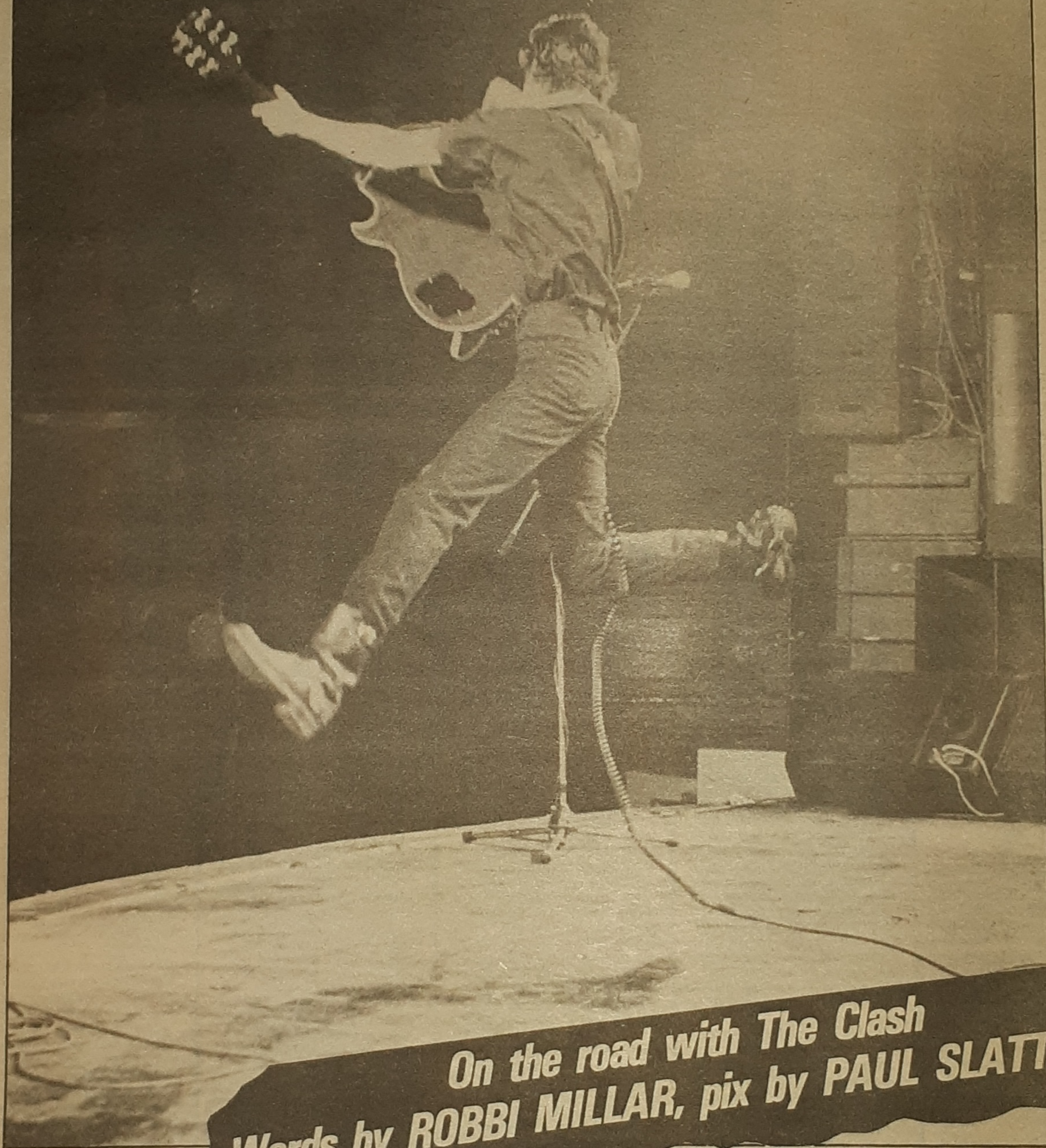


ARMAGIDEON TIME



On the road with The Clash
Words by ROBBIE MILLAR, pix by PAUL SLATTERY

QUOTATIONS: "Heer, you with the pass, are they goin' tae do 'Jimmy Jaezz' tonight? It's the best bit o' the album," — pre-gig pubescent Glaswegian punk.

