

# WHO WANTS TO BE A MILLIONAIRE?

Joe Strummer don't. Neither do The Clash. They just wanna make triple albums. Paul Slattery snaps. David Hepworth raps (ouch!)

**N**ME PHOTOGRAPHER Pennie Smith hit the nail on the head. After spending time on the road with The Clash for her book "The Clash: Before And After", she compared the experience to "a commando raid by The Bash Street Kids".

It was a tongue in cheek comment, but one that throws as much light on Clash Appeal and Clash Dilemma as any of yer in-depth profiles. Inconsistent, self contradictory and occasionally self pitying, The Clash have made an art form of biting off more than can be

chewed.

1980 HAS BEEN a fairly typical Clash year. Two steps forward, one step back most of the way.

Last year's "London Calling" and the touring that backed it up established them as a commercial force in America, something that only two years ago was next to unthinkable. By taking "Train In Vain" from the album — "the only track that doesn't sound like The Clash" as one American DJ pointed out — CBS even put them on the singles chart.

Back in Blighty things rapidly degenerated into the farcical via a prolonged face-off with the record company over the release of "Bankrobber", the sort of unnecessary squabble that a band of their stature should have put behind them long ago. The release of their fourth album — a vast sprawl of a three record set called "Sandinista!" — was marked by their fourth change of management in four years. Business as usual.

"We're not very organised," grins a weary but amused Joe Strummer. "We're not like The Jam who've got a very tight ship, with Dad running things and everything planned out. I find it pretty inhuman the way these groups have got it all so wonderfully sewn up and just jump into the number one spot whenever they feel like it.

"I'm glad we're the way we are. It's more exciting. We go through great depressions and then we get very exhilarated."

The black clouds were gathering fairly heavily for The Clash this summer. Stories of a possible break up were legion. Mick Jones was off in The States with his girlfriend Ellen Foley, Paul Simonon was dabbling in movies and Joe Strummer was said to be muttering darkly about having reached the end of the line and devoting himself to building a studio.

The tattered sails of the good ship Clash have obviously been mended, but what exactly happened?

"We just had a punch up really," says Joe with admirable forthrightness. "A simple common or garden punch up. Due to touring in Europe. It's a strain and we tend to take it out on each other. But in the morning who cares? We just pull ourselves back together again."

Older now and a little wiser, Joe is a good deal more determined to keep the band functioning.

"It's so easy to have a fit and just smash the whole thing up," he says with the air of a man who entertained such thoughts frequently. "But what are you gonna follow that with? I look at my friends who've destroyed their groups and they're not

really coming up with anything that powerful. So that's a warning to us. A warning that we heed."

THE LAST couple of years have seen what started out as A Lark turn into A Career. Although Strummer still maintains his rather confused rebel stance — as well as his original biker jacket — each new horizon that has opened up to him has had its effect on his thinking and his music.

"Sandinista!" abounds with references to faraway places with strange sounding names while the music covers nearly every base, from rockabilly to jazz, from country to reggae via gospel. This diversity has brought a lot of criticism from the punk puritans. (You know the kind — more than two chords is heresy.)

