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Joe Strummer

Paul Simonon

**THE CLASH**

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# I Call On Joe Strummer— And Live to Tell About It!

By Jon Young

**W**hat becomes a legend most? In the case of the Clash, overcoming the obstacles and carrying on, head held high. If you've followed their inconstant fortunes since the flowering of punk in '77, you expect turmoil from Joe Strummer and company. For example, the news in '82 that drummer Topper Headon had been fired for heroin use was just another chapter in the continuing saga. But the ouster last fall of co-leader/lead guitarist Mick Jones seemed more than even these stout-hearted men could survive. Could the group once billed as "the only band that matters" be mortal after all?

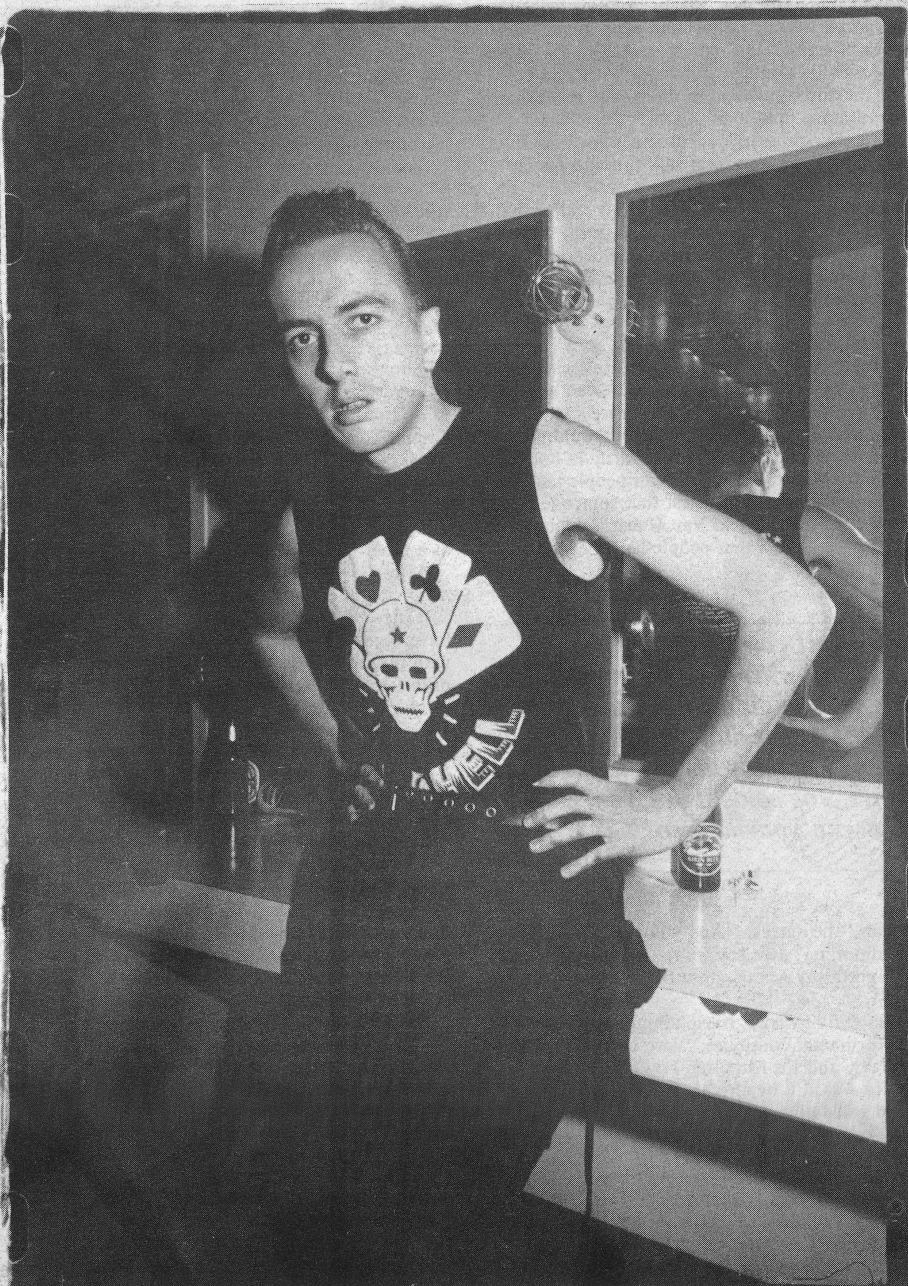
Fear not, dear reader. As you surely know already, original Clashers Strummer (guitar) and Paul Simonon (bass) have recruited new mates—and rejoined the fray. Since January, they've played dates from the West Coast to England to Europe and back to the States again, spreading the word that the Clash is alive and well.

