PUNK ROCK WARLORD

THE LIFE AND WORK OF JOE STRUMMER

Edited by
BARRY J. FAULK AND
BRADY HARRISON

ASHGATE POPULAR AND FOLK MUSIC SERIES

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ASHGATE

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General Editor's Preface

The upheaval that occurred in musicology during the last two decades of the twentieth century has created a new urgency for the study of popular music alongside the development of new critical and theoretical models. A relativistic outlook has replaced the universal perspective of modernism (the international ambitions of the 12-note style); the grand narrative of the evolution and dissolution of tonality has been challenged, and emphasis has shifted to cultural context, reception and subject position. Together, these have conspired to eat away at the status of canonical composers and categories of high and low in music. A need has arisen, also, to recognize and address the emergence of crossovers, mixed and new genres, to engage in debates concerning the vexed problem of what constitutes authenticity in music and to offer a critique of musical practice as the product of free, individual expression.

Popular musicology is now a vital and exciting area of scholarship, and the *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* presents some of the best research in the field. Authors are concerned with locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context, and may draw upon methodologies and theories developed in cultural studies, semiotics, poststructuralism, psychology and sociology. The series focuses on popular musics of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is designed to embrace the world's popular musics from Acid Jazz to Zydeco, whether high tech or low tech, commercial or non-commercial, contemporary or traditional.

Professor Derek B. Scott,
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Barry J. Faulk is a Professor in the English Department at Florida State University and the author of *Music Hall and Modernity* (2004) and *British Rock Modernism* (2010). He has published numerous articles on British literature and cultural studies.

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Walidah Imarisha is a writer, organizer, sci fi scholar, educator and spoken word artist. She is the author of the collection of poetry,*Scars/Stars,* and one of the co-editors of the upcoming *anthology Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements.* Her work has appeared in *Total Chaos: The Art And Aesthetics of Hip Hop, Letters From Young Activists, Word Warriors: 35 Women*

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Edward A. Shannon is a Professor of Literature at Ramapo College of NJ, where he teaches courses in American Literature and is the Convener of the Literature Major. He has published several articles on Woody Guthrie and was named a 2005 *Woody Guthrie Fellow* by the Woody Guthrie foundation. Among his recent publications are essays on Mark Twain for the *Mark Twain Annual* (2009) and on the underground comix artist Robert Crumb in *The Canadian Review of American Studies* (2010) and *Biography* (Fall 2012). He thanks Ramapo College and the Ramapo Foundation for their support completing this project.

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Matthew Worley is a Professor in History at the University of Reading. He has written widely on twentieth century politics, particularly in relation to the British labour movement and the left. His most recent books include *Oswald Mosley and the New Party* (2010), *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party Between the Wars* (2005), and the edited collection, *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900–1939* (2009). He is currently researching the relationship between youth culture and politics in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s.

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Introduction
John Woody Joe Mellor Strummer: The Many Lives, Travails and Sundry Shortcomings of a Punk Rock Warlord

Barry J. Faulk and Brady Harrison

I.

John Graham Mellor (1952–2002), a.k.a. "Woody Mellor" and then "Joe Strummer", the ironically self-proclaimed "punk rock warlord" was the son of a civil service diplomat, an amateur graphic artist, a street busker turned professional musician, actor, soundtrack composer, radio DJ, and most famously, lead singer for the rock band, the Clash. Although a working musician both before and after the Clash, Strummer is most famous, and deeply revered, for his work in that band. Strummer was the group's singer and dynamic front man; he was also the chief lyricist, which entailed being the primary idea man and, along with sometime manager Bernie Rhodes, the concept provider for a band to whom concept, as the evocative name of the group suggests, was everything.

Although Strummer and the Clash have been the subject of a number of biographies, memoirs, documentaries, and more, this is the first collection of critical essays devoted to Joe Strummer.[1] While the writers in the anthology all touch on Strummer's contributions to the Clash, this anthology is new in focusing on all aspects of his varied career, peaks and valleys alike, from his days as a squatter in London to the seeming wilderness years following the demise of the Clash – including his stints as an actor and scorer of soundtracks – to his critical (if not quite popular) resurgence with The Mescaleros. This broad focus is prompted

[1] Among biographies see, for example, Antonio D'Ambrosio's collection, *Let Fury Have the Hour: The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer* (New York: Nation Books, 2004), Pat Gilbert's *Passion Is a Fashion: The Real Story of the Clash* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), Marcus Gray's *The Clash: Return of the Last Gang in Town*, Kris Needs' *Joe Strummer and the Legend of the Clash*, and Chris Salewicz's *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2006). Among documentary films see, among others, Don Letts' *The Clash: Westway to the World* (New York: Epic, 2001), Dick Rude's *Joe Strummer: Let's Rock Again* (Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment, 2005), and Julien Temple's *The Future Is Unwritten: Joe Strummer*.

by Strummer's unique and transformative power as a rock artist. A consummate rock and roll performer in the venerable tradition of other great rock non-melodic singers (Bob Dylan, Neil Young and Lou Reed come to mind), the writers in this collection suggest that John Mellor's real legacy was building a persona that created a strong, affective link between performer and audience far exceeding the conventional bounds of rock music. The Strummer persona permitted Mellor, an intelligent and engaged social critic, to personalize politics. "Strummer" described the struggle between rich and poor, exploiter and exploited, in global, apocalyptic, terms, but always salted with humor. The Clash urged their audience to join, in what would likely be a losing battle, against those in power: yet they always made joining in the fight seem like tremendous fun, an act of community building that cut across diverse cultural and racial lines. In the punk rock world of aggressively different outsider artists, Mellor cultivated an aggrieved, Everyman persona. In live performance, "Strummer" sang with a conviction and dynamism that seemed to involve every muscle in his body, forging strong, intimate bonds with his audience. Fired by the conviction that rock was a medium for change rather than mere entertainment, and offering himself as primary evidence of the power of music to alter lives, Strummer came to embody the notion of self-transformation for his fans. Placing a huge burden of responsibility on himself to deliver on the promise of changing the world, Strummer seemed to make the same demands on his ideal audience. As a result, few that listened carefully to the Clash in their formative years would ever forget it. If you couldn't change the world, you could still make a right mess, or a very big noise.

Mellor's own approach to rock music, steeped in an egalitarian, leveling spirit, seemed rooted in the youth politics of 1968. Slightly older than the rest of the Clash (and most of the first generation UK punk bands), Mellor's formative political experience was the wave of student protests that shook the world in the late Spring of 1968, as he himself recalls in Julien Temple's documentary, *The Future is Unwritten* (2007): "In 1968, the whole world was exploding. There was Paris; Viet Nam; Grosvenor Square; the counterculture. I think that gave me an edge to put into punk. It was a great year to come of age." John Mellor didn't take to the streets – he was only 16 in summer 1968, and still inhabiting, as he once remarked, the "weird Dickensian Victorian world with sub-corridors under sub-basements" that was the City of London Freeman School (qtd. in Needs 11) – but the memory of youth solidarity and the hope of revolution would shape his life and career till the very end. Even when Mellor became Strummer, and aligned himself with a uniquely contentious subculture, he remained in many respects a child of '68. The events of that year would strengthen the link, at least for a brief time, between rock as youth culture and youth culture as a rejection of all adult authority. In the punk era, Strummer kept covert faith with the carnivalesque politics of '68, leavening social critique with humor and mischief-making. He was never one to sacrifice the immediacy of spontaneous revolt for intellectual correctness. As Temple's documentary and the writers in this collection make clear, John Mellor seemed animated to the last by the hope that the established powers might be overturned

by rebel youth, now taking the form of rave dancers and festival travelers, acting in solidarity with other groups of outsiders. And, as many of his songs with The Mescaleros, from "Techno D-Day" to "Global A Go-Go" to "Arms Aloft", demonstrate, he never lost faith in the power of music, bands, and DJs to make a difference, to offer of transcendence through passion, movement, and sonic energy (that glorious force that unites).[2]

If Mellor drew on the politics and dreams of 1968 in fashioning "Strummer", he also drew upon folk music, especially American folk music, for many of his convictions. As earlier mentioned, Joe Strummer was a few years senior to the other members of the Clash. He naturally drew on a broader musical and historical palette for understanding pop music history than his songwriting partner Mick Jones, who, as Marcus Gray notes, had "rock dreams … shaped by a very early Seventies notion of rock 'n' roll" (88). In contrast, Strummer was "rooted in the mythology created by the lifestyles and lyrics of the blues, folk, R&B, and rock 'n' roll performers of between ten and forty years earlier" (Gray 88). Energized by the unrest of '68, he was also inspired by the music and lyrics of Woody Guthrie and other folk artists, and even went so far in his early busking and pub-rock days to call himself "Woody" Mellor. Later to renounce his earlier act of persona-building, Strummer re-embraced Guthrie during his days as a DJ on the BBC World Service and reasserted his folk credentials in performances with The Mescaleros.[3] Influenced by the civil unrest of '68, Strummer also learned his politics and stage persona from Guthrie, Dylan, Tim Hardin, and others. In many ways, it was inevitable that Strummer would increasingly draw upon his expansive knowledge of the pop music archive for inspiration as punk rock music assumed a standardized, generic form.

From his earliest days with the Clash, Mellor used the Strummer persona, and rock and roll itself, as a means to get at bigger things: to confront the problems of racial injustice, social and class inequality, the use and abuse of power on a global scale. For this reason, he is best served by an anthology that not only considers the singer's place in rock history, but that aims to situate him within broader currents of cultural history on both sides of the Atlantic. *Punk Rock Warlord* does not attempt to tell the "true" story of John Mellor, but it does seek to provide a critical perspective on the various mystifications and strenuous arguments that have accumulated around the Strummer persona, and which obscure a critical understanding of the singer's legacy.

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[2] In his landmark study, *Bruits: essai sur l'économie politique de la musique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), Jacques Attali calls this force simply – and elegantly – "noise".

[3] Topper Headon, the drummer for the classic Clash line-up, once called Strummer "Woody" because he thought Mellor's pointy ears made him look like Woody Woodpecker and had not known that Strummer had gone by the moniker; Strummer replied, "Don't ever fucking call me that". See Track 19, "Topper Headon: 'I called him Woody,'". *The Future Is Unwritten: Joe Strummer* (New York: Sony 2007).

Perhaps it was unavoidable that the Strummer persona would become freighted with fantasy, even delusion. Mellor fronted the Clash, the group that became the standard bearer for punk rock when the Sex Pistols imploded during their 1978 American tour. Punk was not just a part of rock history; it was the last time that rock music itself represented a historical force. However, inevitably when history is made, myths are born. Focusing on "Joe Strummer" inside and beyond the Clash allows us a critical vantage point on our subject, while at the same time moving us beyond a notion of punk conceived as a singular event, as a master narrative of history. The contributors to this volume look at "Strummer" from the vantage points of American folk music, American film, the politics and economics of the punk era, feminism, the rise of hip hop, and more.

Of course, the chief obstacle facing Joe Strummer on the way to becoming the face of UK punk rock was John Mellor himself: the diplomat's son and public school student. As Strummer's biographers have made clear, a troubled, dysfunctional family lay behind the façade of upper middle class respectability sought by Joe's father, Ronald Ralph Mellor. Still, Strummer the punk icon spun his family story in order to conceal his privileged background, and bring history in line with his own ideal image of himself as an outsider and rock rebel. In retrospect, it is these very contradictions that make Strummer such a rich subject for scrutiny; John Mellor, before and after the Clash, embodies, in Gray's words, "a microcosm of British social history" (88) and, indeed, some of the history of the fading British empire as well as the histories of popular music and youth subcultures in North America and Europe. By focusing on diverse aspects of Strummer's career (and Mellor's life), the writers in our collection clarify the relation between the performer and broader currents of social history, especially in England, and especially in the years following the upheavals of '68.

Rather remarkably, given Strummer's influence and prestige among fans of the Clash and musicians from Billy Bragg to Bono to Jakob Dylan, and more, one of the most striking features of this collection is the wariness – and, indeed, outright skepticism – about Strummer's politics, commitments and ethics. Simply put, many of the contributors have their doubts, and a few pass beyond suspicion and caveats to outright apostasy. Even as Strummer worked at creating a vital, politically-focused rebel persona, drawing inspiration from American folk music, Hollywood, and English subcultures alike, many question his core values – if he had any – and wonder if Strummer was really all he seemed to want to be. Was there any there there, or was Strummer too flexible, too malleable, too much the old school rock 'n' roller – in it for the sex and drugs, if not the filthy lucre – to be what he seemed to promise: a visionary street-folk musician turned punk rocker turned weary-but-undefeated veteran of the cultural wars?

II.

In "'Don't Call Me Woody': The Punk Compassion and Folk Rebellion of Joe Strummer and Woody Guthrie", the opening salvo of Part I: John/Woody/Joe, Edward Shannon argues that although both Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen at different times and in different measures took up the mantle of Guthrie's folk populism, the true heir to Guthrie's vision and progressive politics was Joe Strummer. Unlike his more famous (and considerably wealthier) American peers, Strummer, after dropping "Woody" in favor of "Joe" as his nom de guerre, followed in Guthrie's footsteps by maintaining through the many phases of his career an anti-capitalist, pro-populist politics and an interest in diverse cultures and musical forms. Crucially, Shannon establishes one of the two pillars of this collection: Strummer and folk. There can be no "Strummer" without the folk tradition.

Although the starting point of Lauren Onkey's "Joe Strummer: The Road to Rock and Roll" is the induction of Strummer as a member of the Clash into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, her chapter underscores Strummer's pluralistic understanding of rock, and his appreciation of the musical forms – blues, jump blues, and R&B – that fed into 1950s rock and roll. However, as Onkey notes, Strummer's view of rock music as being uniquely transformative is currently viewed in popular music studies as "rockism": "a narrow-minded and romantic approach to understanding rock and roll". Onkey argues that Strummer's keen appreciation and embrace of the energy and variety of the first rock era, when rock music's primary meaning was non-mainstream music made by and for African Americans, challenges rockist ideology, particularly in rejecting the notion of the artist as creative genius. For Strummer, Onkey concludes, "It's not about individual genius, but a community of listeners": a notion of folk community that Strummer carried with him from the "Woody" days into the punk era.

Like Shannon, Brian Cogan considers the transformation of John Mellor into Joe Strummer, but where Shannon foregrounds Guthrie's influence, Cogan sees Strummer's interest in a broad and diverse array of musical forms arising at least in part from Mellor's experiences abroad as the son of a British diplomat. Building upon Chris Salewicz's observation that to many who knew him Strummer seemed uncomfortable in his own skin, Cogan argues that Strummer's ongoing process of self- and musical-reinvention reveals not only an ongoing identity crisis in Mellor, but a crisis rooted in the Mellor family's participation in the empire and diplomatic core. Born in Ankara, Turkey, and following his parents to stations in Mali and elsewhere, Strummer was forced by circumstance – and inclination – to learn about and appreciate the lives, cultures, and music of others, and he grew to incorporate reggae, cumbia, hip hop, and more into his own sonic repertoire.

In Part II: I Don't Trust You, our two contributors dive directly into the often acrimonious debates surrounding Strummer and his politics: was Joe Strummer the real thing, a politically savvy and committed spokesperson for his generation, or merely (just another) rock 'n' roll poseur, a hollow man of the worst sort? For Mark Bedford, in "This is Joe Public Speaking: Why Joe Strummer's Passion is

Still in Fashion," there is no question: Strummer was the real thing. Drawing on a number of interviews conducted specially for this collection, Bedford examines the impact Strummer had (and, just as importantly, continues to have) on the generation of 1977 and its progeny. Building on the ethnographic models of Leon Anderson, Bedford's "analytical autoethnography" challenges the notion of subculture difference by insisting that music brings generations together, and that progressive political beliefs are passed on from parent to adolescent. Not only did Strummer have a material, vital impact on the lives of those Bedford interviews, but the rocker's work continues to influence later generations.

In sharp contrast to Bedford and other fans of Strummer's life and work, in "Saint Joe: An Apostate Writes", Alex Ogg not only condemns the rocker for failing to live up to the stated politics and aims of early punk, but also faults Strummer's admirers and commentators for buying into – and seemingly needing to buy into – the myths of Strummer and the Clash. Comparing "the philosophy of punk, as exemplified by Joe Strummer and his band mates in the Clash, with competing views, principally those of Crass and anarcho-punk", Ogg contends that scholars and fans must question "the very possibility of the existence of such an entity as a 'punk rock hero'" and why some still appear to want or need such an icon.

Hewing, perhaps, to a more ambivalent view of Strummer and his politics, actions, and music than the chapters in Part II, Part III: Why Should You Trust Me? offers three views of Strummer in the early, heady heydays of punk. In "Revolution Rock?: The Clash, Joe Strummer, and the British Left in the Early Days of Punk" Matt Worley, reading Strummer's political pronouncements and lyrics from the eponymously-titled first Clash album, and setting them against the positions and statements of such leftist, revolutionary organizations as the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Socialist Workers Party, and others of the late 1970s, finds that although Strummer and the Clash "appeared to accept that their approach was overtly political, defining their outlook as 'anti-fascist … anti-violence … anti-racist and … pro-creative'", he and his band mates held mixed feelings about the British left and the called-for revolution: "Though enamoured by the image of the rock 'n' roll rebel, and though attracted to the romanticism of a just cause, Strummer's commitment to 'revolution rock' did not always sit easily with the expectations of those on the British left." In this important essay, Worley brings to the fore the second crucial pillar of this collection: Strummer and punk: there can be no "Strummer" without the innumerable forces and vectors colliding to form "the condition of England" in the mid-to-late 1970s.

Likewise concerned with the cultural, political, and historical forces calling punk into being, in "The Creation of an Anti-Fascist Icon: Joe Strummer and Rock Against Racism", Jeremy Tranmer looks at a particularly crucial moment in the history of English punk: the famous Rock Against Racism (RAR) movement and "Carnival Against the Nazis" concert of 1978. Tranmer argues that while Strummer was sympathetic to the RAR movement and participated in a number of their events, he was openly suspicious of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), an organizing force behind RAR, and resisted efforts on the part of the SWP to recruit

the Clash as their punk spokespersons. More, Strummer expressed considerable ambivalence about belonging to any political organization and his politics, as Tranmer contends, were as provisional and "confused as punk's in general".

Once more approaching Strummer and his politics and career from a position of considerable ambivalence, Maria Raha contends, in "The Last Gang in Town: Masculinity, Feminism, Joe Strummer, and the Clash", that while Strummer played a key role in bringing in female acts such as the Slits, the Bloods, and ESG to open for the Clash, he and his band mates were far too steeped and caught up in the Western notion of the rebel and their active cultivation of the band's image as "radicals, rebels, thieves, working-class heroes, hoodlums, wanderers, and outlaws" to take women's issues seriously. Despite the fact that Strummer embraced a "myriad of social and political liberation movements from the 1970s to the 1990s", he was too busy being rebel and (masculine) cool to say a word about "one of the biggest Western social movements of that era: feminism". As Raha demonstrates, Strummer's attitudes, beliefs, and practices were as much a product of American popular and political culture as English culture.

In Part IV: Strummer on Broadway (and Sunset), the contributors explore Strummer's abiding interest in all things American, especially musical forms and the movies. Contrary to his early statement with the Clash – "I'm So Bored with the U.S.A." – Strummer had earlier embraced American culture and images and seemingly could not wait to further explore, and emulate, American popular culture. As Justin Wadlow argues in "'I am so bored with the USA': Joe Strummer and the Promised Land", while Strummer was often suspicious and critical of American economic and military power – especially those "Washington Bullets" – the musician engaged in a lifelong dialogue with American film and musical forms, especially folk, funk, punk, and hip hop. Inspired equally by Los Angeles and New York, by both the romances of the cinema and "the streets", Strummer not only based his rebel persona at least in part on American film legends such as Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift, but also absorbed new musical idioms while on tour in the US, trying his hand at rap, rockabilly, and the blues. Raised on American rock 'n' roll and gangster films, Strummer lived his teenage dream to be a rock star and Hollywood actor-composer. Taking a similar approach, Walidah Imarisha observes that during their famous residency at Bond's, the Clash encountered, for the first time, the Sugar Hill Gang and Grandmaster Flash and could not wait to try their hand at rap. As Imarisha contends in "Culture Clash: The Influence of Hip Hop Culture and Aesthetics on the Clash", Strummer not only immediately identified with African American music, just as he had with reggae, but even more understood the economic devastation faced by black communities in New York:

> Perhaps the reason Strummer was able to tap in so quickly to the ethos of the newly birthed hip hop is because it resonated with his existing punk framework. These conditions of no work, of governmental neglect, of racism and exploitation, were not new topics for the Clash – their earliest songs document these themes,

and put out a clarion call to action. To many Clash fans, 'The Magnificent Seven' lyrics must have sounded like an echo of their 1977 'Career Opportunities'.

Finally, in "Mystery Train: 'Joe Strummer' on Screen", Chris Barsanti maintains that Strummer was interested in the intersections between music and film long before he became an actor and soundtrack composer. While working on *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, the Clash watched a steady stream of WWII movies in an effort to catch some of their clamor and urgency; the video for "London Calling" recalled the look and style of John Boulting's *Brighton Rock*; and he and Jones wrote "Charlie Don't Surf" in honor of *Apocalypse Now* (and in homage to Martin Scorsese, Strummer adopted the mohawk in the style of Travis Bickle). Strummer, Barsanti asserts, was, in one way or another, always involved in film, and his time as an actor in movies like *Mystery Train* and *Straight to Hell* was the logical extension of a lifelong preoccupation and act of self-creation: as "Joe Strummer", Mellor was always playing a part.

III.

By way of a conclusion, we can recall the opening sequence of Julien Temple's excellent documentary on Joe Strummer, *The Future is Unwritten*. Over black and white video footage of Strummer in the studio, preparing to lay down the vocal track for "White Riot", one of the Clash's first recordings, we hear an American voice, a TV producer speaking to Joe, in what we now know were his final years. The producer asks Strummer if he would like to have anything run under his name on the screen. Strummer doesn't miss a beat: "I'd like you to write 'Punk Rock Warlord', with WARLORD being one word." Then, we're back in 1976, with "Joe Strummer" in the recording studio. He attacks the first verse of "White Riot". All we see is Joe singing, mouth snarling, concentrated and intense; all we hear is the vocal, sans backing track. Cut to color home movie footage of John Mellor as a child, playing in the backyard with his family. Young Mellor throws a rock, we hear a window crash, and finally the band comes in with a roar on the film soundtrack. The footage rolls, a montage of what seems to be two separate reels of home movies, images of a jubilant young Mellor at play, while we hear the final recorded version of the Clash's explosive anthem,"White Riot".

Temple's film sequence carries multiple meanings. It suggests "White Riot", and punk rock, is the terminus of the youthful energy of Mellor at play as a child. But it also hints at the gap between innocence and experience: the enormous gulf separating the clean cut, innocent looking young man in shirt and tie and Joe Strummer, "Punk Rock Warlord", in full '77 regalia. Like the opening of Temple's film, this collection reminds us of the many lives lived by Mellor/Strummer, before he died at 50. The essays in this collection counter the view of Strummer as an artist lost in "the wilderness", in retreat from the world, and lost without the Clash. Instead, the writers emphasize Strummer's continuing creativity, restoring the full

range of Strummer's many sided engagement, not just with rock, or popular music, but with culture: as an actor, film score composer, activist, DJ and musical archivist. For Strummer, such cultural work was finally what mattered most of all.

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PART I
John/Woody/Joe

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Chapter 1
"Don't Call Me Woody": The Punk Compassion and Folk Rebellion of Joe Strummer and Woody Guthrie

Edward A. Shannon

Popular opinion holds that Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen are the only legitimate heirs to Woody Guthrie's legacy, a mantle both singer/songwriters courted, when it suited them. Early association with Guthrie bought Dylan credibility with folk singers like Pete Seeger and Joan Baez. Later, Dylan needed to shuck that association, so he could establish himself as an authentic rock star, like Roy Orbison or Elvis Presley. With 1965's *Highway Sixty-one Revisited*, Dylan retired as "voice of a generation", setting aside political agitation for a lyrical voice that was personal, mystical, religious, literary – almost never topical, political, and radical.

Conversely, Springsteen sought association with Guthrie only after establishing himself as a mostly apolitical rocker. Relatively late in his career, Springsteen built folk cred through forays into acoustic recordings like *Nebraska* and *The Ghost of Tom Joad*, and a 1986 live recording of "This Land is Your Land" (sans its radical verses). While Springsteen had performed at the 1979 *No Nukes* concerts, fans could ascribe to his music virtually any political leaning they chose. Was "Born in the U. S. A." jingoistic or rebellious? Right wing or left wing? That the song was praised by both Amiri Baraka and George Will (Cowie and Boehm 358–9) testifies to its ambiguity. Springsteen finally put his political capital on the line, endorsing John Kerry in the 2004 presidential campaign, but supporting a major party candidate and career politician was hardly radical, or dangerous. By that time, "The Boss" was a huge rock star with a "Beverly Hills home [which] reportedly cost $14 million". His music "explored issues of social justice, but he did not seriously question the social system that by his own admission allowed him to lead 'an extravagant lifestyle'" (Garman 246).

Dylan and Springsteen are unquestionably rock and roll figures of towering significance. Dylan essentially created the rock and roll singer/songwriter and made space in rock music for political agitation. But both had interests other than radicalism. Their songs pursued artistic and aesthetic paths at once personal and profound, unique and influential. They were also careful architects of their careers. When it suited them, they were political; when it did not, they weren't. They have produced remarkable songs of social conscience, but both have cultivated careers that made use of the Guthrie legacy rather than embraced it in its radical

wholeness. No, among the rock and roll generations, Guthrie's truest heir may be Clash vocalist and songwriter Joe Strummer. Ironically, while Strummer briefly adopted the name "Woody" in his earliest days as a performer, he never cultivated identification between himself and Guthrie, and he dropped the name years before becoming even remotely well known, much less famous. During his peak years of fame, few Clash fans knew that Joe Strummer had once been "Woody Mellor".

Neither was a true Marxist or Communist, of course; Guthrie famously tossed off the line, "left wing, right wing, chicken wing – it's all the same to me" (Cray 138). They were artists first and political theorists second, but both could be called truthfully "fellow travelers". Dylan and Springsteen, like many another singer/songwriter, were more comfortable adopting the guise of "Woody Guthrie as romantic idealist" (Shumway 137) than political radical. David Shumway wrote, "if we are to understand Woody Guthrie's place in our cultural history, we can only do so by recognizing the indigenous radicalism of his songs" (137), and no rock and roll songwriter of prominence managed to present such a consistently anti-capitalist position through so many phases of his or her career as Joe Strummer. With and without the Clash, he offered through his songs a "Marxist-inflected social critique" (Matula 523) that explicitly took on capitalism. For radicalism, Clash songs like "Washington Bullets", "Straight to Hell", and "Know Your Rights" and Strummer solo songs like "Shaktar Donetsk", "Generations", and "Get Down Moses" sit comfortably beside even Dylan's great early songs "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and "Only a Pawn in Their Game", to say nothing of "Thunder Road".

In 1998, when Joe Strummer launched his BBC "Cross-Cultural Transglobal [radio] show" (Salewicz 560),[1] one of the first songs he played was Trini Lopez's mariachi cover of "This Land is Your Land", Woody Guthrie's alternative national anthem. For those only passingly familiar with Strummer from the Clash or fans blinded by labels like "punk" and "hippie", it might have seemed an odd selection, but it was an apt choice. Strummer began his career "singing […] in London's subways for spare change" (Gilmore 53) with Tymon Dogg as "Woody Mellor"; later, he performed with the Vultures and pub rockers the 101'ers under the same name. Not until 1975 did he adopt "Joe Strummer", the stage name he kept until his 2002 death. From that point on, "you couldn't call him Woody – he'd be angry" (Salewicz 127).

Adopting a new identity and obliterating the past was a pattern Strummer often repeated. He left behind his middle-class life to become a hobo-beatnik with the 101'ers, then became a punk rocker and left them to join the Clash. Later, he fired songwriting partner Mick Jones and reformed the most potent rock band in the world as if the personnel were interchangeable, and he really could rewrite the past and the future. Jones called it "Stalinist Revisionism … once you're out you're out" (Jones Interview). On his sticky relationship with history, Strummer

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[1] *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*, New York: Faber and Faber, 2006. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

remarked, "The past is a roomful of treacle. You think you can just walk in and walk out again but you can't" ("Sound of Strummer" np).

Consider another metaphor. "Woody Mellor" is a fossil excavated from rock and roll history, containing various strata of Joe Strummer's identity. His given name, "John Graham Mellor", still visible through the erosion. Also intact is his love of 1960s' hippie culture and American folk music, not yet sandblasted away by Bernie Rhodes or the passing moment of fashion that was punk rock. The name "exposes his unexplored fantasies of being a folksinger, poet, […] painter, or […] just an interesting beatnik bum" (Gilbert 16).[2] In the 2007 documentary *The Future is Unwritten*, Clash drummer Topper Headon recalls angering Strummer by calling him "Woody" as a lark; Headon had no idea that Strummer began his career modeling himself after Woody Guthrie. Why should he have? Strummer had already "created a mist around his past" (Gilbert 16).

A decade after Strummer's death, the artistic, familial, personal, and professional parallels he shared with Woody Guthrie are eerie. Family tragedies and radical politics blended for Strummer and Guthrie: both rebelled against their fathers' middle class politics and social standing. Strummer's brother committed suicide after joining a neo-fascist group, while Guthrie stood by his sister's bed and watched her die of self-inflicted burns, inspiring his identification with the powerless. Both enjoyed success as performers of "popular" music (although they would bristle at the term), reinventing themselves as hardscrabble working class heroes, obscuring their middle-class pasts. Tragedy hounded them, and they died of congenital illnesses in their 50s: Strummer at 50 of a heart defect, Guthrie at 55 of Huntington's Disease.

Both feared and fled from success, rare among show-business figures. When artist Damien Hirst asked, "What's the biggest thing you've ever killed?" Strummer replied, "My career" (Salewicz 467). Guthrie could have offered the same answer. Of course, poor management, a fickle public, and myriad other problems can short-circuit a music career, but neither Strummer nor Guthrie ever had the discipline and determination that distinguish Dylan and Springsteen's decades-long reigns as rock royalty. Financial rewards were at odds with their proletarian values to a degree that neither Dylan nor Springsteen felt.

