



STRUMMER SOUNDS OFF

... about Jamaica, Jesus and Jam. And about money, too.

Chris Salewicz reports.

Like it was for many people, 1980 was a confusing year for The Clash. At the beginning of Spring, the group suddenly broke through commercially in America, with Top Twenty hits for both the *London Calling* album and *Train In Vain* single.

Meanwhile, however, the four members of the group were embroiled in England in what seemed the most pointless yet of all their by now almost cliched squabbles with CBS, their record company.

Having sworn to mark the year by a continual stream of 45s, The Clash's very first attempts at upholding this vow were stymied when English CBS refused to release *The Bankrobbing Song*.

Although it was deemed to have commercial possibilities in other CBS territories, the UK division of the company apparently believed that this single's obvious hit melody didn't stand a chance.

In the late summer, the single was eventually issued. It rose to number 11 on the charts, a position that could have been far bettered had it not been for the vast quantities of import copies that already had been purchased in England.

"They refused to put it out," says Joe Strummer "and so we refused to record anything else. We left it at that for a while. We had a load of

rough mixes from stuff we'd done in New York, but we held off from finishing them off or doing any studio work until they put it out."

After the release of the *Bankrobbing* single, however, The Clash went into Wessex Studios in North London and finished off what became *Sandinista*, the triple album the group got out just before Christmas at a single LP price.

To permit this The Clash themselves have done deals with CBS under which they stand to make little or no profit. In England, *Sandinista* will have to sell more than 200,000 copies before the group makes a single penny — yet *London Calling* only finally tottered up the tally sheet at 180,000. "We'll just have to do a bit better," says the eternally optimistic Strummer. Similar agreements have been reached in other parts of the world.

Sandinista was recorded in three different studios — in Channel One in Kingston, Jamaica, in Wessex in London, and mostly in Electric Ladyland in New York during and after The Clash's early 1980 Spring tour of the States.

Strummer himself claims to have had little experience of the more esoteric example of contemporary rock music: "I've never heard anything by Joy Division. I must be the only person left in the world who hasn't heard them. I feel really out of touch. I've never heard a single one

of all these records that get reviewed in the papers. The ones I do hear really turn me off."

He has a deep suspicion of many of the independent labels, particularly after he heard that Rough Trade had turned down The Modettes on the grounds of being "ideologically unsound": "That's close to Fascism, isn't it?"

I tell Joe that the sheer length of time necessary to be devoted to *Sandinista* had made me resent The Clash the first time I'd played that sprawling sound system-like extravaganza.

Later, though, I'd found that by playing the triple set at random, choosing individual songs or sides, the record had seemed to be solidly in the iconoclastic, witty tradition of greatness set by its predecessors.

"It's a bit over the top, isn't it?" chuckles Joe at my plight. "It's supposed to last you a year, though. There's loads of bits and pieces all over it that you can just suddenly come across and get into. Mind you, we got really slated for it in a load of reviews — just for its length alone. But that PIL album, *Metal Box*, that was three records and used up just as much vinyl, even if it did play at different speed and cost more.

"We seem to really get up people's noses, though I think it's really good. We always bring out some reaction in people."

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Joe, much slighter in stature than his gruff bark makes him sound, is sitting at a table in the small, overpriced flat he shares with girlfriend Gabbie.

Staring down on us in the dimly lit room is a giant-sized poster of Elvis Presley in *Jailhouse Rock*. Sipping from a glass of beer, and playing compulsively with a switch-blade knife that almost belies a true nature that is gentle and unassuming, the romantic realist that is Joe Strummer further considers *Sandinista* all these weeks after its release.

"Some of it is very American sounding," he admits. "But if you go somewhere then obviously it's going to leave its mark on you — and we did that American tour and stayed there for quite a while.

"Most of the album was actually written in Electric Ladyland in New York. We might have had an idea for a number but with virtually every one we waited until we were actually in the studio before working it up into a song or into a backing track. We would make it up just before we recorded it. Before, we'd usually practised all the songs really thoroughly until we could play them all and then march into the studio and record them straight off.

"That's what we did for *London Calling* and all our other records. This is not so much like a record, it's more like an experiment . . . these songs are more like demos, I suppose."

It has been suggested that one reason for the multiplicity of styles on the album was because The Clash were unclear in their own heads as to what they were doing. It was known, after all, that there had been occasional on-the-road rows between Joe and guitarist Mick Jones.

Joe, though, dismisses any suggestion that the arguments might have had any long-term basis to them. "It's just that Mick doesn't like being on the road at all. He really hates it. He has to get a bit pissed to go onstage.

"So there was a conflict there in that the rest of us still really enjoy touring, and Mick thinks it's a trial and tribulation. So something or somebody has to suffer. The rest of us just think of it as a good laugh.

"Mind you, there are lots of things that aren't right about touring. The way they're set at the moment, you're just supposed to go out and sell records and the record company get much more out of it than you do. Yet they are only willing to come up with, say, 10,000 dollars to support a tour when, in fact, you are going to lose something like 30,000 to 40,000 dollars.

"Like when they give you money for studio time or for tour support, then every penny that they pay seems to be one that we owe to them.

"So for a band at the sort of level that we're at, the debts just seem to go on and on and get worse instead of better. Royalties take a really long time to come through, and if you do a few tours that wipes them out anyway.

"It's a question of us having decided that we have to stop all this. You can't go on digging yourself deeper and deeper into debt. It's just ridiculous.

