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Rebel Yell

SIDELINED FOR A DECADE BY RECORD COMPANY POLITICS FOLLOWING THE BITTER DISINTEGRATION OF THE CLASH, JOE STRUMMER IS BACK WITH A TRIUMPHANT NEW ALBUM, *ROCK ART & THE X-RAY STYLE*. IN THIS EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW, HE RELIVES HIS GLORY DAYS AS PUNK'S DEFIANT REBEL WARRIOR AND EXPLAINS WHY GOING DOWN FIGHTING IS THE ONLY WAY TO GO. BY GAVIN MARTIN



Here he comes now, a small, stocky man in a black leather jacket, scuffed jeans and biker boots, stubby fingers gripping a plastic cup of red wine, surrounded by four tall Finnish blokes. It's high summer, 1999, and Joe Strummer—the old campaigner back on the trail—is making his way from the backstage area to meet the people at the Provinnsirock Festival in Seinäjoki, Finland.

Fronting his new band, the Mescaleros, Strummer's just played the last gig of a short European tour. The performance begins disastrously. Strummer and his "pesky Mesksys" have had little sleep since a tri-

umphant show at a festival in Sweden the previous evening, and the first three songs threaten to deteriorate into a morass of hoarse, bad-tempered vocals and malfunctioning equipment. Somehow, however, Joe and the band manage to rescue the concert from ignominy. "If I knew how we did it," he says afterward, "I'd remember and do it again next time I was in deep shit."

A combination of Clash-era classics (the brooding psychodrama of "Straight to Hell"; "I Fought the Law," the Sonny Curtis-composed, Bobby Fuller Four song that Strummer made his own; and the ever-

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astonishing "[White Man] In Hammersmith Palais"), and Mescaleros tunes from the recently recorded *Rock Art & The X-Ray Style* (the epic and punk single, "Yalla Yalla," plus the combustible "Techno D Day" and the celebratory "Diggin' the New") ensure the set eventually turns out to be a three-encore victory.

The set also maps a persuasive route through Strummer's history: outraged visions, withering anger, riotous good times and a musical agenda ranging from rockabilly to techno, dub power to salsa, punk to funk. The small but increasingly enthusiastic crowd encourage a characteristically impassioned performance from a showman with considerable experience producing musical goods under adverse conditions.

Now, as he walks through the crowd, Strummer's like some aged warrior, fresh from battle, out to greet his followers and ready to party long into the night. The four Finnish blokes gathered around him are proud to be foot soldiers in General Strummer's army, for they are none other than Control, the longest-standing (formed in 1979) and best Clash cover band in the world. Strummer feels it's the least he can do to buy them all a beer (several as it turns out).

It will be 5:30 a.m. before he beds down, rising a mere three hours later to lug his reggae-pumping soundbox onto the coach, catch the flight back to London and then onto his wife and kids at home in Somerset.

First, there is much ranting and raving, much putting the world to rights, much spliffing and drinking to be done. Control listen intently as Strummer's talk turns to the sorry state of current British rock music.

"Out talent pool is empty," he says angrily. "The modern British rock groups don't realize we're fucking dying in England and it ain't good enough. They think it's a big joke, it's all ha, ha, ha. They wouldn't have lasted a minute in the punk rock days, when the crowd were like, 'Give it to us and give it now, or we'll fuck you up.' This lot would die like flowers in a vase with no water in it.

"We need punk again. I'm not talking about music. I'm talking about attitude."

Attitude is something that Joe Strummer had long before he found himself at the epicenter of punk rock in the London summer of 1976. Then, as the Clash frontman, urged on by mentor/Svengali Bernie Rhoades, Strummer became the punk scene's loudest voice. Despite an ever-widening musical and ideological template that went far beyond punk's angry beginnings, into both Strummer's folky boho past and co-composer guitarist Mick Jones' dance future, the Clash were finally destroyed as a creative force by the all-too-familiar pitfalls—a ball-breaking record contract, drugs, internecine warfare and management bust-ups.

"Attitude," Joe will admit, looking back, "lost out to ego."

Control's barmy army want to know what happened to the rest of the Clash. The much-troubled, one-time heroin addict and convict, drummer Topper Headon, for example: where is he now, and has he given up drugs?

"He's back in Dover, lying low. Getting out of drugs is a very difficult thing to do. I wouldn't contemplate it for a second," explains Strummer, trying to laugh off something which clearly still upsets him.

Bassist Paul Simonon is painting, he tells them. "He's totally punk rock about his painting. He comes down to my house and paints for hours in the rain. I have to go out with a bottle of brandy to beg him to come in." Like Strummer, guitarist Mick Jones is making a new record.

But with the *On the Road with the Clash* live album (released this fall), Control want to know whether there are any plans afoot to reform the Clash. "No, never. Don't even say that," says an emphatic Strummer. "You have to move forward in life. Maybe in the bitterest financial gloom, it has been considered. But it's a dead subject now."

Twenty-three years ago, Joe Strummer emerged from pub-rock obscurity into the ferment created by the Sex Pistols and London's burgeoning punk scene. There, he was reborn as the apocalyptic ranter and angry idealist fronting the Clash. Over a six-year period, the

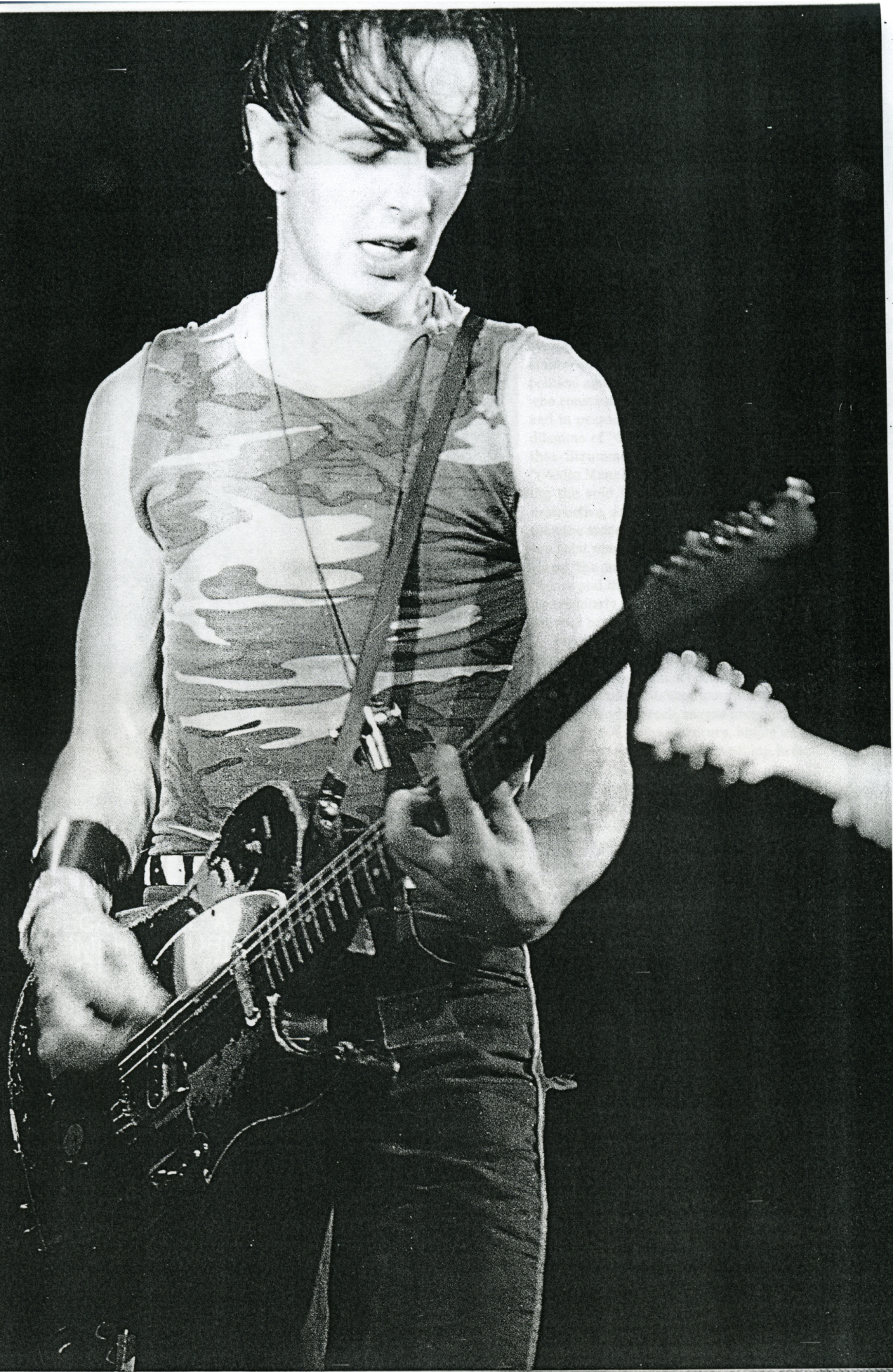
PREVIOUS SPREAD: (LEFT) PENNIE SMITH (TOP RIGHT) PENNIE SMITH (BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT) ELIANE BRYANT / LFI, KEVIN CUMMINGS / LFI, LARRY KAPLAN / STAR FILE, NEIL ZLOZOWSKI / THIS PAGE



