

BEANO

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Clash: Joe Strummer interview



Otis
Blackwell
Nick Cave
D. E. Hardy
Les Blank
and more!

We're very happy to present Beano in this slick, expanded format, which is hopefully reaching new readers and so gives me an excuse to reiterate the Beano constitution.

There are three elements to be stressed, elements which we want to — nay, *must* provoke, bolster and celebrate herein, primarily dealing with the hedonistic magic of Rock & Roll music.

Rock & Roll is kept alive through individual romanticism and fetish. Whether its focal point is Boy George or Elvis Presley, there is lurking in what often seems bald consumerism, a deeply personal commitment. "We try to discover, in things endeared to us, the spiritual glamour which *ourselves* cast upon them." On certain rare honky tonk nights, when this projection of self into image is *felt* enough to coalesce into shared emotion, the entire company receives out of the blue a dose of pure spirit, a charge of boundless fun, fire and drama — fully validated hedonism; Atomic voodoo!

The second is to seek out artists of *endurance*, those whose work exude passion and commitment: SOUL. No cleverly crafted pop nor formulaic dance (be it break, thrash or synth,

which are exhaustively regaled elsewhere) but the plain, perspiring, pock marked face of honesty. This is what Beano admires, reveres and seeks out in artists of any medium, whether music, film or tattoo.

The third and final article of our charter is that we strive to present all this as objectively and truthfully as possible, and to avoid at all costs the self serving rancor of critical writing.

Critical journalism is doubtless the lowest form of literature; a critics witty jibes at his subjects expense does no more entertain or illuminate than a 'Garfield' cartoon strip, and we've precious little time left for that. As Beano icon Raymond Chandler said, "Great critics, of whom there are piteously few, build a home for the truth".

That is what we're trying to do, and while Beano is neither journalism nor literature, bear with us and see if we can do it right.

We look for the spirit, not the seductive charms of personal glamour or manufactured trends, both of which are skillfully purveyed by that most subtle and deadly of influences, Media. Beano sees the Radio, Television and Recording industries as a chimera able to confuse, catch off

guard and lead astray even the sharp young rebels.

This influence and its abuses are what Beano longs to see destroyed. We must pull together to get smart, recognise the pretenders, call them out and disavow them — but never fear them, for, like the vampyr, they must be invited before they're able to cross our threshold.

Thus, we're proud to feature the Clash, one of the first '70s bands who awoke to wring the poisons out of Rock & Roll. Clash have endured, with Strummer's passion and articulation still a credible parallel to that which seems the proper path to follow — "and boot us out if we ain't!"

A Final Note: Vicki Berndt, who showed me how to browbeat the road managers, gave valuable encouragement and advice, as well as shooting some classic photographs, will not be with Beano from here on in. I bid her a regretful farewell and wish her luck.

So read on, read on and remember this:

"We must articulate ourselves, otherwise we'd be cows in a field..."

— Werner Herzog

Jonny Whiteside

Immaculate Consumptive

Otis Blackwell
Clash
D.E. Hardy
Les Blank
Girlschool
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Joe Strummer cover photo by Vicki Berndt

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CLASH



Strummer

Story & Interview by Jonny Whiteside

photos by Vicki

London's Clash, among the very first punk rockers known to mankind, have trod a rocky, crooked path these past eight years. Following the expulsion of founding member-guitarist Mick Jones in late 1983, **Clash** now finds itself embroiled in a bitter firestorm of legal trauma (exactly the sort of destructive law suits that followed the **Sex Pistols** split; Joe Strummer telling **Beano** he's even retained the same lawyer, with the same receiver as in that case). Jones and former **Clash** drummer Nicky Headon contend rights of ownership to the group's name and monies, and are reportedly trying to book shows for their own alternate version of the band.

Continuing as a five piece, Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon must carry on, not only in the face of court action, but also boundless aesthetic and political nit-picking, unqualified criticism and egghead analysis which would've chewed up a less resilient group long ago.

An eight date mini-tour of California (together with East LA giants **Los Lobos** and Malcolm McLaren's pick up troupe of local break dancers) previewed the new line up. **Beano** attended the second and seventh gigs (their first live shows) and will quite confidently state that this *is* the **Clash**, with their beauty and power fully intact, albeit bruised and scabby.

