

**Free CD!** 18-TRACK GUIDE TO  
THE MONTH'S BEST MUSIC

**MUSIC, MOVIES & BOOKS**

SEPTEMBER 1999 £2.95

# THE CLASH

**JOE  
STRUMMER**  
brings back  
the glory  
days

**EXCLUSIVE  
INTERVIEW**

**EMMYLOU HARRIS**

The legend of Gram Parsons

**YELLOW SUBMARINE**

The Blue Meanies are back

**THERAMONES**

Bruddas-in-arms

**LARRY CLARK**

Welcome to the underworld

**Plus** IKE TURNER **RODDY FRAME** DOUG LIMAN **PATTI SMITH**

**GEORGE P PELECANOS** **ROXY MUSIC** **PAUL AUSTER** **SHARLEEN SPITERI**



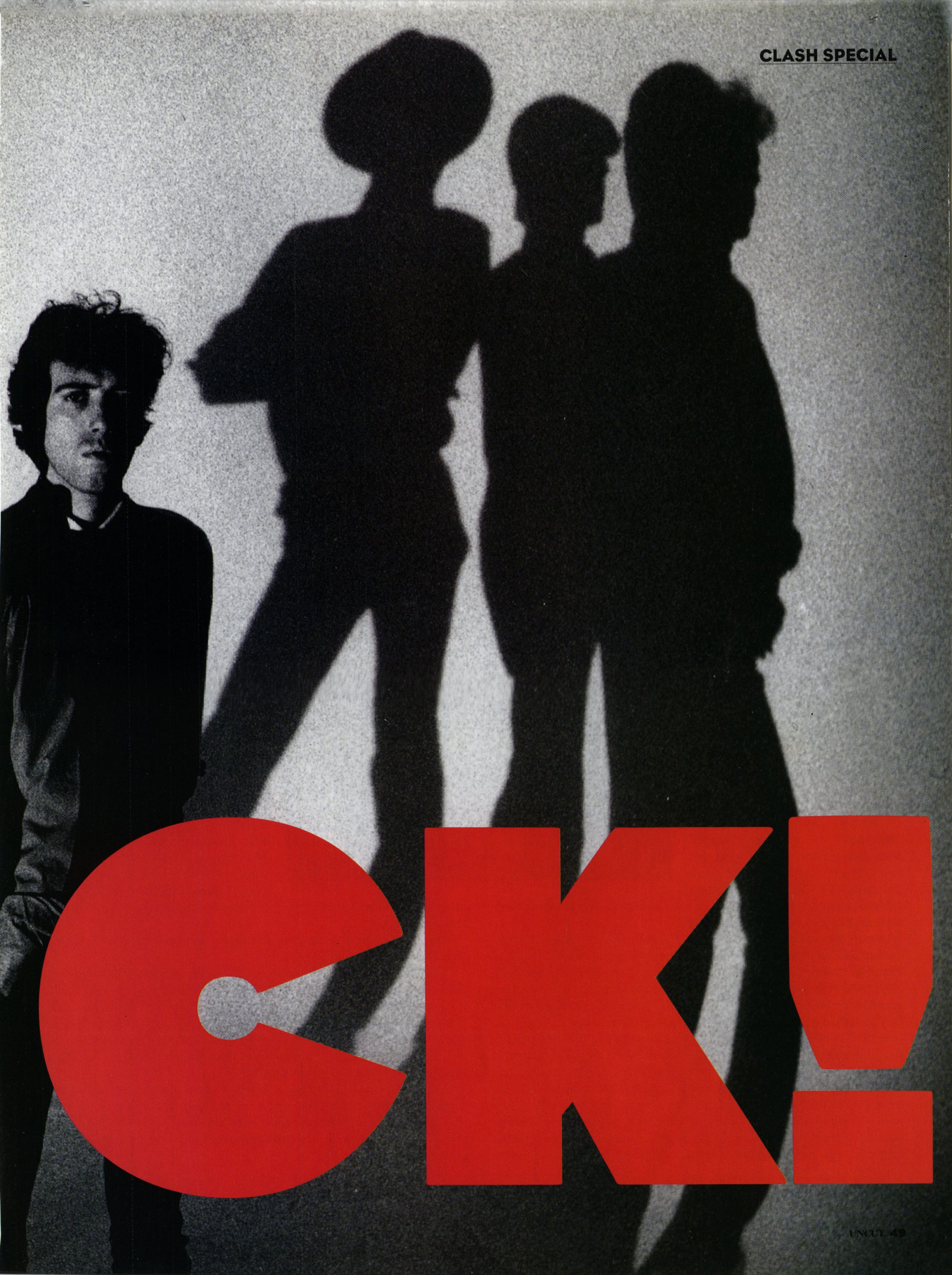


Sidelined for a decade by record company politics following the bitter disintegration of **THE CLASH**, Joe Strummer is back this month with a triumphant new single. In this exclusive interview, he relives his glory days as punk's defiant rebel warrior and explains why going down fighting is the only way to go.  
By Gavin Martin

# COMBAT ROT



CLASH SPECIAL



**CK!**



HERE HE COMES NOW, A SMALL, STOCKY MAN in a black leather jacket, scuffed jeans and biker boots, stubby fingers gripping a plastic cup of red wine, surrounded by four tall Finnish blokes. It's high summer, 1999, and Joe Strummer – the old campaigner back on the trail – is making his way from the backstage area to meet the people at The Provinnsirock Festival in Seinajoki, Finland.

Fronting his new band, The Mescaleros, Strummer's just played the last gig of a short European tour. The performance begins disastrously. Strummer and his "pesky Meskys" have had little sleep since a triumphant show at a festival in Sweden the previous evening, and the first three songs threaten to deteriorate into a morass of hoarse, bad-tempered vocals and malfunctioning equipment. Somehow, however, Joe and the band manage to rescue the concert from ignominy. "If I knew how we did it, I'd remember and do it again next time I was in deep shit."

A combination of Clash-era classics (the brooding psychodrama of "Straight To Hell"; "I Fought The Law", the Sonny Curtis-composed, Bobby Fuller Four song that Strummer made his own; and the ever-astonishing "White Man In Hammersmith Palais"), and recently recorded but as yet unreleased Mescaleros tunes (the epic acid punk single, "Yalla Yalla", plus the combustible "Techno D Day" and the celebratory "Diggin' The New") ensure the set eventually turns out to be a three-encore victory.

Along the way, the set also maps a persuasive route through Strummer's history: outraged visions, withering anger, riotous good times and a musical agenda ranging from rockabilly to techno, dub power to salsa, punk to funk. The small but increasingly enthusiastic crowd encourage a characteristically impassioned performance from a showman with considerable experience producing musical goods under adverse conditions.

Now, as he walks through the crowd, Strummer's like some aged warrior, fresh from battle, out to greet his followers and ready to party long into the night. The four Finnish blokes gathered around him are proud to be foot soldiers in General Strummer's army, for they are none other than Control.

Control? According to their manager – a guy with a weathered, pock-marked face, chiselled jaw and intense staring eyes – Control are one of Finland's treasures: the longest-standing (formed in 1979) and best Clash cover band in the world. Strummer feels it's the least he can do to buy them all a beer (several as it turns out). Especially when he hears that last year they played this very festival to an audience of just three people.

Meanwhile, others in the milling throng, old enough to remember him as the paint-splattered punk renegade, the roots rock rebel with a penchant for terrorist chic, also spot Strummer. Astonished gasps, hugs, tears and much autograph-signing ensues. A big, red-faced biker girl wraps him in an embrace and Joe holds her tight, his eyes starting to water. When they release themselves from the clinch, she's unable to say anything in either English or Finnish. Strummer simply hugs her again, this time for even longer. He signs autographs for all comers and draws up a proclamation for

one guy that declares, "THIS IS SERIOUS – Let this man go wherever he pleases, By order of Joe Strummer and All Punk Rock Overlords."

When it's time to go backstage to find transport to his hotel, Strummer escorts the group assembled around him past the doubtful-looking security guy. Fists thumping his chest he hollers, "I am the King of Provinnsirock, I rocked the house and these are my friends, let them through." Outside the dressing room, festival organisers – probably unaware that when The Clash were on the road Strummer would often have anything up to 22 fans sleeping on his hotel room floor – seem perturbed at the arrival of Joe's new-found Finnish friends.

The Mescaleros are milling around backstage ready to return to the hotel. Though most of the group are up to 20 years younger than their frontman, they have two things in mind after the tiring schedule of the past week and the last particularly exhausting 48 hours: they want to eat and they want to sleep. But Joe's not about to join them – as one member of the crew puts it, Strummer eats sleep. At this time of the year in Finland, the sun barely sets. It will be 5.30am before he beds down, rising a mere three hours later to lug his reggae-pumping soundbox onto the coach, catch the flight back to London and then onto his wife and kids at home in Somerset.

First, there is much ranting and raving, much putting the world to rights, much spliffing and drinking to be done. In the hotel bar Strummer drinks beer, a Finnish Hooch-like concoction called "Gin", and a brandy and Coke. He buys endless drinks for the Control crowd, which has now grown to eight people. Strummer seems unconcerned. He's too busy recounting the story of The Mescaleros' European tour, his voice cracked but emphatic.

"We stormed Europe, we destroyed Paris. They wouldn't let us leave the building. I had to walk through the crowd in my socks and plead with them to leave. We hit Brussels – same thing again. We had to play everything we knew – and some shit twice. We hit Hamburg, a big Clash riot town – I've been banned from Hamburg since 1980, right up to 1993. We went into blitzkrieg overdrive and destroyed the place. A punk came up to me later and

said every punk rocker in Hamburg was in the building and every one of them was crying."

Control listen intently as Strummer's street-fighting talk turns to the sorry state of current British rock music.

"Our talent pool is empty," he says angrily. "The modern British rock groups don't realise we're fucking dying in England and it ain't good enough. They think it's a big joke, it's all ha, ha, ha. Well, it fucking isn't a joke to me, man. Music means everything to me and they're fucking it up; it's weak. They wouldn't have lasted a minute in the punk rock days, when the crowd were, like, 'Give it to us and give it now, or we'll fuck you up.' This lot would die like flowers in a vase with no water in it."

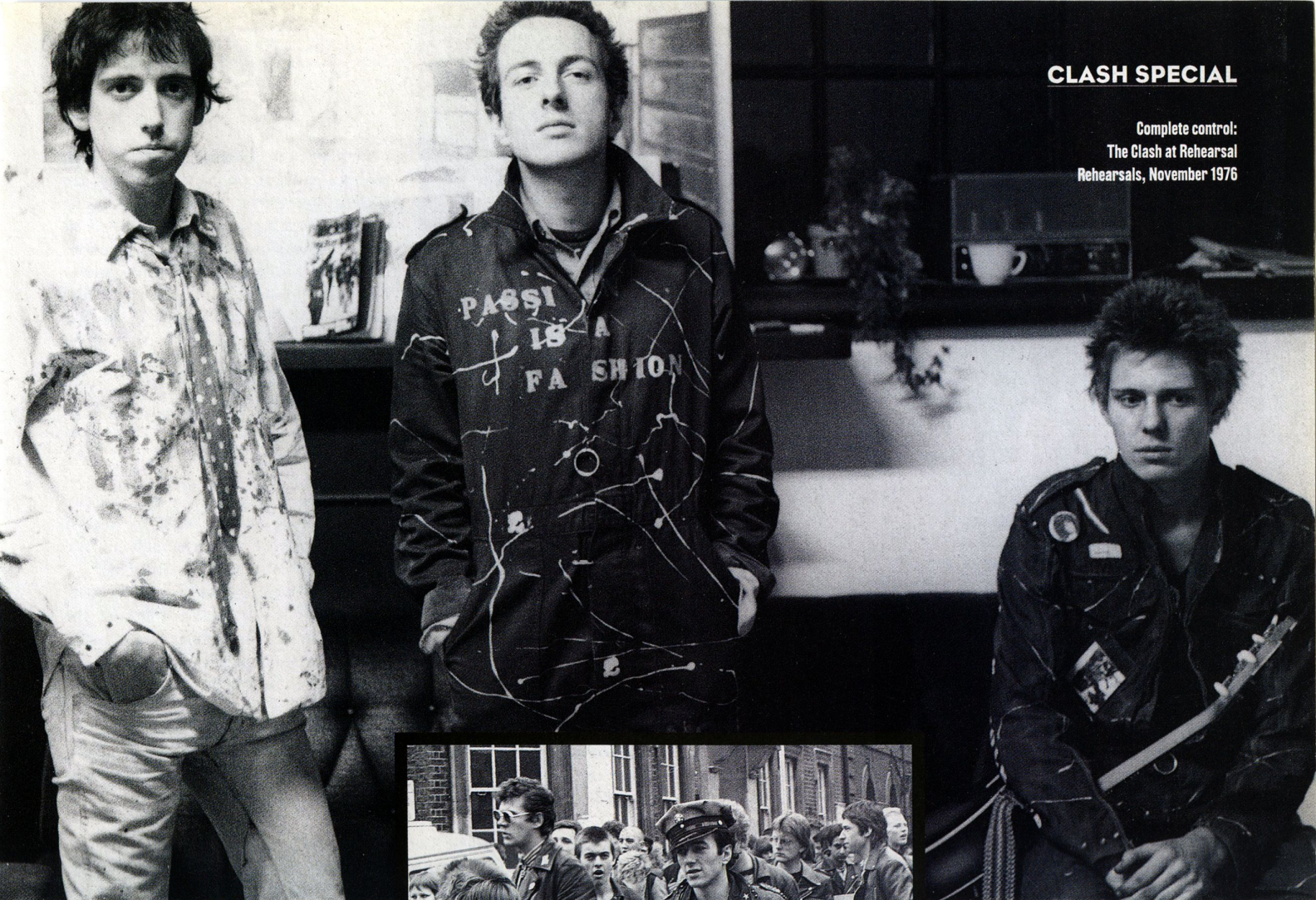
"The Mondays and Black Grape, Basement Jaxx, Fatboy Slim and The Chemical Brothers – that's the sort of shit we want. We can exclude them from any talk about the British rock scene, obviously. They have the path, and it's what we need. We need punk again. I'm not talking about music, I'm talking about attitude."



