

TEN GUNS IN LA

FIGHTING ROCK FATIGUE WITH THE CLASH BY DAVE MC CULLOUGH

WHERE TO start: okay, I'll start with the Clash staying at Le Parc hotel in West Hollywood, one of the city's plushiest we were assured and even though situated just down the road from a whole series of suitably Clashesque, famous Tom Waits and Kerouac locales, surely an indication of the change the Clashers have gone through . . . all of a sudden.

Next I recall the first night we were in Hollywood, feeling fashionably jet-lagged after an eleven hour flight stepping into the Clashmobile and seeing, apart from 'keeper' Ray at the wheel, a wild series of young men dressed in combat gear with shorn hair-looking cool, sure, but more the Clash of '77 than the fashion idols of '81.

Somethin's goin' on, and I knew it all along (see 'Combat Rock' review).

More: at the Hollywood Palladium the Clash were unusually relaxed backstage. The shorter haircuts (I know this is stupid, but it means a lot to an old 'punk' like me), the bimbling around of this wet-behind-the-ears KID, who was there with his sweet little wife and who resembles Norman Wisdom or Michael Crawford (even with the combat gear) — these little scenes of almost domestic bliss, with graffiti artist Futura with his 'Kermi' voice adding to the attraction and easy-goingness of things — it all spelt something that was obvious and wonderful and would have made the hardest hearted, punk rooted, Clash-cynic (they are legion!) crumble in a heap of hopeful nostalgia.

The Clash are back, maybe not with a bang but with an almost self-mocking whimper. Good news.

THE CLASH are steadily becoming huge in America; they sold out five nights at the Palladium where, for instance, the Jam struggled to sell out one. This is a horrible 'business' detail but I relate it as important, given the irrefutable Clash rejuvenation and, more to the point, the direction it'll send them in.

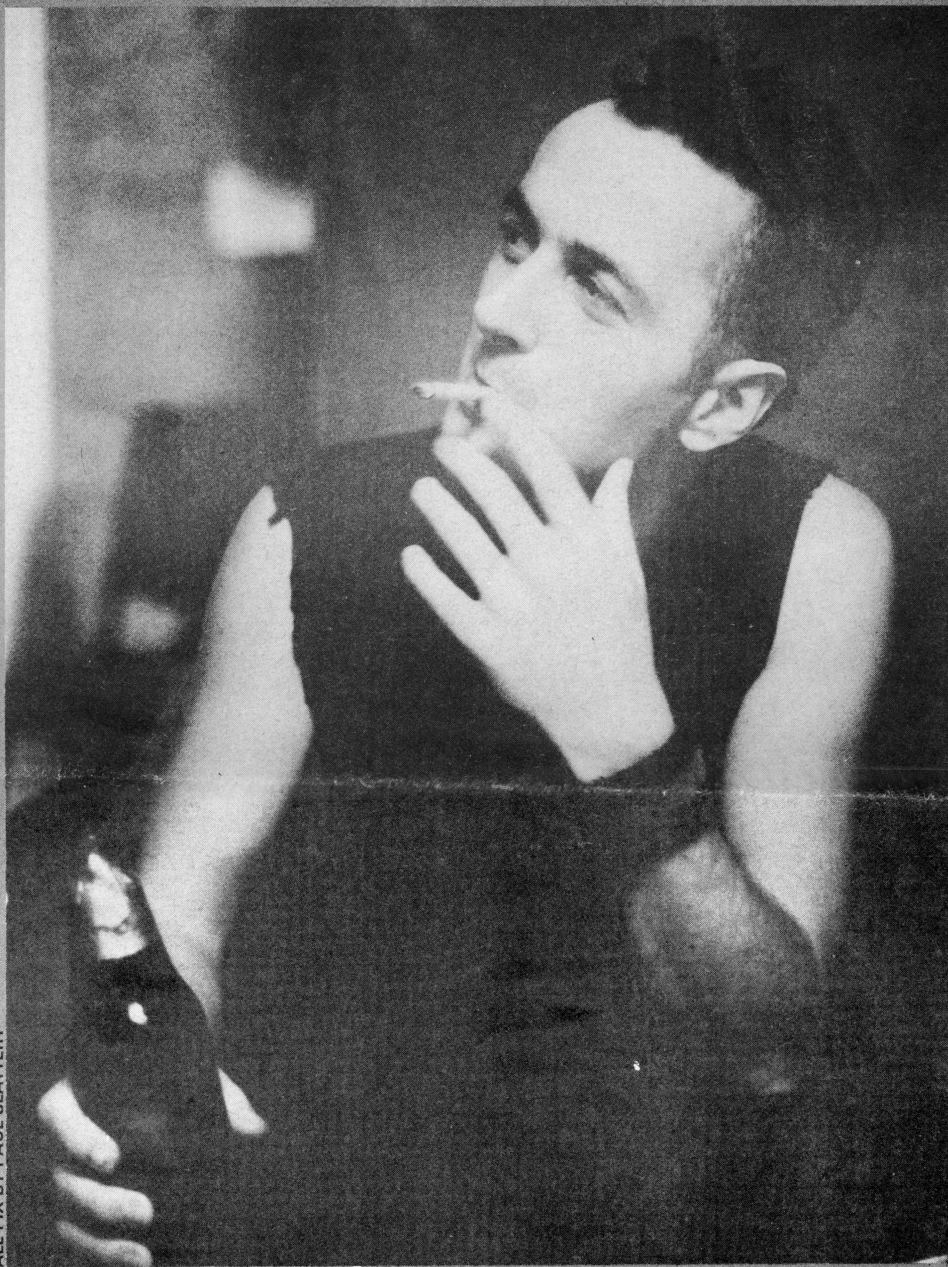
It has the smell of more 'exiles on main street', the Clash becoming stars in the horrid Americas and old has-beens in the land of Our Boys. Bad? Not so bad, as we'll later see.

