

The birth of The Clash

An epiphany at a Sex Pistols gig led to the formation of the most enduring of punk bands. Here, in an extract from a new book, The Clash reveal how they started in a London squat

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The summer of 1976 was long and hot, the airwaves full of the sound of disco, prog rock and Abba. But in a few dark cellars and pubs in London a new sound and a new look was developing. The back room of a bondage clothing store in the Kings Road had spewed up the Sex Pistols, who played a handful of chaotic gigs before landing a Tuesday night residency at the 100 Club. On 4 June, a Pistols show in Manchester organised by the Buzzcocks and attended by less than 100 people inspired journalists to hail the dawn of a new age of punk. A month later, at a small pub in Sheffield, The Clash made their live debut as support act for the Pistols.

JOE [strummer]: We started the 101'ers with one amplifier and one speaker. I built my equipment from a drawer, out of a skip. We booked our own club, too, 'cos no one was gonna book us into a club or pub, so we found a room upstairs in a pub, rented it for a quid for the evening and that's how we learned to play. By doing it ourselves. That was the punk ethos.

PAUL [simonon]: The first time I saw the 101'ers was at this dump which had people running about with their dogs and giant hippies stomping around. There was one guy called Dave the Van or something who wore blue overalls, had a big beard and was jumping around completely sloshed while Joe was on stage. He'd be playing and there was a woman breastfeeding a baby and dogs running across the stage, but Joe was definitely the guy to watch.

JOE: In 1975 Kilburn and the High Roads were the top of the tree that we were on. Then Dr Feelgood came along and they were like a machine of intense proportions and we fell into that scene. One night Allan Jones [later editor of Melody Maker and Uncut magazines], whom we'd known in Newport, came to the Pig Dog Club to see us and wrote a couple of lines about us in the Melody Maker, saying the 101'ers could really rock. I cut it out and took it to some pubs in West London, and eventually in the Elgin the landlord went, "alright, a fiver. Monday." And that was when we broke out of our little scene. The Elgin became a hotspot, the landlord switched us to a Thursday night because we were doing good business, and it really began to take off. Unknown to me the Sex Pistols would come there every Thursday and check us out. I didn't realise how good we were.

MICK [jones]: When Paul came into our basement rehearsal room he looked so stunning that we said, "can you sing?" He tried it and it didn't work out but he made an impression on me and we became quite friendly. He said, "let's get a group together", one day while we were walking round Portobello Market.



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JOE: The first time I heard the word "punk" was in Time Out, a London magazine, where they wrote that Eddie and the Hot Rods were a second-generation punk band. I remember thinking, "what is this word?" Then the Pistols came through and it was clear what they meant.

MICK: We borrowed a bass guitar from Tony [James] and Paul painted the notes on it and then we (Paul and I) sat down to try and learn. He turned out to be a fantastic bass player. He had his own style, plus the look too, and was incredible. It was frustrating to begin with but he gradually built it up.

JOE: The 101'ers had been playing for two years or so when the Pistols burst onto the scene, and when I saw them I realised you couldn't compare the Pistols to any other group on the island, they were so far ahead. I mean, it can't be stressed enough, it was a quantum leap. As soon as I saw the Sex Pistols in the Nashville Rooms – they were supporting the 101'ers – and we had plenty of attitude, we were squatters and we didn't care a damn about anything or anybody but when this lot came in, I remember thinking, damn it, look at these guys. Sid Vicious was the last one in the queue as they came through the dressing room to do a soundcheck, and I thought, "I'm going to mess with one of these guys to see what they're made of", and he was wearing an Elvis Presley-like gold jacket so I said to him: "Oi". He went, "wot?", and I said, "where'd you get that jacket?". And I love Sid for this, 'cos the groups were like that in those days, facing each other out, like dog eat dog, and he could have said, "piss off turd", or something and he didn't. He said: "oh, it's really good, innit? I'll tell you where I got it, you know that stall..." I thought that was great, Sid didn't have to put on an attitude. Anyway, they played, there was hardly any audience, it was a Tuesday or something. And I knew we were finished, five seconds into their first song I knew we were like yesterday's papers, I mean, we were over.

PAUL: We saw the 101'ers at the Nashville with the Pistols. I knew Steve [Jones] and Glen [Matlock], though I'd never met John [Lydon]. He was fantastic on stage, really winding people up, blowing his nose, wearing a big, ripped red jumper and he just didn't give a toss. I thought they were great. I could really relate to them and didn't even notice the bad notes. When the 101'ers came on Joe was great and the rest of them were just sort of twiddling along.

MICK: We'd seen Joe with the 101'ers quite a few times and that he was out there playing was a big deal to us. We had this other singer, called Billy, from Wycombe, but it didn't work out and I can't remember why, but we were looking for a new singer. I think it was Bernie [Rhodes, The Clash's manager] who directed our thoughts to Joe. We'd seen him around, in the dole office and so on, and then we went to see the 101'ers with the Sex Pistols which ended up with the Pistols in a fight and that was the night we decided Joe was the best guy out there.

PAUL: We had a singer named Billy Watts who was a nice bloke but his look was a bit old-fashioned and we needed fresh input. I think it was Bernie who suggested we try to nick Joe from the 101'ers.

