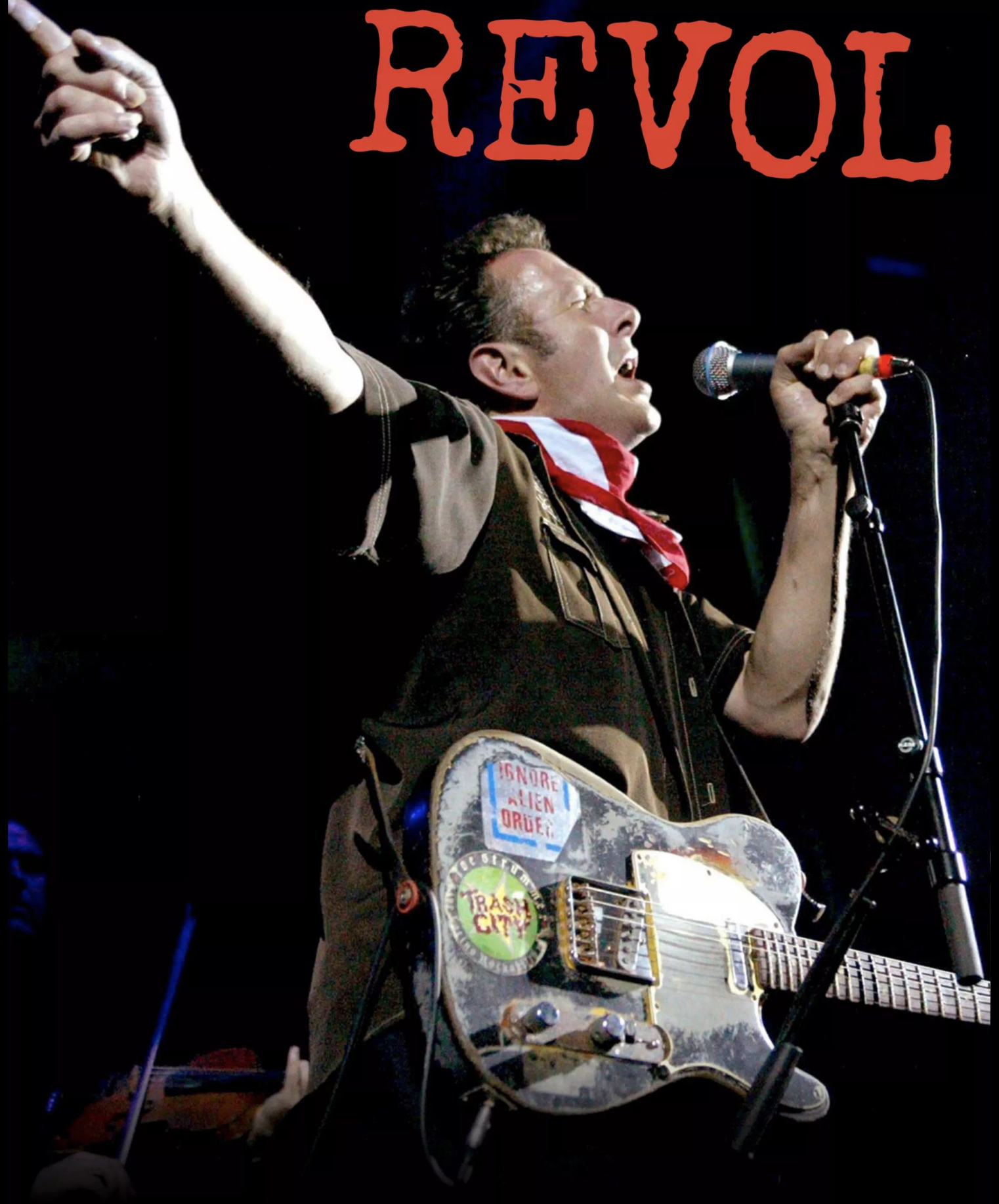


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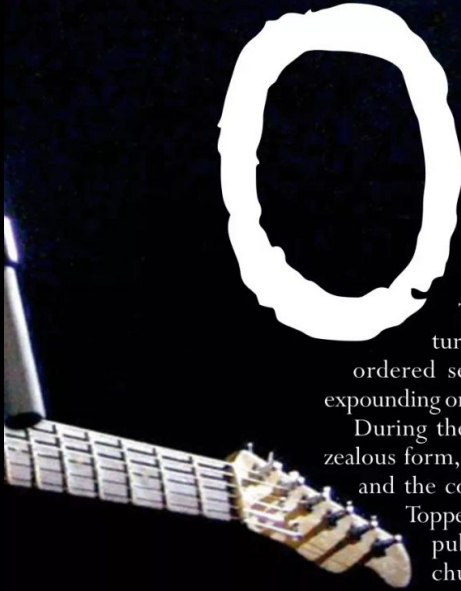


# UTIONARY SPIRIT

From joints in the departure lounge to mayhem on the bus, the last years of **JOE STRUMMER** were a chaotic, uproarious reiteration of his rock'n'roll code. Along for the ride: a maverick new band, The Mescaleros. Lurking in the background: The Clash, and a momentous legacy to honour and challenge. Twenty years after his death, **Pat Gilbert** rounds up the gang to salute Strummer's last stand.

"He made you feel invincible," they remember.

Photograph: **Brian Rasic**



**O**N THURSDAY, JUNE 7, 2001, JOE Strummer paid a visit to the MOJO office. Or, more accurately, the office paid a visit to him. Interview with the magazine done, the former Clash frontman had pitched up in the Coach & Horses pub in Poland Street, just a short hop from MOJO's then HQ. Ticked that most of the staff had turned up to raise a glass with him, he ordered several rounds of tequila slammers, expounding on the benefits of agave-based liquors.

During the interview, Strummer had been on zealous form, flip-flopping between the combative and the contrite ("I should never have sacked Topper and Mick!" he admitted). But in the pub, drinks flowing, and Joe's throaty chuckle melting into the background music, his Grand Seigneur Of Punk carapace dropped. Seated next to this writer, he confided, off the record, how his 'comeback' two years earlier with backing group The Mescaleros had been fraught with unpublicised difficulties – not unlike the ones he'd experienced with The Clash.

En route to their second album – 2001's bewitching, ambient-folk-reggae mash-up *Global A Go-Go* – Strummer had lost one band member to substance addiction, another to musical differences and a third, temporarily, to ill-health. Strummer's thirst to make music again after a 1990s spent in the creative wilderness, coupled with what his widow Lucinda Tait today

