

The Clash by day



NEIL LIBBERT

Joe Strummer: Just keeps walking and looking.

FIONA MALCOLM'S Metropolitan Diary

JOE STRUMMER says he's learnt a lot about London in the past few weeks. The Clash, his group, has been recording in New York after an American tour, which followed a 40-day British tour, and precedes a two-week European tour.

New York is just so set up, Joe says, by which he means that in New York you can forget about the sky because the buildings keep going up and up. Coming back to London made him feel like a sewer rat coming into the light after weeks spent underground.

One or two critics have hailed The Clash as the greatest rock'n'roll band of our time. Joe Strummer and Mick Jones write the songs, Joe sings them and they have been labelled another Lennon and McCartney. The Washington Post said their latest album, 'London Calling,' is their beacon of sobriety slicing through the tension, a mature expression of human responsibility and, as if that wasn't bad enough, it's also 'a willingness to face the apathetic and lethargic present before it becomes tomorrow's tombstone.'

Ten days ago Joe was dunking plain, sweet biscuits in his coffee and reflecting on the more mundane aspects of life. The rest of the band were still in New York but he had to come home because of a little problem with the police in Portsmouth over half a joint of marijuana and because he's just been given notice to quit his squat. 'It's difficult to get that side of life together when you're constantly on the move,' he said.

The battery of publicists, managers and secretaries which is supposed to take care of such practicalities, was not in evidence. 'I resent anyone trying to take care of me. We've had a series of managers. There was Bernie Rhodes at the beginning, then Caroline Coon who, shall we say, retired gracefully, and now we're working

something out with Blackhill Enterprises. I've noticed these pop stars usually dry up after they move into their high security estates with the dogs and that. I just keep walking around the streets lookin' at things. I don't know what else to do.'

To begin with, Joe took care to talk slowly, using bad grammar in deliberate phrases, but after half an hour the background won through his gappy, rotten-toothed grin. He is articulate and intelligent, was born in Turkey, brought up in Epsom and came to London 10 years ago to go to art school. In the late Sixties he listened to the Beatles and the Stones but the Beatles were four berks from Liverpool and the Stones were the real thing. Then there were the Dave Clark Five from the Tottenham Court Road and, on another tack altogether, Captain Beefheart.

Day-dream

He hated art school. 'I cut loose after a year to see what there was to do. I did manual jobs to leave my mind free. I have to day-dream.' His musical career began when he started to collect money for a busker on the underground. He learnt to play basic guitar chords from him and formed his first group, the One-O-ners, in Newport, South Wales, where he went because he grew tired of sleeping on a floor off the Edgware Road. He joined the Clash on his return to London and his lifestyle hasn't changed since they hit the big time, apart from all the travelling.

He likes to switch from living by day to living at night. 'In New York we walked around all night. At the moment I'm walking during the day. It's amazing to be in London, I keep expecting to be hustled on the street and nothing happens. Kids in London are having a hard time and it's getting more violent because there are so many sub-

cultures on the streets and they've got nowhere to live and nowhere to go.

'I watched them pulling down the old 59 club the other day. It was a youth club after they closed it as a rock'n'roll club. Nobody cares where the kids will go now and over the road from there they've converted some houses into flats and the For Sale signs are in English and Arabic. Say no more.'

Punk music has been jumping in London since 1976. Joe said: 'The Clash are fundamentally a punk band but they try never to repeat themselves. I can't stand bands who produce the same sound over and over because it's safe,' he said. 'We take risks a bit. We stick our necks out and one day we'll get our heads chopped off. New York has been a big influence because in that city jazz and punk are meeting head on, and we're looking into the Sugar Hill Jive which is pure and black and from Harlem.'

His inspiration comes from walking pavements, and he likes to feed his brain on McDonald's fishburgers, chips, baked beans on toast, a lot of tomato ketchup and strong lager. When he gets an idea for some words to a song, he acts fast. 'I'm a real cigarette packet merchant,' he said, 'and very one-track-minded, very obsessional. Apart from the band I'm not interested in anything except reading. I'm reading the story of Lenny Bruce and Lord Denning's report on the Profumo scandal at the moment.'

There should be a new album in August which will be full of surprises, said Joe, and everyone will hate it. He modestly omits to mention that every album so far has met with critical acclaim. Until then, Joe would like to pass on Woody Guthrie's message: 'Take it easy, but take it.'