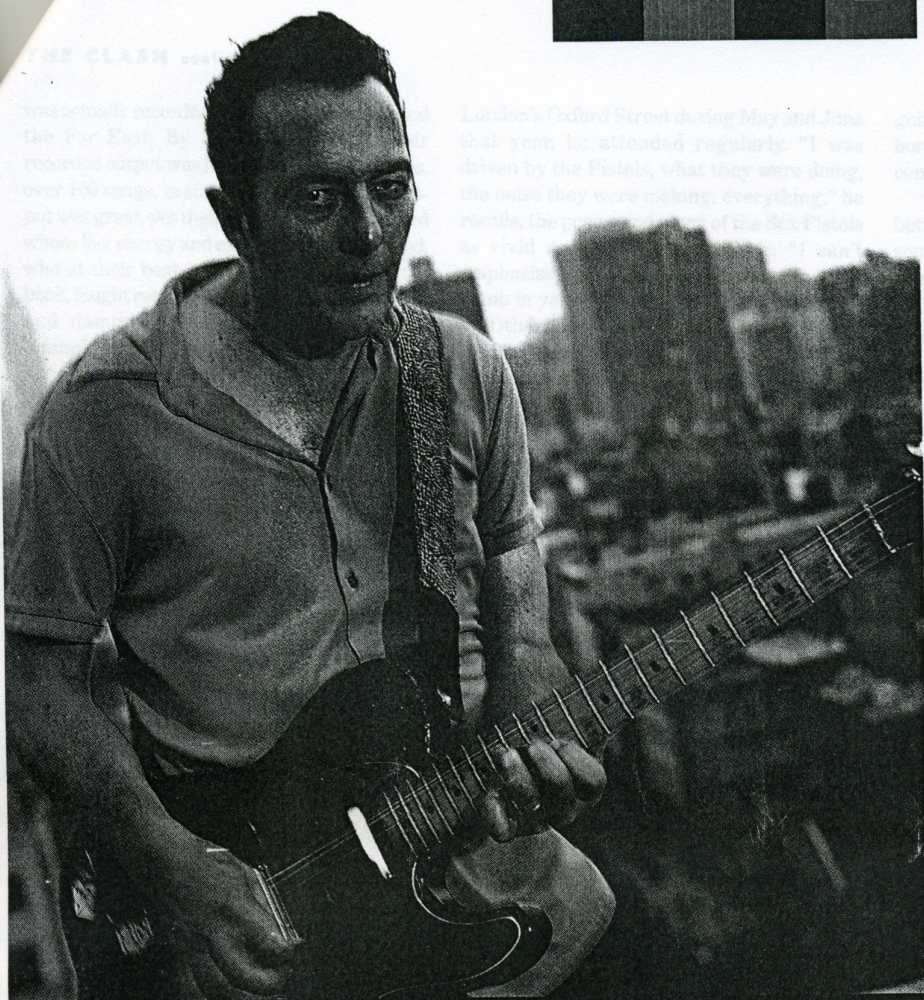
**"WE SIGNED
THE WORST DEAL IN HISTORY.
It was child abuse, man."
—JOE STRUMMER**

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...and Jones collaboration, 1987's *Clash* ...
...and Jones collaboration, 1987's *Clash* ...



Diggin The New

AFTER A DECADE AND A HALF OF OBSCURITY, JOE STRUMMER RETURNS TO THE LIGHT WITH THE COURAGEOUSLY CONTEMPORARY ART ROCK & THE X-RAY STYLE. BY TOM BEAUJOUR

"Hey man...you got any American cash?" The startling question, growled with a thick, threatening accent, comes from a grizzled man in black.

No, this isn't some seedy bar in Bosnia. In fact, it's the penthouse suite in a swank New York City hotel. It's Joe Strummer's suite, to be precise, and the former frontman of the mighty Clash seems to have been caught a bit short today.

"Yeah, I got cash, man," I reply as coolly as possible.

"All right, mate, we're off."

Not 30 seconds after meeting the legendary Strummer, he and I are zipping down to the street on a commando deli run. Joe needs nail clippers. "I haven't picked up a guitar in a few weeks and my nails have gotten too long," he explains. "I absolutely hate the way a guitar neck feels when my nails are long."

After securing the clippers and cementing our newfound friendship with shots of syrupy ginseng extract (courtesy of the same deli), we zoom back across the street to the hotel. During the brief walk—all of maybe seven seconds—Strummer has time to do a mock hunchback walk in front of a bunch of shocked super-model types, curse the fact that he doesn't have a tape recorder on hand to record a particularly strident police siren and ask me when I first got into punk rock. The guy moves fast.

Except, that is, when it comes to putting out records. The gravel-voiced singer's *Rock Art & The X-Ray Style* (Hellcat) is his first proper solo effort in 10 years and only his second album since the Clash dissolved in 1985. Aside from the occasional film soundtrack (*Walker, Permanent Record*), movie

cameo (Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*, Alex Cox's *Straight to Hell*) or producer's gig (the Pogues, Big Audio Dynamite), Strummer has stayed blissfully under the radar. "The Clash recorded 16 sides of full-length vinyl in five years," he points out. "It was so intense that, afterward, I really felt like shutting up for a while so that somebody else could have a go at it."

Limelight burnout was only partly to blame for Strummer's lack of solo output. Until 1996, the singer was embroiled in a bitter legal battle with Epic Records, the Sony subsidiary to which the Clash was under contract. "When the whole Clash thing blew over, I realized that I was enslaved for life to a giant corporation," Strummer says of his extended beef with Epic. "The legal situation that existed while I

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Clash blazed a trail that took them far beyond their beginnings as punk-rock storm troopers, onto a world stage, where their best music stood as a last stand against the totalitarian dream of the Reagan/Thatcher era.

Ironies, contradictions and controversy followed them every step of the way. But, like everything else flung in their path, the band embraced and thrived on them. They were political agitators who loved posing, pacifists who constantly confronted violence in music and in person, punk rebels haunted by the dilemma of "turning rebellion into money" that Strummer described mournfully on "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais." Filling the void left by the Sex Pistols' self-destructive, scorched-earth policy, the Clash took the scope and possibility of British rock to a point where they were marketed in America as "the only band that matters." Like the Stones and the Who before them, they were also regularly acclaimed as "the world's greatest rock band."

Bound by a chemistry that was volatile but complementary, potent yet doomed to a kamikaze ending, the Clash were a cultural melting pot that embraced gangster and paramilitary chic, trad rock, reggae prophecy, folk protest, nascent dance culture, hippie utopianisms, beat visions—almost anything, in fact, that came into their orbit.

Alone among the punk elite, they took enthusiastically to America and most things American—finding a spiritual home in the land of misfits and screw-ups, outlaws and frontiersmen. Their hunger, curiosity and rapacious death-or-glory ethos spurred them on. Through both their shortcomings (a clueless business sense, impossible change-the-world aims and broadsides) and their victories (transcendent live shows, records that defined their time as provocatively as had the Stones' and the Beatles' in a previous era), their influence is, even now, spread far and wide.

