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The Clash: Thinking Man's Yobs

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Sten-guns in Knights-bridge??

"IT AIN'T PUNK, IT AIN'T NEW WAVE, it's the next step and the logical progression for groups to move in. Call it what you want — all the terms stink. Just call it rock 'n' roll . . ."

You don't know what total commitment *is* until you've met Mick Jones of The Clash.

He's intense, emotional, manic-depressive and plays lead guitar with the kind of suicidal energy that some musicians lose and most musicians never have. His relationship with Joe Strummer and Paul Simenon is the love/hate intensity that you only get with family.

"My parents never . . . the people involved with The Clash *are my family . . .*"

THE CLASH and me are sitting around a British Rail table in one of those railway station cafes where the puce-coloured paint on the wall is peeling and lethargic non-white slave labour serves you tea that tastes like cat urine.

Joe Strummer is an ex-101er and the mutant offspring of Bruce Lee's legacy — a no-bullshit sense of tough that means he can talk about a thrashing he took a while back from some giant, psychotic Teddy Boy without the slightest prètension, self-pity or sense of martyrdom.

"I was too pissed to deal with it and he got me in the toilets for a while," Joe says.

"I had a knife with me and I shoulda stuck it in him, right? But when it came to it I remember vaguely thinking that it wasn't really worth it coz although he was battering me about the floor I was too drunk for it to hurt that much and if I stuck my knife in him I'd probably have to do a few years . . ."

When The Clash put paint-slashed slogans on their family-created urban battle fatigues such as "Hate And War" it's *not* a cute turnaround of a flowery spiel from ten years ago — it's a brutally honest comment on the environment they're living in.

They've had aggravation with everyone from Teds to students to Anglo-rednecks, all of them frightened pigs attacking what they can't understand. But this ain't the summer of love and The Clash would rather be kicked into hospital than flash a peace sign and turn the other cheek.

"We ain't ashamed to fight," Mick says.

"We should carry spray cans about with us," Paul Simenon suggests.

He's the spike-haired bass-player with considerable pulling power. Even my kid sister fancies him. He's from a South London ex-skinhead background; white stay-press Levi strides, highly polished DM boots, button-down Ben Sherman shirt, thin braces, eighth-of-an-inch cropped hair and over the football on a Saturday running with The Shed because for the first time in your life the society that produced you was terrified of you.

And it made you feel good . . .

Paul came out of that, getting into rock 'n' roll at the start of last year and one of the first bands he ever saw was The Sex Pistols. Pure late-Seventies rock, Paul Simenon. In Patti Smith's estimation he rates alongside Keef and Rimbaud. He knew exactly what he was doing when he named the band The Clash . . .

"THE HOSTILITIES," Mick Jones calls the violent reactions they often provoke.

"Or maybe those Lemon Squeezers," Paul says, seeking the perfect weapon for protection when trouble starts and you're outnumbered ten to one.

The rodent-like features of their shaven-headed ex-jailbird roadie known, among other things, as Rodent break into a cynical smirk.

"Don't get it on their drapes otherwise they get *really* mad," he quips.

He went along to see The Clash soon after his release from prison. At the time he was carrying a copy of "Mein Kampf" around with him. Prison can mess up your head.

Strummer, in his usual manner of abusive honesty, straightened him out. Rodent's been with them ever since and sleeps on the floor of their studio.

The Clash demand total dedication from everyone involved with the band, a sense of responsibility that must never be betrayed no matter what internal feuds, ego-clashes or personality crisis may go down. Anyone who doesn't have that attitude will not remain with The Clash for very long and that's the reason for the band's biggest problem — they ain't got a drummer.

The emotive Mick explodes at the mention of this yawning gap in the line-up and launches into a stream-of-consciousness expletive-deleted soliloquy with talk of drummers who bottled out of broken glass confrontations, drummers whose egos outweighed their creative talent, drummers who are going to get their legs broken.

"Forget it, it's in the past now," Joe tells him quietly, with just a few words cooling out Mick's anger and replacing it with something positive. "If any drummer thinks he can make it then we wanna know."