"Yeah, 'Jimmy Jazz'. Me and Mick just started messing around in a studio with that song and I *never* thought I'd see the Apollo full of Scotsmen pogoing to it! Never, never, never," — after-gig incredulous Joe Strummer.

Just one song at one concert through three albums; but the Clash are treading footmarks into new ground and sort-of confusing people. "Hey, what's this? — a sell out — look what America does to you — too

slow, no energy — 'course I like some of the songs but it's not *punk* is it?" The cost of progress.

As I see it, once a punk always a punk and directions keep changing. In 1977 Clash were the greatest hope, inflicting gross unique opinions via the almighty rattle of 'White Riot', the snarling disgust of 'Career Opportunities'; with officious conflict against the rock establishment fuelled by the urgency of their songs.

In 1980 the revolution comes with a whisper rather than a bang as the Clash learn to 'experiment', stretching out guidelines to cover many individual tastes, from country and jazz to their excellent interpretations of reggae, mixing and weaving them into the utterly "listenable" 'London Calling' album.

Strummer's reaction glows with amusement: "Now *that's*

what I like about the music press, the way they put one in the eye all the time. It stops you from getting big-headed. Look at the way they treat bands like Yes." (he splutters) "I listen to what people think, to what they say (like when Bushell reviewed the album) because I want to take interest."

"I like 'London Calling'. I can listen to it. I'm not scared to say that I wanted a *listenable* album this time, one that you can just put on the stereo and sit down and hear."

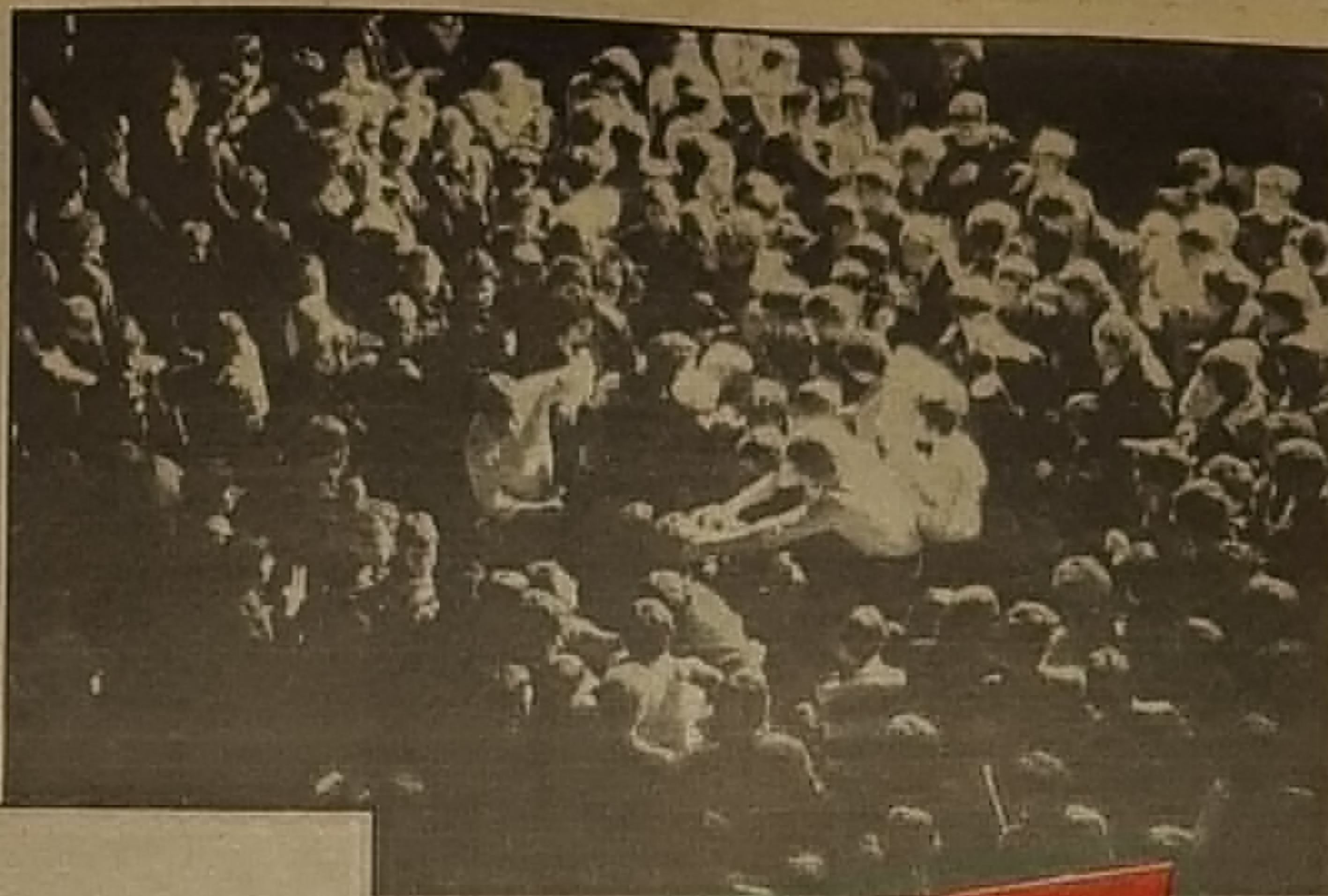
I've landed in the middle of a great big Good Mood. Joe is just part of the multiple evidence of the strong sense of satisfaction resting around the Clash these days. It's boosted, of course, by the joint success of both album and single and adjusted by the complimentary public live response but shines through as a clear indication that the band are writing the *music*

