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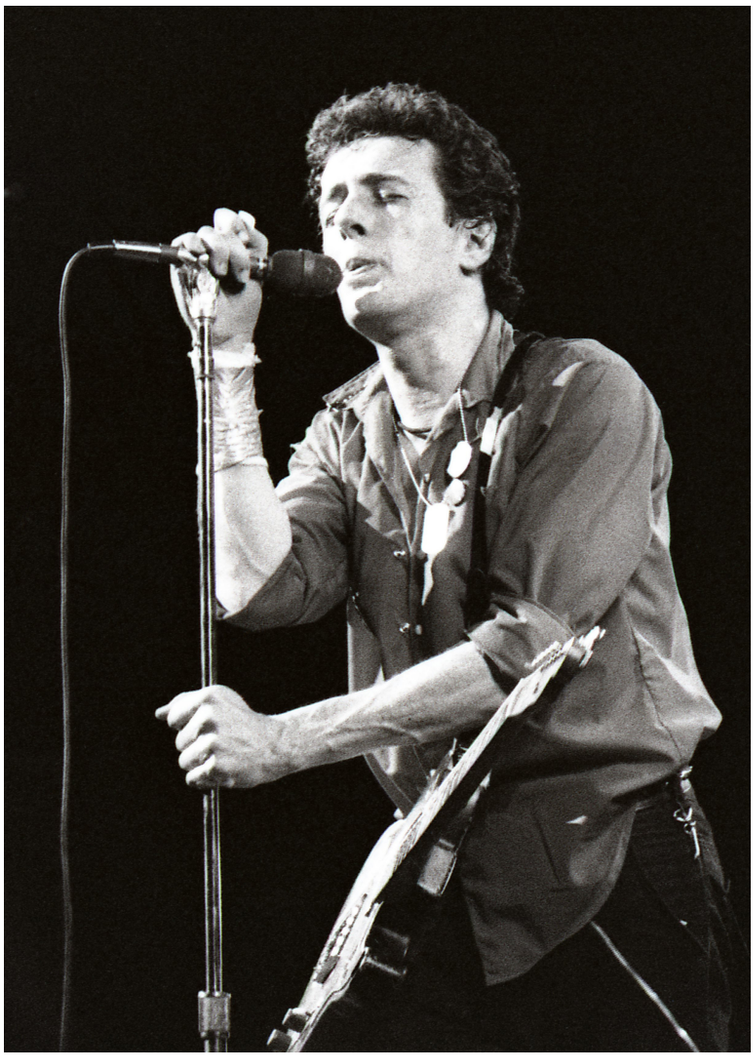
Give 'Em Enough Hope: Joe Strummer at 70

Celebrating the life of the man called the "backbone" of punk

August 21, 2022 Jim Sullivan



The Clash at The Civic Center in St. Paul, Sept. 12, 1979. (Photo: Mike Reiter)

Joe Strummer would have turned 70 on August 21 and for many of us, *once again*, we release that huge sigh. "How could that be? 70!?"

We ponder the inexorable march of time , a march that killed some of our rockers along the route – like Joe who died December. 22, 2002, a victim of undiagnosed congenital heart disease – and those of us who keep living, but, aging and, we hope, rocking.

I was fortunate enough to catch The Clash (and later Strummer post-Clash) at various points along the way. Mostly, this story is about the first and the last times.

We all have these galvanizing rock 'n' roll moments, or, at least I we hope we all do. There are a lot of contenders in stored in my brain box, and they keep shifting around, but the one that keeps rising to the surface is this. It's February 1979 and a soldout crowed is packed into the Harvard Square Theatre in Cambridge, Mass, the area debut for The Clash – singer-guitarists Strummer and Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and new drummer Topper Headon. This was the seventh stop on their first US tour.

Now, the English rock press was all in a snit because punk rock was *over*, had become an abject failure, a parody, a travesty, yesterday's news, and maybe the best of the best had become the worst of the worst. That, you see, was the new reinterpretation/perception of The Clash.