*Boston Rock* recently managed to coax a couple of principal Clash types to the phone to explain what goes on these days. At the time of our chat, the gang was in Miami, on the first leg of a two-month U.S. tour.

First on the line: the ebullient Kosmo Vinyl, a spirited character who serves as the Clash's aide de camp and spokesman. If Joe Strummer formulates much of the band's party line, Vinyl likely as not will be the one who ends up mouthing it.

So, Kosmo, how come Mick Jones left the band? "Paul and Joe told him to go because they'd had enough of him. Mick had changed; he wasn't the same person he used to be—not as enthusiastic. We had to persuade him to tour as much as we did after the success of *Combat Rock* [1982]. If they hadn't fired him, you wouldn't have heard anything from the band to this day.

"In the last conversation he had with Joe, Mick

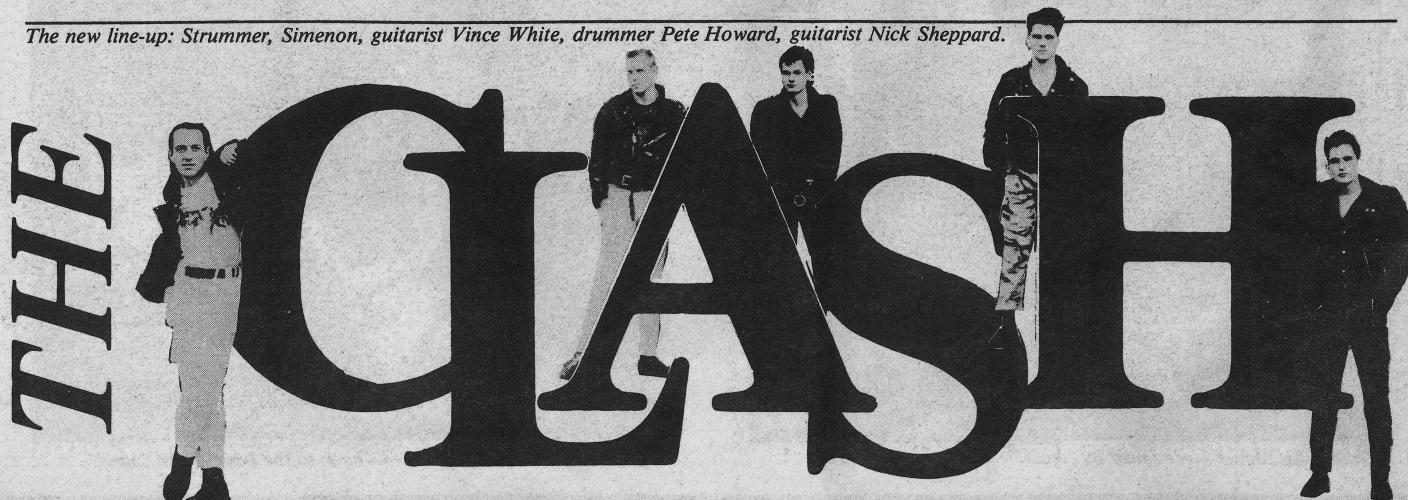


JOE STRUMMER

Randy Bachman

**"Everyone always thought that taking drugs was rebel and anti-law, but the record companies have actively promoted that outlook because it's good for business."**

The new line-up: Strummer, Simonon, guitarist Vince White, drummer Pete Howard, guitarist Nick Sheppard.





said he didn't particularly mind what the Clash did, but it would have to be ok'd by his lawyer. Mick likes lawyers. Joe said, 'Fuck you, go write songs with your lawyer.'