that they really want to.

They've lost the need for aggressive walls of defence, for snarling self-righteousness, even for the fluttering political banner of intent.

And the sweet reward is that it works so well. Sales figures aside, the telling live airings of many of these 'experiments' proves them far less permeable, much harder and Clashier than I was expecting. 'Clampdown' kicks out and rolls over 'Rope' style while 'Brand New Cadillac' overdrives on extra energy. 'Armageddon Time' is simply the best Clash reggae classic and embellished with the gleeful Mikey Dread it's ecstatic.

True, I could do without 'Koka Kola' or the second half of the overlong 'Guns Of Brixton' but that's not important. Opinions are single-minded, actions say the most and anyone who doesn't *bother* to see what's happening with the Clash is a loser.



CLASH



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GLASGOW isn't highland flings and haggis. The city wears a dirty, dour expression on a face made up of sludge coloured houses and olive-toned grass and, like Manchester, you wonder why it isn't always raining. The inhabitants are abruptly friendly, the language is abrasive, the entertainment looks like nil. To see their favourite band, kids of Glasgow cram into the largest draughtiest venue in the entire British Isles and stare ever upwards at the twelve foot (maybe more) high stage.

"It's like playing on the edge of the white cliffs of Dover," muses Joe. "Last time, on a previous tour, was a bloodbath. I looked down from the stage, over the edge, and I could see patches of blood in between the fighting. It was the last night before the Apollo was due to be closed down so all the bouncers were getting even with whoever had caused them trouble in the past."

"The stage was higher last time," decides Mick Jones. "But we were fitter then." Dressed in long black coat, protruding white cuffs and half a pot of Brycreem, he's full of tongue-in-cheek vanity and odd smirks, (who knows if he's laughing at you or with you?) plus lots of bouncy bonhomie.

"I thought I'd better see some daylight today so I came charging out of the hotel, head down, snarling, and there were loads of people waiting," he mock whines. "Look, they say, it's Joe Strummer! Had me signing autographs so I escaped into this churchyard but they

even followed me there. Can't get any peace." I don't think he minds so much.

Switch round to ace press wind-up merchant and man of a thousand solutions, Kosmo. "Look-you'll-have-to-wait-I'm-busy" Vinyl who's decided that if Slattery teaches him how to take photos properly, he'll be able to take all the Clash pix and "sell 'em to the music papers!" Ha!

Messrs King and Jenner, official Clash + Blockhead managers, are lurking within the dressing room; Paul and Topper are lurking without — and support band Mikey Dread is doing a brilliant job onstage with only his voice, his backing tapes, and shaking Donald for company.

"Takes some nerve," mutters Joe.