Their capital offense: The audacity of hooking up with Blue Oyster Cult producer Sandy Pearlman for their second album, Give 'Em Enough Rope. It gave them a loud, punchy, dynamic sound – what Pearlman did for BOC, too – but to the backlash-enamored

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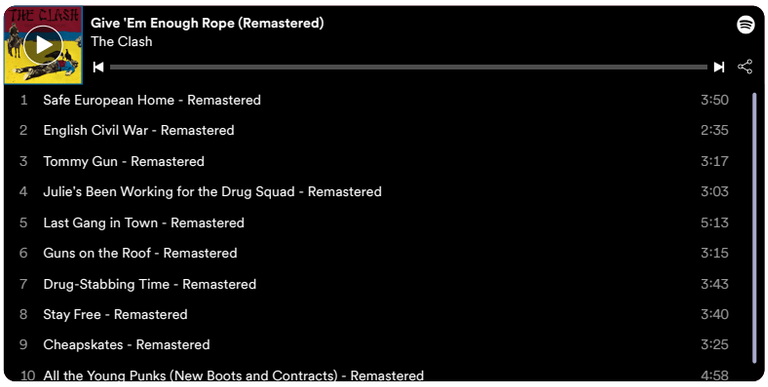
British press Sandy seemed to de-punk and Americanize them into a more conventional “rock” band.



Fuck that, I thought. Just listen to the opening salvo of “Safe European Home” – explosive drums and guitars – about a trip to the reggae paradise gone sideways.

To us, stateside it was the first official U.S. release – CBS had held back on The Clash thinking it just too raw and unrefined for American tastes – and the company had some success with the Pearlman/BOC hookup, so, the thought went …. CBS didn’t release The Clash in the U.S. until July of 1979, and rejiggered it, subtracting four songs and adding four of the 45s. (I can’t argue with the editing; the substitutes were better songs.)

But virtually every Clash fan I knew had bought The Clash as an import in the spring of 1977. We’d been living with it nearly two years. And we bought the killer singles “(White Man) in Hammersmith Palais”/” The Prisoner” and “Clash City Rockers”/” Jail Guitar Doors”) and knew the songs word by word, lick by lick. We were all Clash City Rockers. And if we weren’t buying the superhype laid down by CBS – “the only band that matters,” come on, *really*! – neither were we buying the UK press backlash. The Clash weren’t what CBS said – they hated the tag line too – but they mattered a lot

We rose to our feet as the house PA pumped Sly & the Family Stone’s “There’s a Riot Going On.”

To this date, I’ve never heard a better (and more apropos) opening salvo than “I’m So Bored With the USA.” Strummer wrote it, he told me after the set, about how bored he was with American pop culture, which via TV, was shoved down the English kids’ throats. Particularly galling, the multiple cop ‘n’ killers shows and hence the line, “Killers in America work seven days a week.”

Two points about that: That line would seem truer now – not just on TV (Netflix, Amazon, BBC America, Showtime, HBO etc.), but in real life. No further explanation needed. The song had a small, but radical change early on. It was originally “I’m So Bored with You” – that’s right, an I’m-out-love-song mutated into this searing cross-Atlantic condemnation. Talk about a contextual shift.

My god, this song exploded! The crowd was one with the band. We were on our feet, fists pumping. The Clash was bored with the USA, *we* were bored with the USA and the song was furious. Our boredom certainly had something to do with the staid mid-70s album-oriented rock on FM as well as the music at the top of the charts: The Bee Gees, Olivia Newton-John (RIP), the Village People. Maybe Carter-era angst, which preceded the far greater emotional upheaval of the Actor Who Became President.

The Clash played 16 songs, following “Bored” with “Guns on the Roof” and “Jail Guitar Doors,” the set a mix of songs from the two albums plus the singles. In the middle, “Police and Thieves,” Junior Murvin’s reggae song The Clash made their own. A long siren call signaled its start and the spotlight roamed the stage – you know, the spotlight the cops used to catch the robbers as guitarists Strummer and Jones kick in with the terse, staccato riffs that dominate the tune, Strummer singing passionately. They capped the set with a one four-song encore, closing with “London’s Burning” and “White Riot.”