calls his "extraordinary enthusiasm for life", was eating up collaborators at an alarming rate.

Yet in early summer 2001, aged 48, Strummer felt his band were now "the best it's ever been" and the latest LP "a triumph". He was right: *Global A Go-Go* was a late-career masterpiece, evidence that Strummer was still hellbent on creating daring and original fusion music. But nobody sat with him in the Coach & Horses could guess it would be the last album to bear his name during his lifetime.

**T**HE ROOTS OF JOE STRUMMER'S FINAL musical hurrah can be traced, in part, to 1998, when Strummer received an intriguing fax from SJM Concerts' Simon Moran. The Manchester-based promoter and his team had hit on the audacious idea of offering The Clash a million pounds to re-form for just two V Festival shows in Leeds and Chelmsford the following year. To his surprise, a few weeks later Strummer replied, inviting Moran to Yalway, the farmhouse in Somerset he shared with Lucinda Tait.

"I went down with my mate in his red Cavalier," recalls Moran, who had first encountered Strummer when he promoted several dates on the singer's Rock Against The Rich shows in 1988. "I had a cup of tea and he said, 'I've got you here on false pretences. I don't really want to do The Clash but I want to get out there and play live again. And I want you to be my manager.'"

Strummer explained how he'd begun writing new material with a charismatic young musician called ➤





◀ Antony Genn. A one-time member of Pulp, Genn had gained national exposure (literally) in 1995 by dancing naked on-stage during Elastica's Glastonbury set. Now it was Strummer's turn to be ambushed: at dinner with mutual friends at Damien Hirst's Pharmacy restaurant in Notting Hill Gate, Genn had collared Strummer and given him a piece of his mind.