Guthrie and Strummer were driven by class (personal ideologies of class, identification with the working class, and even fans' and detractors' attitudes toward class), so it is worth considering the parallel tracks they followed from middle class beginnings to their performing careers. Woody Guthrie's father, Charley Guthrie, was a staunch member of the Democratic Party in early 20th century Oklahoma, when to be a Southern Democrat was to support white rule. The elder Guthrie was an "enthusiastic member" of the Ku Klux Klan, although according to Joe Klein, the Oklahoma branch of the Klan "functioned more as the martial arm of the Chamber of Commerce" (23) than a white supremacist brigade.

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[2] *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of the Clash*, Cambridge, MA: DaCapo, 2004. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

Still, literacy tests blocked Blacks from voting and ensured the Democratic dominance that paved the way for Charley Guthrie's election as Okemah court clerk (Cray 8). In Oklahoma, "Jim Crow ruled" (8).

Charley, though, was less concerned with race than with "the rise of the Socialist Party in Oklahoma" (9). He named his son for Woodrow Wilson, who ran for president against Socialist Eugene Debs in 1912. Had Charley heard Woody declare Debs "a pure cross between Jesus Christ and Abe Lincoln" (324), it is likely he would have disapproved. A cursory look at Woody's life and work demonstrates how thoroughly the son rejected the politics of father. In "All You Fascists", Woody explicitly links Southern racism, fascism, money, and power: "Your poll tax and Jim Crow/And greed has got to go". For Woody the Socialist, the end was clear: "fascists [are] bound to lose" (*Lyrics*). Later, he supplied a song for the quixotic 1952 Florida gubernatorial campaign of muckraking journalist Stetson Kennedy, who had investigated the Klan in the 1940s (Klein 405–406).

Joe Strummer/Woody Mellor/John Graham Mellor had a similarly ambivalent relationship with his father, Ronald Mellor. "John Mellor was born the son of a diplomat and worked as a prefect in an upper-class school" (Matula 524), whereas rock star Joe Strummer got "endless stick about his father's job […] in the Foreign Office […] one of the most elite and snobbish departments of the Civil Service". Foreign Office employees were "expected to embody the stiffly conservative values of old Empire" (Gilbert 6). In punk rock, a privileged background was a hanging offense. Ray Davies, the great rock spokesman for the British working class, crystallized the sentiment in the 1976 Kinks song "Prince of the Punks": "He acts working class but it's all bologna,/He's really middle class and he's just a phony" (Davies "Prince").

Some went so far as to take Strummer to task for writing the great Guthrie-influenced outlaw song, "Bankrobber". Critic Tony Fletcher saw in the lines, "My daddy was a bankrobber/but he never hurt nobody" a clumsy attempt by Strummer to pad his resume. Utterly blinded by the specter of class, Fletcher calls the song "preposterous" (46), as if he cannot conceive that one might write from a point of view other than his own, as if all lyrics must be autobiographical. Truly, Strummer's middle-class background had "repercussions […] throughout his life" (Gilbert 6). Ronald Mellor, however, was no Charley Guthrie; his politics were not that far from his son's, yet Strummer would spend "years feeling estranged" from his father (6) and mother, largely because "he felt abandoned when he'd been sent off to [boarding] school" (Salewicz 112). Like Guthrie, Strummer spent his teen years separated from parents and family, a separation that left its mark. Sadly, Guthrie and Strummer both lost siblings to gruesome deaths. These youthful traumas forced terrible repercussions on both, although only Guthrie was able to write directly about it.

Clara Guthrie's death haunted her younger brother. Nora Guthrie, Woody's mother, by this time was feeling the effects of Huntington's Disease, which would later claim Woody. Her illness likely spurred the events that led to Clara's death: "Nora ordered Clara to stay home from school […]. Clara insisted she had to

take a final exam that day […]. Finally, the strong-willed Clara spilled kerosene on her dress, struck a match and set it on fire" (Cray 18). As it turns out, dealing with tragic fires became a survival skill for Woody. Ten years before Clara's death, "sparks from [a neighbor's] kitchen ignited the Guthrie house" (8). In 1946, Woody's three-year old daughter Cathy Ann died in a fire in their Coney Island apartment. Guthrie's father was badly burned in 1927, as Woody himself was in 1952. Fire stalked him, just a few steps ahead of Huntington's Disease. In his autobiographical novel, *Bound for Glory*, Guthrie recounts Clara's death in terms of his devotion to his sister and her own indomitable hope. Dying, she exhibited the kind of optimism Guthrie would later express in so much of his music. From her deathbed, she admonished, "don't you cry. Promise me that you won't ever cry" (134). Bryan Garman sees Clara's ghost haunting Guthrie's songs. As a child absorbing the folk songs his mother sang in an ever "loster" voice, politics, music, and family trauma mingled for Woody. Listening to his mother's "hurt songs", Woody's imagination fused "Clara's death, the family's dire financial situation, and Nora's deteriorating health" (91) into a vision for his own work.

Guthrie's art expressed compassion for the suffering as not just a human virtue, but also a political one. His union song "1913 Massacre", for instance, makes its argument empathetically, recounting an actual event "in which company police incite[d] a riot […] at a union Christmas party" (Garman 182). The facts are grim:

> [on] Christmas Eve, over five hundred children and some of their mothers and fathers crowded the hall […]. A short time after 4p.m., someone yelled "Fire", and a panic resulted […]. A mass of children and some parents scrambled down the stairwell […], got trapped there, and smothered in the press of their own bodies. After the stair was cleared [a witness] "saw the marks of the children's nails in the plaster, where they had desperately scratched to get free, as they suffocated". (Jackson 114)

The enormity of the crime is almost enough to choke any response into a shocked silence. However, Guthrie approaches the story from a very human level, focusing on smaller details and individual figures among the 73 victims and their killers. He imagines "a little girl [who] sits down by the Christmas tree lights,/To play the piano so you gotta keep quiet", even as "the copper boss' thug men are milling outside". After the tragedy, "The gun thugs they laughed at their murderous joke,/ While the children were smothered on the stairs by the door". Guthrie must have seen his sister in the image of the little girl who died in a fire. He ends the song not with a call to organize, but with a plaintive lament of regret and despair: "See what your greed for money has done" (*Lyrics*).

If obfuscation, stonewalling, and silence were the modes Joe Strummer took to address his brother's suicide, it is no less true that the tragedy shaped his songwriting. In a rare comment on David Mellor's death, Strummer said, "I don't know how it affects people" (Salewicz 19). His confusion was genuine, as he also remarked, "I think for him committing suicide was a really brave thing to do

[…]. Even if it was a total cop out" (69). In 1970, David, 18 months the senior of John, was "found dead on a bench […] in Regent's park […]. The cause of death was […] aspirin poisoning, following the ingestion of one hundred tablets. The verdict was suicide" (68). John "identif[ied] the body of his brother, which had lain undiscovered in the park for three days" (68). Before his suicide, David had been transformed by radical politics, as his brother later would be. Unfortunately, where Joe Strummer found leftist politics, non-conformity, and compassion, David Mellor discovered fascism and self-loathing. At 18, David suddenly redecorated his room with "Nazi pictures […], swastikas and images of Hitler". Teenage rebellion is the stuff of rock and roll, and David may have been simply looking for attention; "Perhaps as a rebellion against […] Ron Mellor's socialism, David […] had joined the National Front, the radical right-wing British political party" (67).

There is no direct line from David's suicide to Joe Strummer's art, but at least two major themes in Strummer's songwriting seem influenced by his brother's death. Of course, Strummer regularly returns to anti-fascist political reform, not to say revolution, often in attacks on racism and bigotry. Another link to David's suicide is Strummer's repeated admonitions to deny death and optimistically, joyfully seize life in the moment. Like Guthrie, Strummer explores politics on a human scale. "Ghetto Defendant" addresses urban despair and the loss of humanity and hope by the masses through the example of a lone defendant. Strummer reminds us that: "It is heroin pity/Not tear gas nor baton charge/That stops you taking the city" (*Combat Rock*). The nameless protagonist of "Ghetto Defendant" is, as David Mellor had been, overwhelmed by forces too massive and monolithic to challenge or even comprehend. Like David, she disappears into whatever tonic can soothe her pain. For David, it was fascism. For the Ghetto Defendant, who is "Forced to watch at the feast/Then sweep up the night", it's heroin. Strummer had long railed against poisoning youthful minds with lies, drugs and hate. "Ghetto Defendant" asserts that drug abuse, far from being subversive, is a powerful tool for stifling youthful rebellion, that it is, in a word, hateful. Twenty-odd years later, on his final recording, Strummer echoes this sentiment asking, "Who's sponsoring the crack ghetto?" ("Moses").

Perhaps nowhere in his later output is the fearful power of capitalism captured more poignantly than in "Generations", his contribution to a human rights benefit album. Strummer imagines the listener as a father "out buying pajamas/For [his] four year old girl". Finding the clothes "Cheap on the rack", the father collapses into self-loathing: "Oh, don't you feel like dirt?/'Cos you can see into the shack/Where they sewed the shirts". He captures the despair not just of the nameless worker who "sewed the shirts" but of a father dehumanized by the consumer society in which he lives, forced to be party to abuse and oppression he can only imagine. In essence, Strummer says, "See what your greed for money has done" (Guthrie *Lyrics*).

Guthrie and Strummer's compassion focused on identification with the Other. In "White Riot or Right Riot: A Look Back at Punk and Antiracism", Antonio

D'Ambrosio nicely dissects the successes and failures of punk's – specifically, the Clash's – treatment of racism. He concludes that "punk's approach to antiracism […] was far from effective" (184) and that even when successful, punk focused on issues of Blacks and Whites (especially in terms of musical influence) while "racism against Asians, Hispanics, and Jews was essentially ignored" (188). True, punk was hardly a civil rights movement and punk rockers frequently addressed racism naïvely. "White Riot", for example, likely struck many listeners as a call for white unity *against* black people rather than *with* them. But racism is an intricate and intractable problem; addressing it at all leaves one open to all manner of questions. Indeed, when D'Ambrosio writes about "racism against […] Jews" (188), he himself is being naïve; are "Jews" a "racial group"? Strummer and Guthrie addressed racism and bigotry in the terms of their day, and decades later their work can be found wanting according to our terms and times. However, both crafted songs throughout their careers that stressed unity with the Other, and in the case of Strummer, D'Ambrosio overlooks songs specifically regarding the groups he says the Clash ignored.

For Guthrie and Strummer, addressing the Other means honoring community, and for both, community starts with the music. The roots of Guthrie's folk music sank deep into the collective memories of oppressed peoples, black and white. Those roots nourish his most famous song, "This Land is Your Land". Never one to invent when he could appropriate, Guthrie lifted the tune for "This Land" from the Carter Family's "When the World's on Fire" and "Little Darling, Pal of Mine". Those songs owe a further debt to "Rock of Ages" recorded in the 1920s by Blind Willie Davis. Like the Carters before him, Guthrie "didn't see any great divide between the races where the blues was concerned" (Zwonitzer 137). While "This Land" does not address race specifically, its first two lines speak to community, generosity, and responsibility: "This land is your land/This land is my land". A "voice […] chanting" offers "this land" to the narrator *and* to the listener, urging shared responsibility on both. Since "this land was made for you *and* me", we all have a responsibility to care for it and for each other. The song is an invitation to create a community, not to fence anyone out. The final, infrequently performed stanza reminds us of the shared responsibility incumbent upon a community of citizens: "In the shadow of the steeple I saw my people,/By the relief office I seen my people;/As they stood there hungry". The speaker, as lost as "his people", is left to wonder, "Is this land made for you and me?" (Guthrie xxiv). For Guthrie, building community meant rejecting the racial ideologies of his day. In 1937, while a DJ in Los Angeles, he received a letter from "a young Negro in college" complaining about his use of racist language. Reading the letter on air, Guthrie promised to rip all the "nigger songs out of his book" (Klein 95).

This empathy is the heart of one of his last great songs, "Plane Wreck At Los Gatos (Deportee)", which he "composed after reading, in early 1948, that a plane deporting migrant farm workers back to Mexico had crashed" (Klein 362). The song chronicles not just the workers' deaths; for Guthrie, the real tragedy was the denial of these nameless laborers' very humanity, as the media assigned them only a

mass identity: "The radio says, 'They are just deportees'". Guthrie names the dead and honors them with a farewell: "Goodbye to my Juan, goodbye, Rosalita,/Adios mis amigos, Jesus y Maria". He ends the song addressing the workers as brother and sister human beings, individuals whose labor and lives need to be honored. Finally, he asks, "Is this the best way we can grow our good fruit?/To fall like dry leaves to rot on my topsoil/And be called by no name except 'deportees'?" (Guthrie, *Lyrics*). Strummer echoes the sentiment 30 years later in "Beyond the Pale", memorializing Mick Jones' grandfather, a Russian immigrant. Strummer rejects empty patriotism, jibing, "Saint George used his sword/On the immigrant poor/'Cos he can't kill no dragon", and reminds us "The city was made/Of immigrant blood and money". In the UK as in the US, "Immigration built the nation" ("Pale").

Strummer's career reflects a cosmopolitan sensibility; from his early interest in reggae, he sought out the world musically. In "Bhindi Bhagee", he succinctly sums up his sound, saying "It's um, um, well, it's kinda like/You know, it's got a bit of, um, you know". From the hip-hop of "Magnificent Seven" to the Asian inflections of "Sean Flynn" to the Macedonian beats of "Shaktar Donetsk", Strummer's lyrics were regularly set to the tune of "Ragga, Bhangra, two-step Tanga/Mini-cab radio, music on the go" (*Global*).

Lyrically, his songs spoke to the plight of the refugee and immigrant including, yes, "Asians, Hispanics, and Jews" (D'Ambrosio 188). Three singular Clash songs speak directly to these groups. "Straight to Hell" addresses the plight of the offspring of American GI's, left in Viet Nam to sing "the Amerasian blues" (*Combat Rock*). "Washington Bullets" offers a quick lesson in US imperialism in Latin America. Strummer condenses history into simple terms, noting that "When they had a revolution in Nicaragua,/[and] There was no interference from America", the result was that "the people fought the leader,/And up he flew". Strummer asks, "With no Washington bullets what else could he do?" (*Sandinista!*). Of course, that song appeared on *Sandinista!*, named "after a Latino armed rebel organization" (Not4prophet 293). During 1981's Bond's Casino shows, Strummer invited "a spokesman for the Committee in Solidarity with the people of El Salvador […] to rap out his message during 'Washington Bullets'" (Gilbert 298). Finally, "Clampdown" paints a violent picture of anti-Semitism: "Taking off his turban, they said, is this man a Jew?/'Cause they're working for the clampdown" (Strummer *London Calling*).

Strummer frequently returned to the question of the Other – often the refugee – with a focus on community and generosity that would have made Guthrie proud. In "Beyond the Pale", he imagines a nameless refugee, "a rocker in Vladivostok/[who's] Got every side by Jerry Lee" and recognizes that "But for accidents of disorder/That guy could well be me". More prosaically, Strummer offered, "[r]efugees add to our culture" (qtd in D'Ambrosio "You Can't" 207).

"Shaktar Donetsk" takes the form of "the diary of a Macedonian [smuggled into] Britain in the back of a lorry" (Strummer *Global*). The song values this newcomer's labor and dreams just as Guthrie had valued dust bowl refugees in "Pastures of Plenty". Guthrie's migrant is geographically alienated and rootless,

moving from "California, Arizona" then "North up to Oregon to gather your hops". His worker is an American citizen fleeing the Dust Bowl, but he is not included in the American dream. Even his pronouns betray him: "[I] [d]ig the beets from *your* ground, cut the grapes from *your* vine/To set on *your* table *your* light sparkling wine" (*Lyrics*; emphasis mine). Strummer's migrant worker is also an alien, also unwelcome, and also possessed of a simple human desire for home and community, finding little more than "a two bar heater/Waiting for him in two rooms". Separated from home and family, he's "got a dream" and "a little postcard […] of a 1925/Red telephone box with Wembley in the background" (*Global*). Strummer and Guthrie's sympathy for the stranger is out of step with the spirit of their times; when is the stranger ever welcome? Also radically out of step is their disdain for national identity, parochialism, and borders. Millions of American children learn "This Land is Your Land" as a ritual entry into American identity, but few learn to sing:

> As I went walking I saw a sign there
> And on the sign it said "Private Property".
> But on the other side it didn't say nothing,
> That side was made for you and me. (Guthrie "This Land" xxiv)

The b-side of their politics is a shared comic vision. While *Dust Bowl Ballads*' title calls up despair, songs like "Talking Dust Bowl Blues" and "Dusty Old Dust (So Long, It's Been Good to Know You)" exhibit a wild cartoonish humor and zest for life. "Talking Dust Bowl" sympathizes with Okies without succumbing to despair. The narrator comically relates feeding his family a stew so thin that "You could read a magazine right through it". Guthrie pointedly adds, "if it'd been just a little bit thinner,/Some of these here politicians/Coulda seen through it" (*Lyrics*). Compare this to Strummer's wryly concise history of Marxism from "Magnificent Seven": "Marx was skint – but he had sense/Engels lent him the necessary pence" (*Sandinista!*). Like Guthrie, Strummer laughs with his fans without pandering.

His output never approached Guthrie's, and while punk demanded an irony and anger that folk did not, Strummer always nurtured his optimism and humor. "Garageland", a song from *The Clash* opens with the comical lines, "Back in the garage with my bullshit detector/Carbon monoxide making sure it's effective". The song praises the simple pleasures of community, music, and hope represented by young punk rockers dreaming of fame: "There's 22 singers! But one microphone/ […]/There's five guitar players! But one guitar". Another early Clash song, "Cheapskates", extols the simple pleasures in music and being out among people. Strummer's narrator refuses "to hang about/In this lonely room", seeking instead a vibrant, musical city, singing, "London is for going out/And trying to hear a tune" (*Enough Rope*). Later in life, Strummer no longer needed to couch his sentiments in irony. "Island Hopping", "Diggin' the New", "Willesden To Cricklewood", and "Bhindi Bhagee" all insist life be richly celebrated. *Rock Art and the X-Ray Style* (1999) resounds with this attitude. On the title song he sings, "I wanna live

and I wanna dance awhile", while in "Yalla, Yalla", he more viscerally howls, "[I'm] [s]ucking the wine right outta the vine/[And] [s]pitting it out again".

Humor only highlights the seriousness Strummer and Guthrie brought to their work. "Generations" critiques not just unfair working conditions, but an economic system that oppresses worker and consumer alike. Most topical rock songs single out "unprincipled people, not political structures" (Garman 251). Strummer and Guthrie's politics fall short of doctrinaire Marxism, but both indict false ideologies propagated through self-perpetuating and oppressive economic, cultural, and political systems. Strummer looks behind the suffering of the individual to the political and economic systems causing the suffering. The great tragedy of a song like "Ghetto Defendant" is not that the people need more access to a corrupt political system. These songs do not call for reform; they call for revolution. The abuse of youth and workers by a system they do not comprehend is the drumbeat of Strummer's work. In "Car Jamming" he maps the city as a maze and an illusion, where youth are interpellated into young believers in the corporate state. This is a city where "saints of the seven avenues […] sell/The seven hells", and where even charity is heartless:

> [On] [v]entilation units where towers
> Meet the Streets
> The ragged stand in bags
> Soaking heat up through their feet
> This was the only kindness
> And it was accidental, too. (*Combat Rock*)

Strummer preaches that the cultural assumptions of capitalism many of his young fans took to be true and natural were mere social constructions.

Guthrie and Strummer – no less than Springsteen and Dylan – invented and reinvented themselves, searching for an identity their respective audiences would find "authentic" enough to suit the times, but acclaim never sat well with them, and both distanced themselves from celebrity. In 1940, separated from his family, Guthrie scored a dream job hosting the CBS radio show "Pipe Smoking Time". Desperate to "study real hard [at] being a dad" (qtd in Cray 197), Guthrie took the job, re-writing "So Long, it's Been Good to Know You", as the theme song. Such a job in the Depression was miraculous, earning Guthrie "a weekly salary of $180 […] an annual salary of $123,000" in today's terms (197). But commercialism was at odds with his politics, and he left the job. In *Bound for Glory*, he seems ashamed that he was able to achieve any commercial and financial success at all. Writing about the period when he recorded *Dust Bowl Ballads* and hosted "Pipe Smoking Time", he says precious little other than, "Sometimes I was lucky and found me a good job" (256).

Strummer, of course, famously sacked Mick Jones and followed up the Clash's most commercially successful album, *Combat Rock*, with the self-destructive creative implosion that is *Cut the Crap*, perhaps rock and roll's sorriest swansong.

Although, considering the competition for that title, perhaps the Clash deserves some credit. At least they never endlessly reformed like other "classic rock" groups. Remember, Joe Strummer and The Mescaleros opened for the Who in 1999, almost 20 years after the Clash supported them on their first farewell tour. Strummer's post-Clash career was marked by a hesitancy to fully invest himself in projects that would keep his name and work in the public eye. After 1989's *Earthquake Weather* fizzled, Strummer remained somewhat active in films and recording, but fully a decade passed before a second genuine Strummer solo album. In that same span, Mick Jones had fronted four versions of Big Audio Dynamite, toured regularly, and released five albums. But Strummer's antipathy for commercial success was obvious even early in his career. On "Cheapskates", he spits, "Just because we're in a group/You think we're stinking rich". Strummer ends the song tossing an ironic curse at those would accuse him of being "stinking rich":

> Well I hope you make it one day
> Just like you always said you would someday
> And I'll get out my money and make a bet
> That I'll be seein' you down the launderette (*Enough Rope*)

Wishing fame on your enemies is a curious revenge fantasy for a rock star completing his second album for a major record label.

Strummer and Guthrie were not without their contradictions. Both embraced commercial compromise later in life that would have horrified their younger selves. Guthrie enthusiastically re-wrote "So Long, It's Been Good to Know You" yet again for Pete Seeger's pop-folk supergroup the Weavers in 1950 (Cray 338), hoping it would "sell up into the blue jillions" (338). The Clash, of course, "labored for Columbia Records, filling the coffers of large corporations even as they complained about the corporate control of music on songs like 'Complete Control', 'Hitsville, UK', and 'Capital Radio One'" (Matula 523). While forging a career with The Mescaleros, Strummer offered a weak justification for using "London Calling" in a Jaguar ad: "If you're in a group and you make it together, then everyone deserves something. Especially 20-odd years after the fact. It just seems churlish for a writer to refuse to have their music used on an advert" (qtd Bertsch 181). What would Joe have said in 1979? Something about a "gimmick hungry yob digging gold from rock 'n' roll" (*London Calling*), perhaps?

Separated by generations, genres, and the not-inconsiderable expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, Strummer and Guthrie exhibit many points of departure. Most markedly, they had very different attitudes toward work. Strummer famously sang that a factory is "no place to waste your youth" (*Enough Rope*). For Guthrie, factory work was heroic (when someone else was doing it). He even paints a bizarre vision of the afterlife in "Heaven", imagining a "sunshiny factory where dresses and shirts are both clean;/A brother and sister are singing at work as they watch all the wheels" (*Lyrics*). Chris Salewicz suggests that Strummer's nominal link to Guthrie is "mythology" and that "Woody Mellor" was merely a corruption of

another nickname, "Woolly" (63). If so, fate has intervened: in his life, in his work, even in his death and legacy, Joe Strummer has inherited the mantle of Woody Guthrie. Like Woody, Joe will have to endure revisionist histories, mythologizing obituaries, attacks he cannot defend against, confused fans, and unfortunate cover versions. Fortunately, like Woody before him, Joe Strummer perpetrated most of these offenses against himself and his reputation before his death. Woody seems to have survived, and if the quality of the work he left behind is any indication, Joe seems likely to endure with similar style. Ten years after his untimely death, Joe Strummer leaves behind a legacy to rival that of his Dust Bowl refugee mentor. Strummer's voice still rings out gleefully: "Drive, drive, drive/Distance no object, rasta, for I" (*X-Ray Style*).

Chapter 2
Joe Strummer: The Road to Rock and Roll

Lauren Onkey

In December of 2002, the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame announced that the Clash would be inducted into the Hall of Fame in the class of 2003 alongside performers AC/DC, Elvis Costello and The Attractions, The Police, The Righteous Brothers, record executive Mo Ostin, and sidemen Benny Benjamin, Floyd Cramer, and Steve Douglas. It was the first year of Rock Hall eligibility for the Clash. Like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin, The Who and Bruce Springsteen, their selection to the Hall of Fame was inevitable and uncontroversial. No one writes letters to the Hall of Fame to complain that the Clash are not deserving or influential enough, not even the stalwart prog rock and arena rock constituencies whose favorite bands have yet to be inducted. The band that burst onto the rock scene with Joe Strummer singing "No Elvis, Beatles, or Rolling Stones in 1977" while wearing "Chuck Berry is dead" stenciled on his clothing was now joining rock's pantheon. What does it mean for the Clash, and Joe Strummer in particular, to slide so easily into the rock and roll canon? Strummer's place at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, both as an inductee and as a subject of exhibits at the Museum in Cleveland, Ohio reminds us that one of his most lasting achievements was his attempt to revolutionize rock and roll within the discourse of the genre itself, a discourse now termed "rockist". As Greil Marcus wrote in 1984, "If the Sex Pistols … truly were committed to the destruction of rock 'n' roll not only as myth but as fact, the Clash were committed to changing rock 'n' roll, to taking it over, to becoming the Number One Band in the World" (119). Strummer's faith in the power of rock and roll was a consistent element of his public persona, even when he was most critical of the ways that the music had gone wrong.

In his exhaustive Strummer biography *Redemption Song*, Chris Salewicz reports that Strummer had mixed feelings about being inducted into the Hall of Fame. His wife Lucinda described Strummer as "excited … for five minutes" (600).[1] Strummer's friend Dick Rude told Salewicz that it was important to Strummer that the voting body of the Hall of Fame included previous inductees: "even though he knew it was a load of crap, he did recognize that it still meant something. It was his peers who were the people who had voted them in, so it really was an honor" (600). Paul Simonon decided not to appear at the ceremony, as it violated the fan-

[1] Salewicz, Chris. *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*. London: Faber & Faber, 2008. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

centered ethos of the Clash: "'I thought it would be absolutely wrong to play the Hall of Fame. I wanted to explain to Joe that the tickets were twenty-five hundred dollars. There'd be no ordinary fans there. I was threatened, 'We'll get Mani' [Mounfield, from The Stone Roses]" (601). On December 22nd, 2002, the day Strummer died, he finished selecting songs for *The Essential Clash* compilation, which was to be released in time for the Hall of Fame induction ceremony in March. He sent a fax with the track list to Tricia Ronane, Simonon's wife, and added a note for Paul "suggesting he reconsider his refusal to play at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 'Try it. You might like it,' he suggested" (607).

Strummer's sudden death ended the possibility of a Clash reunion, of course, but it also papered over the complexities of the honor for the band. After Strummer died, Simonon changed his mind and decided to appear at the March 10, 2003 ceremony to accept the award, along with Mick Jones and Terry Chimes. The members of the band did not perform and, in an unusual move at the Hall of Fame ceremonies, no one performed Clash songs on their behalf. If Strummer did feel that the honor was at some level a "load of crap", nothing in the speeches of Simonon, Jones, Chimes or Lucinda Strummer suggested it. Strummer was simultaneously absent from the induction ceremony and ubiquitous in the night's speeches. Breaking with custom, two induction speeches were given to induct the Clash: one by Tom Morello of Rage Against the Machine, and one by future Hall of Famer The Edge of U2. Strummer and the Clash were hailed by both for representing the essence of rock and roll, as a band that saved the music.

The Edge made grand claims for the band, calling them "next to the Stones – the greatest rock and roll band of all time … in rock and roll terms The Clash are the shit! There's no one else". The band, in his estimation, saved rock and roll itself, in part by what they contributed after the first blast of punk: "the Clash's contribution to the story of rock and roll is immense. Their contribution to the survival of rock and roll is unique 'cause during the late 1970s and early 1980s, when punk was starting to wane, mainstream rock had become hopelessly and awfully redundant" ("Induction Speech for the Clash"). By going mainstream with *London Calling* and *Combat Rock* – by breaking down the distinction that had formed between punk and mainstream rock – the Clash redeemed rock and roll.

The Edge accounted for the Clash's importance by representing rock and roll itself as life-changing for listeners, at least those listeners who went on to form rock and roll bands. Ever since the first Hall of Fame Induction ceremony in 1986, induction speeches have been used to describe the impact of the inductee's work on the speechmaker, from Springsteen on Dylan to Lou Reed on Dion to Bette Midler on Laura Nyro. In this tradition, The Edge vividly recalled the first Clash show he ever saw, at Trinity College in Dublin in 1977. For him it was the dividing line between past and future: "By the end of the night, Dublin was a different place. Something had changed. It was like the axis of the world had shifted; for everyone there, that show was an awakening. We all caught a glimpse of something. Something distant, but now attainable. A sense of possibilities – part political, part

musical, part personal – but all completely inspirational. The revolution had come to town" ("Induction Speech for the Clash").

Tom Morello described something similar about a later Clash show he saw at the Aragon ballroom in Chicago: "It was an experience that changed my life … There was such a sense of community in the room, that it felt like anything was possible." Morello attributed the power of the band directly to Strummer:

At the center of The Clash hurricane stood one of the greatest hearts and deepest souls of twentieth-century music. At the center of The Clash stood Joe Strummer … [W]hen Joe Strummer played, he played as if the world could be changed by a three-minute song, and he was right. Those songs changed a lot of people's worlds forever – mine at the top of the list" (172). The changes that Morello and Edge describe are vague, almost mystical. Nothing specific happened; it was a change in consciousness and energy that inspired them to form their own bands.

