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Tribute to Joe Strummer 1952-2002

God bless the people's punk

Sean O'Hagan recalls his teenage hero - the passionate, powerful voice of the Clash

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Even when the venue was wrong, or the sound was shit, or the bouncers were in full-on psycho mode, what you got from a Clash gig was pure passion. They hit the stage running and did not let up until the last encore, Strummer up front, flailing at his guitar, or wrapped around a mike stand, howling out his words like some unholy cross between Eddie Cochrane, Lenny Bruce and someone in the throes of an epileptic fit. You left feeling wrung out and exhilarated, feeling like you had felt the full force of some primal rock'n'roll energy that had its source way back in Memphis or Chicago rather than west London. This, though, was the fabled Sound of the Westway, in all its guttural, frenetic, inchoate glory. It was a kind of white boy blues, a kind of protest; the sound of primal rage and racial tension, of inner-city boredom and sheer frustration, all channelled into this pent-up noise that at times threatened to consume the singer. The titles alone gave ample warning that this was not a music for the faint-hearted or the purist: 'White Riot', 'Garageland', 'I'm So Bored With the USA'.

For an all too brief time, the Clash were the greatest rock group on the planet. Period. Anyone who tells you different is lying, or a pop-swot who sat out punk on the sidelines, taking notes and formulating theories, while everyone else surrendered to the noise and the chaos. Nowadays, the original meaning of punk has all but been buried under a surfeit of mostly transatlantic pseudo lit-crit theorising, and while the Sex Pistols are seen as the true heirs of the Situationists - despite the fact that three-quarters of the group couldn't even spell the word, never mind absorb the politics - the Clash have received short shrift.

If you want to hear British punk at its most pared down and powerful, though, the Clash's eponymous debut album still sounds more singular and ground-breaking than Never Mind the Bollocks, not least because it avoids the heavy metal guitar roar that, alongside Rotten's enervated sneer, was so much a part of the Pistols' signature. I can still

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remember the first time I heard 'Janie Jones' exploding out of my speakers at breakneck speed, a thrill so new I was not even sure I understood it, much less liked it.

The Clash were also the coolest band on the planet. At times, they looked impossibly cool, a hybrid of every rock'n'roll style motif, with nods to the Beats, the Dreads and the Chicanos for good measure. If you came of age in the Seventies, long after rock's first golden age had passed, and the twin evils of English prog-rock and West Coast country rock ruled supreme, the Clash looked and sounded like you always imagined all the truly great rock'n'roll groups looked and sounded: lean, lithe, loud, primal, and fucked-up. The Clash was the first group that made me feel that I had not been born too late: too late for the Stones, for the Velvets, for the Stooges and the MC5, for the Doors and Hendrix and Dylan. But not, praise be to punk, too late for the Clash.

Perhaps, for all of the above reasons, the group carried a weight of expectation that would have toppled a lesser band. Fans hung on every word of Strummer's like it was gospel. I remember the first big NME interview, conducted by Tony Parsons on the Circle Line, then issued as a flexidisc with the song, 'Capital Radio', thrown in for good measure. Instant collector's item. I remember Strummer on the front of NME, photographed at the typewriter like Kerouac, penning a feature on a single roll of paper: The Thoughts of Chairman Joe. I remember Strummer, again on the cover of NME, clad in pajamas and lying prone on a hospital bed from a bout of hepatitis caused by a gobbing fan. ('What did you do in the punk wars, daddy?') I remember the group turning up to chat to fans outside the shortlived Roxy in Harlesden after the cancellation of a sold-out show, Strummer in bondage strides, Simonon and Jones in leather biker jackets, Topper, God bless him, wearing a trilby. We were meant to be all in this punk thing together, but when Strummer spoke, it still felt like Moses had descended from on high.

As punk fizzled out and died, the Clash, like the Jam, came of age, metamorphosing into a great hard rock group, albeit one who could never quite get over their reggae fixation. ('White Man in the Hammersmith Palais' - a biographical tale about Strummer's discomfort at being the only white punter at a Leroy Smart show - was perhaps their most successful rock-reggae hybrid, just as 'Rock the Casbah' saw them incorporate elements of funk and rap.) They made the difficult second album, Give 'Em Enough Rope, which was just that. Then, London Calling, which, in retrospect, signalled the moment when the Clash looked set to become not just the best but the biggest rock band in the world.

Then, they faltered. Sandinista! was an OK triple album that should have been a great single one. Combat Rock was better but they ended up trying to break into the States in 1982 by supporting the Who in a series of ill-starred stadium shows. The States was ready but it just wasn't right, and the group who had began life as the most committed punks on the block knew it. They split

asunder amid much recrimination, Strummer sacking his sidekick, Mick Jones.

Later, honest to a fault, Strummer took the blame, and said simply: 'I stabbed him in the back.' Whatever, the original Clash split up and, despite the lure of obscene amounts of money from American promoters, never re-formed. 'The Clash were the best group in the world,' Larry Mullen of U2 once told me, 'and they would have been bigger than U2 without a doubt. For a long time, they were who we measured ourselves against.'

Me, I think they broke up at exactly the right time. They burned bright at exactly the right moment, and to try to rekindle that flame would have been well-nigh impossible. Sure, they made mistakes - that triple album, the short-lived post-Jonesy line-up - but what great rock group didn't? (And, OK, Joe Strummer was born Joseph Mellor, the son of a diplomat rather than a bank robber, but so what? Dylan was middle class and not a hobo. Iggy plays golf. As someone once said: 'It ain't where you're from, it's where you're at'.)

I finally met Joe Strummer properly when I interviewed him for NME on the release of a retrospective album, The Story of the Clash, in 1988. He was mellow and accommodating, nursing a pint of Guinness in the Portobello Star in the company of Penny Smith, the photographer who immortalised the group in their heyday. I asked him if, as a solo artist and actor of some repute, he minded talking about the Clash? 'Not at all,' he quipped, 'I was in 'em. It don't get much better than that.'

I spoke to him again when he fronted the Pogues during one of Shane MacGowan's recuperation periods. This time, though, it wasn't so rosy. I rang him on tour in Germany at a prearranged time, but he seemed to have forgotten about our pre-arrangement, and he harangued me at full volume for about a minute before slamming down the phone. I later heard from one of the band that he had kicked in a hotel window. I'm not sure if the two things were connected. Whatever, he was having a bad day. Road fever, Pogues-style.

Later, over drinks at Pogue Jem Finer's gaff, we made up. There, Strummer quizzed me about the late great Irish writer and carouser, Brendan Behan, whose books he was searching out. 'They don't write like that any more, do they?' he said. 'They're all hung up on getting it right now. They don't just let it flow...' He could have been talking about himself, of course. The last of the true believers in rock'n' roll as pure passion, as catalyst, as a ragged but transcendent force; someone who made the big leap of faith and carried us all with him in his wake. The last time I saw him he was carrying an award of some kind, sauntering though the late night streets of Soho on his way for a late drink somewhere. 'It's for being an inspiration,' he shouted over his shoulder, laughing like this was the most absurd thing that had ever happened to him, but proud all the same. I don't think he ever really knew - no matter how many times those he had touched told him - just how big an inspiration he was. I hope he does now.

Rave on, Joe Strummer, wherever you are.

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