*'Letsagetabitrockin'!*  
Strummer with The 101'ers  
at The Elgin, Ladbroke  
Grove, August 1975



Complete control:  
The Clash at Rehearsal  
Rehearsals, November 1976



ATTITUDE IS SOMETHING THAT JOE Strummer had long before he found himself at the epicentre of punk rock in the London summer of 1976. Attitude was what got him through boarding school in Epsom, Surrey, cutting up Benzedrine inhalers for a speed rush, dropping acid, flunking studies and flaunting the lash as he soaked up the Stones, The Who and The Kinks. And he relied on it later – first, when he took to busking, and after that, when he started playing belligerent R&B with The 101'ers out of a West London squat.

Then, as The Clash frontman, urged on by mentor/svengali Bernie Rhodes, Strummer became the punk scene's loudest voice, its most outspoken idealist, famously making grand, rash promises that often ended in pratfalls. Despite an ever-widening musical and ideological template that went far beyond punk's angry beginnings into both Strummer's folky boho past and co-composer guitarist Mick Jones' dance future, The Clash were finally destroyed as a creative force by the all-too familiar pitfalls – a ball-breaking record contract, drugs, internecine warfare and management bust-ups.

"Attitude," Joe will admit, looking back, "lost out to ego."

In his fitful post-Clash career – laying the group to rest with the band he now calls The Clash Mark 2 and the universally derided *Cut The Crap* album, producing and touring with The Pogues, going on a loss-making, Class War-sponsored tour with his Latin Rockabilly War, teaming up with The Levellers, Happy Mondays and celebrity yobs about town Fat Les – Strummer has sought to keep the attitude alive. With age now snapping at his heels – he's 47 this year – The Mescaleros might be his last chance for a final gnarled and ragged, bolshy but big-hearted attempt to walk it like he talks it.



to do. I wouldn't contemplate it for a second," explains Strummer, trying to laugh off something which clearly still upsets him.

Bassist Paul Simonon is painting, he tells them. "He's totally punk rock about his painting. He comes down to my house and paints for hours in the rain. I have to go out with a bottle of brandy to beg him to come in." Like Strummer, guitarist Mick Jones is making a new record.

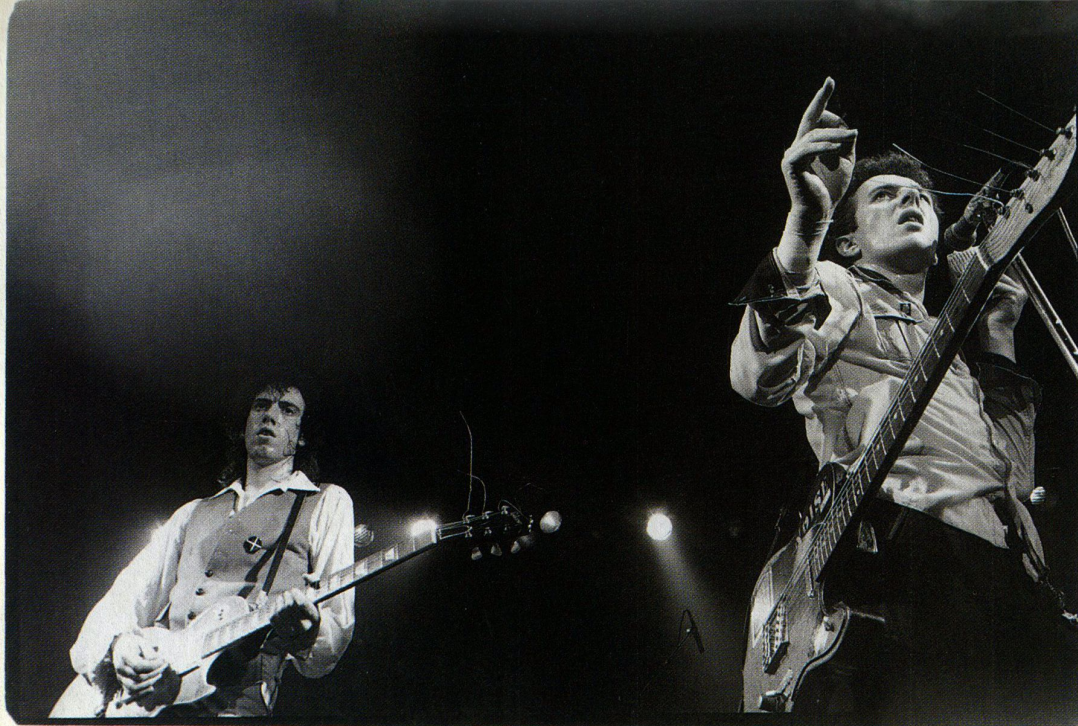
But with the imminent *On The Road With The Clash* live album due in October, Control want to know whether there are any plans afoot to reform The Clash. "No, never. Don't even say that," says an emphatic Strummer. "You have to move forward in life. Maybe in the bitterest financial gloom, it has been considered. But it's a dead subject now."

Since The Clash split, Strummer has lived off his royalties – some years a feast, others a famine. Was money in mind when he formed The Mescaleros?

"Not compared to reforming The Clash," he says. "But, hey, c'mon. I've got to earn a living. I've gotta pay my mortgage off. Make sure the wife's got some dosh, look after my kids and make sure we're eating nice. I don't want any more than anyone else. I ain't got no swimming pool, or anything like that. I just want to earn a living. If I don't fucking get out on the road, it's mini-cabbing or... mini-cabbing."

"Paul Simon wrote this wonderful song called 'One Trick Pony,'" he says then. "And that's what I am. It's time to get out in the ring again."





Paul Slatery

TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO, JOE STRUMMER EMERGED FROM PUB rock obscurity into the ferment created by The Sex Pistols and London's burgeoning punk scene. There, he was reborn as the apocalyptic rant and angry idealist fronting The Clash. Over a seven-year period, The Clash blazed an incendiary trail that took them far beyond their parochial and claustrophobic beginnings as punk-rock stormtroopers onto a world stage, where their best music stood as a last stand against the totalitarian dread of the Reagan/Thatcher era.

Ironies, contradictions and controversy followed them every step of the way. But, like everything else flung in their path, the band embraced and thrived on them. They were political agitators who loved posing, pacifists who constantly confronted violence in music and in person, punk rebels haunted by the dilemma of "turning rebellion into money" that Strummer described mournfully on "White Man In Hammersmith Palais". Filling the void left by The Sex Pistols' self-destructive, scorched-earth policy, The Clash took the scope and possibility of British rock to a point where they were marketed in America as "the only band that matters". Like the Stones and The Who before them, they were also regularly acclaimed as "the world's greatest rock band".

Bound by a chemistry that was volatile, but complementary, potent yet doomed to a kamikaze ending, The Clash were a cultural melting-pot that embraced gangster and paramilitary chic, trad rock, reggae prophesy, folk protest, nascent dance culture, hippie utopianisms, beat visions – almost anything, in fact, that came into their orbit.

Alone among the punk elite, they took enthusiastically to America and most things American – finding a spiritual home in the land of misfits and screw-up, outlaws and frontiersmen. Their hunger, curiosity and a rapacious death-or-glory ethos spurred them on. Through both their shortcomings (a clueless business sense, impossible change-the-world aims and broadsides), and their victories (transcendent live shows, records that defined their time as trenchantly and provocatively as had the Stones, The Who and The Beatles in a previous era), their influence and acolytes are, even now, spread far and wide.

Norman "Fatboy Slim" Cook, Primal Scream's Bobby Gillespie and future Stone Roses guitarist John Squire were all young fans energised and inspired by The Clash. Following in their wake, U2 learned much from The Clash, capturing the American imagination with a combination of sociopolitical concern and an innate awareness of the power of mediated imagery.

States, at least twice that number in Britain, with regular forays across Europe. The final Strummer-Jones collaboration, 1982's *Combat Rock*, was actually recorded on a tour of Australasia and the Far East. By today's standards, their recorded output was huge – eight vinyl albums, over 100 songs, in six years. Not all of the output was great, yet their significance – as a band whose live energy and excitement never waned, who at their best rewrote the rock song rule book, fought established industry expectations and damned the consequences – remains undiminished.

#### IT'S TWO DAYS AFTER THE MESCALEROS' PROVINNSIROCK SHOW.

In Battery Recording Studio, in Willesden, north-west London, Strummer and the band are putting the finishing touches to their debut album, *Rock, Art And The X-Ray Style*. The Mescaleros came together after Strummer met guitarist and new songwriting partner Anthony Genn (ex-Elastica and Pulp sideman) at a Fat Les session. When not out on tour, Strummer and The Mescaleros have been living and recording here since February, sleeping on floors during the day and working at night.

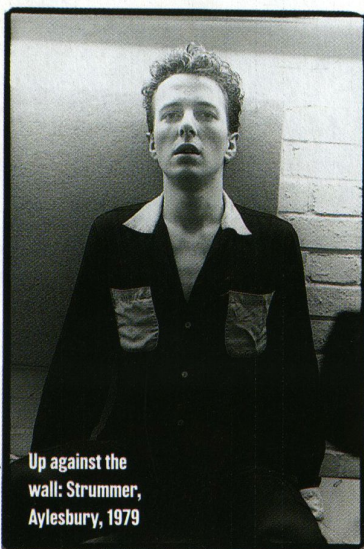
"I could have fallen asleep at any point in Finland, but I'm a living legend to some of those people," says a matter-of-fact Strummer. "And when you know that, to say, 'Oh, I'm going to my room' or 'I'm going to sleep' sounds kind of pussy. Those guys in Control have been standing up for punk rock through some real lean times. Imagine playing to three people. I have to show I'm down with the peeps. To me that's what rock'n'roll is all about."

Strummer's desire to inspire a sense of community is central to several Mescaleros tunes and was present in

many Clash songs – from the cataclysmic debut single, "White Riot", right up to "This Is England", one track worth salvaging on the final post-Mick Jones LP, *Cut The Crap*.

This determination to reach a constituency of like minds can be traced back to his peripatetic childhood. Born John Edward Mellor in Ankara, 1952, he lived in Turkey, Mexico, Germany and Cairo before his father, a Foreign Office employee, sent him and elder brother David to boarding school in Epsom, Surrey.

"My earliest memory is of a huge earthquake in Mexico City. There was a big column in the city centre and a golden angel had fallen from the top," he recalls, sipping red wine, the makings of a joint on the upturned box in front of him.