Certainly at the Palladium the Clash played 'live' in equal measure as 'Combat Rock' has sharpened them up, made them all of a sudden alive again, on record. And they played almost exclusively only the first, and a bit of the second, album material!

Nostalgia? It would make you (I already flagged out flying) see a local quack.

Thing is, as the layers of incredulous euphoria build up like some sort of crass cartoon 'Heroes Back Again' storyline — thing is, songs like 'Career Opportunities', 'Janie Jones', 'London's Burning' et cetera, with 'Safe European Home' chipped in as the most contemporary thing around (it was blistering too), these songs were performed with the kind of fresh faced élan you wouldn't have credited short of reincarnation.

The Clash are back-back



ALL PIX BY PAUL SLATTERY

to front, they are belying their own, so sought after destinies.

It is practically hilarious. How could it be otherwise (all good and great groups have big streaks of comedy down them; even the most serious, believe me), with the 'Penguin' figure of Bernard Rhodes employing the pathetic figures of backstage goils to fetch and carry drinks to him (and me asking him what his role now is with the Clash and him answering in Jewish, drunken indignation: I OWN THIS GROUP), or with legendary mentor, and 'Travis' voice-over star of 'Straight To Hell', Kosmo Vinyl swopping the normal chorus of the Supremes 'I'll Be There' for the (revealing?) lines of:

"Bernard Rhodes/He'll steal all your mon-eee . . . Et cetera and so on. All this nonsense, and then having to join with the band in sneaking around Hollywood like criminals in order to avoid a So Many Million Dollar law suit that this old toad was going to

slap on them for their using his TV advert in the centre of 'Innoculated City' (big black He Man, Ray featuring heavily in this).

All this, and the Clash at the top playing as hot as they did in punk days, but now with enough skill to send them (during 'Murdered') to heights of great BEAUTY now (Strummer turning round with a big broad smile for Chimes at one memorable, seething moment) — it's enough to give you a heart attack.

It's enough to make you want to read on.

(THE INTERVIEW takes place, finally, much arguing later, in a hotel bedroom in the early hours — not my kinda thing. One had heard the Clash wanted to 'do' Sounds to get back to, gulp. 'Street Level', wanted Bushell or me. Strummer quite drunk, so am I. A man is selling cars on LA late night telly, he is walking on to his car lot followed by a camel — America's this kind of place. We turn the sound down.)

DMcC: I hear you started running.