None of the Clash guys talked much between songs, which were delivered loudly, quickly and with utmost freneticism. Headon added a punch Terry Chimes (aka Tory Crimes) didn’t convey on that first album. Jones and Simonon crisscrossed the stage all night, frequently winding up at the other’s mic stand. When Jones didn’t make it on time to sing harmony, it didn’t matter – he simply joined in on the following line. Simonon was anything but the typical stoic, John Entwistle-esque bassist. He stalked the stage, mugged, twisted his bass up behind his neck. Headon rarely looked up from his kit and made his snares sound like machine gun volleys. It was Strummer, though, who was most riveting – like a caged leopard looking for an escape route.

Post-set, Strummer was almost a different person. Still dressed in the black leather jacket and trousers, same chains around his torso, with his black leather cap on. Whatever theatrical anger he had on stage had vanished. He wasn’t boozing it up or partying. He seemed reserved, almost taciturn. When he spoke, he mostly looked downward, glancing up occasionally to make sure you were following his drift.

I asked the inevitable question about punk rockers like The Clash making money through the major label system.

"When we make some, we might have an answer for you," Strummer said. "I don't see how it's possible. Maybe if you sell some records, you make some money."

I ventured that while that's yet to happen in the US, hasn't the band done well in England?

"Well, we sold a lot, yeah," he said, "but it didn't seem to do us much good. I mean as far as money's concerned, I think it's because of those debts we racked up before we sold the records. I don't have any good news about our finances for you – I haven't heard any good news in a long time. But I don't want to talk about it. I'm sick of people coming up and going, 'Hey, hey, what are you doing with all the money?' You know, I'm just sick of telling people there ain't any 'cause it's boring to go on about it."

One thing Strummer did want to tell me about, politics aside, was what punk rock meant to him: "At least the young people are playing rock' n' roll now. In '76, they weren't 'cause they couldn't see how they could 'cause all the groups were just too big- how can you be like Yes and have a secret ambition to be a rock 'n' roller? You think 'Forget it, I'll go back to my cleaning shop.' Now, people in England realize that anybody can be a star and that goes without exception. And that's a vital thing in rock 'n' roll. The beginners have gotta realize they can be stars; otherwise, they ain't gonna bother with it."

Many, many years later – in the 21st century – I asked Yes keyboardist Rick Wakeman about that quote. After all, Yes was one of the prime name-checked bands.

"Joe Strummer was absolutely right," the keyboardist told me. "I liked The Clash. You know you don't have to have the world's greatest technique to be in a rock band. Some of the finest bands in the world are, shall we say, not the most musically talented but they can produce fantastic music and great songs. Which is brilliant and that's how it should be."

A lot went down after Rope. London Calling, which everyone harkens back to as the "classic" Clash album, and I won't argue with that; Sandinista! which everyone seems to consider a sprawling, should-be-cut-down mess. I'll agree only partway with that. I kinda love the sprawl, the insertion of so many genres and sub-genres, the fiddling about, the non-Clash players, the unexpected twists and turns only a triple-disc can give you. (And, yeah, the sheer *audacity* of releasing a triple-disc after a double!)

I saw the band several times during this period, a couple of times at Boston's Orpheum Theater – I wrote, "They ripped through a 24-song set that showed them far from being mere survivors of the initial punk-rock surge. They are now, simply, a very good and intelligent rock 'n' roll band." I saw 'em at the Cape Cod Coliseum, then at Bonds International Casino in New York, during that 17-gig stint in the spring of 1981.

Then, the big hit breakthrough, Combat Rock, and – sorry to hew to the general rock crit line on this – but here's where The Clash moved to the middle of the punk road and the middle of the pack in my world. Maybe, this is how the Brit critics heard Rope, but, to me, this was mainstream, give-the-people-what-they-want-Clash, en route to arenas and stadiums. Then, intra-band strife surfaced leading to Cut the Crap – with Jones and Headon dismissed – and three other guys in the mix. I was out the door. I probably listened once. Joe fired Mick. What the fuck? And this was still supposed to be The Clash?

