

GOD, WHAT A BUMMER! STUCK HERE WITH JOE STRUMMER!

"YOU CAN'T have those barricades." Mick Jones almost cries, his facial muscles visibly tightening with emotion as he reflects on the gig from which The Clash have just returned to their hotel.

"You've gotta have *all* those barricades down. Then you'll find you just don't need them at all.

"But I did my Keith-at-Altamont bit, didn't I?" he laughs ruefully. "You've gotta show 'em you're not scared. That's where Jagger went wrong.

"It's like a street fight: once you show 'em fear you've 'ad it."

"It didn't seem like a gig. It was more like a war," says Paul Simonon, stretching the neck of his conceptually frayed sweater to show where a half brick had landed on his left shoulder and broken the skin.

"One thing that pisses me off is that if someone wants to 'it me they can come and 'it me and I'll 'it 'em back. But it's easy to throw a brick at a stage.

"But anyway I can throw bricks better than them. I showed that at the Notting Hill carnival," he laughs.

"Ah, so all that last night was part of you and Joe's karma," Nicky "Topper" Headon considers drolely.

THE OPENING "punk" night of the 14th Bilzen festival, near Lieges, begins relatively inauspiciously. After a seemingly endless series of Belgian jazz bands, first Elvis Costello and then The Damned do their respective "things".

It is noted, however, that Elvis is intimidated by the large press and ligger area at the front of the stage. It is also noted that this area is "protected" from The People by a thoroughly distasteful concrete and wire ten foot high fence.

One begins to sense that perhaps all those apparently fatuous Bilzen/Belsen puns were, in fact, ominously accurate, and this fact is pointed out to the audience by Dave Vanian as The Damned are about to dive through "Problem Child", their fifth number.

By this time it has already been necessary for Rat Scabies to prowl to the front of the stage from behind his drum-kit to inquire somewhat forcibly: "Oo wants their asses kicked?"

At least Elvis Costello was largely spared the salvo of beer cans that have punctuated The Damned's first four numbers.

Perhaps the 5,000 or so North European hippies — with a reasonable safety pin contingent — stuck in this field believe this implies a cordial welcome to a punk band. Perhaps they are pissed off by (a) The Fence or by (b) those standing, and thereby restricting their view, by The Fence.

PAUSING ONLY for Paul Simonon to liberate the goat whose charred and burnt flesh the promoters are intending to proffer backstage at the end of the festival, The Clash are onstage minutes after The Damned end their set. No evidence of any delaying tactics to tease the audience's anticipation buds.

"London's Burning", "Capital Radio", "Bored With The USA" . . .

The Clash power rush slams against you, holding you rigid until the warmth that's always present in its slipstream wafts about you. The gnawing tensions of the instrumental and vocal dynamics hold you open-mouthed, near-dumbstruck by the dark, raging intensity that emerges mostly from Joe Strummer's throat.

Also, even though their tower-block backdrop couldn't be put up tonight, the band — especially the three front-liners — are visually stunning.

Stage right, Mick Jones, in ice blue jacket, white pants and t-shirt, prances like a mountain goat on acid. Stage left, Paul Simonon, in white with strategic tears and paint splodges, sways like a rasta who's smoked too much grass. In the centre, drawing together all the disparate forces the deliberate, almost Chaplin-esque, Joe Strummer, in scarlet shirt and black pants.

"Topper" Headon . . . Well, you can hardly see him. Just a flash of hair and features from behind the kit were he lays it all down, Ringo to the very obviously Lennon side in Strummer.

. . . The First New Number: "The Prisoner". Close up to the (very excellent from further out in the audience) sound system it's difficult to make the words — something about "German soldiers". It's very staccato, Jones' more trebly, more melodic vocals seeming more in evidence than Strummer's . . .

. . . But it's impossible to take in both that and what is now going down with The Fence: the kids at the front have been taking turns to try shifting those kiss-of-death concrete posts and finally they seem to be getting somewhere . . .

