

CALENDAR

POP MUSIC



BOB CHAMBERLIN / Los Angeles Times

Clash leader Joe Strummer clowns around on bus as his band heads to a party outside of London.

Strummer leads the way to truck-stop snack.

A RE-FORMED CLASH IS BACK ON THE ATTACK

By ROBERT HILBURN

LONDON—The Clash is a rock band that lives up to its name. Band leader Joe Strummer and manager Bernard Rhodes were irate a few nights ago about an item in the Sun newspaper. The blurb revealed that Strummer and his long-time companion, Gabbie, had just had a daughter.

Strummer and Rhodes weren't so concerned that the news had leaked out, but with errors in the item: the suggestion that the couple had named the baby Jazz in honor of Strummer's "favorite type of music" and, more importantly, that "papa Joe" was so thrilled with the baby that he was sad about leaving her to do concerts.

Riding in a chartered bus that was taking the group to a post-New Year's Eve celebration in nearby Bristol, Strummer talked about how he hates jazz music and couldn't wait to begin the tour. He was worried that kids would get the idea from the story that his heart wasn't in rock 'n' rolling anymore.

As the bus moved through the dark countryside, Rhodes, the frustrated manager, asked a visiting reporter what the band could do to combat the newspaper item. Rhodes discarded the thought that Strummer could call the columnist.

On the way back to London several hours later, Strummer and the rest of the entourage seemed to have forgotten the baby story. They danced in the bus aisles and sang along with Elvis Presley and Fats Domino tapes.

Ah, but Rhodes finally came up with a proper retaliation to the Sun. Pointing to the desolate countryside, Rhodes wondered aloud, "What if we invite the bloke along on our next trip, wait till we get to

an area like this and them throw him off the bus? Do you think he'd get the message?"

□

During 1983, the combat-ready rock group got into a slugging match on stage with members of the US Festival crew, went through more hassles with its record company and fired Mick Jones, one of its co-founders, after internal feuding kept the group from touring and recording for a year.

Still, the Clash isn't just another gang of rowdy rockers. It's been called the

most important group in the world by many critics, who see the outfit's strident sociopolitical anthems as an update of the '60s militancy of Bob Dylan et al.

The Clash's albums chronicle and attack a web of oppression and greed that the band sees stretching from government chambers in Washington, London and Moscow to ghetto streets and South American battlefields.

In a passive rock world that has placed little value on commentary in recent years, the Clash started out as a commercial long shot. But it had fought its way into a powerful position by the start of

last year.

Thanks to rousing live shows and massive radio exposure for its "Rock the Casbah" single, the Clash saw its "Combat Rock" album pass the million sales mark. The group was also invited by the Who to join it on several of that band's farewell concerts—a move widely interpreted as a passing of the torch from one rock generation to another.

Despite these advances, the Clash's year-long layoff has clouded the group's future. Has the band lost too much momentum in the trendy world of rock? Have fans grown weary of the constant conflict surrounding the group? Will the music suffer from the absence of Mick Jones, who co-wrote most of the band's songs?

These questions are important because what happens to the Clash could alter the course of rock. If the band goes into a tailspin, it would relinquish rock's main stage to the lightweight escapism of the Duran Durans and the macho posturing of the heavy-metal crowd.

If the band rebounds strongly, however, it could inspire other groups to take more challenging and independent paths. The Clash's idealism has already helped open a door for such socially conscious groups as U2, Big Country and the Alarm.

The surviving Clashers declare themselves confident as they embark on a worldwide tour that includes a stop Tuesday night at the Long Beach Arena (the group wanted to begin its tour in California because that's where the old band ended.) They figure they've learned by their mistakes and are excited by the chance to start anew.

Explained Strummer: "If you transfer that sloppy writing (about his daughter) into the news pages, you see why we get so little real information in this country. I believe in speaking out about things like how wrong it is for 8% of the population

THE CLASH LPS: TOP MARKS

Here are excerpts of Clash album reviews from the nation's two leading books of rock criticism, "Christgau's Record Guide" by Robert Christgau, and "The New Rolling Stone Record Guide."

"THE CLASH" (1977): "The U.K. version is the greatest rock and roll album ever manufactured anywhere. . . . It never stops snarling, it's always threatening to blow up in your face. (grade) A."

—"Christgau's Record Guide"

"GIVE 'EM ENOUGH ROPE" (1978): ". . . These familiar contradictions follow upon the invigorating gutter truths of the first album for a reason—they're truths as well, truths that couldn't be stated more forcefully with any other music. A."