"Ant said to him, 'You're Joe Strummer, what are you doing just fucking around?'" says Martin Slattery, soon to be The Mescaleros' keyboard player and multi-instrumentalist. "At the time, Joe was doing soundtracks and small projects, hanging around with the Black Grape crew. Ant said, 'You should be out there with a fucking Telecaster round your neck.' He can be quite a persuasive guy."

Strummer introduced Simon Moran to Genn at the Pharmacy two weeks later, where Joe dug out a contract he'd been sent by Hellcat, the American label co-owned by Rancid's guitarist Tim Armstrong. They were offering a \$250,000 advance for a Strummer solo record. Moran suggested they should negotiate a separate side-deal for the UK and Europe. Plans for Strummer's comeback were falling in place.

"My problem was always finding people to work with," Strummer said in 2001, explaining the difficulty of escaping The Clash's long shadow. "You're in a successful band from years back and it puts you in a weird bubble. You can never get that thing again when you're all young together, struggling together... You're [just] a

**Clash city rocker: (clockwise from top left) The Clash (from left) Topper Headon, Mick Jones, Strummer, Paul Simonon, New York, 1978; Joe at the Poetry Olympics Festival, London, April 4, 2000; The Mescaleros Mk I (from left) Pablo Cook, Steve 'Smiley' Barnard, Strummer, Antony Genn, Martin Slattery and Scott Shields, 1999.**

famous geezer people want to hang out with. There was a low point when I was going to hang the guitar up. But then I struck lucky."

In the early months of 1999, Strummer and Genn started piecing together an album at Battery Studios in Willesden, beginning with Yalla Yalla, a meditative, lyrically opaque chant written with Black Grape percussionist Pablo Cook and The Grid's Richard Norris. As the record progressed, Genn began to recruit more musicians, including Manchester jazz man Slattery, ex-Gun drummer and multi-instrumentalist Scott Shields, and former Robbie Williams drummer Steve 'Smiley' Barnard.

As *Rock Art And The X-Ray Style* neared completion, rehearsals for a tour kicked off at The Depot in King's Cross. Strummer dubbed his new band The Mescaleros — after the nomadic Apache warriors who fermented the agave plant — and ceded the role of musical director to the capable, gung-ho Genn. Yet on the first day, an issue arose that would prove hard to shake off: the set list.

"Simon Moran came down and we played four songs from the first album," says Barnard. "He stood there and then said, 'Can you play London Calling?' There was an awkward pause and we played it. It was undeniably a great song but there was this... tension."



"I was a big fan of The Clash," says Moran. "I thought the new stuff was great, but I said to Joe, 'Your legacy is amazing. You should play faithful versions of the songs you made with your previous group.' I'm not ashamed I said that, because that's what I'd have wanted to see. Joe didn't resist it."

When Strummer hit the road, for the first time since his *Earthquake Weather* tour in 1989, there were no fewer than seven Clash songs in the set, including Tommy Gun, (White Man) In Hammer-smith Palais and Rock The Casbah. At the first gig, Sheffield Leadmill on June 5, the reception Strummer and The Mescaleros received from the crowd was incendiary. The Portsmouth show four days later added a spirited version of Brand New Cadillac, knocked up at the soundcheck.

If The Mescaleros were suddenly wondering if they'd joined a Clash tribute band, they weren't alone. Coincidentally interviewing Clash bassist Paul Simonon for MOJO several days later, this writer produced a copy of the Portsmouth set list, which the group's manager, Simonon's then wife Tricia, gasped at in horror. There was an unwritten agreement that no ex-Clash member would ever play more than a few token songs from their catalogue live. At which point, the phone rang – Strummer, no less, pleading that the likes of I Fought The Law, Brand New Cadillac and Junco Partner weren't technically by The Clash. Bankrobber, Straight To Hell, and many others, he conceded, might well be.

