Paul, Mick, Topper & Joe pose for legendary portrait, Niagra Falls.

The Fastest Gang In The West (Part 2)

Details: PAUL MORLEY
Photography: PENNIE SMITH

DETAILS: THE FIFTH MEMBER

Micky Gallagher turned up in Boston. Four or five dates into the Clash itinerary and The Blockheads' jumpy Irish keyboardist slips in to play, hanging about during daytime hours waiting to meet up with Clashmen who stay in bed late recovering from a 15-hour journey from Detroit. "I hated that, waiting around."

Gallagher has contributed keyboard sounds to the deeper, wider new clash songs, but knew little of The Clash from 'White Riot' through to 'I Fought The Law.' Only recently had he familiarised himself with Clash history.

His presence is part of the Clash growth process.

"I never envisaged this kind of development," admits Strummer. "Mick said to me six months ago we'll get a piano player for the British tour and I said 'Oi leave it out, we're a four-piece group', and then we got Mickey down to play in the studio. Organ's so much cooler than piano!"

Visually Gallagher is an interference, musically superfluous, but he's a necessary experiment. And 'White Riot' or 'Garageland' with Gallagher frantically washing the rush riffs with organ swells has to be a 'Blonde On Blonde' on speed design. "Great, great, what a sound," drools Strummer, an unashamed rock historian.

"When I was on the plane coming over," confides Gallagher a couple of hours before the show, finding it diffucult to keep still, "I wondered what the hell I was doing. But then I realised it was too late, I had to get on with it. I get off on the nervous energy of the group, different kinds of energy. That'll get me through. There's Joe's energy and Mick's energy and Topper's energy and Paul I don't really know, he's a bit quiet. I'm looking forward to it." He attempts a smile. He can't keep still.

Gallagher and The Clash spend the Boston soundcheck getting used to each other; plenty of A's and B's and D minor's fly around as Gallagher within an hour attempts to become an integral part of the Clash slam. The night's show indicates no radical progression. Tucked away at the side of the stage, Gallagher is barely heard or seen. He chews gum feverishly and is kept on his feet. Just before going on stage, for the ninth song in the set, to play through to the encores — 19th or 20th — Gallagher seems to be edging towards the side door, a sick look on his face.

The first time Mickey Gallagher ever saw The Clash live on stage he played with them.

DETAILS: THE INTERVIEW

Boston hours are split between absorbing Gallagher and squabbling about when to journey to New York for the next day's Palladium appearance. Initially Headon, Strummer and Simonon favour travelling immediately after the Boston gig, which will get them into New York by eight. Theoretically. Mick Jones dislikes the idea, preferring to leave Boston early in the morning. Ten to arrive at two. Clash aren't the world winners at early rising.

After much discussion Strummer and Headon come round to Jones' way of thinking. Simonon unfussily travels on the roadies' bus straight after the gig with his New York girl friend Debbie. The other three decide to sleep in Boston and leave early for New York — which ultimately sees them departing at midday, arriving at four and going right into the soundcheck.

Clash's journeys through America are on a silver thin coach, complete with claustrophobic bunks, a toilet, a table, some cupboards, some seats, and plenty of rockabilly, reggae and Motown. It's not luxury travel, but it's a couple up on The Undertones' car and Gang Of Four's transit. With Kozmo Vinyl on board, parts of the journeys are something like parties.

There are a number of overnight journeys without hotels. Vast expanses of America are glimpsed brokenly through darkened windows; fleetingly, frustratingly. Forgotten, Bits of cities are seen at a distance. The mind strays behind the body. Is this a sacrifice? An adventure? A privelege?

"Well, we must always compare this poncing about with what they're doing back home," reasons Strummer. "Like say what my mates are doing, maybe working in a motorcycle shop, right? I mean we've either got to do that or do this as far as I'm concerned. There's no lying about on the beach ... if you have a job — you've done a job, getting up and things — that's a pressure, and we don't have to do that. We have to do this instead. That's what we've got to compare it with. To take the rough with the smooth."

Strummer thinks a lot in these terms.