It's hardly surprising that, in America, where in 1990 *Rolling Stone* voted *London Calling* the album of the Eighties (though it was released here at the end of 1979), their influence should be most widespread. Public Enemy's Chuck D has said that his group's classic album, *It Takes a Nation of Millions*, was conceived as a cross between the Clash's ballistic fury and Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*. Rage Against the Machine, Green Day and Rancid have all taken elements of the Clash's original game plan and reaped commercial rewards that they were never able to attain (*London Calling* sold 300,000, whereas a Rage album can sell millions). "I've never figured that out," muses Strummer.

The Clash were constantly on the road, undertaking five extensive tours of the States, at least twice that number in Britain, with regular forays across Europe. The final Strummer-Jones collaboration, 1982's *Combat Rock*,

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was actually recorded on a tour of Australia and the Far East. By today's standards, their recorded output was huge—eight vinyl albums, over 100 songs, in six years. Not all of the output was great, yet their significance—as a band whose live energy and excitement never waned, who at their best rewrote the rock-song rule book, fought established industry expectations and damned the consequences—remains undiminished.

The Clash story officially starts on April 17, 1976, when the Sex Pistols opened up for Joe Strummer's pre-Clash band, the 101'ers. Strummer was transfixed. When the Pistols started a residency at the 100 Club in

London's Oxford Street during May and June that year, he attended regularly. "I was driven by the Pistols, what they were doing, the noise they were making, everything," he recalls, the power and glory of the Sex Pistols as vivid as ever in his memory. "I can't emphasize that enough. It was like an atom bomb in your mind."

Others, like budding entrepreneur Bernie Rhodes, were also impressed. Keen to emulate and expand on the growing success with the Sex Pistols, Rhodes tried his hand at managing a group named the Heartdrops, which consisted of songwriter and guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Terry Chimes. Unfortunately, the band was

going nowhere fast, and Simonon, growing bored with his part in the Heartdrops, was considering a return to art school.

Sensing the chemistry that might exist between his young charges and the more seasoned Strummer, Rhodes approached Joe at one of the Pistols' 100 Club gigs in June. The 101'ers' "Keys to Your Heart" had just been released by Chiswick, but Strummer knew the pub rock days were coming to an end. He agreed to meet Bernie's group at 22 Davis Road, the rehearsal and living space they had in London's Shepherd's Bush district.

"The day Joe came round to Davis Road, we were all terrified," Mick Jones later recalled. "He was already Joe Strummer, he was already somebody. It was a big deal getting Joe Strummer."

The 101'ers played their last gig at the Clare Halls on June 5. The next day, Strummer joined the Heartdrops, taking with him 101'ers sound mixer Mickey Foote—a friend since the Newport art-school days—who would subsequently produce the first Clash album (the Heartdrops were renamed by Paul Simonon shortly after Strummer joined).

Two months later, the Clash played their first-ever show, supporting the Sex Pistols at the Black Swan in Sheffield. On August 29, they supported the Pistols again at the Screen on the Green in Islington. It was the Clash's "official" London debut.

The focus of the band now became the songwriting partnership of Strummer and Jones. Before long, it was thriving on the sort of creative tension that had once existed between Lennon and McCartney of Jagger and Richards.

Six years later, Rhodes would help tear the partnership apart, yet Strummer remains eternally grateful that he ever got them together in the first place. "That man's some sort of genius," he says without a trace of venom. "Whatever else went on, he had foresight, a real knack for putting people together."

"It was obvious from the start that Jonesy was great at melody and totally useless on lyrics. So it dovetailed to me—not so bad on the lyrics, not so great on the melody. Mick sang me this song, 'I'm So Bored with You.' It was one of those girlfriend songs, and I said, 'Fuck that, man. Let's call it "I'm So Bored with the U.S.A." We were off.'"

By the time the Sex Pistols embarked on their Anarchy in the U.K. tour in November '76, with the Clash as one of the supporting bands, punk rock was well on its way to becoming a national outrage, causing a wave of fear and loathing from tabloids, politicians and town halls that would be impossible to imagine today.

"It was exciting for us," Strummer says. "Suddenly there was mad hacks from the tabloids motor-rallying their cars around the coach, racing people to the hotel. There were

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The "White Riot"/"1977" single was released in March, 1977 and was followed the next month by the band's eponymous debut album, which had been recorded over three weekends at the end of January and start of February at the CBS studio in Whitefield Street. "The same place where the Stooges recorded *Raw Power*," Strummer observes. "It was the shittiest room in London, but when I found out Iggy recorded there, I kissed the floor."

Rave-reviewing the album, music journalist Tony Parsons hailed it "the most exciting rock and roll in contemporary music...membrane-scorching tensions, a natural feel for dynamics...a mirror reflection of 1977 working-class experiences that only seem like a

cliché to those people who haven't had to live through them."

The album's themes, reiterated to the point of parody by the band's many imitators, have been cheapened over the years. But it remains a seething document of late-Seventies inner-city London life, suffused with the sense of dread at the time, with unemployment, social decay and race riots all looming on the troubled horizon. A few years later, Mick Jones said he was taking so much speed during the recording he couldn't remember making the album.

"The speed thing was over very quickly for me," says Strummer. "I got so pissed off afterward it wasn't worth it; too debilitating.

Some people had the metabolism where it wouldn't affect them. But I'd get comedowns where I wanted to put a hammer through my head. I suppose if Jonesy said that, it must be true, but even on the first album he did all the arranging put a hell of a lot of work into it. In some ways, that's the most difficult thing—arranging when you've only got three out of four elements. We didn't just go in there and blam it out; everything was played a thousand times in the rehearsal room until we had it right."

Even amid the album's spartan metallic thrash, the group pointed toward future diversity with a single interpretation of the Lee "Scratch" Perry/Junior Murvin classic, "Police and Thieves."

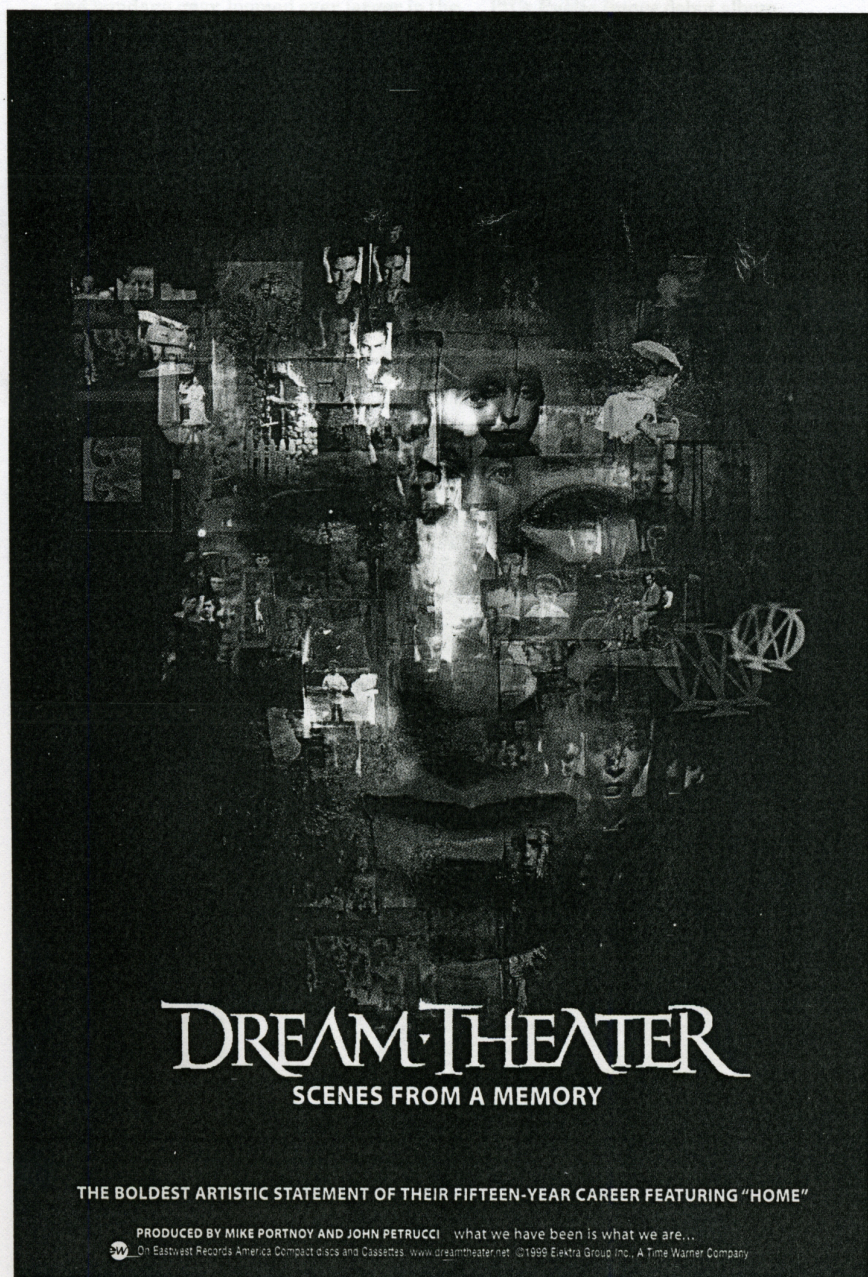
"The main thing in town was reggae," says Strummer of a period renowned for its punky-reggae parties. "If we went anywhere, that's what we played. It was a total obsession. There was this attitude that this stuff was too good to ruin. That was the ethos—'No one is going to ruin this stuff by covering it.' But 'Police and Thieves' was so rocking I just said, 'Come on, let's do it.' We worked it out real fast. But it must have taken big balls to do it at the time."