"WHY IS THIS SPACE HERE???" Joe spews rage into the mike. "VENEZ ICI! VENEZ ICI!!!" — flashes of Lennon addressing the Paris audience at those gigs the mop-tops played before they left for the States for the first time — "ET MAINTENANT . . . LES FLICS ET LES VOLEURS."

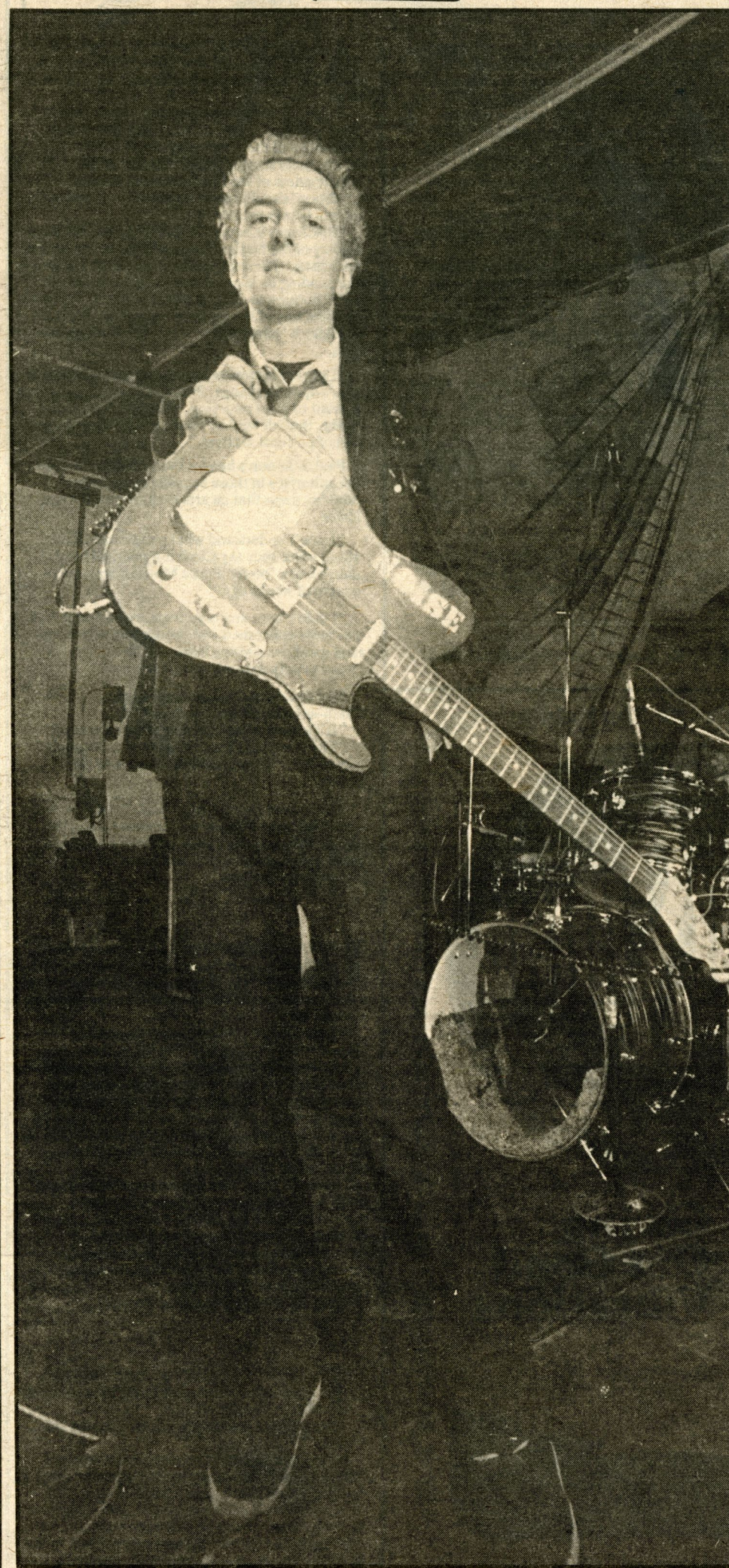
Now it's Strummer side-by-side with Dany Cohn-Bendit on the May '68 Paris barricades with empty beer cans landing all around like CS Gas canisters . . .

