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## The CLASH

An Interview With Joe Strummer

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THE LOOK  
OF HORROR



by Tom Doran

**T**he Clash's Joe Strummer has done a lot of interviews, but one he did recently in Washington seemed exceptional to him.

"I saw the ultimate thing today at DC-101," Strummer was recounting rather skeptically after the Clash had finished playing the Smith Center at George Washington University. "I mean, the station is a machine, I swear. When you stand there and actually see it, with the big tapes rolling, and the commercials coming in on racks, and the news going in and out on a feed." Strummer rolls his eyes. "I mean, it needed no human being to run. We could all be gone tomorrow and the station will still be going on."

That resilient attitude has increasingly become a trademark of the Clash's music. Their forays into various Third World musical styles have raised eclecticism from an artist preference to a political philosophy. True to the Clash's collective persona, the tape deck in the dressing room plays gentle rhumba music from Prez Prado's *Havana 3 A.M.* album, which helped popularize music of developing countries in America some years back.

Does Strummer like this music for aesthetic reasons, or does he just like the internationalist image?

He winces... how could someone ask such a pompous question? "I just like it because it's fun! God knows about its aesthetics," he says sharply. "We even had some Puerto Rican women on the tour teaching us how to dance." Again, he seems to wonder why he should always be defending his political integrity. Hasn't he already done enough to demonstrate his international sensibilities?

The Clash have done a lot for internationalism. They have played in Thailand and Japan, and Jamaica, always to eager audiences. They have skirted, in popular diction, with issues heretofore reserved for abstruse tracts on Marxism and other political ideologies. But the realities of show business hustling still surface in the public's questions, and so Strummer will take great care to demonstrate that he has a reason for his calling, a justification for his critiques of society.

Because his father was a low-ranking embassy official in the British Foreign Service, Strummer got a full dose of the "character" building process reserved for children of the British elite. "We were always moving around... and one of the perks of the job was that you got a free education for your son because they knew that they were going to move you from Tehran to Africa to Mexico to Germany. So to get an uninterrupted education, when I was nine I got sent to a very violent public (i.e. private) boarding school. It was very fucking tough. No food on weekends."

*Tom Doran is a Washington-based freelance writer whose work appears regularly in the P.G. County Sentinel and the Journal papers.*

## Return Of The CLASH



*Strummer is treading the turf between public and personal politics much more cautiously this time around. The idealism is still very much there—it comes up all of the time, in fact—but so is a certain professionalism about the Clash's existence as a profitable entity.*

Strummer's early regimen of bullies and institutional discipline toughened him up. So did his years working at a rubber factory, which made his long hair fall out, and his brother's suicide. It is no wonder that he doesn't like words like "aesthetic." In his view, he ran into a Wall every bit as thick as Pink Floyd's Ian Gilliam's, and wants the Clash to remember how to live without too many creature comforts. "We got a Greyhound bus, without a bunk, without a TV, without a bar... we just sit on the bus, we drive 14 hours straight." He looks proud. "We fucking roadhog it."

**I**f there is one thing that makes people either love or hate the Clash, it is their very attitude of toughness. It is unmistakable in their lyrics, their dress, their stage presence. The attitude implies a remarkable amount of violence, but Joe Strummer is eager to point out that the violence implied is not arbitrary, that it has a direction.

"We need self-defense," he says. "We dress up in all of those army clothes because... what is the opposite of a U.S.

Green Beret? A shambling, drug-taking hippy, right? And that's not good enough!"

The Clash, at least according to Strummer, are still committed to some kind of revolutionary change. "We have to take the part of that U.S. soldier," Strummer says abruptly. "Our music has got to have that sharpness, that discipline. If the Green Berets are training, the opposition's gotta train."

Again, as soon as he makes a public statement, he qualifies it with a more personal one. "That's why we cut out drugs in this group—we were looking for something hard, you know. I'm pleased to see that there is a straight-edge scene in Boston, because it's something that's separate from us, yet we happen to be travelling on parallel paths. It reinforces my belief that it's right."

The Clash seem to have lifted some propagandizing techniques from the government, as well as their disciplines attitude. In their attempt to define what they stand for, their stage show juxtaposes songs with film, recalling Laurie Anderson's mixed-media presentations of politics with popular culture. Nine TV sets around the stage feature a diverse array of images including scenes from popular

movies and newsreel footage.

"Film is really a good way to reach an audience," Strummer says, noting that recent movies like *Circle of Deceit* and *Missing* have helped give credence to the left's political message. Rather than miss an opportunity to inform, the Clash provide their own interpretation of their songs for public viewing.

The result is rather sensational. Images of war jar the crowd in time with Simonon's hammer bass. Fast-forwarded planes crash into the ocean, then crash again as the image is repeated for effect. At various points in the show, BBC newsreel footage of riots in London and Northern Ireland brings scenes from modern history to the audience with the only narrative interpretation being the Clash's music.

Commenting on the cinema verite effect, Strummer notes that "the time scale has narrowed between reality and fiction" in world events. Music, he adds, helps restore the connection between what happens on a newsreel and what happens to individuals.

