



Former Stone is still rocking

He may now be better known for his books on metal detecting and celebrity cricket matches, but ex-Rolling Stone Bill Wyman still has time to rock – appearing back on stage with the Stones' Ronnie Wood at the Albert Hall last week, and bringing his Rhythm King's to Norwich and Kings Lynn next week, as he tells **ROB GARRATT**.

BILL WYMAN IS IN A GOOD MOOD, and looking at his diary for recent weeks, I can't say I blame him.

On Sunday the retired Rolling Stone took to the stage of the Albert Hall, standing in for the Faces for their first full reunion since 1975.

Speaking to me during the midst of rehearsals for the headline charity gig Wyman, known for his dry, measured tones, is noticeably enthusiastic.

"I enjoy it," says Bill, now 73. "They're a fun band, they always were. They take everything in a very loose way, a bit of a laugh – more relaxed than the Stones. They don't have a huge career to hang on to like The Stones and it was just a good time fun band, and still is."

The role saw him stepping into the shoes of bassist Ronnie Lane, who died in a house fire in 1997, and playing on stage alongside guitarist Ronnie Wood, who the Stones notoriously "poached" from the Faces in the mid-seventies.

"Ronnie was a great friend of mine," says Bill. "It's nice to play with him again, and Kenney Jones."

"It's a bit difficult as a bass player because they all play different rhythms and different things, so it's hard to know who to follow. It's more difficult than the Stones or the Rhythm Kings."

The Rhythm Kings is Wyman's musical pet project, and his other reason to be happy – a frantic six-week, 32-date tour kicked off yesterday, just three days after taking to the Albert Hall's hallowed stage.

Formed in the aftermath of his departure from the Stones in 1992, the Rhythm Kings saw Wyman trading stadiums for theatres – and Jagger and Richards for a revolving door of top musicians.

The line-up reads like a who's who of music legends, with Georgie Fame, Albert Lee and Geraint Watkins signed up full time, while Procol Harum's Gary Brooker recently stepped down from his role on keys.

Meanwhile stars including Eric Clapton, Peter Frampton, Chris Rea, Mark Knopfler, George Harrison, Mike & The Mechanics' Paul Carrack and ex-Rolling Stone Mick Taylor have all appeared on stage or the band's LPs.

The project sees the ever-eclectic Wyman, who is based in neighbouring



SATISFACTION: Former Rolling Stone Bill Wyman says he has a great time playing with his current band the Rhythm Kings, who appear at King's Lynn Corn Exchange on Monday.

Suffolk's Gedding Hall, delving into the rich tapestry of his influences, playing a good-time mix of classic rock and roll, blues, soul and swing.

"It's amazing because it's like a little family, a football team," says Bill. "And if someone's got a gig somewhere else – because we've all got our own careers – we bring in a substitute to cover for them."

This tour sees sixties rock singer Gary US Bonds joining the Rhythm Kings for the first time, replacing soul singer Eddie Floyd, of Knock On Wood fame.

"We've brought Eddie over for two or three years and English audiences have seen him a few times. I thought it was time for something different," explains Bill.

The tour is promoting the band's new Best Of compilation, a set Bill was happy

to let the record company compile because "it's nice to have a fresh set of ears".

One of the reasons Wyman has quoted for quitting the "biggest band ever" was a gruelling practice schedule ahead of every mega-tour.

This 32-date Rhythm Kings tour will be polished in a few spare hours of rehearsal.

"We do it all in an afternoon," boasts Wyman. "It's a bit different to what I was used to in the Stones – a month to learn stuff we've been doing for 30 years."

The rehearsals will be drawn from a 200-tune songbook; taken from five studio albums, a couple of live albums and a series of official bootlegs Wyman has put out to foil those taping his shows and making a quick buck.

The bassist is equally disdainful

towards the illegal downloads that are forcing the record industry to suffer.

"It's awful," he laments. "It's alright for the established artists but for young bands starting up it's quite hard."

"It's a bit sad really, every young kid wants free downloads and musicians have to make a living."

Wyman was always the oldest of the Stones – now 73 to Mick's 66 – growing up a bricklayer's son in South London. He joined the band after a successful audition in late 1962, adopting the surname of a charismatic friend and ditching his birth name William George Perks.

He and drummer Charlie Watts formed the stoic rhythm section, as settled in their private lives as they were in the backbeats they laid down.

Today, Watts is still the Rolling Stone he sees most regularly, and his "closest friend in the band".

He added: "I don't see Keith [Richards] much because he's in America, and Mick [Jagger] is always socialising and travelling."

Wyman's settled life of today is a far cry from the sex-craving caricature that hit the headlines in 1993 when it emerged he was having a relationship with 13-year-old Mandy Smith, a girl he went on to marry at 18 – while his son pursued a relationship with her mother.

Typing "Bill Wyman" into Google still today brings up "bill wyman mandy smith" as one of the most popular suggested searches.

Meanwhile, his 1990 autobiography Stone Alone attracted outrage when he claimed carnal knowledge of more than 1,000 women in the decade that safe sex forgot.

But in recent years Wyman has developed the reputation of an elder statesman of rock n' roll, maintaining a public profile – but keeping it very well preened.

His wide and varied non-musical interests are frequently flaunted in the press – as a regular participant in charity cricket matches, an author of seven books and the restaurateur behind a chain of Stones-themed eateries.

He is also acknowledged as one of Britain's most celebrated metal detectors, and has designed and created a detector for children and newcomers.

As his website wryly notes, "Si Si, he's so much more than just a rock star" – a reference to his one-off early eighties hit (Si, Si) Je Suis Un Rock Star.

Looking back over his five decades in music, Wyman adds: "I am very proud of my 30, 31 years with the Stones – it wasn't a bad divorce, it was very amicable."

"I'm still very good mates with them, we send each other presents, its family – not business."

"I had great times with them, I have great times with the Rhythm Kings. I wouldn't do it otherwise – there's no money in it, it's not a career move."

"I don't want to be touring the world over, suitcases and aeroplanes, I've had enough of it."

"We play England and Europe and anywhere we can get to by road or rail, that's it. And it's enough."

■ Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings play Kings Lynn Corn Exchange on November 2, box office 01553 764864, and Norwich Theatre Royal on November 3, box office 01603 630000.