Like a Rolling Stone’ Review: Rock ‘n’ Roll Confidential

The odyssey of Jann Wenner, co-founder, publisher and editor of Rolling Stone magazine, who rode the psychedelic wave of the rock era.



Jann Wenner in 1970. PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

By Edward Kosner

Sept. 21, 2022 6:13 pm ET

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Jann Wenner is a kind of Zelig of the incestuous realms of rock ‘n’ roll, pop culture, the radical youth politics that evolved into today’s progressivism, and the New Journalism.

Born in 1946, he had Dr. Benjamin Spock, the liberal icon, as his pediatrician. He first heard Elvis’s “Heartbreak Hotel” at 10 and Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock” soon after. He was at Sproul Hall when Joan Baez serenaded the mob of Berkeley student demonstrators in 1964. He tripped on acid while listening to the Beatles’ “Revolver” album. One of his girlfriends ran off with Ken Kesey and his drug-addled Merry Pranksters, and he once hitched a ride with Neal Cassady, aka Dean Moriarty of Kerouac’s “On the Road.” And, of course, he dodged the Vietnam War draft. This was all before he was 21, when he and his mentor, critic Ralph J. Gleason, founded Rolling Stone, the febrile chronicle of pop music and politics.

When he finally ascends to Magazine Heaven, Mr. Wenner will be eligible to join Harold Ross, Henry Luce, Clay Felker, Helen Gurley Brown and a few others at the high table reserved for editors who created or revitalized great and enduring American magazines like the New Yorker, Time, Life, New York and Cosmopolitan. The tempestuous Mr. Wenner might feel a bit out of his element at first, his crowd on Earth running to John Lennon, Mick Jagger, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, Bette Midler and John F. Kennedy Jr. rather than Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, Chiang Kai-shek and Elizabeth Taylor. But he belongs there.

Before moving on up, Mr. Wenner, now 76, has bequeathed us “Like a Rolling Stone,” a lavishly illustrated brick of a memoir full of rock-star and show-biz anecdotes and gonzo journalistic war stories. It’s his conceit—in every sense of the word—that his story and the saga of his magazine could be “a great read” and “a historically authentic way of telling the story of my generation, our times, and my own mission.” Remarkably, in a way, he’s right.

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Like a Rolling Stone: A Memoir

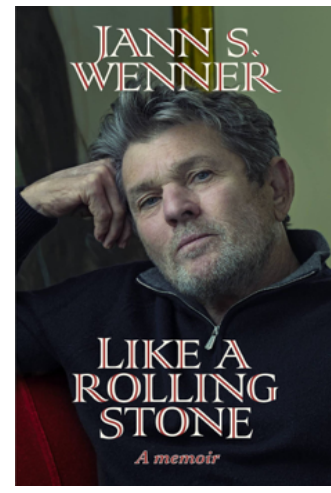
By Jann S. Wenner

Little, Brown and Company

560 pages

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At 556 pages, “Like a Rolling Stone” is something of an immovable feast. Besides headlines like Jagger and Lennon, the author drops every conceivable name in or out of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame (which he helped establish) from Aerosmith to ZZ Top. There are plenty of movie stars, pols, writers and artists too: Truman Capote meet Andy Warhol, George McGovern meet Hunter S. Thompson.

For a paragon of the anti-Establishment, Mr. Wenner comes off as something of a limousine liberal with a taste for five-star hotel suites, cruising the Mediterranean on a hotel backer’s yacht, sleepovers at the Hearst Castle in San Simeon, holidays on St. Barts, racing his Ferrari and ferrying fellow celebs in one of his Gulfstream private jets. And he recounts his prodigious drug-taking—cocaine, speed, hash, LSD and more—with the care of a connoisseur.

None of this would seem preordained for a boy born in New York of smart but initially conventional parents who soon moved with him to the Bay Area, where they founded a baby-formula business. Young Jan (he added the second “n” for resonance) was rambunctious from the start. He was thrown out of a couple of private schools but survived boarding school because he was smart and, like many future editors, put out the school paper and ran the yearbook.

His tale of inventing Rolling Stone with Gleason and company is a hippie-era version of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney putting on a show—all instinct and improvisation driven by talent and desire. But the magazine, originally a scrappy San Francisco tabloid, quickly made its mark. It started to make money despite Hunter Thompson’s expense account, published landmark work by photographers like Richard Avedon and Annie Leibovitz, and broke big news like the inside account of Patty Hearst’s kidnapping, escape, and capture by the FBI. “Other than Watergate,” Mr. Wenner proclaims, “it was the scoop of the seventies.”

Rolling Stone, whose first issue was dated November 1967, eventually outgrew its Haight-Ashbury roots. Within 10 years editor Wenner moved the magazine to New York and began expanding his portfolio, publishing Outside, Us Weekly and Men’s Journal. He quickly assimilated—enjoying close lunches with Jacqueline Onassis (who liked to sit in the Siberian balcony at the Grill Room of the Four Seasons) and showing up at chic New York literary parties (including one I attended at which Norman Mailer slugged Gore Vidal).

At his side through much of this was his wife, Jane—they married in a synagogue in their early 20s—with whom he had three children. Mr. Wenner is straightforward about his sexuality: He recounts his flirtations with homosexuality in boarding school, and writes that he considered (but rejected) coming out to his dying father in 1988. His life changed in 1994 when he met a hot, handsome Calvin Klein designer named Matt Nye, broke up his family, and moved in with his new love. Nearly three decades later, they are still together and have three children of their own (although proud papa Jann is mum on how the kids were conceived).

The second half of “Like a Rolling Stone” has an elegiac quality as the author catalogs years of dressing-room visits, dinners, holidays and interviews with Mick, Bob, Paul, Bono and the rest, Michael Douglas and other movie-star pals, and every Democratic president or loser from McGovern to Obama. There’s a recitation of Rolling Stone triumphs from that Patty Hearst scoop through all those covers eulogizing Lennon, Michael Jackson, Jim Morrison and other dead rock idols. There are some of the disasters, too—the cover story on the Boston Marathon bomber that cost millions in cancelled advertising, and the misbegotten exposé of a gang rape at the University of Virginia that was concocted by the “victim.”

The book climaxes in 2017, five decades after the founding of Rolling Stone, with Mr. Wenner selling off the magazine and dissolving his media company. He then survives a horrendous run of medical calamities to emerge in his mid-70s mellow, very rich and hobbling on a cane. “I didn’t speak for [my generation],” he concludes with uncharacteristic modesty. “I spoke to it.”

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Mr. Kosner’s “It’s News to Me” is a considerably shorter memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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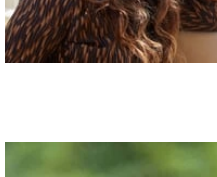
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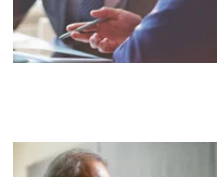
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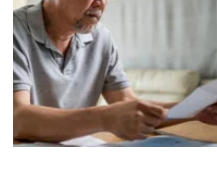
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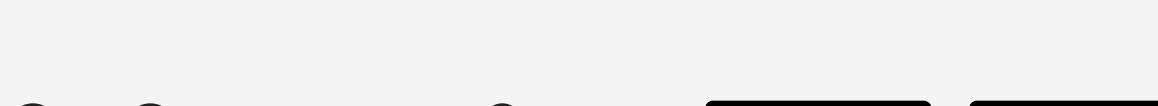
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