Paul Slatery

Up against the wall: Strummer, Aylesbury, 1979

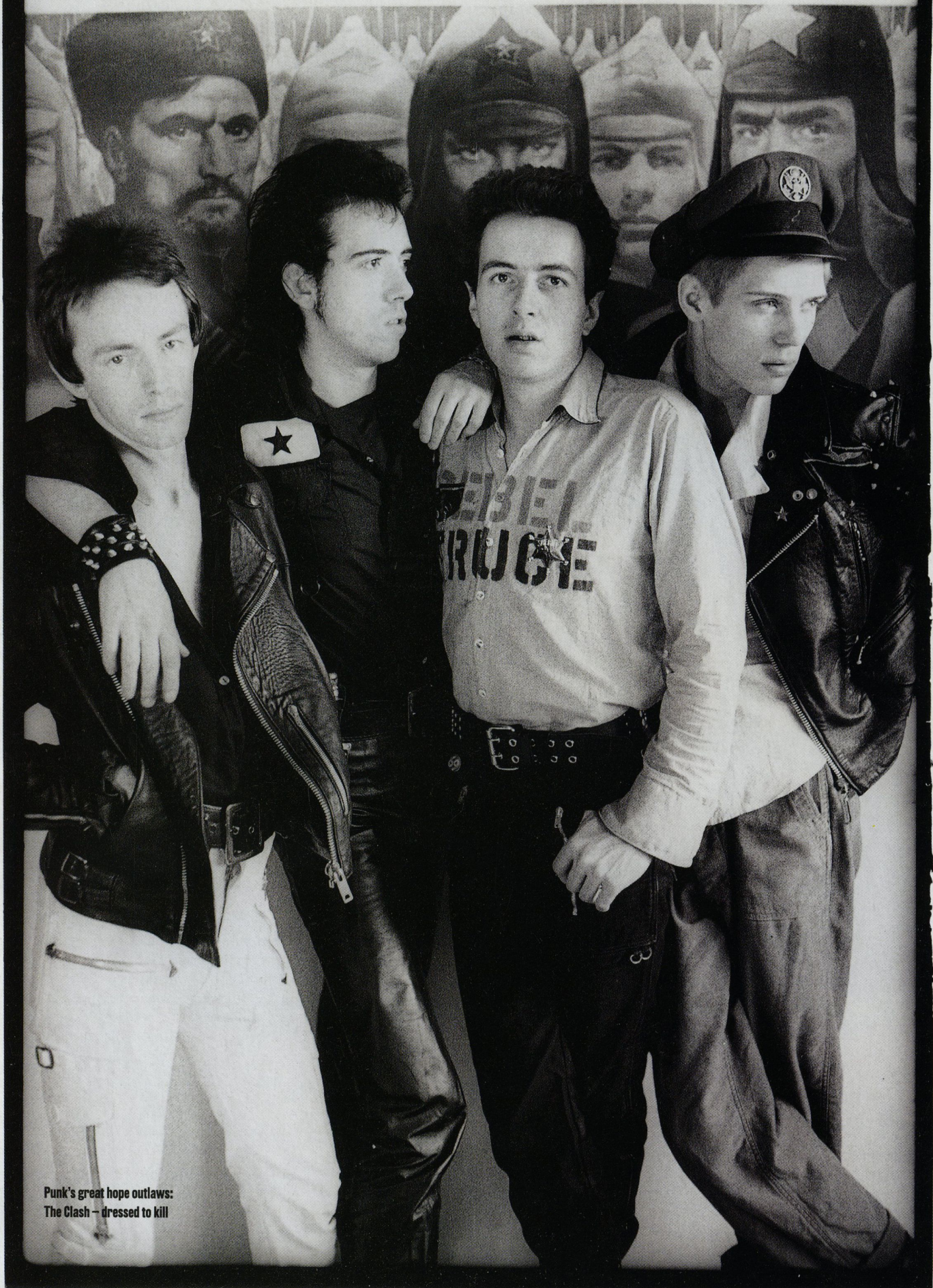
Adrian Boot





Topper Headon, Mick Jones,  
Paul Simonon and Joe Strummer,  
Belfast, October 1977





Punk's great hope outlaws:  
The Clash — dressed to kill

Pennie Smith



"I read years later that Burroughs and Kerouac were there at the same time and experienced that same earthquake. My dad took me to see the fallen angel – everyone else in Mexico City must have had the same idea.

"I said in my first interview that my father was a diplomat – that was to make him feel good. He worked his way through the Foreign Service. I was bigging him up when I said he was a diplomat, because he was my dad. The fact is he had fuck all – all we ever had was a four-roomed bungalow in Warlingham: a tiny kitchen, no washing-machine, nothing.

"I was sent to boarding school, because my dad had pulled himself out of the shithole by studying, and he thought it was the way for me, too. But I couldn't handle it. I'd see him once a year, and he'd blow a gasket because I was shite.

"My reports got worse and worse until I became the king of the long-term boarding school prisoners. Eight years in the joint, right?" he shouts, hammering his hand with his fist.

"The day pupils were assholes to us. We were beaten like sheep. I've been beaten with wooden coat hangers, golf clubs, hockey sticks, leather slippers. Everything you could beat a person with. And I still came out shouting 'Bollocks!'"

The music Strummer discovered at boarding school made sense of his anger and frustration. "I remember walking through this room on some stupid errand and they had this big wooden radio set up. I heard the start of The Rolling Stones' 'Not Fade Away'. It was turned up really loud, those things had massive bass. I just thought, 'This is it.' I never paid attention to anything I heard in school after that.

"I was the worst – 24th out of 24 the whole way through. But imagine it. Every week there was new stuff from the Stones, The Beatles, The Who, Hendrix... that was a real fertile period and there was no time to do anything else. Really. Music was everything."

The Mellor boys, Joseph and David, developed as completely contrasting personalities and once ensconced in boarding school they soon drifted apart. Younger, more outgoing and shorter than his classmates, Strummer remembers always casting himself as a ringleader. Withdrawn and solitary, brother David became obsessed with Ian Smith's Rhodesian UDI movement and immersed himself in the vile racism of the National Front, a source of rancour between the brothers and a spur to the younger Strummer's future political activism and awareness. On July 19, 1970, David was found dead in London's Regent Park, having committed suicide.

"I still think about him a lot," Joe tells me. "He was withdrawn. Talking wasn't his thing, man. It was a different world back then, no counselling or people to help you through. You just had to deal with it yourself.

"We were really in two different worlds. I remember he saw footage of the Stones' concert at Hyde Park [1969] on the TV and he couldn't get over how organised it was. He thought everything I was into was a huge sprawling mess. He didn't understand what it was about. We wanted to take over the world. That became the point for me – the drugs, the sex, the music, the point where it was trying to alter the way things were."

After boarding school, Joe went to London's Central School of Art but was soon thrown out for dropping acid. He followed a girlfriend down to Cardiff, but when she rejected him he wound up in Newport, where he knew some people. There, in exchange for the use of his drum-kit, the local art-school band – who, in various incarnations, were called Rip Off Park Rock'N'Roll All Stars and then, briefly, Flaming Youth – took him on as singer and guitarist, Joe re-naming them The Vultures. It was 1973 and the band played mostly at the student union building on Stowe Hill, made occasional forays across the Severn Bridge and into the Welsh valleys,

Strummer supporting himself by "cleaning toilets, digging graves, washing dishes, doing anything at all". By 1974, he was back in London, where he took to busking with his friend, Tymon Dogg (who would later appear on *Sandinista*), making several forays around Europe before landing up in a squat at 101, Walterton Terrace, just off the Harrow Road in north-west London.

"We were the kings of the post-11 o'clock slot: Leicester Square, Piccadilly Circus. You name it, we were down there," says Strummer of his busking days.

When Tymon Dogg was arrested for assaulting a police officer with a violin ("Which was shit, that just doesn't happen, man"), Strummer decided to put an R&B group together: The 101'ers, a band named after and based around the Walterton Terrace squat.

Strummer has fond memories of this most difficult of transitional periods. "Punk was a doddle compared to what we went through. The bass player went to the door one day and this guy put a hatchet through it. Hell's Angels would smash the place up. They even set the house next to us on fire. There was a lot of deranged people around there, the place was a ruin."

The 101'ers played their first "proper" gig at The Telegraph pub in Brixton on September 7, 1974, using equipment borrowed from the Battersea-based reggae band, Mutumbi. In December, they hired a room above The

Chippenhams, a pub on the corner of Malvern and Shirland Roads, just opposite the Walterton Terrace squat. This became The Charlie Pigdog Club, where The 101'ers played a weekly residency on Thursday nights, tickets on sale at the door, priced 10 pence.

"We decimated the *barrio*," he says, rifling through his bag of military metaphors. "There was hundreds of squatters, gypsies ripping people off, and dogs jumping out the window."

The mayhem that usually surrounded these gigs eventually became too much for the Chippenhams's landlord, who closed the club down in April, 1975. A couple of months earlier, however, Strummer had got in touch with *Uncut* editor Allan Jones, who'd just started writing for *Melody Maker*, and

invited him down to The Chip. Jones gave The 101'ers their first-ever write-up. Strummer showed the cutting to the manager of The Elgin, a pub on Ladbroke Grove in West London. For the next nine months, they played The Elgin every Thursday night, a legendary residency that no one who was there will ever forget.

The 101'ers at this time consisted of guitarist Clive Timperley (who would later join The Passions, who had a hit with "I'm In Love With A German Film Star"), drummer Richard "Snakehips" Dudanski (who went on to play with Basement 5, Public Image Ltd and The Raincoats), a bass player called Mole, and Strummer on vocals and guitar. Towards the end of their Elgin residency, Dan Kelleher joined on guitar and vocals. By then, The 101'ers were stalwarts on the London pub rock circuit – a self-styled "rhythm-'n'-blues" orchestra – and even attracting modest record company interest.

In July, 1975, Strummer "almost fainted" when Chiswick Records offered his band the chance to make a record. He was stunned. Happy, but stunned.

"Making records wasn't something we even considered," he says now. "It was something Yes or ELP did. We just thought it was an area closed off to no-marks like us."

NO-MARKS OR NOT, THE STREET URCHINS BATTERING OUT A racket in London rehearsal rooms and pubs were rapidly accruing a cult following. In August, 1975, Bernie Rhodes – then working as an assistant in Malcolm McLaren's famous Sex emporium – had spotted one John Lydon wearing a Pink Floyd T-shirt with "I hate..." provocatively scribbled over the logo. Once Lydon was introduced to McLaren, Steve Jones, Paul Cook and Glen Matlock, the terrible fury of The Sex Pistols began to



Paul Simon and  
Bernie Rhodes:  
*mano a mano*

Kate Simon



## CLASH SPECIAL

'All we had was each other ...'



Pennie Smith

incubate. With it would come a seismic change in British music.

The Pistols supported The 101'ers on April 17, 1976 at The Nashville. Strummer was transfixed. When the Pistols started a residency at The 100 Club in London's Oxford Street during May and June that year, he attended regularly. "I was driven by the Pistols, what they were doing, the noise they were making, everything," he recalls, the power and the glory of The Sex Pistols as vivid as ever in his memory. "I can't emphasise that enough. It was like an atom bomb in your mind."

In June, 1976, Mick Farren's "Sink The Titanic" feature in NME sounded a rallying call for a new potent rock culture equipped to deal with a society that the established British rock hierarchy (the Stones, The Who, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin) were too jaded and detached to address. "Putting The Beatles back together won't save rock'n'roll. Four kids playing to their contemporaries in a dirty cellar might," wagered Farren.

Others, like Bernie Rhodes, were thinking on similar lines. Keen to emulate and expand on McLaren's growing success with The Sex Pistols, Rhodes had been trying to form a group around a musical collective called London SS for the past year. By June, the members, now renamed The Heartdrops after a number by reggae artist Big Youth, were future PiL guitarist Keith Levene, songwriter and guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Terry Chimes.

Both Jones and Simonon were ex-art-school students. The former was besotted with the New York Dolls, The MC5 and Mott The Hoople, and lived with his gran on the 18th floor of Wilmcote House, a council tower block overlooking The Westway, a view which would inspire The Clash's "London's Burning". Simonon, growing bored with his part in a band that didn't seem to be going anywhere, was considering a return to art school.

Sensing the chemistry that might exist between his young charges and the more seasoned and impetuous Strummer, Rhodes approached Joe at one of the Pistols' 100 Club gigs in June. The 101'ers' "Keys To Your Heart" had just been released by Chiswick, but Strummer knew the pub rock days were coming to an end. He agreed to meet Bernie's group at 22 Davis Road, the rehearsal and living space they had in Shepherd's Bush.

"The day Keith Levine brought Joe round to Davis Road, we were all terrified," Mick Jones later recalled. "He was already Joe Strummer, he was

between Lennon and McCartney or Jagger and Richards.

Six years later, Rhodes would help tear the partnership apart, yet Strummer remains eternally grateful that he ever got them together in the first place. "That man's some sort of genius," he says without a trace of venom. "Whatever else went on, he had foresight, a real knack for putting people together. He would listen to rehearsals and the famous quote he came out with was, 'Write about what you know.' Which was just as well, because we couldn't have written about Mick's girlfriends forever.

"It was obvious from the start that Jonesy was great at melody and totally useless on lyrics. So it dovetailed into me – not so bad on the lyrics, not so great on the melody. Mick sang me this song, 'I'm So Bored With You'. It was one of those girlfriend songs and I said, 'Fuck that, man. Let's call it 'I'm So Bored With The USA'. We were off."

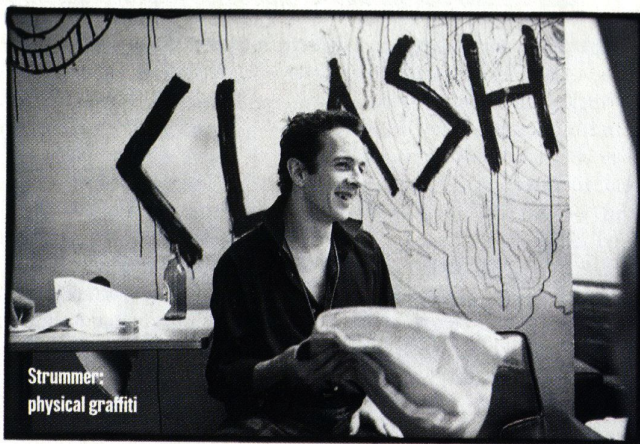
Unlike McLaren, Bernie Rhodes had no clothes shop to raid for his band's stage clothes. But he did have access to a large British Rail property he rented cheaply in Camden Lock – Rehearsal Rehearsals, which became The Clash's north London hang-out. It was there, after a particularly messy painting and decorating session, that their slogan-emblazoned, paint-flecked, neo-Situationist Oxfam look was born.