Other scenes depicted are of people dancing and enjoying themselves, but never

*cont. on pg. 38*

*"I like it in America, because they allow you the respect not to spit on you." He smiles impishly. "It's great not to be spat upon."*



*Strummer with Tom Doran.*

## CLASH

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without qualifications. Scenes of Elvis Presley in *Jailhouse Rock* are interspersed with picture a Southern policeman displaying a sign that reads, "We Serve White People Only." A number of popular films are used as well, including *Mad Max* and *Taxi Driver*, both of which feature a protagonist who wears a mohawk hair-style and turns to violence as a recreation against a threatening world.

In one particularly startling segment, scenes from *Goldfinger* show Bond being thrown

***Their forays into various Third World musical styles have raised eclecticism from an artistic preference to a political philosophy.***

down repeatedly by the brutish villain of the film, "Odd Job," as Bond tries to keep him from detonating Fort Knox with a nuclear explosive. To the accompaniment of "Safe European Home," a song about English life, the scene is dragged out for the duration of the song and finally culminates with Bond grabbing an electric wire and electrocuting his seemingly impregnable rival.

Why did the Clash choose that particular scene? "I think that people will identify with the characters," Strummer says, "because they can obviously distinguish between good and evil."

Does Strummer see the world in such clear-cut terms?

"I don't consider myself an activist at all," he says. "My life is singing, travelling, play-

ing... music can do a bit, it can awaken. But if there's going to be a struggle between the old and the new, between the right wing and the left wing, between nuclear arms and humanity, music will awaken but music will not do the job."

What then? "Then you need human involvement, you know, action."

If this means violence, Strummer is not advocating it yet. He supports the candidacy of Jesse Jackson for the presidency because "the others just want to build more arms. At the moment it seems at a ridiculously high level." He sees himself primarily as a singer against injustice, which he emphasizes with a typically educational example.

## COUGAR

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repeatedly tweaked the pre-teen training bra contingent. Ma and Pa musta circled DAR about 479 times waiting to pick up the little ones.

All the hits were there. "Jack & Diane," "Crumblin' Down," "Pink Houses," etc., etc. A tireless tourer, Cougar seems not to have tired of these songs; at least he gave the impression that the tunes still possessed some vitality for him. With minimal props, he dramatized the more obvious elements of his hits. Current fave "Play Guitar," this decade's installment of the "So You Want to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star?" saga, found the little bugger flailing away at a \$2,500 custom-made air guitar, when he wasn't sticking the wireless mike into his britches. "Is that a banana in your pants, or are you glad to see me," I thought I heard her cry. Shut up and speak into the microphone, baby.

If J-C cavorts like a Melonhead, mugs like a constipated Cro-Magnon, he still retains his

"In some kind of Indian religion, I don't know which one it is, they geographically place in certain body parts states of mind... and they put humanity in the throat. My throat has the sound of that."

Maybe it is this identification of music with humanity that determines Strummer's taste. Two acts he currently admires have made a career out of mingling with the down and out—Tom Waits and the Ramones. Joe Strummer himself seems to fall into the same category. "I never spend nothing on clothes," he will tell you. A tart blend of atavism, activism and pragmatism, the Clash's lead singer vows to keep living simply and sparsely. ●

***Current fave "Play Guitar," this decade's installment of the "So You Want to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star?" saga, found the little bugger flailing away at a \$2,500 custom-made air guitar, when he wasn't sticking the wireless mike into his britches.***

likeability. Sincerity? Perhaps. Uniqueness? Nope. Rock 'n' roll spirit with absolutely no threatening menace? In spades.

Charles McCardell

## REELS

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●The game of baseball has always been a loopy choreography of fortune and grace. Luck and skill have surged through the boundaries of the Diamond with a sort of equal measure—a hit, a run, an outrageous catch—like chance breaking within a moment's swing. The AFL is showing the highlights of some of the most rousing World Series games caught on film. On May 7 at 8:45, The National League Wins in four Series from '46 to '75. On May 14 at 8:30, The American League Wins. You'll get to see Cleveland's great victory in '48, of which someone once said "this series will be the last time it is fun to be an Indians' fan."

●During his lifetime, Werner Fassbinder was known as a master director without masterpieces, and could almost view his finest films, such as *Fear Eats the Soul* or *The Bitter Tears of Petra Van Kant* as pieces of an unnamed larger work about nothing less than the moral climate of the Western World. Since his death, however, *Berlin Alexanderplatz* has been shown for the first time in the U.S. and has been widely acclaimed as the culmination of his career. *Berlin* is an adaption of a 1929 literary epic by Alfred Döblin about the apocalyptic forces that threaten, and ultimately destroy, the fabric of the Weimar Republic and the legend of decency and hope with which it was founded. Because the film was originally a 15-hour adaption for German television, it is one of the few movies with a length that permits it the full range of a novel's tone and nuance, with its violent and moving tapestry of love and betrayal, innocence and joy. May 4 - 17 at the Biograph, *Berlin* will be shown four times in two weeks; see Calender for schedule.

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