—"Christgau's Record Guide"

"LONDON CALLING" (1980): "A record so shatteringly potent that it

simply steamrollered skepticism. . . ." (rating) Five stars ("indispensable").

—"Rolling Stone Guide"

"SANDINISTA" (1981): "More problematic. Its best songs . . . are almost of a piece with 'London Calling,' but the group also indulges itself with spacier pop." Four stars ("excellent").

—"Rolling Stone Guide"

"COMBAT ROCK" (1982): "Streamlined their political funk-reggae-rock, and this focused album earned the group its first U.S. gold L.P." Four stars.

—"Rolling Stone Guide"

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to own this country. In our music, we try to balance things a little by giving people information that they aren't going to get on TV or in a newspaper.

"We should have been out there stomping on the Police or the Rolling Stones and all those heavy-metal bands. The Police are just the new Moody Blues and the Rolling Stones. . . . I don't even know what they are any more. But there was all this internal bickering. We couldn't go out and stomp on those other bands when it was all bang-bang-bang among ourselves."

□

Earlier in the day, Strummer, 30, had raced down the London subway steps for his train as if he were on the lam. People glanced over their shoulders to see who was chasing him.

"It's just habit," the rocker said. "These subway stations used to be my concert halls. You could pick up some money by busking (street singing).

"But you had to run fast to get away from the Transport Police. I got to where I could take the steps three at a time with my guitar in one hand and the hat in the other—without dropping a single coin."

Strummer no longer races from the local police, but he's still a man on the run as the leader of the Clash, the most acclaimed and controversial survivors of punk-rock's first wave.

The Clash was featured in "Rude Boy," a stark 1980 film that was about (among other things) the difficulty of maintaining idealism. Even without the cameras

rolling, however, there is a sense of constant drama about the Clash—a mood accentuated early this month by the generally overcast London skies.

Appalled by the way so many rock bands have sacrificed their integrity, the Clash has tended to fight anything or anyone they feel was out to temper their vision.

Some long-time observers of the band feel the group has hurt itself in this regard, picking unnecessary fights and seeing villains when none existed—as if obsessed with the need to reassure itself that it, too, wasn't selling out.

Among the campaigns the Clash has waged against its British record company, CBS: keeping the group's promo videos off the most important pop TV show in London and releasing a triple album for the price of a single one.

Tension surrounding the group reached a peak at last spring's US Festival near San Bernardino. The band vowed not to go on stage until promoter Stephen Wozniak donated 10% of the estimated \$18 million festival budget to local charities. The band finally performed after Wozniak agreed to a compromise sum.

But tempers were so aroused that two members of the Clash entourage got into a free-for-all on stage with part of the festival crew.

As the Clash headed home to London after the festival, there was a growing suspicion that the band was on the verge of self-destructing.

Sure enough, co-founder Mick Jones

was fired in September—the second person to be booted out of the Clash in as many years. Even manager Rhodes was once fired.

All this conflict has led to confusion.

Even some of the group's fans feel the group tends to carry its rebel stance too far. The harshest critics wonder if the band members' squabbles aren't publicity gimmicks.

Looking back on the record company dealings, Strummer said: "You have to remember how it was at the beginning for us. We knew that CBS didn't know who we were or what we were. We knew that we had to fight in order to get some type of independence or control over what we wanted to do.

"At some point, however, fighting with the record company becomes wasted energy. It's a side issue and we tended at times to make it the main issue. The important thing is to keep making records you believe in. If we can then get the company to promote it, we are a step ahead in terms of reaching people."

□

Strummer appears to like pressure. He seemed disappointed when he was able to easily board a waiting subway train. He told of the many times in the old days when he had raced down the subway stairs and leaped on the train at the last possible second. "Just like in the movies," he said, acting out how he'd squeeze past the closing doors—safe from the pursuing police.

Strummer was on his way to the New

Year's party. The gang was to meet at a pub near the Clash rehearsal hall for the two-hour ride. They chose to celebrate in a club in Bristol because they feel alienated from the trendy, fashion-conscious London club scene.

"The London thing reminds me of the mid-'70s," said Kosmo Vinyl, the group's colorful, talkative aide-de-camp. "It's like the whole glam-rock period. The press is filled with gossip again. The only difference is that instead of Mick and Bianca and Rod and Britt, it's Mick and Jerry and Rod and Alana."