STRUMMER: I do all my jogging in one go. I do a Marathon a year. It half kills me. I'll practice before it in future. What do you think of Terry (Chimes)?

DMcC: He was the star of both shows. Seriously, he's got that raw back-beat going again.

STRUMMER: I'm glad about that. It's a hell of a thing, after five years, to come in. . . We're used to playing really long sets you see, with everything 'right' down to the last second. Too long really. . . we know a hell of a lot of numbers. Maybe I could teach it all to Terry; given time. . .

DMcC: Will Topper Headon be back?

STRUMMER: Well . . . I don't really think so. I think he's getting something together himself right now. (Turns off cassette, tells me the story they want people to hear is that Topper left because he was politically out of key with the group, but that the real reason, which I unfortunately have

to break to Strummer's been already leaked in Britain, is to do with nasty substances. And that Topper was sacked by Strummer personally.)

A trauma. . . It's horrible having to do. I thought Topper was really good. Man, was he talented! He could play synth, he could play bass, or guitar or piano — I just can't do anything like that. . . We had to find a drummer within five days before this tour. FIVE DAYS! We couldn't think of anybody except Terry. We just went therefore for what he knew, so we're playing the old stuff on this tour. I. . . I still kinda like that old material.

DMcC: It sounded really fresh. Any reasons for this?

STRUMMER: I think we're really desperate, really hungry again. Cos Topper's left and we feel vulnerable again. That adds a desperation, a franticness to everything, and that feeds the old stuff really well.

I've been feeling pretty strange this tour. I'm getting older, but I don't want to

not confront that fact. I WANT to face it. The difference is, in the old days, nothing but the gig was important.

Sometimes on this American tour, and if you'd seen some dates YOU'D have said to our faces we were really poxy or something, you know, this ain't so hot — I've had this strange feeling I've never had before. I couldn't turn myself off during a performance.

I used to be one with the audience, but lately sometimes my mind's been separate, it's not been one with what I've been doing. Sometimes when I see the audience I'm not interested.

I see them slam dancing. . . We're up here but our egos never forget that. You only get up on stage because you've a huge ego. I want everybody to be looking at us, and they're into slam dancing, whatever.

I start thinking, What am I doing up here? I can't take my mind off that feeling. I've been feeling pretty weird.

DMcC: Maybe the Clash have stopped being a 'protest band' and started being a soulband. You said in the rap line tonight:

"Don't you realise there's no answer?" That sums the change up, while making it clear that it, life is STILL a problem and a problem to be dealt with. . .

STRUMMER: Yeah, and it's like we're coming to recognise certain limitations we've got. Like the political thing. They insist we're Marxists over here, they pulled the police guns out on us in Atlanta. Somebody told the cops there was a Communist riot going on down town. And they freaked!

But, no, I've been on radio shows over here and they've asked me political questions I just haven't had an answer for. What's your great plan to save the world Joe? I dunno.

DMcC: I read a yank paper that said, why do these fellas dress like they do if they aren't Reds? Trouble is, I see what they mean. Is it just pure ego?

STRUMMER: Well you've been watching

Simonon. . . I'm certain he practices in front of a mirror! We've got to cope with how it's changed for us. As I say, I'm getting older. The difference between the sort of 'youthful naivety' we're always accused of and . . . it's strange still to be doing it, you know? I thought we'd have blown up somewhere back down the line. That's what I'm trying to get at.

DMcC: You're here because you enjoy it still. . . STRUMMER: I do, but I can't still shake the feeling off. Why am I doing this still?

DMcC: I don't think the audience tonight understood a word you were saying. Though, the energy was enough in itself. You seem to deal now in beauty too — an awkward kind of beauty.

STRUMMER: You know Bob Dylan came to check us out? Imagine that! Even though we weren't good on the night, it was weird thinking Bob Dylan was out there. He's said to have been recording rock 'n' roll again the very next morning. CBS have said that.

Me and Kosmo are the only two that really like Dylan. Like Simonon thinks he's hippy. . . But imagine, the very next day! Some of the lyrics that guy's written in his time. . .

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CLASH

DMcC: Is there a conscious pun in the title 'Combat Rock'?