Drummer Terry Chimes had only played on *The Clash* sessions as a special favor—by that time he'd actually left the band. "He went to join a band called Jem," says Strummer. "He said the singer calls himself Jem Morrison, the guitarist is Jemmy Hendrix...I couldn't believe it. I thought he'd cracked. The whole concept just made my skin itch."

It was only after auditioning 206 drummers that they found a replacement in Nicky "Topper" Headon. Then aged 21, he was a wiry little bloke from Dover who practiced Tae Kwon Doe martial arts and had been drumming professionally since he was 15, mainly in Dover's soul clubs catering to U.S. crews. "He thought, This lot are mad, but I'll bash on here for a while and later join a proper band," says Strummer. "That's what he told me. Without him we weren't shit, but with him we were everything. Me and Topper used to drive that band through sheer dint of effort."

The Clash was the first installment of a 10-year, 10-album \$170,000 recording contract with CBS signed on January 21, 1977. At the time, it seemed like the group had hit the jackpot, Rhodes having trumped the Sex Pistols who only got \$70,000 from EMI for their first deal. With an album in the Top 10, Strummer was overjoyed. But in time the contract would become a mighty burden.

"We signed the worst deal in history," he says now, head buried in his hands. "I mean, 'Kill me, baby.' It took me until 1996 to get off that contract. We didn't even think about it at the time. Ten albums in 10 years? That's a year to work it, a year to sell it and a year to make it. That's 30 years. And they expect you



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THE CLASH

to make the same money for 30 years. It was child abuse, man. They killed us on that shit. They killed me on it. I'm here, but only by the skin of my teeth."

On May 9, 1977, the Clash headlined a seat-smashing, riotous show at London's Rainbow Theatre. "Absolutely epoch making. I went to bed obscure and woke up famous, a three-page spread in *The Evening Standard*," is how Strummer remembers it.

With arrests for minor infractions (graffiti, stolen hotel linen, drugs) and more punk concerts banned in the wake of the Pistols' single, "God Save the Queen," the image of the Clash as punk's great hope, warrior outlaws in custom-designed combat and bondage gear, loomed ever larger in the public's imagination.

Strummer's accent can change depending on how excited or angry he gets. When he recalls the trouble that surrounded the writing and recording of the Clash's second album, *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, in 1978, he slips into the familiar edgy Cockney patois. "The second album was a lash-up, no doubt about it," he says. "We shouldn't have made it. We were tired. When the record company said, 'Where's the second album?' we went, 'Whaaat?' Couldn't believe it.

"We wrote it in Jamaica, just me and Mick in a Trust House Forte hotel for two weeks.

We didn't know anybody there except Lee Perry, who we couldn't find anyway. So apart from 'Safe European Home'—which I'd put alongside anything the Clash or anyone else has recorded—Jamaica didn't really have any bearing on the record."

Released in November 1978, *Give 'Em Enough Rope* was an attempt by the Clash to transfer the first album's propagandist glee, guerilla tactics and latent humor to a wider international stage. It was essential that the Clash move on—any semblance of unity the punk movement had was now fractured. Musically, 1978 was the year of the angry iconoclast: Elvis Costello's tense, lacerating *This Year's Model* and ex-Sex Pistol John Lydon launching into a new angular direction with PIL's *Public Image* debut album.

The Clash were suddenly under a lot of competitive pressure—a lot was riding on the new album. But as journalist Nick Kent suggested in his review, *Give 'Em Enough Rope* highlighted as many Clash weaknesses as strengths. Although hailing the mighty "Safe European Home" as their finest moment, he derided the band's "totally facile concept of shock-politics."

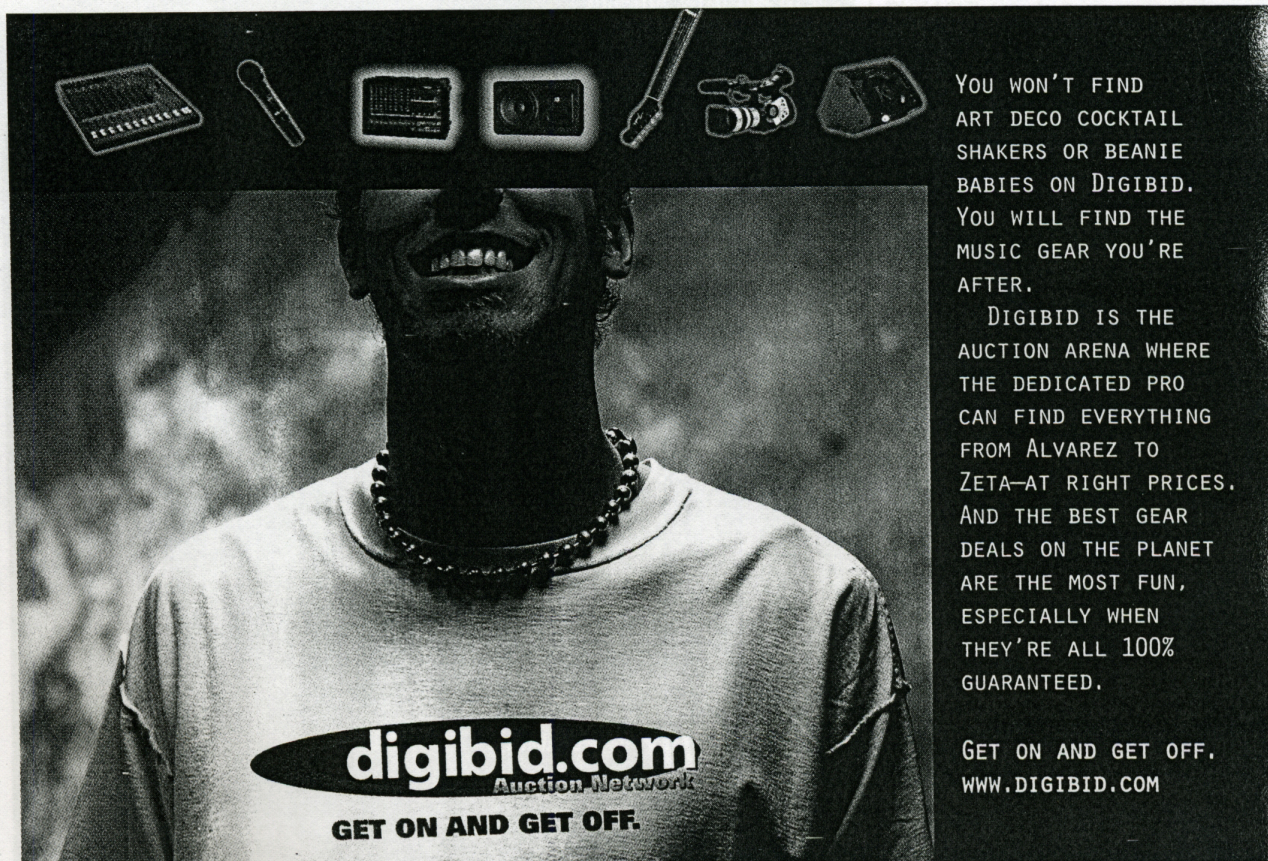
Certainly, the rabble-rousing, militaristic stormer, "Tommy Gun"—the first single taken from the album—was ripe for misinterpretation. Especially as the band, Strummer in particular, had taken to guerilla garb

in a big way. As for accusations of reveling in terrorist chic, it's a case of guilty as charged, your honor.

