

Group gets back to its punk roots

# A fired-up Joe Strummer brings his new Clash to America

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It was almost as if it were the punk summer of 1977 all over again. On January 19th, the latest version of the Clash—bolstered by two young, spiky-haired guitarists—made its world debut in front of 2000 rabid fans at the Arlington Center for the Performing Arts in Santa Barbara. And it was clear from the opening notes of the first song, "London Calling," that the new Clash is as angry and self-righteous a political beast as ever.

"I'd like to dedicate this one to Santa Barbara," shouted singer-guitarist Joe Strummer, sporting a short-cropped, dyed-orange haircut, "the only town in America where the Bank of America was burned down!"

The show was the Clash's first public appearance since Strummer and bassist Paul Simonon kicked guitarist-singer Mick Jones, one of the band's founding members, out of the group last fall. The sacking came after more than a year of band infighting that kept the Clash from recording a follow-up to their last album, 1982's platinum *Combat Rock*. Clearly, some things had changed since the release of that LP: At the Arlington, there were no more excursions into funk and reggae, rap and jazz; instead, this Clash was raw and visceral. New guitarists Vince White and Nick Sheppard sounded as if they'd grown up solely on a diet of early Clash and Sex Pistols records. And every song, from "Rock the Casbah" to "White Riot," from "Should I Stay or Should I Go" to "Police and Thieves," had been stripped down to the basics. "It sounded like Hiroshima up on the stage," the thirty-one-year-old Strummer said after the concert. "That ain't bad."

Still, something was missing, and that something was the dynamic chemistry, a certain electricity, that once existed between Jones and Strummer. The two used to front the Clash together, but in Santa Barbara it was clear that none of the new members will fill Jones' shoes when it comes to the leadership of the group. The Clash is now Strummer's group. In addition to raiding the Clash's five LPs for material at the show, Strummer debuted a handful of new songs, including "Sex Mad War," an antipornography rant; "Three Card Trick," which is about what Strummer calls "the politics of fear"; and a powerful punk anthem, "We Are the Clash!" The latter number includes a chorus apparently directed at Mick Jones: "I ain't gonna be



Joe Strummer: trying to right the Clash's wrongs

treated like trash/I know one thing and/We are the Clash!"

MICK JONES WOULD DISAGREE WITH THAT final line. A few days prior to the Santa Barbara show, he called promoter Bill Graham, who had booked the Clash into the Civic Auditorium in San Francisco. "The band you are promoting isn't the Clash," Jones reportedly told Graham. "I'm going to bring the real Clash over."

Jones, who refuses to speak to the press, has been working in London with his own version of a band he hopes to call the Clash. That outfit includes Topper Headon, the group's former drummer and composer of "Rock the

Casbah," and two other musicians. "Mick says he's going to let his music speak for itself," said Elliot Hoffman, Jones' American attorney. "He says that when the truth comes out as to what really happened between himself and two of the other members of the Clash, the fans are going to see what they have been told has not been true."

So why won't Jones speak for himself now? "Mick is really quite content to let Strummer do all the talking at the present time," said Hoffman. "He really is not terribly interested in getting into a public debate. He is much more interested in getting into the studio."

According to Hoffman, Jones has recently written a batch of songs and will begin record-

ing a new album, probably in London, as soon as he gets back from a vacation in the Caribbean.

Meanwhile, Jones' British attorneys are investigating the legal specifics of the name "Clash," and Jones and Headon are planning to tour America shortly with their band. In addition, the two Clash camps are wrangling over finances. "It has to do with the division of certain funds," said Hoffman. "It's a matter of their having to work out how the money is to be divided, and they couldn't work it out without outside help. Therefore, there is an arbitration proceeding in London right now."

AFTER MIDNIGHT, IN A SPARSE DRESSING room beneath the stage at the Arlington Center, a tired but excited Joe Strummer smoked cigarettes (he gave up all drugs, including marijuana, about seven months ago) and sipped from a cup of black coffee. "At times, I felt like a frog in a microwave oven," Strummer said of his performance, his voice echoing in the empty room. He was about to answer a question when a female fan shouted through the grating at the bottom of the dressing-room door: "What happened to Mick?"