"We're going to the Pistols' gig tonight to find a new drummer!" Mick says excitedly. "But they gotta prove themselves," he adds passionately. "They gotta believe in what's happening. *And they gotta tell the truth . . .*"

THE BAND and Rodent have their passport photos taken in a booth on the station. Four black and white shots for twenty penee.

They pool their change and after one of them has had the necessary two pictures taken the next one dives in quickly to replace him before the white flash explodes.

When you're on twenty-five quid a week the stories of one quarter of a million dollars for the cocaine bill of a tax exile Rock Establishment band seem like a sick joke . . .

The Human Freight of the London Underground rush hour regard, The Clash with a culture-shock synthesis of hate, fear, and suspicion.

The Human Freight have escaped the offices and are pouring out to the suburbs until tomorrow. Stacked haunch to paunch in an atmosphere of stale sweat, bad breath and city air the only thing that jolts them out of their usual mood of apathetic surrender is the presence of The Clash.

Because something's happening here but The Human Freight don't know what it is . . .

"Everybody's doing just what they're told to / Nobody wants to go to jail / White Riot / I wanna Riot / White Riot / A Riot of me own! / Are you taking over or are you taking orders? / Are you going backwards or are you going forwards?"

"White Riot" and The Sound Of The Westway, the giant inner city flyover and the futuristic backdrop for this country's first major race riot since 1959.

Played with the speed of The Westway, a GBH treble that is as impossible to ignore as the police siren that opens the single or the alarm bell that closes it.

Rock'n'roll for the late Nineteen Seventies updating their various influences (Jones — the New York Dolls, MC5, Stooges, vintage Stones; Simenon — Pistols, Ramones, Heartbreakers; and Strummer, *totally* eclectic) and then adding something of their very own. The sense of flash of beach-fighting Mods speeding through three weekend nights non-stop coupled with an ability to write songs of contemporary urban imagery that are a perfect reflection of the life of any kid who came of age in the Seventies.

The former makes The Clash live raw-nerve electric, a level of excitement generated that can only be equalled by one other band — Johnny Thunders' Heartbreakers.

The latter makes The Clash, or maybe specifically Jones and Strummer (as Simenon has only recently started writing), the fulfilment of the original aim of the New Wave, Punk Rock, whatever; that is, to write songs about late Seventies British youth culture with the accuracy, honesty, perception and genuine anger that Elvis, Beatles or The Rolling Stones or any others in the Rock Establishment could never do now that they're closer to members of the Royal Family or face-lift lard-arse movie stars than they are to you or me . . .

BUT SO MANY bands coming through now are churning out cliched platitudes and political nursery rhymes. The Blank Generation is the antithesis of what The Clash are about . . .

Strummer and Jones disagree on the best environment for a new band to develop and keep growing.

Joe thinks it's all too easy right now and having to fight every inch of the way when the band was formed a year ago is the healthiest situation — whereas Mick believes in giving every help and encouragement possible while being totally honest with bands who are just not delivering the goods.

"I'm as honest as I can be," he shouts over the roar of the tube train. "All the new groups sound like drones and I ain't seen a good new group for six months. Their sound just ain't exciting, they need two years..."

The sound of The Clash has evolved, with their experience this year in the recording studio first with Polydor when they were dangling a contract, and more recently recording their first album after CBS snapped them up at the eleventh hour.

The change in the sound first struck me as a regulation of energy, exerting a razor-sharp adrenalin control over their primal amphetamined rush. It created a new air of tension added to the ever-present manic drive that has always existed in their music, The Sound Of The Westway . . .

And, of course, the subtle-yet-indefinite shift in emphasis is perfect for the feeling that's in the air in the United Kingdom, one quarter of 1977 already gone:

"In 1977 you're on the never-never / You think it can't go on forever / But the papers say it's better / I don't care / Coz I'm not all there / No Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones / In 1977."

"1977", the other side of the single, ends with the three-pronged attack shouting in harmonies derived from football terraces: "1984!"

The CLASH napalm Cheltenham.