"Really," explains Joe, "I was saying, 'Us rockers are all posers and egomaniacs, but we know that you terrorists are just as bad, or worse than we are.' Terrorists are definitely egomaniacs, they definitely love to read their own press. I know they dedicate their life to a cause and what have you, but they're always posing for pictures. We were guilty of everything. Terrorist chic? Yeah, that was probably down to me. There wasn't any thinking, or any intellectual process to it. We just did it. People used to ask me, 'Why are you guys wearing combat trousers?' I couldn't think of anything to say except, 'Self-defense.'"

Shortly after the album was finished, Simonon and Jones persuaded Strummer that Bernie Rhodes should be replaced as manager. Various candidates—including journalist Chris Salewicz and photographer Pennie Smith—were suggested before the band settled on Caroline Coon. Formerly a leading light of the Sixties underground and one of the founders of Release, the pioneering drugs advisory service, she was, by 1978, a music journalist who had written extensively about punk for Britain's *Melody Maker*. She was also Paul Simonon's girlfriend. *Very Spinal Tap*.

"I was the only one who realized how lucky



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we were to have Bernie and tried to argue against it," Strummer says. "I was the only one who'd been struggling around, bashing my head on the wall since '71. It's a thankless task trying to keep a group going in those circumstances. So I realized that Bernies didn't grow on trees. But maybe Mick and Paul thought, Hey, anyone can do this."

"Caroline's achievement at Release was phenomenal, really amazing. But I think her ability was more organizational than inspirational or visionary. So it didn't translate too well into the weird world of rock."

There were open confrontations between Strummer and Coon when the band under-

took their first American tour in January 1979. There, as in his early days in Britain, Strummer had to fight to be heard, up against record company intransigence and a virtually nonexistent, pre-MTV promotional network.

"We were the idiots the English branch of CBS had signed, so the record company was completely indifferent. We were treated like lepers. I began to get the feeling that if someone from the record company did take any interest in us, they'd be sacked."

By the time *The Clash* was released in the U.S. in 1979, with a substantially different track listing, it had sold 100,000 copies, at that time the highest-selling U.S. import album ever. So there was undoubtedly an

American audience hungry for punk action. The Clash, for their part, were certainly hungry for America. They were emboldened by its music, cinematic imagery and the various minority cultures that had been marginalized by the Reagan era, with its repressive social and economic policies and belligerent Cold War mentality.

On that first American tour, they chose blues legend Bo Diddley and New Orleans veteran Lee Dorsey to support them—much to the horror of CBS. In San Francisco, Strummer met political radical Moe Armstrong, who told him about the Sandinista rebellion in Nicaragua.

"He was a member of a band called Daddy Longlegs who had made a big noise in London in 1969-'70, so I knew about him," Strummer recalls. "He'd become very left wing, and he gave us the info, which was quite hard to find, about the Sandinistas. It was the sort of thing they weren't interested in printing in the *Sunday Times*. A bunch of Marxist teenage hooded rebels oust one of your favorite dictators? The establishment didn't want to know about it."

Back in London, attention was focused on politics within the band. Strummer's problems with Coon had come to a head. Mick Jones had met Peter Jenner, one-time manager of Pink Floyd and a prime mover in London's late-Sixties underground. Jenner was now running Blackhill Enterprises, a company that managed Ian Dury and the Blockheads, among others. He was keen to work with the Clash. Strummer was suitably impressed.

"I admired and respected him for what he'd done in the Sixties. To me, the underground was still a reality, though I'd come onto the battlefield too late, when the wounded were still groaning. I thought they could give us the direction which we needed at that point."

Blackhill's immediate plan for the group was to go to ground for a work-intensive, five-month period. The resulting sessions at rehearsal rooms in Pimlico and then Wessex Recording Studios in Highbury bore abundant fruit. An EP, *The Cost of Living*, featuring the barnstorming "I Fought the Law" and a re-recording of "Capitol Radio," previously only available as a limited-edition collector's single, was released in May 1979 and reached No. 22 in the charts.

At the end of the year—on December 7—the mighty double-vinyl album, *London Calling*, would be released.

But first, and as soon as recording was finished, the Clash struck out on a second U.S. tour, which began at the Tribal Stomp Festival in Monterey, California, on September 8. There, luck shone on Strummer in a strange way.

"I came onstage so full of enthusiasm—I hit the first chord and staggered back with the sheer excitement of the whole thing and fell

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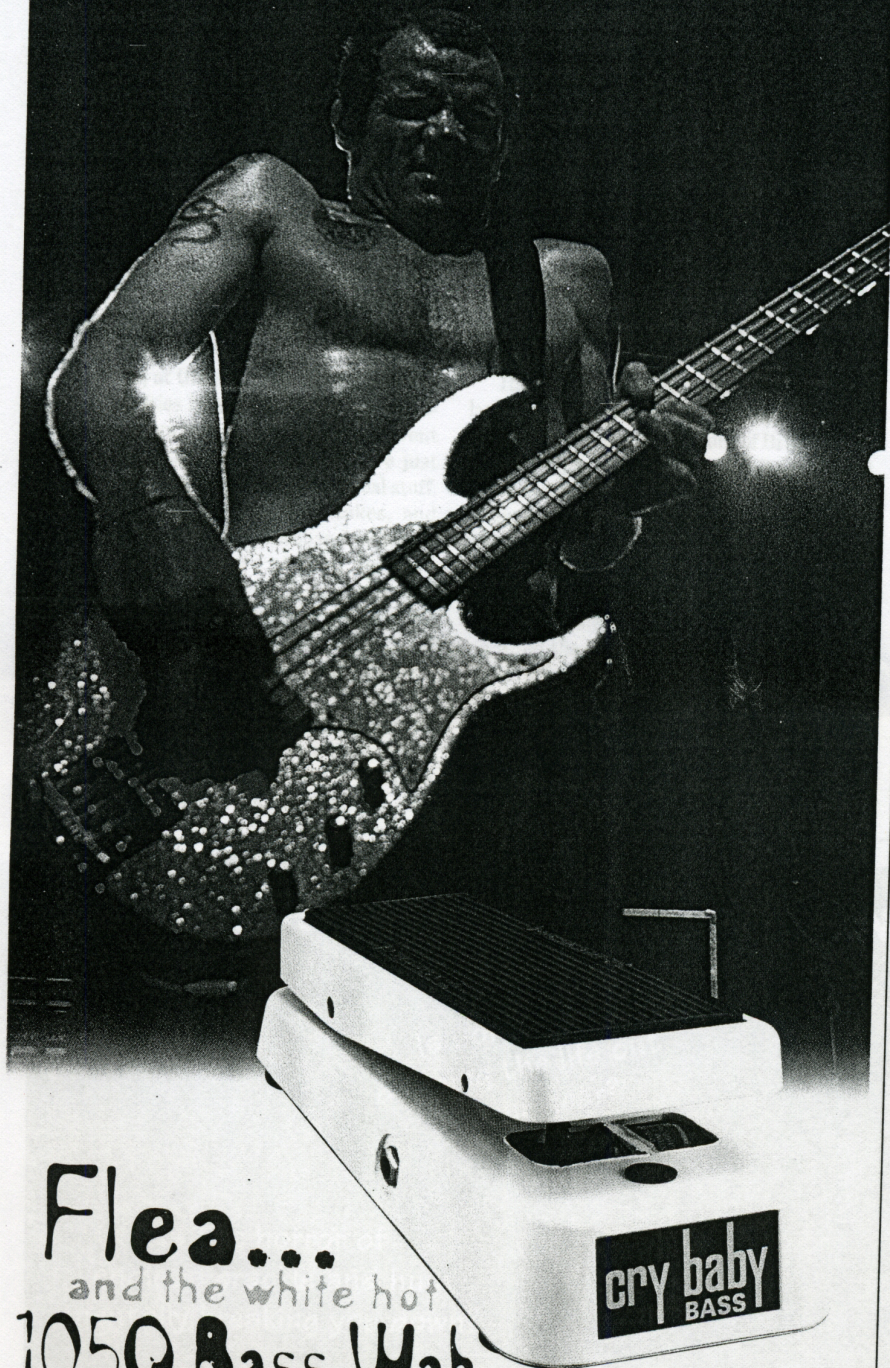
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THE CLASH