"He's gone," said the singer, grimacing. "He'll be rocking around with some kind of piano nonsense, you'll see."

"I miss him," the girl said.

"Yeah, well, go see him," snarled Strummer.

"Why did you kick him out?" asked the girl.

Strummer reached over and turned off my tape recorder: " 'Cause he's an asshole."

The tensions between Strummer and Jones date back to at least 1977, when a journalist who spoke with them in London observed the dichotomy between Strummer's fierce politics and Jones' pop-star tendencies. When asked when he and Jones first began to drift apart, Strummer said, "Being kind, I'd say three years ago. *Being kind*. We felt iffy on the team for the last couple of years, 'cause Mick was moaning and groaning. He wanted to go on holiday, and he didn't want to tour, and he didn't want to play the guitar, and he thought he was an artist and thought it was all beneath him."

Strummer was unhappy with the music the Clash was making, too. Strummer said the last demo Jones made "wasn't our music. He was playing with beat boxes and synthesizers. I was thinking, 'It's time for us to stop ripping off the black people so much that they don't get on the radio anymore.' I [Cont. on 47]



## Clash

[Cont. from 43] didn't want to play South Bronx music, you know?"

But for Strummer, Jones' worst offense came when he lost sight of what the Clash were all about. "He turned to me, supposedly his close buddy. I was his partner, right? Remember? He turned around to me and said, 'I don't mind what the band does as long as my lawyer checks it out first.'"

Strummer shook his head from side to side, as if he still couldn't believe it. "So I said, 'Well, you can go to your lawyer, and you can write the bleeding songs with him.' Because there wasn't any lawyer when we invented this spirit, this raging force. I feel that he turned bad on us."

The group was at its rehearsal studio, located in a warehouse in London's Camden Town section, when Simonon and Strummer gave Jones his walking papers. "I asked him, 'How have you enjoyed the past seven years?' And he said, 'Okay, why do you ask?' And I said, 'Because I think it's time we come to a parting of the ways. I think it's time that you left. I think you should leave this room right now.' And he picked up his guitar and left."

Sitting in the dressing room, looking lean and tough, Strummer was all hyped up. He wanted to explain what had gone wrong with the Clash. "Wrong turnings, pitfalls along the way. First was the musician bull. We thought we were musicians. Fatal, because you become self-indulgent. Second fatal mistake: 'Hey, I'm an artist.' I'll tell you, Robert Johnson never thought he was an artist."

But while Strummer was critical of his band's mistakes, he was even more vitriolic in his criticism of America. "Truth is illegal. I sit there looking at the Declaration of Independence and all that. You got rid of the lousy British and that bull the English were coming on with, and you said, 'We are the land of the free, where a man is free to carry a gun, walk the streets, say what he thinks, worship anything, do what he likes.' And in 200 years, you've turned it around. If anyone shows any individuality whatsoever, he's fired. And this was the place that was going to be the land of individuals. The government, they're insane. They are smashing around the world in hobnail boots, crunching people, crunching people's hopes, condemning them to starvation and ignorance, still waving this banner that says DEMOCRACY AND FREEDOM, when back home, truth is illegal."

Strummer was talking nonstop; it was as if he were plugged into an electric socket. "People think I'm a raving idiot. I go to radio stations and say, 'Look, ninety-two percent of Americans have no idea where Central America is or what's happening there, at least, and they go, 'Yes, but, uh, tell us about your new hairstyle....'"

The singer slammed his fist down in frustration. "I've been elected. I seriously believe I've been elected to say the truth and stamp out all the bull."

It was nearly two a.m., and Joe Strummer still had to make the long drive back to L.A. He joined the rest of the new Clash in a white van behind the auditorium. And as the van began to move, Strummer shouted, "Print some of that, ROLLING STONE!"



Clash (clockwise, from left): Simonon, White, Sheppard, Howard, Strummer

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