STRUMMER: Definitely there is. It's a sort of drunken in-joke of the band's. I mean we know we're a rock band now, and we know also that rock's unfashionable. But I meant it seriously at the time...

DMcC: America's your big influence and your big problem.

STRUMMER: It's true, the USA is our one big influence. But in order to survive we have to spend more time here. Even people like the Jam are coming here now. To survive you have to. Which means you get terribly influenced by the place.

Our album was recorded here and it has that huge American influence all through it... but I'm not sure if it's good. If anybody asks me where

I'd like to live I wouldn't hesitate: it's London. This time America's been really different because all the romanticism has gone. First two times I came with a headfull of Kerouac and Tom Waits and Woody Guthrie — that's all out the window now.

I see America as ugly, plasticated, horrific — all the same from New Jersey to wherever. That Zappa song about American TV, "let the sludge pour out of your TV set", that's what it's like. Thank God for English TV.

England's given us the big brush off, we know that. We probably wouldn't have had to come here if it hadn't. Even so, I want to live in London. I'm not in love with this place AT ALL. But it's good in a way; I mean, I have to live somewhere where I can be free to walk around.

I'm sure Paul Weller'd get people shrieking at him when he walks down the street. But I can live quite freely in London. I don't want to be 'one of those faces' and that's why I can't stand LA 'cos I can't walk about.

I think if we'd really made it, we'd have had it. We've always seemed to be struggling. Like we got this British tour; and it ain't sold out, we have to really struggle to sell it out! That's a fact of life. I'm glad of that. I'd hate to feel we've really made it. I like to feel we've a constant struggle on our hands.

Though it was a great feeling to be Number two for a week in good old Britain, you know?

DMcC: Would you appear on *TOTP* now?

STRUMMER: No I wouldn't. I don't think that programme has an effect on

the people the Clash reach. I'm still hopeful *TOTP* isn't the be-all and end-all of British TV. And I still can't get *Ready Steady Go* out of my head...

There's no thrills in Britain but it's somehow an amazingly creative place. Everything seems to Start Off there musically. I mean, I ask around here, who's the new Doors and they look back at me dumb. There's no one here...

WHILE IN LA, the TV stations were buzzing with news of Hinckley's trail. There was also an attempt to organise a petition to have Martin Scorsese sent trial, presumably for inciting loonies to shoot important people, because of the content of *Taxi Driver*, the movie that's so influenced 'Combat Rock' and current

Strummer thinking. Strummer's even (almost) perfected the De Niro Mohican hairstyle. He looks genuinely wild.

STRUMMER: That's more Clash Americana, the *Taxi Driver* bit. Kosmo gave the Travis speech one day and I just could not get it out of my head. It's so true for this place...

DMcC: It's a fitting symbol for the Clash turnaround.

STRUMMER: We're always trying to kick off what we've always been, because that, that means Clash destruction. I want to be creative. And I don't want to be everything I 'have to be'. It's like Hendrix refusing to do his old songs — and they didn't like that.

We want to be free; if possible. I'd rather be free than go down as a has-been. Just to regurgitate. It's very difficult for us, you know. Because that first album just

keeps on getting more and more relevant!

DMcC: 'Career Opportunities' is truer than it ever was. And you're playing it again!

STRUMMER: Yeah, it's getting heavier. It's hard to live with, because I sort of said it then in one go, and now I've had to go on from there; it's tough. But I enjoy it. My ego's enormous.

I even enjoy being corny. I enjoy *BEING THE CLASH*.

DMcC: That's extraordinary. That's mainly the reason why you were shot down critically after the first album. And why, I think, the Rolling Stones comparisons are applicable.

STRUMMER: True. I think they're applicable too. Mick I think is... that early Mick Jones is definitely besotted by Keith Richards. It's true! It has to be said. I myself was much more of a Stones fan when I was a kid than anything else.

I think '1977' was an attempt to kick that out. Make a new space to work in. But I don't respect the Rolling Stones any more. Their creativity is nil.

I think it's definitely down to punk rock, the fact they're playing all these early songs again, it kicked them in the bum so hard they're having to do and re-record that good stuff again.

If it hadn't been for punk rock they'd be writing songs about owning Rolls Royces. Punk rock rejuvenated the Stones.

