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The Clash

Joe Strummer Of The Clash Dead At 50

12.23.2002

Joe Strummer
Photo: Anton Corbijn

Joe Strummer, vocalist and guitarist of the pioneering punk band the Clash, was found dead in his home in southwest England Sunday, according to a police spokesperson. The cause of death is unknown, though authorities do not believe the circumstances to be suspicious. An autopsy has been scheduled for Tuesday. Strummer was 50.

Strummer's body was discovered Sunday afternoon in his Somerset home by his wife Lucy, who phoned police. They arrived around 4:45 p.m. and pronounced him dead at the scene. Officers believed Strummer died from heart failure. **(Read fans' reactions and share your remembrances of Strummer in You Tell Us.)**

Along with the Sex Pistols and the Ramones, the Clash ushered in punk's first wave, giving voice to a generation of restless youth that was too nihilistic for disco's feel-good vibe and the bloated corporate rock of the day. Unlike the Pistols, though, who reveled in the anarchy of their loutish behavior as much as the chaos of their music, Strummer and the Clash harnessed their rage and ferocity into reggae and dub-influenced political anthems about class and economic struggle such as "Death or Glory," "London Calling" and "The Guns of Brixton." The results were albums such as 1979's *London's Calling,* considered by many critics to be one of the greatest rock albums of all time.

Born John Graham Mellor in Ankara, Turkey, in 1952, the son of British diplomat Ronald Mellor, Strummer attended London's Freeman boarding school in Surrey as a child, visiting his parents in Teheran and in sub-Sahara Africa during school holidays.

He began his rise to musical prominence busking in the London subway and in the cover band the 101ers in the early '70s. After seeing a performance by the Sex Pistols in 1976, Strummer broke up the 101ers and set out in search of a more intense muse.

Joining forces with co-singer/guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Topper Headon in West London in the mid-'70s, Strummer was instrumental in bringing his political, worldly view to one of the most influential and principled bands in the history of rock. The group performed its first concert in the summer of '76, opening for their idols, the Sex Pistols, in London. A slot on the Pistols' hectic Anarchy in the U.K. Tour that fall helped land the Clash a recording contract.

Though they trailed the Pistols in arriving at the punk party, the Clash far outstripped the sideshow antics of Sid Vicious and Johnny Rotten with fiery, passionate songs of righteous protest such as "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A.," "London's Burning" and "White Riot," from their self-titled 1977 debut, which was not released in the U.S. because the band's American label did not think the songs were fit for radio. The album was released Stateside in an altered form two years later.

In part because of Strummer's peripatetic childhood and his embrace of global music, the Clash augmented the usual three-chord punk blitz with reggae, dub, rockabilly, folk and a swaggering, Wild West style and bearing. His middle-class background mixed with Jones' working-class Brixton upbringing made for a volatile combination, which the band played to the hilt in its image, songs and interviews. For a time, the group's fearless embrace of political ideology and cultural diversity earned the Clash the distinction as "the only band that mattered."

That status was reinforced with the release of the band's third record,

Audio & Video

Joe Strummer 1952-2002
An MTV News video report

The Clash
"Should I Stay Or Should I Go?"
Combat Rock
(Sony)

The Clash
"London Calling"
London Calling
(Sony)

The Clash
"Radio Clash"
Super Black Market Clash
(Sony)

Band Links

The Clash

News Archive: The Clash

London Calling. The double-album is rife with searing, rocking, working-class politico-punk anthems such as the title track, but it also features a startling array of musical styles: loungey jazz ("Jimmy Jazz"), rockabilly ("Brand New Cadillac"), ska ("Rudie Can't Fail"), pop ("Lost in the Supermarket"), boozy R&B ("The Right Profile") and even some Stonesy blues rock ("Lover's Rock").

It's a staggering artistic statement from a group that had only been together for three years, but had already surpassed its peers in terms of growth and stylistic range.

Through it all, Strummer was the angry young man at the center of the storm. With a cigarette-scarred, throaty rasp, Strummer stumbled through the Clash's reggae cover of the traditional blues number "Junco Partner," croaking like a drunken street-fighter hitting daylight. The song sits alongside many of the classics written by Strummer and Jones on the band's 1980 magnum opus, the three-album set *Sandanista!*. Tracks such as "Somebody Got Murdered" and "Career Opportunities" decry the plight of England's youth with a passion and vigor, as well as a desperate hopelessness, that made Jones and Strummer the poet laureates of punk. Like *London's Calling,* the album, though packed with songs, was released at a fan-friendly discounted price.