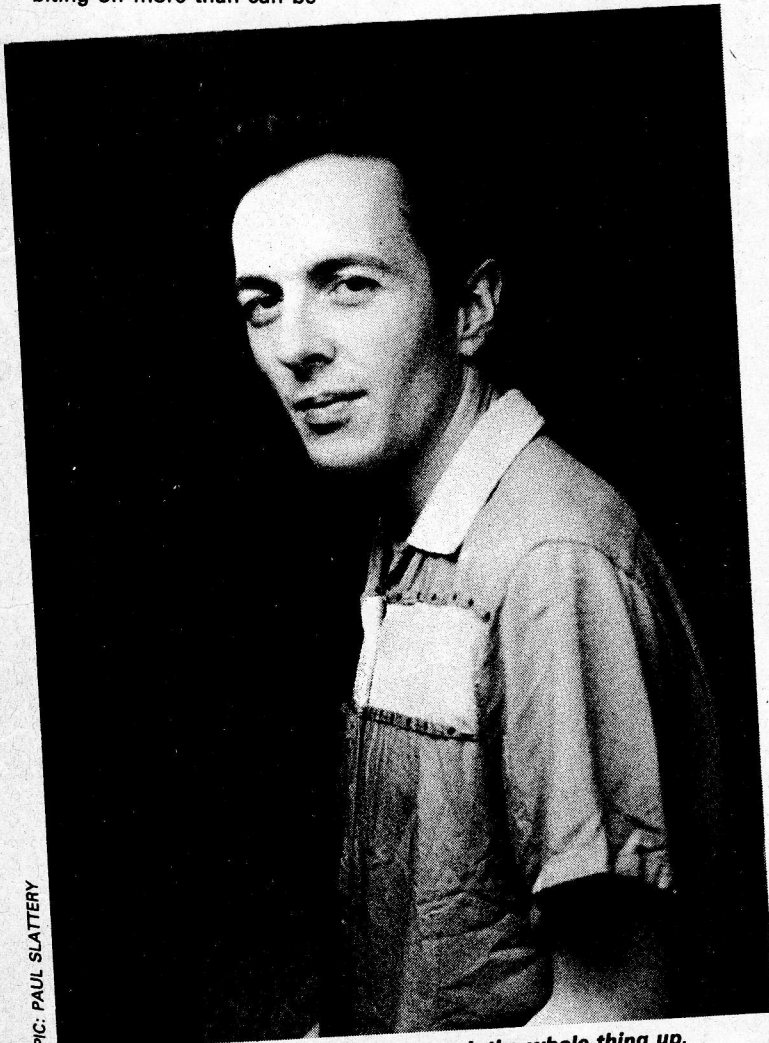
"We're gonna record just exactly what we want to record," Joe declares, "and nothing else. We never pay any attention until afterwards when the record is out and you're in Hamburg and there's some mob of punks shouting 'Sell out!' Then you start thinking 'I'm glad we put this record out before we met this bunch because we're right and they're wrong.' I know they are."

"The New Wave Of Heavy Metal has just recently reached the end of its blind alley just because it deals in recreating the blueprint of ten years ago. I don't think that kind of thing can last. I think eventually people making the best and newest and most original music will be remembered."

Although Joe still sees punk as "viable", The Clash are determined to get out of the way of bands who are playing it.

"They've a right to play it because they can't play anything else. And I think that's a strength. But in five years time those bands won't be playing punk rock because they'll have learnt another lick. And why go home and play that in your bedroom and pretend that you don't know it?"

THAT'S A valid argument, but the problem with "Sandinista!" —



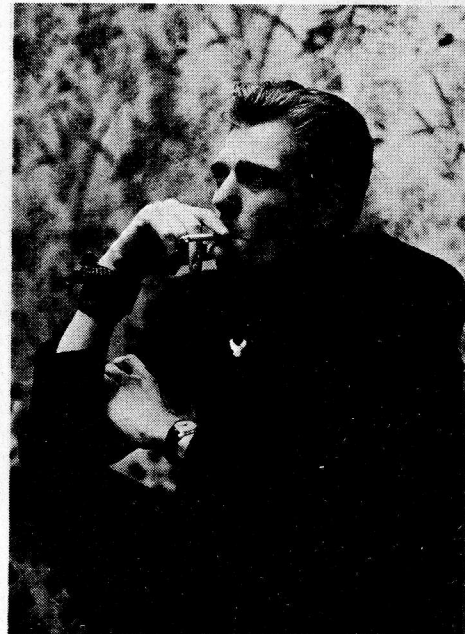
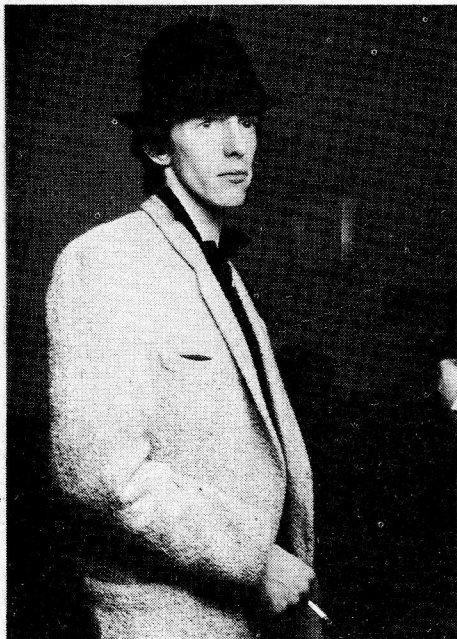
PIC: PAUL SLATTERY

"It's so easy to have a fit and just smash the whole thing up. But what are you gonna follow that with?"