All along the line the concrete posts are moving backwards and forwards. If a couple of the kids would just jump on them with all their weight and push them down into THIS SPACE they could all

THE CLASH AT BELSEN... 'ALL JOURNALISTS ARE SWINE'



BY CHRIS SALEWICZ, WHO DUCKS AND RUNS . . .



JOE STRUMMER Pic: STEVENSON

be through — though then it'd be face to face with a psychotic-looking bunch of Belgian security heavies.

Up at the front, directly in front of Simonon, there's a girl pinned almost under the wire and getting stomped on by some dark figure and stomped and stomped and stomped again. The heavies aren't doing a thing to save her. Just shifting about behind their wire riot shields as the salvos of missiles thud around the stage area.

Joe's mikestand slips into the pit. Joe's in the pit himself, racing for the post that's nearest to coming down, grabbing it, shifting it backwards and forwards, wrestling with it with all that taut-shouldered aggression you pick off him when he's onstage.

For maybe 30 seconds none of the heavies move. The barrage of street-fighting weaponry doubles as the kids at the back express discontent at their Non-Visual Situation.

Joe's down on the ground. No-one quite sees what happens. ("One of 'em took a swing at me"). Dragged back behind the main wire shield. On his feet surrounded, like some very aggro gallant young squire in a mediaeval battle scene.

"STOP. LEAVE HIM ALONE-LONE-LONE-LONE-LONE-LONE!!!" screams Mick Jones into his mike, as sound engineer and album producer Mickey Foote bungs dub phasing on his vocals.

Strummer's now clawing at the edge of the stage. ("They definitely wanted to have a go at me.") Pulled up. Pushed up . . .

"DON'T THROW CANS-CANS-CANS-CANS-CANS!!!!" "COS THEY'RE GOING TO THROW THEM BACK-BACK-BACK-BACK-BACK!!!!" "IF ANYONE NEXT TO YOU THROWS A CAN-CAN-CAN-CAN-CAN-CAN MAKE 'EM STOP-STOP-STOP-STOP-STOP-STOP" . . .

With a cartoon-like BOYN-N-N-N-N-G a can bounces off the head of the guy standing next to me. He retires, injured . . .

Great show, huh?

This one'll run and run.

"WE'RE GONNA PLAY 'SHE LOVES YOU'", sneers Strummer, just letting out the merest hint of breathless confusion. Then: "LISTEN YOU . . . WE'RE GONNA HAVE 'COMPLETE CONTROL'."

The emotions of the situation are running too strongly to make out much of the number. Then there's "Remote Control", and "Hate And War" and "Career Opportunities" and "Clash City Rockers" and maybe "White Man In Hammersmith Palais" and "Janie Jones".

The numbers just pour out, with the Situation Situation having shifted the internal balance of this little display of living art to a near-sexual peak. Your whole body's engulfed by the (still positive) emotions the band's chemistry osmoses until you feel The Clash might spontaneously combust onstage.

No encore. What? You're kidding.

Manager Bernie Rhodes, a man of many parts that include having worked in the Sex shop, run a Renault repair service and put The Damned together, goes backstage where Mick Jones is puking up.

"The cymbals were too loud at the back," is his only comment.

This was not the first time Joe Strummer has fazed the security supplied at a gig.

When The Clash played St Albans on their spring British tour Joe, who had become increasingly brought down by the number of security guards on previous night, insisted that no front-stage security be supplied whatsoever.

In mid-set he performed a kamikaze headfirst dive into the audience.

"He proved his point, though," points out Mick Jones. "They caught him. They didn't trample on him . . . Of course, if they hadn't he could have broken his neck. Joe has a very forceful way of proving a point."