Sadly, that center that Morello described was absent from the Waldorf Astoria ballroom that night. We'll never know how Strummer would have approached the occasion. One hopes he would have stirred up the proceedings like Iggy Pop did in 2010 when he called up people from the audience to dance on stage with The Stooges. It seems likely that Strummer would have embraced the honor and that his speech would have fit comfortably with the rhetoric of transformation that dominates these nights. Throughout his career, Strummer invested the idea of rock and roll with the power to transform performers and audiences; he spoke about it as passionately as some of the genre's traditionalists, like John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen. The best example of this is the interview Strummer did in 1995 for Time-Life's multipart documentary *The History of Rock and Roll*, which was broadcast on television and later released on DVD. The documentary, much like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, attempts to construct a narrative that weaves together the diverse elements of rock and roll in one story. The film presents The Clash as less of a rupture than a rebirth, with Strummer as the band's central spokesman.

In his interview for the film – not all of which was used in the documentary – Strummer said that his first memory of rock and roll was hearing The Rolling Stones' version of "Not Fade Away" at boarding school: "the sound was so different from what we were living in our day to day reality … [it was] the sound of a different world." He might as well be The Edge describing his first Clash concert. When asked his definition of rock and roll, Strummer emphasizes the music's emotional impact rather than any particular sound or style:

> rock and roll has to have some worth to it. Rock and roll is a record that's done something to you after you've heard it. Such as say [Nirvana's] 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' – once you've heard that record you've gone through on a journey, and that's rock and roll. It's affected you in some way emotionally or in some way. That's what rock and roll is.

Like many rock and roll fans over 40, he also describes the music as having lost its way, as more commercial and less authentic than it once was:

> The song is not good enough, the production is too slick, there's no emotion, nobody really cares about the song, it's just a merchandising gimmick to float a video and nobody really stops and says this is substandard … I feel lucky to have experienced it before lawyers and accountants figured out how much money could be made from this thing. ("Interview")

In the decade since Strummer's death, this view of rock and roll has become passé, and in popular music studies, it exemplifies "rockism", a narrowminded and romantic approach to understanding rock and roll. By most definitions, Strummer is certainly rockist. Strummer exemplifies Robert Christgau's discussion of the debate in the UK. in the 1980s: "rockism wasn't just liking Yes and the Allman Brothers – it was liking *London Calling*. It was taking the music seriously, investing any belief at all not just in its self-sufficiency, which is always worth challenging, but in its capacity to change lives or express truth." Critics of rockism pointed out that too many advocates for rock and roll talk about the music as if it's the only art form that can have a transformative impact. Strummer's investment in the authenticity of old music, cars, and clothes, as well as his frustration with commercial rock music implies a rejection of the power of pop music. As Kelefa Sanneh famously wrote in *The New Yorker*, rockism means:

> idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video. Rockism makes it hard to hear the glorious, incoherent, corporate-financed, audience-tested mess that passes for popular music these days. To glorify only performers who write their own songs and play their own guitars is to ignore the marketplace that helps create the music we hear in the first place, with its checkbook-chasing superproducers, its audience-obsessed executives and its cred-hungry performers. To obsess over old-fashioned stand-alone geniuses is to forget that lots of the most memorable music is created despite multimillion-dollar deals and spur-of-the-moment collaborations and murky commercial forces. In fact, a lot of great music is created because of those things.

Strummer is in some ways a sitting duck for such a critique. But although Strummer has fallen into some of the clichés of rockism over the years, his version of the rock and roll canon is not defined by "old-fashioned stand-alone geniuses". Although the rhetoric around Strummer and the Clash evokes the life changing stories of the 1960s, what may be most valuable about it is how it refigures or revived the 1950s. The 101'ers, Strummer's band before he joined the Clash, played 1950s style rock and roll in the early 1970s. Their repertoire included songs by Chuck Berry, Slim Harpo, Bo Diddley, Them and early songs by The Rolling Stones. Strummer seemed to feel most at home with the loud, messy style of music produced by a wide range of

voices, famous and otherwise, that got called rock and roll in the 1950s. Strummer's version of rock and roll history ignores psychedelia and the experiments of prog rock in favor of British rocker Vince Taylor (who originally recorded "Brand New Cadillac") and Bo Diddley (who opened for The Clash in 1979, when Diddley was not well known to the band's audience). This is a messy version of the birth of rock and roll that can't be reduced to the story of big stars like Elvis (although Elvis was important; Strummer occasionally wore an Elvis t-shirt in the Clash days, and of course the cover of *London Calling* riffs on Presley's first album). In many ways the 1950s has been reduced to a handful of big names: Elvis, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino, Little Richard, Buddy Holly, and Jerry Lee Lewis. But the range of styles and one-hit wonders unleashed in the energy and enthusiasm of the period were all considered rock and roll. But now we put them in boxes labeled "rhythm and blues", "country", "rockabilly", and "doo wop". The importance of the time cannot be confined – or even accounted for – to a handful of stars. Few artists who emerged in the 1950s had sustained careers. Strummer's embrace of the energy of the 1950s, rather than the individuals of the 1950s, challenges rockism in many fundamental ways. It's not about individual genius, but a community of listeners.

The visual representation of Strummer at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame underscores his connection to rock tradition. Strummer dominates the visual representation of the Clash at the museum. The permanent punk exhibit prominently features Strummer's Fender Telecaster that was spray-painted at an auto body shop. Also on display are lyrics to several songs written by Strummer: complete lyrics to "London Calling", "English Civil War", and "Tommy Gun", as well as four lines from "Lost in the Supermarket" scrawled on a guitar string packet.

But it's a photograph of Strummer that conveys his belief in rock and roll. Throughout the Museum, there are large black-and-white photographs of Hall of Fame inductees on the walls of the hallways and entryways. They are exciting, iconic photos of the artists in their prime. The images of the artists are cropped out from their original context and printed on a white background; as a result they all have somewhat of a uniform look, although they were shot years apart by different photographers.

On the second floor of the museum, along a long wall next to an exhibit called "The Architects of Rock and Roll", is a row of striking images: Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, David Bowie, Tina Turner, Janis Joplin, Prince, Patti Smith and finally, at the end of the row, Joe Strummer. It's a 1983 photo of Strummer sitting on the sidewalk of a New York street with his arms around his knees. At the time, he was sporting a Mohawk haircut, but the photo is cropped in such a way that his hair has a 1950s rockabilly look: slicked back on the sides, high on top. He has a blank expression on his face. His style roots him to the beginning of rock and roll, the pictures of 1950s heroes elsewhere in the Museum, rather than to the other 1980s artist pictured alongside him. His photo could fit right in next to Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran or a picture of the Beatles in Hamburg in the early 1960s. He is both of his time and out of time. Compared to the style and glamour of the artists pictured next to him – even Patti Smith is dressed up in her best Keith Richards

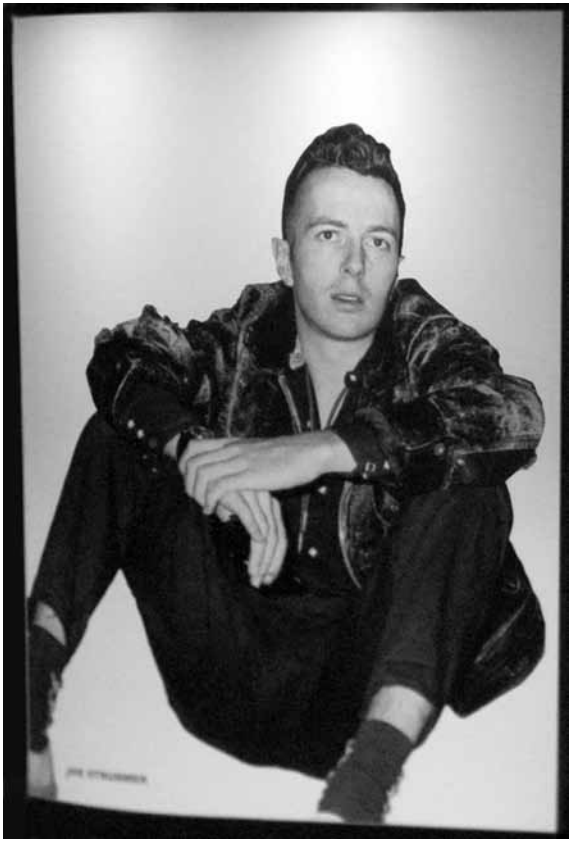

Figure 2.1 "The Architects of Rock and Roll". Courtesy of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum

style – Strummer almost looks like a fan. The photo may even be seen by some observers as reassuring next to the gender-bending images of Bowie, Prince and Smith. But there's nothing contained or especially reassuring about the look on Strummer's face. He looks dead serious, his expression a challenge to all that walk by him; rock and roll is important, a matter of life and death, a chance to connect yourself to others, create a community, inspire those behind you, discover music from all over the world, and keep making more music. In his interview for the Time-Life documentary, Strummer described how seeing the Sex Pistols for the first time changed how he viewed the 101'ers and other bands at the time; it now seemed like all they were really saying was "dig our boogie", while the Pistols said, "we don't care if you like us" ("Interview"). Strummer believed that rock and roll music had a purpose – as he wrote in "The Road to Rock and Roll", "to leave a little light in the wilderness/For somebody to come upon". That he became a star in the process, a feted "Hall of Fame Inductee", is one of the fundamental contradictions of those who believe that rock and roll changes lives.

Chapter 3
From the 101'ers to the Mescaleros, and Whatever Band was in-between: Joe Strummer's Musical Journey (Or, Why Woody?)

Brian A. Cogan

Joe Strummer is perhaps one of the most lionized figures in punk rock. Since his untimely death from an undiagnosed heart condition in 2002, his legacy has grown to almost mythic proportions, especially in the punk community. And for once, perhaps the canonization of St. Joe is more accurate than of many punk legends that passed on too early. To many fans, Strummer was the face of the Clash (to many, "the only band that matters"), the band that best merged punk's energy with radical politics, dub reggae, world music and pop friendly radio hits. But Strummer was also a man of wavering tastes, changing allegiances and mercurial decisions that were not always in his best interests (*Cut the Crap* anyone?). But despite this, Strummer's influence on punk, and on music in general, is not just as a key part of the punk revolution but also as a musical and cultural version of Johnny Appleseed (who Strummer name checked on his last record with the Mescaleros). Strummer was an astounding, and to many, infuriating bundle of contradictions, almost as if his whole life was a constant series of rediscovery and reinvention, most obviously in musical terms. From an early age Strummer's musical tastes were eclectic, and to many in and out of the punk scene, his legacy may also be considered in terms of how he changed the boundaries of punk itself, adding reggae and world music to the mix and making punk, and post-punk a hell of a lot more interesting than its initial promise. Like many in the early British and American punk scenes, Strummer was frustrated by the seemingly inflexible boundaries placed on punk music. Unlike many in the scene, he was in a unique position to try and expand the template of punk rock, and he made that his life's mission on and off for the next 35 years of his life. But in doing so, St. Joe became many things to many people, leaving so many different impressions that the question has to be asked, who *was* Joe Strummer? And how the hell was he able to both digest and later articulate so many diverse forms of musical expression during his relatively brief recording career? It was as though some rotting toothed Zelig stepped out of a time machine and said, "Hey lads, let's try this, why not?" According to his biographer Chris Salewicz, "many

people who spent time in close proximity with Joe were able to observe that he was not entirely comfortable with himself – that there was sometimes a tension about him as though something didn't quite fit" (Salewicz 285–6).[1] Perhaps Strummer's diversity in musical tastes was not just a keen love of outsider music and culture, but also represented an identity crisis.

To sum up: from his early days in the pub-rock 101'ers, to his later work with the Clash (a brief disclaimer, I really, really like *Sandinista*! but I'll get to that in good time) to his soundtrack work for Alex Cox and others, to his radio show, and his work with the Mescaleros, his last band, Strummer's eclectic influences helped change punk into a more inclusive, diverse and much more interesting genre than it should have been. This chapter will examine Strummer's formative influences, his early work with the 101'ers (and skipping some mysterious period in the mid 1970s to mid 1980s where I understand that he had a band that sold some records around the world) to his supposed wilderness years, to his latter days with the Mescaleros, in order to show how Strummer's increasing sophistication and fascination with other cultures, led to a breakthrough that changed punk music for the better, and in doing so, changed the way in which many punks thought of punk itself, from a rigid musical subset of rock, to an inclusive social movement that involved acts of self creation, self re-creation, and self promotion. In doing so, it needs to be said that understanding the "Punk Warlord" is, and was, not an easy task, even for his closest friends. But before I go any further, it needs to be said that Strummer was not just Joe Strummer. He was the diplomat's son turned folkie/art student/squatter/rude boy/actor/consummate host/and secretive almost mystic shaman. Who was Joe Strummer? Well, he was many things before Joe Strummer, and "Joe Strummer" was just the latest (and most long lasting) in a series of audacious reinventions that marked his life, his death, and beyond.

A Young Rock and Roller to the Final Revelation where Woody Cuts his Hair

But who was Joe Strummer anyway? First of all, he wasn't Joe Strummer, he was John Mellor, at least that was his birth name. He was a scrappy young son of a career diplomat (Strummer was born in 1952 in Ankara, Turkey), and was a child of England in name only, always on the move, and as comfortable in Iran or Africa as he was in London. And in every move, Strummer learned something new, usually about music. As Chris Salewicz mentioned in *Redemption Song*, while his parents were stationed early on in Malawi, he not only kept in touch with new rock and roll releases, but also in terms of world music, Strummer was "also very interested in the local Malawian musicians" (Salewicz 54). While many of his contemporaries brought an English "cultural bubble" with them to keep foreign

[1] *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*, New York: Faber and Faber, 2006. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

cultures as far away as possible, from an early age Strummer was eagerly seeking out other cultural influences.

Strummer chose new names not just to show that he had outgrown his youthful nicknames but to indicate that he had made major, sometimes irrevocable, changes to his life. But those are just ways of peering in on Strummer, imagining that we can get inside his head almost a decade after his death. The real question is; who did Woody/Strummer/Mellor *want* to be? That was a question that would occupy Strummer for the rest of his life, and his biographers for years after. Even the people closest to him at various parts of his life had trouble understanding what was going on inside his head. As Scott Shields from the Mescaleros said, "Sometimes he was like your father, sometimes he was like your devil, and sometimes he was somebody that you just couldn't understand" (qtd in Salewicz, 554).

Strummer was not only worldlier than most other students; he was also more likely to experiment. It's unclear if Strummer was embarrassed by his parents, or simply needed a change, but before most his friends had realized it, young John Mellor had disappeared, and in his place a new creature had arrived, Woody, the wandering musician.

It was this first essential moment of re-creation, in the quintessential (before) punk act of changing one's identity, ones very name. In reimagining a name (and a history, perhaps a new philosophy) a still young John Mellor allowed a sudden romanticization of himself, not just as a patent rejection of his past but also as a reinvention into a modern English version of Woody Guthrie is particularly apt (especially as Strummer had adopted the nickname "Woody" as an early act of reinvention) in that Strummer had always romanticized his own life. When Strummer was 18, he, like many of his British musical predecessors, embarked on a career in art school, enrolling in Central School of Art and design in London.

If art school was too confining, there was always a new way of looking at things, and of looking at himself. One where he realized by the early 1970s that his life would be one of constant reinvention, where he didn't needed to be confined by his past and that Woody the R&B pseudo-folkie, could cut his hair and become Joe Strummer, punk rocker. But before then, there was Woody, the transitional phase. After realizing that despite his inherent talent in art, Strummer became an aimless squatter with vague musical ambitions. Despite limited talent on the guitar, he soon began to busk, sometimes alone and other times with old friends such as Tymon Dogg, who later joined him in the Mescaleros.

The busking was easy, but the busker needed to be someone else, someone more romantic than John Mellor. John Mellor was not the proper name for a pseudo-hippie with political ideas, he needed a name that sounded more archetypical, one that was both familiar, but with a certain amount of gravitas. And within a few months, John was gone and Woody was born. According to Salewicz in *Redemption Song:* by 1969 Strummer had experimented with new names, first calling himself, according to Pablo Labritain, "Wooly Census" before repudiating the name and telling Labritain, "No, no: I'm Woody now" (63). While the stretch was not too far for Strummer to make from "Wooly" to Woody" it

was essentially a crystallization of his world view, from a new name based on his unkempt appearance and lifestyle, to one that was based on a particular musician, one already sainted by the folk music and hippie scenes. Woody would be the name Strummer would go under when he founded his first bands, eventually leading to his longest running pub rock band the 101'ers, based on 101 Walverton Road, the squat where the 101er's lived and practiced.

But Woody was not simply a folk musician, early on he had begun to try and work not just R&B into his act but also a more multi-cultural world view, one he would stick to for the rest of his career. According to Salewicz, "one of the main themes propagated by the Clash was the rise of a multicultural Britain" (6), a theme that had occupied Strummer since his childhood. Also, by 1973, Strummer was frequenting a Jamaican illegal club called the Silver Sands, where "Woody would come most Friday and Saturday nights and this was where he was first fully exposed to Jamaican music" (102). While he tried to incorporate his new fascination into the 101'ers, the other band members were resistant and their reggae experiments were largely confined to practice. Strummer, even early on, was caught between two different worlds and two conflicting identities. This would not be the last time.

But maybe even the new identity of Woody was too constricting as well. Strummer was always picking people's brains, looking for new ideas, particularly about music and politics, his later exposure to Bernie Rhodes (future Clash manager) set off in Woody an impetus to further his education into the esoteric political philosophies of the more learned punks. Don Letts, one of the key people in Strummers furthering reggae studies, observed that, according to Bernie Rhodes, Joe Strummer had been created for a different reason, "before we met, Joe and I, he had a dilemma, he was dissatisfied with himself and his life. He took on the role of Woody, but then he met me and I shook his life into the future. Joe didn't want to be Woody anymore, he wanted to be me, and that's how he became an international success" (Letts 151–2). While Strummer could not *literally* be black, through reggae and world music, he could at least resemble his much worldlier friend, Letts. When Strummer eventually joined the punk movement, he would need to reinvent himself again. Punk, also a symbolic place where reinvention was not only possible, but also almost expected, provided Strummer with the perfect vehicle in which to change himself from working musician (and avid busker) into a working class hero. Or, at least that's part of the story.

But before the Clash, Britain's great musical savior was pub rock, a gritty revival of R&B as epitomized by bands such as Ducks Deluxe and Dr. Feelgood. The pub rock movement was a musical reimagining of classic rock and rhythm and blues tropes from the late 1950s and early 1960s, and developed like punk, in reaction to the bloated excess of orchestrated rock and roll that dominated the charts at the time. It was fun, it was fresh and it had a built in shelf life.

Strummer was always too social a person to make it on his own. In the early 1970s, Strummer, then Woody, joined an R&B band called the Vultures, before returning to busking for a few years in 1973 and 1974, before eventually

forming the 101'ers who at first played a high energy brand of pub rock not too far from Dr. Feelgood. Strummer became the front man and honed his image as a dynamic singer of standards like "Gloria," but also decided that the band would need to write their own material to stand out. Strummer's first official composition (one that he would include in solo set lists to the end of his life) was the anthemic "Keys to Your Heart," which although leaning towards standard R&B, also demonstrated that with Strummer's limited voice, the role of the crooner would never be his. But he also learned that his voice had a rough hewed sensibility that made even the most mundane cover songs sound passionate.

Strummer seemed boxed in by the rigidity of pub rock and his early interest in various genres such as folk and world music (which would influence the Clash's exposure to reggae, via Don Letts, as well as Strummer's later work in world music in soundtracks and with the Mescaleros) and wanted to expand the parameters of the band. While some might look at this as a canny career move, it was also a leap into the unknown. The 101'ers were in some ways proto-punk, but also showed diversity of musical tastes that punk was not known for at the time period. Despite their limited musical range, the 101'ers were possibly the most promising and dynamic of the pub rock groups of the time. Their only problem was that punk was about to make them irrelevant. But the impetus for evolution was evident in Strummer even in his first major project. In some ways, the way in which punk music became codified around a particular sound (Ramones or Sex Pistols as templates, take your pick) was what led Strummer and others to intentionally push at the boundaries of what could be considered punk rock, both with his work in the Clash and with his solo projects.

As the 101'ers were finally becoming successful, their music was becoming redundant. Punk had appropriated the energy and creativity of pub rock and made it sound almost outdated. Strummer realized that his latest identity was as ill suited to the retro-rock of the 101'ers and realized it was time to move on, to once again, embrace the new. The 101'ers got successful, because Woody was already metamorphasizing into Joe Strummer. "As he became Joe Strummer, he discovered a persona into which he could inject all of his abilities and fantasies of rock 'n' roll mythology, exaggerating parts of himself, pulling other parts back, adding his own secret ingredient – himself, and that frantically pumping left leg and always a sign that things were about to 'getabitarockin'" (Salewicz 131). Woody eventually faded into Joe Strummer and the vaguely leftist stance of the old days began to evolve (under the tutelage of Bernie Rhodes) into something more close to the general politics of punk at the time. Antonio D'Ambrosio notes that close friend Dick Rude describes Strummer's politics as "as having strong views that he was willing to change" (142). But Strummer's evolving political and social sentiments did not just come from punk rock and Bernie's "Marxism 101" courses. Strummer had already begun his political education as a child traveling across the world, and he received his O levels in international and global culture through his exposure to a type of music with a particular spiritual, and political agenda; reggae.

Don Letts is the Selector

Strummer was not the first or the only punk that loved reggae. Many in the nascent punk scene were huge fans of reggae and dub (Johnny Rotten supposedly had one of the largest reggae collections in England during the late 1970s, allegedly the one thing he regrets leaving behind when he moved to Los Angeles), but Strummer was an early convert to the music played by Jamaican immigrants and, as usual, eventually ended up completely immersing himself in the culture. Like many of his contemporaries, Strummer had attended the street festivals in Notting Hill, and was so impressed at the resistance he saw towards the police that he was later inspired to write "White Riot" one of the quintessential songs off the first Clash album, and one of the earliest songs to fuse the Rastafarian cultural resistance to Babylon with punk's fury. Strummer could not only relate to Rastafarian culture, he could study it, adapt it, and reinvent it both politically and musically.

Despite his impatience with art school during his brief tenure there, Strummer was a lifelong student, albeit one that had no use for the conventional British school experience. When a subject engaged him, he often immersed himself into it, playing endless versions of the same songs for friends, deciding that he needed to learn Spanish fluently, or even running a marathon when he had only been originally running home from the pubs to work off his endless cans of cider or lager. The same thing held true for reggae and Rastafarian culture (it didn't hurt that ganja was a sacrament to Rastafarians). Strummer was also lucky enough to be in the epicenter of a new movement that based much of its subcultural appeal on non-white culture to Rastafarians. Strummer also had a knack of making connections, particularly ones that would send him in search of mastering new areas of knowledge, and had also become friends with influential punk filmmaker and DJ Don Letts. Letts, a black man in an almost all white punk scene, had been a resident DJ at the Roxy where he played sets of early Bowie, T-Rex, Slade, and of course rocksteady and heavy dub records. As the British punk scene did not have an official record out until the Damned's "New Rose" single came out in October 1976, the unifying music of the scene was reggae. In many ways, many punks felt an affinity for the Jamaican and West Indian immigrants that had moved into London during the 1960s. Strummer took this one step further, he tried to live it.

To many punks reggae was the symbolic music of the oppressed and therefore punks could feel symbolic outcasts by listening to Augustus Pablo, King Tubby and Lee Perry records. As Letts later recalled, he "first noticed Strummer, along with Paul Simonon and John Lydon as he was behind the counter every day at Acme with Tappa Zukie's 'MPLA dub' booming out of the speakers, burning spliffs and holding my corner I started to notice the same white faces coming down to the basement" (80). After praising the young punks taste in reggae and dub, Letts goes on to acknowledge that Joe and John Lydon were the creative forces behind what was emerging. Letts remembered being impressed by the fact that "these guys were already into reggae and were seriously interested in the stuff I was pumping out" (81). Despite his youth, Letts was also a mentor to the punk

scene, one of the few black punks involved in the early British punk scene, and the one largely responsible for introducing the young white punks to the outsider scene for Reggae. As Dave Nobakht notes in the introduction to his and Letts book, "Whilst John Lydon and Joe Strummer already knew their reggae, it was Letts that introduced them to the latest releases and gave them a deeper insight into Jamaican culture" (15).

Wait, Punks and Reggae? Let's Look at that again for a Minute, eh?

While outside of the Clash, reggae was not particularly mixed in with most punk records (The Ruts, Generation X and some others aside) but was influential in terms of how punk evolved into post-punk with a more reggae edged soundtrack, one that had already been mostly created by Strummer and the Clash.

To Jon Savage, who wrote a fairly definitive history of the early punk movement in his book *England's Dreaming*, as compared to the Sex Pistols "The Clash were more human, closer to the dialogue of social concern and social realism – more in the world" (231).[2] The importance of their music lay not so much in their actual imitation of reggae, which Savage characterizes including "plentiful use of drop-out – where the instruments drop away, just leaving the beat, borrowed from the dub reggae you could hear in Shepherd's Bush to Portobello Road markets" (232). The reference to the legendary minority-dominated London neighborhoods epitomizes what on one level was a *conscious decision* by Strummer to pursue a politicized musical hybrid, and also a distinct historical moment where it was inevitable that the racial troubles then boiling over in England would influence anyone with half an eye open. On the one hand, their manager Bernie Rhodes was openly agitating for the band to take on a more politicized role, as Marcus Gray noted in his book *Last Gang in Town: The Story and Myth of the Clash*, Bernie, like Malcolm, was influenced by the situationist view that "politics is how we live" (184).[3] The Clash, who themselves were ripe with contradiction as most of the band came from art school or upper-middle class backgrounds, hardly seemed to be fated to raising revolutionary consciousness. As Jude Davies had written, "The Clash wore their crudeness as a badge of working class pride, in purely social terms, they were hardly entitled" (3). But still they emerged as one of the first punk bands to adopt a consistent and stridently political agenda. The roots of this can be traced back specifically to one date, Monday August 30, 1976, the date of the infamous Notting Hill Carnival.

The Notting Hill Carnival was the scene of a racially diverse, but primarily Afro-Caribbean population, who had suffered under heavy-handed police tactics

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[2] *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

[3] *Last Gang in Town: The Story and Myth of the Clash*, New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1995. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

during public gatherings. In 1976 the Carnival was particularly polarized and violence was heavy in the air. According to Gray the soundtrack for the Notting Hill Carnival was a "menacing heavy beat and militant lyrics of that year's crop of reggae sounds, reflecting the even more politically unsettled climate of Jamaica" (185). When the inevitable riot broke out, to Strummer and Simonon, who had gone to the carnival as a lark, the heavy-handed police tactics and the subsequent resistance of the community during the subsequent riot provided inspiration not only for two of the early Clash's most powerful songs, "White Riot" and "White Man in Hammersmith Palais" but also told the band that there was a constituency outside of the insular punk community already making protest music. Gray noted that "By the late summer of 1976, most of The Clash had already recognized reggae to be some of the most vital music currently being made and the entire band's interest increased dramatically once the riot gave a local context to its stirring militancy" (185). According to Savage, Strummer had been as impressed by the local resistance as they were to the music blasting from the local DJ sound systems. To Savage, "Reggae transmitted the experience of England's most visible outsiders: Those Rastas who, confronted with prejudice, totally refused to enter England's dream" and he went on to note that the Clash had seen how reggae had acted as a soundtrack for social resistance at the Notting Hill Carnival and "were attempting their own white Rastas in punk – a new cultural resistance" (238). Whether consciously at first or not, Strummer was well on his way to a merger of Rasta certitude and punk attitude.

According to Andy Medehurst in his article "What Did I Get: Punk, Memory and Autobiography," "Punk's most important and long lasting influence on white British popular culture was its alliance with reggae" (230). This is certainly an optimistic assessment, but a very pertinent question is how much was appreciation and how much was appropriation? Rock music has a long and ambiguous history regarding race and certainly many appropriations of black musical forms (Pat Boone singing Little Richard songs anyone?) were at best, no more than a form of watered down mainstreaming of outsider culture, or at worst, outright musical colonialism. However, at least in the case of Strummer, from his early exposure and for the rest of his life there is evidence that the reggae rhythms were more homage and feeling of solidarity than appropriation. Lester Bangs, perhaps put it best in his appreciation of the Clash when he mentioned that "somewhere in their assimilation of reggae is the closest thing yet to the lost chord, the missing link between black music and white noise, rock capable of making bow to black forms without smearing on the black face" (238). While one of the main myths about punk was that it was inherently political, in reality there was no clear-cut agenda early on. Certainly many like Strummer were politically to the left from the start, and even the Sex Pistols espoused anarchy, but a more nuanced way of looking at early punk could be to say that it was, at best, politically confused. Certainly the use of the swastika and other Nazi memorabilia was prevalent on the early scene. Despite the efforts of Greil Marcus and others to situate punk, as a natural continuation of Situationist or other ideology, original punk was not politically

savvy or Situationist oriented. According to Chrissie Hynde, "it was clever and smart, while it certainly didn't have a political philosophy behind it" (Lydon, Zimmerman and Zimmerman 186).

Also the prevalence of the National Front and other fascist youth groups in Britain and the allegiance of a small number of punk bands to openly racist ideology (Skrewdriver is a prime example of this trend) at the time showed that there was no dominant punk ideology. However, after Strummer joined the Clash, they were among the first to articulate an inclusive form of punk ideology. According to Gray, "The Clash began to see reggae as a cultural blueprint for the development of both their own music and of punk in general. The punk scene, still largely an elite club for art school students and decadent poseurs, could be co-opted for the disaffected white equivalent of the rioting black youths; and could provide a more positive political process than that offered by the National Front" (186). The elitism of early punk is well documented and one of the main problems cited by many writers about punk rock was (and is) its essential whiteness. Gray also noted that "Punk was an almost exclusively *white* musical form, so far removed from its roots in the blues that nearly all the black influence had been lost: It was noisy uptight and aggressive, the very antithesis of funky" (186). Reggae gave Strummer, and others who adopted reggae rhythms, a sense of purpose bordering on the religious. As Savage mentioned, "Reggae had an authenticity and a spirituality lacking in the dominant white culture" (237). The idea that Rastafarians were a group to be emulated tied into the punk notion articulated by the Clash and other groups that punk was a subculture opposed to mainstream culture by principle. In this outlook, the Rastafarians seemed to be natural allies or even mentors. Noted punk Viv Goldman was quoted as saying that there was a "real connection between punk and reggae" because "the Rastas were regarded as the dregs, as untouchables – the same as the punks were" (Colgreave and Sullivan 311). According to John Lydon, "reggae was the only other radical music that was completely underground and not played on the radio" (Lydon, Zimmerman and Zimmerman 268). According to Dave Thompson punk rock formed "blood ties with reggae were forged though a mutual mistrust of the establishment" (41). To Hebdige the attraction of reggae was that it "offered an impregnable solidarity, an asceticism born of suffering" (63). For Strummer, already a keen student/Zelig of outsider culture, this would prove to be crucial in his new identity.