The sound is uneven, yet the exception of Jones makes barely a shred of difference (though you'll never find a drummer to beat out Topper in his prime, alas..).

The three new members: Nick Sheppard (former **Cortinas** guitarist), lead guitar; Vince White, guitar; Pete Howard, drums, are the sort of scruffy generic 1970s London punks who bear no resemblance to today's gruesomely coiffed oi children, and play just the sort of noise **Clash** was meant for — worlds apart from the calculated chicanery of "Combat Rock" or the droning indulgence of "Sandinista."

Clash is fighting like a lion, with Strummer's new songs cast in the sort of scalding, almost journalistic style which suits him best — a long overdue return to the punk rock of yore. While they're bound to be labeled regressive for it, in practice it's as if Joe and Paul suddenly awoke to realize what neglectful sloths they've been. Facing their obligations, it seems they're grateful to be able to get out once again and "liquify everybody gone dry."

We're fortunate, especially in this time, with so many craven tricksters masquerading beneath the "acceptable face of **Clash**" (as Strummer puts it) that **Clash** came back to honor their commitment *for real*, which is simply to be forthright, play harder than the rest and keep us all on the forward path.

Star crossed and spat upon, the band has been target for abuse from all quarters. They've been asking for it these last two years, and while it's not a sense of shame nor desperate bid to make up lost time that motivates this "**New, Improved Clash**" it *is* as if they've snapped back twice as strong.

At the root of **Clash's** endless tribulation is the fact that they are a political band. It is misinterpretations and misrepresentations emanating from outside the band that dog them; management, press and fans all distort what is essentially a purely personal, shared worldview into a galaxy of warped applications, blown so out of proportion as to be unrecognizable.

Take a typical **Clash** chest thumper like "Working For The Clampdown" — it's simple to define as inflammatory anthem, when in reality 'tis a mere statement of late 20th Century survival tactics and common sense.

Clash is primarily a stance, part political science, part call to arms, but no one of these alone. Here in the US most so called hip followers of the vapid Anglo rock scene long ago wrote them off as posers and idiots. While UK punk withered, former devotees began pledging their inconsistent allegiance to a series of bands (a la **PIL**, **Joy Division**, **Gang of Four**) whose initial press and recordings struck a chord amongst those seeking a "new(er) consciousness." Yet all of these groups ultimately revealed themselves as just the sort of callow traitors and fluff merchants **Clash** are accused of being.

Strummer *et al* cannot be charged with having layed stake to the extravagant claims of personal infallibility, artistic groundbreaking and ego amplification so many of their trendy contemporaries make routine.

"And every gimmick hungry yob, digging gold from rock and roll, grabs the mike to tell us that he'll die before he's sold, but I believe in this and it's been tested by research: he who fucks nuns will later join the Church..." Joe prophesied that one dead on: '1984's pop charts glutted with just that sort of shyder-limey-punk-rock-turncoat-bands, who're now in a position to shape young minds but have sold their souls into bondage, or deadened them with drugs and cash. This is when we *need* **Clash**, now that our defenses are down and the beast is upon us.

One of their most endearing aspects (and one that sets them apart from every other 'major rock act') is that any mistakes made or dirty wash laundered is done in direct view of the public eye. **Clash** does it the hard way. Any business taken care of is invariably done ass backwards.

Thus far, it's been a career of wildly silly stunts, from "Complete Control" on up to the 18 consecutive shows at Bonds, Strummer's 1982 disappearing act, the US Festival fiasco — with the current legal deadlock brought on by Mick Jones promising to be the most gloriously unnecessary (and potentially crippling) bloodletting to date.

Checking out this new **Clash** was a trying, almost painful experience — at first. Sacking Jones and returning to punk always seemed to be what should've happened immediately following "**Sandinista**." But at the SF show, with Strummer trying singlehandedly to pull the still awkward playing into the groove by sheer force of his manic, butane performance (a virtuoso rocker, he did indeed give off sparks), one couldn't help thinking of the two eighteen-wheeler trucks they need to haul their stage set and PA, the thousands of dollars worth of video equipment onstage — never mind Joe's wireless microphone — and that tour with the **Who**.. how grotesque it all seemed.