But I came back in a manner of speaking in 1985 when Strummer filled in for The Pogues ailing Shane MacGowan (when Shane was doing Shane, but perhaps to a greater extreme and was on leave or kicked out or whatever). Strummer explained from the stage: "I'm channeling the spirit of Shane MacGowan" he said. Pretty damn good job he did, too. The Pogues, frankly, were not that far from a Celtic-ized Clash.

In 1989, Strummer came back with a band and played a soldout club gig in Boston at the Paradise. "I view it as my second childhood," he told me, after the soldout set. "It seems, like, harder. It was probably *harder* back then, but you forget. At the moment, it's all exhausting."

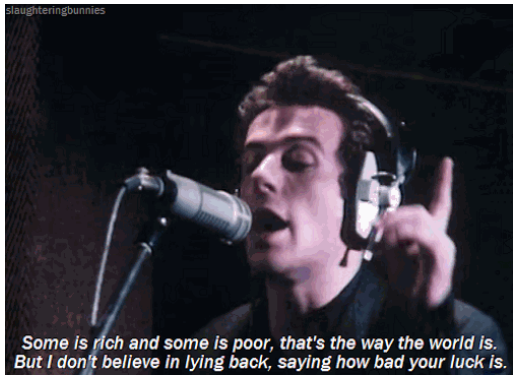
His look-back at The Clash was brief: "Good thing, good fun."

Strummer and his band mixed Clash songs – "The Magnificent Seven," "London Calling," "What's My Name?" "Armagideon Time," "Brand New Cadillac" and "Police & Thieves" (yes, Junior Murvin's song but them made it theirs) with some from his Earthquake Weather LP. A pounding "Love Kills" from the Sid & Nancy soundtrack, a stretched out "Straight to Hell." Even a track from his old mate Jonesy's band, Big Audio Dynamite, "Sightsee M.C."

As it turned out, my then-girlfriend and I took Joe to Foley's, one of Boston's great dive bars – not a *conceptual* dive bar, mind you – that was a prime hang post-show for rock bands and fans who wanted, well, more beer. The punters were amazed! Joe Strummer in their bar! Suffice to say, Joe could not buy a drink that night, everyone lined up to do honors.

Flash forward a couple of years, October 12, 2001 – a month after the terrorist attacks.

That was the last time I saw Strummer. It was in Worcester, Mass. at a large club called the Palladium. On this night, Strummer took the stage with his backing quintet, the Mescaleros, with a large U.S. flag hung behind the stage. Strummer and company began with an instrumental Irish traditional song, “The Minstrel Boy,” a tune that’s been played at many of the funeral services for the New York firefighters killed in the attacks.



Strummer – singing with squinty eyes, often facing the side of the stage, dressed as always in black, and hammering out rhythm guitar chords – looked pretty much the same as he ever did, which is to say sharp and impassioned. Long ago (with the Clash and beyond), he’d broken from the fast-loud-short orthodoxy of punk and moved to incorporate a world of sounds: dub, reggae, rap, funk, Celtic, Middle Eastern and more.

That’s the journey on which Strummer remained two albums deep into the Mescaleros era, which seems to have rejuvenated him. Their two-hour set had the feeling of a band working together, not a solo artist plus hired hands. The flavorful lead lines often came from fiddler Tymon Dogg (a sometime Clash contributor) on his knees or on his feet, who also played Spanish guitar; Martin Slattery contributed on various keyboards and horns. The music was a crazy quilt of sound; the mood these guys put across was very much one of, as Bob Marley once termed an album, positive vibrations.

As expected, Strummer featured songs from his then-latest disc, Global a Go-Go – the title track, “Cool ‘N’ Out,” “Johnny Appleseed,” “Shaktar Donetsk,” “Bummed Out City,” and “Mega Bottle Ride.” The selections from The Clash’s catalog were also, as expected, that is if you’ve followed Strummer’s career, the slinky, more groove-oriented selections – “Armagideon Time,” “Bankrobber,” “Rudie Can’t Fail” – and the reggae covers: Toots and the Maytals’ “Pressure Drop,” Jimmy Cliff’s “The Harder They Come,” Junior Murvin’s “Police and Thieves,” and the ska-rock Specials’ “A Message to You Rudy.” The rapturously received nods to Clash punk came with Eddy Grant’s Clash-ified “Police on My Back” and “London’s Burning.”