Vinyl was a Clash fan before he worked with the group. He enjoyed the freshness and directness of songs like "Career Opportunities" that spoke about unemployment, police oppression, disillusioned youth and other street-level issues.

In "White Riot," the Clash attacked social apathy:

*All the power is in the hands
Of people rich enough to buy it.
While we walk the streets
Too chicken to even try it.*

The songs were often more high-energy slogans than formal pop expressions. But they were performed with such explosive force that the words became battle cries among young, disaffected Britons.

When Vinyl began working with the
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The Clash and entourage ham it up at truck stop. Said a group aide, "See, socialists can have fun, too."



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THE CLASH: BACK ON THE ATTACK

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band in 1979, the Clash already was a power on the British scene. But the group was still having difficulty getting American rock fans to take the songs seriously. To most U.S. fans, the British punk movement—as symbolized by the Sex Pistols—was no more than a foolish pose. Conditions were pretty soft for most of America's middle-class rock fans. So what was all this ranting and raving about unemployment and social injustice?

About goals, Strummer, who proclaims himself a socialist, said: "What we are trying to say is, 'Let's have some social justice.' We want to make that idea more attractive and important to kids than all the other stuff that is thrown at them."

"When you're 15 and hanging around Oklahoma City, there is too much telling you, 'Hey man, get wrecked' and that whole Keith Richards, rock 'n' roll myth that people buy lock, stock and barrel. We've got to come out and say, 'No, there's another way . . . that you can actually do something with yourself and there is a future.'"

□

The Clash—whose lineup now includes original members Strummer and bassist Paul Simonon, along with drummer Pete Howard and new guitarists Nick Shepard and Vince White—had a good time at the Dugout Club in Bristol. They danced to new soul and funk records, played video games and talked about the upcoming tour. Quipped Vinyl, "See, socialists can have fun too."

Strummer and Simonon seemed especially pleased when fans came up to ask about the band—why it had been inactive in recent months and when it was going to tour again.

As bands gain popularity (and income), the tendency is to get separated from one's early surroundings. That's one reason why rock fans are so cynical about groups that try to carry social banners. Inevitably, the have-nots become the haves.

And the Clash's financial situation certainly has improved since the days when Strummer wrote the sarcastic "Career Opportunities" after returning to his London "squat" (condemned apartment) after picking up a welfare check.

But the group hasn't adopted the regal rock star life style. The band members are still relatively visible on the London scene—traveling via subway, hanging around the neighborhood pubs and rehearsing in the same studio where they honed their music in the late '70s.

Like many of their fans, most of the Clash members (past and present) came from tough low-income areas of England and spent time on the dole.

Like the rest of the band, Simonon, 27, favors T-shirts, black-leather jackets and jeans. He's shy, preferring to leave the spotlight to Strummer. But in a neighborhood cafe the morning after the Bristol party, he was outspoken as he looked back bitterly on his school days, echoing a disillusionment that is common in England.

"I went to a pretty run-down school and the teachers were only there for two



Drummer Pete Howard, left, and singer Joe Strummer rehearse for tour.



Guitarist Vince White listens to playback in Clash's London rehearsal hall.

weeks," he said. "They just wanted to be able to put on their (resume) that they had taught in a tough London school. They didn't care about teaching anything."

"What was worse was that when it got time for us to start leaving school, they took us out on trips to give us an idea of what jobs were available. But they didn't try to introduce us to anything exciting or meaningful. They took us to the power station and the Navy yards. It was like saying, 'This is all you guys could ever do.'"

"Some of the kids fell for it. When we got taken down to the Navy yards, we went on a ship and got cooked up dinner and it was all chips and beans. It was really great. So some of the kids joined up—because the food was better than they ate at home."

□

Strummer speaks with the intensity of a man on a mission, often checking your eyes to make sure you are following his words. Like Simonon, he spent time on

the dole, but Strummer didn't come from a lower-class family.

"You see, I'm not like Kozmo or Paul or the others," he said, sipping coffee. "I had a chance to be a 'good, normal person' with a nice car and a house in the suburbs—the golden apple or whatever you call it. But I saw through it. I saw it was an empty life."

His father was a diplomat in the British Field Service, but the two never saw much of each other after Strummer's ninth birthday. Sent away to boarding school, the son detested "the thick rich people's thick rich kids" and learned to fend for himself as a teen-ager.