I almost felt guilty for enjoying the show, and who are those new guys anyway?

Truly, though, none of that matters.

A week later, in the cozy basketball court ambience of the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium, all coalesced, both for the band's sound and the doubtful fan. Faith fully renewed by a **Clash** show played the way it has always been, just the way it's meant to be.

A simple howling darkness from the band matching Strummer's punkrocksteady gospel fervour, growing a mile high, especially on the new ones, "Are You Ready For War" — blistering p-funk — or the old-timey thrash of "We're Still The Clash;" faith renewed indeed.

Body and mind, heart and soul are immersed in their work. Not rock stars; nor preachers, nor tricksters; they're not even necessarily musicians, but merely committed persons trying to go through without compromise, and making just as many idiot mistakes as you or I would. Tighten up, tighten up. Wish them luck, 'cause they're out there plugging for our best interests.

I interviewed Joe after that Santa Cruz show, while Simonon and ever-present bopatron blasted **Eek-a-Mouse**..

ok — new improved Clash — how's it been?

Well, this first tour is a bit of a nightmare..

how much rehearsal time've you had with the guys?

Only three months with Nick, and a month and a half with Vince. We went straight into play Santa Barbara and Vince had never seen more than sixty people. He could hardly control it. But it all came together for us last night in Fresno; we started to play together like a group, rely on each other, chop the changes. They just picked it up and got going.

one of your onstage rants in SF was about our culture and how we've got to define it. What about that?

This is something we've got to discover; we had a culture, you know, and I feel we've neglected it.

meaning good ole punk rock?

It has to have some other element in it. I like the attitude of punk rock; I'm not saying it has to be great thrash, but that attitude of "we *are* good enough, we're as good as anybody else and I'm not taking the second row seat that everyone wants to give ya.." That's the sort of thing. But I feel Clash have neglected their own culture, because we went to a sort of cultural imperialism when we found out we could play: 'roundabout "London Calling" when we discovered we could play; we were saying, "Oh, let's do a calypso number, let's do a jazz number, let's do a Mose Allison, let's do a funky number.."

what snapped you out of that?

(emphatically) "Combat Rock."

do you look back on that as wasted time?

No, 'cause I learnt. If you learn, then nothing's a waste of time. I felt like we were trying to be wooly, wooly in the head like. Everything was going on for six minutes, and when I look back at the first album, I liked the tight writing.

so that's what you're after now?