"I reckon it should go back to the local scene. You know, really low key. All the really big groups make money on tour in America when they play these huge stadiums every night. Their ticket income is multiplied by 20 every night, yet the costs for crew and equipment are about the same as ours."

Also, I say to Joe, the human expense, the wear and tear on human beings in rock'n'roll, seems to be most uneconomical. Well, that's what usually does happen. It seems inevitable that people get worn out and fight with each other, that you and Mick should have been rowing . . .

"We're not rowing at all" says Joe. "It happens that we have rows sometimes, but then you have rows with your girlfriend, too. You forget about it the next day — it's not the end of the world. It's not just one row that causes groups to split up . . ."

The *Sandinista* title has ensured that yet again The Clash are being accused of naive political sloganeering. Really, though, *Washington Bullets*, the song that is partially concerned with the Nicaraguan people's overthrow of the dictator Somoza, is a simple, sad anthem to freedom, pointing out along its path a few of the crimes against other peoples committed not just by the United States, but also by Russia and by other imperialistic viewpoints.

Strummer isn't too concerned about any accusations of being radical chic. "Bob Dylan said if you can't bring good news then don't bring any. And I feel what we're bringing is good news. Nicaraguan people taking their country over for a change instead of the US-supported dictator running it. Maybe everyone is just secretly guilty because all over the Western world they've been electing right-wing leaders.

"In France they've had one for years, and we've got Thatcher and now there's Reagan. But I think a lot of people just want to listen to real *FUN* musicians and just forget about it.

"People just want to hear about clothes or fashion or sex and gossip. They don't want to talk about the main thing that's real.

He goes on: "We saw the same sort of thing going on in Jamaica when we were down there. It was before the election and people getting shot every day. We were travelling down to Channel One studio and a youth of 14 was shot dead on Hope Road just ten minutes after we'd gone past it.

"Not that we didn't have our own problems in Jamaica. We could only do one song when we went down to Channel One — that was *Junko Partner*. Then we had to leave town in a hurry. All the people down there that hang about outside the studios — the session musicians and songwriters — they believe that if you're a white group then you must have loads of money, and, therefore, 'Where's our share?'

"But we were stuck there on Paul's girlfriends credit card desperately trying to wire some money through from CBS for the whole week we were down there.

"But when we went down to Channel One they were starting to threaten Mikey Dread and the natty Kongos who were working with us. They said they were going to beat them up and

Thinking man's Joe



do their house over. Then they said they were going to wait until after dark and do everybody as they left the session in the midnight hour. And Mikey Dread was convinced that we should just pack our guitars and move out there and then. So we just left the studio, quick-style."

The final track on side three of *Sandinista* is *The Sound of Sinners* an elaborate gospel pastiche that, along with references to Biblical mythology, contains the lines: "After all this time/To believe in Jesus" — words that should be little cause for surprise considering Joe's affinity with the devotional-based reggae music.

Those words about believing in Jesus are followed by two more lines "After all those drugs/I thought I was him." Joe subtly sidesteps, though, when I inquire whether that was part of his own experience.

"You know, people tripping freak out and think they are Jesus. It's the most common one apart from jumping out of windows thinking you can fly. Thinking you are Jesus is the second cliché of tripping, isn't it?"

"But I wanted to see words like 'drugs' in a gospel song. Because I like all the imagery in gospel like 'Going down to the riverside', and all that stuff. You know, you can have 'hurricanes' and 'winds of fury' and all that.

"In the Bible," he adds dramatically, "they blew the horns and the walls of the city crumbled . . . well, punk rock was like that."

The Sound of Sinners obviously is a strong reference to what Joe has spoken of elsewhere as the religious feelings he's been discovering within himself. With this as a starting point a lateral thinking leads me to the suggestion of hard-line left or right-wing viewpoints as bigoted as each other. "Well," nods Joe, "Western society I see that the way it's going that it's every man for himself. If you have a job, you can't have any money.

"So how are people going to find a way if that's what they have to deal with? It's like eat dog, isn't it? People feel that? It's made out that it's some competition one over on your fellow mate. Then people are supposed to . . ."

Joe walks through into the kitchen to fetch us each another beer. He is running the cold water tap with effort to lower their temperature.

"It's true," he reflects, "but it's not people's noses. But it's like I've grovelled to all the time . . . like every review I read is 'wonderful, fresh energetic young trio' . . . I finally got the information I was looking for in all of all things the *Daily Express*. They said that they thought The Jam were becoming really lacklustre.

I tell Joe that I really love a lot of The Jam's singles, and cite *Start* as an example of the excellence I find within the group.

He retorts: "*Start*? Awful! See, you're not a musician, so you have a different viewpoint. If you're a musician then you listen to The Jam, and all you hear is lock-stock-and-barrel lifts. And I'm not saying that nobody lifts stuff, but at least most people have the decency to try and think of some original way of letting the steal be of some use.

"Being a musician, you don't judge it objectively. You ask yourself whether it's a good record or it isn't a good record. You judge it thinking about the creative processes that produce the record, rather than the record itself as direct competition, or whatever.

"You start seeing it from the creative process. Whether they make good records or not I wouldn't be able to tell you. I only ever listen to them from that viewpoint."

Suddenly Joe's attention is grabbed by a *Newsflash* card on the volumeless TV screen. He jumps up and turns on the sound. The news is of a letter bomb attack. Joe smirks: "That's a bit amateur, isn't it? I can't see a letter bomb doing the job. We've all got to try a bit harder than that."