In a sense, from the time Strummer joined the Clash until the end of his life, he was a relentless popularizer of reggae, dub, and other forms of world music to many in the punk community, and beyond. Strummer's link to post-punk is clear in that reggae helped define post-punks new herky-jerky rhythms. By the late 1970s many punk, feeling stifled by punk's growing conformity, decided to expand and adapt punk's DIY aesthetic in new directions, including more towards dub and funk. In his seminal work *Subculture: The Meaning of Style,* Dick Hebdige noted, "Reggae attracted those punks who wished to give tangible forms to their alienation. It carried the necessary conviction, the political bite, so

obviously missing in most contemporary white music" (Hebdige 63). A bite that became central to the Clash's message of cultural resistance.

This is not to say that all, or even the majority of punks, embraced reggae or post-punk. As Roger Sabin pointed out in his chapter "I Won't let that Dago by" noted that "even pro-reggae punks could hold racist/Fascist views without even pausing over the contradictions" (205) and that even the basic punk idea that reggae and Rasta culture was somehow "authentic was of course, a kind of racist stereotype in the first place" (205). While there are problems with Sabin's article (he provides little empirical evidence and the opposite generalizations could just as easily be made anecdotally), this does not mean that many punks did not accept reggae as a fashion statement or as a way or symbolically being experiencing the "authentic" black experience. For Strummer, reggae not only provided a solid foundation for outsider politics, but also allowed his reinvention to continue after the Clash was done. The world traveling Strummer felt free to borrow voraciously from other cultures and forms of music, even if it confused his fans and band mates. The transformation from Woody to Strummer was not just a name change, it was a world-view change, one influenced by Strummer's early fascination with world music, as well as well as a world-view based on resistance as epitomized by reggae as the soundtrack to the oppressed people of the world.

And the contradictions had worked both ways, although he was by no means a fan of the genre, Bob Marley himself did take notice of the intersection of punk and reggae at its height After Lee Perry worked with the Clash he inspired Marley to write "Punky Reggae Party" which was "a celebration uniting black and white, punk and Rasta with an inseparability which remained as powerful two decades later in the hybrid sounds of Rancid, Sublime and NOFX" (Thompson 41). The punky reggae party was the source of malleable identity, as "reggae music was used as a vehicle to radically reconstruct the self-image" of those Rastafarians who were most politically active (King 106–107), it could also be used by a generation of young British punks, both as a source of quick credibility, and for others such as Strummer, reminding him that self-invention didn't just stop with a new name, but was a constant ongoing process of discovery. This was epitomized in the one album even most ardent Clash fans love to hate, *Sandinista!*.

To Strummer, *Sandinista* was perhaps the most perfectly realized vision of the way in which different musical forms could come together. To most of the fans, it was an insane endless mess with about a half a side of good music. But, to some astute observers, it was a landmark of an album. A new way of looking at the endless possibilities of a record by a band willing to take chances. And, it proved influential to many upcoming musicians, as it became clear that the importance of *Sandinista* was because it influenced "breaking race boundaries and sense of unfettered experimentation to American musicians of the early 1980s can't be overestimated" (Mullholland 58). *Sandinista* may be the most evocative of all of Strummer's work because it is willfully perverse and willfully confusing. It is ambitious, but schizophrenic, a failure that might have been the most ambitious rock record ever made. For the most "commercial" of all punk bands, it was a

blatant challenge for fans to follow them. Like Strummer, it stands apart from everything else and is marginally ugly and confused, but unlike anything else that existed before it. At least until Strummer went solo.

The Wilderness Years to the Mescaleros

Like most rock legend histories, there are literal narrative arcs and pre-supposed second, and even third acts. The narrative of Strummer, which mirrors in some ways the narrative of John Lennon (an equally iconic rock star to many) in that there is a glorious original burst of creativity, followed by a slackening off, then bitter acrimony as the band breaks up, leaving our hero adrift, both musically and personally. Leaving out the obvious influence of a Yoko Ono type figure (although several books alone could be written about the influence of women on Strummer both musically and socially) both then work for a short inspired time, and then spend time in the metaphorical wilderness, before "coming back" and releasing new music that matches or is even better than before, before succumbing to an early unfortunate end, leaving the grieving followers to wonder sadly, "what if?"

While parts of this easily applicable narrative work for both Strummer and Lennon, their paths diverge in many respects. In Lennon's case, he had actually made some of his best (and worst) music immediately following the demise of the Beatles, before largely retiring from music for the five years before his death. Strummer after his ill-advised attempt to keep the embers of the Clash burning, was not so much in a state of retirement but a state of where, for the third time in his life, he needed to figure out who he was, or at least who "Joe Strummer" was. If John Mellor was too limiting an identity for the plethora of contradictory ideas rattling around in the young man's head, Woody was a natural second act. The young man of (relative) privilege reborn as a folkie/pub rocker, railing against the injustices of the world and busking until his fingers bled. Woody was a reference back not just to Woody Guthrie (in a nod to Strummer's new political awareness, we must remember that emblazoned on Guthrie's guitar was the slogan, "This machine kills fascists"), but back to the idealism of the hippie movement, which Strummer would reach back to appropriately yet again in his fourth (fifth, sixth?) reinvention as a modern day musical troubadour in his campfire days. When Woody cut his hair and joined the Clash, Strummer had reinvented himself yet again. Taking his cue from the both the urgency of punk and his politicization from his exposure to Rastafarian subculture, Strummer was the avenging angel of punk. Here to pick a fight, like some modern day Tom Joad with a major label contract, Strummer took it upon himself to try and be a moral center for punk. That he failed (and how could anyone help but fail at such as monumental task?), was not the important lesson. Strummer was left without his musical friends, and without a real clue as to where he was going. But, despite all of this, in his pre-Mescaleros years, Strummer was not wandering in a wilderness. He was fairly busy, doing soundtracks, acting, and waiting. Waiting for a logical next step in his life.

After the demise of the Clash, Strummer started experimenting with playing with new musicians, which in many ways reinvigorated him for a time. In 1987, he wrote the score for his first feature film, *Walker* for director Alex Cox (Strummer had previously contributed music to two of Cox' earlier features, *Sid and Nancy* and *Straight to Hell*). *Walker*, which tells the improbable, but largely true story of William Walker, who briefly conquered Nicaragua from 1856–57 and was later executed for trying much the same thing in Honduras in 1860. The *Walker* soundtrack was a look forward into what the Mescaleros would say over a decade later. The mostly instrumental soundtrack is largely based on a selection of pseudo-Latin American themes, as well as a brief dash of spaghetti western, along with such afro-Cuban flourishes. To D'Ambrosio, Strummers politics could not be separated even from his instrumental compositions, such as the *Walker* soundtrack. To D'Ambrosio, "undoubtedly, Strummers committed anti-anti-imperialist stance and his support for the Sandinistas and other Latin American revolutionaries explains the films remarkable soundtrack" (139). While Strummer may have actually believed this, it was probably also a good opportunity for some off the radar, low-pressure work.

While this was Strummer's only full-length soundtrack (his music has been in much demand for film and television soundtracks, especially since his death, and he had contributed songs to other soundtracks). Strummer also contributed vocals to some of the strongest cuts on the soundtrack, "The Unknown Immortal", "Tennessee Rain" and "Tropic of No Return".

Strummer had also done some acting both in bit parts (such as *The King of Comedy*, and in *Walker*). Strummer had also tried his hand at filmmaking, in a short film he produced and directed in 1982, *HellW10*, which featured a lengthy brawl ending up in a Kentucky Fried Chicken with Strummer featured improbably as a police officer. Strummer, a natural for the spot light, showed his natural aptitude as an actor, both in a bit part in *Straight to Hell*, as well as a meatier, almost self-parody in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*. In *Mystery Train*, Strummer is perfectly cast as the cantankerous Johnny (called "Elvis", much to his chagrin). Strummer was particularly proud of his work with Jarmusch and his performance in *Mystery Train*, stating that "I played myself … it was my best performance" (D'Ambrosio 141). Of course *which* version of himself he was playing is unclear.

Strummer capped his acting career playing an amalgam of Vince Taylor (the real life composer of "Brand New Cadillac") in the French film *Docteur Chance*, where Strummer delivered his lines in passable French. He had also worked on a solo record, *Earthquake Weather* in 1989, one that while not bad, also indicated a certain lack of focus in Strummer. Strummer was always most comfortable bouncing ideas off musicians, leaving the studio for a day and coming back to see what they had come up with. He needed collaboration in order to make his best work, and when working with musicians who were also fans, instead of a legitimate backing band, Strummer never found the cohesion he was so comfortable with in the Clash years. At least not until he finally decided to form his last band, The Mescaleros.

London Calling

During his famous wilderness years, Strummer was allegedly adrift, both spiritually and literally, spending time working on soundtracks, going out to see bands, and spending time with his family. However, Strummer was also re-immersing himself in the sounds of Latin America music, rai, calypso, flamenco and others that would make the Mescaleros sound both a logical continuation of the Clash's experiments with world music, as well as a unique and fascinating band, cut short before their time.

Strummer also fulfilled a lifelong dream in 1998, when he became a radio DJ on BBC World Service. Strummer's show "London Calling" was an eclectic mix that revealed some of Strummer's earliest influences, including early rock and roll and rockabilly such as Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Richie Valens and Bo Diddley, to world music favorites such as Amadou and Mariam, to obscurities such as Serbian prison singer Saban Bajramovic, reggae toaster U Roy as well as Cumbrian bhangra and African music.

Strummer, the son of a diplomat had listened to the BBC World Service on Short Wave radio as he traveled the world with his parents and as he told an interviewer in 1999, "ever since then, I always wanted to spin records on the World Service" (Dilworth 59). Strummer's radio philosophy centered on the "liberating force of global radio bringing the planet together: motivated by the same mood that had driven the anti-globalization demonstrations" (Salewicz 577). "London Calling" was Strummer's attempt to use radio as a tool of radical politics and a chance to play his beloved scratchy vinyl for a wider audience. And while it may be easier to look at Strummer as the dilettante diplomat's son adrift again, this was not the case. Strummer wasn't just digging in crates to look cool, he was finally free to play what he wanted, with no one; no band label, or even fans to answer to or explain.

Strummer continued the show until his untimely death in 2002, and later parts of his DJ work were featured in the documentary, *Joe Strummer, the Future is Unwritten*. Strummer particularly loved this aspect of his life and relished the chance to be the selector himself, to introduce fans both old and new to the diverse and exciting world music that had not only shaped his long career, but also been the soundtrack to his restless youth, first as a child crossing the world, and later as a man in search of a stable identity, one that could hide his complexity not only behind a series of alternate identities, but who also could find solace hiding behind the music itself. As Joe Strummer the DJ, hidden on the radio playing his precious, more "authentic" vinyl, Strummer was content to sit amidst a sea of reinvention, a cross cultural maelstrom that allowed him everything, and asked him nothing but to share only as much as he was comfortable to share. A few months before his death, he had signed a deal to broadcast "Joe Strummer's Global Boombox for VH1, which was to essentially to be a television version of his radio show" (Salewicz 599). To Dilworth, "Strummer's eclectic playlists reflected both his influences and on-going passions for new music from around the globe" (59), and it was only logical for him to take his show to the American music video audience.

As Brady Harrison notes, Strummer "draws upon the technologies and means of late capitalism to do what he can to create a better world; once more these ventures run the risk of participating in capitalism's baleful dynamism" ("Cultural Offices"). But also that "[b]y whatever means necessary, Strummer implies, you do what you can do; opportunity by opportunity, you try to reach others; bit by bit; and using the global broadcast technologies of late capitalism, you try and change the world" ("Cultural Offices"). Despite the contradictions of working within a system he had fought against, Strummer once again felt it important to bring to the world the musical memories he had nurtured since his childhood, of a global village connected via music. This was also the same kind of musical mélange that Strummer was trying to achieve with the Mescaleros.

Strummer formed his last band the Mescaleros in 1999 with gifted multi-instrumentalist Anthony Genn, a perfect foil for Strummer and in some ways a musician who inspired him to new heights almost as much as Mick Jones. The first record was also largely the work of Strummer's and Genn, a perfect mélange of world music with some traditional rock and roll, an almost audacious step for a man who had avoided the limelight for so long. But as with any Strummer-centric project, there was always volatility, particularly with Genn who eventually had to leave the band due to his growing heroin dependency. If *Rock Art and the X-ray Style* was an adventurous start, when Strummer switched bassist Scott Shields to guitar, the Mescaleros finally became a cohesive band. The second record with the Mescaleros, *Global A-Go-Go* was even more ambitious and benefited from the return of Strummer's old friend and busking partner Tymon Dogg, who Joe had not seen since the sessions for *Sandinista*. Dogg's violin added an extra level of resonance for the band, especially on the epic seventeen-minute version of the old Irish folk song, "The Minstrel Boy". Adding Celtic influences to the Rai, Reggae and world vibes of the Mescaleros, it seemed as though Strummer had finally found the sound he was looking for. Unfettered, globally conscious and politically aware, The Mescaleros were the fulfillment of Strummer's childhood dream, his version of a world where identity were malleable and John Mellor/Woody/Joe Strummer could be reconciled as a fusion of different identities and musical styles all coming together in harmony. Although one thing was certain, privileged John Mellor was gone for good. Strummer never did use his given name again. At one point in the nineties, Dick Rude tried to play him a song called "The Ballad of John Mellor," but Strummer angrily told him, "Don't ever play that song again!" (Salewicz 413). Although John Mellor was dead to him, he wasn't adverse to the occasional joking nickname, as when The Pogues called him "Strumboli" based on a straw Stetson hat he constantly wore during the recording of *Hell's Ditch* (458).

Overall, Strummer may have never been happier than working with the Mescaleros on his last tours (and his brief onstage reunion with Mick Jones shortly before he died). While Strummer was finally showing signs of his age, drinking his usual copious amounts of brandy, beer or cider, and puffing his ubiquitous spliff, time was running out on Strummer. After two critically acclaimed records, Strummer was anxious to work more on the Mescaleros third record, work towards

a possible Clash reunion at the Clash induction to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and most importantly, hopefully have long-time idol Johnny Cash cover one of his songs. Strummer died before the album was completed and the final album *Streetcore*, was finished after his death, leading to an appropriately ramshackle feeling of impermanence. Strummer, was, in the words of D'Ambrosio, "humbly writing the next chapter in his life without knowing that the journey was about to come to an end" (303). Strummer died never having been forced to make a final definitive statement, or finally reveal himself. As if, at the end of his life, he was even capable of trying to figure out who he really was.

Conclusion: Strummer in Retrospect

A lot of punks changed their names, adopted new identities, claimed working class roots despite relative affluence (as do many rappers to this day as a sign of perceived authenticity). But Strummer did something different, he didn't just change his name, he changed who he was. Or, more accurately, Strummer engaged in a process of conscious reinvention through his life and career, from John Mellor, the son of a diplomat, to Woody, the art school dropout and busker, and finally to Joe Strummer, leader of the Clash and later the Mescaleros. Many punks gradually realized that assuming a new identity became a full-time job, but perhaps none more so than Strummer. As a man of the people, constantly letting fans into his shows for free from the start of his musical journey to the end, Strummer could never let his guard down. "Joe Strummer never closed, and you could see the stress that lurked permanently behind that superficially benign stoned countenance" (Salewicz 216). He could let you in for a bit, but not for long. In his long journey of reinvention, from the vaguely political Woody, to the Rasta-influenced Joe Strummer, he had achieved everything he had originally wanted as a child, to be constantly in the act of creation, to build on his mythos and create something that was sorely lacking in the punk community, a true Saint. But there are no real punk saints, not just because of his many contradictions and reinventions, but also *despite* them, he turned out to be as close to a secular saint as a punk can get. One that would try and do something worthwhile with his life, as though he knew that it would be as short as it ultimately proved to be. Let's face it, the Clash sold millions of records, played to adoring crowds and in some ways, paved the way for punk to become mainstream. But does that mean that we should dismiss the Clash, or Strummer, because they fail the punk litmus test? (In the long run, who can pass it?) To sum up, Joe Strummer's journey is to note that, at its best, punk served as a free space where reinvention was always possible. As I have written elsewhere, "Today, Strummers inspirational legacy, is that of a man who tried to stretch punk to its fullest potential and actually live a life worth living" (Cogan 319). RIP Saints John/Woody/Joe.

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PART II

I Don’t Trust You

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Chapter 4
"This is Joe Public Speaking": Why Joe Strummer's Passion is Still in Fashion

Mark Bedford

There is no way that I can introduce this chapter without disclosing my personal investment in its subject. I can pinpoint the moment I became a fan of the Clash and Joe Strummer to January 1979 when, as an 11-year-old, I bought the Clash single, *Tommy Gun*, from an out-of-chart "bargain bin" in a South London branch of Woolworths. Although I didn't see the Clash live in their original line-up(s) they have always been my favorite band. I saw Joe Strummer perform with his last band, The Mescaleros, on nine occasions between 1999 and 2002. The last of these was at Acton Town Hall in west London on November 15, 2002 where the band played a benefit for a trade union struggle that I was a part of.

In November 2002 I was one of over 50,000 fire fighters across the United Kingdom who took strike action in a bid to improve national fire service pay. Fire fighters at Acton Fire Station (in the same West London Area Command that I was attached to) organized a benefit event at their local town hall and announced they had secured the support of Joe Strummer. That night – which followed a 48 hour national strike – was one of the most memorable of my life. The venue, a dilapidated deco-era municipal hall, was crammed with over 500 Fire Brigades Union members and a couple of hundred of Strummer's most loyal fans. The politically charged nature of the event gave the show a rousing energy that some who were present say rekindled memories of the Clash.[1]

In the period following Joe Strummer's sudden death (just six weeks after he had supported the FBU at Acton), Strummer "experts" made their pronouncements about what Joe Strummer had and hadn't stood for. Reviewing the release of the Clash Singles box set in 2006, *Uncut*'s Alan Jones (who had known Joe Strummer

[1] In the documentary, *The Last Night London Burned* (Alan Miles and Gregg McDonald, 2003) the then general secretary of the FBU, Andy Gilchrest, states "Just when you thought the evening couldn't get any better at all, Mick Jones [Strummer's former song writing partner with the Clash] strides on and starts rekindling everyone's memories of the Clash on stage". In the film, Gilchrest also describes his experience of seeing the Clash at the Rock Against Racism Carnival in east London in 1978 – joking "well, you have to learn your politics somewhere".

Figure 4.1 Fire fighters provide a guard of honour at Joe Stummer's funeral at West London Crematorium on December 30, 2002. Courtesy of Tim Hoy

during his pre-Clash period) paid tribute to "Strummer's unbridled passion", yet mocked "Joe's ill-conceived admiration for a variety of squinty-eyed killers passing themselves off as revolutionary freedom fighters" (124). In the same year, however, *Mojo*'s Pat Gilbert (author of *Passion is a Fashion*, published 2004) attempted a revisionist account of Strummer's supposed support for the FBU during the 2002 dispute. Gilbert states that because Strummer was "no trenchant socialist, he himself wasn't entirely sure about the FBU's decision to strike, and [that] he used the award [i.e. the fire fighter statue] he received [from the FBU] as a doorstop" (87). This kind of posthumous commentary has contributed to a discourse that at once celebrates Strummer's everyman appeal while exculpating him for any "naive" political commitments he may have made.

My chapter builds upon other work relating to Joe Strummer, the Clash and Clash fans that I produced between 2007 and the summer of 2011 and aims to give expression to the latent voices of Clash and Strummer fans that are largely absent from the popular and academic discourses surrounding Joe Strummer. Central to this enquiry is the question of *who* the fans of the Clash and Joe Strummer were/are. It is a question that I first asked myself in December 2007 at an event organised by Philosophy Football to celebrate the Clash on the eve of the fifth anniversary of Joe Strummer's death. During a panel discussion at this event, the esteemed cultural studies academic, Paul Gilroy, made the (quite possibly throwaway) comment that the Clash, unlike peers such as Sham 69, had never attracted a fascist element

Figure 4.2 Mick and Joe: Joe Strummer and Mick Jones reunited on stage – for the first time in almost 20 years – in support for the fire fighters' cause at Acton. Courtesy of George R. Binette

because the band's fan base was middle-class. Yet almost all of the people I knew who had followed the Clash circa 1976–82 could not be described as middle class. Indeed, not long after listening to Gilroy's remarks I had a conversation in a central London pub with the friend of a mutual friend, Tim Mardell (born July 1962), who explained how Joe Strummer became a "figurehead" for a layer of disaffected white working class youth who may otherwise have been pulled into the orbit of the far right National Front. For Mardell, an east Londoner who was 14 when he first listened to the Clash in 1977, Strummer was the key to Rock Against Racism's success in fashioning a cultural movement that would steer thousands of white working class youths away from the ascendant National Front.[2] In an interview for an article I wrote commemorating the 30th anniversary of the April 1978 RAR carnival at Victoria Park, Mardell made a cogent and compelling case for this thesis:

[2] Rock Against Racism was established in 1976. "Ironically the inspiration for [RAR] came from the singer Eric Clapton […] who had gained fame and fortune from black music [after he] interrupted a gig in Birmingham in [August] 1976 to tell his audience that Enoch [Powell] had been right [to predict the inevitability of race riots]. The first RAR gig was held in November 1976. The RAR Carnival that took place in east London's Victoria Park on 30 April 1978 attracted over 80,000 people. RAR produced a fanzine called *Temporary Hoarding* which by 1979 was selling 12,000 copies an issue" (*Searchlight Extra* 2–9).

> The National Front had been trying to influence youngsters by leafleting football matches and were starting to find a way into the music scene as well, but Joe gave us a figurehead for what became a stand against racism, and his involvement with Rock Against Racism was fundamental to retuning whole swathes of [white] working class music fans in London to the anti-fascist and anti-racist stance. (qtd in Bedford 64)

White Punks on Beer and Analytical Autoethnography

In May 2011 I was invited by Anna Gough-Yates at London Metropolitan University to submit a paper for a cross-disciplinary symposium on "subcultures, popular music and social change". The invitation provided me with the opportunity to organize ten interviews with Clash fans born between 1959 and 1966 and to explore their experiences of, and feelings about, the Clash's impact on their lives. More specifically, I was interested in the extent to which fans of the Clash felt they were politicized by their engagement with the band's polemical-punk aesthetic. Nine out of the ten interviews that my paper, "'Like Trousers Like Brain', the Walk and the Talk of the Clash City Rockers", was predicated upon were carried out in London pubs with white male participants.[3] The other interview, with the only female (but also white) participant, was carried out in the interviewee's west London home. Using the socio-economic indicators of occupation, level of education, parents' occupation and whether parents owned property to operationalize the participants' social class, I established nine of those taking part in the study to be working class. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion. There was structure in so far as each participant was asked the same questions, but there was also flexibility in that the structured questions sometimes led to other questions and lines of enquiry.

Problematic for my study was the fact that, in different capacities and within the spectrum ranging between acquaintance and close friend, all of the participants were known to me. Indeed, the desire to be vicariously immersed in the recollections of the particular people I had targeted was an important motivational driver for my research. My personal involvement with both the subject matter and the participants thus foregrounds my role as a social actor within the research process. Moreover, the examples of "explicitly personal anecdote" and "self narrative" that I have disclosed to frame this essay necessarily means this work is subsumed by the field of autoethnography (Anderson 376). This is a branch of ethnographic sociology that includes biographical ethnography and self-narrative research. The sociologist Leon Anderson states this genre "has become almost exclusively identified with those advocating the descriptive literary approach of

[3] The consumption of alcohol by most of the participants during the interviews may be considered as an extraneous variable that has influenced responses. However, the interviews were all carried out mid-week i.e. on days where the participants had work the following day and only moderate amounts were imbibed.

evocative autoethnography" (377).[4] However, in contrast to the "postmodern or poststructuralist sensitivities" of the subjectively centred "evocative or emotional autoethnography", Anderson has proposed the development of "a viable and valuable [autoethnographic] subgenre in the realist and ethnographic tradition" (375–8). This approach places auto-ethnographic research in a social analytic context, allows for broader generalization and has a commitment to theoretical analysis. Anderson terms this "analytic autoethnography". In this conception, there is a reflexive "awareness of the reciprocal influence between ethnographers and their settings and their informants" that can help the researcher "refine generalised theoretical understandings of social processes" (382–5).

Availing myself of Anderson's analytic autoethnographic approach has allowed me to include discussions between the participants and myself that were outside the overtly observed (and recorded) interview process. With the exception of one of the interviews (with Matt Wrack, born May 1962, who is the current General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, and was my first interviewee), all of my first sets of interviews were carried out a few days after the wave of rioting that erupted in London (and elsewhere across the UK) in early August 2011. The irony of discussing the Clash in the aftermath of this contemporary social unrest was not lost on the participants (or myself) and led to some interesting pre-interview group discussion. Before taking their turn to be interviewed individually, two of the participants (Joe Williams and Gary Bassett) concurred that the lyric "every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock" from the first album song, *Career Opportunities*, was "completely relevant" to riot-torn Britain. Also prior to being interviewed, a larger group (Dave Watkins, Kevin Barry, Bob Morris and George Bishop) discussed how one only needed to look at the national and international news to see how the Clash's themes of conflict – from the local "White Riot" to the global "Washington Bullets" continued to render the band "important" and "relevant". Similarly, the question of the social composition of the Clash's fan base that precipitated the study arose in an extemporised manner when, in post-interview conversation, I mentioned to Joe Williams and Gary Bassett that the musician Tom Robinson had stated fairly recently that he believed RAR had not functioned "to convert bigots, but to create solidarity amongst those who opposed them" (*Searchlight Extra* 7). Williams and Bassett disputed this claim and concurred that while this may have been true for the already "converted" Tom Robinson Band (TRB) fans, it was not necessarily so for all fans of the Clash. Gary Bassett (born, September 1959), who works for the London Ambulance Service, stated during our (first) interview that the "area" of south east London he grew up in "had always had a fascist presence". For Bassett, the Clash "put a line down [and asked anyone interested in what they had to say] which side of it are

[4] Anderson quotes Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner's description of evocative autoethnography as being "the mode of storytelling [that] is akin to the novel or biography and thus fractures the boundaries that normally separate social science from literature" (377).

you on?" These sentiments all echoed Mardell's thesis that the Clash effected a causal influence in "retuning working class youth towards the anti-fascist stance".

The Talk of the Clash City Rockers

The conclusions that I drew from the study I carried out in the summer of 2011 were congruent with Dave Laing's observation that "punk's 'subculture' was [never] fully outside the wider cultures" (128). Indeed, I found that punk – especially as embodied by the Clash – was often quite easily reconciled with the participants' wider parent culture(s). Kevin Barry (born April 1961), who is a type setter by trade, described how "for people like us who have always been in the union, punk rock and especially the Clash, galvanised solidarity for our generation". Joe Williams (born November 1962), who works as a Buildings Services manager for Greenwich Council, talked about how the Clash "reaffirmed a world view that came from being born into a family that believed in joining a union and not crossing a picket line". Dave Watkins (born April 1961) built a branch of the National Union of School Students in his Secondary Modern school in 1975 and was a member of RAR from its inception in 1976. Watkins' mother was a life-long Labour Party activist who fought for pension rights for part-time workers. Wrack, meanwhile, had a family history of trade unionism that stretched back to the 1926 General Strike and believes that being a Clash fan "reaffirmed" his growing socialist consciousness. In fact, six of those taking part in the study had a long track record of family affiliations to the labour movement and are of the view that this contributed to shaping their *a-priori* worldview.

Perhaps even more interesting for a study concerned with the influence of the Clash (and Joe Strummer) upon the lives of the fans was the revelation that three of the participants (Bob Morris, George Bishop and Sian Griffiths) were from similar socio-economic backgrounds, yet only embraced the labour movement after their experience of punk and once they had entered the workforce. Bob Morris (born December 1963) intimated "I didn't get my politics from my family; my political stance came from music". George Bishop (born February 1966) stated "I respected the Clash even more after I became left wing" as a trade unionist in the Civil and Public Servants Association during the mid-1980s. Sian Griffiths (born October 1960) attended the RAR carnival in April 1978 to "have fun" and "see the Clash for free" but went on to be an active trade unionist in the FBU and an organizer of support networks for other female fire fighters. The first survey's final participant, Piers Bannister (born March 1962), who is the only middle class representative of Clash fans in the study, worked for Amnesty International for over 22 years and currently works for an anti-death penalty voluntary organization. Bannister put his interest in international politics down to his love of the Clash – stating "I developed with the Clash" and that the Clash's exposition "of global injustice made me want to do something about it". However, he also credits the influence of his educated parents and, by extension, a liberal-left middle-class parent culture.

While the term 'parent culture', as figured by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s, was not supposed to be confused with intergenerational relationships, the role of parents and parenting during the formative socialization process was offered by *some* of the participants as an important explanatory factor for why they gravitated towards the Clash and Joe Strummer over other punk bands and front-people during the punk era. Tim Mardell stated that he believed he benefited from having had a father who was a "staunch Labour supporter, a staunch trade unionist" and who "had an open mind about multiculturalism". Indeed, with hindsight, my own father's abiding support for the Labour Party (at the moment Margaret Thatcher drew a line under the post-war political consensus) and my mother's love of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen (both of whom were significant influences on Joe Strummer) are likely to have helped orientate me towards the Clash's "new-wave" rebel rock aesthetic.

Another conclusion of the study was that despite a loud backlash in the letters pages of the music press and elsewhere arguing the Clash had "sold out" (in the period following RAR), many Clash fans remained loyal supporters of the Clash and the band's front-man.[5] Certainly, most of the participants professed to having stuck with the Clash – through the challenge presented by *Sandinista!* circa 1980 (discussed below) and even the *Cut the Crap* fag-end of the band's life circa 1984–85. Generally, there was a consensus that the Clash (and Joe Strummer) emerged as "leaders" of the UK punk movement and then outgrew this sub-cultural scene in mostly positive ways. During the symposium at London Met I argued that my study's qualitative data ultimately lends itself to the interpretation that posits fans of the Clash (over time) were either reassured of, or assisted in becoming assured in, their progressive (pro-Labour and trade union) commitments.