"It can turn round that you don't. It can happen. But having people like Koz along on a jaunt like this can help, especially if you're down ... he says things with that in mind, like say you go, oh no another five hours to Chicago, he'll go, well it's fucking better than!!!' and he'll describe someone working in a baker back in England or something. That helps me. You'll sniff and go bollocks ho hum, Detroit, or whatever, you'll slip — and you need someone to come along and go, you tosser, do you know where you are? And you go, that's right! All that childish sort of thrill is essential when you come over here. My God! We're going to New York! I hope I never lose that."

Coach journeys can be smooth enough and monotonous enough — time stands still — to be ideal places for tape recorded conversation. Insulated by circumstances, interviewees staring out the back of a coach at disappearing countryside become revealingly introverted.

Boston to New York; up the back of the coach sat by a crumpled Mick Jones who's sleeping off the genuine traumas of having to rise at 11 o'clock, Joe Strummer, looking preoccupied yet talking sharp, speaks his way towards Manhattan.

What you're doing, I ask ... it has to be done?

"Yeah. It has to be done. The same way that Koz talks about the radio airwaves, every second we're on the radio that's a second less Boston or Foreigner. In the same way I keep thinking of all those studios in London or Kingston Jamaica or anywhere, and you get a picture of London with like fifty recording studios and they're full with groups in the morning and groups in the afternoon, all those studios used by all those people and I just think we gotta get in there and grab some of that time.

"That's why I say it's gotta be done. If we don't some other group's gonna get in there, you know what I mean, and we're egotistical enough to think we've got something to say. All those tape machines are waiting there for our big say."

Do you have to do it for yourself?

Strummer shrugs, he looks around, his mind seems to wander.

"I don't know. I'm not sure how I got to be here. I can't put no perspective on it. It hasn't happened that fast, we've been going for like three years and that's a long time, so I dunno, I can't quite figure out what it is that we do. Maybe we're so close up to it, the records and the shows and the interviews, and I just can't see what it is that we are."

So what was the initial energy?

"I think it must be the hunger," concedes Strummer, seriously. "That thing, everyone says the best groups are the hungry groups, the ones that want a piece of the action. I think it was hunger to be heard, hunger to make your mark. Through Bernie Rhodes or Johnny Rotten or our own thinking, or a combination of those things we found something to write about; it's a strange thing to say but everybody needs something to write about.

"I remember what a fuck-up it was after the first record. We wrote all those songs, believed in them, dead sincerely, maybe naively — you can listen to them now and maybe laugh at some of them, but after we'd done that we kind of turned round and said *now* what are we going to do? We just couldn't think of anything to follow it with really. We sat back and it was kind of yeah, and then it was what about the second LP? And we were kind of going, hey hang on a minute, and so we had to think about it for a long time. Eighteen months I think it took us."

It's taken The Clash this long to get over the force of that first LP; its reputation, its comparative completeness.

"After doing the second LP it almost killed us. Somehow all that business of flying over to America and like all the hours with Pearlman in the studio, it half killed us. We came out like zombies — and we looked at each other and we said we don't want to go through that again. We were really low at the beginning of this year, spiritually, really low. We'd just done a tour of Britain or somewhere, and we thought now is the time that we want to sit down and write a load of new songs, and throw all the bollocks out of the window, forge on new.