Half an hour later and it's the Clash in command, throwing Glasgow head-over-heels into the 16 Tons tour with the thrashing intro to 'Clash City Rockers'. It wouldn't be fair to use a tour, especially after waiting this long for one, to showcase 'London Calling' so the band grasp handfuls of each album throwing out a rough-edged 'Safe European Home' before an incredible Jones guitar stamped 'Jimmy Jazz'. (As for pogoing — it's the only way you can dance when you're jammed between two rows of seats!)

Strummer's twisted facial contortions alongside Paul Simonon's grim beauty echo the rough and the smooth, 'Janie Jones' and 'White Riot' hustling into the encores in the wake of 'I'm Not Down' — a tendency to leave the older songs till later though the set's being changed continually — with a top rate

'White Man In Hammersmith Palais' slotted in between.

You name it, they probably played it, and even on a poky balcony with the dreaded Kosmo bouncing up and down and shouting in my earhole, the sound's a little short of perfect with Paul's big white bass lending the guts to Topper's shamelessly perfect drumming.

Jones, ever in danger of sliding right off the stage and into the arms of the mean bouncers — give 'em a bow tie and watch 'em turn into gorillas — vocally spot on and lead guitar wise mighty pleased with himself. I'd like to hear 'Supermarket' and 'Spanish Bombs' but not tonight, Rats!

The funny thing is, if you didn't know beforehand you'd probably not notice much difference between the variously aged songs and the Clash, having already surfaced from the teething troubles at Aylesbury unscathed, have fixed their act into such unobtrusive control that I'm not nudged into looking for imperfections. Simply doesn't cross my mind — or the minds of about three thousand other folks who also happened to be watching.

Though the audience are all clad in the obligatory 'Destroy' leather gear plus variations, punk is somehow in the past. They've all got the album and they've queued for the posters and programmes. Politics is for Maggie Thatcher; they've come to see the Clash play music, and the next night'll be even better.

Chaos-ville in Glasgow's Pond Hotel tonight. Not only is everyone in high spirits 'cos of the show but some idiot's gone and booked a convention of the Scottish Crime Squad into the

self same building which is much like testing a gas leak with a lighted match.

The two factions are not on agreeable terms as the faithful cops have managed to turn up at pretty well every hotel the band has yet stayed at, these being hard to come by at the best of times, and cheering up the hotel bosses greatly. Whether this is because of Topper's ghastly attempts at whipping tablecloths from banquetting tables without adequate practice, or because the Clash are associated with a certain 'evil' cult known as punk rock, I shall leave the reader to decide, but when tour manager Johnny Green loses his glasses, his temper and his ability to avoid breaking glass, it's time for bed — as Zebedee would say.

INTerview calling. The time is midnight; the place is Joe's room. He's in the grey trilby and the hooded eyes while I'm in the red corner with ballpoint pen.

Whether it's through choice or circumstance, it's Strummer that seems to be doing the main explanations on this season's round of Clash interviews, though with easy manner and ready smile, he's content to answer any queries that me or Slattery put forward and if he's trying hard not to put his foot in it or make any of the 'quoted mistakes' that the Clash used to make — then it *don't* show one bit.

Joe airs vast musical knowledge, stuns me into the horrified silence, that too bad a memory and too little worldly music knowledge is bound to invite, and doubles back.

"You know, I listen to the

radio and a record comes on and, click, I know *all* about that record. I think, 'What's the use of knowing a million and one completely useless facts about rock and roll?' Most people forget them but I seem to retain everything!"

What Joe won't forget is that the present Clash single is the highest charted Clash single yet — and still no Top Of The Pops.

"Yeah. Seems to have been steady in the charts for ages. I mean, I was listening to the radio today and the bloke said 'London Calling', great song though, it's down the charts a bit' so I rushed right round to Kosmo to see what had happened. It was only two or three places: I was imagining a number twenty nine or something."

Strummer's contentment on that score is clear, and the success has ironed over a lot of wrinkles — including the CBS situation. How's relations now?

"Explosive!" he laughs. "No about six months ago I think it was pretty bad — I really thought they were going to boot us out or something. We did the album as almost a last try. It's funny how things work better in that situation; and today it's such a different thing. You know, I've finally realised that we can actually *sell* records!"

Autumn's a strange time to release an album?