Gauging Joe Strummer's "Long Shadow"

Matthew Worley, a member of the Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change Steering Committee (who is researching the politics of the British punk rock scene more generally) put me in touch with Brady Harrison at the University of Montana who was involved in a collective project exploring cultural perspectives on the life and work of Joe Strummer. Although my symposium paper was centred on people's reflective responses to questions about the Clash, much of the data that I had collected

[5] For a good example of second-wave punk anti-Clash sentiment see the documentary, *Rough Cut and Ready Dubbed* (Hassan Shah and Dom Shaw, 1982). In this film young punks and skinheads line up circa 1980 to give their opinions on the Clash: "Not as good as they used to be"; "Sold out"; "A bunch of wankers". However, the "election" of Joe Strummer as fantasy prime minister by *NME* readers in the 5 May 1979 "Election Special" demonstrates continuing support from young music fans and corresponds more closely with the opinions of the participants canvassed for this study.

exceeded this remit and included ruminations about Joe Strummer that post-dated the Clash. In the light of my discussions with Harrison and with the tenth anniversary of both the FBU benefit and Joe Strummer's untimely death on the horizon, I agreed to design a follow up survey that I could use to elicit the participants' thoughts and opinions about the impact of Joe Strummer on their lives and upon popular culture more generally. Some of the questions were intended to encourage responses that considered Strummer within his early Clash context. The first question asked was: "Do you think Joe Strummer became a 'figurehead' or 'spokesperson' for young people in the late 1970s?" Other questions enquired about the participants' views on the significance of Joe Strummer's post-Clash after-life. Thus, the question detailed above was followed by: "Do you think Joe Strummer's enduring credibility is all down to this Clash-era period?"

For the second set of interviews I tried to repeat the original process by meeting the same individuals and groups I had met with for the first interviews in the same venues.[6] Subsequently, I met up with Tim Mardell in the same Canary Wharf pub in the central business district where he manages construction projects. I met again with Joe Williams and Gary Bassett in their local pub in south east London, and the larger group in Soho in central London. The latter group was minus Dave Watkins, but plus Lisa Hayman (born January 1965). Hayman's agreement to participate in both surveys back-to-back doubled the female contingent of the sample (without altering its class or ethnic composition) and also brought the aggregate number of participants to eleven. Matt Wrack, Sian Griffiths and Piers Bannister didn't take part in the second round of interviews, but due to their respective personal involvement with Joe Strummer benefit events (at Acton in 2002 and Milton Keynes in 1988) I had already collected useful material regarding their feelings towards Strummer's post-Clash work.

The remainder of this essay draws upon a synthesis of data from both sets of interviews and, therefore, extends beyond analyses of people's early memories of the Clash (and the punk scene the band was integral to) to present the more nuanced discursive narratives that a broader temporal frame of reflection has permitted the participants to plot. To some extent, the project can now be considered as one that has employed "a retrospective method for collecting life history data" (Elder and Giele 7). This methodology has facilitated the study members' "comparison of events in a particular year [… with] events across the [heretofore] life span" (7). The particular significant moments for this study are the Clash's "RAR turn" in April 1978 and Joe Strummer's support for the FBU in November 2002. The use of this quarter-century time frame – from the vantage point of a further ten years' critical distance – has precipitated the generation of reflective data that resists both "post-modern" evocative/emotional autoethnography and phenomenological interpretations by locating the participants' life stories within the material contexts of their life stages. Sian Griffiths' personal narrative, for example, illustrates a

[6] This strategy was partly practical and partly to maintain continuity. However, the same caveat detailed in footnote 3 obviously continues to apply.

process of politicization that developed over time. Unlike others canvassed for this study, she recalled how her 17-year-old-self attended the April 1978 RAR Carnival Against the Nazis not "to be serious" or because she was "political", but so she could "have fun" and "see the Clash for free".[7] However, this recollection was from the perspective of a trade unionist recently suspended by her employers (the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority) for eight months over an incident relating to her trade union activity during an industrial dispute in October 2010. Moreover, eight years previously, in December 2002, Griffiths organized a guard of honour for Joe Strummer's funeral in west London. Griffiths felt she had a "duty to honour Joe" and to repay a double debt. Joe Strummer had supported her trade union's then current struggle, but he had also been "part and parcel" of the punk scene that had been central to shaping her identity and forging her self-confidence a quarter of a century earlier.

This is Joe Public Speaking

During the first round of interviews, Joe Williams (born November 1961) put the release of the Clash's third single, *Complete Control*, in September 1977, as the moment the Clash's "anger" was tempered "by something in Joe's delivery that had a hurting poignancy which made him our spokesperson". Asked whether Strummer became a spokesperson for young people in the late 1970s for the follow-up interview, Williams reminisced once again about the Clash's third single. "I was still 15 when I bought *Complete Control*, [the line] 'This is Joe Public speaking' spoke to me, not just because I was Joe and he was Joe, but because it spoke to *us*." Responding to the same question, Kevin Barry shot back: "Yeah, definitely, Joe was a bit older – he knew what he wanted to say. People used his lines."

Considering the significance of the Clash's endorsement of RAR for the project's first survey, Tim Mardell offered a rhetorical question: "Who else in the punk era was prepared to say the NF and fascism had to be confronted?" He continued, "the Pistols toyed with fascist imagery and the Jam were conservatives [yet] skinheads were a constant menace. We were only kids, but there was a hardcore element going the wrong way; we were lucky to have a figurehead in Joe which meant you could go the other way and be in Joe Strummer's gang". Asked if Strummer became a youth figurehead for the follow up survey, Mardell responded unhesitatingly: "Absolutely, Joe was pivotal in bringing politics into the [punk] scene."

Bob Morris described himself as "a Mod" who "loved the [punk] music". He attended the RAR event in April 1978 at Victoria Park but missed the Clash's performance on account of being waylaid by NF supporting skinheads who wanted to fight. Morris described how the multi-racial group he was with fought with

[7] Joe Williams, aged 16, marched from Trafalgar Square under the banner 'Action for the Community of Tooting' and says he would have marched to the rally even if the Clash had not been performing.

skinheads at the edge of the park and, with the assistance of some Rastafarians, eventually saw them off. For Morris, the Clash endorsing RAR "had credibility" because unlike the "overtly political" TRB (who headlined the Victoria Park event), "the Clash were a rock and roll band". However, Morris is reticent about affording Joe Strummer youth spokesperson status. He argued "the Clash were greater than the sum of their parts" and that it was *the Clash's* intervention in the public discourse around fascism that mattered. In Morris's account, "the NF was a bit of a fashion thing, you either were [for the NF] or you weren't. The Clash playing reggae and coming out on *our* side was different to right on bands like Tom Robinson [doing so]". The emphasis on the role of the Clash over Joe Strummer notwithstanding, Morris's argument about the Clash's positive connection with young, white working class audiences concurs with the opinions of Mardell, Bassett and Williams detailed above. In the accounts of these participants, the Clash had a punk rock street credibility that helped the anti-racist message of RAR to reach a white working class audience that the TRB could not. Gilroy's extemporized thesis may better fit the TRB fan base than the fans of the Clash. It is primarily for this reason (as articulated by Mardell and Morris) that the participants all expressed a belief that Joe Strummer and/or the Clash played an important progressive role in challenging the rise of the far right in Britain during the late 1970s.

Another aim of the research was to ascertain the participants' attitudes towards the Clash and Joe Strummer in the early 1980s and towards Joe Strummer during the two decades that followed the Clash's implosion (circa 1982–85). The purpose of this was to explore the relationship between the participants and the Clash/Joe Strummer over time. With the exception of one participant, Gary Bassett, who became disillusioned with the Clash, Joe Strummer and punk more generally "around *Combat Rock* time [circa 1982]", there was a consensus that the Clash and Joe Strummer continued to make positive – political – contributions to popular culture in the early 1980s and in the period that followed up to November 2002. Kevin Barry remembered finding the 1980 triple album, *Sandinista!* "hard work", but argued this work was "rewarding". For Barry, "the Clash were the punk rock group that grew up" and who "painted bigger pictures for us". Asked if Joe Strummer's enduring credibility was all down to his work with the Clash, Barry replied: "Partly down to this period and partly down to how he handled himself afterwards." Barry saw Joe Strummer with the Latino Rockabilly War "on the Rock Against the Rich tour" in May 1988, almost exactly ten years after the RAR carnival, with the Pogues in 1991 and fronting The Mescaleros "half a dozen times". He also pointed up that he "enjoyed Joe's contribution to Big Audio Dynamite – on songs like *Beyond the Pale*" (from the 1986 album, *No. 10, Upping Street* on which Strummer has seven co-writing credits).

Joe Williams believes that the later Clash period had a bigger impact upon his political consciousness than the earlier "angrier" era. "*Sandinista!* fed stuff into my mind about oppressive regimes around the world that I wouldn't otherwise have known about." In response to the question of whether Strummer's enduring credibility ultimately derived from his association with the Clash, Williams

replied with a forthright "No, absolutely not! Of course it's not". Similarly, when asked if he saw Joe Strummer in the post-Clash period, he replied "Of course I did". Like Kevin Barry (Tim Mardell, Bob Morris, Dave Watkins, Lisa Hayman, George Bishop and Piers Bannister) Williams also saw Strummer with the Latino Rockabilly War and The Mescaleros. Like Barry again, Williams also appreciated Strummer's collaboration with Mick Jones in B.A.D.

The two youngest participants in the project, George Bishop and Lisa Hayman, both spoke at greater length and with more alacrity while participating in the second survey. On the question of whether Strummer's credibility was down to his contribution while with the Clash, Bishop replied:

> For me, no, because we went on with Strummer. Yes, to a point, the early days made him credible, but he stayed credible to the end. Strummer never let us down, he always delivered; musically, politically and professionally – it sounds funny to say, but it's true – we were always guaranteed a good night out.

Hayman responded to the same proposition with a question: "Was it in the 1970s or later? From my point of view, people took more notice of his [Strummer's] causes later, because he was separated from the Clash." For this reason Hayman suggests Joe Strummer was more of a "spokesperson" for her in his later incarnations than whilst in the Clash.

The Burden of Authenticity

One of the key questions participants were asked during the second survey was: "How much of Joe Strummer's persona was authentic and how much was a performance?" Joe Williams responded with the John Lennon lyric "A working class hero is something to be". Williams argued "this weighed heavily on him [Strummer], it was important to Joe to buy into what people wanted him to be". During the first survey, Williams expressed how, occasionally, he had felt disappointed by Strummer's wilful "yob image". But for Williams, Strummer's beliefs were more important than his persona. "Joe's beliefs stayed the same. As Joe became more comfortable [with himself], layers peeled away and what was there in the first place was still there." Tim Mardell replied to the same question more indignantly:

> Who says it [Strummer's persona] wasn't real? He lived the life, didn't have the dough, [he] had hardship. His background doesn't change his achievement one iota. Joe never conformed; he didn't become a banker he became a musician and an artist. He wasn't afraid to change musically and he opened people's ears and eyes to the possibilities of different music. He kept looking forwards. Joe represents making the right choices.

Considering this question, Kevin Barry reasoned that although Joe Strummer's "privileged background was exaggerated […] he [Strummer] felt he had to overcompensate for it". On the same question, George Bishop concurred with Barry's assessment: "Strummer's background wasn't *that* posh – he was middle class, so what? Strummer wasn't a fake; if he was we wouldn't be talking about him now." Bob Morris remembers being uninterested by the "flak" the Clash got for "supposedly being middle class poseurs". He says "that [criticism] came from people who were jealous". For Morris, Joe "Strummer was consistently sincere and consistently interesting – which is what attracts people like me [a working class youth worker] to him, even if he's playing Hungarian folk [music]".

Arms Aloft in Acton Town

None of the non FBU members participating in the project attended The Mescaleros' FBU benefit at Acton Town Hall in November 2002, but there was unanimity amongst everyone surveyed that Acton symbolized why Joe Strummer still mattered. Lisa Hayman, who works for the Musicians Union, remembers thinking "it was amazing, but not surprising that he would support such a brilliant cause". For Hayman, Strummer's support for the FBU at Acton "justifies why you had such a passion for him in the first place". Bob Morris used similar language: "I thought it was brilliant. As a trade unionist I thought it was amazing." George Bishop concurred more emphatically: "It was absolutely fucking brilliant. They [the fire fighters] were working class blokes in normal jobs and Strummer was there for them." Joe Williams saw the Acton benefit as illustrating his argument about Strummer's consistency. "Joe playing for the FBU has resonance – it fitted with the whole Clash ethos. Joe and Mick being solid and representing the people they'd always been about – 'this is Joe public speaking!'"

There was unanimity also on the question of whether Joe Strummer had ever "sold out". Responses to this question were mostly succinct. Kevin Barry replied: "No, in a word. No chance." Echoing Barry, George Bishop's response was even more peremptory: "Never. No way. Not by any stretch of criteria." Bob Morris offered: "No, it was the opposite with Strummer. He could have done a 'Hookey' [i.e. rested on his back catalogue in a self-serving way in the manner of Peter Hook] but his passion for music drove him on'. Gary Bassett is the one participant who "confess[ed]" to having thought Joe Strummer had sold out. But Bassett is now at pains to stress "on reflection, this was more to do with my own confused world view". Bassett says "I better appreciate and understand the Clash and Joe Strummer now than I did then".

"The First Important One of Our Generation to Die"

Ten of the 11 participants remember exactly where they were when they heard the news that Joe Strummer had died. All remember how they felt. Tim Mardell recalls:

> I was working at Canary Wharf DS4 working on a building. I saw the *Evening Standard* headline: 'Punk Legend Dies.' I thought it would be someone from the Lurkers or a rumour. I was devastated. Even though I'd never met him, I felt like a family member had died. I cried my eyes out right there.

George Bishop remembers being "distraught". "Dave [Watkins] phoned me at work. I listened to the message standing in the cold in shock". Bob Morris talked about "feeling gutted". He recounted that although "Lee Brilleaux and Ian Dury had already gone [...] Joe was the first important one of our generation to die". Morris spent most of Monday December 23rd raising a glass to Strummer: "I left a pint of Guinness for Joe [in every pub] all along the Mile End Road."

Piers Bannister had met Joe Strummer while working for Amnesty International when the Latino Rockabilly War played a benefit concert for the humanitarian organization at the Milton Keynes Bowl in June 1988. Bannister's eldest son, Elliot, who was born in July 2003, has the middle name Strummer on his birth certificate. Like Sian Griffiths, Bannister felt a similar need "to pay tribute to Joe". When Bannister reflected on the bands and musicians that have been important to him in his life he concluded: "I liked David Bowie, Adam and the Ants and the Jam at the time, but the Clash and Joe Strummer have stayed with me." Other participants also expressed how they felt the influence of the Clash and Joe Strummer in later life. Asked if he thought liking the Clash had affected how he thought about the world, Dave Watkins replied "More now than then". A locksmith by trade who is now a manager for a successful security company, Watkins gestured to his business suit and recited lines from *Clampdown*: "You grow up and you calm down, you start wearing blue and brown."

Turning Rebellion into Action

In his seminal 1984 essay, "Postmodernism, or the cultural logic of late capitalism", the American cultural critic Fredric Jameson dismissed the counter-cultural "political interventions [...] of *The Clash*" for being "all somehow secretly disarmed and reabsorbed by a system which they themselves might well be considered a part, since they can achieve no distance from it" (87). A schematic engagement with this thesis might posit Strummer as having re-connected with the struggle against capitalism because he had achieved sufficient "distance" from the "system" supporting the anarchist Class War led Rock Against the Rich campaign in his "wilderness" period, and then the FBU having become an independently

signed artist at the turn of the millennium.[8] Matt Wrack saw the Clash on the White Riot tour November 15, 1977–25 years to the day before the Acton FBU benefit.[9] In the first interview carried out for the project, Wrack commented that he "thought it was great that our bands were lining up for the anti-fascist cause" circa 1978. However, he suggested that Strummer's final gesture of "supporting a trade union struggle was more socialist than the Clash supporting a populist campaign against racism" 24 years earlier.

Yet while Wrack's comments cogently point out that Joe Strummer became, if anything, more radical at the end of his life, most of the participants of this project have suggested Strummer's popular cultural interventions – both with and without the Clash – have, for the most part, been a consistent source of personal and cultural enrichment.

Echoing Sian Griffiths' life history, Lisa Hayman expressed her belief that "getting into punk music and liking the Clash made me confident and changed my whole life". She says that without this experience "I wouldn't have become interested in politics or worked for the Musicians' Union". Yet Hayman is also of the view that Strummer remained important as a spokesperson for her generation by demonstrating that "he definitely did care" and "was genuine" in the post-Clash periods.

Jameson's critique is further undercut by some of the participants' insistence that Joe Strummer should be defined by a consistent commitment to challenging his audience in terms of both form and content. In the words of Tim Mardell, Strummer "opened people's ears and eyes to the possibilities of different music". Indeed, it was while with the Clash – working within the "system" – that Strummer most boldly risked alienating his audience. Reviewing the sprawling triple album, *Sandinista!*, for *Melody Maker* at the end of 1980, Patrick Humphries argued the Clash's "interesting subject matter" was "lost in a welter of reggae/dub overkill" (qtd in Gray 354).[10] Marcus Gray has noted with irony how the Clash went from being critiqued "for exhibiting retrogressive tendencies [circa the *Give 'Em Enough Rope* and *London Calling* periods] to being criticised for experimenting with form" (356–7). But this experimental foray also pulled the rug from under some of the band's most ardent supporters. Garry Bassett says "I didn't understand

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[8] Strummer was brought in from the "wilderness" with "the offer of a record deal with Hell Cat, the pet project of Tim Armstrong of Rancid" (Salewicz, *Redemption Song, the Definitive Biography of Joe Strummer*, London: HarperCollins, 2006, p. 560). All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

[9] Wrack saw the Clash on November 15, 1977 at the Elizabethan Belle Vue in Manchester, exactly a quarter of a century before Joe Strummer's final London performance at Acton Town Hall.

[10] *Return of The Last Gang in Town*, London: Helter Skelter, 2003. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

Sandinista!" while Tim Mardell remembers finding the album "difficult".[11] Although Bob Morris remembers being intrigued by the album's title – "[a]ll of a sudden I wanted to know what Sandinista was" – he also admits that "[a]part from the singles I didn't like the album at first". The wilfully anti-commercial, "difficult" *Sandinista!* period surely goes some way to refuting Jameson's suggestion that the Clash were easily "reabsorbed" by the "system". Moreover, the accounts of the participants detailed in this essay attest to the progressive influence of the Clash and Joe Strummer upon their lives (and popular culture more generally) throughout their youth and into middle age.

Conclusion

For almost all the participants, Joe Strummer has remained a progressive touchstone for over three-and-a-half decades. All regard Strummer as having a significant place in their life stories. It is no exaggeration to suggest the White Riot tour, RAR, the *Sandinista!*-hurdle, the Clash's implosion, Strummer's collaboration with B.A.D., Rock Against the Rich, returning with The Mescaleros and supporting the FBU at Acton are all plot-points in the participants' lives. There is a sense of journey in the way some of those surveyed discussed how they "developed with" the Clash and "went on with" Joe Strummer. Yet there is also the suggestion that Strummer represented consistency – by "stay[ing] credible" and "consistently sincere". Indeed, in the very act of "not being afraid to change", Strummer consistently "mad[e] the right choices", "musically, politically and professionally".[12] Perhaps most pointedly of all, Joe Strummer is remembered by the participants for being "about", and "there for", people such as themselves.

Although based on a small and potentially unrepresentative sample, the reflective recollections that have been elicited make the project an important contribution to the critical discourse around Joe Strummer. Despite shortcomings, not least the failure to address Dave Laing's observation that punk's "anti-elitism did not preclude the reproduction of macho styles" (381)[13] the study has demonstrated ways in which Joe Strummer has had a material impact upon the lives of its participants. While the project as it stands can lay claim for validity (for its insights into the influence of the Clash and Joe Strummer upon the lives of its participants), a larger and more diverse study is needed to establish the extent to which the parent-cultural forces considered above provides a useful theoretical

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[11] Bassett and Mardell respectively add, "I now put that down to my stupidity" and "I have since grown to love it".

[12] Interestingly, no one brought up the question of the Clash's infighting and Joe Strummer's sanction of the sacking of band members. This simply seems to be taken as read.

[13] The participants of the study were generally of the view that the Clash's masculine gang aesthetic was integral to the band's appeal and this was seen as positive by both the male and female participants.

approach for understanding the appeal of the Clash and Joe Strummer. A wider (i.e. less London-centric) collection of oral histories is necessary for developing more "generalized theoretical understandings of social processes" (Anderson 385) in which different audiences have established and maintained an affinity with Joe Strummer. Towards this objective, more interdisciplinary work in the fields of cultural history, sociology and other areas of enquiry is surely needed to more fully evaluate the long shadow that Joe Strummer continues to cast across many people's lives and popular culture more generally.

Chapter 5
Saint Joe: An Apostate Writes

Alex Ogg

One of the prevailing dictates of punk is that there is no room for heroes, that the separation of performer from audience runs contrary to its tenets and affronts an essential article of faith. It is, like much in the punk ethos, a guiding principle rather than concrete reality. A similar struggle for authenticity can readily be observed in other genres. One thinks immediately of hip-hop's "keep it real" rhetoric, despite the slew of records themed on (sometimes playful) braggadocio that concurrently boast of personal wealth, fantastical or material, running counter to that premise. Yet punk's DIY/independent principles intrinsically and avowedly broke down barriers and challenged the pre-ordained, even as the dismantling of established hierarchies led to alternative totem poles. The evolution, layer-cake like, of "punk values" has meant that authenticity conflicts and conceits are perhaps more resonant within punk than across other genres where performers have less desire to express "meaning" beyond the consumption of entertainment. It is also key to understanding the way in which Joe Strummer of the Clash is perceived and why volumes such as this consider *his* meaning to be worthy of investigation.

Some context around the forces that shaped UK punk is useful. One acknowledged facet of the distance between the mainstream rock and pop worlds and that of the new generation of bands that emerged in the UK from 1976 onwards was how manifestly differentiated their lyrical subject matter was. The first wave punk bands employed self-deprecation extensively in response to the aggrandisement common to much rock 'n' roll. The roll call of negative or disparaging sentiments ranged from image anxiety (X-Ray Spex's "Identity") and "loser" status (the Buzzcocks' plaintive "What Do I Get?" typified much of their catalogue) through to sexual failure and impotence (ATV's "Love Lies Limp"). Others intuitively questioned the authenticity of the punk milieu (The Prefects' "Going Through The Motions," the TV Personalities' "Part Time Punks") or self-mockingly hailed their lack of musical virtue (The Adverts' "One Chord Wonders", the Nosebleeds' "Ain't Bin To No Music School").

The Clash's own "Garageland", written in response to Charles Shaar-Murray's dismissive notice for their *Screen on the Green* appearance,[1] bestrides both subsets. At that time the Clash were clearly in step with the movement's narrative, though in lines such as "The truth is only known by guttersnipes", naive romanticism of

[1] Shaar-Murray states: "The Clash are the kind of garage band who should be returned to the garage immediately, preferably with the engine running" (qtd in Gray).

the working class/lower class that filtered through many of Strummer's songs is evident too. The Clash were not unduly modest for long. In songs such as "Clash City Rockers" (released as a single in February 1978 but included on the American version of their debut album) and "Last Gang In Town" (from second album *Give 'Em Enough Rope*) they were perversely self-celebratory, missing a beat on the martial stride of punk, or perhaps superimposing one.

The precept that punk performers are not "above" punk consumers and audiences – explored here in relation to the mythic quality of "heroes" – was already well established by this time. Examples enshrined in punk lore include the Stranglers' "No More Heroes" (an abstract lyric, but one whose fabric framed the "overthrow of the old order" zeitgeist perfectly), the Maniacs' "Ain't No Legend" and Rudi's "Big Time", via the satire of the Art Attacks' "Punk Rock Stars". Contemporaneous examples that demonstrate how much this became a punk rock *meme* internationally include Situated Chaos' "Kill Your Idols"[2] or Vomit Visions' hilarious 1980 Deutschpunk single, "Punks are the Old Farts of Today" ("Johnny Lydon is just a liar").

The incitement to activism offered in the Desperate Bicycles' "Go and do it" mantra[3] can similarly be seen to have transmitted itself to *Maximum Rock 'n' Roll*'s *Book Your Own Fucking Life* how-to guide and all manner of independent counter-cultural activity beyond, supported by a world-wide network of participants. It is here, though, that we can see the first fissure open up between the Clash and punk's trajectory. "Independence" is a philosophical as well as practical construct and observable at myriad levels in the punk subculture. Within the sphere of contemporary live performance, for example, many have sought to symbolically reduce or negate the barrier of the stage by joining the crowd or inviting audiences to join them on stage. For many, the Clash symbolically held true to this by allowing their fan base to access venues illegally, without paying, often to the dismay of promoters (see Gray, Gilbert, Salewicz and others; but note also that this was a convention Mick Jones had learned as a teenage fan of Mott The Hoople). Media characterizations of the band's members overwhelmingly depict them as both personable and approachable in contrast to the unattainable or remote rock stars of the mid-1970s. Such a level of access and communion with "fans" (another extremely loaded term in punk circles) – recounted unfailingly in most depictions of the band from serious literary endeavours to internet comment box one-liners – duly became part of their "heroic myth".

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[2] Later used as a name by a Long Island hardcore punk band as well as being the title of a Sonic Youth album.

[3] The Desperate Bicycles made the statement "It was easy, it was cheap – go and do it!" on "Handlebars", the b-side of their independently released debut single "Smokescreen", in August 1977. It was repeated in the graphics of their later releases and was widely replicated by subsequent independent bands, one derivation being "Do It Records", who released several early Adam and the Ants recordings.

The idea that bursting the pomposity of the creator-audience rubric was an empowering and democratizing objective took root principally via the concept of independence enshrined in vinyl releases and fanzines, made available by technological advances in pressing plants and photocopier technology, cheapening access to both. "The DIY ethic states that Punks should not be content with being consumers and spectators but instead should become active participants in creating culture by starting their own fan magazines … creating their own record labels, starting their own bands, and creating a network of venues for live performance" (Roberts and Moore 22). The Clash's decision to sign to CBS, which we will return to, placed them outside of that culture (although all the pre-eminent first wave UK punk bands, with the exception of the Damned, would also sign to "majors").

All these innovations provided ballast to an argument, sometimes explicitly made within punk, against placing any performer on a pedestal. Perhaps the most didactic, literal lyrical example is Stiff Little Fingers' "Nobody's Hero", the near title-track from the Belfast band's second album.[4] "Don't wanna be nobody's hero", Jake Burns intoned. "Don't wanna be nobody's star." Double negatives aside, the meaning was emphatic. "Don't let heroes get your kicks for you, it's up to you and no-one else." Twenty-three years on, the keynote track on Stiff Little Fingers' 2003 album *Guitar and Drums* was "Strummerville", Burns' tribute to the fallen Joe Strummer. This time, after saluting "the voice of a generation", the lyric ran thus: "And if the music seems mundane/It's cos the companies get their own way/And all the young bands seem to say/Please turn our rebellion into money."[5] This is a self-conscious lift of a line from the Clash's "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais", itself a snide attack on rivals the Jam's adoption of "Burton suits". (The reality was that Burton suits were far more redolent of a genuinely working class psyche and likely a great deal cheaper than the purposefully "distressed" clothes Clash manager Bernie Rhodes and a team of seamstresses devised to further the Clash's rebel chic). More significant, however, is Burns' drift from year zero absolutism to a nostalgic sentimentality; it would be easier to dismiss both utterances as rhetoric shaped by the zeitgeist were it not for the fact that Burns is such a heartfelt performer who ostensibly crafted himself in Strummer's image.[6]

The author invariably encounters associates who are dismissive of punk, often in stark terms, but will then offer up the olive branch "but of course I love the Clash". The mainstreaming of the Clash into a powerful – and largely though not straightforwardly "conventional" rock act – allowed them to connect with an audience for whom punk was harsh, alien and largely incomprehensible. They served as an entry point that provided a resonance and regard for the past that the Pistols seemingly eschewed. But the complexities of the Clash's role in

[4] By which time, it should be noted, they had gravitated from an independent label to a "major", with ensuing controversy.

[5] Lyrics reproduced with permission from their author Jake Burns.

[6] "As you all know I considered the man a giant", Burns would post on his Facebook account on the 10th anniversary of Strummer's death, December 23, 2012.

popularizing or traducing punk, depending on which side of the fence you sit on (and the Bernie Rhodes-embossed[7] rhetoric of the band was very much about choosing sides), is not the issue at hand. It is, however, allied to this chapter's central contention that the Clash's transition from punk band to rock 'n' roll orthodoxy, with all its associated delights, set the foundations for their leader's elevation into the pantheon of rock icons.

It is not my intention to undermine in any way an artist who gave so much pleasure, not least to this author. Yet the dominance of the Clash in punk narratives and Strummer's beatification is troubling for someone who, perhaps naively, took some of the initial statements about punk at face value. Today some of those early clarion calls ring terribly hollow; the forced sentiments of debut single "White Riot" were at best clumsy and its celebration of black culture utterly condescending. In the first issue of *Temporary Hoarding*[8] there are interviews with both Strummer and Lydon. The latter is engaged, thoughtful and articulate; the former given to largely incoherent Pygmalian-in-reverse pronouncements that clearly seek to fabricate working class "authenticity".[9]

The Clash's first major music press interview was with Caroline Coon (later romantically linked with Paul Simonon, illustrative of the Clash's knotted ties with the media), their second with Miles for the *NME*. Strummer spent the latter interview toying with a flick-knife and making veiled threats to the journalist, who attempted to point out the pitfalls of songs like "White Riot".