THE PRESSURE. That's what they call the heavy atmosphere in Jamaica, the feeling in the air that very soon, something has got to change . . .

The Jamaican culture is highly-revered by The Clash. They hang out in black clubs, pick up reggae import singles in shops where it ain't really wise for them to tread and express their disgust at the undeniable fact that in the poor working-class areas of London where they grew up and still live the blacks are treated even worse than the whites.

But, ultimately, they know that White Youth needs its *own* sense of identity, culture and heritage if they're going to fight for change.

A riot of their own . . .

But can the masses take to the incisive reality of what The Clash are about the way they lap up the straight-ahead rock bands who push nothing more than having a good time?

"Maybe the reason those bands are so big is because they *don't* say anything," Mick says. "But we ain't

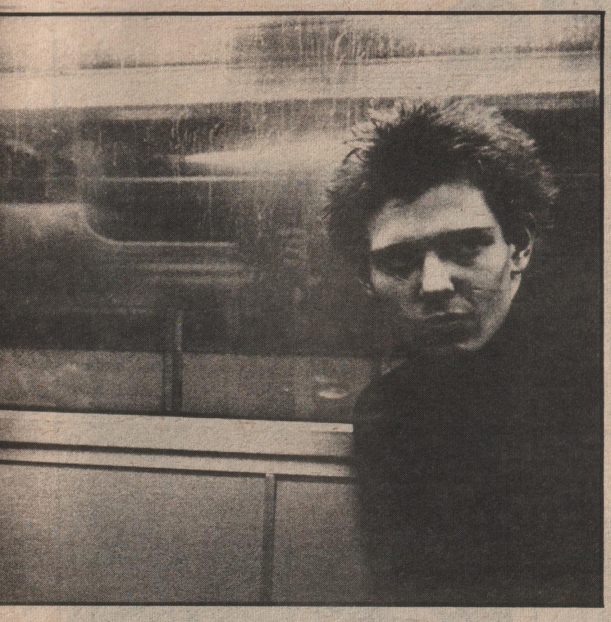




MICK JONES



JOE STRUMMER



TONY PARSONS was there.

gonna preach and sound like some evangelist."

I mention to Joe what happened when he walked on stage at Leeds Poly for the first gig that actually happened on the Pistols' Anarchy tour.

He said a few words before the band went into the set that they'd been burning to play for weeks about how the gutter press hysteria, local council butchery and Mary Whitehouse mentality of The Great British people was preventing certain young rock bands getting on stage and playing for the people who wanted to see them.

I remember him saying that 1984 seemed to have arrived early as the Leeds Poly students bawled abuse at him.

With the minds and manners of barnyard pigs the over-grown school-children conveyed the message that they didn't give a shit.

"I think they will take to us, but it'll take time," Joe says. "But I don't want to go *towards* them at all, I don't wanna start getting soft around the edges.

"I don't want to compromise . . . I think they'll come round in time but if they *don't* it's too bad."

"We ain't *never* gonna get commercial respectability," Mick says, both anger and despair in his voice.

Paul Simenon takes it all in and then ponders the nearest station that has a bar on the platform.

THAT'S THE DIFFERENCE between their attitudes to, how you say, Making It.

Strummer is confident, determined, arrogant and sometimes violent in the face of ignorant opposition (a couple of months back in a club car park he faced an American redneck-rock band with just his blade for support).

Mick Jones is a rock equivalent to a Kamikaze pilot. All or nothing.

The Clash gives him both the chance to pour out his emotional turmoil and offer an escape route from the life the assembly-line education the country gave him had primed him for.

When a careers officer at school spends five minutes with you and tells you what you're gonna do with your life for the next fifty years. More fodder for the big corporations and the dole.

Mick is beating them at their own game by ignoring all the rules.

"*Someone locked me out so I kicked me way back in,*" he declares in "Hate And War".

His uncanny resemblance to a young Keef Richard allowed him to relieve an early identity problem by adopting the lookalike con-trick which fools no-one but yourself. Then he met Strummer who told him he was wearing a Keith Richard identikit as though he had bought it in a shop.