into the drum kit. Knocked it all over. As luck would have it, there was a very sharp photographer from the *Los Angeles Times* and he shot me in five frames—going, going, going, going, gone.

"They put it right across the front of the paper. If I hadn't fallen into the drums, would we have been in there? No! That's what so much of this business is about: being in the right place at the right time and getting the breaks."

Of course, there was more to it than that. A collective strength discovered in the *London Calling* sessions produced what Robert Christgau—"the dean of U.S. rock critics," as he is commonly known—hailed "the greatest double album since the Rolling Stones' *Exile on Main Street*."

Seeking out the ironies and contradictions in their own position on "Death or Glory," invoking the doomsday scenarios of the title track, acknowledging the emergent 2-Tone phenomenon on "Rudie Can't Fail," playing intoxicating gin joint blues on "Jimmy Jazz" or atomic rockabilly on "Brand New Cadillac"...*London Calling* was where the Clash came into their own as an expansive but alert, swaggering but focused rock band.

It was also the record that would help them stake a strong claim in America, the embryonic anger of their punk roots tempered by earnest, hard-won optimism and open mindedness. America was where Strummer's pre-punk hippie idealism and Jones' love of guitar heroics could develop fully. Over the next three years, they would become protectors of the very tradition that they had once set out to destroy. Hard graft and teamwork were the key. "*London Calling* is only as good as it is because of the five months' preparation that went into it. It's proof that hard work rocks. We lived at the rehearsal room in Pimlico. Every day, we'd play football, write and rehearse *London Calling*. And then we went to Wessex and knocked it down in the month of August. We were so well prepared, we could go in and blam the whole thing in one or two takes."

Nineteen-eighty was a year of constant touring and another management split from Blackhill. ("I don't know why, man," says Strummer. "They probably sent us a bill for their services.") With no one apart from former Blackhill employee, press agent and now full-time Clash fellow traveller Kosmo Vinyl to guide them, and with Paul Simonon looking after the accounts, the Clash roamed wild and free.

When they arrived in New York during a touring break in May, the band were able to indulge their deepest, some would say barmiest, musical excesses, gleefully slipping the leash after the taut discipline that had characterized the *London Calling* sessions.

"That tour of America, we were really stoking, 20 hot gigs in a row. Can you imagine it? Gigs can be sort of so-so, but these were all

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hot. Flaming hot. Twenty of them—bam, bam, bam, one after another. We hit New York, and we blasted straight into the studio. This is something that I must recommend to other groups. Normally after a tour, we used to go home and lie down for a few weeks. But we came off that tour full of go.

"We had nothing written. You don't write on tour, it takes all your concentration to make the gig—that's survival technique. Afterwards, you run around town to find interesting hipsters and go to all the interesting spots. You got to go to every hotspot until everything has closed down. The adrenaline is furious. You're wired as hell.

"Anyway, at the end of that tour we'd had 20 hits, 20 cities in a row. We didn't particularly know anywhere in New York, so we went into Electric Ladyland. Every day, we just showed up and wrote phantasmagorical stuff. Everything was done in first takes, and worked out 20 minutes beforehand. What we did was go to the core of what we were about—creating—and we did it on the fly and had three weeks of unadulterated joy. We were in New York and I never went out."

He's exhaling a joint now, thinking about what he just said.

"I never went out in New York! I can't believe it. Maybe once, to get a beer. But it was the most beautiful time ever. To be at 8th Street in New York, in Jimi Hendrix's studio,

everything on a roll.

"You know what New York was like then? You'd get up at 10 in the morning and you'd get in a cab to go to the studio. Rocketing downtown, the driver would stick his hand back with a grass joint. Cool as fuck! I was thinking, *This is New York*. We'd play until we couldn't stand up. And it was good. I stand by that album. I'm proud of all our records. Even the crap ones."

The album that resulted was the triple-vinyl opus *Sandinista*, named after the revolutionary Nicaraguan group Moe Armstrong told them about.

Its six sides were diverse to the point of collapse—gospel, swing, jigs, skanking reggae, kiddie chorus versions of "Guns of Brixton" and "Career Opportunities" and an experimental instrumental cut-up modeled on the Beatles' "Revolution No. 9" called "Mensforth Hill," a waltz, a calypso, even Strummer singing scat on Mose Allison's "Look Here." Punk's "no future" credo had been swapped for an all-governing "no rules" policy.

Amid the sprawling indulgence, however, there were some bright moments, notably "The Magnificent Seven"—a radical departure that was perhaps the first Brit-rock/rap crossover. Written by Jones after a record-buying trip to Brooklyn, the track pointed toward the direction his past-Clash career

would take with Big Audio Dynamite.

"Jonesy was always on the button when it came to new things," says Strummer now. "That stuff we made the week after he came back from Brooklyn with those Sugarhill records—it all still rocks. This was 1980. And I've got to say the next year, when we played Bonds in New York, the Brooklyn audience bottled Grandmaster Flash off our stage. Now they're all 'hip-hop wibbly wibbly wop, it don't stop,' with the funny handshakes and all that. But when we presented it to them then, they bottled it off."

The group's practical politics were never more evident than in their hard-won album-pricing policy. As with the double *London Calling*, the triple-LP *Sandinista* sold for the price of a single album—but only after CBS had demanded a commensurate cut in royalties.

"They said, 'If you want to put out *Sandinista* you have to do it for no royalties.' So we said, 'Okay, shove it up your bum, that's what we'll do. You think you're calling our bluff—we'll do it.

"Of course, they got even more angry when Bruce Springsteen went to them and said, 'How come those Limey tosspots are doing a triple album and I can't do a double?' and then went off and did *The River*."

But how much of *Sandinista* does Strummer think stands up to scrutiny now?

"All of it," he responds without hesitation,

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THE CLASH

adding, "Ask the skinheads in Perth. They take acid and listen to it all night, the whole way through."

In early 1981, Strummer persuaded the others to accept Bernie Rhodes back as manager. "We were drifting, and I saw my chance. We wanted some direction to the thing because *Sandinista* had been a sprawling six-sided...masterpiece. You got to get out there and fight like sharks—it's a piranha pool. And I wanted to reunite the old firm, like in *The Wild Bunch*. Get the old gang together and ride again. I knew we had something in us.

"We didn't know anything about anything. We were buffoons in the business world. Even

Mick wanted him back, because he's not stupid and he had to admire Rhodes' ability to make things happen and, even better, to get things over.

"Did we notice the difference? Immediately. It was all his idea to go into major cities with a big crew and stay there. We were always noticing that: going into a town and out again was kind of unsatisfactory. So it was Bernie's idea to go in there and do seven nights—New York, Sydney, Tokyo. And we did them. The shows were great, because you could hang out with people, get a feel for the place, and get the true idiots coming every night.

With Rhodes back in the driver's seat, internal divisions within the band grew.