> Joe has been opening and closing his flick-knife throughout the interview. He holds it close for me to see. '… Well, if you don't learn anything from it, then it's not worth it, right? But suppose some guy comes up to me and tries to put one over on me, right? And I smash his face up and he learns something from it. Well, that's in a sense creative violence.' (Miles)

The Clash were always, as the above examples demonstrate, intrinsically inauthentic. The image of Strummer as a street-fighting man from the wrong side of the tracks is perhaps the most comical expression of that. The "year zero" mantra – given further expression in the Clash catalogue via "1977" and its dismissal of musical forebears whose songs Strummer once covered in the 101'ers, has been effectively dispelled by anyone with a real knowledge of the forces that surrounded the development of punk. The Clash were certainly

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[7] Bernie Rhodes, the Clash's manager, routinely pronounces on his importance in framing the band's politics and outlook. He can be seen in this regard as something of an apprentice to Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols' manager, who similarly attempted to wrestle away ownership of the "myth" of these two iconic bands for their own fiscal gain.

[8] The first issue of *Temporary Hoarding* was released on May 1, published by Rock Against Racism.

[9] By this time, of course, Strummer had affected a complete change in his public school accent to one broadly redolent of the London working class.

no different to the Pistols, Damned and most of the other major players in having a pre-history that was decidedly "un-punk". However, John Mellor's transition from Woody the Hippy with the acoustic guitar to Joe Strummer with three chords and the truth, and a *very* electric guitar, was amongst the sharpest of Damaclean U-turns. In fairness, his honesty in citing the Pistols as precursors to that transition is well documented – "the stun grenade in the room", "a million years ahead", as he recounted in Julien Temple's *The Future is Unwritten* documentary. And if he did jump any bandwagon, there was clear evidence of footfall in the direction it was travelling during his squatting years.

Yet the charge sheet against the Clash turns not only on authenticity. Principal amongst the misdemeanours cited by detractors is that decision to sign to CBS. This was famously derided by Mark Perry of *Sniffin' Glue* in his "Punk died the day the Clash signed to CBS" proclamation. But the "betrayal" was also anathema to the new generation of independent labels such as Rough Trade, who were in the process of proving that the indentured servitude of a conventional recording contract could be circumnavigated. "We saw that as a sell out, I guess", Geoff Travis of Rough Trade explained.[10] However, he also points out that it was a further incentive to "renew our endeavours". The "rejection" perversely energised independent music, with direct references to the Clash made in indie 45s by the Mekons, Scritti Politti and others.[11]

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[10] Personal interview that formed part of the book *Independence Days*.

[11] The issue of the Clash signing to CBS remains divisive. Any claims advanced by the likes of Perry, Penny Rimbaud or indeed the author of this piece as to the wisdom of that decision are contested by others, such as *Last Gang In Town* author Marcus Gray, who points to timing, opportunity and pragmatism. "Challenged in early 1978, Bernie said his reasoning was this: without the means of production, independence was just a gesture. In early 1977, the infrastructure was not there to enable the Clash to get through to a mass audience on an indie label, and there wasn't time to develop it. The window of opportunity for punk as of January 1977 looked as though it was going to last about six months to a year. Malcolm [McLaren] got his payoff from EMI in January and Bernie obviously thought, that's the way it'll go with the Clash and CBS. Take the money from the major now, do something with it, and when they throw us off or change their minds in six months' time, then we can look at the other options. It didn't happen because CBS were too savvy and were quick to realise how the shock and horror media response to the Grundy show outburst added up to priceless publicity. But it took the Pistols and the Clash doing what they did on major labels to make it possible for other bands to do what they did on indies and quasi-indies. They got the publicity, they created a market, they convinced small businessmen it was worth a punt. People choose to forget, but Strummer actually did sign to an indie label in April 1976: Chiswick, with the 101ers. Bernie used an indie to break Subway Sect, and then sold Vic Godard about three times over for useful money. And the Specials used Bernie's model to record 'Gangsters' and establish 2-Tone. Bernie used his own indie label, Oddball, to break Dexy's Midnight Runners, and again sell them to a major for big bucks. He did what worked" (personal correspondence).

But the most sustained criticism arose from Dial House in Essex, home of the Crass collective.

> 'I was taken in, if you like', Penny Rimbaud conceded.[12] 'I only saw The Clash once, in Chelmsford, and I really liked them. I liked the style. I liked the attitude. I sort of "believed" it. So it was a huge disappointment. The Clash were shipping themselves off to the US, making an extreme and unacceptable contradiction. So we felt we were on our own, whereas we thought we were part of this game, almost like kids in a playground … And that's just the rock 'n' roll circus. The Pistols belonged firmly within that. I'm not critical of that. That's what rock 'n' roll always has been – schoolboy revolution, a lot of fun, a great Saturday night out – but it's no more than that. The Clash had certain political pretensions, but not the age or experience to see them through. Strummer showed later in his life that he had some genuine political ideology, which he tried to practice. Somewhat misguidedly, but then that's my political view. So they moved slightly to the right, or left, of the rock 'n' roll lineage, and that's where they collided with us. We took the baton. They fell back very quickly into that lineage, and we were out on our own – and that's where the punk movement started, in my view, rather than rock 'n' roll history, which is where that lot belong, and rightly so, because they were good rock 'n' rollers.'

Rimbaud's theory that punk effectively started with Crass is contentious and borderline self-mythologizing, but there is substantial evidence to suggest that the actuality of punk became redefined due to their interjection. If we address the concept of punk as it now manifests itself worldwide – from queercore and riot grrl to East European hardcore bands and Japanese D-Beat – it has far more in common with the aesthetics and philosophies of Crass and their progeny than the Clash. Not that the Clash's influence is unfelt, of course, and you could point to the global success of Green Day, for one, as evidence of the "reach" of more commercial punk-based hybrids (even though their mindset has as much to do with bands such as Dead Kennedys). Similarly, it would be duplicitous to employ hindsight to berate the Clash retrospectively when their initial "moment" came at the outset of British punk, with its "values" still in the firmament. But the assertion is made here that our understanding of what "punk" *is* has been challenged and fundamentally altered by artists who followed in their wake.

Related to the charge of "inauthenticity", a further criticism of the Clash in general and Joe Strummer in particular, is that of sloganeering. As Jello Biafra points out, "It's one thing to call an album *Sandinista!*, it's another to actually *do* something about the situation in Nicaragua" (personal correspondence). Strummer's tee-shirt advocacy of political causes such as the terrorist cell *Brigate Rosse*[13] or his misreading of the complexities of the Northern Ireland punk

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[12] Personal interview that formed part of the book *Independence Days*.

[13] Seen at the Rock Against Racism carnival in Hackney in April 1978.

community[14] serve as examples. Having famously gone to Belfast for a show, cancelling it over security concerns whilst still managing a photo opportunity at an army checkpoint, the delicately positioned alliance between Catholic and Protestant punks was strained by Strummer's later comments over the Republican struggle. This caused dismay within a community that idolized the Clash but had desperately tried to free itself from sectarianism. "We didn't need that", wrote Guy Trelford, author of *It Makes You Want To Spit* (personal correspondence, qtd in *Independence Days*).

Sometimes these objections took physical form, notably when Strummer was beaten up[15] for being "fake working class". Later, the band's May 19, 1980 appearance at the Markthalle in Hamburg would pass into Clash folklore as the show where Strummer assaulted a violent fan with his guitar. That the reasons behind the audience's behavior are rooted in perceptions of the band as "sell-outs" is recorded in the work of Gray and others. But perhaps not the *specificity* of the objection, with the audience challenge directly informed by the Crass lyric "Punk Is Dead".[16] The following is an extract from the book *Keine Zukunft was gestern – Punk in Deutschland*, written by Rudi Krawall.[17]

> The Clash were generally seen as traitors of the punk rock spirit and the CBS deal certainly did not help them. On top of that, many thought their music to be too soft, etc … The troubles surrounding this gig were not coincidental or spontaneous but rather planned … I remember attending a gig with a few local bands at a youth centre called Shalom in Norderstedt. If my memory serves me right, it was Scrubby Kids, Razors, Slime and Kotzbrocken on the bill. At some point during that night one person grabbed the microphone in between the sets and gave the audience a speech. In this speech he was mentioning that The Clash will be performing at the Markthalle in Hamburg in a few weeks' time and that everyone should boycott said gig. The main reason to call a boycott was the fact that tickets were costing DM17 or DM18 and at the time other international acts were playing for DM9 to DM12. Furthermore, references were made to the Crass song 'Punk Is Dead' and that the Clash were on a major record label and only in it to make money and not for any revolutionary reasons … On the day of the gig I arrived at the Markthalle and there were already about 70 to 80 punks there basically barricading the main entrance to the venue … At some point the security realised that something was up and they stepped in so that the people with the tickets could get in and dispersed the group of punks … Many of the punks that were out for trouble pushed themselves all the way up to the

[14] See *It Makes You Want To Spit*, Sean O'Neill and Guy Trelford's excellent book on Northern Irish punk.

[15] See Chris Salewicz's *Redemption Song*.

[16] "Schoolboy sedition backed by big time promoters, CBS promote the Clash, But it ain't for revolution, it's just for cash" ran the lyric.

[17] Kindly translated for me by Josef Loderer.

> front of the stage so that they could shout abuse at the band and often did so by shouting 'Punk Is Dead' at the end of a song … The fact that the band just constantly carried on as if nothing was happening left some of us in awe and respect for the band to the point where some of us that originally came to the gig to cause disturbances turned into impartial spectators. But a few songs later in the band's set Joe Strummer lifted his guitar up in the air and smashed it over the head of one of the punks constantly heckling and provoking him in front of the stage … After the gig I stood with a few friends in front of the Markthalle as two police cars arrived at the venue. I saw the cops entering the venue and about five minutes later they came out with a handcuffed Joe Strummer, passing right through our little group. Two of my friends sang 'Police and Thieves' for Joe and the whole story of this evening made it into the Bild-Zeitung the following day.

A bootleg LP of the evening captures some of the tension and an incident that had a deep impact on Strummer. He told Roy Carr of the *NME* a few days later: "I was emotionally shattered, completely disheartened to see what's happened to *the seeds of what we've planted* [author's italics]. If those pricks and kids like them are the fruits of our labours, then they're much worse than those people they were meant to replace." However, elsewhere he would note that it had changed his mindset. "I myself went over the top at one show, laying about me with a guitar neck, after that I realised that never again would I combat violence with violence" ("Interview with Radio Hallam").

Many ideological objections to the band were overcome by such humility. The celebration of black culture that was so gauche in "White Riot" was addressed with wincing self-realisation in both "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais" and "Safe European Home". Strummer also documented his affection for the independent boom and tacitly acknowledged criticism of the CBS contract in "Hitsville UK", his paean to the independent label boom. The sacking of Mick Jones in September 1983, which ultimately led to the break-up of the Clash, took rather longer to repair, yet when he did he accepted the blame for the situation entirely. Perhaps then the various statements around Strummer's "humanity" can be reconciled with the desire for atonement expressed in his lyrics and public pronouncements. That is evidently sufficient for many. Yet it doesn't quite explain the degree of reverence he seemed to attract, especially following his demise.

Sentiment over Strummer's death clearly betrayed percolating fears of mortality for a whole generation for whom he had served as a constant. His passing was not the spectacular implosion of the "27 club", nor did the story possess the depths of depravity and squalor associated with cartoon punk hero, and former friend, Sid Vicious. Instead a middle-aged man had passed early after walking his dogs, just as he seemed to have emerged from a barren period and become intoxicated with music again. A truer comparison would be with DJ John Peel, another constant for many adults of a similar age, who died two years later. Their essentially humble personalities and the undoubted size of their "contribution" evoked a similar outpouring of grief. Both had "touched" lives, a potentially

hysterical and oft-repeated lament following the death of celebrated or notable person, but sometimes a legitimate one.

It is indicative of the sentimentality of the British nation that both would have numerous posthumous honours bestowed upon them. Peel has had a Glastonbury stage named in his honour, a train, a national "Peel" day and an award for jazz musicians. Strummer got his own train too, as well as a tree plantation and a Glastonbury memorial stone. The Clash became members of the Rock 'n' Roll Hall of Fame (an honour rejected by the Sex Pistols) and both Strummerville and Strummercamp were founded. The latter is a not-for-profit organization "celebrating the life, music and influence of Joe Strummer and the Clash", the former run by his widow, provides funds for "new music".

These are widely described as fitting legacies. Perhaps, but there is also the faint whiff of idolatry and nostalgia-fuelled reverence. Worse, in the case of Strummer there seems to be a level of identification that disposes elements of the media to invoke his name to provide gravitas by association. In several of the many articles written about the Clash or Strummer since his death, prose tends to be littered with references to the personal bond shared between author and artist. It is an unedifying spectacle that runs contrary to basic tenets of good journalism and yet the question is not whether such writing is craven, but rather why Strummer attracts such uncommonly large amounts of it. What is it that makes a tenuous link to Strummer such a favoured war story or badge of honour?

It is natural to wish to be associated with success, but especially the sort of success that is widely held to be "transformative". The Police sold many more records than the Clash ever did, yet tributes professing to "life-changing" qualities are likely to be in much shorter stock when Sting finally joins the great rainforest in the sky. The latter's opportunism ("we rode the punk bandwagon for all it was worth", drummer Stewart Copeland recently conceded) is widely seen as a greater sin than Strummer's switch because the latter's was demonstrably closer to a true conversion. But it remains only a question of degree.

So why does Strummer attract such deference? The term "everyman" has been invoked by Salewicz and others. It is a word with an interesting etymology, divined from the title of the fifteenth century morality play in which the protagonist is summoned by death and is accompanied only by his "good deeds". The central allegory has evolved to denote a non-specific representative of humanity, or fictitious "man on the street". But more interesting, perhaps, is its gender-specificity. In most accounts of the Clash and Strummer, an atmosphere of "blokeyness" pervades. Strummer was constantly surrounded by male accomplices, both in his professional and personal life. Much has been made in the last two decades – often frivolously – of the crisis of male identity in the light of female empowerment. This was doubtless a large part of Strummer's widespread appeal – the man's man who stands his round at the bar, alongside the rebel posturing, as conveyed through an overwhelmingly male media who largely shared his appetites.

That is one element, perhaps, to the "mythic" quality of the Clash. Karen Armstrong's *A Short History of Myths* states that "myths are ways of making things

comprehensible and meaningful in human terms" (qtd in Byatt). The Greek hero was originally a demigod but eventually came to represent those who overcome adversity courageously or sacrificed their own interests in pursuit of a greater good, especially in combat – and the Clash were never short of combat metaphor. Later important historical revisions to the concept include those of Hegel, who proposed that heroes embody a particular culture's Volksgeist.[18] Thomas Carlyle's 1841 essay *On Heroes, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* made the hero the centrepoint for cultural, economic or military change (commonly referred to as "heroic vitalism"). Intrinsic to the book (initially given as lectures) is the proposition that heroes must overcome first their internal flaws to merit the status and, most pertinently, are not beings of moral perfection. Criticisms of these imperfections, as we may be judged guilty of in this chapter, he described as "valetism", drawing on the common expression that "no man is a hero to his valet". One can only be amused by the use of the term in the knowledge that original Clash roadie "Roadent" left the band's camp for the Pistols stating to Mick Jones that "[y]ou don't want a fucking roadie, you want a fucking valet!" (qtd in *Young Flesh Required*).

While Carlyle's view has been repudiated, not least by Marx, it does seem a fitting apparatus with which to weigh contemporary attitudes to Strummer. Chris Salewicz's "definitive biography" knowingly used Bob Marley's "Redemption Song", which Strummer covered with his post-Clash band The Mescaleros, as its title. The concept of redemption is undoubtedly key to any understanding of Strummer, or readings of his contemporary cultural value. There is much that is attractive about the apologetic rebel, reaching back to the mythic strand of Marlon Brando, and the combination of courage and vulnerability that was so influential to the outsider art references of early punk. Which, in turn, were evident nowhere more than in the body of work the Clash left behind. Even the cover of *Redemption Song* (based on a poster treatment by Chuck Sperry, employing a Pennie Smith photograph) has the feel of one of Holbein's ecclesiastical portraits (though it cleverly lends an impish, almost Mephistophelean quality, too).[19]

Strummer's death in 2002, and the reactions thereto, proved to be emblematic of a certain Anglican spirit of "displaced" mourning (as addressed in various studies around the death of the Princess of Wales). There is something about the British psyche that identifies with the flawed hero, as *Diana, The Making of a Media Saint* (Richards et al.) elucidates, tracing her transition from "media

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[18] To which a close translation would be "spirit of the people", similar in tone to the more prevalent use of "zeitgeist".

[19] In a personal note offered to the author, Sperry did not dispute that observation, and also made clear that he too bought into some of the "aura" of Strummer: "I softly coloured [the Smith photograph] to give it a feel I had for Joe. I've always been struck by the other-worldly quality of religious art – as if it were a 'different' kind of photography. I think all the Saintliness is Joe's doing. I just did my best to bring it out in a photo. Joe's life had a strange effect on people and sometimes I feel his spirit brings people together in odd ways."

icon" to "media saint". Within its introduction, Paul Johnson's contemporaneous *Spectator* article is quoted, which stated that "the effect of Diana's short life did more to promote Christian values in this country than all the efforts of our state Church in half a century. She made people, especially the poor, think seriously about what life is about. Despite her silly, pleasure-loving side, she was the grace of anti-materialism made flesh".

Leaving aside the unreasonable premise of associating the late princess with any disdain for materialism, we can attempt to navigate a further apparent absurdity in comparing the hagiography and sentiment around Strummer's death with hers. For much of what Johnson says about Diana has been claimed in Strummer's name. "For a whole generation of us", wrote Scott McLemee for the socialist *Solidarity* website, "including many people never prone to worshipping rock stars … Joe Strummer … was a hero".

How then do we gauge how Strummer brought "meaning" and "comprehension", in Armstrong's definition? The truth is that the cornerstone of Strummer's "heroism" rested, like Diana's, on something more romantic and idealized; each becoming human panacea for the world's ills to a certain section of society – or perhaps more importantly, the idolater's ills. Sainthood in the classic Christian sense tends to revolve around those who are holy by dint of the presence of Jesus (or God) within them. The attributes of sainthood are explained by Coleman (1987) in terms of those offering an "exemplary model", or being an "extraordinary teacher", "wonder worker", "intercessor" or a being of a nature that is "selfless" or "ascetic". It is a matter of philosophical and religious conjecture whether fluency in one of these skills obviates a deficiency in another. The Anglican tradition suggests that a saint is likely a being who has been *transformed by virtue*.

Coalescing these notions of the hero and the saint, one commonality is of "overcoming". In Diana's case there was clear and much documented public paranoia over her death, building on statements she herself made about "dark forces" ranged against her. Strummer's dark forces were largely internal (according to Salewicz and many others, he intermittently suffered from bouts of depression). However, his external "dark forces" revolved largely around the recording contract he originally signed with CBS that for several years limited him in terms of recording, or practicing his craft. Both, in essence, were authors of these destinies (offering fidelity to the classic notion of the heroic demise). The lady didn't have to marry the heir to the British throne and Strummer didn't have to condemn himself to a similarly misguided match. Yet both were also highly sympathetic public figures, many times applauded for demonstrating candid emotional responses to events. In a country where reserve is still highly valued, that allowed others to map or invest some of their own emotional pathology on to them.

The death of the Princess of Wales produced, according to Rosalind Blunt's interpretation of Foucault, "an immense verbosity". Blunt claims that this outpouring challenged prevailing views of death within Western culture. It is a bridge too far to present a case for her paving the way for the reaction to the death of such a seemingly oppositional character as Strummer, but it certainly framed

media terms of reference. As Blunt notes, "The key question asked of people in *vox pops* was: 'What did Princess Diana mean to you?' It invited a response that expressed both immediate subjective identity with the Princess and also wider social and cultural definition". The columns, blogs and *vox pops* associated with Joe Strummer's death worked on a similar *assumption* of subjective identity. "A whole generation has not only lost its voice but also its conscience", ran one tribute on the BBC. Another: "Joe Strummer was Truth."

Strummer was *not* truth. Throughout his life, as Salewicz's investigations make clear, he fibbed *relentlessly*. A favorite has to be his protestation that the first Clash PA was purchased with a loan from a local drug dealer, when the funds actually came from Winston Churchill's granddaughter. But the deeper that book delves into Strummer's personal life, on which subject it is highly revealing, unlike much of his Clash career for which readers are better served by Gray,[20] the murkier the picture becomes. Salewicz, a (frequently) self-professed close friend did not come to bury Strummer's reputation, indeed he seems to remain resolutely in thrall to him. Yet the evidence he uncovers is immensely damning, the testimony of an unknowing double agent for the prosecution.

There was little "punk" about Strummer's or the band's behaviour once the Clash were established. Within three years of year zero they were demanding to be greeted at the airport of any country they travelled to with drugs. Women were largely considered as vessels for sexual gratification rather than collaborators or peers; Strummer's appetites extending even to wives and girlfriends of his own band members. Whilst making public statements against the use of cannabis, Strummer was imbibing the same on a frankly daunting – and more importantly, disabling[21] – level. He infers in Bernie Rhodes some kind of rarefied intelligence long after he has lost any credibility, intellectual or otherwise, with others in the Clash's orbit.[22] He drinks and drives. He knocks around with Class War while

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[20] *The Clash: Return of the Last Gang in Town*, London: Helter Skelter, 2005 (1995). All other citations in this chapter are from this edition. His two-line denunciation of the Ruts as "Clash copyists" merits a proper slap, too.

[21] It is contended here that, however fashionable cannabis use might be among rock musicians, its generally stupefying effects played at least some role in Strummer's "wilderness years".

[22] Gray argues that Rhodes' true value to the Clash has been underplayed. "By late 1978 the Clash weren't listening to him anymore. What he did do that proved to be immensely valuable to Strummer, Jones, and eventually the other two, was hold on to their publishing until they were in a strong position, then appoint Riva to administrate on a 90-10 percent deal in the Clash's favour. Bernie didn't take any of it for himself, either. It all went to the band. In the end, that's what bought those boys their houses. Compare that to the Beatles, whose manager Brian Epstein negotiated a deal whereby Dick James and his partner got 10 percent administration. Then the remainder was divided 50 percent to Dick James and partner, 10 percent to Brian Epstein's management company, and finally 20 percent each to Lennon and McCartney. Bernie was smart enough when it counted. I'm not going to deny that he was difficult even then and seems to have become impossible to deal

routinely emptying several bottles of pink champagne per session in newly gentrified Notting Hill. He then complains about said gentrification. Later, despite individual acts of generosity and loyalty, he is revealed as conniving, capable of viciousness and a fair-weather parent. He is horribly unsympathetic to his mother's lingering death from cancer, berating her to the end for sending him to boarding school, which he blames for his brother's suicide. And, with stunning hypocrisy, and in an epic failure of Hegel's "heroic vitalism", he ends up sending his own daughters to boarding school.[23] He who fucks nuns, eh, Joe?[24]

I put these points to Marcus Gray – an author sometimes considered a heretic within Clash circles for being the first to tenaciously expose elements of the Clash myth.

> It is a very male arena, rock 'n' roll, and a lot of the lyrical content and fantasy lifestyle borrows heavily from the swashbuckling pirates, steel-eyed gunslingers and noble warriors of the Boys' Own Adventure stories. Or, if you wanted to give it a little more gravitas, you could say it borrows elements from Greek myths, Bible stories and even Shakespearean tragedies. It's partly to do with the ritual of performance, and partly to do with how human beings are. We raise them high and worship them, these childish, selfish, lazy, often poorly read and ill-informed 'rock stars'. We need to give it up to someone, and they evidently need to receive it more than the rest of us. Punk had the added ingredient of being a movement, quasi-political or even religious, so its frontmen got boosted up from Star to Glorious Leader and/or Messiah status. We've established that Joe wasn't an economist, that he wasn't an academic of any sort. You could even say that he wasn't that much of a thinker. More of a feeler. As you suggest, those who feel affection towards him do so in spite of the Clash's failure to deliver the punk ideal, and in spite of his own deep flaws as a human being. Part of the mythological story arc has to do with flaws and limitations, suffering because of them, or doing penance for them, and then striving to overcome them. I think what people sensed in Joe was a genuine desire to deliver; they got to see him ride out in his battered suit of armour, and fail to slay the dragon, and spend 40 days and 40 nights in the desert, and try and try again. (I'm really

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with in subsequent years. But Bernie made being in a rock band as unlike being in a rock band as it was possible to be at the time, and at least half of the Clash valued that highly. Bernie was an ideas man, not a stupid man."

[23] It was considered the girls were not progressing sufficiently at the local Colville Primary School. They were later sent to the exclusive Bedales (Salewicz 498). Bedales is one of the most expensive independent schools in the UK. Fees are currently in excess of £9,000 per term (boarding). Interestingly, the nearest cultural attraction to Colville? The Museum of Brands.

[24] "He who fucks nuns … will later join the church" is a line from *London Calling* track "Death Or Glory".

> mixing 'em up here, aren't I?) They got to watch him struggle, and they related. (personal correspondence)

Of course, arguments about how John Mellor matched up as a person to the transforming, *belief-giving* performer Joe Strummer are not truly the issue; for those who desire it, he can indeed be toasted as a first-rank rock 'n' roll hero or deified as per your preference. But *punk rock hero*? Any informed reading of punk must dismiss that as an oxymoronic proposition. There are no such career opportunities. Even for Joe Strummer.

PART III
Why Should You Trust Me?

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Chapter 6

Revolution Rock? The Clash, Joe Strummer and the British Left in the Early Days of Punk

Matthew Worley

> The Clash are interested in politics rather than revolution. Revolution sets a country back a hundred years … I don't think we were ever revolutionary. I think we were interested in the politics of the situation. And I think we still are.
>
> Joe Strummer 1981, Paul Rambali, "Clash Credibility Rule", p. 30–32.

On May 17, 1977, Max Farrar, a writer for the revolutionary socialist newspapers *Big Flame* and *The Leveller*, ventured into Leeds Polytechnic to see the Clash. Buoyed up by the band's growing reputation as an authentic voice from inner-city Britain, and evidently excited by the experience of witnessing a band that one early reviewer described as having "crystallised the dormant energy of all the hours of crushing boredom of being an unemployed school-leaver, living with your parents in a council flat, into a series of three minute staccato blasts delivered like a whiplash at the audience" (Miles "Review" 43), the young comrade followed the band back to their hotel. Once there, he found Joe Strummer already being quizzed as to his political opinions. The British had no business in Ireland, Strummer said, before stating his preferred ideological position:

> I don't know no Marx, no Trotsky, no nothing. I know about fascism and I don't like it, but I don't know about communism. The Socialist Workers' Party [SWP], you know, they keep coming up and saying "come and join us". But they can fuck off, the wankers, that's just dogma. I don't want no dogma.

In an instant, it seemed, the "hopes of those […] trying to conjure up a working-class youth movement out of punk" were dashed (Farrar 17). The Clash were not the cultural vanguard of the proletarian revolution; Joe Strummer was not a guttersnipe-Guevara dressed up in a stencilled boiler suit.

Such expectations, and such relative disappointments, were to accompany the Clash throughout much of the band's existence. After all, the 1970s saw Britain pass through a period of sustained socio-economic and political crisis. Inflationary pressures inherited from the 1960s had instigated widescale industrial

unrest; unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, was rising and thereby fuelling media-led fears of social disintegration and juvenile delinquency; the IRA bombing campaign of the British mainland continued apace; racial tensions were becoming apparent within the inner cities; and the politics of consensus that had steered Britain through the period since the Second World War were unravelling. Against all this, punk appeared as a youth movement that embodied and reflected the disarray on-going around it. But where many saw in the Sex Pistols' references to anarchy, chaos and "No Future" only a raging nihilism, so the Clash's stance was recognized to contain the seeds of a "primitive socialist protest" (Marris 15). Initially, too, the band appeared to accept that their approach was overtly political (Walsh 3–6), defining their outlook as "anti-fascist … anti-violence … anti-racist and … pro-creative" (Miles "Eighteen Flight Rock" 14). The social realism of their songs, particularly "White Riot" and "Career Opportunities", suggested an awareness – a (class) consciousness – of the problems facing British youth. As a result, the Clash became the torch-bearers for many a young militant; the soundtrack to an impending revolution. It was, moreover, as Strummer's comment above makes clear, a position to which he and the band held mixed feelings. Though enamoured by the image of the rock 'n' roll rebel, and though attracted to the romanticism of a just cause, Strummer's commitment to "revolution rock" did not always sit easily with the expectations of those on the British left.

Better Find a Solution …

Britain's leftist revolutionary organizations were small and fractured in the 1970s. The Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) remained the largest group to the left of the governing Labour Party, but was by this time in a state of terminal decline that reflected the ailing reputation of the Soviet Union as a symbol of progressive political change. Partly as a result of this, various Trotskyist groupings had risen to some prominence during the socio-cultural upheavals of the 1960s, among them the SWP (previously the International Socialists), but these too remained small and drew their support not from the fêted proletariat but primarily from students and white-collar professionals. There also existed numerous social movements organized around issues of race, gender and sexuality, some of which bled into a post-1960s counter-culture that proffered alternative lifestyles and a sense of libertarianism that defied any formal political creed (or direction). Significantly, however, most of these groups recognized that a form of cultural politics was opening up alongside the more traditional socio-economic struggles of the Marxist left. Questions of consumption and cultural hegemony were beginning to inform political debates, amidst which the radical potential of youth and youth cultures became a staple bone of contention. More to the point, the economic upheavals of the mid-1970s provoked widespread concern as to the sustainability of the existing political mainstream. Organizations of both the far left and the far right

became more visible as the political focus shifted away from parliament and onto the picket-lines and inner-city streets.

Given such a context, the emergence of punk in 1976 became a source of much debate amongst a section of Britain's revolutionary milieu (Worley). Was this overtly confrontational youth movement a sign of revolt or simply a misguided distraction from the realities of the class struggle? Was punk an expression of working-class rebellion or a product of the music industry? Was it revolutionary or reactionary? The Clash, initially at least, seemed to offer a positive answer to all these questions. They were labelled "Britain's best band" in the Young Communist League (YCL) newspaper *Challenge* (Bradshaw 7), while the *Socialist Worker*'s Garry Bushell enthused about how Clash songs such as "White Riot" and "1977" offered a focal-point for working-class kids trying to comprehend a society that was "collapsing around them" (Bushell "Sex Pistols" 11).