Though the group's influence was on the wane in England, with the release of 1982's *Combat Rock* the Clash finally achieved the American success they long sought with the hits "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" and "Rock the Casbah." The Middle Eastern-themed video for the song made the mohawked Strummer an icon for the MTV generation. (The anti-war track was later played by the U.S. military as it bombed Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War.) The group, however, was frequently booed off the stage in the fall of 1982 as it made the rounds with the Who on the venerable English rock band's first farewell tour.

The Clash's appearance at the massive US Festival in the summer of 1983 would mark their last major concert, as the group disintegrated following the September 1983 firing of Jones, whom the others felt had strayed from the band's original ideals. A new lineup toured the U.S. in 1984 and released the poorly received *Cut the Crap* album before disbanding in 1986.

Jones and Strummer reunited in 1986 to write a handful of songs for Jones' band, Big Audio Dynamite, while Strummer began a second career as an actor. The singer appeared as "street scum" in "The King of Comedy" (1983), a baddie in Alex Cox's punk rock western, "Straight to Hell" (1987) and Cox's "Walker," (1987) and played bit parts in "Candy Mountain" (1987) and Jim Jarmusch's "Mystery Train" (1989). In the latter, he played the part of "Johnny" a.k.a. Elvis, in the film about a Japanese couple's obsession with 1950s America.

Strummer released his solo debut, *Earthquake Weather,* in 1989, which bore the signature Clash mash-up of dub, reggae, folk and punk rock. After a brief 1991 stint as the touring vocalist and rhythm guitarist for Irish rockers the Pogues, Strummer receded from the spotlight, performing on Black Grape's 1996 hit "England's Irie" and scoring the John Cusack comedy "Grosse Pointe Blank" (1997). Strummer lent his voice to "It's a Rockin' World" from the soundtrack to "South Park" (1998). He returned in 1999 backed by his new band, the Mescaleros, with *Rock Art and the X-Ray Style,* an eclectic album that added some dancey beats to Strummer's increasingly world music mix of exotic percussion and African influences. A second album, *Global a Go-Go,* followed last year, and Strummer had been working on a third Mescaleros LP. He had also recently completed a European tour with the band.

A punk to the end, Strummer had ignored lucrative offers for the Clash to reunite and steadfastly followed his musical and social conscience. Along the way, he influenced everyone from former Rage Against the Machine singer Zack de la Rocha to Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and U2's Bono, with whom he collaborated on a song for an upcoming concert in South Africa to raise money to fight AIDS. Along with the Eurythmics' Dave Stewart, the pair wrote "48864" — named for former South African president Nelson Mandela's prison number — which will be performed at the benefit show on February 2 (see **"Bono, Shaggy, Macy Gray To Play AIDS Benefit In South Africa"**).

Strummer recently filmed a pilot for an MTV2 show, "Global Boombox With Joe Strummer," which features clips from a number of world, reggae, pop and punk artists, including Buccaneer, Capleton, Angelique Kidjo, Youssou N'Dour and Rancid.

The Clash are scheduled to be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame on March 10 in New York (see **"AC/DC, Clash, Police To Be Inducted Into Rock Hall Of Fame"**), and the drums had begun beating for a long sought-after reunion. Jones and Strummer performed together for the first time in nearly 20 years on November 16 at a charity gig at London's Acton Town Hall, playing the songs "London's Burning," "Bankrobber" and "White Riot," which raised hopes for an onstage set at the Hall of Fame induction.

Strummer is survived by a wife, two daughters and a stepdaughter, who are all requesting privacy at this time

[This story was updated on 12.23.02 at 3:25 p.m. ET.]

Bands A-Z: The Clash

Joe Strummer

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Bands A-Z: Joe Strummer

-- Joe D'Angelo and Gil Kaufman

"Westway to the World," a two-hour documentary on the Clash, will air on MTV2 Tuesday at 11a.m. ET/ 8 a.m. PT, and Wednesday at 12 midnight ET/ 9 p.m. PT.

- For more on **The Clash** and **Joe Strummer**, check out the **MTV News Archive**
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