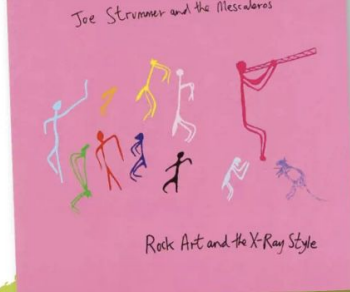
Yet while Clash HQ frothed, Strummer's fanbase was delirious their hero was back in business. For the singer, ever concerned he was yesterday's man, it was an emotional validation. "He never said anything to me, but when I look back on it now I know he was nervous," says Lucinda Tait. "He was worried it wouldn't go down well, which is why he incorporated so many Clash songs, he knew what people wanted. But the response was just so good, he was ecstatic."

**T**HE MESCALEROS SPENT MOST OF 1999 ON THE road – Europe, the US, Japan – adjusting the balance of old and new material according to the occasion. Both singer and audience quickly slipped back into their old roles, Strummer on occasion acting with a punk belligerence many thought he'd long left behind. At Glastonbury Festival, where in the mid-'90s his campfire scene had become an annual fixture/attraction, the singer furiously wielded a mikestand at a cameraman. In September, at Munich's Kunstpark Ost, supporting US neo-punks Offspring, Strummer's reversion to his 1977 model nearly landed him in A&E.

"Someone kept telling Joe to fuck off," recalls Scott Shields. "So he stopped the gig and said, 'Come on, then, let's fight!' Normally the person backs down, but this big fucker came up on-stage! Joe was a bit taken aback. Security kept them apart."

The Mescaleros quickly got used to Strummer's tour routine: surface mid-afternoon for soundcheck, play gig, then stay up all night talking to fans, the band, the crew, anybody. "We called it 'Strummer Watch'," explains Barnard. "Someone would be nominated to stay up with Joe, the brandy would come out and he'd interrogate you for five hours (*laughs*). He had his own area on the bus, filled with cassettes, books, pens, notebooks. He was naturally sociable, he loved talking to people."

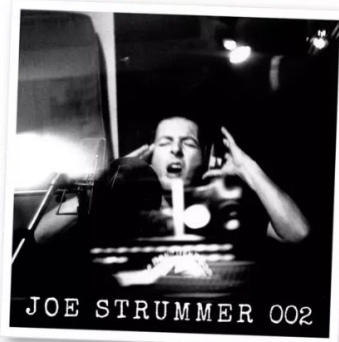
"One time in Paris, it was six o'clock in the morning," adds Shields. "We were still drinking and Joe said to me, 'If you go to bed



**"It was six o'clock in the morning, we were still drinking and Joe said to me, 'If you go to bed now, I'll sack you.'"**

**SCOTT SHIELDS**

GLOBAL A GO-GO



now, I'll sack you.' He was joking... but... he also kind of wasn't."

Strummer's old-school rebel antics impressed his young bandmates: smoking joints while queuing at airport security, cowboy hat on head; playing his ghetto blaster in hotel foyers at 4am; generally not doing what he was told. "And it rubbed off," says Shields. "He made you feel invincible! You felt you could do or be anything you chose."

The liberating rush of being a Mescalero quickly spiralled into all-out rock'n'roll lunacy. It was an open secret that Antony Genn was a functioning heroin addict – a fact Strummer was aware of when they joined forces, but felt he could accommodate. "Antony was very much the leader, and he drew us into his world," says Shields. "He had a strange life, chasing drugs all the time. We weren't doing what he was doing, but we were getting led astray. Things were getting messy with me, Pablo and Martin."

On the bus to a show in Glasgow in October 1999, the band and crew were joined by Joe's 'Manchester posse' – "ticket touts and loveable rogues," according to Slattery. An Olympian party got underway along the M6. When the driver spotted someone smoking heroin from tin foil, he pulled over and threatened to leave the group stranded. "I've never seen Joe so angry," says Slattery. "He got out and tried to rip the windscreen wipers off the bus." Later that night, at the Glasgow Hilton, where a policeman's ball was taking place, Strummer sat smoking joints in the foyer; upstairs one of the crew conducted a 'dirty protest' in his room.

For all the madness, The Mescaleros maintained their on-stage punch and swagger, culminating in euphoric gigs at London's Astoria and New York's Roseland Ballroom. But as the new century dawned, Genn's addictions began to get the better of him; failing to turn up for a festival at Jesolo Beach in Venice in June 2000, the group performed without him. Strummer, who'd seen it all before with The Clash's Topper Headon, took the difficult decision to sack his musical director.