The reasons for such leftist enthusiasm are easy to fathom. If the Sex Pistols' early notoriety related to the sporadic outbreaks of violence that accompanied some of their gigs, then it was further fuelled by their iconoclastic interviews that dismissed rock's ageing hierarchy (from The Rolling Stones to Rod Stewart and The Who) as irrelevant and detached from their audience. Such a critique was underpinned by socio-economics, as the Pistols' working-class backgrounds and Britain's on-going economic crisis were regularly cited as the source of punk's rancour. Indeed, punk was briefly described as a form of "dole queue rock" (Marsh 112–4), a conception bolstered by the emergence of the Clash, whose set-list and interviews drew from their manager Bernie Rhodes' advice to concentrate on issues that reflected their everyday lives (Savage 232).[1] The band's early oeuvre thereby offered a series of snapshots of a country in crisis, depicting race riots in Notting Hill ("White Riot"), boredom ("London's Burning"), unemployment or dead-end jobs ("Career Opportunities", "48-Hours"), clashes with authority ("What's My Name") and, significantly, visions of a UK descending towards violence and authoritarianism ("1977", "Remote Control", "Hate and War"). The band's iconography – all tower blocks, police charges, concrete, graffiti and London's Westway flyover – served to reflect a sense of decaying urbanism, while early interviews typically concentrated on the band's broken homes, their lives on the dole, their affinity with their audience (emboldened by tales of fans sleeping on hotel floors and sneaking in the back door to watch gigs for free) and their desire to utilize music "to get something going for the kids" (Coon "Clash" 33). From a leftist perspective, therefore, the Clash seemed to offer a political point of contact between popular music and "life itself". Here was a band keen to vent their frustrations in a way that recognized the inequities of both capitalism and liberal democracy, who sought to detail problems and mobilize a response. In the words of the *NME*'s Tony Parsons, whose highly-politicized take on punk in 1977 was informed by the politics of the revolutionary left (Parsons and Burchill 5),

[1] *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, London: Faber and Faber, 1992. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

the Clash offered a "mirror reflection of the kind of […] white, working-class experiences that only seem like a cliché to those people who haven't lived through them" (Parsons "Review" 33).

Two themes, in particular, were picked up on within the Clash's early repertoire. First, unemployment. For the YCL's Steve Munby, the Clash succeeded in capturing the contemporary image of life on the dole, and he urged his comrades to link up with such "progressive" trends in youth culture to help mobilize a campaign against youth unemployment (191). Second, much was made of the Clash's stated anti-racism and experiments with reggae. Strummer talked of trying to "bridge the gap" between punk and reggae, both of which he regarded as an expression of cultural revolt. "The poor blacks and the poor whites are in the same boat", he insisted (Miles "Eighteen Flight Rock" 14), with the band's cover of Junior Murvin's "Police and Thieves" offering a first taste of the punk-reggae fusion that would inform the Clash's output through to the 1980s. This, in turn, was recognized by the left as a blow against the resurgent NF, Britain's foremost racist organisation in the mid-1970s. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Clash were soon approached to support the Rock Against Racism (RAR) campaign that was closely associated with the SWP, and duly appeared at the first Anti-Nazi League (ANL) carnival organized with RAR in the spring of 1978.

As this suggests, the uncompromising way in which the Clash presented themselves, the subject-matter of their material, and their willingness to speak out on a number of contemporary socio-political issues, each helped inform the way in which sections of the far left understood punk as an emergent cultural movement. This, however, led to pressures and expectations. If the Clash, alongside other bands, were a source of rebellion, then leftist organizations set themselves the task of channelling such youthful revolt towards suitably progressive ends. In so doing, they sought affiliations and commitments that neither Strummer nor his band-mates proved able or willing to meet.

How Can You Refuse It?

Joe Strummer would not have been wholly unfamiliar with the rhetoric and analysis applied to his band by Britain's young revolutionaries in 1976–77. As Chris Salewicz's biography makes clear, Strummer spent much of the early 1970s in a bohemian world awash with talk of revolution and cultural revolt. At least one of his tutor's at the London Central School of Art and Design, where Strummer studied in 1970–71, was a Trotskyist who claimed to "connect" with Joe over politics, while Salewicz makes much of Dave Goodall's Marxist influence on Strummer's understanding of the world around him. On moving to Newport, moreover, where Strummer began to properly cut his musical teeth, he reportedly lent some support to the local communist party's grass-roots activities before moving back into London's counter-cultural underground in 1974 (Salewicz 80, 98, 105–106). Once

ensconced, amidst squatters, anarchists and radicals of every hue, Strummer made his live debut with the 101'ers at a benefit gig for the Chilean resistance.

Yet, as Salewicz also makes clear, such influences tended to inform Strummer's broader worldview rather than its specifics. Whether Strummer really attended CPGB meetings to woo an attractive female comrade, or whether he really sold the *Morning Star* to Welsh miners at the pithead, is perhaps less important than his later insistence that "toeing any [political] line is obviously a dodgy situation" (105). Though Strummer claimed in 1981 to have read and been influenced by Marx (Garbarini 50–57; Du Noyer 20–22), and though Clash artwork (*Give 'Em Enough Rope*), titles (*Sandinista*) and lyrics ("Spanish Bombs", "The Magnificent Seven") made blatant reference to the iconography, struggles and forces of revolutionary socialism, the *politics* of both Strummer and the Clash tended towards a generalized – if overtly leftist – critique of the world, especially once the band's focus shifted from the minutiae of the punk guttersnipe to the geo-political broadsides of their later work. "My politics are definitely left of centre", he told the *NME*'s Paul Du Noyer. "I believe in socialism because it seems more humanitarian, rather than everyman for himself. […] But you can't bring socialism in with orders." Thus, both the Soviet Union and the Khmer Rouge were held up as examples of a bastardized socialism "ten times worse than the shit we've got going on here" (Du Noyer 20–22).

The early politics of the Clash were constructed over a series of interviews given in late 1976 and the spring of 1977. In these, the band was framed – and endeavoured to frame themselves – as a politically committed group of angry young men on a mission to both reclaim rock 'n' roll and somehow demystify and change the world of which they were part. The first such interview was given to *Sniffin' Glue* in September 1976, and saw the band attempt to carve out a (political) space for themselves distinct from the Sex Pistols. Interestingly, it was Mick Jones who appeared to take the lead in this, making the unequivocal statement that "we're definitely political" and declaring the band's basic stance as being anti-apathy and pro-creative. It was Jones, too, who made clear that the Clash "ain't a bunch of raving fascists". Only when the band was asked to clarify its politics did Strummer come more to the fore, dismissing anarchy as "bollocks" but claiming to want some kind of "revolution". In so doing, Strummer located the root of the band's anger in their detachment from the formal political process, presenting the Clash as an alternative source of information and a medium for communication. "The situation is far too serious for enjoyment", Strummer insisted (Walsh 3–6).

The themes raised in the *Sniffin' Glue* interview were then developed in mainstream press pieces by Caroline Coon, Barry Miles and Tony Parsons. Coon's piece, for *Melody Maker* in November 1976, served to reaffirm the band's commitment to stimulating creativity and engaging with the socio-political problems that surrounded them. Coon, who was by this time in a relationship with Paul Simonon, emphasized the band members' dysfunctional backgrounds and detachment from mainstream society, before letting them bemoan the boredom of "society today". This, of course, was all prior to the band having signed a record

contract or released a record; by the start of 1977, more people would have read about the Clash than heard or seen them. The image presented, therefore, of social delinquents struggling to "articulate the essence of the era which inspires their music" (Coon "Clash" 33), would serve to inform the way in which the Clash's records were both received and interpreted.

Coming a month later, in December 1976, Barry Miles' *NME* interview with Strummer, Jones and Simonon set itself the objective of more clearly defining the band's political stance. For Strummer, evidently becoming more confident as an interviewee, this meant emphasising the band's anti-fascism and anti-racism. Indeed, punk's affinity with reggae was articulated by all band members, and was further made clear once Miles asked the band to explain how their music served as a "solution" to the boredom and alienation of life on the dole or in a dead-end job. Here, again, Strummer provided the most forthright reply:

> Our music is a solution to this, because it's a solution for us, number one. Because I don't have to get drunk every night and go around kicking people and smashing up phone boxes. […] I get my frustrations out on stage and in creating something like clothes or songs. Number two is for our audience, because we're dealing with subjects we really believe matter. We're hoping to educate any kid who comes to listen to us, right, just to keep 'em from joining the National Front when things get really tough in a couple of years.

In short, Strummer placed The Clash in direct opposition to the NF, with punk presented as a progressive force that contained the power to both change people's lives and their consciousness. In Miles' estimation, the band had emerged from the "concrete jungle" to depict a society in disintegration. But rather than let the country succumb to fascism, the Clash were "fighting back" ("Eighteen Flight Rock" 14).

Finally, in April 1977, Tony Parsons took the Clash for a ride on the London underground in an attempt to juxtapose the band's wide-awake street-level engagement with the somnolent fatalism of the suburban commuter. Crucial here was the introduction of "Roadent", real name Steve Connolly, a member of the Clash entourage who had joined up with the band having served a brief spell in prison. So the story went, the 19-year-old Roadent had been carrying a copy of *Mein Kampf* around with him before seeing the Clash and speaking to Strummer had "straightened him out". In other words, the Clash had done what they claimed to do: provide a focus and direction for Britain's wayward youth. In addition, Parsons reaffirmed the Clash's ability to serve as a barometer of Britain's political climate, pushing them to declare their political affinities with the left via a tale of the band's attending a left-wing community workshop that had been later burnt down by the NF ("Sten Guns" 14–18).

But if the Clash could be read as primitive rebels forging their own response to the inequities of capitalism, then they refrained from offering an ideological commitment. The band seemed to *promise* the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness: they were disaffected but aware of the dangers of fascism and

authoritarianism; they sought change and provided a mouthpiece and a medium for revolt. However, they also voiced their wariness of politics in general and the capability of music to radically change anything (Cain 11). As a result, both Strummer and the Clash came in for a degree of criticism that few artists have experienced either before or since. The band's early promises of using profits to open venues and establish radio stations for "the kids", of being "authentic" and committed to providing value for money, each became sticks with which to beat the band. This, undoubtedly, was partly a product of the group's own (myth-) making, but it also stemmed from the hopes and expectations projected onto the band from within the media. On the left, too, the critical stakes were raised once the Clash were recognized to be something more than an archetypal rock 'n' roll band. First, Strummer – as vocalist and principal lyricist – found himself having to deal with the pressure of becoming a supposed "voice of a generation". Talking to *Record Mirror*, Strummer (along with Mick Jones) bemoaned the way in which the Clash were expected to act as leaders of a politicized punk movement. "We haven't got control over the situation at all", Strummer insisted, "we haven't got control over our lives. We just get tossed about like everyone else. Look – political power grows from the barrel of a gun – and I haven't got a gun" (qtd in Marris 15). Very quickly, therefore, Strummer claimed to acknowledge the limits of punk – and music more generally – as a political force. If it served well enough as a rallying point, or as a source of protest or expression, then Strummer clearly understood its limitations with regard to affecting real or substantial political change (Coon "Clash Personality" 29).

Second, the band's decision to sign to a major record label – CBS – soon led to criticisms that the band had nullified any political intent they may have harboured. Most famously, of course, Mark Perry was reputed to have announced that punk died the day the Clash signed to CBS, and such analysis was echoed by others who preferred punk's politics to be expressed through and by the construction of alternative production and distribution networks beyond those of the established music industry. Signing to a major ensured a loss of control, Perry argued, who extolled the values of independent labels and punk as a form of creative expression (Walker 14–15). Even so, the band's decision was read in even harsher terms elsewhere. Already, leftist enthusiasm for punk had been challenged by those who saw it as a deliberate attempt by the forces of capital to divert working-class youth away from the revolutionary path. For hard-line Trotskyists in the Workers' Revolutionary Party (WRP), punk peddled "backward, neo-fascist ideas" at the bequest of the record industry; it was not a "threat to the system. […] It is just the kind of dead-end thinking into which the ruling class would like us to sink" (Leach 7). This, in many ways, was a blunted reading of Theodor Adorno's famous critique of popular culture, whereby mass production served to both standardize creativity and bury the realities of the class struggle beneath the allure of consumption. As a result, the content or substance of any cultural product was mediated through its mode of production. With regard to the Clash, therefore, the band's politics were seen to have been distorted – and

disarmed – once the band became the employees of a multi-national record label and their records massed produced and mediated through capitalist channels of production and communication.

Such reasoning was sometimes taken to extremes. After playing a gig at Lanchester Polytechnic in November 1976, the student committee refused to pay the band on account of "White Riot" being deemed racist (Savage 243). Similarly, a conference organized by Music for Socialism in May 1977 debated, amongst other things, the relationship between politics, music and culture, with the meaning and significance of punk informing much of the two-day discussion. The Clash's debut album *The Clash* (1977), which had been released just a month earlier, became exhibit (a) for the prosecution. According to Cornelius Cardew, then a Maoist and part of the People's Liberation Music, one look at *The Clash* was enough to recognize it as "fascist". Not only was it released by an international monopoly capitalist concern, but its sleeve featured a symbol of imperialism (the Union Jack on Paul Simonon's shirt pocket) and propaganda for state forces in its back-cover image of policemen charging (Frith 77–9).

Strummer's response to such critiques tended to be dismissive, suggesting that the argument that punk should remain outside "the system" was where the hippies went wrong; that is, they ignored how everything was "set up" (*Temporary Hoarding*). The objective was to reach people, Strummer insisted, something more easily achievable on a major label than an independent (Gray 217).[2] Certainly, Strummer's lyrics show an awareness of capitalism's ability to turn "rebellion into money", the somnolent influence of popular culture ("London's Burning", "Capital Radio"), and the alienating effects of capitalist production ("Lost in the Supermarket"). From the outset, moreover, he recognized that a conflict of interest existed between his band and the record company. "You watch", he said, "they're gonna attempt to muffle us up in the next six months" (qtd in Gray 217), and the band's tenure with CBS was rife with tension and dispute. Nevertheless, it became common to accuse the Clash of having "sold out" by 1978–79 (see Shah and Shaw). Not only did the band appear focused on breaking into the United States market, touring there regularly and recruiting Sandy Pearlman to produce *Give 'Em Enough Rope* (1978), but the group's broadening musical palette led some to see them as straying too far from their punk roots. Thus, Garry Bushell, having graduated from the *Socialist Worker* to the music weekly *Sounds*, complained that the four-sided sprawl of *London Calling* (1979) contained no "vision or coherence or charisma, no killer punches, no sense of fighting". With its Presley-referencing graphics, the album conspired to turn the Clash into just another rock 'n' roll band, he suggested, going so far as to quote the group's own lyrics back at them. If "Death or Glory" talked of those who fucked nuns later joining the church, then the Clash had attacked the "bland, boring bourgeois" rock establishment only to become part of the "good ol' wanked out rock tradition – the sicko corrupt

[2] *The Clash: The Return of the Last Gang in Town*, Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2004. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

mythology built up from fatboy Presley to the Stones, the antithesis of what they [the Clash] had set out to be" (Bushell "Give 'Em Enough Dope" 28).

Third, the discrepancy between Strummer's punk persona and his class background served to dilute his credibility as a representative of inner city, working-class youth. Though the band presented themselves as disaffected young men straight off the dole queue, this belied a slightly more complex truth. Strummer, Jones, and Simonon had all been to art school; and while Jones and Simonon could claim working-class backgrounds of differing degree, Strummer's being the son of a British foreign office employee and an ex-boarder at the City of London Freeman's School clashed with the rough and ready image the band tried to cultivate. Indeed, the band's image was hindered further when it was revealed that their entourage included Sebastian Conran, the son of the designer Terence Conran, whose connection became a source of amusement for the music press and embarrassment to the band. To what extent, the band's critics began to ask, was the Clash's image – and their politics – nothing but a pose? (Gilbert 179)[3]

Strummer was undoubtedly sensitive about his background. Much has been written about his embracing punk as year zero, disowning his past and many of his friends as he transformed into what the *NME* described in April 1977 as a "thinking man's yob". It took some time before the true details of his family and childhood came out, with Strummer offering many a false lead along the way. Arguably, too, Strummer's inability to draw on class as a form of punk cultural capital led him to extol other social outsiders that he fed into the band's broader image and iconography: criminals, foreign revolutionaries, rock 'n' roll rebels, the Wild West and subcultural gangs. This, in turn, opened the band to ridicule and accusations of macho-posturing and revolutionary chic, much of which came from journalists or musicians – such as Ian Penman and Green Gartside – with links to radical groupings on the British left (Reynolds 199–200).

Again, such criticisms stung. For Strummer, speaking to *Rolling Stone*'s Mikal Gilmore in early 1979, his references to revolution, terrorism and violence were simply an extension of punk's original approach. In other words, they were a reflection and response to the world as he perceived it. The Clash, Strummer insisted, were not a band that preached; their politics were not subject to doctrine. "Our music's violent", he said, "[but] we're not. […] It's just that sometimes you have to put yourself in the place of the guy with the machine gun. I couldn't go to his extreme, but at the same time, it's no good ignoring what he's doing. We sing about the world that affects us. We're not just another wank rock group like Boston or Aerosmith" (Gilmore 22).

Finally, the few times in which the Clash came into direct contact with organizations of the far left did not always suggest a meeting of minds. This was most apparent regarding the band's relationship to RAR. On the one hand, the Clash's agreeing to play the ANL/RAR carnival in April 1978 lent further credibility to RAR

[3] *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash*, London: Aurum, 2009. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

amongst punks for whom the Clash were the premier band following the Sex Pistols' collapse three months before. Strummer had already given an interview to RAR's magazine, *Temporary Hoarding*, in mid-1977, and the band's avowed anti-racism and oft-repeated respect for black culture made them perfect exponents of the RAR cause. On the other hand, the Clash's growing reputation led to suspicions within RAR that they were more interested in being rock stars than political agitators. This, reputedly, was stirred by Tony Parsons following the band's preferring to stay in the studio rather than accept his invitation to partake in what became known as the "Battle of Lewisham" in August 1977 (an SWP-organized protest against the NF that ended in widespread violence) and was reaffirmed by a dispute as to the band's wanting top-billing on the carnival stage (Widgery 90).

Over time, therefore, many on the left came to see the Clash's politics as naïve. According to Strummer, he and the band always went on the defensive when confronted with overtly political questions; they saw them as a trap designed to box them into a predefined political niche. Nevertheless, Strummer could often be his worst enemy in this regard. His decision to wear a Red Army Faction/*Brigade Rosse* (sic) t-shirt at the ANL/RAR carnival in April 1978, for example, was soon criticized for aligning himself and, by extension, the anti-racist cause with the politics of revolutionary terrorism. Equally, when Strummer was interviewed on television alongside the Labour MP Joan Lestor in early 1978, his attempt to offer a solution to the disillusionment felt by his generation came across as a clumsy synopsis of kindergarten Bolshevism: "All the people who own the factories, who drive a Rolls-Royce, you get rid of them somehow and put them in a camp" (qtd in Gilbert 177). As so often seemed to be the case, Strummer failed to match the moral insight of his lyrics with a coherent political analysis. Or, in the words the SWP-aligned Redskins:

> The problem with the Clash was that it was never "wait", it was always go out and do it now, it's all there […] grab it and it's yours. Mainly because they never had any collective experience to look to. It was always the individual experience of people […] always a rebel thing, individual acts of terrorism or whatever was a very strong theme always running through their songs. (Rees 20)

Sound of Sinners

By 1979, it is fair to say that leftist hopes that punk might form the basis of a politicized working-class youth movement had been tempered. The success of RAR had shown how music could be used to mobilize young people for a specific cause, and punk had undoubtedly conspired to inject political content into popular music. Simultaneously, however, the music industry had proved itself able to absorb and manage the challenge of punk just as the wider political struggle deepened in 1979 with the election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. If the YCL reviewer of *London Calling* still regarded the Clash to

be "greatest band in the world", then he did so primarily in musical rather than political terms (Razorhead 7).

Punk itself had by 1979–80 splintered into various factions and sub-genres that ranged from the class-based social realism of bands such as Sham 69 and the Cockney Rejects through to the experiments of post-punk and the hard-line anarchism of those gathered around Crass. As for the Clash, they retained an ambivalent position with regard to both their punk heritage and the rock 'n' roll lineage to which they were becoming an entrenched part. Strummer, most certainly, harboured misgivings about what the Clash had become by the 1980s; proud of their work and success, but all too aware of the distance they had travelled to achieve it. Though he had little sympathy for the experiments of post-punk or those proclaiming "rock is dead", his interviews made regular reference to the strictures of being on a major label and the need to retain an affinity with his audience (Bohn 12–13; Du Noyer 20–22; Millar 25–7; Morley 22–5; Shaar Murray 30–31). The Strummer-Simonon version of the Clash that busked its way round Britain in 1985 was very much a response to the "self-indulgent" nature of *Sandinista!* and the band's ascendency to the realm of stadium gigs.

Politically, Strummer continued to use music as a means of protest. His scope widened; it was the geo-politics first hinted at in "I'm so bored of the USA" rather than the street-level reportage of "White Riot" that served as a template for his later songs. In these, he railed against American imperialism, celebrated resistance fighters, and evoked images of global catastrophe. As this suggests, the Clash's later albums, from *Give 'em Enough Rope* (1978) though *London Calling* (1979), *Sandinista!* (1980) and onto *Combat Rock* (1982), come across like world service broadcasts, highlighting trouble spots from every continent against an increasingly diverse musical backdrop. Promotional copies of *Give 'em Enough Rope* even came replete with a world map depicting contemporary sites of terrorism and war. This, in part, reflected the band's growing status and popularity, paving the way for their sell-out concerts at Bond's International Casino in New York over May–June 1981. But it also related to Strummer's true political calling. As the son of a foreign office official, born in Ankara and educated in a boarding school, he was a rootless individual. His rebellion was not built on class expression; nor was it theorized. It was, by contrast, a liberal humanist response to injustice wherever it occurred (Du Noyer 22).

Strummer's revolt, then, did not fit into a revolutionary Marxist template. Posthumous attempts to reclaim Strummer as a kind of martyr for the left tend to rely on a somewhat romanticized reading of both the Clash and its lead singer (see, for example, essays in D'Ambosio and Ogg's critique of such an approach in this volume). But nor too would it be fair to suggest that Strummer and his band's ambivalence towards leftist organizations served to hinder the struggle against racism and reaction (Gray 278–9). Strummer never pretended to have any answers to the crises he depicted, but he did recognize that the world was riddled with corruption and needed to change. Back in 1976, he claimed his objective with the Clash was threefold: to challenge (or "threaten") the audience; to communicate

with people; to make them move (Walsh 5). This he did. Moreover, his words – alongside the band's performances – served as a wake-up call that could sometimes politicize in the way his leftist champions hoped they would. According to John Baine, for example, who became the punk-poet Attila the Stockbroker: "The day I saw The Clash I knew exactly what I wanted to do. […] They just focused everything; everything culturally made sense" (qtd in Reddington 85). If not a revolutionary socialist, Joe Strummer was at the very least an inspiration for those who believed that the future had yet to be written.

Chapter 7
The Creation of an Anti-Fascist Icon: Joe Strummer and Rock Against Racism

Jeremy Tranmer

Joe Strummer has frequently been presented as a passionate and articulate advocate of anti-racism and anti-fascism.[1] His participation alongside young blacks in the disturbances at the 1976 Notting Hill carnival, his songs including "White Riot", and his fusion of punk and reggae are all cited as examples of his beliefs. However, central to his elevation to the iconic status of an anti-racist and anti-fascist activist was his performance with the Clash at the 1978 Carnival Against the Nazis. Organized in support of Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), the outdoor concert gave Strummer the opportunity to express himself in front of a crowd of tens of thousands of people. While not questioning his genuine opposition to racism and to the National Front, this article aims to re-evaluate Strummer's engagement with RAR, suggesting that his commitment to organized anti-fascism and his attitude to its proponents were more complex than they seemed at first sight and have usually been portrayed since. It will be argued that his limited involvement with RAR does not correspond to the accepted conventions of political activism and results from a combination of political, cultural and personal factors. Nevertheless, the attitude of the successors to RAR and the depoliticization of the British music scene have contributed to transforming Strummer into an anti-fascist icon.

The Emergence of an Anti-Fascist Figurehead

RAR was founded in 1976 after the guitarist Eric Clapton had expressed his support for the politician Enoch Powell during a concert in Birmingham.[2] Powell was a senior member of the Conservative Party but had, since 1968, distanced himself from official party policy and publicly expressed his opposition to Asian immigration to the United Kingdom. Arguing that immigrants would never be

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[1] In the introduction to his book, Antonino D'Ambrosio describes him as "an indefatigable political activist" (xii).

[2] For the history and politics of RAR, see Ian Goodyer, *Crisis music. The cultural politics of Rock Against Racism*, Manchester: MUP, 2009. It is the only detailed analysis of the movement.

successfully integrated into British society, he claimed that their presence would result in conflict between rival communities and that rivers of blood would flow through the country's streets. He therefore advocated forced repatriation. Demoted by the Conservative leadership for his inflammatory rhetoric, he rapidly became a folk-hero for many right-wing British people who shared his racist assumptions. His ideas bolstered the far-right National Front (NF), which achieved significant scores in local elections and claimed to be the third major political force in the country behind the Labour Party and the Conservative Party. Members and supporters of the NF also engaged in violent attacks on black and Asian people, as well as on left-wing activists, and organized provocative demonstrations in areas where large numbers of immigrants and their descendants lived. Clapton's drunken comments were thus made at a time of serious racial tension.

Several left-wing music-lovers, including Red Saunders and Roger Huddle, sent a letter to the music press urging the creation of a movement to combat racism in the music industry. This resulted in the foundation of RAR, and rapidly local groups sprang up throughout the country. In December 1976, the first RAR concert, featuring the blues singer Carole Grimes, was successfully organized in London,[3] leading to similar concerts taking place elsewhere. RAR quickly developed into a dynamic grassroots movement which attracted both traditional political activists and ordinary young people. From the end of 1977 onwards, it worked in tandem with the Anti-Nazi League (ANL), which was formed following the clashes between protestors and the police at an NF march in Lewisham in August of the same year.[4] The organizational backbone for RAR and the ANL was provided by members and sympathizers of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP).[5] The SWP was a Trotskyist party led by Tony Cliffe, which was heavily involved in violent protests against the NF. Among its members and fellow-travellers were Dave Widgery, Roger Huddle and Red Saunders, who had been involved in the 1960s counter-culture and believed that popular music had the potential to contribute to social and political change. In the early days of RAR, two kinds of music were of particular interest to them – reggae and punk. Reggae was deemed to be the expression of black people's opposition to the racist oppression that they faced, while punk conveyed the anger and despair of young British white people and represented cultural innovation. RAR actively sought out and gained the support of reggae and punk bands. Their joint presence on line-ups at concerts symbolized racial unity and guaranteed a racially mixed audience. Punk was in this way at the heart of RAR's attempts to reach out to young people and to prevent them

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[3] For a review of the first RAR concert, see Anon, "What a success", *Socialist Worker*, 20 November 1976, p. 2.

[4] The only in-depth account of the ANL is Dave Renton, *When We Touched The Sky. The Anti-Nazi League 1977–1981*, Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2006.

[5] For a brief history of the SWP, see John Callaghan, *The Far Left in British Politics*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987, pp. 84–112. See also, Tony Cliffe, *A world to win. Life of a revolutionary*, London: Bookmarks, 2000.

from falling into the clutches of the NF.[6] It is in this context that Joe Strummer's involvement with RAR has to be situated.

Even before Strummer began cooperating with RAR, he was already linked to anti-racism. In his first interviews with the music press at the end of 1976, he "outlined the Clash philosophy of being anti-fascist, anti-racist, pro-creative and anti-violence" (Ogg 138). This vision was confirmed by the lyrics of the band's first single, "White Riot"[7]: "Black people gotta lot a problems/But they don't mind throwing a brick/White people go to school/Where they teach you how to be thick."

The song, written by Strummer, was based on his, Paul Simonon's, and Bernie Rhodes' experience at the 1976 Notting Hill carnival, when black youths fought with the police. Strummer, Simonon, and Rhodes joined in, even trying to set fire to a car. In the song, Strummer expresses his admiration for young black people who dare to use violence against the system that oppresses them. He encourages young white people to imitate them and take action too. Although the NF attempted to use the song by perverting Strummer's professed intentions and claiming that it advocated violence against blacks, "White Riot" was clearly "a plea for white youth to emulate the vigor with which their black counterparts confronted the forces of law and order" (Salewicz "White-Hot Strummer"). It thus encouraged white people to learn from blacks and as such advocated racial harmony rather than confrontation.

Released in March 1977, "White Riot", the archetypical punk single, peaked at number 38 in the charts, yet remained there for a surprising 33 consecutive weeks. Significantly, the first ever edition of RAR's fanzine, *Temporary Hoarding*, which was published in May 1977, contained the lyrics to "White Riot" and a poster of the group (Renton 35). This suggests that leading members of RAR immediately identified common ground with the group and saw the potential of being associated with Strummer and the Clash. It can also be assumed that Strummer, as the author of the song, gave his permission for the lyrics to be reproduced. "White Riot" also features on the group's first album *The Clash*, which came out in April. The album revealed Strummer and the Clash's interest in black culture since it contained the reggae song "Police and Thieves", originally written and recorded by Junior

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[6] For an analysis of the relationship between punk and anti-racism, see Jeremy Tranmer, "'Nazis are no fun': Punk and Anti-fascism in Britain in the 1970s", in Bjorn Horgby and Fredrik Nilsson (eds), *Rockin' The Borders. Rock Music and Social, Cultural and Political Change*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010, pp. 117–138.

[7] The background to the song is explained in Dorian Lynsky, *33 Revolutions Per Minute. A History of Protest Songs*, London: Faber and Faber, 2010, pp. 337–358. According to Don Letts, the sleeve of "White Riot" is also "evidence of the Clash's respect for reggae" since it is strikingly similar to that of the reggae album *State of Emergency* by Joe Gibbs and the Professionals. Don Letts and Alan Nobakht, *Culture Clash. Dread Meets Punk Rockers*, London: SAF, 2008 (2007), p. 151.