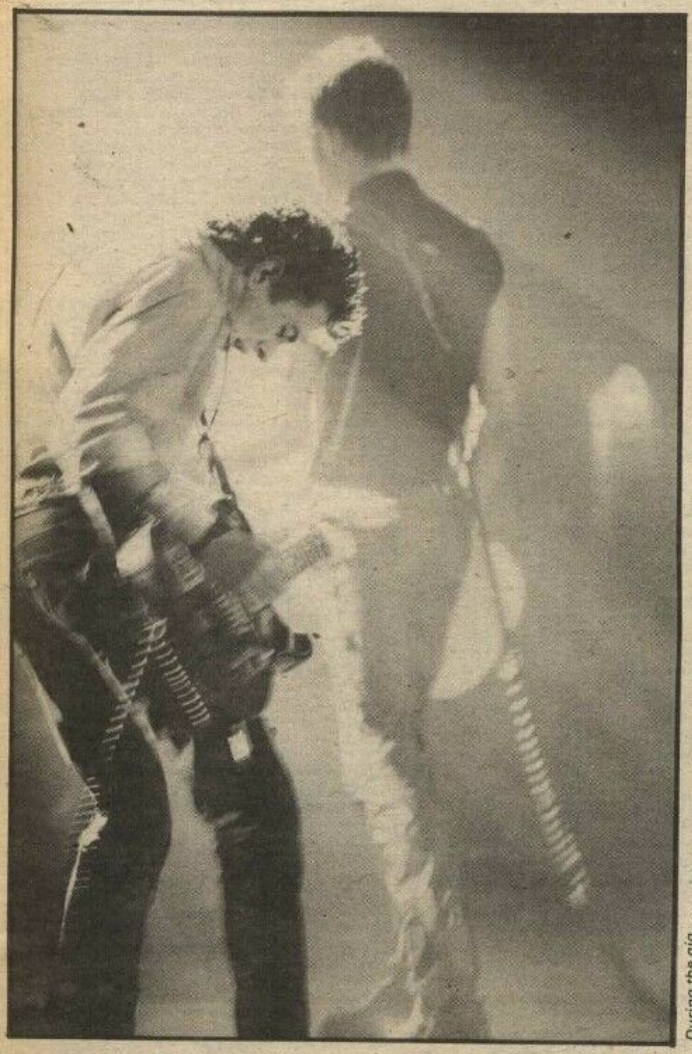
"We went and retreated into Pimlico and we stayed there for a couple of months, writing everyday and recording ..."

Mick had been talking a lot about how the changes since the first album, the growing pains, the mistakes, had been done under public scrutiny: "washing out our dirty linen in public". Was this the first time since the opening period you've been able to work more or less privately?

"Yeah, it was. In Pimlico we were all on our own. It was the only way we could survive."

Do you feel pressures?

"I don't feel too many pressures at the moment but sometimes I feel pressure to bust. The number one pressure is coming up with it.



During the gig . . .

There's always that pressure five seconds before a show, it's kind of like you have that moment of self doubt: can I come up with it? Or before a take, making a record, and you're singing a vocal that no one's heard, and even going to a radio station and they like drag you out of the car, and you slump in front of the microphone, and I think, oh god I feel just like a blank empty bag, a paper bag, I don't feel like bursting HI AMERICA!

"That's a pressure. You want to wake up one day and wander amongst the bushes or a bar in Camden Town. Just wander off, sit down and scratch your head or something. But you can't, can you?"

Have you lost anything during the days of Clash? Jones murmers in his sleep. Joe Strummer slowly nods.

"I've certainly lost my youth. I'm 27. A few weeks ago ... So I've had to seriously ... Like when you're 22 you're still a young man, you're practically a teenager. I don't want to sound like an old gaffer, but imagine being 27 ... You have to so some serious thinking. You have to say goodbye to some stuff, torturing your body with all kinds of stuff. You can't do that, once you're past 25 it leaves a mark, scarred face and all that. You have to kiss good bye to all that.

"Actually it's a great relief for me to be 27 in a way, cos I think the worst time of my life was when I was 24, cos I used to lie about my age, make myself younger, say I was 22 or something, I was so paranoid about it. It was the early days of Clash, like fuck if they find out how old I am that's it, I'm in the bunker, the dumper ... and them I thought fucking hell I feel great, I feel like cos I'm older than this lot I've got a little bit extra to add. Kind of experience."

Does he feel comfortable at 27?

"I'm really comfortable with it. I feel lively. I can't do what I used to, I must admit I have become ... in order to do the shows I can't really get into boozing. At times like this when we're riding along in the bus I might have a beer, and even this weak piss they've got here, for me that's about it. A few years back it was like ten bottles of Special Brew every night. Just to feel alright I had to do it. So it's better in a way, to be normal. If I was 22 I'd think I'd be a right piss artist ... I think about Paul Weller, right, no one seems to remember that he's really young. Nineteen and he'd made three albums or something ridiculous. I got to raise my hat to him, cos I'm not sure, god knows, I've had seven years more living than him."