"I think my creative input was over by that point anyway," reasoned the guitarist later. "To be honest it wasn't exciting any more." Genn insisted on bowing out at their V Festival date in August; before he took the stage for the warm-up gig in Leicester, he necked 14 pints of cider and 10 Valium and forgot the songs.

Before the V Festival show, Strummer made an afternoon campfire in his hotel car park, staring into the flames, wondering what the future held. A stunned security guard bowled over to challenge him: "What you doing?!" "We're making a video," Strummer explained, "but the camera crew are running late." "What's the video for?" countered the guard, not entirely convinced. "Paul Weller's Wild Wood," Strummer smiled back.

In truth, like Wild Wood's entangled narrator, Strummer was stymied without Genn. A new musical path would have to be found.

**O**N APRIL 4, 2000, STRUMMER AND PABLO COOK attended the Poetry Olympics at the Astoria, on London's Charing Cross Road. The annual event, organised by '60s counterculture figure Michael Horovitz, was admired for its throw-back beatnik vibe. At the bar, Joe bumped into Tymon Dogg, his pre-Clash busking partner who'd guested on The Clash's *Sandinista!*. The two hadn't met for over a decade, and renewed their bond that night by jamming an acoustic set with Cook on congas.

That evening had a profound effect on Strummer. "I thought, >



**Going Global:** (clockwise) Strummer on-stage with Tymon Dogg, Shepherd's Bush Empire, July 11, 2002; Mk II Mescaleros (from left) Slattery, Shields, Strummer, Dogg, Cook, 2000; Simonon, Strummer, Headon and Jones reunite at the Ivor Novello Awards, London, May 24, 2001; Joe and wife Lucinda Tait, 1997.



**"Joe was so happy. Maybe he pumped it out so quick because something in him knew his life was short."**

**LUCINDA TAIT**

◀ "This is the way to go – let's relax," he said later. When The Mescaleros played their first show without Genn, at London's 100 Club on October 27, as a warm-up for a tour with The Who, Tymon Dogg was on-stage adding violin and acoustic guitar. The last number in the set list would soon be a folk rendition of The Clash's White Riot, titled Folk Riot.

"It changed during The Who tour," recalls Barnard. "Joe had started recording *Global A Go-Go* with Tymon, Scott and Martin and the music had started going down that folkier route. I wasn't really happy with the direction. My last association with Joe was standing at the urinals at Wembley Arena as The Who were coming on. He said, 'I'm doing a new album, come along and play the drums.' And that was it. I never heard anything again."

Also absent from The Who tour was Scott Shields, who was unable to walk after being struck down with a mysterious illness. "I thought I'd gone nuts, that I'd taken too much stuff," he says. "It had been a pretty full-on time. It took months to figure out that I actually had MS."

In the early months of 2001, The Mescaleros resumed work on what would become *Global A Go-Go* at Battery Studios. The idea had originally been to record a cover of Bobby Charles's delightful swamp rocker *Before I Grow Too Old*, but the sessions continued for three months. If Shields needed a break from Strummer's half-crazy night-owl life, this wasn't it.

"You'd start coming in at lunchtime but by the third day you'd be starting at 8pm and leaving at 9am in the morning," remembers Martin Slattery. "It was fucking lunacy. Joe would stay up all night, he'd be the one bringing the joints in, he was the puppet master."

"He set up in the studio, building his little box where he'd go and write his lyrics," says Shields. "He pretty much lived in there the whole time."



The music, created in layers by Slattery, Shields and Cook, reflected Joe's broad tastes in music – Colombian cumbia, reggae, pastoral folk, mariachi, Cajun, Danzón, dancehall, Afro-American work songs – to which his young collaborators incorporated contemporary beats and loops. Dogg added Spanish guitar, mandolin and violin, while Strummer's lyrics echoed the trippy, fever dream cut-up style he'd perfected on The Clash's *Combat Rock*. There were familiar references to radio transmissions, the CIA, exotic foreign place names, tangy Latin phrases, and flashes of careworn wisdom (check out the stirring Johnny Appleseed: "If you're after getting the honey/ Then you don't go killing all the bees...").

