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Definitely not admitting defeat yet

Caroline Sullivan talks to Joe Strummer, the public schoolboy who became an improbable rebel

Friday September 24, 1999
The Guardian

"I think good manners will come back. In America, kids saw punk rock as a licence to be as rude as possible. I didn't like that." Not, as you might have thought, Cliff Richard speaking, but the man who framed punk's radical agenda and warned of the white riot to come.

At 24, Joe Strummer was lobbing bricks at policemen at the Notting Hill Carnival; a year later he sang, "London's burning, dial nine-nine-nine-nine-nine." But that was half a lifetime ago, and now, a relaxed 47, Strummer is holding forth on a less explosive issue: the erosion of common courtesy.

"When I worked as a maintenance man at the English National Opera in 1974, the cleaning ladies would say, 'Ooh, hasn't he got lovely manners?' because I held doors for them." He delivers this image-shattering bombshell with a reminiscent grin and tops up his coffee with a miniature bottle of Martell, which joins a litter of other bottles on the coffee table. "Another drink?"

In 1974 he was two years away from forming The Clash, the band generally agreed to be the best punk group of all time. He was an improbable rebel, given the public school background that still tints his speech today, making his pronouncements sound more Westminster than Westway. He managed to convert the accent into a functional London bark once the band had made a name for itself. Prudently disguising his Beatle-loving hippie origins, he became an icon revered to this day for never selling out.

But what would his acolytes - Public Enemy, Manic Street Preachers - think if they could see this courteous middle-aged man who gets to his feet when a lady enters, fetches drinks and moved to Somerset because he didn't want his kids growing up in London? They'd probably insist on seeing identification, because the Joe Strummer of myth is the punk-rocking, rabble-rousing white man in the Palais.

The only sign of that Strummer is the reggae playing in a corner of his hotel suite, where he's discussing his first

solo album in 10 years, Rock Art & The X-Ray Style. This Strummer may be dressed in the familiar black clothes and biker boots, but the scourge-of-the-establishment persona is more sartorial than ideological these days. After all, he's older than the prime minister (who, in a burst of old-skool wrath, he vilifies for "getting rid of democracy. I voted Referendum in the last election").

"I never thought I'd be this age," he admits softly. "But I was 23 when we started, and you'd break into a sweat because you were supposed to be 19. I think middle age starts at 68. My motto is 'What's the hurry?'"

He still looks fantastically youthful ("which is weird, because I still party till five in the morning"), and this mellowing has caught him unawares. "I don't think I embarrass my daughters [Jazz Domino Holly and Lola Maybellene] too much, but they go, 'Oh, don't be a git, dad.' " Pfffft. Don't the little insolents realise that dad wrote White Man in Hammersmith Palais?

Songwriting is a more contemplative act now, and Strummer finds himself, atypically, producing love songs. There's one on the new album. Characteristically, though, it's called Nitcomb. The chorus runs, "You'll need a nit comb to get rid of me", which he somehow carries off movingly. He's laughing as he explains, "When you've got kids, a nit comb is a permanent part of your apparatus, and after a while you start to look at it..."

But despite marriage, fatherhood and resettlement in the West Country, he still speaks up for causes close to his heart. On Techno D-Day, one of the most militant tracks on the record, he rages, "This is about free speech." It's partly inspired by the Criminal Justice Act, which he's campaigned against since he began going to raves several years ago. Through them he's developed a taste for the Chemical Brothers, Basement Jaxx and Fatboy Slim, whose ethos reminds him of punk's.

The spirit of '76 also resurfaced at Glastonbury this year when, playing with his band The Mescaleros, he attacked a cameraman. "I was angry to see the crowd 50 yards away and the space in between taken up by camera machinery. I'm going to appeal to the EEC to establish something called a punter's unit, the maximum distance you can be from the crowd," he adds, the fire surging back into his veins.

Why has he chosen to come back now? "It was mostly financial. Rancid might sell 11 million LPs, but London Calling sold 300,000, and there's a big difference. I live on royalties, which can come in a flood or dribble depending on the year. It's a precarious way to live."

But it's not as mercenary as, say, his friend Shaun Ryder's comeback. Strummer stands by his new music, which has the rough-and-ready feel (if not the tunes) of vintage Clash, coupled with technology and a sleeve by Damien Hirst. Before you ask, he has no plans to reform The Clash, regularly declining offers that would set him up for the rest of his life.

"Reuniting would be artistic death," he maintains, quizzically examining his murky brandy-coffee mixture. "Unless it was like a mopping-up thing it'd be like admitting defeat. If I felt I had nothing left in me, we'd do it. Give 'em the hits."

If they could tolerate each other long enough to do it, that is. It's been 16 years since he, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Topper Headon were in a room together. Yet they might find themselves nudged toward it by the biggest flurry of Clash activity since their 1985 split. A BBC documentary, a live album and a video are all due within the next few weeks, and should refocus attention on the band, as well as swell their coffers.

"We all wanted to do the documentary, but we couldn't do it in the same room. It's still too heavy. We haven't been all together since Topper left." He brightens. "It was touching, that bit where he apologised to the group for getting addicted to hard drugs and screwing up the group. He'd never apologised before."

Headon is now back in his native Dover and apparently doing well, while Jones, who was thrown out of the band for "attitude problems", is recording an album. Strummer's especially friendly with Simonon, who has returned to his first love, painting, and often stays at Strummer's place.

As for Strummer, who's spent the last decade writing soundtracks for director Alex Cox, freelancing with the Pogues and hanging out with younger bands, he's more interested in the future than the past. "We were a group that was of a time and place. When you're in a big-shot group, you get isolated. We had the bloody golden apple in our hands, and threw it away. For a long time, I did other stuff to avoid thinking about it," he remembers, devoid of self-pity. "We thought we were going to save the world. I'm going to write our story one day. Do all the anecdotes. But at the same time, I don't want to, because I can dine out on my anecdotes." What a book that should be.

• Joe Strummer's album Rock, Art & the X-ray Style is out on October 18. His tour starts the same day.

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