Strummer speaks with a roofless voice through rotten teeth and a goofy sort of grin. I ask him how he sees the notion of change. He delivers a manifesto of sorts.

"Punk came out and said bollocks to the lot of you, change is what it's all about, this is

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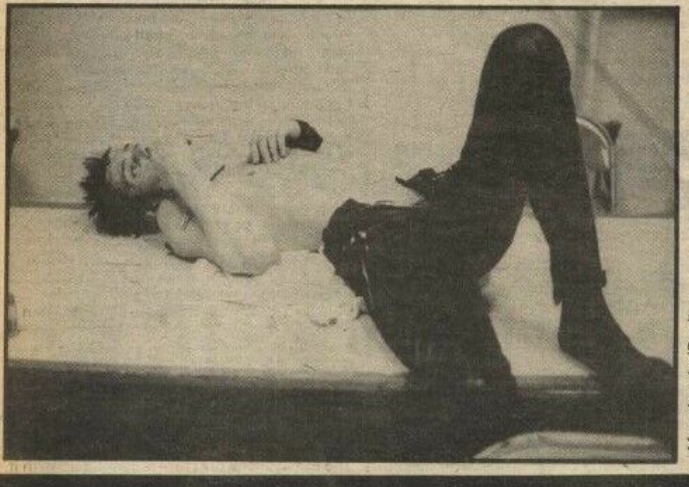

After the gig (Paul) . . .

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new ... new, change, new, change, right? And now people are saying. Hang on a minute mate that ain't quite punk, you're not quite toeing the rope, and they're treating punk as something like hippy music or teddy boy R&R. Punk's now become Oh yeah he's got zips all over him sewed on by his mother and he's shouting in Cockney making no attempt to sing from the heart and the guitarist is deliberately playing monotonously, and they're all playing as fast as possible, so this is punk so yeah I can dig this. There are some people who are becoming snobs.

"I don't want to see punk as another slavish attitude and image and everything is pre-planned and pre-thought out for you to slip into comfortably. Like say mod is. Let's all put on mod suits and feel less nervous.

"I vote for the weirdo, I vote for the loonies, I vote for the people off the left wall, I vote for the individuals.

"Because that was what we were all like in '76. It was all like individual. There was a common ground, it was punk rock, but anything was OK, like he was wearing this and he was wearing that, and he was experimenting with that, anything was alright.

"But to think, Oh you've got to wear zips and hang on a minute those shoes ain't punk or hey this beat ain't punk, that like, God help us, have we done all that to get here? That's why we're going to do a tour of Britain as soon as we get back home because it seems like we haven't toured there for years. We're going to take out a show on the road that is just going to be fucking great. If people are going to stand there saying this ain't punk or whatever then they'll be the fucking losers. I mean if people stand and watch us do a song with Micky Gallagher and they go, What the fuck's this? they're gonna miss the point. Because it feels good to me."

What does he see as the power of rock 'n' roll to affect people?

"We all know that the song is the be-all and end-all of everything. It is in my life anyway. No one can take a song away from you, even sitting in a Kentish Road jail, at least you've got a song right, and that seems to me to be the most powerful thing ever. I think it has got the power to change, it's got to change, hasn't it? People go to clubs and they hear the songs and the words coming at them, and that's where the information is, so it's gotta be the only thing.

"It's sharing human experience and having new knowledge and insights to it, and the more people know about it, the further we're getting into it."

Mick makes up for all the missed lesoons

What kind of things turn you on apart from rock 'n' roll? Strummer thinks I ask what turns him on about rock 'n' roll, and his face registers a slow shock at the stupidity of the question. *Apart* from rock 'n' roll!

"I like the look of things . . . I'm kind of generally interested in everything. I get interested . . . I want to know about everything really. When you're in some god-knows-where cafe and you're feeling down and you're having a cup of coffee, you can start listening to what they're saying at the next table and for me it almost becomes grippingly fascinating. I almost forget totally about myself and I start working out who they are and what they're doing. I dunno. I get interested in any old crap."