Strummer partly attributed the album's heady fusion vibe to the area where it was made. "That's how things felt in Willesden," Strummer explained in 2001. "Everyone is out in the street. People from all over the world. When we recorded the album, all I can remember is the sweetness of no one having to say anything. We were telepathic by that time. Everything was written in the studio, it just flowed."

Soon after The Mescaleros began a world tour in summer 2001, Pablo Cook quit the group to work with Moby, leaving just Strummer, Shields and Slattery from the first line-up. New members drummer Luke Bullen and bassist Simon Stafford enhanced the group's new live sound: dubbier, trippier, folkier. But backstage, fresh divisions were appearing. Shields, in particular, didn't see eye-to-eye with Dogg, whose musical freedom sat uneasily with the others.

"I nearly whacked an acoustic guitar around his head once in rehearsal," recalls Slattery. "I was like, 'We're all playing our parts on the record, can't you just fucking play yours?' I'd just had a kid, so I was lacking sleep. I saw Tymon years later in Portobello Road and he said, 'I remember that. It was only because you'd just had a kid that I let you off and didn't fucking punch you in the face!'"



So what did Joe think of it all? “He loved it in his mischievous way, his crazy band members being at each other’s throats,” Slattery continues. “He definitely loved a bit of chaos.”

The band were by now playing bigger venues. But while *Rock Art* had sold 150,000 copies worldwide and *Global* looked set to surpass that tally, they were only ever breaking even financially. “No one was making significant revenue out of it,” says Simon Moran. “It paid its way as it went. Joe had his Clash income, he wasn’t doing it for the money. He did it because he loved it.”

After preliminary sessions for a third album at 2Khz Studio in Kensal Green, The Mescaleros set off for a November 2002 tour of smaller UK venues, the set still finishing with old Clash tunes. Around the same time, news broke that The Clash were to be inducted into the Rock’n’Roll Hall of Fame in New York in March 2003 – with the possibility of the group re-forming for the event. It wasn’t exactly what Shields and Slattery wanted to hear.

“I remember thinking, ‘If Joe gets The Clash together, that kills what we’re doing,’” says Slattery, who these days works on TV and film soundtracks with a long-cleaned-up Antony Genn. “On that last tour, if anyone’s enthusiasm was flagging, maybe it was mine.”

When Mick Jones joined The Mescaleros on-stage at a benefit for striking fire fighters at Acton Town Hall, on November 15, the band’s spirits were further knocked. As Clash fans the world over shed tears of joy at Joe and Mick’s first live performance together for 19 years, The Mescaleros contemplated their future. Although Strummer’s official line was “I’ll only do it if Topper does it” – a deliberately ambiguous statement as the drummer’s health was still questionable – the prospects for a Clash reunion looked bright.

“Joe was up for it, so were Mick and Topper,” confirms Simon Moran today. “It was only [Clash bassist] Paul Simonon who wasn’t keen. It’s documented that Joe asked Mani [from The Stone Roses] if he would play bass, if Paul decided not to.”

Yet, tour over, Strummer remained fully committed to a third Mescaleros album, joining Shields and Slattery at Rockfield studios in Wales for a week of sessions in early December. Then something unthinkable happened: Strummer passed away suddenly at home in Somerset on Sunday, December 22. The post-mortem concluded he’d had a congenital heart defect which could have taken him at any time.

There would be no Clash reunion, nor any more Mescaleros shows – not that such things now seemed to matter much.

**S**TRUMMER’S DEATH, 20 YEARS AGO THIS YEAR, wasn’t the end of The Mescaleros story. With Lucinda Tait’s blessing, in 2003 Slattery and Shields pieced together a final album – the rollicking, rock-reggae *Streetcore*, with its hit Coma Girl – using extant recordings from 2Khz and Rockfield and Strummer’s notes on how he envisioned certain songs. It was a strange and emotional journey for those involved. “You’d play a take and hear Joe say, ‘Turn it up, Scotty,’ as if he was in the room,” says Shields. “It was surreal. It just wouldn’t sink in that he was gone.”