Joe: "Only superstars and lunatics release albums before Christmas — we're in the second category — but it had to be done then you see."

What's next on the agenda? "Single? In Manchester, we're going to record 'Bank Robber' with Mikey Dread and see what

happens. If we can get a track single organised, could have a track of and another new song side."

'Bank Robber' is still to make up my mind. Catchy in the same way 'London Calling' for any idea set against albums for singles. Bl is welcome and with Dread 'at the controls knows?

"Mikey's a great bloke. Was a d.j. on a Jamaican station and they tried to keep everyt and relaxed and easy. Mikey'd come on the live things up too much so they threw him out. I think he's got so much to do his show in front of indicating the Scottish 'with only his tapes."

A black guy producer single seemed inevitable. sole form of tour music entertainment depends enormous collection of tapes played continuously in hotel to dressing room. Clash are, sure, one of the white bands that are doing it the way it should be done.

"The reggae boom's been stronger now than ever. Look at what they've done, especially in America. The music scares a lot of people away but over in America they use these type of class Americans come saying 'Hey! Are you any of that reggae?' (in accent) and we'd ask they'd say 'But we like it. Now, if they lap up the why not get them to it



happens. If we can get a three track single organised then we could have a track off the album and another new song for the B side."

'Bank Robber' is strange. I've still to make up my mind as it's not catchy in the same vein as 'London Calling' for sure. Still, any idea set against pilfering hit albums for singles, Blondie style, is welcome and with Mikey Dread "at the controls," who knows?

"Mikey's a great bloke. He was a d.j. on a Jamaican radio station and they tried, you know, to keep everything calm and relaxed and easy but Mikey'd come on the air and liven things up too much for them so they threw him out. I think he's got so much front to do his show in front of that lot" (indicating the Scottish crowd) "with only his tapes."

A black guy producing a Clash single seemed inevitable. Their sole form of tour musical entertainment depends on an enormous collection of reggae tapes played continuously from hotel to dressing room, but the Clash are, sure, one of the only white bands that are capable of doing it the way it *should* be done.

"The reggae boom's bigger and stronger now than it's ever been. Look at what the Police have done, especially in America. The elitism of the music scares a lot of people away but over in America we used to get these typical middle class Americans coming up to us saying 'Hey! Are you gonna play any of that reggae?' (mid-west accent) and we'd ask why and they'd say 'But we like it!'"

Now, if they lap up the Police, why not get them to try some of

the real stuff.

"There was a lot of prejudice against playing anything that had black-sounding voices. They only took to Chuck Berry, you know, 'cos he sounded almost white. They didn't find out he was black until afterwards."

Moving back to Clash music, I wonder how many people have only just 'adopted' the band with the advent of 'London Calling'; so much more generally accessible than the last LPs.

Joe recalls: "We always used to get people coming up to us and saying 'Why don't you put the lyrics in the album?'. Well of course, this time we did and one guy in Edinburgh comes up and says to me 'Why do you *always* put the lyrics in the album? I creased up laughing. I could see that one coming."

PEOPLE's memories are short and, apparently, Slattery pops in with the neat question of how much the future depresses Joe. With conflict all over the globe, does he get bothered about another world war?

"No. I've given it all up now. What's the point; I couldn't give a toss. I was watching this programme called Weekend World — you know, the one with the really mad bashing Mountain theme music — and they were going on about atomic missiles. Bollocks to it! If there is another war then nuclear arms are up to such a high standard that it'll be a case of pressing a button and eliminating an entire army. What's the point of worrying? I just enjoy myself."

"Have you seen 'Apocalypse Now'? That's an incredible film. You know, it doesn't leave you,

it's like a dream. Marlon Brando's the craziest general I've ever seen; and they have this shot with him in the dark with just the light shining on his bald head. Incredible film."

The whole doomy, newspaper frenzy about the future shows through on the present single, with Joe heaping together a load of snippets that he's read in papers into the words.

"I kept seeing all these headlines warning about the future like the sun getting closer to the earth, at the same time, another ice-age — how's that possible? — and thought that, well, whatever happens you're best to be right in the middle of it. I'd rather have a missile land on my head than die slowly with radiation sickness."

A pause for alcoholic sustenance ensues before a return to the less morbid future events. Simonon's going to the States to do a film after the tour finishes and the rest of the band may well go too.