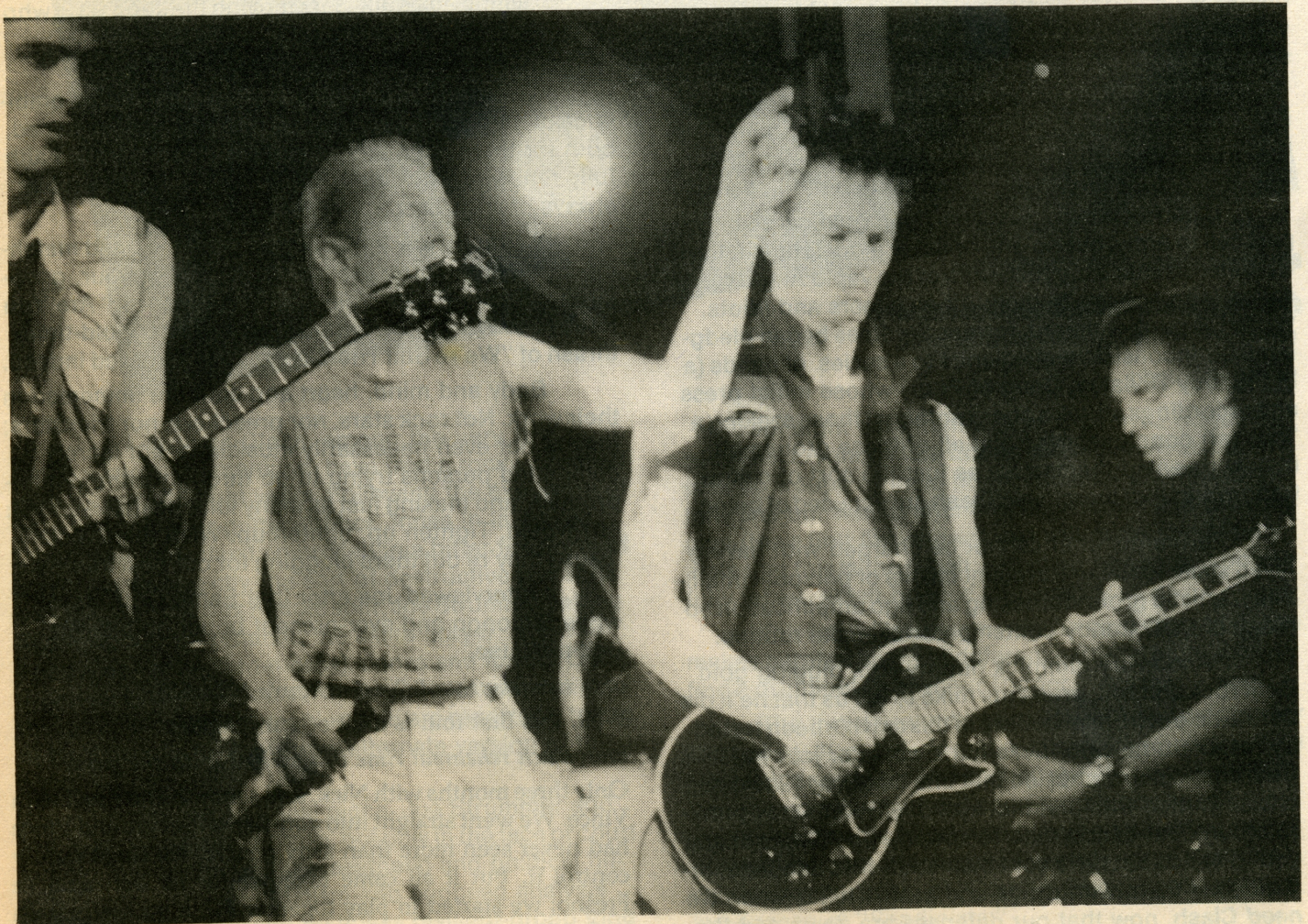
Yeah: zam, zam, zam, zam, zan, you know? I like the lean writing, and it struck me that it was tougher to write lean, than it was to go on and on and on lazier. And that was something I couldn't get into Mick. Mick was saying, "The verse and chorus, as form, *are over*." Do you understand what he was saying? And I said, "That's very interesting. What are you going to replace it with?" And he says, "We'll just sort of go on and on and on.." And I wanted to get back to the first style and write lean. We fell out over everything in the book, really; that was just one of the many things.

one of your songs "We're Still The Clash" says you're the "watchdog." Do you really feel that's the spot you're in?

Yeah. I like to go out, rock and roll and have fun, but I feel that I have to take this position up, although I am eminently suited for it, I have to because we've been out for two years, done nothing, and nothing's gone through that I can really say, "The rumble's starting." So I feel we've got to get back out there, you know? All those groups like U2, Big Country and the Alarm are the acceptable face of Clash, and they're trying to make it. What they're trying to make it is stadium rock. Already, U2 are very good at stadium rock.

do you feel like you're in competition with them?

No, I feel we have to come back and say, "well, you've had



Nick, Joe, Vince, Paul.

photo by Vicki Berndt

the Imitator, now here is the Originator." It's just a lot of bullshit. I feel if the Alarm really were the Alarm, they would've said, "We're not gonna go on 'Top of the Pops,' we're gonna turn down the chance of top 10 success in England forever and ever, amen."

But no, they did their hair and went on it like, shooom! They practically ran on. It's just nonsense, and it sets us back 10 years because it only sets us forward 10 minutes. It's all nonsense, like Spandau Ballet is saying, "Worship us, we're so slick," and Boy George is saying, "worship me, haven't I got a nice voice?"

I'm beyond that. I don't want that; I want people to come away from us going, "Well, I don't agree with that!" or "I do agree with that!"

so the scene in London must be pretty boring now..