"Bernie always said the thing he really liked about punk rock was low the overheads," Strummer recalls. "We'd take stuff round to the spray shop next door and we had the

guys spray our guitars. We had to do something to stick out."

Rhodes' love of Situationist slogans and the band's affinity for Jamaican reggae – music that directly reflected a society in crisis – would combine to turn The Clash into living propagandists. In time, their set list would cast them as crazed musical guerrillas, all apocalyptic newsflashes and calls to arms. The urgent hand-outs of their songs were reflected in the slogans daubed all over their clothes: "Heavy Manners", "Sten Guns In Knightsbridge", "White Riot".

Such a heavily politicised agenda in these post-political times might seem a little quaint, valueless even. But back then, it worked as pure shock



Pennie Smith



treatment, an inflammatory, confrontational attempt to shake rather than save the world. Even before anyone had heard them, pictures of The Clash suggested they were primed to make rock'n'roll more exciting and explosive than anything that had come before.

BY THE TIME THE SEX PISTOLS EMBARKED ON THEIR "ANARCHY In The UK" tour in November '76, with The Clash as one of the supporting bands, punk rock was well on its way to becoming a national outrage, causing a wave of fear and loathing from tabloids, politicians and town halls that would be impossible to imagine today.

"It was exciting for us," Strummer says, recalling this most convulsive of rock'n'roll eras. "Suddenly, there was mad hacks from the tabloids motor-rallying their cars around the coach, racing people to the hotel. There was people singing religious songs when we got off the bus in some Godforsaken place in Wales, about 100 of them singing holy songs against our evil presence. It was quite a kick. You should have seen our faces. We were stunned. It was like something from a surreal movie. The last thing you expect after a long coach ride is to get off the bus and see 100 people singing 'Glory, glory, hallelujah' in a freezing night-time car park in the middle of the Welsh valleys. If we'd been thinking, we'd have taped them or, even better, plumbed them into the gig over the PA. If we'd been thinking."

During the latter half of 1976, The Clash songbook grew in size and stature, drawing on Jones' experience as a Post Office parcel-checker during an IRA bombing campaign for "Career Opportunities", a tabloid vice scandal for "Janie Jones" and subverting hippie-era "love and peace" platitudes on "Hate And War". At the end of that hideously long hot summer, two events provided the backdrop for pivotal tracks on The Clash's truly seminal first album.

When the NME's Charles Shaar Murray reviewed their support slot at the Pistols' Screen On The Green gig, he dismissed them as a garage band who "should be returned to the garage, preferably with the motor running". Strummer and Jones were incensed enough to immediately knock out the anthem "Garageland", an affirmation of underclass status played with righteous anger.

Strummer still remembers how infuriated he was by Murray's callous put-down. "He was saying that our whole work of art was so piss-poor we should be executed immediately, which was pretty severe criticism, don't you think? 'Kill these people immediately!' That's how I read it. At least it was clear-cut. There was no fucking around with poncey intellectual bollocks. He said what he meant. But so did we. We knocked one back on him."

Two days after they played at the Screen On The Green, violent scenes at the Notting Hill carnival provided Strummer with the inspiration for The Clash's first single, "White Riot" – a "Street Fighting Man" for the new era.

Joe picks up the story: "Me, Paul and Bernie were on the spot in Notting Hill when the riot broke out – right at the match head. I can remember clear as day, it was all – ha, ha, ha – peaceful, then a line of coppers went under The Westway, up by Ladbroke Grove. Sheer hell broke out. Obviously, that affects you. It was great material. Sid Vicious missed all of it – he was asleep back in our squat."

Far from sleeping through the streetclash, Strummer got well stuck in. "I tried to set light to a car, which ain't that fuckin' easy. We tipped it over so the car was on its side. I got out my Swan Vestas and this fat Jamaican

woman was going, 'Oh lard, lard, lard, he's gonna set fire to the car,' and I'm going, 'Calm down, I can't concentrate here.' Me and three black guys were pathetic with this box of matches. We couldn't work out how to set the car alight! We were old enough to know you get the bloody petrol cap off, stuff something in there and run like fuck. But in a riot you can't think straight."

There was, of course, a serious political point to be made that day, as Joe is quick to point out. "The Notting Hill riot was a black riot. It was like saying to the cops, 'Hey, we've had enough of your truncheon nonsense, now you take it in the neck.' It was a spontaneous expression of 'We ain't taking this any more.' With 'White Riot', I was trying to say these guys have a point – when they're pushed to the wall, they fight back; if we don't do the same we'll get trodden on. Gandhi said, 'We must defy the British.' Which is something I repeat everyday. 'We must defy the British.' Meaning the Establishment, man, the status quo."

THE "WHITE RIOT"/"1997" SINGLE WAS RELEASED IN MARCH, 1977,

and was followed the next month by the band's eponymous debut album, which had been recorded over three weekends at the end of January and start of February at the CBS studio in Whitfield Street. "The same place where The Stooges recorded *Raw Power*," Strummer observes. "It was the shittiest room in London but when I found that out I kissed the floor."

Rave-reviewing the album in NME, Tony Parsons, now a novelist, TV pundit and columnist for *The Daily Mirror*, hailed it "the most exciting rock'n'roll in contemporary music . . . membrane-scorching tension, a natural feel for dynamics . . . a mirror reflection of 1977 working-class experiences that only seem like a cliché to those people who haven't had to live through them."

The album's themes, reiterated to the point of parody by the band's many imitators, have been cheapened over the years. But it remains a seething document of late Seventies inner city London life, suffused with the sense of dread and desperation that was abroad at the time, with unemployment, social decay, race riots and Thatcher all looming on the troubled horizon. A few years later, Mick Jones said he was taking so much speed during the recording he couldn't remember making the album.

"The speed thing was over very quickly for me," says Strummer, a confirmed pothead. "I

got so pissed off afterwards it wasn't worth it; too debilitating. Some people had the metabolism where it wouldn't affect them. But I'd get comedowns where I wanted to put a hammer through my head. I suppose if Jonesy said that it must be true, but even on the first album he did all the arranging, put a hell of a lot of work into it. In some ways, that's the most difficult thing – arranging, when you've only got three or four elements. We didn't just go in there and blam it out; everything was played a thousand times in the rehearsal room until we had it right."

Even amid the album's spartan metallic thrash, the group pointed towards future diversity with a singular interpretation of the Lee "Scratch" Perry/Junior Murvin classic, "Police And Thieves".

"The main thing in town was reggae," says Joe of a period renowned for its punky-reggae parties. "If we went anywhere, that's what we played. It was a total obsession. There was this attitude that this stuff was too good to ruin. That was the ethos – 'No one is going to ruin this stuff by covering it.' But 'Police And Thieves' was so rocking I just said, 'Come on, let's do it.' We worked it out real fast. Lydon had long since stopped talking to us, so



Pennie Smith



we didn't care what the Pistols thought, really. But it must have taken big balls to do it at the time."

Terry Chimes had only played on *The Clash* sessions as a special favour – by that time he'd actually left the band. "He went to join a band called Jem. He said the singer calls himself Jem Morrison, the guitarist is Jemmy Hendrix... I couldn't believe it. I could not believe it. I thought he'd cracked. The whole concept just made my skin itch."

It was only after auditioning 206 drummers that they found a replacement in Nicky "Topper" Heaton. Then aged 21, he was a wiry little bloke from Dover who practised Tae Kwon Doe martial arts and had been drumming professionally since he was 15, mainly in Dover's soul clubs catering to US crews. "He thought, 'This lot are mad, but I'll bash on here for a while and later join a proper band.' That's what he told me. Without him we weren't shit, but with him we were everything. Me and Topper used to drive that band through sheer dint of effort."

THE CLASH WAS THE FIRST INSTALMENT OF A 10-YEAR, 10-ALBUM £100,000 recording contract with CBS signed on January 21, 1977. At the time, it seemed like the group had hit the jackpot, Rhodes having trumped McLaren, who only got £40,000 from EMI for the Pistols' first deal. With an album in the Top 10, Strummer was overjoyed. But in time the contract would become a mighty burden.

"We signed the worst deal in history," he says now, groaning, head buried in his hands. "I mean, 'Kill me, baby.' It took me until 1996 to get off that contract. We didn't even think about it at the time. It was the same contract George Michael was on. I was cheering him on when he was in court. Ten albums in 10 years? That's a year to work it, a year to sell it and a year to make it. That's 30 years. And they expect you to make the same kit for 30 years. I was going, 'Go on, George, get in there.' I think someone got to the judge. It was a travesty of justice. It was child abuse, man. They kill us on that shit. They killed me on it. I'm here, but only by the skin of my teeth."

ON MAY 9, 1977 THE CLASH HEADLINED A RIOTOUS, SEAT-SMASHING show at London's Rainbow Theatre. "Absolutely epoch-making. I went to bed obscure and woke up famous, a three-page spread in *The Evening Standard*," is how Strummer remembers it. Documentary film-makers Jack Hazan and Dave Mingay also saw *The Evening Standard* spread and began hatching plans to base a movie, *Rude Boy*, around the band and fan-turned-roadie, Ray Gange.

"We were honourable. We said, 'You want to make a film? OK, do what you want to do. Just one thing, don't get in the way.' Today it would be, 'What are you going to film? Oh, you can't do that!' We didn't ask for any of that, which was fucking hip. Also, we didn't have two minutes to think about it, we had a lot on. But the whole thing was a pain in the arse, to be honest, and the film was boring. When it was premiered at the Berlin Film Festival, we didn't want to go anywhere near it."

*Rude Boy*, eventually released in 1980, stands as both an honourable document of The Clash in great live form and an astute look at the dynamic between fans and stars. But it's easy to understand Strummer's disaffection with the finished work, since nothing could capture the sense of momentum and righteous fervour that surrounded the band back then.

"We became very close. We had to be. All we had was each other. It was us against the world. There can be a lot of illusion about changing the world, touching the audience, all of that. You really think you are doing something and maybe for that moment in that hall you are."

With arrests for minor infractions (graffiti, stolen hotel linen, drugs) and more punk concerts banned in the wake of the Pistols' anti-Jubilee missive, "God Save The Queen", the image of The Clash as punk's great hope, warrior outlaws in custom-designed combat and bondage gear, loomed ever larger in the public's imagination.

In Sweden – to cite just one confrontation – they faced down the notorious local Raggare gang.

'No one understands what that shit was like. They planted a bomb at the gig! Well, they said they did. Then they cleared the venue and everyone had to go and stand outside while they searched the joint for about an hour-and-

half. But the Raggare were fucking tough. I wouldn't have wanted to be a punk in Sweden at that time. We had to have a punch-up with them. I took on the biggest one, because I'm a real idiot.

"This guy was lying on the floor and he grabbed Topper's foot. Tops was wearing spurs, so he lashed out, cut him on the head. This guy got up and he was as big as a lamppost and we had to sort him out. He cornered us in the bog downstairs – me, Topper and some other poor helpless gilet. I thought, 'I'm going to have him before he has us.' He was about to smash us into porcelain. I said, 'C'mon, then!' And it was enough to make him think, 'Maybe they're serious.' We talked our way out in the end."

In Belfast, a cancelled show on October 22 brought fans onto the streets. A real rarity in the city at that time, the result was a non-sectarian riot.

"It was like Tiananmen Square, punks lying down in front of Land Rovers, it was amazing," recalls Joe, misty-eyed at the memory.

THE MUSIC THEY WERE MAKING CERTAINLY THRIVED ON ALL THIS energy and chaos. A new single, "Complete Control", released in October '77, was more furious still than anything on the first album. A withering broadside – inspired by nothing more than CBS issuing what Strummer calls "the most pussy track from the album" against the group's wishes – "Complete Control" was something else again: pure sonic warfare.

In New York's *Village Voice*, the esteemed Greil Marcus, on hearing the single for the first time, wrote of his "disbelief that mere humans could create such a sound, and disbelief that the world could remain the same when it's over." The record's power derived at least in part from a one-off liaison with the notoriously eccentric Jamaican producer, Lee Perry.

"Bernie Rhodes went to find Lee Perry in London. It took him six or seven hours, going round about 15 flats with a big bag of weed, before he could get him to the studio. Bernie was a crucial thinker. 'Let's do something different,' that was always his angle. Perry was his idea, and it paid off. It was real fun just to be with Lee, but he was only in the studio for about 15 minutes."