DETAILS: THE SHOW

1. BEFORE. Think of Detroit and think of . . . MC5 and *Creem* magazine?

During the day at Detroit, after soundcheck and at the hotel, Clash are interrogated by *Creem* magazine. The pop papers have minimal influence over American rock standards; they're utterly impotent next to the radio. Their consistent inability to cover emergent trends and cults, to alter their perspective, is, paradoxically, one reason why American rock culture curled up and moreover, why the bulk of the audience grew tired. New British music confuses them. The elder statesmen of rock critics — Bangs, Marcus, Rockwell, sweet things — treat Clash as the honeys of the new age, but so far this has meant little.

The Creamguy interviews Strummer a few hours before the Detroit show, at the motel, and spurs Strummer into a rage by ignorantly blowing smoke into his face. A sensitive area for Strummer, who despite being a smoker superstitiously steers clear of any smoke before an appearance. He walks off.

Later on in the dressing room he quietly apologises to Kozmo. "He was getting on my nerves!" Koz cools him. Still to come is the half legendary *Creem* Boy Howdy/Lifeline page; Clash must be pictured supping Boy Howdy beer and underneath *Creem* will invent suitable lifelines. Clash go out of their way to make sure they do the lifelines, and then invent equally frivolous insertions.

Clash become irritated by the *Creem* presence, not really bothered about pages in the magazine, and as they sit and fidget in the dressing room there are sneers whenever the photo session is mentioned.

Strummer thinks that *Creem's* mock Boy Howdy brand is a genuine beer that *Creem* sponsor. "Well, you learn something everyday," he marvels when he discovers the secret.

The Clash eventually reluctantly gather for the shot. Two plainly nervous photographers have prepared a room with white sheets, harsh lights, and have carefully wrapped Boy Howdy stickers around Budweiser beer cans. The Clash are restful and playful.

"Don't take any pictures until I say," raps Kozmo, a West Ham fan. "If you take a picture while they are smiling," he threatens, rubbing his hands together remembering his George Cole poses, "then you will be kicked out of the hall and have to buy your pictures at vastly inflated prices from Pennie Smith." The two photographers chuckle nervously.

The Clash drop into contrived roles of outrage. Fangs and claws appear from nowhere. Expressions contract into fake fury. "Right," cues Kozmo, an expert choreographer, and cartoon hell breaks out in front of the unsteady lens. Cans are ripped open, stamped on, hurled onto the floor, at the walls. Somehow the damage doesn't stretch beyond the four people area. Within the area: packaged destruction. Foam, curled lips, hate. A peculiar switch-on.

The two camaramen hurry for their shots. It's all over in a few seconds. Clash slump off, shaking away spilt beer, dropping back into impatient pre-gig attitudes. The photographers visibly shaken, gratefully pat affable Kozmo on his ample back. He shrugs it off and joins the group back in the dressing room. The photographers pack up, thinking of the tale they'll have to tell.

The minutes slowly disappear before the show. Joe tries to stay in one place, Paul has an injured hip lovingly bandaged by Debbie, Topper and his girlfriend Dee frolic with each other. Wayne Kramer, renowned MC5 guitarist, has arrived, and he and Mick Jones have a lot to say to each other.

One by one the group leave to prepare for the show. Soon only Topper and Dee remain in the dressing room, Dee trying to hurry the diminutive drummer. "There's no panic," Headon excuses himself as he carefully introduces a large slice of ham into his mouth. Dee shuts the door on him: "I don't believe that man," she sighs.

2. DURING. "Whichever way you look at it it's a show, innit? It's like we're on a show bus travelling on a show circuit, and kids are paying to get in and see the show. It is a show. We happen to be dealing with that other stuff, the things that matter, because it seems kind of deceitful not to, which The Beatles didn't deal with."

A Clash show, good or bad or thrilling, illustrates the maturity and discrimination of their rock perspective, unique amongst their contemporaries, and their determination to convince, which sets them amongst the greats. They understand the economy and tone of the '50s, are suckers for the flash of the '60s and early '70s, invented the direction of punk, can translate the slip and slide and feel of reggae, and they know how important it is to look good and move good.