Punk was the only fad that ever moved me. And it was mainly down to that thing of, 'Anybody Can Do It'. That idea is so important still. As soon as we're into techno rock, all that shit... you have to be a bit, you know, clever or scientific to play that.

DMcC: The Clash have a muscle, a dynamo still live. Even in the sense that a New Order have too...

STRUMMER: Yeah, I know we're old fashioned but I still go for the Raw-get up there and do it.

DMcC: It's almost like exorcism night after night — trying to kill off the Stones' influences, tradition.

STRUMMER: Live, you see, is what saves us. Like the Stones, we're a live band. I love playing those songs, that idea of the four of us. I mean, the Clash are ABOUT these four geezers trying to bluff their way through, it might be a load of old tat but THAT'S the Clash.

DMcC: I see Townsend's trying to flog his new solo LP by continually linking together you and Paul Weller. As I do I suppose!

But do you have any empathy towards Weller?

STRUMMER: I really like Weller, as a person. We'd get on really well if we met in a room. But, to be quite honest, I think he's in a non creative situation. And I feel the set-up of the Jam doesn't do him... Weller enough to be Weller!

I respect him but I expect so much more from him too. I used to think he'd one of the great white soul voices. But I... can't seem to hear it these days. I'm worried about that. Yeah, even though he always slags us off, Weller, yeah he's a cool cat all right...

DMcC: Did you get married...

STRUMMER: Oh no, I'm already married. I married a non British for £150 to buy that black guitar I played tonight. I can't manage to get divorced though. I... can't seem to find my wife. That is, I can't seem to remember her surname. This sounds ridiculous I know. But that name... it just won't come back to me. It's like a novel.

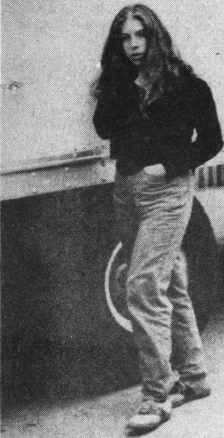
DMcC: What about the runaway 'tempter'?

STRUMMER: I just got up and went! My girlfriend's mother is in jail in France, so I had a personal reason to go there, but I did literally get up and go. I went to shake the Clash up, to shake the Clash fans up, to shake the Clash haters up. To shake myself up too.

It was a bravado thing. I mean, we've done six years of this...

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CLASH



I still think we can go on to be relevant, still be viable and realistic.

What I was thinking at the time was, Mick Jagger's 38 whatever and he's still up there prancing around. Somehow I wanna avoid that. I really want to avoid it.

DMcC: You'd have to do more runners.

STRUMMER: Jagger did something pure and good in his youth. . . and now he has to recreate it. I have to avoid that at all costs. I don't know how but I'll try.

"We've got this self-destructive streak in the Clash. If we think we shouldn't do something, we'll do it. We're supposed to be out there struggling for attention with all the other super groups.

But none of them have our self-destructive urge. The *NME* I'll tell ya had a headline on us that said, 'Up The Hill Backwards'. I looked at it and I thought, 'It's f***in' TRUE! Ha ha!

DMcC: It's wilful though. It's like the Lennon and McCartney clichés. The Clash are definitely Lennons.

STRUMMER: It is wilful yeah. But I think we'll continue to exist on it. Boy, would we be f***ed if we ever made it!

DMcC: Number two. Close. . .

STRUMMER: That was great: to be accepted in our home land for that we'd give up everything, everything we've meant in any other country all over the world. I think, Jesus do we really mean that little in England? Has it got that bad? It's better to deal with the situation though, to face it.

DMcC: Whereas Dylan seems to be heading back to the Clash's rock and roll style, the Clash seem ironically to be heading towards the narrative style of the likes of Dylan, Morrison and Joni Mitchell.

DMcC: That's kind of richness on 'Combat Rock', that's what I'm saying.

STRUMMER: Van The Man, I know a lot about him from 101ers days. I think he started to go off it a bit when he moved to America. His true experience I felt belonged to N Ireland.

But 'Cypress Avenue' — that was his soul. 'Astral Weeks' is so f***in' BRILLIANT — and then he moved over here and went down the pan.