"ALL JOURNALISTS are swine." Ah, he's controversial, is Joseph. It's probably all that book-reading that does it. Everyone knows it's not natural reading too many books. You never see horses doing it.

Better to ignore him. Even if he is sending a frisson of discomfort through me. Besides, we're both drunk and it's 4.00 a.m. and we're back at the Ramada Inn in Lieges after the gig.

"All journalists are *COMPLETE SWINE*," he repeats.

Oh God, no. Not when I'm in this state.

Paul and Mick come to my aid by uttering disturbed noises. Mick says the press have helped The Clash a lot in the past. Joe tells Mick he's too gullible — he would never tell them the things Mick does. Mick says that's because Joe's conscious of the need to maintain his mystique.

Joe Strummer, it seems, feels he has been used by all the journalists with whom he has made friends.

An oblique remark Joe once made to me about Goebbels suddenly attains clarity. Goebbels, of course, was in charge of propaganda for the Hitler label. Even if one does follow the point that he was apparently making then one still feels that equating members of the music press with the Third Reich propaganda machine is taking things a little too far.

But apparently not . . .

"They're *all* swine. Journalists are people who should be kept at arms' length at all times. This is nothing personal against you, Sandwich," Joe

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The Clash

■ From previous page

snarls sibilantly through the gaps at either side of this upper front teeth. "The nature of what you do means you must be kept at bay."

It is pointed out to Joe that if you make arbitrary decisions about Set X of people then you must begin to start condemning whole other groups also. It is hoped that he may have some recollection of what he said about Goebbels. And, if he does, that he can see the paradox in what he is saying.

Also that he can see the paradox in placing barricades around himself while having physically tried to tear down the barricade at the festival.

Also that he can see the paradox in what he's saying being set against the musical background of the raw, rootsy reggae that is pumping out of the cassette machine — a music that is, above all, about freedom and personal liberation, and which Joe dearly loves.

In fact, like punk rock itself which contains such sociological dilemmas as appreciative spit, Joe is something of a paradox himself. No, that's too simplistic: like the band he plays in, Joe is pretty multi-dimensional.

OFFSTAGE Joe Strummer frequently smiles in a relaxed, amiable manner. He can be a very warm, likeable person. In fact, he seemed so happy and full of the joys of life when I first spotted him bouncing cheerfully along at Heathrow Airport prior to the flight to Belgium that he reminded me of a battered Charles Boyer playing one of the Seven Dwarves.

Loosening up completely, though, doesn't enter Joe's everyday scheme of things. He'll almost open up . . . then hold back. Indeed, the staccato, telegraphic, proselytizing — and frequently very witty — nature of the band's songs seems to be very much a reflection of Strummer's personality.

The cosmic chemistry must have been operating without the least dilution of forces when Jones and Simonon, out looking for a singer, spotted him with the 101'ers and realized that some things just have to be.

He binds the band together, giving a fixed direction to the anarchically liberating force the other three provide.

Maybe, you find yourself thinking, if he *did* loosen up completely the music might lose its edge. Though more likely it could become too powerful, too liberated for us to take.

Though it's doubtful there was ever any conscious scheme behind it, there are a set of multi-conceptual bases to The Clash that run even deeper than those of the Pistols.

Although none of them completed their courses, all The Clash except for "Topper" are the product of the art school system.

For the record, Strummer went to the Central for almost a year ("I thought that it was great that I'd got a place — until I'd been there about a week").

Jones studied at Hammersmith College ("I was down to like just showing up on grant day. But I hung on till my final year . . . I only went to art



school to join a group anyway. I thought 'Pete Townshend, Ray Davies, Keith Richard — they all went to art school so if I can go to art school I will . . . and meet hundreds of musicians'.")

Simonon won a scholarship to the exclusive fee-paying Byam Shaw up the road in Holland Park: "It's great because everybody there is rich. You can walk around the college, nick their paints, nick their canvases and they don't really miss it because then they can buy more . . . You don't get many working class kids like me and Mick going to art school. Better than going in the factory."

