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He'll rock the casbah no more. Joe Strummer dies at 50

By James Brown

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What do you write when one of your heroes bites the dust? I am shell-shocked by the death of Joe Strummer. For my generation, the loss of the Clash frontman is as bad as Lennon or Marley. It's enough to make you go out and get a tattoo.

Little girls had Diana, Princess of Wales; we had Strummer and the Clash. If you grew up with the Clash you knew exactly what a great rock band should be like and few subsequently measured up. They stole the baton from the Rolling Stones and inspired everyone from U2 to the Stone Roses and the Manic Street Preachers.

With Paul Weller, the Clash were the key that opened the door out of teenage apathy, songs such as "Career Opportunities" giving more inspiration than any teachers could. They were like true revolutionaries, not pop musicians. For those in search of a cause, theirs was a genuine call to arms.

The difference between the Clash and the Sex Pistols? The Clash made more great records. Such was the influence of this band they figured for a week as the photographic content of *The Independent's* letters page. Strummer was everything a rebel rock star should really be. People believed in him, and the Clash inspired all from soldiers to newsreaders to miners to students. Strummer had integrity, romance, looked great and was a brilliant sloganeer. Throw in stylist and, most importantly, musician.

People say you should never meet your heroes but Joe Strummer never let you down. In election week 1987, he gave me an interview that would make the cover of *Sounds* and get me a job on *NME*. I have been pleased to see him ever since. It was the first time he talked openly about the Clash since their demise.

"I wish we were still together today. It was a good band but the trouble was we fell to ego," he said with typical candour. In the late 90s, a friend of mine flew over to Los Angeles to photograph Black Grape's Shaun Ryder. Strummer was knocking about in the studio and, while my mate took his picture, Strummer said: "I've done nothing decent for 15 years." He was being too hard on himself but, shortly after, he picked up his guitar and went back on the road, mixing new numbers with confrontational Clash classics.

To meet Joe was to meet a man with a teenager's passion and an old blues singer's pain. He had to carry the knowledge that he had created truly great music at a great time and then confined it to history.

"There's no point going forward if you can't maintain your respect," he once told me. Yet the Clash songs never sounded dated, nor did anyone's enthusiasm for them. Only the band avoided revisiting days gone by.

Strummer spoke passionately about his beliefs – be they endangered gorillas, Nicaraguan street kids or a macabre pride in seeing English hooligans doing battle abroad. He played his part to the max. Sounding part Central American revolutionary, looking part Cagney-era gangster chic, he played his guitar so hard

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he wore bandages – the Strum-guard – around his wrist and fist to stop himself bleeding to death on stage. Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking CV.

He was also a great leveller – if you met someone who liked the Clash, they were all right. All around the world, people between 30 and 50 are putting on Clash songs and air-posing in tribute. It's Christmas 2002, the offices are empty and Strummer is dead. But remember – Joe Strummer lives for ever.

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