You could say Strummer’s mind-set was more mellow – only if by “mellow” you don’t mean complacent and settled. His music was less agitated, less all-out galvanizing, more groove-centered and flowing. Strummer’s vocals were often lost in the somewhat echo- y sonics, but he’s never been, to these American ears, the most intelligible of singers.

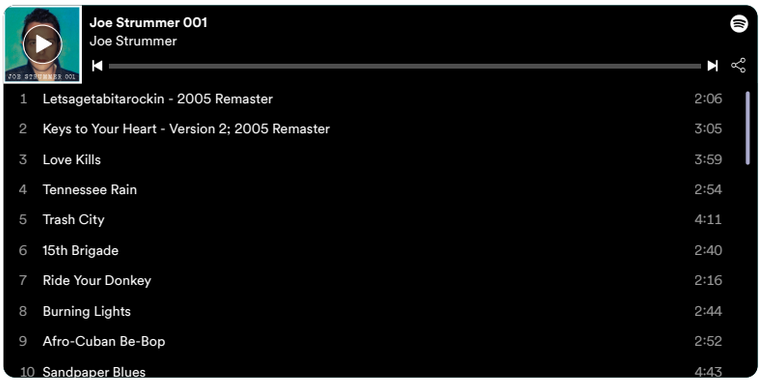
He had the company of numerous stage crashers and mic grabbers, all trying to claim a moment of glory and/ or share a vocal with their main man. Sometimes it came off as punk solidarity, but too often clueless crashers overstayed their welcome, had to be hauled off or pushed back into the crowd by security, and engendered boos from the large percentage of the 1,700 people there for the music, not the tiresome stage crash ‘n’ dive spectacle. There’s a fine line to walk there – you don’t want security brutalizing your most rabid fans, nor do you want the concert to descend into chaos.

The show ended with a tribute to late Ramones singer Joey Ramone. Strummer and his gang played “Blitzkrieg Bop,” with its “Hey ho, let’s go” optimism, sense of expectation, and, yes, cartoon violent imagery intact. These guys doubled the Ramones length, kept it beatin’ for maybe four minutes. It proved to be a sweet bracketing of the set – a somber tribute to New York’s finest first responders at the onset and a raucous paean to New York’s finest punks at the end.

Had a friendly chat with Joe, post-show, but wasn’t taking notes.

After his death the following year, I was talking to Buzzcocks’ Steve Diggle. “Joe Strummer was the backbone to the whole punk thing, really,” Diggle said. “He was very humane, and he was a great punk orator as well, bringing a political and social awareness. Strummer’s songs challenge you to examine your life and find yourself through music.”

Fair enough. As the English say, “Good innings, Joe.”



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John Packel
August 21, 2022 at 10:44 pm
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“Fuck that, I thought. Just listen to the opening salvo of “Safe European Home” – explosive drums and guitars – about a trip to the reggae paradise gone sideways.” Amen, Jim.

What a treat to read about these shows and your conversations with Strummer. I love this dichotomy, and your description makes me feel like I was there:

“It was Strummer, though, who was most riveting – like a caged leopard looking for an escape route. Post-set, Strummer was almost a different person. Still dressed in the black leather jacket and trousers, same chains around his torso, with his black leather cap on. Whatever theatrical anger he had on stage had vanished. He wasn’t boozing it up or partying. He seemed reserved, almost taciturn. When he spoke, he mostly looked downward, glancing up occasionally to make sure you were following his drift.”

I’m came to love The Clash too late to catch them (missed them by 2 months by going to the wrong Who show in late 1982 for my first concert), but really kick myself for not being more aware of the Mescaleros and seeing him/them. Did you ever see them play “Redemption Song”?

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