Strummer concurs with lenswoman Pennie Smith's observation that the spats were like lovers' quarrels—they ended as soon as they began—but the signs of a real split were beginning to appear. In December 1981 Topper Headon was fined \$1000 after being busted for heroin possession at London's Heathrow Airport.

"Unless you accept treatment, you will be the best drummer in the graveyard," warned the sentencing magistrate. Topper's addiction signaled the beginning of the end for the Clash. It still pains Strummer to talk about how the drummer was sacked.

"Bernie said, 'He's a junkie, he has to go.' Ignorance ruled the day. We knew nothing about heroin."

In fact, it was during the 1982 sessions for *Combat Rock* at New York's Electric Ladyland, when Headon's addiction was becoming critical, that the drummer devised the brilliant "Rock the Casbah"—a song that Strummer dedicates to him every time the Mescaleros play it and which would provide the Clash with their one and only American Top 10 single, in November '82.

"I saw it with my own eyes—Topper Headon's great talent," says an awestruck Strummer, who had been unaware of the drummer's versatility up to that point. "I swear in 20 minutes he'd laid down the whole thing: bass, drums, piano. He laid them all himself. It took other people by surprise. Jonesy really wasn't into that tune when we released it as a single. We had to persuade him a bit. I think he thought it was a bit comedic.

"When you're concentrating on the latest masterpiece you've carefully put together and someone comes up with something so fast, it can be a little...disorientating," he goes on, the hint of a sneer creeping into his voice.

Jones' "latest masterpiece" for the Clash's fifth album was "Should I Stay or Should I Go," which would eventually top the British charts in 1991 after being revived for a Levi's advertisement. Years later, Paul Simonon would recall that, when the song was recorded, Jones and Strummer were barely on speaking terms. It's now read as a direct comment by the guitarist on his future in the band.

Did Joe hear it that way?

"No comment."

Didn't he tell you what it was about?

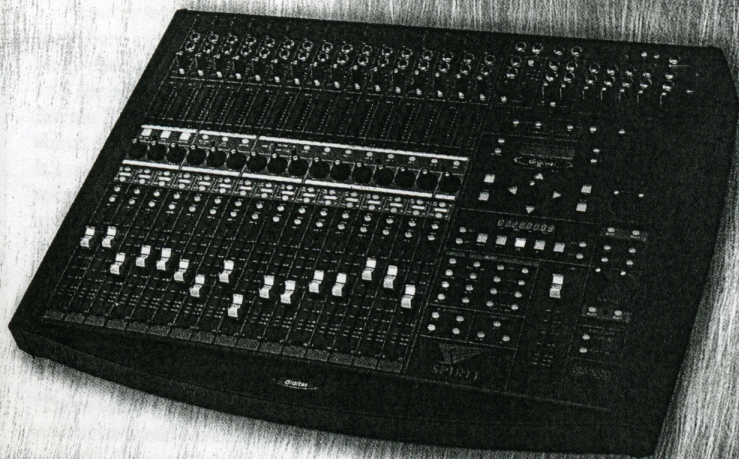
"You do understand what 'no comment' means, don't you?"

Despite the *Sandinista*-style failed experiments—the Allen Ginsberg guest spot on "Ghetto Defendant," the half-cocked rap of "Overpowered by Funk"—the best of *Combat Rock* showed the Clash reasserting their core values, under siege but fighting.

Far from being a fatuous exercise in gung-

continued on page 113

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no chic, "Straight to Hell" evoked a mood of fatalism and despair that ranged from dole queue Britain to Vietnam, evincing a rare blend of bruised anger and compassion for victims of war, oppression and organized human stupidity. Though Strummer's defiant "Know Your Rights" battle cry received scant airplay and failed to make the singles chart in April the following month as a British fleet sailed toward the Falklands, *Combat Rock* itself reached No. 2.

According to Strummer, making the album amid simmering tensions and the usual organizational chaos had been an often exhausting and dispiriting experience.

"We were so stupid," he says. "Things got jammed up again. The company needed another album, so we ended up recording on tour. At first, it was just us knocking it out at Electric Ladyland, trying to mix it, and it sucked. We toured Australia, and each night after the show in Sydney we'd go down and mix the album. But of course, that sucked as well. So we got back home and then we just brought Glyn Johns in. We had to beg him, really, because he didn't like producing stuff he hadn't recorded. He gave it a go and got it into a listenable shape. He saved it at the 11th hour, really. But otherwise no one knew what they were doing. They say record companies fashion shit, but in our case it was always a shambles waiting to happen."

On the eve of the Know Your Rights tour in April 1982, Strummer went missing. Before I've managed to finish the sentence, "Like a rat leaving a sinking ship," he's on the defensive.

"I never left the group!" he insists, setting the record straight—a mythical interlude in a story chock-full of apocryphal rumors—once and for all. "I fucked off to Paris because Bernie Rhodes told me to. He had forgotten about the fact that we had a huge walk-up. It's something I still have. A walk-up means people who don't buy tickets for your shows upfront. You mightn't sell a huge advance. But with a walk-up you'll sell out, piss easy. For me, it's a really honorable thing to have. It means you've got hipsters in the crowd who don't plan things in advance. That's the crowd you want."

"Bernie forgot about it," he continues. "There was a gig in Inverness that wasn't sold out, but we would have filled it easy. He panicked and said, 'Someone's got to break their arm or something, you'll have to disappear.' I felt like disappearing anyway. I was supposed to call him when I went away but I thought, This has got to look good. So I really did disappear."

On Strummer's return from Paris, Topper Headon was sacked from the band and old hand Terry Chimes brought back in. That's when Joe realized the Clash were as good as finished.

"I don't think, honest to God, we ever

played a good gig after that," is his honest assessment now of the Clash's final phase. "Except for one night in New Jersey, we played a good one, but I reckon that was just by the law of averages. Out of a 30-gig tour, one night is okay—you've got to say it's a fluke."

At the end of 1982, supporting the Who on their farewell stadium tour, Strummer saw the Clash's future. And it was dinosaur-shaped.

"We did eight gigs in super-stadiums, all the biggest joints—L.A. Coliseum, Oakland Coliseum, Shea Stadium. I realized that was where we were heading and it didn't look good. We just had to crash and die. I never said nothing to nobody about it, but I was in

deep shit with that in my mind."

Pennie Smith reckons the Clash fell apart in front of her eyes, as she shot the cover photo for *Combat Rock* on a deserted railway line in Thailand in March '82. But first with Chimes and then with Pete Howard on drums, Strummer, Jones and Simonon fought on through a strained American tour in 1983, playing their last show together at the three-day festival on May 28, 1983.

That September, a Clash press release was issued declaring that Mick Jones had "strayed from the original idea of the Clash" and had been duly sacked.

"It was all my fault. I let Bernie take over," admits Strummer, ever ready to play martyr

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THE CLASH

for the cause. "I think Bernie wanted to be Mick Jones. That threw us. We were musicians who never thought about being managers. So when the manager wanted to be a musician, we weren't prepared for it.

"Bernie wanted to arrange and produce and shape material. I suppose it must be boring selling stuff that he had no control over. It must be frustrating, like the coach of the football team standing on the sidelines, shouting, 'Pass it, you cunt!' They must want to run in and do it themselves.

"What we should have done after *Combat Rock* was take a year off. I don't know why nobody turned around and said, 'Look, you've just knocked out 16 sides of long-playing vinyl in five years, you got to take a rest.' Kurt Cobain could have done with that advice, too."

And yet, even with Jones gone, there was little time to rest. Strummer returned with a back-to-basics street-punk incarnation of the Clash in 1984. Waging war on pretty-boy pop, they went on a busking tour and announced that drugs were out.

"That was Bernie's new regime. It didn't last long. After two weeks, we were gagging for it."

Dramatic changes in Strummer's personal life—he became a father for the first time, his dad died suddenly and his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer—undoubtedly-

ly allowed Rhodes to gain increased control. A sense of desperation was fueling him as the band seemed to be imploding, defeated by forces they'd set out to conquer. He recalls writing "This Is England," the last great song to go under the Clash's name, on one string of a ukulele, "feeling like a no-good talentless fuck." He didn't even get to hear Rhodes' atrocious mix of the *Cut the Crap* album until it was released in November 1985.