It's over, which is good because it means it must begin again. All we've got is night clubs — Steve Strange/Marilyn/Boy George night clubs — and they all run a 54 policy on the door, "you can come in, but you can't.., you can come in, but you can't..". Tres elite, chi chi, clique, clique. Me and Kosmo, we ain't got anywhere to hang out. Me and the boys want to go out in London, fuck, I don't know where! So we were trying to use the US Festival money, which was like half a million dollars; we were hoping to start a scene in London, because you need an atmosphere — things happen within an atmosphere..

so you're consciously trying to get that going?

Yeah, except Mick Jones has injunctioned every cent we've got. Every cent. It's all gonna go to lawyers, just like with the Sex Pistols..you do some research into how *that* ended.

do you ever feel like this has gotten out of proportion?

No, no. I feel we're just startin'. I want to get people talking; I want to get a conversation going, like when we meet people after, out in the theatre or in the car park, sometimes I just shut up, and it sparks off this conversation, like when there's people going, "Hey, man, don't you know what we're doing down in El Salvador?" And I'll say, "Yeah, man, but what about — the Communist Threat?!" And then there's this sort of.. they forget about me, and they have this conversation going.

That's the conversation I want to spark off everywhere in America, and in Britain.

with the press' continual bullshit and misrepresentation of Clash, do you feel that people get a clear enough idea of what you're really on about, through the music alone?

No, No, not at all. They're not even beginning to.

are you afraid of losing fans due to that?

I don't mind, really; I'm ready to go back to Nowheresville, get back on the street.

is the "message" getting through to them?

It's coming through as much as possible, but I'm very wary of thinking I'm doing more than I am doing. I've been into that in the past. I'd rather even *depreciate* it, just to be; I want to know reality.

I want to know how far it goes, I want to know what percent of the people get it, and when I see the crowd at

Long Beach shouting, "you nigger music lover" at Malcolm McLaren, when the break dancers are going, *that* goes straight to Joe Strummer's head.

you've been writing a lot of songs?

Yeah, I've gotta keep writing, keep writing and playing the stuff onstage, because that's the way to get a song to shape up. When you've got people standing there listening, that scares the shit out of a song, I'll tell ya.

That's the way I want to write; that's why we ain't got a record now, not only 'cause we can't afford to record it, but it's just as well.

do you want to try and draw more young punks?

I just want to draw young people; I don't care, just as long as they know that this ain't a Kiss concert, and that they'll try to investigate *why* it ain't a Kiss concert. Sometimes I don't know why it ain't, but, then, sometimes I know it ain't.

so, after contractual binds lapse, what then? an indie?

Well, it's coming up now, they're looking at us now, going, "Oh, no! They've sacked the glam boy! Now what are we gonna do about this, boys?" They're sitting around their boardrooms saying, "They've fucking sacked the glam boy! What are they gonna do now? They've got that gruff asshole in there.."

if they cut you loose, what do you want to do?

All I want to do, right, the next record we're gonna make is gonna be one of those records that lasts 10 years. Every single groove will be full of good shit, right? That's what I want to do, and I'm gonna deal with the rest of it when I've got that together.

when is that happening?

Summer, early fall. It depends; we're gonna keep on the road 'til then, bring 'em up, baptise 'em in fire.

so that's the MO, keep pluggin'?

Yeah, we're gonna be everywhere at once. See, we wanna go, we're up for it, but Jonesy, he was a bit of a moaner, you know? I mean a bit of a sort of a, "Oh, aren't I wonderful? I need a bit of a rest.."

so all the tribulation of the last few years really hasn't changed you, then?

No, I just feel more determined, and I feel a little wiser, you know? I think I know how to take care of myself a little more — like I have two beers instead of eight, stuff like that. Little gems of wisdom.

allright, here's to you! (they drink)

Strummer's Parting Shot and/or Final Summation:

"The Stones led me to Chuck Berry; Berry led me to Howlin' Wolf; Howlin' Wolf led me to Blind Willie McTell, and to Bukka White — all those great guys — and that led me right into this. When I heard those blues singers, I knew it was for real, I knew it. 'Cause what did we have? Cliff Richard, Lonnie Donnegan, Straightsville. But like, Howlin' Wolf, he shouts to the top degree; everything comes out. It's not feeble; it's gnnrrrrraaahh, gnnrrrrraaah, and you know it's born out of suffering.

I want people to apply that standard all around, and boot out those who ain't got it — and us, if we ain't."