It is a show — entertainment! — and it is experience. They are cliched and they are inspired. Through Jones' natural posturing, Strummer's intensity, Headon's skill, Simonon's introversion, they communicate; people will listen. No show is the same. One night Strummer will leap clear over Topper's drumkit — Headon not missing a beat as Strummer's arm and leg whisks by his hair — another night Simonon will destroy a Fender bass, because he felt a bit funny. "Sometimes I feel a bit funny."

Three new songs from the upcoming Clash double LP indicate the current Clash state. "Jimmy Jazz', which swings and stutters and stretches. 'Clampdown' featuring a riff of sublime precision and aggression. 'Guns Of Brixton' sung by Simonon with Strummer on bass, starkly elegant, effectively repetitive.

This new music isn't unusual. It uses tradition; it uses more of it and uses it better than anybody else. It doesn't forget black music, past or present. The music looks all

over the place. The Clash are growing up, potentially not a group for the squeamish.

Lyrically, there's a change too. Less a perverse, persistent journalistic parody, a commentary on surroundings, more a concentration on the nature of response. Mastering or reacting to events? Looking in, not out. Exploring.

"We're stepping into a few areas that we've left untouched, like sexuality . . . things like that, I dunno, urban psychosis . . . like plumbing the depths," Strummer tantalisingly explains.

"Depression," Jones sneers with a mixture of relish and distaste, "*real* depression, as opposed to being depressed cos you haven't got a job."

Confessional? Clash depression?

"It might be something to do with being in The Clash," Jones enunciates, "All of it actually, it's everything."

"It comes with pumping it out all the time," Strummer thinks, "and sometimes we don't get nothing back and we really get down."

Are you bothered how people are going to take it?

"Naah." Strummer dismisses the idea. "We're so far gone, I tell you. I feel I could get up and do anything really. Y'know, I'm way past all that What are they going to think of this? I don't care anymore . . . cos whatever you do people are going to say bollocks — it doesn't matter what."

Clash are playing halls in America, and responses are good, sometimes too good. "New York is a Clash city, Chicago is a Clash city, Los Angeles is a Clash city, Boston is a Clash city . . . Detroit isn't but we're working on it."

Detroit is notoriously tough city. The audience is not particularly aggressive, just blank. The Clash sensed the negativity from the stage and grew progressively angry. They failed to finish the set. "We did what we had to do, we did our job."

Locals reported that the response was, for Detroit, favourable. I suggest that maybe The Clash, to reach the suspicious and the cynical, should be a little more patient.

"When a group gets in a bad mood it's in a bad mood," Strummer tells me. "To have a good night you've got to have a bad night, and like I was just in a bad mood. I don't know why . . . but it was such a comedown after playing Chicago, that was like playing Manchester or something like that. That's a bad mood to get into, I like to stay clear of it. It's really really nasty: you're playing songs for people, pouring out your heart and your whole, but at the same time it's like schizophrenic, cos you hate them. It's really weird.

"I was pissed off because I'd been around all those radio stations in the morning" — every city The Clash visit Kozmo arranges radio interviews to noisily spread the message — "and I knew that as soon as we left them they'd been going, And here's the new one from Styx or Boston, er mommas going to lick you tonight . . ."

"We were getting out the Foriegner and Boston LPs at one of the stations we were at" — Jones rolls his eyes — "scratching them and putting them back."

Strummer: "So they'd go to get their most played LPs and they'd say, Gee we don't have a copy."

Jones: "Or hopefully they'll not notice and play them . . . it'll get through quicker, it'll jump. We'll try anything . . ."

"But I was feeling really hopeless," continues Strummer. "Those radio stations in Detroit — I knew that as soon as we drew out of the car park they'd be into the old Styx. And it just seems all the Epic guys that you meet across the country, they're kind of 'Yeah I really think you stuff's great' but they're wearing Meatloaf jackets, and you realise Meatloaf, The Clash — it all means the same thing to them. The great grey people out there, it means the same thing to them. That really does get on top of me, the thought that people have no judgement.