Joe: "Joe Ely's recording an album so me and Mick might go and help on that score."

The band's interest in the States, as far as Joe's concerned, seems more a fascination than a liking for the place.

"I like all the old movies on T.V. Over here, the television ends at midnight but there you can sit and watch really great films all night."

Such films have ranked high in the Clash's collective ideas for 'London Calling' and Joe can't understand why national entertainment is so limited in Britain, as he looks with disgust at the hotel fitted with transistor with its tinny 'late night Radio Two' type garbage. Slattery

suggests that the English *like* being told what to do; that they love a Hitler figure. Strummer reckons we've already got one:

"I never thought Thatcher would be the way she is. I mean, I knew she was an arsehole but she's bulldozed through everything. Even so" (harping back to morbidity and looking out over the uninspiring Glasgow skyline) "this place is still better than America. I'd rather be blown up here than there!"

ASK what Strummer thinks of the new music awareness; bands like Joy Division, even mod bands.

Joe: "I haven't seen any of the mod bands. I don't go to gigs that often now 'cos sometimes, I don't know, I can't take it. I'd rather stay at home. But I don't like the 'new musik' that being picked up on. It's got no real tune to it, there are no songs and it's not what I think of as music."

I point out that these bands are gaining phenomenal interest and large advances.

"But when I see a group boasting about how big an advance they've secured I just think about how naive and stupid they are, just like we were. If you get a small band that makes just enough advance to set them up in good equipment and pay off any costs, then I think they're sensible. It's only a loan. You're supposed to pay it back and, honestly, there is *no* such thing as a free lunch!"

"I wish the independent record labels had had more success. Perhaps in three, five years time or so I'd like to think,

we might reach a position, like in Jamaica, where there's lots of small labels and all the big ones, like CBS, are reduced right down to the size where they operate from a tiny offices."

On a completely different subject, what does Joe think about the Clash film wrangles?

He smiles: "I don't really know much. I don't know what'll happen. We don't want it released but Bernie Rhodes signed the contract over the film just before we parted company with him — none of us have signed it — and it's only written on a really scrappy bit of paper, the back of an envelope or something. The band are promised a set wage and there's a quote about percentages but it's all very dodgy."

The Clash are taking bigger steps towards the band world circuit now, and thinking of all the countries, continents and islands to be visited. What about going to, say, Japan?

"We've sold a few albums out there and the band might do some sort of tour later on. See how things go. We always put off the idea of going to Japan, thinking that the scene was very repressed with careful supervision and great big concert halls but some of the gigs only hold about three hundred or so."

What's the smallest place the Clash have played? Their second gig, in a pub, had an audience of one lone drunk refugee from the club/disco below where the bouncers were having the shit beaten out of them by a bunch of squaddies. The Acklam Hall was larger and quieter.

Joe: "Those gigs were good. It was mainly people from the area who turned up, like the

Ladbroke Grove skins. They wanted 'White Riot' and they were yelling that it was about that area. O.K. we thought and we played it. There wasn't any trouble at all."

THE DAYS of disrupted Clash gigs seem over. They died a death when Rotten became Lydon

and Virgin 'lost' Sid to wherever he took the decaying remains of punk rock, leaving only scarred devotees in Boy bondage pants to keep the tradition alive.

So there was never really any need for the Clash to desert "the cause" for it died its own unnatural death and left two choices; carry on fashion or carry on music. The Clash chose the latter, and changed, and hung onto their individuality by doing what *they* wanted in *their* own way. But it's certainly worth the thought that even if the nation was still throbbing to the 1-2-3-4 beat of Rotten and the Pistols, if the Clash still wished to explore their own interests, be they reggae, jazz or disco, then they would surely have done just that and nothing would have made a blind bit of difference.

As for selling out, the *Apollo* is sold out on Tuesday night. From the safest vantage point of a corner of the stage, I can see the balcony not swaying but bouncing under a mass attack of numerous moving bodies, and punters defying the wrath of bouncers in order to *dance* to the *Clash*. The gig is ace and there're three encores and I remember something that Mick Jones said to photographer Slattery last Autumn in Boston, USA.

"I think we're getting better."