"I got my self-respect in this group," Mick says. "I don't believe in guitar heros. If I walk out to the front of the stage it's because I wanna reach the audience, I want to *communicate* with them. I don't want them to suck my guitar off . . ."

And Paul Simenon: total hedonist.

His fondest memories of the Anarchy tour are hotel room parties and broken chairs, things trod into the carpet and girls who got you worried because you thought they were gonna die like Jimi Hendrix if they didn't wake up. He's a member of The Clash because they're the best band in the country and it gets him laid a lot.

So what did they learn from the Anarchy tour, so effectively butchered by the self-righteous Tin Gods who pull the strings?

"I learned that there's no romance in being on the road," Mick says.

"I learned that there's lots," Joe smiles.

"I learned that if they don't want you to play they can stop you," Joe says seriously. "And no-one's gonna raise any fuss . . ."

"For the first four days we were confined to our rooms because the *News Of The World* was next door," Mick continues.

"We thought — shall we go out there with syringes stuck in our arms just to get 'em going? Yeah, and furniture seemed to have labels saying,'Please smash me' or 'Out The Window, Please'."

And when they finally got to play, the minds in the Institutes Of Further Education were as narrow as those in Fleet Street. So Strummer gave them something — even though they were too blind to see it . . .

"This one's for all you *students*," he sneered before The Clash tore into the song that they wrote about Joe being on the dole for so long that The Department Of Employment (sic) wanted to send him to rehabilitation to give him back the confidence that they assumed the dole must have destroyed, together with Mick's experience working *for* the Social Security office in West London, and, as the most junior employee, being told to open all the mail during the time of the IRA letter-bombs.

The song is called "Career Opportunities":

"Career Opportunities / The ones that never knock / Every job they offer you / Is to keep ya out the dock / Career Opportunities. / They offered me the office / They offered me the shop / They said I'd better take ANYTHING THEY GOT. / "Do you wanna make tea for the BBC? / Do you wanna be, do you wanna be a cop?" / I hate the army and I hate the RAF / You won't get me fighting in the tropical heat / I hate the Civil Service rules / And I ain't gonna open letter bombs for you!"

"MOST BANDS and writers who talk about the dole DUNNO WHAT THE DOLE IS!" Mick shouts.

"They've never been on the dole in their life. But the dole is only hard if you've been conditioned to think you've gotta have a job . . . then it's sheer degradation.

"The Social Security made me open the letters during the letter bomb time because I looked subversive. Most of the letters the Social Security get are from the people who live next door saying their neighbours don't need the money. The whole thing works on spite.

"One day an Irish guy that they had treated like shit and kept waiting for three hours picked up a wooden bench and put it through the window into Praed Street."

Mick shakes his head in disgust at the memory of the way our great Welfare State treats its subjects.

"Every time I didn't have a job I was down there — waiting. And they degrade the black youth even more. They have to wait even longer. No-one can tell me there ain't any prejudice . . ."

WE MAKE FOR "Rehearsal Rehearsals", the North London studio of The Clash. An enormous building once used by the British Rail for a warehouse. Only part of it is in use at the moment, a large expanse of property ruled by no lighting, rats and water.

Upstairs Joe, Mick and Paul look glad to have guitars in their hands again. The walls are covered with posters of Bruce Lee, Patti Smith, the Pistols and The Clash themselves.

A large map of the United Kingdom faces the old TV set where Hughie Green is being sincere with the speech turned down. Biro graffiti stains the screen. The television is not treated like the Holy Grail in *this* place . . .



PAUL SIMENON



I watch Joe playing a battered old guitar with all but two of its strings missing and think about his comments when I wanted to know how he would cope with financial success when/if it came . . .

"I ain't gonna fuck myself up like I seen all those other guys fuck themselves up," he said. "Keeping all their money for themselves and getting into their head and thinking they're the greatest.

"I've planned what I'm gonna do with my money *if* it happens. Secret plans . . ."

I could be wrong, but at guess the development of Rehearsal Rehearsals into anything from a recording studio to a rock venue to a radio/TV station seem like possible Strummer visions for when The Clash get the mass acceptance they deserve.