The speed with which bands like The Clash recorded and released tracks in those days would never happen now, as Strummer acknowledges when he says: "It was a good time. You could just cook up a single and have it out in three weeks."

On April 30, 1978, they headlined a concert for the Rock Against Racism movement, playing in front of 100,000 people in Victoria Park, east London. Strummer remembers the incongruity of meeting ex-Velvet Underground chanteuse Nico wandering round backstage trying to score some heroin. At the end of The Clash's set, he was upstaged by Sham 69's Jimmy Pursey, not a sensible thing for anyone to do, let alone Oi's Mr Charisma.

"Some people thought Sham were a right-wing skinhead band, so in order to let Jimmy show he was on the right side we said, 'Sure, come up and sing the encore.' So he rushed up, grabbed the mic and started singing 'White Riot'. I'd made a real effort to work the crowd into a lather the whole set long – 50 minutes of full-on blitzkrieg energy. And here was this guy, who'd been sitting in a chair the whole time, coming up and stealing my thunder."

"Like in a cartoon, the devil came up on one side and said, 'Go on, push him over the side of the stage.' It has to be said, that was a hell of a drop. It wasn't no low stage. Then the angel came on the other side and said, 'Be a man. Don't rush forward and shoulder our Jim off into that hideous pit.' So I just chilled and battered the chords out and let him get on with it. Afterwards, I had a quiet sit down and congratulated myself. I really had to resist that urge."

BACK TO THE PRESENT. STRUMMER IS SITTING IN A SPANISH tapas bar in Willesden, a few hundred yards from the recording studio, drinking red wine and attempting to get the owner to stay open late. Relaxed, affable and gregarious, he talks easily about his love for the Spanish way of life. He's spent considerable time in the country over the years visiting relatives of Palm Olive (Slits drummer and his girlfriend during The Clash's early years), and later with his first wife, Gabriel, in 1985, when The Clash Mark II split up.

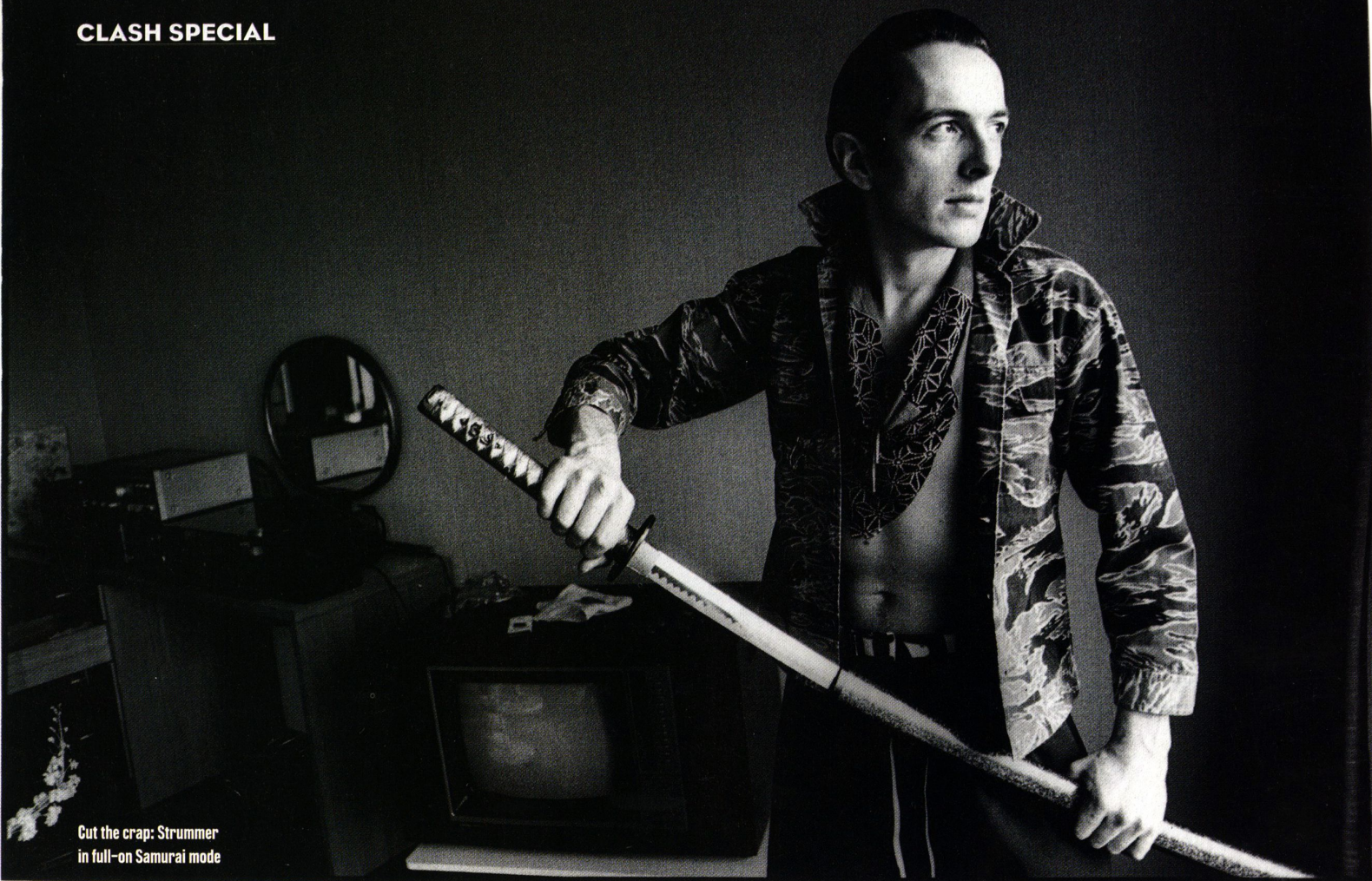
Strummer's accent can change depending on how excited or angry he gets. When he recalls the trouble that surrounded the writing and recording of The Clash's second album, *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, in 1978, he slips into





Clash city rocker,  
Glasgow, 1980





Cut the crap: Strummer in full-on Samurai mode

the familiar edgy Cockney patois. "The second album was a lash-up, no doubt about it," he says. "We shouldn't have made it. We were tired. When the record company said, 'Where's the second album?', we went, 'Whaaat?' Couldn't believe it.

"We wrote it in Jamaica, just me and Mick in a Trust House Forte hotel for two weeks. Mick nearly fainted when Bernie agreed to his suggestion. We didn't know anybody there except Lee Perry, who we couldn't find anyway. So apart from 'Safe European Home' – which I'd put alongside anything The Clash or anyone else has recorded – Jamaica didn't really have any bearing on the record."

The album's gestation brought tensions to the surface within the group. Headon and Simonon were aggrieved to miss out on the Jamaican jaunt and, later, a trip to America where Jones and Strummer spent several fractious weeks remixing with Blue Oyster Cult producer and former rock critic, Sandy Pearlman.

Chosen by Rhodes from a CBS-approved list, Pearlman had a punk past in the States – helping secure Iggy Pop's Stooges a deal with Elektra and producing New York proto-punks The Dictators. When Pearlman first attempted to get backstage to meet the band, Robin Crocker, The Clash's security man and subject of Mick Jones' "Stay Free", thought he was an intruder and punched him straight in the face, knocking him out. But Pearlman was still determined to work with them, telling *Rolling Stone's* Mikal Gilmore that "rock'n'roll should be violent and anarchic, not cute and adorable. On that basis alone, The Clash are the best around."

Strummer respected Pearlman's tenacity, but admits the collaboration was only partially successful.

"A lot of stuff went on behind our back. When we were recording we thought, 'We're in Island's Basing Street studios, this is the big realm, let's rock.' We didn't realise there was a whole crew of Yanks in the room with Pearlman, everyone putting their oar in."

Released in November, 1978, *Give 'Em Enough Rope* was an attempt by The Clash to transfer the first album's propagandist glee, guerrilla tactics and latent humour to a wider international stage. It was essential that The Clash move on – any semblance of unity the punk movement had was now fractured. Musically, 1978 was the year of the angry iconoclast: Elvis Costello's tense, lacerating *This Year's Model* and ex-Pistol John Lydon launching into a new angular direction with PiL's *Public Image* debut album.

Meanwhile, bitter rivals The Jam had released *All Mod Cons*, their third album, that October, and discovered a sense of vigour and purpose absent from their desultory second album, *This Is The Modern World* (November '77). The Clash were suddenly under a lot of competitive pressure – a lot was riding on the new album. But as NME's Nick Kent suggested in his review, *Give 'Em Enough Rope* highlighted as many Clash weaknesses as strengths. Although hailing the mighty "Safe European Home" as their finest moment, he derided the band's "totally facile concept of shock-politics".

Certainly, the rabble-rousing militaristic stormer, "Tommy Gun" – the first single taken from the album – was ripe for misinterpretation. Especially as the band, Strummer in particular, had taken to guerrilla garb in a big way. As for accusations of revelling in terrorist chic, it's a case of guilty as charged, yer honour.

"Really," explains Joe, "I was saying 'Us rock'n'rollers are all posers and ego-maniacs, but we know that you terrorists are just as bad, or worse than we are.' Terrorists are definitely egomaniacs, they definitely love to read their own press. I know they dedicate their life to a cause and what have you, but they're always posing for pictures. We were guilty of everything. Terrorist chic? Yeah, that was probably down to me. There wasn't any thinking, or any intellectual process to it. We just did it. People used to ask me, 'Why are you guys wearing combat trousers?' I couldn't think of anything to say except, 'Self-defence.'"

Shortly after the album was finished, Simonon and Jones persuaded



Strummer that Rhodes should be replaced as manager. Various candidates – including NME journalist Chris Salewicz and photographer Pennie Smith – were suggested before the band settled on Caroline Coon. Formerly a leading light of the Sixties underground and one of the founders of Release, the pioneering drugs advisory service, she was, by 1978, a music journalist who had written extensively about punk for *Melody Maker*. She was also Paul Simonon's girlfriend. Very *Spinal Tap*.

"I was the only one who realised how lucky we were to have Bernie and tried to argue against it," Strummer says. "I was the only one who'd been struggling around, bashing my head on the wall since '71. It's a thankless task trying to keep a group going in those circumstances. So I realised that Bernies didn't grow on trees. But maybe Mick and Paul thought, 'Hey, anyone can do this.'"

"Caroline's achievement at Release was phenomenal, really amazing. But I think her ability was more organisational than inspirational or visionary. So it didn't translate too well into the weird rock world."

THERE WERE OPEN CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN STRUMMER and Coon when the band undertook their first American tour in January, 1979. There, as in his early days in Britain, Strummer had to fight to be heard, up against record company intransigence and a virtually non-existent, pre-MTV promotional network.

"We were the idiots the English branch of CBS had signed, so the record company was completely indifferent. We were treated like lepers. I began to get the feeling that if someone from the record company did take an interest in us, they'd be sacked."

By the time that *The Clash* was released in the US in 1979, with a substantially different track listing, it had sold 100,000 copies, at that time the highest-selling US import album ever. So there was undoubtedly an American audience hungry for punk action. The Clash, for their part, were certainly hungry for America. They were emboldened by its music, cinematic imagery and the various minority cultures that had been marginalised by the Reagan era, with its repressive social and economic policies and belligerent Cold War mentality.

On that first American tour, they chose blues legend Bo Diddley and New Orleans veteran Lee Dorsey to support them – much to the horror of CBS. In San Francisco, Strummer met political radical Moe Armstrong, who told him about the Sandinista rebellion in Nicaragua.

"He was a member of a band called Daddy Longlegs who had made a big noise in London in 1969/70 so I knew about him," Strummer recalls. "He'd become very left-wing, and he gave us the info, which was quite hard to find, about the Sandinistas. It was the sort of thing they weren't interested in printing in *The Sunday Times*. A bunch of Marxist teenage hooded rebels oust one of your favourite dictators? The establishment didn't want to know about it."

BACK IN LONDON, ATTENTION WAS FOCUSED ON POLITICS within the band. Strummer's problems with Coon had come to a head. Mick Jones had met Peter Jenner, one-time manager of Pink Floyd and a prime mover in London's late-Sixties underground. Jenner, who Allan Jones had dragged down to The Elgin in the late summer of 1975, was now running Blackhill Enterprises, a company that managed Ian Dury And The Blockheads among others. He was keen to work with The Clash. Strummer was suitably impressed.

"I admired and respected him for what he'd done in the Sixties. To me, the

underground was still a reality, though I'd come onto the battlefield too late, when the wounded were still groaning. I thought they could give us the direction which we needed at that point."

Blackhill's immediate plan was for the group to go to ground for a work-intensive five-month period. The resulting sessions at rehearsal rooms in Pimlico and then Wessex Recording Studios in Highbury bore abundant fruit. An EP, *The Cost Of Living*, featuring the barnstorming "I Fought The Law", and a re-recording of "Capitol Radio", previously only available as a limited edition collector's single given away free with NME, was released in May 1979, and reached Number 22 in the charts.