JOE: The first time I saw Mick and Paul we were all in Lisson Grove labour exchange. I was queuing to get dole, which was about £10.64, and they were obviously waiting to see someone in there. I could see them staring at me and I didn't realise they'd seen the 101'ers the previous weekend and were probably going, "look there's that bloke from the 101'ers." But I thought it was on, you know [a fight], so I ignored them, collected my dole and was expecting them to tangle with me on my way to the door or in the street, but they continued sitting there. They were eye-catching though, they already looked different to everyone else. But I thought there was going to be trouble so I was working out which one to punch first. I thought I'd punch Mick first because he looked thinner and Paul looked a bit tasty so I decided I'd smack Mick and leg it.

PAUL: I remember seeing Joe in the dole queue and I think he caught us looking at him and was a bit worried, like he might get done over. He looked, for a moment, quite timid and in terror. We were just going, "it's that bloke out of the 101'ers."

MICK: We decided to ask Joe if he wanted to join us, and were all in the squat when Bernie and Keith [Levene] went to see him play at the Golden Lion in Fulham. I think they gave him 48 hours to make his mind up but

Bernie couldn't wait and phoned him after a day and Joe said yeah.

JOE: After seeing the Pistols I thought the 101'ers might as well give up there and then. The other members couldn't see it and we were beginning to splinter. The guitarist stormed off after a gig not much later at the Golden Lion in Fulham, V C but that night Bernie Rhodes came to the dressing room with Keith Levene and went, "hey, come with me, I want you to meet some people." There was something about the way he and Keith looked I just said "OK" and we went to Shepherd's Bush, to a squat in Davis Road where there were these two guys waiting who I'd seen in the dole office not long before. There were amps in the room and we started to practise either then or the next day. Afterwards Bernie said, "why don't you think about joining this band?" I thought about it for about 24 hours and then rang him and said, "OK, I'm in." It was the look of them more than anything else, you could see the new world.

MICK: He came to see us at Davis Road and we were all nervously waiting and then we went straight into it. We went into the little room where we'd put eggboxes on the walls to soundproof it and began. He didn't want to do his tunes so much but he was into improving our songs. So we had a great lyric writer working with us and Bernie helping us to realise what we were about and what we should be writing about.

JOE: The day I joined The Clash was very much back to square one, year zero. Part of punk was that you had to shed all of what you knew before. We were almost Stalinist in the way that we insisted that you had to cast off all your friends, everything you'd ever known, and the way you'd played before, in a frenzied attempt to create something new, which was not easy at any time. It was very rigorous; we were insane, basically. It was completely and utterly insane.

JOE: When The Clash formed there was no real agenda, it was what everybody put in. There was only Mick and Paul, and Mick was teaching Paul how to play bass 'cos he'd only been playing for three weeks or something. Mick could already play really great guitar and I could hack it in there, but we didn't have a drummer. It was all new, all built from the ground up.

PAUL: When Joe came to see us at Davis Road we went into the little room to practise, and me and Mick started throwing our guitars about, jumping around, and I think Joe enjoyed it 'cos he didn't get that from his other band, where everything they did had to be perfect. With us it was just bash it out, and with me it was pot luck whether I hit E or G, which is why I painted the notes on the neck. Mick would say "G" and then I could just go to the G. Mick called it the Paul Simonon School of Music method.

JOE: Paul was practising bass to reggae songs and the first Ramones album, which was seminal. It can't be stressed how great the first Ramones album was to the scene because it gave anyone who couldn't play the idea that it was simple enough to be able to play. We all used to practise along with it. Paul and I spent hours, days, weeks playing along to the record. Anyone could see where the notes went and it gave everyone confidence. It was the first word of punk, a fantastic record.

JOE: Our equipment was pretty rudimentary, we only needed three amps and cabs; we didn't have a drummer to begin with. Bernie bought us a PA and three microphones. One of our mics came from the English National Opera. I had a job there cleaning the toilets just before joining The Clash. I noticed a microphone high above the stage on the top gantry, for the man up there to talk to the wings or spot operators. One day when there was no-one around I climbed up this ladder to the very top with a pair of wire-cutters in my overalls. I got hold of the mic, cut the wires, stuffed the mic down the front of my trousers and climbed all the way down again. I was kind of sweating with the excitement of it all and, as I walked through the back corridor, the manager of the Opera House walked towards me and I thought, "he's sure to notice this microphone down my trousers", but he just walked straight past me. We used that mic in the early days.

This is an extract from 'The Clash: Strummer, Jones, Simonon, Headon' by The Clash, published by Atlantic, price £30

The first gig: 4 July 1976, the Black Swan, Sheffield (with the Sex Pistols)

Joe: The line-up for the first gig was Terry Chimes on drums, Paul Simonon, Mick Jones, myself and Keith Levene, so we had a three-guitar set-up at that time.

Mick: I don't think we had been rehearsing that long before the first gig.

Joe: The first gig we ever played was at what we used to call the Mucky Duck (actually called the Black Swan) in Sheffield. We had a song we did called "Listen", which had a bassline that went up in a scale and then down a note to start, and Paul was so nervous that he just kept going up the scale, and we all fell over laughing 'cos we didn't know when to come in.

Paul: The day The Clash started really was when we played the Mucky Duck with the Pistols, which was great.

It was the first time that I had ever played on stage. The night before it felt frightening but once we were on the way there then I began larking about. I tied one of Keith's shoes to a piece of string and hung it out of the back of the van – the door had to be open anyway so we could breathe. So there we were sitting with all the amps and luggage with a plimsoll bouncing around behind us and all the cars behind us slowing down to avoid it. But the moment that we walked out on stage it was like I was in my own living room. I felt really comfortable. Things went wrong during the evening, and Mick had to come over and tune my guitar, but it didn't bother me. I just wanted to jump around, but Mick wanted it to be in tune.

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