By then, the Clash were nearly over. They were finally declared dead in December '85. Almost immediately, Strummer went to see Jones in the Bahamas, where he was working with the Talking Heads' Tina Weymouth. Over the course of a long weekend, they got burgled, witnessed a near-fatal car smash and ended up in a crack house looking to score weed. Strummer's apologies were accepted, and personal differences were patched up. But his old partner was doing fine with Big Audio Dynamite and didn't want to relive the good old bad old days.

Indeed, subsequent attempts to reform the Clash have always been initiated by Strummer, not Jones, to which he readily admits.

"Yeah," he says, "but I'm not that big on pride, you know? Mick had more occasions to be proud because of what had happened and the way it had ended. I had to eat humble pie. I deserved to." **GW**

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The Clash

The Clash Live—From Here to Eternity (Epic)

Joe Strummer & the Mescaleros

Rock Art & The X-Ray Style (Hellcat)

by Bill Crandall

"Every great band should be shot before they make their *Combat Rock*," declared post-punkers Too Much Joy in 1988. Although there are better ways than guns to solve such issues, the Clash's most commercially successful album was indeed among their least inspired. And things only descended from there, until a year after 1985's *Cut the Crap* (recorded without guitarist Mick Jones and drummer Topper Headon), when the Clash decided to heed the advice of that album's title.

But every great band also deserves a live album, and more than a decade after their dissolution, the Clash finally have theirs. Epic Records owes the band this, if only to erase the memory of this year's Clash tribute album, *Burning London*, which, in the hands of Third Eye Blind, No Doubt, Silverchair and Co., became an inadvertent roast.

The Clash Live—From Here to Eternity does the legend proud. Culled from eight live shows recorded between 1970 and 1982 at venues ranging from small clubs to Shea Stadium, the collection emphasizes the early songs. Organized chronologically—by song, not performance—*The Clash Live* opens with "Complete Control," which argues for the Clash as punk rock's most sophisticated outfit and Joe Strummer and Jones as its greatest songwriters. A dialogue between Jones' guitar wails and Strummer's gruff vocals, "Control" is as much power-pop as punk. The song's almost complete unraveling midway through only accentuates the blistering, call-and-response ending.

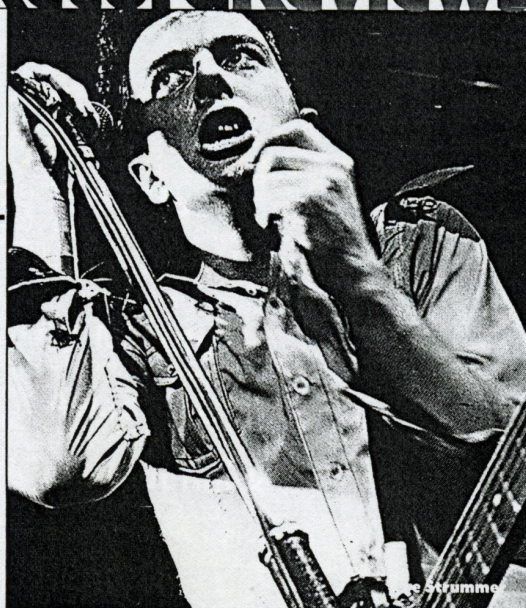
From there it's a rapid-fire tour of the first album's more drivin' numbers. "(White Man) In

Hammersmith Palais" then introduces the Clash's reggae/punk fusion, perhaps the band's greatest contribution to the rock pantheon. Recorded without Headon a mere year before Strummer and bassist Paul Simonon would fire Jones, "(White Man)" finds the Clash still a tight live outfit.

Later highlights include the dead-on "London Calling," the revved-up version of the Simonon-penned "Guns of Brixton" and the dancey staple "Magnificent Seven," where the Boston audience supplies the "what!?"s.

Unfortunately, the insipid "Should I Stay or Should I Go" and the self-indulgent "Straight to Hell," which at seven minutes seems like an eternity, foreshadow the demise to come. Luckily, the album cuts it there.

Clash frontman Joe Strummer has kept a low profile since the group's demise, sticking mostly to soundtrack work while second-generation punkers weaned on his music have made millions. While old punkers are not known for aging gracefully, Strummer seems hell-bent on dispelling that adage on *Rock Art & the X-Ray Style*, his game return to rock and roll form. Though the album wears the logo of Rancid singer Tim Armstrong's Hellcat Records, Strummer doesn't seem concerned with proving to young punks that the original Clash City rocker can still rock. In fact, the multi-culti, bongod-driven "Sandpaper Blues" and the acoustic tinklings of "Nitcomb" are more the stuff of W.O.M.A.D. than Warped.



Unfortunately, kinder and gentler doesn't always translate to more accomplished. Songs like "Road to Rock N' Roll" and "Yalla Yalla" offer some infectious Nineties dance beats, but nothing more.

Ultimately, the album's great shortcoming is Strummer's songwriting. "Tony Adams" is a virtual rewrite of the Willie Williams reggae tune "Armageddon Time," a song the Clash covered; the ballad "Willesden to Cricklewood" is pretty but bland; and the aforementioned "Sandpaper Blues" attempts to make the very same world-beat pop connection Peter Gabriel found more than a decade ago in his song "In Your Eyes."

The best of the bunch is the breezy, guitar-strummin' "X-Ray Style," but nothing here war-rants ejecting the Clash live album. •

EDITOR'S PICKS



Mike Stern Play

(Atlantic Jazz)
Jazz fusion giants John Scofield and Bill Frisell join fellow legend Mike Stern on his latest album for a historic six-string summit. Stern and Scofield explore their mutual fondness for blues, funk and bop, while the sonically adventurous Frisell invokes the angular lines, dissonant chordal voicings and pedal steel effects he is noted for. A telling portrait of three highly individualistic jazz guitar stylists stretching out with a sense of abandon.

—Bill Milkowski



Dream Theater

Scenes from a Memory (Eastwest)
After two morose, droopy records, Dream Theater deliver the high-falutin' prog-metal bombast their internet-obsessed fans have been cooing for since *Images and Words*. A 78-minute concept album about a murderous past life invading the dream world of a character named Nicholas, *Scenes* is rife with rapid-fire riffing from John Petrucci, a versatile player who, come ballad time, also embraces the fluid calm of David Gilmour. The result is an instructive but enjoyable feast for tinkers and thinkers alike.

—Martin Popoff



Pete Townshend Live: A Benefit for Maryville Academy

(Platinum)
Pete Townshend performs so rarely these days that each time out becomes a reason for reinvention. Recorded during an annual charity gig in Chicago, *Live* features left-field cover choices (Canned Heat's "On the Road Again" and Bob Dylan's "Girl from the North Country") and finds Townshend and his drummerless band fiddling about on favorites such as "Anyway Anyhow Anywhere" and "Won't Get Fooled Again." Bonus: he and Eddie Vedder yell at each other splendidly on "Magic Bus."

—Gary Graff



Various Artists Whole Lotta Blues: Songs of Led Zeppelin

(House of Blues)
This is the best of the House of Blues tribute album series. Veterans like Magic Slim, Robert Lockwood Jr. and Otis Rush take back the blues from Zep, but it's a trio of young guitarists who steal the show: Alvin Youngblood Hart remakes "Heartbreaker" into a funk-blues romp, while Derek Trucks and Eric Gales shred "Custard Pie." Gales also offers an acoustic version of the same song and a cliché-free "Trampled Under Foot," serving notice that this former phenom is back with a vengeance.

—Alan Paul



No Use for a Name More Betterness

(Fat Wreck Chords)
Filling that narrow gap between NOFX and Pennywise, No Use for a Name deliver their sixth slice of bouncy skate-punk set to 300 mph drumming, intended to beat listeners into a moshing frenzy. Though heavy on the big guitar hooks and sing-along vocals, *More Betterness* avoids the power-pop trap of sophomore angst. Instead, the band gets back to the roots of the California punk scene by firing off aggressive, melodic riffs and lyrics with actual content. It's 1983 all over again.

—Brian Stillman