As we talk about how The Clash have reacted to putting their music down on vinyl I tell them that the major criticism people not cognisant with their songs have expressed is that the unique Strummer vocal makes understanding their brilliant lyrics almost impossible for the uninitiated.

"The first time we went into a studio with a famous producer he said, 'You better pronounce the words, right?' " Joe remembers with his amused sneer.

"So I did it and it sounded like Matt Monroe. So I thought I'm never doing that again . . . to me our music is like Jamaican stuff — if they can't hear it, they're not supposed to hear it. It's not for them if they can't understand it."

THE CLASH SAY that being signed with CBS has had no interference with the preservation of their integrity and, even with the band's attitude of No Compromise, a termination of contract in the manner of the Pistols seems most unlikely.

They believe the sound on the album to be infinitely superior to that of the single because the latter was cut during one of their first sessions in the studio after the decision to let their sound man Micky Foote produce the band even though he had no previous experience in production.

"We tried the famous ones," Joe grins. "They were all too pissed to work."

"Outside, there ain't no young producers in tune with what's going on," Mick says. "The only way to do it is to learn how to do it yourself."

"You do it yourself because nobody else *cares* that much, " Micky Foote, Boy Wonder Producer tells me, his sentiments totally in keeping with the clan spirit in The Clash camp.

The band talk of their respect for their manager Bernard Rhodes, who has been a major influence on all of them, and who has made enemies because of his obsessive commitment to The Clash. But Joe, Mick and Paul are free spirits, unlike a lot of bands with heavy personality management .

"He really pushes us," Paul says.

"We do respect him," Mick adds. "He was always helping and giving constructive criticism long before he was our manager." Mick then points at the other members of the band and himself. "But the heart is there."

I ask them about their political leanings. Do they believe in left and right or is there just up and down?

They reply by telling me about a leftist workshop they used to frequent because they enjoyed the atmosphere — and also because it gave them an opportunity to nick the paints they needed for their artwork.

"It was really exhilarating there," Mick says. "They used to play Chinese revolutionary records and then one day the National Front threw bricks through the window.

"The place didn't shut, though. So one day they burned the whole joint down and they *had* to close down . . ."

"Can you understand how much we hate this place?"

"In 1977 there's knives in West Eleven / Ain't so lucky to be rich / Sten guns in Knightsbridge / Danger stranger / You better paint your face / No Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones / In 1977 / Sod the Jubilee!"

"I always thought in terms of survival," Mick says.

"And these people are the opposition of free speech and personal liberty. And they're trying to manipulate the rock medium."

Then he repeats something he said earlier, reitetating the importance of The Clash: "And I ain't ashamed to fight . . ."

IT HAS BEEN over a year since Mick Jones, Paul Simenon and their friend Glenn Matlock first met Joe Strummer down the Portobello Road and told him that he was great but his band was shit.

Later Joe talked to Bernard Rhodes and twenty-four hours after he showed up on the doorstep of the squat where Mick and Paul were living and told them he wanted in on the band that would be known as The Clash.

And from the top of the monolith tower block where they wrote their celebration of the Westway you can gaze down through the window of — as Mick Jones puts it — one of the cages and see that London is still burning . . .

"All across the town / All across the night / Everybody's driving with four headlights / Black or white, turn it on, face the new religion / Everybody's drowning in a sea of television. / Up and down the Westway / In and out the lights / What a great traffic system / It's so bright / I can't think of a better way to spend the night / Than speeding around underneath the yellow lights. / But now I'm in the subway looking for the flat / This one leads to this block and this one leads to that / The wind howls through the empty blocks looking for a home / But I run through the empty stone because I'm all alone / London's burning, baby . . ."

"Each of these high-rise estates has got those places where kids wear soldiers' uniforms and get army drill," Mick says quietly.

"Indoctrination to keep them off the streets . . . and they got an *artist* to paint pictures of happy workers on the side of the Westway. Labour liberates and don't forget your place."

He looks down at the fire hundreds of feet below.

"Can you understand how much I hate this place?" he asks me.

1977 is the year of The Clash.