Says Vinyl, "I've been told through the grapevine that Mick feels the split was for the best, 'cause what's the point of us forcing him to do something he doesn't want to do? He's getting another band together, but I understand he's dropped the idea of calling it the Clash."

Ultimately, according to Vinyl, the split came down to the fact that Strummer's camp wanted to continue assaulting the public consciousness, while Jones preferred a mellower approach.

"Mick felt we'd made it after *Combat Rock*, where we felt that was just the beginning. A million-selling record isn't all that impressive when Def Leppard sells seven million. We want to sell more than Michael Jackson!"

Last fall was devoted to finding not just guitarists, but a new drummer as well. Following Head-on's dismissal, Terry Chimes (from the first Clash LP) signed on for the '83 tour, but no more. After looking at 350 guitarists and 200 drummers, Strummer and crew hired White, Sheppard and Howard—all from obscure London bands, unless you consider Sheppard's tenure in the Cortinas ("Fascist Dictator") a brush with fame.

According to Vinyl, the prognosis so far is favorable. "Some people say this band sounds more like the Clash than ever," he bubbles. "It's stripped down, but they're not trying to relive 1976. It's not a 120-miles-per-hour thrash—they haven't gone hardcore, but they have gotten tougher and more hard-hitting."

New songs include: "The Dictator," "Three-Card Trick," "Are You Ready for War?" and "This Is England." All Clash-sounding titles, don't you think?

He stressed that the new guys aren't yes-men, noting that "Police and Thieves" is in the set at Vince White's insistence. Remarks Kos', "Vince said to Joe, 'We have to do "Police and Thieves." It's one of the greatest moments of the Clash!'"

"So it's not like it's Paul and Joe's group, with the other guys doing what they're told. They all pretty much agree on what the Clash should sound like in the first place. Now they just want to get on with it."

Next in the docket: Mr. Clash himself, Joe Strummer, which turns out to be like trading a pussycat for a rattlesnake. Monosyllabic and surly at first, Strummer immediately makes me grateful he's on the phone and not live in person.

Here's an excerpt from our initial exchange: How would you describe your new songs?

"They're like rock'n'roll songs, kinda lively. They've got guitars on them."

When will you record?

"Summer."

Why haven't you done so before?

"Not ready."

How do you get ready?

"Play some more live. I want to know what I'm doing before I do it, rather than experiment. We're going to be harder and more severe. I'm not saying we're gonna do punk by numbers, but I don't wanna fucking sit around in the studio at \$200 an hour and make up a load of shit!"

At last, the old sourpuss loosens up—though he doesn't lighten up—and our talk turns to his current objectives.

Strummer snarls, "I want people to realize that no one has any sensitivity toward anything anymore. It's just more, more, more, color, color, color, video, video, video. They're so stuffed they can't see good or evil, right or wrong. I just want people to get involved with life."

"If they accept what they're given, they're to blame for it. I don't believe people are seriously checking whether records are good or bad anymore. They're just sleepwalking. There's so much media illusion, with videos and all. I wouldn't even turn on an American radio—that formula hot rock sound is soul destroying. How can people take it?"

Far be it from me to suggest that someone might actually enjoy listening to Van Halen. Obviously, the correct answer is that people have been conditioned to accept it.

***"In the last conversation [Mick Jones] had with Joe [Strummer], Mick said he didn't particularly mind what the Clash did, but it would have to be ok'd by his lawyer. Mick likes lawyers. Joe said, 'Fuck you, go write songs with your lawyer.'"***

—KOSMO VINYL

"Yeah," he agrees. "And who's gonna do the unconditioning? Just say we're trying our little bit. We've gotta say what's gotta be said and speak the truth."