"I only saw my father once a year (after being sent to boarding school)," Strummer said. "He was a real disciplinarian, who was always giving me speeches about how he had pulled himself up by the sweat of his brow: a real guts and determination man."

"What he was really saying to me was, 'If you play by the rules, you can end up like me.' And I saw right away I didn't want to end up like him. Once I got out on my own, I realized I was right. I saw how the rules worked and I didn't like them."

Strummer ended up getting thrown out of art school and being evicted from a flat after watching the police take bribes off the landlord, he related.

"Before the police came, I had gotten a copy of the renter's act, which said you couldn't be evicted without a court order," he maintained. "But the cop just said to me, 'Get out or I'll fill your face in.' I thought, 'So much for the rules.'"

Strummer started living in a condemned apartment building and picking up money for food by playing Woody Guthrie tunes on an acoustic guitar in the subway. He moved into rock when the police started cracking down on subway buskers. After brief stints in other bands, he joined Mick Jones and Simonon in the Clash.

□

The Clash's most famous battle with CBS Records involved the group's "Sandinista" album in 1981. The plan was to get the company to release the three-record set for the price of a single album—an outrageous move by industry standards. CBS balked. The compromise was to release it at a "reduced" double-album price.

Recalled Strummer: "The idea (with that album) was, 'Let's get out there and show all these other groups that they're just ripping all the young people off.' The plan was to give people a whole heap of music and give it to them dirt cheap. We figured we'd show CBS—the mightiest record company in the world—how powerful we were."

"But we found we weren't all that powerful. CBS showed us that they could put something out on their label and then sit on it just to prove a point. They didn't just not promote it. What's the opposite of promote? They demoted it."

Because the Clash is still on the label, CBS executives in London and New York were extremely reluctant to discuss the Clash situation. Someone who has worked with the group for years in London, however, agreed to give some perspective if his name wasn't used.

"They've always had a combative element to their dealings with the company, which I think they've thrived on,

quite frankly," the executive said. "I think it's helpful in their attitude and in their music. I think if they had a cozy relationship with the record company, it would affect how they actually are."

On whether that attitude has helped the group's career, he added: "To be quite honest, I think it has hurt them. I think it has hurt them on an organization basis, doing things at the right time—things that would be natural for any other band in their position, whether it were putting out a record at a certain time or doing a TV promotion or a tour at a particular time. They've almost done the opposite."

□

Bernard Rhodes, the Clash's manager, is as high-strung as Strummer. He speaks so rapidly and is so prone to changing the subject that interviewing him can be exhausting. Record company executives say dealing with him is equally demanding. Some of those executives feel he is responsible for leading the group into some of its dubious confrontations. Everyone involved, however, agrees that Rhodes is devoted to this band.

Once an assistant to Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren, Rhodes saw the Clash in 1976 as the good guys of the punk movement. Where the Pistols tore down, the Clash built up. He encouraged them to write about topical issues rather than love songs or simply good-time tunes.

When Rhodes resumed managing the Clash in 1981 after a stormy separation three years before, the group was several hundred thousand dollars in debt. "It wasn't that the band had gone out and bought pink Cadillacs and houses in

Beverly Hills," he said. "They had run up huge bills recording and touring. They didn't have anyone watching out for them."

He eased the financial problems with a series of sold-out concerts in New York City that had the added benefit of demonstrating the group's growing popularity to its U.S. record company.

But as the band went into the studio to record "Combat Rock," Rhodes knew even larger troubles had to be resolved: the personnel.

"It was easy to see the problems when I rejoined the group (in 1982), but it was another thing to sort them out," said Rhodes. "They were a lot more serious than I thought. It was like you think to yourself, 'Oh, all we need is a new tire.' Then you discover that they don't make that kind of tire anymore—you have to go to, say, Jupiter, to get it."

The tensions centered on drummer Topper Headon and guitarist Mick Jones, neither of whom responded to numerous phone calls by Calendar.

About the tensions, Rhodes said: "Topper would invite all these people backstage and they were all drug takers. I remember one time when I was washing my hands and there was all this powder on a mirror. I thought it was just talcum powder. I started to kind of clean up the place and 10 hands grabbed me. It was these expensive drugs. It was like carrying a hospital around."

Plus, he said, Strummer and Simonon were growing increasingly disenchanted with Jones, whom they felt no longer shared their career objectives.