Continued over page ...







from previous page

one that it shares with most Clash records only more so — is that the ideas outstrip the execution.

It's a tribute to their love of music but a giant sized example of their unwillingness to make records with the precision and attention to detail that makes music really live. Some of the vocals are frankly dreadful. Not just off the cuff or casual but downright awful.

Then there's the title — the name of the revolutionary group who recently toppled a long established dictatorship in Nicaragua, but a rather ill considered choice for a band who have repeatedly been accused of borrowing radical clothes to suit their image.

"I just look at it as a space on a piece of cardboard that will be all over the world," is Joe's defence. "I'm proud of the fact that our records are heard all over the world. We could have put some 'groovy' phrase on there, like 'Hedgehogs Are Cool' or something equally meaningless. But I wanted to put something that means something, and perhaps people will investigate what it is."

It's also, Joe reckons, "a very powerful word."

As for the album's marathon length, that was just for the hell of it, according to Strummer.

"It just grew. We went into Electric Ladyland after the American tour in February and we just made some music and it just kept going on and on. Six

months later we got into the studio over here and we cut some more stuff. We added it all up and we realised we weren't going to get it on our usual two and so we thought, let's go for three.

"We've had to take a cut in order to get the company to agree. A certain number of LPs have to be sold before we see any money from it."

The American market — where many of those LPs might be sold — did not fall to the band after their touring campaign.

"We never really put a lot of worry into that," Joe offers. "As for actually 'cracking it', we thought it was a ridiculous idea to start with.

"When we first went there, the opposition to it was pretty intense, from all the radio stations and all that. But we managed to sell a few copies of 'London Calling' since then. It's a good thing too because we don't sell that many records here."

THE CLASH are not rich. Every tour ends up in the accountant's office and Joe admits that he has to be bullied into going along because he can't stand the depression of listening to him.

"It's really our fault," he concedes. "We were very naive when we started. We didn't realise what an advance was. We thought it was a free gift, which it isn't. We're trying to patch things together and we're getting better at it all the time. Our finances are in a lot better condition now than

they were a year ago."

But The Clash still don't sell all that many records. Apart from the fact that their 45s are too disorderly to have mass appeal, The Clash have consistently refused to appear on Top Of The Pops — the single most important piece of exposure in the game.

Back in 1977 Joe declared that the whole farce should be done away with. It was, he recalls, "a five minute decision" after an abortive attempt to mime on a German TV show.

Joe will admit, however, to being a regular TOTP viewer.

"I wouldn't miss it if I can help it. But I'd like to see a TV show that had some excitement to it, in that people are actually putting themselves on the line."

Don't The Clash owe it to their fans to make themselves visible, even if it is through a programme that dilutes the power of the music?

"I don't think it's unfair," Joe considers. "I think people are going to get more out of us if they make an effort to get out of their bedrooms and get a ticket to see the show for real."

But even if that were possible now, those tickets are going to get considerably scarcer in the future. Disinclined to take on any more massive tours, The Clash plan to put on fewer but more ambitious shows — but in carefully selected venues, possibly well off the beaten track. Another example of The Clash's

left hand not being entirely sure about the intentions of the right.

There's no doubt, however, that Joe's heart is still in the right place.

"In the past money has been kept to be sat on. A ranch or a lovely house with a big wall. I don't think that any of us want to get into that at all.

"When we do get a billion pounds, I hope that we'd use it to create a million opportunities. That's what I want to achieve — a useful function of money. They say that money is energy and it must be passed around."

THE CLASH have always aimed way beyond their reach. It's this ambition that causes some people to write them off as hopeless charlatans while others believe in them near-religiously. It's their willingness to risk getting egg on their faces that will probably keep them from joining The Police and Gary Numan in the mega-league.

It could also be that The Clash want to continue making their music at a sane level.

"I like that aspect," Joe agrees. "It's slightly foolish at times but it's better than limiting yourself. To know your limitations is a hell of a thing. It's the mark of a man. But you've got to keep pushing in order to find those limitations."

I'm convinced that when Joe Strummer does actually come up against his limitations, he'll refuse to acknowledge them. Personally, I like him.