At the end of the year – on December 7 – the mighty double vinyl album, *London Calling*, would be released.

But first, and as soon as recording was finished, The Clash struck out on a second US tour, which began at The Tribal Stomp Festival in Monterey, California on September 8. There, luck shone on Strummer in a strange way.

"I came onstage so full of enthusiasm – hit the first chord and staggered back with the sheer excitement of the whole thing and fell into the drum kit. Knocked it all over. As luck would have it, there was a very sharp photographer from *The LA Times* with a motordrive there and he shot me in five frames – going, going, going, going, GONE.

"They put it right across the front of the *LA Times*. If I hadn't fallen into the drums, would we have been in there? No! That's what so much of this business is about: being in the right place at the right time and getting the breaks."



Of course, there was more to it than that. A collective strength discovered in the *London Calling* sessions produced what Robert Christgau – "the dean of US rock crits," as he is commonly known – hailed "the greatest double album since *Exile On Main Street*". Meanwhile, NME's Charles Shaar Murray – having finally changed his mind about wanting to see the band gassed in their garage – decided it was "the first of The Clash's albums [that was] truly equal in stature to their legend yet [one that] for the most part disposes of the more indigestible portions of that legend".

Seeking out the ironies and contradictions in their own

position on "Death Or Glory", invoking the doomsday scenario of the title track, acknowledging the emergent 2-Tone phenomenon on "Rudie Can't Fail", playing intoxicating gin joint blues on "Jimmy Jazz" or atomic rockabilly on "Brand New Cadillac" . . . *London Calling* was where The Clash came into their own as an expansive but alert, swaggering but focused rock'n'roll band.

On tour in America that autumn, Strummer had railed against the inherent snobbery that gripped the British punk scene. "I don't want to see punk as another slavish attitude and image where everything is pre-thought and pre-planned for you to slip into comfortably," he told a journalist. "I vote for the weirdo, for the loonies, for the people of the left wall."

By this measure, *London Calling* was easily a match for the breathtakingly diverse post-punk British scene – the abrasive dialectic of Gang Of Four's *Entertainment*, the dub force of PiL's *Metal Box*, the angular pop shapes of Wire's *154*, and Joy Division's harrowing *Unknown Pleasures*.

It was also the record that would help them stake a strong claim in America, the embryonic anger of their punk roots tempered by earnest, hard-won optimism and openmindedness. America was where Strummer's pre-punk hippie idealism and Jones' love of guitar heroics could develop fully. Over the next three years, they would become protectors of the very tradition that they had once set out to destroy. Hard graft and team-





London calling: The Clash in Mick Jones' nan's flat, Wilmcote House, Harrow Road, west London, 1979

work were the key. "London Calling is only as good as it is because of the five months' preparation that went into it. It's proof that hard work rocks. We lived at the rehearsal room in Pimlico. Every day, we'd play football, write and rehearse *London Calling*. And then we went to Wessex and knocked it down in the month of August. We were so well prepared, we could go in and blam the whole thing off in one or two takes."

Strummer maintains that his ex-wife Gabriel often claims a part in writing the toweringly anguished title track.

"I was riding back in a taxi from Pimlico along the Thames to our flat at the World's End in Chelsea, and we were talking about the state of the world. There was lot of Cold War nonsense going on, the Evil Empire, the ecological thing. We already knew that London was susceptible to flooding. She probably told me to write something about it. So I sat in the front room of the flat and worked it out right there, looking down at Edith Grove. Years later, I found out I was looking right onto the flat where the Stones lived when they started out, which seemed appropriate enough.

"But it was Mick who told me to go and make the verses better. The choruses were written, but the verses weren't right. This is when we worked best together – two heads better than one. Unless you're superhuman like Bob Marley or Paul Simon or Bob Dylan – people like that are on another level as

far as I'm concerned – then you need a team. One guy's expertise comes in where the other guy's falls short. You up the ante, challenge each other."

Strummer has long since made his peace with Jones over the way the guitarist was hounded out of the band in 1983. He's reluctant to rake over old animosities, but admits the bond established during the *London Calling* footie practises and writing sessions didn't hold for long.

"You're like a team going onstage, and no one lets anyone else down. When that happens, you have to resort to violence between each other, punch people. It's beyond discussion. I've punched Mick Jones so hard in the middle of the head that he had my knuckle print stamped there.

"We'd just got offstage somewhere up north and the crowd was going screaming mad, bonkers, and I was going, 'Let's give them what they want, let's give them 'White Riot', to show we're not poofs. He went, 'You've got no respect for the stage.' I said, 'Don't fucking tell me about the stage.' And he threw his vodka and orange in my face. So I hit him as hard as I could in the centre of the head.

"I know its not really funny, but what was funny was the bouncers. It short-circuited their brains. They were there to stop people hitting the band. But if the band are attacking each other – it was like, 'What do we do now?' Anyway, then he [Jones] got up and we played 'White Riot'. The crowd deserved it. Why should we just be pompous assholes only playing our new album?"

A PLAN TO "HIT UP THE SINGLES SCENE" WITH A blitz of five or six releases throughout 1980 stalled at the first hurdle. The sufferation ballad "Bankrobber", featuring Jamaican DJ/toaster Mikey Dread, was recorded after a show in Manchester in February and delivered to CBS boss Mo Oberstein. In Strummer's words the song's lyric "really twisted his clock" and he refused to release it. But, after it had sold steadily on Dutch import throughout the summer, Oberstein relented. The single was released in August, reaching Number 11 in the charts.

Nineteen-eighty was a year of constant touring and another management split from Blackhill ("I don't know why, man," says Joe. "They probably sent us a large bill for their services.") With no one apart from former Blackhill employee, press agent and now full-time Clash fellow traveller Kosmo Vinyl to guide them, and with Paul Simonon looking after the accounts, The Clash roamed wild and free.

When they arrived in New York during a touring break in May, the band were able to indulge their deepest, some would say barmiest, musical excesses, gleefully slipping the leash after the taut discipline that had characterised the *London Calling* sessions.

"That tour of America, we were really stoking, 20 hot gigs in a row. Can you imagine it? Gigs can be sort of so-so, but these were all hot. Flaming hot. Twenty of them – bam, bam, bam, one after another. We hit New York, and we blasted straight into the studio. This is something that I must recommend to other groups. Normally after a tour, we used to go home and lie down for a few weeks. But we came off that tour full of go.

"We had nothing written. You don't write on tour, it takes all your concentration to make the gig – that's survival technique. Afterwards, you run around town to find interesting hipsters and go to all the interesting spots. You got to go to every hotspot until everything has closed down. The adrenalin is furious. You're wired as hell.

"Anyway, at the end of that tour we'd had 20 hits, 20 cities in a row. We didn't particularly know anywhere in New York, so we went into Electric Ladyland. Every day, we just showed up and wrote phantasmagorical stuff. Everything was done in first takes, and worked out 20 minutes beforehand. What we did was go to the core of what we are about – creating – and we did





London calling: The Clash in Mick Jones' nan's flat, Wilmcote House, Harrow Road, west London, 1979

work were the key. "London Calling is only as good as it is because of the five months' preparation that went into it. It's proof that hard work rocks. We lived at the rehearsal room in Pimlico. Every day, we'd play football, write and rehearse *London Calling*. And then we went to Wessex and knocked it down in the month of August. We were so well prepared, we could go in and blam the whole thing off in one or two takes."

Strummer maintains that his ex-wife Gabriel often claims a part in writing the toweringly anguished title track.

"I was riding back in a taxi from Pimlico along the Thames to our flat at the World's End in Chelsea, and we were talking about the state of the world. There was lot of Cold War nonsense going on, the Evil Empire, the ecological thing. We already knew that London was susceptible to flooding. She probably told me to write something about it. So I sat in the front room of the flat and worked it out right there, looking down at Edith Grove. Years later, I found out I was looking right onto the flat where the Stones lived when they started out, which seemed appropriate enough.

"But it was Mick who told me to go and make the verses better. The choruses were written, but the verses weren't right. This is when we worked best together – two heads better than one. Unless you're superhuman like Bob Marley or Paul Simon or Bob Dylan – people like that are on another level as

far as I'm concerned – then you need a team. One guy's expertise comes in where the other guy's falls short. You up the ante, challenge each other."

Strummer has long since made his peace with Jones over the way the guitarist was hounded out of the band in 1983. He's reluctant to rake over old animosities, but admits the bond established during the *London Calling* footie practises and writing sessions didn't hold for long.

"You're like a team going onstage, and no one lets anyone else down. When that happens, you have to resort to violence between each other, punch people. It's beyond discussion. I've punched Mick Jones so hard in the middle of the head that he had my knuckle print stamped there.

"We'd just got offstage somewhere up north and the crowd was going screaming mad, bonkers, and I was going, 'Let's give them what they want, let's give them 'White Riot', to show we're not poofs. He went, 'You've got no respect for the stage.' I said, 'Don't fucking tell me about the stage.' And he threw his vodka and orange in my face. So I hit him as hard as I could in the centre of the head.

"I know its not really funny, but what was funny was the bouncers. It short-circuited their brains. They were there to stop people hitting the band. But if the band are attacking each other – it was like, 'What do we do now?' Anyway, then he [Jones] got up and we played 'White Riot'. The crowd deserved it. Why should we just be pompous assholes only playing our new album?"

A PLAN TO "HIT UP THE SINGLES SCENE" WITH A blitz of five or six releases throughout 1980 stalled at the first hurdle. The sufferation ballad "Bankrobber", featuring Jamaican DJ/toaster Mikey Dread, was recorded after a show in Manchester in February and delivered to CBS boss Mo Oberstein. In Strummer's words the song's lyric "really twisted his clock" and he refused to release it. But, after it had sold steadily on Dutch import throughout the summer, Oberstein relented. The single was released in August, reaching Number 11 in the charts.

Nineteen-eighty was a year of constant touring and another management split from Blackhill ("I don't know why, man," says Joe. "They probably sent us a large bill for their services.") With no one apart from former Blackhill employee, press agent and now full-time Clash fellow traveller Kosmo Vinyl to guide them, and with Paul Simonon looking after the accounts, The Clash roamed wild and free.

When they arrived in New York during a touring break in May, the band were able to indulge their deepest, some would say barmiest, musical excesses, gleefully slipping the leash after the taut discipline that had characterised the *London Calling* sessions.

"That tour of America, we were really stoking, 20 hot gigs in a row. Can you imagine it? Gigs can be sort of so-so, but these were all hot. Flaming hot. Twenty of them – bam, bam, bam, one after another. We hit New York, and we blasted straight into the studio. This is something that I must recommend to other groups. Normally after a tour, we used to go home and lie down for a few weeks. But we came off that tour full of go.

"We had nothing written. You don't write on tour, it takes all your concentration to make the gig – that's survival technique. Afterwards, you run around town to find interesting hipsters and go to all the interesting spots. You got to go to every hotspot until everything has closed down. The adrenalin is furious. You're wired as hell.

"Anyway, at the end of that tour we'd had 20 hits, 20 cities in a row. We didn't particularly know anywhere in New York, so we went into Electric Ladyland. Every day, we just showed up and wrote phantasmagorical stuff. Everything was done in first takes, and worked out 20 minutes beforehand. What we did was go to the core of what we are about – creating – and we did



it on the fly and had three weeks of unadulterated joy. We were in New York and I never went out."

He's exhaling a joint now, thinking about what he's just said.

"I never went out in New York! I can't believe it. Maybe once, to get a beer. But it was the most beautiful time ever. To be at 8th street on New York, in Jimi Hendrix's studio, everything on a roll.

"You know what New York was like then? You'd get up at 10 in the morning and you'd get in a cab to go to the studio. Rocketing downtown, the driver would stick his hand back with a grass joint. Cool as fuck! I was thinking, 'This is New York.' We'd play until we couldn't stand up. And it was good. I stand by that album. I'm proud of all our records. Even the crap ones."

THE ALBUM THAT RESULTED WAS THE TRIPLE VINYL OPUS, *Sandinista*, named after the revolutionary Nicaraguan group Moe Armstrong had told them about.

Its six sides were diverse to the point of collapse – gospel, swing, jigs, skanking reggae, kiddie chorus versions of "Guns Of Brixton" and "Career Opportunities" and an experimental instrumental cut-up modelled on The Beatles' "Revolution Number 9" called "Mensforth Hill", a waltz, a calypso, even Strummer singing scat on Mose Allison's "Look Here". Punk's "no future" credo had been swapped for an all-governing "no rules" policy.

Amid the sprawling indulgence, however, there were some bright moments, notably "The Magnificent Seven" – a radical departure that was perhaps the first Britrock/rap crossover. Written by Jones after a record-buying trip to Brooklyn, the track pointed towards the direction his post-Clash career would take with Big Audio Dynamite.