"I used to draw blocks of flats and car dumps," he tells me in the back seat of the Transit on the way to Brussels airport. "I used to really hate Leonardo Da Vinci at first. I didn't understand him. Then I realized he'd do just a thumb and line and it'd be the whole hand."

"That's what I tried to do."

That's what he tries with his bass playing, in fact — just laying down those simple, yet highly emotive, patterns about which your though processes are fused.

"You know," he recalls, "you'd do a painting and people'd love you for a week. But you're just in a room on your own playing with your own ego. You're not really communicating. That's why I started playing music."

"I wanna play a lot, you know," he says, answering my query about The Clash's not having done much live work since the end of their British tour, "because you must communicate that good feeling you can get from playing."

"Sometimes it can make you feel like a Superman. That's why Joe leapt into the audience. He thought he could just pull it down."

ALTHOUGH IT'S generally accepted that The Clash hold down the political end of the punk movement they are *not* a political band.

Dogmatic maybe but certainly not doctrinal. The "political" views of The Clash are merely reflections of their everyday moral stance — which, embracing a distaste/disgust at the hopelessness of the Establishment British condition, should surely be the view of reasonable human beings everywhere.

Mick Jones is equally appalled by the mindless bigotry of the Nation Front and the International Socialists: "The International Socialists are always like sending us telegrams of congratulation. But we're nothing to do with either of them. We don't consider any of it a political statement. We just consider it statements of . . . life through our eyes."

"I'm very interested in changing the individual who's open to change. We're still innocent enough to want to keep on trying. They won't stop us trying, though we don't want to end up as some sort of political martyrs."

Paul Simonon's head is even further out than the guitarist's in those acoustic space/lateral thinking areas that an arts background can help foster.

"I don't understand what people are talking about when they say Clash is a political band. I didn't know 'oo the Prime Minister was until a couple of weeks ago!"

"I didn't have any *need* to be interested in it. I was more concerned with wondering where my next meal was coming from . . . Well, that doesn't apply so much now, I suppose."

Hey Joe! What do you think to the Clash-as-political-band schtick?

"It's a load of bullshit. We're just a group."

"The Nation Front are against us, though," muses Joe. "They know about us. And the police."

"There were times," adds Paul, "when me and I'm would be walking down the street when the jubilee thing was at its peak. and we'd see these 'ouses with like five union jacks on them and we'd feel really threatened."

IT IS, then, naive to see Clash as mere musical politicians; crass indeed to interpret it as The Right To Work. The Clash are closer to being a quite conscious/totally unconscious multi-media explosion.

Where they're coming from is close to Rauschenberg's "gap between life and art".

It is impossible to separate The Clash from their cultural groundings. Whether their conceptual approach is purely subliminal or part of a grand design is, by its very nature, totally irrelevant. It just is. Like Joe says about leaping off the stage to attack the barricade: "I don't think about things I do too much. I just do 'em."

To regard The Clash as a consciously political outfit is to misunderstand them in the same manner in which the Dadaists were viewed as a political movement and not, as in reality, anti-political and anarchic and attempting to destroy by ridicule the pseudo-culture rampant in post-World War One Europe.

Get the picture? Spot the barricades?

LOOKING GOOD on or off stage isn't just down to wanting to play the rock star role. Is it, Paul?

"Even before the band I was always very into clothes."

At this very moment Paul sports his scarlet "frayed look" (sic) baggy mohair sweater, black multi-zipped pants, and black lace-up boots. The spiky hair is currently blond. One observes the twin scars, like an Indian buck's colours, on each high cheek bone. He looks very good. In the past he's also been a skinhead and, during his Elvis period, dressed in full Ted gear.

"I used to walk about in cowboy boots. People used to say I looked great. I could have said, 'All right, I'll just keep wearing these same clothes'. But you've got to keep changing. Change is vital."

"Also, if a group goes onstage just wearing jeans you really don't get anywhere near the same rush as if they go on looking really great."