It's a good parallel to do with a lot of people as well. Maybe it's true, every writer

has just one good book in him or, with us, maybe only two good albums. Maybe we should all pack it in after doing something great, I don't know. It remains to be seen.

But, Jesus, 'Cypress Avenue' and 'TB Sheets' — I just knew he'd lived those songs and been to those places. 'Madam George' . . .

DMcC: People will find this funny — Strummer's into THESE things after all.

STRUMMER: Yeah well I've got to be honest. I defy anybody to say 'Cypress Avenue' isn't soul I thought Morrison's genius was he could take one phrase, or even a word, and stretch it out unbelievably, play with it. . .

STRAIGHT TO Hell' seemed to me to be about heroin.

STRUMMER: Not really. It's about having no place in the world to live. Kids growing up with Thatcher, being denied education, being denied their actual piece of this world they're entitled to.

Verse one's about 'Amerasian', which is an actual kosher word now, that's offspring of American GIs: they're really looked down upon in their homeland and they're not allowed to go to America. . . Verse three does deal with heroin. All the junk they sell to people to kill them off with. . .

DMcC: Heroin from personal experience?

STRUMMER: I've never taken heroin and if anyone comes round with it I just tell them GET OUT. Anybody who deals with that is a right idiot. I think junk's evil, no doubt about that.

All that Burroughs' *Junkie* stuff about them saying, 'We don't need sex when we've got junk: that is so real life it's not true!

It's so insidious: your trick is, you think you're the one in control, you walk a very subtle line with it, then one morning you wake up and you think you've got the flu and you discover your body's running on the stuff. You can't do without it anymore.

Most addicts, yeah, they say it's cool, they're not reliant on it, they're. . .

I've given up all drugs this year. I've said a thousand times already on this tour. Thanks but no thanks. That's GOOD too, I love saying it. A lot of them are vampires, they think they can suck a piece of you by giving you some cocaine free. That's

their way-in to being friendly with Joe Strummer. Thanks but no thanks!

DMcC: That's almost where the Clash's sense of style comes to a halt. . .

STRUMMER: I've always hated that image of the rock star as an out of it shambles. These guys, some of them, the Stones and that, they're GUILTY these guys for killing a lot of people by saying that junk is style. They've killed people in the name of style.

If drugs are style man, then let's forget it. Let's all be bank assistants or stock brokers.

DMcC: Style to the Clash is more balanced again. And it seems to mean being proud of your body.

STRUMMER: That's true. You see it's not a preoccupation of youth to look after your body, but when you get a bit older you find it's useless f***in' yourself over. I feel if you look good you're turning people on. When we're driving round in the car and I see this real smart black guy, it just makes my day.

DMcC: Again, that's a very innocent thought; and it's what you're berated for because it seems false. You're too innocent for your own good.

STRUMMER: Boy, I never knew how great Britain was till I'd been all round the world. I mean, you can walk into a pub in Soho and it's like a Fellini film! All these different people decked out all different from each other. The Americans know nothing at all about style I've had an overdose of mediocrity like this all round the world.

DMcC: What about England politically? Does it meet your satisfaction as well?

STRUMMER: I heard on the radio the other day about a group of drunks from Missouri who tried to phone Maggie Thatcher and they got through! It's said they tried to phone Ronald Reagan afterwards and they got no answer. . .

The Falklands thing seems like double dealing to me: how they wouldn't give the Falkland Islanders British passports and then they sent our boys out there to get killed. I'm just shocked that it could happen at all. Shit, I must be old fashioned, but I

thought we were civilised.

DMcC: That seems surprising, given your interest in war. . .

STRUMMER: True, I am interested in war, but it's an anti war interest. We haven't the experience of war that our fathers had; our fathers were out there fighting: right on the line. I certainly would have gone to fight Hitler. It was black and white then, no doubts about it.

I'd like to see the world under one government—that's the trouble. I see the world as human beings and something like the Falklands or Israeli war, I just can't get a hold of it, even though it was right we grabbed the islands back. How many were killed out there? Would you have gone out there?

The truth was with the teenage Argentinians out there who were told lies—that's the real tragedy. . .

I just feel the capitalist system is unfair to the people who do the work, that's what we're attacking all the time in the Clash. On the other hand the Soviets worry me just as much. Look at how they put down Solidarity. . .