Others reflected on how much energy Strummer had invested in his remarkable last musical hurrah, and the toll it may have taken. “When you think Joe could be on-stage for two hours with that leg pumping, it makes you wonder,” says Lucinda Tait. “We were in a hotel once and the lift had broken. We were on the fourth floor, and Joe took it very slowly up the stairs. Now I realise that was a sign of a weak heart. But all I can say is that his love of what he was doing was so strong, and he was so happy. Maybe he pumped it out so quick because something in him knew his life was short.”

“He was loved by everyone who knew him,” concludes Simon Moran. “It was as simple as that. He was just such a massive talent. You can’t help thinking he’d still be out there doing it today if he was alive.”

**M**

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Thanks to Anthony Davie, author of *The History Of Joe Strummer & The Mescaleros* (Lund Choos Publishing). The expansive Joe Strummer 002 *The Mescaleros Years* box set is out on September 23 via Dark Horse, while Joe’s life is celebrated by a special event at Maxilla Social Club, London W10 on November 19.



Ring of fire: (from left) Henry Rollins, Joe Strummer, Rick Rubin and Johnny Cash in summit at The Pantages Theatre, Los Angeles, 1995.

# “JOE WAS REALLY AFRAID”

When Joe Strummer met Johnny Cash, neither were long for this world, but they left a stirring co-legacy.

By Sylvie Simmons.

IT WAS Easter in LA and Joe Strummer was on vacation, staying at a friend's house in Bel Air. A half-hour drive east along Sunset Boulevard, Johnny Cash, one of Strummer's musical heroes, was working in producer Rick Rubin's home studio on their latest American Recordings album, *American IV: The Man Comes Around*. Strummer had told Cash's stepdaughter Carlene Carter he was a big Johnny Cash fan years before, when he saw her perform on a night off during an early Clash tour of the States.

"One day we were working with Johnny and Joe just showed up," Rubin recalls. And kept showing up, day after day. He'd arrive early in the morning, which was when Cash liked to start work, and sit on the floor in the control room with his back against the glass so he could watch Cash sing. Rubin recalls a day when Cash recorded a cover of Marty Robbins's song *Big Iron*. Strummer was floored by it. "He told me that hearing Johnny Cash sing this song embodied the whole romance of outlaws and gun-fighting and the Old West and his whole vision of what America was about."

After 10 days or so of these daily visits, Rubin took Strummer aside. "I said, 'If you can come up with a song you and Johnny can do together we'll try it.'" Strummer had been writing songs and might well have been hoping that one would work for Cash, but his reaction was abject fear. "Joe was asked to write a song for him," remembers his widow, Lucinda Tait, "Cast A Long Shadow, and Cash said, 'I don't

really understand this.'"

"[Joe] was *really* afraid," says Rubin. He suggested they come up with a cover song that both he and Cash would be comfortable singing.

"Johnny had a home in Jamaica and spent a lot of time there. He loved Jamaican music. So when I told Johnny that The Clash was a punk band who brought reggae into punk, Johnny said, 'I love reggae.'" They pulled out a pile of reggae CDs and sat around listening to a slew of songs. Cash seemed taken by Bob

Marley's *Three Little Birds*; Rubin suggested Jimmy Cliff's *The Harder They Come*; then Cash's son John Carter Cash mentioned Marley's *Redemption Song*. "And as soon as we played it," Rubin says, "Johnny said, 'We'll do that.'"

With Tom Morello of Rage Against The Machine on guitar, Cash and Strummer sang the song as a duet. Among the multiple takes that Rubin recorded was a Joe Strummer solo version that would appear on Strummer's posthumous *Streetcore*. Their duet would appear on Cash's posthumous box set *Unearthed*.

When I talked with Cash shortly before his death, we touched on *Redemption Song*. "I recorded it for the last album, but I just didn't feel like I did the song justice," he said. "Maybe I did, but I just wanted to feel like it was really something special, which it has to be if you're covering a Bob Marley song." Recalling the session at Rick Rubin's house, he spoke warmly of Joe Strummer. "What a good musician he was," said Cash. "And a good man."

Sylvie Simmons

"What a good musician he was. And a good man."

JOHNNY  
ON JOE