"Jonesy was always on the button when it came to new things," says Strummer now. "That stuff we made the week after he came back from Brooklyn with those Sugarhill records – it all still rocks. This was 1980. And I've got to say the next year, when we played Bonds in New York, the Brooklyn audience bottled Grandmaster Flash off our stage. Now they're all 'hip hop wibbly wibbly wop, it don't stop,' with the funny handshakes and all that. But when we presented it to them then, they bottled it off. Grandmaster Flash doing 'The Message', and it was bottled off."

The group's practical politics were never more evident than in their hard won album-pricing policy. As with the double *London Calling*, the triple-LP, *Sandinista*, sold for the price of a single album – but only after CBS had demanded a commensurate cut in royalties.

"They said, 'If you want to put out *Sandinista* you have to do it for no royalties.' So we said, 'OK, shove it up your bum, that's what we'll do. You think you're calling our bluff – we'll do it.'"

Of course, they got even more angry when Bruce Springsteen went to them and said, 'How come those Limey tosspots are doing a triple album and I can't do a double?' and then went off and did *The River*."

For the two tracks with Mikey Dread, they had flown down to Jamaica to record at Channel One studios in Kingston. It was their first time on the island since writing the second album. Strummer remembers it as a particularly hairy period. Fun, but hairy.

"We had to run for it. We recorded 'Junco Partner', and it sounded great. All the Dreads were outside cheering. I was sitting at the piano figuring out the chords for the next song. Mikey tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'Quick, we've got to go. The drugmen are coming to kill everyone!'

"We didn't know, but we were meant to pay a tithe of honour to these guys.

Of course, being as disorganised as ever, we didn't have a bean between us. So we jumped in a Renault station wagon – all of us, several other people and all our guitars – and we drove off down the road. But it weren't no ... *Harder They Come* style getaway. It was more Jacques Tati."

But how much of *Sandinista* – described in *Uncut* last year as one of the greatest long-players of all time, a paragon of eclecticism and an index of possibilities – does Strummer think really stands up to scrutiny now?

"All of it," he responds without hesitation, adding: "Ask the skinheads in Perth. They take acid and listen to it all night, the whole way through."

During the *Sandinista* recording sessions in New York, The Clash met up with director Martin Scorsese, who gave the group small parts as extras in the Robert De Niro vehicle he was then making – *The King Of Comedy*. Not that the band made the most of their golden opportunity to star alongside one of contemporary cinema's greats. "We loused that one up big time," says an

honest Strummer, still regretful after all these years. "Nil points for us that day. We were meant to interfere with the De Niro and [Sandra] Bernhard characters as they came down the boulevard. There was nothing said and suddenly there's Robert De Niro. Today, I'd know – 'Hey, get in the picture!' – but we just kind of stood there, bumbling around."

IN EARLY 1981, THERE WAS nowhere left to turn. Strummer persuaded the others to accept Bernard Rhodes back as manager.

"We were drifting and I saw my chance. We wanted some direction to the thing because *Sandinista* had been a sprawling six-sided ... masterpiece. You got to get out there and fight like

sharks – it's a piranha pool. And I wanted to reunite the old firm, like in *The Wild Bunch*. Get the old gang together and ride again. I knew we had something in us.

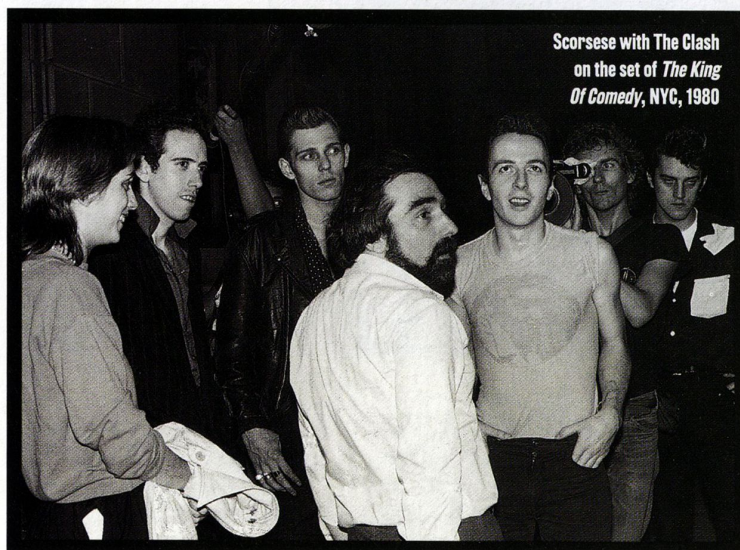
"We didn't know anything about anything. We were buffoons in the business world. Even Mick wanted him back, because he's not stupid and he had to admire Rhodes' ability to make things happen and, even better, to get things over.

"Did we notice the difference? Immediately. It was all his idea to go into major cities with a big crew and stay there. We were always noticing that: going into a town and out again was kind of unsatisfactory. So it was Bernie's idea to go in there and do seven nights – New York, Sydney, Tokyo. And we did them. The shows were great, because you could hang out with people, get a feel for the place, and get the true idiots coming every night.

"When we played Paris, the English punks would come over and they got to know the French punks. There was some nice scenes in the back alleys."

Throughout the latter half of 1980, right up to November 1981, The Clash toured constantly in Europe and America but never in Britain. During their time away, the riots raged in Liverpool, London, Manchester and Bradford. As Thatcher's policiest hit hard in the inner cities, the violent confrontations depicted on The Clash's apocalypse-anticipating debut album actually appeared to be happening.

In July 1981, The Specials' chart-topping "Ghost Town" captured the mood of urban despair, but the prevailing trends were new romanticism and bright electro pop – Depeche Mode, Heaven 17, Adam And The Ants, Spandau Ballet and Duran Duran. In this climate, The Clash were derided as failed rebels, irrelevant poseurs, deserters even. Worse, they were – to deploy a derogatory term coined by Wah!'s Pete Wylie – rockist. All those nasty guitars in an era synonymous with synthesisers? Wrong time, wrong place, mate. The Clash were about to be dismissed as brutally as the



Vinny Zallan/Lexipix





The end of the line:  
Thailand, 1983

punks had dismissed the hippies five years before.

With Rhodes back in the driving seat, internal divisions within the band grew. Strummer concurs with lenswoman Pennie Smith's observation that the spats were like lovers' quarrels – they ended as soon as they began – but the signs of a real split were beginning to appear. In December 1981 Topper Headon was fined £500 after being busted for heroin possession at Heathrow airport.

"Unless you accept treatment, you will be the best drummer in the graveyard," warned the sentencing magistrate. Topper's addiction signalled the beginning of the end for The Clash. It still pains Strummer to talk about how the drummer was sacked.

"Bernie said, 'He's a junkie, he has to go.' Ignorance ruled the day. We knew nothing about heroin."

IN FACT, IT WAS DURING THE SESSIONS FOR 1982'S *COMBAT ROCK* at New York's Electric Ladyland, when Headon's addiction was becoming critical, that the drummer devised the brilliant "Rock The Casbah" – a song that Strummer dedicates to him every time The Mescaleros play it and which would provide them with their one and only American Top 10 single in November '82.

"I saw it with my own eyes – Topper Headon's great talent," says an awestruck Strummer, who had been unaware of the drummer's versatility up to that point. "I swear in 20 minutes he'd laid down the whole thing: bass, drums, piano. He laid them all himself. It took other people by surprise. Jonesy really wasn't into that tune when we released it as a single. We had to persuade him a bit. I think he thought it was a bit comedic.

"When you're concentrating on the latest masterpiece you've carefully put together and someone comes up with something so fast, it can be a little... disorientating," he goes on, the hint of a sneer creeping into his voice.

Jones' "latest masterpiece" for The Clash's fifth album was "Should I Or Stay Or Should I Go", which would eventually top the British charts in 1991 after being revived for a Levi's advert. Years later, Paul Simonon would recall that, when the song was recorded, Jones and Strummer were barely on speaking terms. It's now read as a direct comment by the guitarist on his future in the band.

Did Joe hear it that way?

"No comment."

Didn't he tell you what it was about?

"You do understand what 'no comment' means, don't you?"

DESPITE THE SANDINISTA-STYLE failed experiments – the Allen Ginsberg guest spot on "Ghetto Defendent", the half-cocked rap of "Overpowered By Funk" – the best of *Combat Rock* showed The Clash reasserting their core values, under siege but fighting.

Far from being a fatuous exercise in gung-ho chic, "Straight To Hell" evoked a mood of fatalism and despair that ranged from dole queue Britain to Vietnam, evincing a rare blend of bruised anger and compassion for victims of war, oppression, and organised human stupidity. Though Strummer's defiant "Know Your Rights" battle-cry received scant airplay and failed to make the singles chart in April the following month as a British fleet sailed toward The Falklands, *Combat Rock* itself reached Number Two.

Once-disillusioned fans rallied round the Clash flag. Reviewing the album in NME, journalist X Moore – also front-

man for skinheaded radical soul activists The Redskins – declared it "an inadvertent counterblast to The Falklands, too important to be lumped with the other dross, by a band too important to tear themselves apart".

According to Strummer, making the album amid simmering tensions and the usual organisational chaos had been an often exhausting and dispiriting experience.

"We were so stupid," he says. "Things got jammed up again. The company needed another album, so we ended up recording on tour. At first, it was just us knocking it out in Electric Ladyland, trying to mix it, and it sucked. We toured Australia, and each night after the show in Sydney we'd go down and mix the album. But, of course, that sucked as well. So we got back home and then we just brought [producer] Glyn Johns in. We had to beg him, really, because he didn't like producing stuff he hadn't recorded. He gave it a go and got it into a listenable shape. He saved it at the 11th hour, really. But otherwise no one knew what they were doing. They say record companies fashion shit, but in our case it was always a shambles waiting to happen."

On the eve of the Know Your Rights tour in April '82, Strummer went missing. Before I've managed to finish the sentence, "Like a rat leaving a sinking ship," he's on the defensive.

"I never left the group!" he insists, setting the record straight – a mythical interlude in a story chock-full of apocryphal rumours – once and for all. "I fucked off to Paris because Bernie Rhodes told me to. He had forgotten about the fact that we had a huge walk-up. It's something I still have. A walk-up means people who don't buy tickets for your shows up-front. You mightn't sell a huge advance. But with a walk-up you'll sell out, piss easy. For me, it's a really honourable thing to have. It means you've got hipsters in the crowd who don't plan things in advance. That's the crowd you want.

"Bernie forgot about it," he continues. "There was a gig in Inverness that wasn't sold out, but we would have filled it easy. He panicked and said, 'Someone's got to break their arm or something, you'll have to disappear.' I felt like disappearing anyway. I was supposed to call him when I went away but I thought, 'This has got to look good.' So I really did disappear."

ON STRUMMER'S RETURN FROM PARIS, TOPPER HEADON WAS sacked from the band and old hand Terry Chimes brought back in. That's when Joe realised The Clash were as good as finished.



"I don't think, honest to God, we ever played a good gig after that," is his honest assessment now of The Clash's final phase. "Except for one night in New Jersey, we played a good one, but I reckon that was just by the law of averages. Out of a 30-gig tour, one night is OK – you've got to say it's a fluke."

At the end of 1982, supporting The Who on their farewell stadium tour, Strummer saw The Clash's future. And it was dinosaur-shaped.

"We did eight gigs in super-stadiums, all the biggest joints – LA Coliseum, Oakland Coliseum, Shea Stadium. I realised that was where we were heading and it didn't look good. We just had to crash and die. I never said nothing to nobody about it, but I was in deep shit with that in my mind."

Pennie Smith reckons The Clash fell apart in front of her eyes, as she shot the cover photo for *Combat Rock* on a deserted railway line in Thailand in March '82. But first with Chimes and then with Pete Howard on drums, Strummer, Jones and Simonon fought on through a strained American tour in 1983, playing their last show together at the three-day US festival on May 28, 1983.

That September, a Clash press release was issued declaring that Mick Jones had "strayed from the original idea of The Clash" and had been duly sacked.

"It was all my fault. I let Bernie take over," admits Strummer, ever ready to play martyr for the cause. "I think Bernie wanted to be Mick Jones. I think he wanted to be like Malcolm [McLaren] and find out what it's like to be a musician in your own right [Rhodes' former employer had, by summer '83, reinvented himself as a pop star]. That threw us. We were musicians who never thought about being managers. So when the manager wanted to be a musician, we weren't prepared for it."

"Bernie wanted to arrange and produce and shape material. I suppose it must be boring selling stuff that he had no control over. It must be frustrating, like the coach of the football team standing on the sidelines, shouting, 'Pass it, you c\*\*\*!' They must want to run in and do it themselves."

"It's the same in the music world. If you're doing all the multitude of things these guys do, obviously you're going to start wanting to mess around with the lyrics, get that middle-eight over there. But I didn't see that at the time. Bernie had this sort of rule of terror, because he wanted to maintain his position. Perhaps that's what human beings are truly like. It always seems to go back to the Borgias – power struggles, the machinations of holding on to power. What we should have done after *Combat Rock* was take a year off. I don't know why nobody turned around and said, 'Look, you've just knocked out 16 sides of long-playing vinyl in five years, you got to take a rest.' Kurt Cobain could have done with that advice, too. Songs don't come often. I'm with The Stone Roses – let's leave a good five years between each record."