The pressure of what to do with Headon and Jones, Rhodes said, led to

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THE CLASH IS BACK

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Strummer's much-publicized unannounced "holiday" in 1982, which forced the postponement of 20 British shows and left the rest of the group wondering if he was still in the band. When Strummer returned from Paris, he told the press he had simply taken a much-needed break from the pressures of constant touring and recording.

Soon after Strummer returned, Headon "resigned."

□

With a temporary drummer, the Clash went on a triumphant U.S. tour in 1982 that included five sold-out shows at the 5,000-seat Hollywood Palladium. Though tensions continued between Jones and the rest of the band, manager Rhodes looked forward to 1983 with optimism. By last spring, however, he had become to worry about the Clash's future. The problem was that Jones simply didn't want to work, Rhodes said. That meant the band couldn't tour or meaningfully record.

When the U.S. Festival offer came along, Rhodes saw it as a chance to get the band moving again.

The Clash doesn't look back on the US Festival participation as a mistake, even though many felt it was hypocritical for a group espousing socialist/Third World sentiments to accept \$500,000 for appearing on a bill with many of the groups the Clash dismisses as "lightweight."

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Strummer's answer to the criticism: "We felt we had to compete against the acts. We felt we were offering the audience something that no one else was going to do. Plus, I felt that getting up there with Van Halen and David Bowie would show (conservative rock fans) that we can't be all bad . . . that they might give us a try. It was an attempt to reach out."

"So many people want punks to be purists and stay in little clubs for cliques to see. They go, 'I was into it before you' and all that stuff. But that's not what it's all about. There's a big world out there. A clique turns people away. We want to reach people with our music and ideas."

But what about the way the Festival turned out—the haggling with Wozniak and the fight on stage?

Again, Strummer saw no reason to apologize: "I think that (Wozniak matter) was great. We got a letter from a few hundred people who got to go out in the country because of the money (Wozniak agreed to donate to local charities). I also think we gave a touch of madness to what was otherwise so horribly predictable. I'm just angry that I missed the fight."

Returning to London, however, the Clash found the Jones issue was still tearing the group apart.

The showdown with Jones, who sang lead on tunes like "Train in Vain" and "Should I Stay or Should I Go," occurred last summer.




□

"Mick was my best friend at one time," Strummer said, sitting in a pub near his flat. "We were partners and I don't dispense with my partners easily. I had been trying for four years to patch things up. I had gone to the brink 199 times and come back. But things finally had to end."

"The thing with Mick—and I've said this to his face on numerous occasions—was that he was really with us at the beginning. He really did a lot . . . a really good tunesmith, really good guitar player. But he became indifferent. He didn't want to go into the studio or go on tour. He just wanted to go on holiday. He just wasn't with us anymore."

"Finally, he turns up at a rehearsal and I go, 'How have you enjoyed the last seven years?' and he goes, 'All

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right, why do you ask? And I say, 'Well, I think it's time for a parting of the ways.'"

(Jones, who was described by a friend as "surprised and shocked" by the firing, has formed a new band with Headon and may be doing shows by early summer.)

In their rehearsal hall in an old railroad storage yard, the five members of the Clash played with the nervous edge of musicians who know they're going to be measured against the old Clash.

Though newcomers Sheppard and White have been in various bands, neither comes from a big-name outfit. Noted Strummer: "We didn't want to just take some old pop star off the shelf and dust him off. We wanted someone with lots of energy and from the same background as us."

The band was running through old tunes like "London Calling" and "Clash City Rockers," but Strummer expects as the tour unfolds to introduce some of the two dozen new songs he has written. The plan is to tour for several months before going into the recording studio.

"In many ways, we're a brand new band," he said. "We want to get used to working together and see how the songs work live. I'd like to go back and capture that lean, tough sound we had on the first album. I think we got a little too arty in places after that."

Despite the enthusiasm, Strummer knows how hard it is to get music with a message across in today's pop world.

"Dylan was able to use his music to get people to think about the real world," Strummer said. "But it was easier in the '60s because you had something concrete to fight (for or) against: the civil rights movement and Vietnam.

Everyone was going down to the demonstrations and the current of the times was, 'Let's change things.'

"In 1977, there was that pitch in Britain. It was like, 'It's wide open for the taking.' It's not like that now, though the conditions in the country are worse and I think they are headed that way in the United States. Someone has got to get the pitch wound up again and I'm hopeful of our chances. We've solved all our problems, hopefully. We've got a new team, new energy." □

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