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psychiatry in music

Mother's Little Helper

Gary Woods

Penned by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, 'Mother's Little Helper' is the opening track on the UK version of the Rolling Stones' fourth studio album *Aftermath*, the first of the band's LPs to have been written in its entirety by the now iconic song writing partnership. Recorded in Los Angeles in late 1965, the song reached number 8 on the US Billboard Chart in July 1966 but was not released as a single in the UK.

The song addressed the sudden rise in popularity of the anxiolytic diazepam and the enthusiasm with which the medication was initially prescribed to the era's housewives.

First marketed as Valium in 1963, diazepam had followed chlordiazepoxide as the second benzodiazepine discovered by Dr Leo Sternbach of Hoffmann-La Roche. The benzodiazepines' relatively low propensity for respiratory depression and their resultant increased safety in overdose led to them rapidly superseding both meprobamate and the barbiturates in the treatment of anxiety and insomnia. Although their mechanism of action was not determined until 1977, benzodiazepines were quickly prescribed in prodigious quantities for a multitude of indications. Diazepam was the top-selling prescription medication in the USA between 1969 and 1982, its popularity eventually waning only when increasing evidence of benzodiazepine dependence emerged.

Despite the song's short duration (2 minutes 46 seconds), it deftly addresses the psychosocial stressors of marriage, motherhood and running a household, as well as exploring both benzodiazepine tolerance and overdose. It was not the group's first song with a psychiatric leaning, '19th Nervous Breakdown' having charted earlier in 1966. The Stones' founding member Brian Jones would later drown in July 1969, shortly after leaving the band following long-standing difficulties with alcohol and substance misuse.

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