AND YET, EVEN WITH JONES GONE, THERE WAS LITTLE TIME TO rest. Strummer returned with a back-to-basics street punk incarnation of The Clash in 1984. Waging war on pretty boy pop, they went on a busking tour and announced that drugs were out.

"That was Bernie's new regime. It didn't last long. After two weeks, we were gagging for it."

Dramatic changes in Strummer's personal life – he became a father for the first time, his dad died suddenly and his mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer – undoubtedly allowed Rhodes to gain increased control. A sense of desperation was fuelling him as the band seemed to be imploding, defeated

by forces they'd set out to conquer. He recalls writing "This Is England", the last great song to go under The Clash's name, on one string of a ukulele, "feeling like a no-good talentless fuck". He didn't even get to hear Rhodes' atrocious mix of the *Cut The Crap* album until it was released in November, 1985.

By then, The Clash were nearly over. They were finally declared dead in December '85. Almost immediately, Strummer went to see Jones in the Bahamas, where he was working with Talking Heads' Tina Weymouth. Over the course of a long weekend, they got burgled, witnessed a near-fatal car smash and ended up in a crack house looking to score weed. Strummer's apologies were accepted, and personal differences were patched up. But his old partner was doing fine with B.A.D. and didn't want to relive the good old bad old days.

Indeed, subsequent attempts to reform The Clash have always been initiated by Strummer, not Jones, to which he readily admits.

"Yeah," he says, "but I'm not that big on pride, you know? Mick had more occasion to be proud because of what had happened and the way it had ended. I had to eat humble pie. I deserved to."

AS A LOOSE CANNON AND "LIVING legend", Joe Strummer has spent his post-Clash life "getting on the fun tip, doing some loony things". He has acted in, and written music for, Alex Cox movies *Straight To Hell*, *Sid And Nancy* and *Walker*. He appeared in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train* and put together the soundtrack for John Cusack's *Grosse Pointe Blank*.

He has also – deep breath – released one solo album proper, 1989's *Earthquake Weather*; driven Black Grape through Tijuana in his bullet-ridden 1956 Cadillac; deputised for Shane MacGowan on a Pogues world tour and produced that band's *Hell's Ditch*; encouraged ex-Happy Mondays manic dancer Bez to make his currently-in-production solo album; and hung out and recorded at Peter Gabriel's Real World studios with a Celtic harpist, a Congo nose flautist, The Grid's Richard Norris and The Master Musicians Of Jojouka ("They smoked all our spliff, man," he says of the latter).

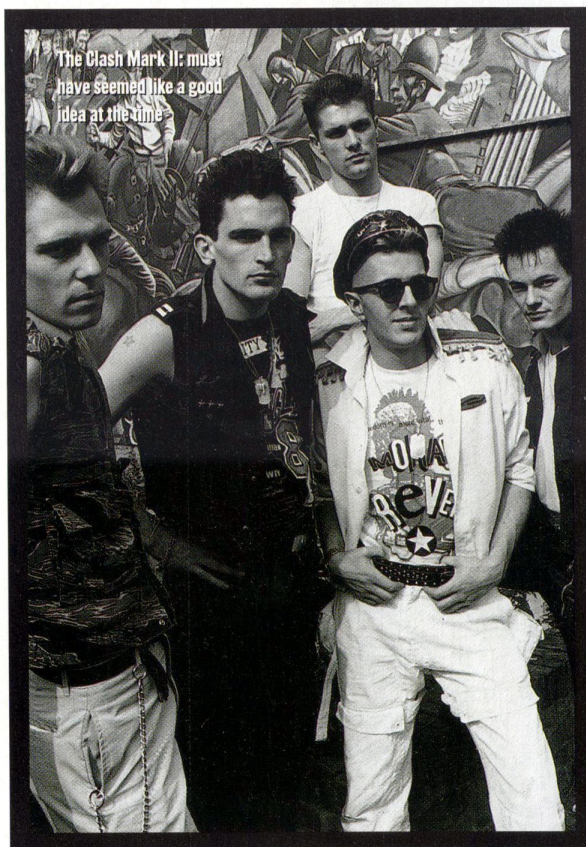
Refusing to accept has-been status, Strummer is honest enough to acknowledge that he's no longer a frontline contender. He occupies a similar position in the minds of his devotees as we approach the 21st century to that of John Lennon in the Seventies: that of untouchable icon who achieved everything before his 30th birthday, one who symbolises rock cool. Whatever happens next, Strummer has turned up in a range of odd places: at the "Punk Generations" Amnesty benefit, on Jack Kerouac and Roxy Music tribute albums, and *South Park's* Chef Aid.

"You gotta move around," he says. "Cartoons are the only decent thing on TV. They seem to be more political, making social comments, tipping the balance in the right way."

*Uncut* is enjoying yet another night in the company of the ex-frontman of the most religiously revered band of the punk era, down at Battery Studios. Strummer is laid out on a couch while a female string section go through their paces on "Forbidden City", a song inspired by the student massacre in Tiananmen Square.

On a table nearby, there's a selection of Chinese medicines and a jar of honey – remedies for the constantly-embattled Strummer larynx.

We soon retire to a nearby Indian restaurant, where Strummer





smokes roll-ups, drinks red wine and orders brandy. He talks to the restaurant proprietor about their bizarre mutual love of Sixties pop music – Rolf Harris, Keith West, Trini Lopez – GM foods and the state of the English countryside around where he lives. He promises to bring a big group of people in for a meal if the record he's making is a hit.

He tells me that two of the songs written with dancemeister Richard Norris after the aforementioned Real World sessions are an attempt to achieve an acid house/punk rock interface.

"We didn't quite make it. But we've made a fantastic blow against the empire with 'Yalla Yalla' and 'Diggin' The New'," he says, once more honest to a fault.

Has he not, I venture, begun to feel his age now, singing those old songs onstage, and surrounded by younger musicians in the studio?

"Not at all," is his quick reply. "I just don't conceive of that idea. To me, time has no meaning. In my mind I haven't been on the road for 60 or 70 years. It's like, no matter how long I've been laid off, this is what I know best. This is my thing."

"And," he barely pauses for breath, "this new record is not a load of nauseating pap. It's a record for grown-ups. We ain't playing no teenage rockabilly, we're playing for real. The Mescaleros aren't a bunch of vegetable-chewing pussies."

THEN THERE ARE THE VARIOUS CLASH projects to mull over. Too busy with The Mescaleros to get actively involved, Strummer has entrusted the task of assembling material for the double-live set, *On The Road With The Clash*, to Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and engineer/producer Bill Price (of *Never Mind The Bollocks* fame). He maintains the record is not a huge deal – "It's not like finding the lost Beatles tapes," he says – and even counters my contention that The Clash were a phenomenal live act (who never released a live album) when he says: "Yeah, but every time there was a mobile [recording console] around, Murphy's Law would kick in. You play shite."

So will *On The Road With The Clash* not be worth buying?

"No, it's good," he parries. "But only through the efforts of Mick, Paul and Bill Price, probably. I just remember every time we were being recorded, feeling, 'This is unfair. I'm dealing with a riot, I've got a crowd, I'm rocking the house and I don't particularly want to be recorded.' It's not like we're all sitting on stools concentrating on the chords, y'know. I often didn't have time to concentrate on the chords because I could see some bird with her leg broken in the front row or something."

"The Clash were a very loud group," he says, as if those of us with blown-out ear-drums didn't already know. "Mick Jones was extremely loud onstage, I'd say 500 times louder than any guitarist onstage today. And, of course, Paul had to turn up 500 times louder because he couldn't hear the bass – and I was in the middle."

"I've got Topper Headon, the biggest powerhouse drummer in the world, behind me, and there was no way you could hear the singing."

Wasn't it the same for Jonesy when he was singing?

"Not really," he smiles. "He'd turn it down when he was singing and had us playing like a lovely-jubbly little combo by comparison."

Back in The Battery studios, new collaborator Anthony Genn is enthusiastically bouncing ideas off Strummer for songs and a video. "We make a great team, you and me," he tells Joe. Band members come and go, joints are passed

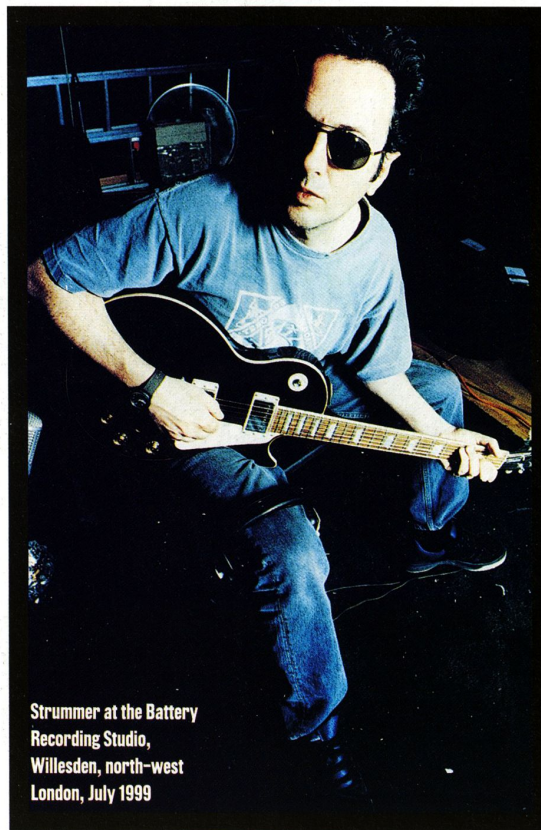
around, and the night's sleeping arrangements are sorted out.

Joe takes a phone call from an evidently tired and emotional Damien Hirst to discuss the video he's off to shoot in New York. Their conversation is heated. Strummer is trying to convince Hirst that an audience is out there already waiting for his grand return.

"There's over 200 Joe Strummer web sites," he tells Hirst, who perhaps needed convincing.

Hirst asks to talk to me. He tells me he's worried about Strummer, that he's a best mate, a lovely human being and an all-time hero, but he still fears he's been off the circuit too long, and things might go wrong. Then he starts singing "Yalla Yalla" down the line.

Strummer, friendly and intense, boastful but unaffected, funny but determined, takes the amiable chaos in his stride. It's the way he's lived for years. In his time he's been a hippie wannabe, a beatnik bum, a mad punk, an enthusiastic observer at the acid house explosion, and a doting father to a Spice Girl-adoring daughter. A man of many parts.



Strummer at the Battery Recording Studio, Willesden, north-west London, July 1999

AND HE'S STILL HERE, WELL INTO HIS middle years, but still able to rock the house, still determined to stay true to his past as a loud-mouthed rebel and gung-ho desperado with one eye on the contemporary scene and the other on changing the world.

"Perhaps that's just a nice fantasy, but you gotta dream," he says of his past, his world-changing schemes, and his vision of the future. "The only thing we can agree about is that everything's wrong. Something has to keep nudging things and music is one of the few arts that keeps pushing that button. Everybody else is so smug and self-satisfied in the intelligentsia in this country."

"There's still a terrible snobbish attitude and they don't realise that for all their education and erudition, it's nothing to what a bunch of dirty hippies out of their minds on drugs have done for the world. Or dirty punks for that matter. And they should suck on that and smoke it till they puke, because all their waffling drives people inside, not outside."

"Any misfit lunatic has done more for this planet than all the toffs and their snidy newspaper articles. They got up the Criminal Justice Act, trying to crush everything that moves. They think they're going to crush it? They haven't got a hope in hell of crushing it. I don't care if they put us all in

Stalag 9 right now. We're still going to have it large. I don't care if we're all under curfew and there's a policeman at everyone's door as you come in and out. "Whatever they do, we can do it better."

"Some day," he says, coming over all misty-eyed, still equal parts idealist and nihilist, "there's going to be a leader of this country who realises, 'Hey, people who smoke spliff and are into stuff are valuable members of society. In fact, they're perhaps the most valuable members of society, not all these alcohol-driven, greed-driven, money-feeding bastards, the businessmen in suits raping the planet and standing round laughing about it'."

"One day," says Joe Strummer, once more preparing to enter the fray with his trusty guitar and headful of steam, "there's going to be a payback. They think they got it all sewn up. But I know they haven't."

**"Yalla Yalla", is released by Casbah Records through Mercury on August 8. The album, *Rock, Art And The X-Ray Style*, follows in October**



# JOE STRUMMER AND THE MESCALEROS



# yalla yalla

LIMITED EDITION SINGLE RELEASED: 16/8/99

october tour dates:	21 london astoria	26 wolverhampton civic hall	credit card hotline:
18 nottingham rock city	23 norwich uea	28 manchester academy	0115 912 9000
19 leeds town & country club	25 cardiff university	29 glasgow barrowlands	