Apparently by way of explaining his disagreeable state, Strummer continues, "I've been here for four days, and I'd forgotten how American America was. I'll be alright, but it's difficult going around explaining to people at radio stations and small-town papers who haven't got the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"It's all fake here. Everybody's been watching TV since they were born."

Better scratch the question about whether he likes "Dallas" or "Dynasty" better. Instead, I make the unforgivable blunder of inquiring if things are better in England.

Spitting ensues. "I'm not saying that, dammit! I'm saying people should realize they're not watching their lives on television! I'm taking this seriously and getting involved to the bottom of my spirit! Do you think I should be whistling and

happy?"

Excuse me! Time to change the subject.

Lest we forget, jolly Joe is the leader of a very fine rock 'n' roll combo called the Clash. Said band is touring now—without "product" to promote—to ensure that the new line-up jells into a legitimate band.

Says Joe, "I want this to be a group in all senses of the word; that's why we haven't rushed into the studio. Once we have some shared experiences, we'll feel like a unit."

He wants to recapture the directness of that first Clash LP.

"We're after that basic sound of guitars and drums, 'cause that's the Clash sound. Somewhere between the first album and *London Calling*, we lost our sound."

In between was *Give 'Em Enough Rope*:

"I don't think we were ready to make that album. We put so much into our first record that we didn't know what to follow it with. I felt a little left out, because [producer] Sandy Pearlman—whose ears were full of that hot-rock Blue Oyster Cult sound—and Mick were dubbing on 40 guitars at a time."

After *London Calling* came the triple-disc *Sandinista!*, another faux pas:

"There were so many songs on there that could have been better, but we weren't severe enough with our artistic decisions. If there'd been 36 dynamite songs, all well and good, but it didn't demand to be a three-LP set."

As for *Combat Rock*, he says, "At one point in the sessions, I began to feel a whiff of *Sandinista!* in the air. A lot of the tracks were over six minutes long. It started to get out of hand, so we gave it to Glyn Johns to mix."

(According to Kosmo Vinyl, bringing in Johns was a way to squelch Mick Jones, who was dominating the production, to everyone else's annoyance.)

There's something else new about this Clash besides its lineup: no more drugs. Explains Strummer, "I always liked reefer, but I decided that the drug culture wasn't going anywhere. Perhaps we could have accomplished more if we hadn't been reefered."

"Everyone always thought that taking drugs was rebel and anti-law, but the record companies have actively promoted that outlook because it's good for business. It's the Keith Richards glamor syndrome: 'Hey man, he's so wasted, isn't it great?' The hospitals and soup kitchens are full of people that bought that line."

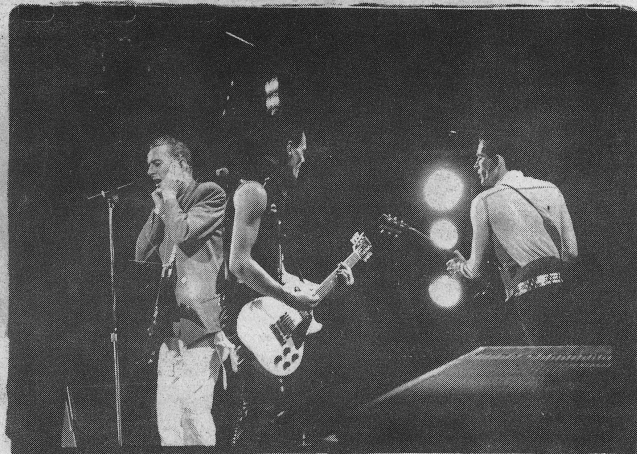
AT LAST, Joe Strummer laughs: "Yeah, we've got a much healthier thing going here now."

So all's well that ends well, for the moment, anyway. Wish the Clash luck and pray they don't entirely lose their sense of humor. If Joe Strummer can be believed, they're on the right path.

"Now that our problems are out of the way," he says, "and we've got a new team in, we're rediscovering how lively rock 'n' roll can be."★



White & Strummer surrounded by fans.



Strummer, White & Sheppard—back to the basic Clash sound.