How does he feel, though, about all the 30-year-old musicians in various bands who've suddenly "gone punk"? Don't such calculated actions really grate?

He shakes his head: "It doesn't matter if someone cuts his hair and decides overnight to become a punk. He's changed. You've just gotta keep doing that."

Actually, Paul's life has changed considerably over the last 12 months. He looks quite blissful about the current position. "I think it's *amazing*. A year ago I couldn't even play a musical instrument. 'E taught me," he adds, pointing to "Poodle" Mick Jones slumped in his best outlaw chic pose on his guitar case in the middle of the flood at Brussels Airport.

Manager Bernie Rhodes is equally knocked out. None of them, he tells me, expected the album to go in the charts. All they wanted to do was make the record.

Bernie feels sorry for the new punk bands. The Clash and the Pistols, he points out, had time to try out their act and material in public and reject the dross. "Now, with every new band it's 'Is this the one?'"

"I get really annoyed," he free-associates, "When people say things like, 'Their songs aren't going to take me to the barricades'. That's not it at all. They're not meant to. They're just meant to keep the spirit bubbling, to keep fostering that emotion. England is a very creative place. Very accessible to new ideas."

"But the most important thing is the fun. We may take the piss out of The Damned but," he reflects on the previous evening when the punk laden hotel bar had suddenly become afflicted with The Plague in the form of a certain Heavy Band. "We're all against Uriah Heep."

"There's the *professional* hate . . . But there is the *emotional* bond."

Mick Jones is even more forthrightly understanding about the way the Pistols have bitched about The Clash: "It's understandable. The Pistols were shat on again and again. And then we went off on that tour, and all over the country they went bonkers. And the Pistols couldn't even play. And we're supposed to be more their mates than The Damned."

"So they'd got to say something about it: it's the release, you know. I should imagine they must have felt terrible. That's what it was all down to."

"I mean, we don't bicker. If people ask me about The Sex Pistols I say 'Oh, they're my favourite band'."

FOLLOWING the constant hassles they experienced on their tour ("We were met by police and escorted everywhere," — Jones) the Clash's paranoid level was kept on the boil by the Birmingham festival fiasco that turned into a classic case of Establishment harassment, a harassment that was made to appear even more insidious by the large number of police the Clash observed observing them as they journeyed up the motorway to perform a gig that had been banned by the City Fathers.

This unseemly edge to their existence was possibly tempered by their visit to the CBS Convention. Rather than take a hardline stance and refuse to indulge in such nonsense they went (a) because they were interested in seeing what it was all about, and (b) to wallow in the inevitable absurdity.

The band's relationship with CBS follows an uneasy path — for both sides. CBS, points out Bernie, can appear to change by signing up punk bands. Their heads, however, remain in the same place — tucked down by the profit forecast sheets.

For the meantime the band is broke — the first fifty grand instalment of their £100,000-for-two-years deal has already been spent, with reputed losses of £15,000 pounds on the British tour having eaten up much of it. Currently, then, CBS have the upper hand — hence the release of "Remote Control" as a single.

"We told them it was gonna be a turkey, that it was gonna flop," says Jones. "We didn't think it was a good idea having something off the album. But if we'd chosen 'Janie Jones'. And the B side — the live 'London's Burning' — is abominable. We mixed it and they went and re-mixed it."

He's not concerned about The Clash's having failed to join the other New Wave bands in the singles charts — "It'll come."

The band are currently in the studio cutting a series of tracks from which two will be selected for a single due out by the middle of next month. By the time the next album is out — "It'll be at Christmas. We're gonna call it 'Clash's Christmas Turkey' and it'll feature 'Run, Rudolph, Run In Lewisham High Street'," Mick Jones tells me — at least one more single will probably have been released.

Jones says that every attempt will be made to ensure that neither is on the album.

One may well expect the singles and the album to be of a very fine standard indeed.

After all, at this point in time The Clash are probably the most vital rock'n'roll band in the world.

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