"I was feeling angry about this and then the Detroit audience just sitting there didn't help. We've really got high standards. The British audiences that we've been brought up on have always been great and that's our high standards and if an audience doesn't reach that or if we can't get an audience up to that pitch, then we'll feel angry and we'll blame it on them. We'll take some of the blame, but we'll blame it on them too cos it's got to be both, hasn't it? And I can't stand it if they're just going well hit me babay. Like fat Rob Tyner sat in the front row, with his arms folded. Hit me . . . Yaah!"

"I gave him a look to melt him," grins Jones, referring to Tyner, another member of MC5. "The difference between that guy and Wayne Kramer! Kramer said before we went on, Don't ever pander to these people, really hit hard, and after the show he was the first one back to still be positive, and that's the difference."

"Audiences have got to help." Strummer won't let go. "They've got to get up and say, Give it to me I'm ready for it. It's no use sitting back and saying, Impress me, cos if I feel that they're doing that I get really pissed off. That's when I start hating it, that's when it starts coming over really twisted."

Joe at Canadian Customs

3. AFTER. Following most shows Clash wound down in small hotel rooms with liquor and late night TV movies, or travelled to the next city. Detroit had to be different.

In a small club somewhere in the city Wayne Kramer, dressed like a bank clerk somehow managing to play crude jams with Johnny Thunders, falling over somehow managing to play sweet on Berry and Hendrix bar songs. The legends pile up on top of one another. Thunders and Kramer in a Detroit club!

Jones breaks out of himself. He's just finished his own show: "This is what its all about," he gushes, swaying at the front, loving it all, hardly believing it.

Once, on the coach, as Jones rolled yet another joint, I laughingly pointed out that here was the definitive Jones. He laughs a little, but he suddenly realises what I mean and he's quite hurt. "No it's not," he insists. Of course, he's right. The defninitive Mick Jones is onstage, holding a guitar.

After Kramer and Thunders have licked each other, and Kramer has insulted me, Jones is first on the coach ready for the short journey back to the motel. As everyone else gathers he's wildly enthusing. "That was something special."

When a couple of manager type persons are in earshot he exclaims: "We've got to get them on a couple of American dates." Financial difficulties are pointed out. Jones is still on a high. "We've been privileged to see that, but how many people get the chance to got to a Detroit club? We've got to get them on the British tour!" It's carefully pointed out that this isn't as easy as it seems. The dream crumbles around him. Jones slips from his high. By the time the coach pulls up outside the hotel, he's totally quiet. Putting on a brave face.

DETAILS: THE WAY OUT

On the Boston to New York coach Mick Jones has surfaced from his deep slumber and has joined in the conversation. We're discussing how the old rock people let us down; how they didn't drag anything with them, how they abuse their position of power. They don't use their influence positively. Is it possible?

"I think it's because they're not bitter enough. We're really bitter enough."

Clash have it within their potential to be superstars. These words are realistic.

"Yeah, we're really bitter and no amount of sweetening will change that . . . I dunno, I just don't want *them* to get around us . . ."

Can they resist the effects that mellow out and isolate?

"Yeah. Our only hope lies in the fact that they've all been and done it. When we were in school we watched them do it, and so we've got one more dimension than they have. This ain't the '60s. Things are different, y'know, and we're a really different group than there used to be around. Things are changing and this is one of the aspects of the change. Y'know? I mean, should we really be here . . . ? We could've exploded already . . . gone on self-destruct in Guildford or Aberdeen . . ."

"Those early dates?" asks Strummer. "Yeah."

"But we've got to go 15 rounds," emphasises Jones.

But is that it? Fifteen rounds and over?

Strummer thinks it over. "Well, you see, people think doing one round is it, but they don't realise that there's fucking 15 rounds! Look at the Stones — they're maybe on the 10th or 11th. Chuck Berry's on the 15th and maybe he's gonna come out for another bout. It's so quick in London, your 15 minutes of fame and then you're into the dumper. It's so quick people think that's all there is. But they don't realise that it's got to go on and on and it's no use counting up now." Strummer continually speaks in the sturdy language of the rock 'n' roll traditionalist.

What round do you think you're on? Three or four?

"Actually I don't think that we've done three or four . . . maybe one. One round, come out,

■ *Continues page 42*