I just think we could TAKE CARE of people better. I haven't got any forceful plans to solve it all, I just feel there's a better way of doing it. To hell with nations, let's have a single government.

DMcC: With 'Sean Flynn', even despite its unusual nature for the Clash, there's still that rushing into politics, that's always been characteristic of you. . .

STRUMMER: . . . I just feel uncertain, confused. Like The Revolutionary Communist Party, they tried to be our friend over here. But I didn't rush in there: I wanna know what I'm getting into.

I think Karl Marx has a lot of good things to say. But look at how the Soviets took it, the way they still have an upper class. . . which is what the Clash have always been trying to GET RID OF.

DO YOU EVER feel you should be creating in a different area? Writing novels maybe.

STRUMMER: Definitely, and more. Like I said,

I'm thinking now, What am I doing up on stage? Who are these big fat guys in yellow security tee shirts in front of me? I feel I could get into something else. Half of me wants to cut out, write a book or do a film. I'm very into films now. But then I think, while we're up there still, we might as well make it good.

DMcC: Do you ever feel rock, being such a wild form of expression and so raw in your terms of carrying it out, that it could ever kill you?

STRUMMER: Sometimes, a few times I've felt it could kill me, I received a pilmsole on the head on this tour and I thought some one had shot me. I'm not kidding. When you're playing away the farthest thing on your mind is something slamming into your brain from a distance.

Get this! This is really humiliating. I was playing one night, concentrating on my guitar, a spotlight blinding my eyes so I couldn't see a thing and suddenly someone throws a jacket, a big thick jacket and it goes right over my eyes.

I'm playing away and I can't get it off! It's sort of stuck round my head and I'm still trying to sing into the microphone. What can you do? I must have looked ridiculous. . .

Then another night a firework, a really vicious thing an MX80, went up my trouser leg, and it was the leg I keep time with. I've still got the scar. Here, look at that. . .

DMcC: Not much style in that.

STRUMMER: There certainly isn't. . . I mean, about playing live, that's our outlet and if gig's are becoming old hat in Britain, which they certainly appear to be, then I really can't see how we can survive over there.

I certainly think punk was the most exciting thing to happen to music. Nothing has moved me since. I certainly don't subscribe to the thickness that's going about, I'd rather have articulacy and intelligence in music.

DMcC: The lyrics to 'The Clash' were averagely thick! Cave-man like. . .

STRUMMER: Cave man like! Yeah, well perhaps cave men were in style then and they aren't so much needed now. Also, it was sincere when we did it.

Perhaps every cave-man style still rules, perhaps it's just that I don't appreciate it anymore. I don't know.

DMcC: You essentially write pop songs. Can you see yourselves part of, what even people like the Banshees are becoming part of, the new pop hierarchy in Britain?

STRUMMER: We'll definitely be outside it.

We're always outside everything that's going on! And good on us, I say. We're one of the few still burning. Even so, I prefer to be under cover. I have to feel like a real person to write songs. I have to feel I haven't made it in order to continue to write.

I mean, I was a bum. I was evicted from a flat, I was rowed about from one labouring job to another, a lot of what I'm now saying is still stemming from that experience.

Not from THIS. Not from Le Parc and all its chic. If this was my whole life I'd dry up quicker than a river. . .

DMcC: Your private life, your girlfriend, is still important?

STRUMMER: Yeah, I'd go insane without it. I'm no drug addict but I think I'd. . . if I hadn't something back home it would be ludicrous. I don't want to destroy myself just yet. I still have something to say.

It's so easy to be a casualty, to die young. F*** it! It's much harder to struggle on I reckon. I feel like jumping out of windows loads of times but I decided one day to survive. Because I realised it was much harder. . .

But imagine being 19 and having hits! Bam, you've disappeared in a fortnight. It's horrible, and I've been spared that thank God. It's got to do your head in. I mean, imagine being haircut 100?

Imagine, Strummer can.

WHERE TO close: right, I'll close with Strummer hearing me babbling about the narrowing of rock, its denigration its possible destruction, the 'death of music'.

"Yeah, hopefully!" The Clash are back in the black again.



CLASH