Murvin and produced by Lee "Scratch" Perry.[8] Before performing the song live, Strummer reminded his audience that song had been originally written by a black man (Widgery 71). Strummer and the Clash were therefore associated with opposition to racism from very early in their career. However, their participation in the Carnival Against the Nazis represented a qualitative change in their reputation.

The Carnival Against the Nazis took place at Victoria Park, East London on April 30, 1978 and was organized jointly by RAR and the ANL. The location was chosen for symbolic rather than practical reasons since Asians in East London faced frequent verbal and physical harassment from NF members and supporters, and there was a long history of anti-fascist activity there. The concert was intended to take place after a march from Trafalgar Square in central London. Artists such as Tom Robinson, X-Ray Spex, Patrick Fitzgerald and Steel Pulse agreed to perform, and posters were prepared with their names on them. The line-up thus included punk and reggae bands, as had become customary at RAR gigs. The participation of the Clash was only confirmed officially a week before the event. Bernie Rhodes, the group's manager, had not wanted them to perform and had prevaricated (Saunders "Interview"). He feared that they would be seen to be endorsing the politics of the SWP, whose members were heavily involved in organizing the concert, which could have a detrimental effect on the group's image. He also thought that the carnival would have little impact and would do nothing to weaken the NF, as only students would attend it. Negotiations between Red Saunders on behalf of RAR and Rhodes dragged on, with the latter at one point stating that the Clash would play at the concert only if a tank was bought for the opponents of the racist regime in Zimbabwe.

Strummer was instrumental in ensuring that the Clash performed. When told of Rhodes' position, he answered, "Yeah, but tell Bernie people have gotta walk before they run. If people get out of their bedsits for the day it'll have achieved something. If they think about politics just enough for 'em to know they hate fascists, that's something" (Green and Barker 66).[9] Saunders, who had decided to change tactics, contacted the group directly. Strummer understood what was at stake and decided to perform (Saunders "Interview"). After "a lengthy discussion" between the band and their manager (Gilbert 188),[10] it was agreed that they would play, although Rhodes continued to express doubts behind the stage on the day of the concert: "It's not my idea, this. I didn't think they should do it. But some

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[8] Strummer was knowledgeable about reggae, although this only became apparent to most people when the album was released. Many London punks were introduced to reggae by Don Letts, a friend of Strummer's, who DJed at the Roxy club in London. Their interest in reggae was therefore known to punk's inner circle but not to the general public as a whole. See Letts and Nobakht, *Culture Clash*, pp. 93–99.

[9] Johnny Green was the Clash's road manager.

[10] *Passion is a Fashion. The Real Story of the Clash*, London: Aurum Press, 2004. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

members seemed to feel very strongly about it" (Salewicz 217).[11] To publicize the carnival, Strummer and other members of the Clash took part in a picket outside the headquarters of the NF.[12]

Strummer's stance was vindicated. The march attracted over 50,000 people, while approximately 80,000 attended the concert, making it the largest anti-fascist mobilization since the 1930s. The Clash were the third group to play, and their set is widely thought to have been one of the highpoints of the day. Since then, they have become so closely associated with the event that they tend to be put at the top of the list of the groups involved, suggesting erroneously that they headlined the concert.[13] Their set consisted of "Complete Control", "London's Burning", "Clash City Rockers", "Tommy Gun", "Jail Guitar Doors", "White Man in Hammersmith Palais", "Last Gang in Town", "Police and Thieves", "English Civil War", "Guns on the Roof", "Capital Radio", and culminated in a version of "White Riot" in which Strummer reluctantly shared the vocals with Jimmy Pursey, the singer of Sham 69.[14] The concert had a profound effect on Strummer's career and the public's perception of him since his "sterling performance as front-man at this Rock Against Racism rally marked the moment when his own mythology took off, righteously opposing the National Front – the personification of positive punk" (Salewicz 218). It greatly contributed to his reputation as an anti-fascist and anti-racist activist.

Strummer and the band's next involvement with RAR came over a year later (Gray 310).[15] In April 1979, the NF planned an election meeting in Southall, a borough of London with a significant Asian community. In the protests against the meeting, the police violently attacked and arrested large numbers of demonstrators. RAR created the Southall Defence Fund in order to help with the legal costs of those who had been arrested. Two benefit gigs, entitled "Southall Kids are Innocent", were organized at the Rainbow venue in July 1979 to raise money for the fund and to protest against the treatment meted out to the demonstrators. The Clash agreed to headline the second one and were supported by Aswad, the Members and Enchanters. As at Victoria Park, Jimmy Pursey joined them on stage to sing "White Riot".

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[11] *Redemption Song. The Definitive Biography of Joe Strummer*, London: HarperCollins, 2007 (2006). All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

[12] Members of the reggae group Steel Pulse were also present.

[13] See for example, http://www.punk77.co.uk/groups/rockagainstracism.htm; Roger Huddle, "Rock Against Racism – 1970s", *Socialist Review*, June 2004, http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=8931; "Joe Strummer, one of the greatest anti-racist, political musicians of his generation, has died, aged 50", http://lovemusichateracism.com/2002/12/joe-strummer-1952-2002/.

[14] Extracts from the Clash's performance can be seen in the film *Rude Boy* directed by Michael White and first released in 1980.

[15] *The Clash: Return of the Last Gang in Town*, Milwaukee: Hal Leonard, 2004 (2001). All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

RAR organized a "Militant Entertainment" tour of the United Kingdom during the 1979 general election campaign in order to protest against the 303 NF candidates standing in the election.[16] A combination of the dynamic local and national campaigns undertaken by RAR and the ANL in the previous years and the swing to the right of the Conservative Party under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher resulted in the marginalization of the NF.[17] Its candidates gained a miserly total of under 200,000 votes. The RAR and the ANL continued to mobilize against the violent neo-Nazi British Movement, but many activists became more heavily involved in the struggle against the newly-elected Thatcher government. A concert in Leeds in 1981 headlined by the Specials was the last major activity organized by RAR, and later that year both it and the ANL were disbanded.[18]

It is generally accepted that Joe Strummer and the Clash contributed to the success of RAR. For RAR activists, the Clash were the "most exciting band" of the time and helped the movement by "giving full support to the Carnival" of 1978 (*Who Shot the Sherriff*). According to the historian and activist Dave Renton, the Clash gave RAR "real credibility" among young people (35). Furthermore, their presence allowed the movement to persuade other groups to perform at concerts. The relationship between the band and RAR is thus presented as being relatively straightforward. As the singer and composer of many of the group's songs including "White Riot" and as the most vocal member of the Clash, Strummer became a symbol of their collaboration with organized anti-fascism. However, the relationship between Strummer and RAR was, in fact, far from simple, and his status as an activist is equally complex.

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[16] The NF had stood a record number of candidates and was present in nearly every other constituency in the country.

[17] Margaret Thatcher had become leader of the Conservatives in 1975 and adopted a more radical discourse than her predecessors. In 1978, she had declared that she understood British people who feared being "swamped" by immigrants and their foreign culture. This statement allowed her to win back the support of many people who had been attracted by the NF. Most orthodox historians put the NF's decline in the late 1970s down to Margaret Thatcher's comments. Some left-wing historians and sympathizers tend to emphasize the role of the ANL in disturbing the NF's public meetings and rallies and of RAR in reducing its influence among young people. The two interpretations are not necessarily incompatible as they concern different sections of the population.

[18] The ANL was reformed in 1992 to combat the British National Party (BNP) and merged into the broader Unite Against Fascism in 2003.

An Anti-Fascist and Anti-Racist Activist?

Strummer's direct involvement with RAR was, in fact, relatively limited[19] and not without controversy. As mentioned above, he agreed to attend a picket of the NF headquarters, his only example of orthodox anti-fascist activism, and perform at two concerts. He neither devised these events nor participated in the organization of them. This can hardly be described as a sustained commitment to RAR. Moreover, his involvement had a certain ambiguity. At the Carnival Against the Nazis, he sported on stage a t-shirt on which the RAR star symbol had been altered and a gun and "Brigade Rosse" had been added.[20] The Red Brigades were an Italian left-wing organization, which engaged in acts of terrorism such as murder and kidnapping. The decision to wear the t-shirt can be interpreted as "a typical punk gesture" (Denselowe 146), which was intended to cause irritation among RAR supporters, in the same way that some punks wore swastikas without necessarily supporting Nazism, and to distance himself from RAR. If this was the case, it was not particularly successful since it did not upset the organizers of the carnival (Saunders "Interview"). Nevertheless, it did express a certain political ambiguity and confusion. Strummer claimed afterwards that he had wanted to publicize the Red Brigades' cause and had hoped that his T-shirt would be seen on television:

> I wore it because I didn't think they were getting the press coverage they deserved. Personally I think what they're doing is good because although it's vicious and they're murdering people – you know, they go around killing businessmen and the people they see as screwing Italy up – well, I think what they're doing is good because it's brutal system anyway, and people get murdered by the system every day and no one complains about that. But when some fat businessman is shot down in the street, everyone is horrified, right. (*Record Mirror*)

In fact, he had already expressed certain sympathy for the armed struggle. When later challenged about this, he stated that, "we don't know anything about it [politics]. We're a load of idiots" (Denselowe 147).

Following the Carnival, Strummer and other members of the group had been highly critical of RAR's handling of the gig, saying that they wanted nothing else to do with the movement. As Strummer put it succinctly, "F--- Rock Against Racism" (*Record Mirror*). Strummer and the Clash believed that they should have headlined the gig instead of the Tom Robinson Band, even though the latter were more commercially successful. Relations between the members of the two groups deteriorated as the day progressed, the Clash making homophobic remarks to Tom

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[19] There is no proof, for example, to suggest that the members of the Clash, "were often present at demonstrations and pickets against the NF". Rob Morgan, "The fire The Clash started still burns today", *Socialist Worker,* 4 September 2004, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=2168.

[20] The correct spelling is Brigate Rosse.

Robinson, one of the few openly gay rock stars of the time. The Clash also believed that the Tom Robinson Band had been condescending to them and had deliberately lowered the sound during their set. As a result of the large number of people present, those at the back of the crowd had been unable to hear the music clearly. The Clash had also been obliged to finish their set earlier than they would have liked to. The extent to which RAR was responsible for these problems is open to debate, although the organizers had little experience of concerts of that size involving famous groups. Even though the dispute may have resulted from petty spite and jealousy between the two groups, RAR took the blame and was damaged by the group's comments.[21] In other words, Strummer had not hesitated to criticize RAR in public, risking weakening it at a crucial time for the movement, and to put what he perceived to be the interests of his group before those of the main organization struggling against the NF. Their outburst is all the more surprising because RAR had given them access to the largest audience they had played in front in their relatively short career and had given them an enormous amount of free publicity. The group also allowed the cameramen at the Carnival to film them. The Carnival was thus used as part of the backdrop of the film *Rude Boy*, in which the Clash featured prominently. The organizers had not been consulted beforehand (Widgery 90).

Matters were not helped by the fact that Strummer and the other members of the group were suspicious of the SWP, the main driving force behind RAR and the ANL. Speaking shortly after the carnival, Strummer had said:

> I don't know no Marx, no Trotsky, no nothing. I know about fascism, and I don't like it, but I don't know about communism. The Socialist Workers Party, you know, they keep coming up to us and saying 'Come on, join us' – but they can fuck off, the wankers, that's just dogma. I don't want no dogma. (qtd in Farrar 17)

Here is not the place to analyse and comment on the political and ideological orientation of the SWP in the 1970s. However, given the role played by SWP members locally and nationally in RAR and the initiative taken by the party in creating the ANL, it is clear that without it neither organization would have had the same impact and would have been able to undertake such a wide array of activities against the NF. Moreover, the SWP obviously had a more clearly

[21] Critics of RAR have since seized on this dispute and used it as a means of discrediting the organization. In his history of punk, for example, Phil Strongman claims that, "the Clash […] were to become more than a little disillusioned with RAR bureaucracy and its determination to treat gigs purely as recruiting opportunities". Phil Strongman, *Pretty Vacant. A History of Punk*, London: Orion, 2007, p. 229. This interpretation of events is not, however, entirely accurate. Some of the problems between the Clash and RAR may have been partly due to age. Many of the organizers of the Carnival were about ten years older than the members of the group and may have been likened to the "old" hippies punks were reacting against.

thought-out worldview than that of the Strummer, and its actions had a distinct ideological underpinning.

It is, however, true that the SWP had assiduously courted the Clash, sending them congratulatory telegrams, for example. This resulted partly from pragmatic considerations and the desire to be associated with a successful, fashionable band and possibly recruit some of their fans. It also came from a belief in the subversive potential of music in general and of punk in particular. As early as 1976, Roger Huddle had expressed in the columns of *Socialist Worker*, the SWP's weekly newspaper, the "conviction that rock music is potentially a forceful celebration of life while at the same time just another commodity for the bosses to dull our minds and make money out of" (11). This contrasted with the views of many on the left who simply saw popular music as the product of a capitalist industry, whose aim was to manipulate people and make a healthy profit.[22] *Socialist Worker* also noted with approval that, in certain circumstances, rock music could even be a political threat to an established regime (Desivy 11).

When punk appeared in 1976, some active members of the SWP saw in it a sign of young people's revolt against the society in which they lived and interpreted it as a "challenge to capitalism and against fascism" (McGuinness and McGuinness 13). Punk, which emerged at the same time as RAR, was seen as white youth's equivalent to reggae. Punks were presented in the party press as young people who were revolting against a system which denied them the chance to work and generally oppressed them. Furthermore, the DIY ethic that was so central to punk could, to a certain extent, be articulated with the political philosophy of grassroots activism that SWP members took into RAR. Between the end of 1976 and 1979, *Socialist Worker* published numerous reports about RAR,[23] and its letters page frequently published the views of readers on punk,[24] while the

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[22] The SWP was much quicker to latch onto punk than the largest radical left party in the United Kingdom, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). This may be because the SWP had within its ranks a number of members, such as Huddle, who had been involved in the counterculture of late 1960s and had an open mind concerning popular music. What is more, the CPGB attempted to present itself as a respectable organization in order to create alliances with left-wing elements in the Labour Party and the trade unions. It was therefore unlikely to be attracted by such an unrespectable movement as punk. Because of the political and social themes present in their lyrics, the Clash are, nevertheless, systematically mentioned in the rare articles in CPGB publications that deal with punk such as Bob Lentell, "Youth in Contemporary Capitalism", *Marxism Today*, January 1978, pp. 6–15; Dave Laing, "Interpreting Punk Rock", *Marxism Today*, April 1978, pp. 123–28; Steve Munby, "Bored and Angry. The Politics of Youth Unemployment", *Marxism Today*, June 1978, p. 183–191.

[23] For example, Anon, "Carol Grimes and Aswad blow against racism", *Socialist Worker*, 14 May 77, p. 13; Dick Witts, "Music to knock the Nazis of the north", *Socialist Worker*, 8 July 1978, p. 11; Anon, "Fun tour", *Socialist Worker*, 24 March 1979, p. 2.

[24] For instance, Bill Forster, "Punk: Is it revolutionary – or is it rubbish", *Socialist Worker*, 18 June 1977, p.12; James Keogh, "Punk: Is it revolutionary or is it rubbish",

monthly *Socialist Review* ran in-depth articles about punk and RAR.[25] A regular music column appeared in 1978. Punks groups were booked to play at "Stuff the Jubilee" events planned to coincide with celebrations of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee in 1977 and at benefit concerts organized for the Right to Work campaign.

While the SWP could be accused of opportunism and jumping onto the punk bandwagon, sections of it, including the likes of Garry Bushell, were openly sympathetic to punk in general and to the Clash in particular ("Sex Pistols" 18).[26] In an article in *Socialist Worker*, Nigel Fountain, for example, quotes admiringly from an interview with the Clash published in the *New Musical Express* of December 11, 1976: "We're hoping to educate any kid who comes to listen to us ... just to keep them from joining the National Front when things get really tough ... We just don't want the National front stepping in and saying, 'Things are bad-it's the Blacks'" (qtd in Bushell "Sex Pistols" 11). Garry Bushell later defended the Clash's decision to sign a contract with Polydor, writing that, "It's rubbish to say that the Clash, for example, can't be revolutionary because if they were Polydor wouldn't sign them. Do [sic] Penguin publish books by Trotsky because he was a political moderate?" and concluding that, "to turn our backs on those groups that are associating with revolutionary ideas, to turn our backs on young working class people looking for new ideas, would be dangerous" ("Punk" 12). A letter signed "Rock Against Racism" described "White Riot" as "one minute 58 seconds of thermo-dynamic rock", and added that "the flip, 1977, is just as good", before going on: "At a time when punk is being drowned by businessmen, trendies, and band-wagon-jumping musicians, Clash still have the raw honesty and gut disgust at society that made last year's punk rock explosion so exciting." The letter ended with the following advice, "Buy this single – and get the album when it comes out in April" (12).

Only one letter in *Socialist Worker* was critical of the Clash. According to its author:

> The Clash may promote a kind of self-indulgent anarchy within the capitalist system, which it pays capitalist businessmen [...] to encourage and foster, but they can do nothing for socialism.
>
> In fact, ultimately, they exploit the working class, because the band may use the money of their followers to become rich and successful while the exploited dupes who support them are left on the dole queue.

Socialist Worker, 18 June 1977, p. 12.

[25] John Rose, "Rocking Against Racism", *Socialist Review*, June 1978, p. 13–14; Alex Calinicos, "When The Music Stops", *Socialist Review*, June 1978, pp. 15–16; John Hoyland and Mike Flood Page, "You Can Lead A Horse To Water", *Socialist Review*, June 1978, pp. 16–17.

[26] Interestingly, some *Socialist Worker* readers believed that the paper gave far too much importance to punks. See for example, Kevin Nowlan, "Not all jobless are punks", *Socialist Worker*, 2 September 1978, p. 6.

> It's not long since the well-known multi-millionaire and social poodle Mick Jagger was calling himself a socialist.
> The only difference between Jagger and Joe Strummer is one of degree. They're both in the same game, for the same reasons-to exploit people financially and emotionally. (Keogh 12)

This letter was totally unrepresentative of *Socialist Worker*'s overall coverage of Strummer and the Clash.[27] Consequently, Strummer's desire to maintain a certain distance from RAR and the SWP may seem rather surprising. This is particularly the case since the two organizations along with the ANL were composed predominantly of white people who were prepared to stand up, take to the streets and act against the system, even if this entailed using violence. The SWP and its forerunner, the International Socialists, had been behind much of the violent protest against the far right in the 1970s. Its members had taken part in the attack on a National Front march in Lewisham in 1977, and one of its activists, Blair Peach, was to be killed by the police at a demonstration in Southall in 1979. In other words, they were the kind of people of who could have been involved in the activity Strummer had imagined in "White Riot". It is likely that Strummer was not a regular reader of *Socialist Worker* and was unaware of the different reactions to punk present in the SWP. However, Strummer's attitude regarding RAR can also be explained by taking into account the context of the time, the nature of punk, and his personal background.

The mid to late 1970s was characterized by an atmosphere of crisis in the United Kingdom. The economy appeared to be locked in a downward spiral. By 1975, unemployment had risen to over one million and was continuing to increase, while inflation stood at over 20%. The following year, the government was forced to ask the International Monetary Fund for a loan to bolster the pound, which was perceived by many as a national humiliation. In exchange for the loan, the government was obliged to implement massive cuts in spending, slashing social programmes and breaking election promises. The United Kingdom was consequently seen abroad as the "sick man of Europe". High inflation fuelled demands for wage increases, complicating the government's requests for wage restraint. Strikes broke out in key sectors of the economy such as mining. In 1973/1974, the miners went on strike over pay, leading to electricity shortages, power cuts in homes and a three-day working week being imposed. The 1970s was also a time of political

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[27] The *Socialist Worker*'s unwavering commitment to Strummer reappeared after his death: Red Saunders, "Joe Strummer: the sounds of an urban revolution", *Socialist Worker*, 11 January 2003, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=2197; Rob Morgan, "The fire The Clash started still burns today", *Socialist Worker*, 4 September 2004, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=2168; Julie Bundy, "Joe Strummer – Past, Present and Future", *Socialist Worker*, 4 September 2004, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=2167; Andy Ridley, "A photographic look at Joe Strummer's legacy", *Socialist Worker*, 11 June 2005, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=6662.

instability. Changes of government occurred in 1970 and 1974, a year in which a second election had to be held in order for the government to have a clear majority in the House of Commons. In 1976, Prime Minister Harold Wilson was replaced by James Callaghan, who needed to conclude a pact with the Liberal Party the following year in order to stay in power. Labour and the Conservative both lost ground in elections to the nationalist parties of Wales and Scotland, which were demanding independence. Northern Ireland was embroiled in violent civil war as nationalists demanded reunification with the Republic of Ireland. The Irish Republican Army resorted to bomb attacks in Britain, adding to a widespread sense of insecurity. Meanwhile, feminists questioned traditional gender roles, and militant homosexuals challenged the dominant views concerning sexuality. In short, British society appeared to be falling apart.

British punk has often been interpreted as a reflection of the crisis that society was undergoing. A sense of impending doom was certainly present in some of Strummer's songs including "London's Burning" and "English Civil War". The Clash were far from alone in the world of music in thinking that things could only get worse. The singer Tom Robinson, for example, performed "Winter of '79" in which he imagined a Britain where political and social violence had become the norm, while the Ruts sang of "Babylon Burning". With neither of the two main political parties seeming able to propose credible solutions, the NF appeared to be on the verge of a major breakthrough. Violent confrontations between the NF, anti-fascists and the police became commonplace, and in this context many believed that it was of crucial importance to take sides. Strummer was clearly of this opinion and chose anti-fascism, hence his involvement with RAR.

However, Strummer's anti-fascism has also to be seen through the prism of the emergence and consolidation of punk. Politically speaking, punk was a confused phenomenon, being neither inherently of the left or the right. It was not underpinned by a coherent philosophy shared by all punks, despite common elements such as the DIY ethos and opposition to authority. The use of the swastika for shock value merely blurred punk's image and confused matters even further. Strummer was clearly different to most punks since he expressed left-wing political opinions in interviews and broached social issues in his songs. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that it was the group's manager Bernie Rhodes, who had encouraged him to write about social issues in the early days of the band. This was no doubt partly in order to give Strummer and the Clash a distinctive image and differentiate them from the Sex Pistols. Strummer's politics were in some ways as confused as punk's in general. As mentioned above, he expressed admiration for the Red Brigades in Italy as well as for the Baader Meinhof gang in West Germany, but on other occasions opposed violence and admitted that he knew little about politics. Although he has often been dubbed an articulate proponent of anti-racism and anti-fascism, it could be argued that this reputation was not wholly accurate. It was gained, at least to a certain extent, by default. Many punks never expressed political opinions of any sort and/or had a nihilistic vision of existence. It is not for nothing that "no future" became one of punk's main slogans. What is more,

inarticulacy was one of the defining characteristics of punk's "blank generation", since the clear expression of thoughts and feelings smacked of elitism and intellectualism and risked diluting the anger of punk. Furthermore, punks played great store on individualism, refusing to conform to the dominant conventions and forms of behaviour of British society. As a result, it sat uneasily with political organization, which requires a certain degree of discipline and a sense of group identity and of collective responsibilities.

Given the confusion about politics, the importance of image, and the individualism encouraged by punk, it is of no surprise that Strummer did not wish to be too closely associated with any particular organization. Although he and Rhodes disagreed over the group's participation in the Carnival Against the Nazis, their respective positions concerning RAR were less distant than it is often assumed. Along with others, Strummer also believed that punk was a potentially powerful social and musical force that could change society for the better. Following this idea to its logical conclusion would suggest that there was no real need for an organization such as RAR, which can help to explain Strummer's ambiguous attitude. In addition, punk defined itself very much in opposition to "adult" society, expressing a deep mistrust of "old" people.[28] Organized politics was dominated by older people, which probably contributed to many punks' aversion to it, making it seem irrelevant to them. Many RAR activists were in their late 20s/early 30s, creating a small but not negligible age difference between them and Strummer (Saunders "Interview"). By becoming heavily involved in Rock Against Racism, Strummer would have moved away from the world of punk towards the adult world of activist politics and cut himself off from his fans, other punk musicians and even his gang, the Clash.

Personal factors also come into play. His brother, who had committed suicide when Strummer was 18, had been fascinated by fascism and had joined the NF (Salewicz 69–75). This no doubt marked him and played a part in his opposition to the extreme right. He also had experience of other countries. Born in Turkey, he had spent time in his formative years in Egypt, Mexico and West Germany, opening his mind to different cultures. His political opinions were formed by the events of 1968 and his experience of squatting. Strummer was 16 in 1968 (a "great year to come of age" [*The Future is Unwritten*]) and followed what was happening in Paris, the demonstrations in London against the war in Vietnam, and the burgeoning counter culture. Interestingly, organized politics was of secondary importance to the events of 1968, suggesting that change could come about without clearly delineated movements and groups. His experience of squatting in the mid-1970s, which he viewed as a "political act" (*The Future is Unwritten*), was in some ways not dissimilar, since squatting is based on self-activity, that is unmediated direct action.[29] The happenings of 1968 and his experience of squatting

[28] Aged 25 in 1977, Strummer himself was considerably older than many other punks.

[29] Moreover, the experience of squatting in a house that was raided by the police contributed to his hatred of the latter. Gray, *Return of the Last Gang in Town*,

did little to persuade Strummer of the importance of political organizations and help explain his attitude towards RAR. However, it would be erroneous to assume the he was only motivated by political considerations. Strummer wanted, above all, to be a successful rock star with the attendant lifestyle and commitments. His involvement with RAR was not, and could not be, his first priority.[30] In order for him to be of any use to RAR as an artist, he had to be successful, which entailed recording in studios and, if possible, touring. Professional commitments can make it difficult for musicians to develop a sustained commitment to a cause by preventing them from attending meetings and demonstrations. Strummer and the other members of the group claimed, for example, that they were unable to attend the anti-fascist demonstration in Lewisham in 1977 because of recording commitments (Gray 254).

Bearing in mind the somewhat complex relationship between Strummer and the organized anti-fascist movement, it is important to understand how Strummer became, and has remained, an anti-fascist icon. As mentioned above, RAR and sections of the SWP believed in the radical potential of punk and used it as a means of reaching out to young people. Given the commercial and cultural success of the Clash, it is hardly surprising that Strummer stuck out from the rest. Moreover, in comparison to many punks, who had little interest in current affairs, he appeared as a committed artist, even though he was not especially articulate. Although in most areas RAR activities were scaled down following the 1979 elections and ceased almost completely after 1981, Strummer retained his status as an anti-fascist icon. This has been particular apparent since his death in 2002.

The continuation of his iconic status is partly due to the creation of Love Music Hate Racism (LMHR). Founded in 2002, LMHR presents itself openly as the legitimate successor to RAR. Its very name is significant as the expression was coined in the first issue of *Temporary Hoarding*. The obituary of Strummer published on the organization's website refered to him as "one of the greatest anti-racist, political musicians of his generation" ("Joe Strummer 1952–2002"), before adding that "Strummer's group The Clash headlined the momentous Rock Against Racism carnival in Victoria Park, London on April 30 1978". Some local LMHR groups organized events to commemorate the fifth anniversary of his death ("LMHR Calling Derry"). In his sympathetic study of RAR, including a section on LMHR, published in 2009, Ian Goodyer described Strummer as "a carnival stalwart" (147). It could be argued that LMHR and its sympathizers have

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p. 93. For three years, Strummer also regularly performed at benefit gigs for the London Squatters Union and the Advisory Service For Squatters. Jim Paton, "Joe Strummer", *Guardian*, 24 December 2002, http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2002/dec/24/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries. For a presentation of this period of his life, see Salewicz, *Redemption Song*, pp. 113–36.

[30] Furthermore, unlike Tom Robinson who had topped the bill at the Carnival Against the Nazis, for example, the leader of the Clash did not have a history of involvement in activist politics before he had become famous.

attempted to use Strummer and the Clash,[31] allowing them to link themselves to one of the defining moments in the relationship between music and politics in Britain. Furthermore, this legitimizes their position as part of an unfolding tradition of musical opposition to the extreme right.[32] LMHR has thus actively contributed to the maintaining of Strummer's status.

His image as an activist has also varied according to events in the world of music since the demise of the Clash. During the 1980s, many musicians took an interest in politics and became involved in the struggle against Margaret Thatcher. A number of hit songs, including "Ghost Town" by the Specials, openly criticized the government, while artists such as Paul Weller of the Jam and later the Style Council and Billy Bragg regularly played at benefit concerts for causes as diverse as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and striking miners.[33] Other groups such as The Redskins were also highly active in numerous movements against the Thatcher governments. The most unusual initiative of the decade was the creation in 1985 of Red Wedge by Bragg, Weller and others to support the Labour Party, and to influence its policy, before the 1987 legislative election. It was the first time that a number of musicians had given their active support to a British political party. Red Wedge published a review, *Well Red*, and organized a national tour during the 1987 election campaign. However, it could do nothing to prevent Labour from sliding to a third successive election defeat. It is generally accepted that the failure of Red Wedge to influence the outcome of the election discouraged many musicians and led to a gradual decline in their political activities.[34] Although many of the individuals and groups mentioned above were influenced by Strummer and the Clash, Strummer's activism pales in comparison to the sustained nature of those he influenced. During the 1980s, Strummer and the Clash's reputations were less clear-cut. David Widgery, one of the leading figures behind RAR and the author of the first book about it, was surprisingly critical of them, describing them as "infantile, egocentric and in love with rock and roll which means *I'm somebody and you're nothing*" (90).

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[31] Mick Jones, formerly of the Clash, even performed at a LMHR concert in 2004 with the Libertines.

[32] The SWP has also linked itself to Strummer, publicizing a number of initiatives to commemorate his life. See for example, Julie Bundy, "Joe Strummer – Past, Present and Future", *Socialist Worker*, 4 September 2004, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=2167; Andy Ridley, "A photographic look at Joe Strummer's legacy", *Socialist Worker*, 11 June 2005, http://www.socialistworker.co.uk/art.php?id=6662; Jinan Coulter, "A loud and rebellious compilation dedicated to Joe Strummer", *Socialist Worker*, 15 January 2005, http://www.socialistworker.org.uk/printart.php?id=5348; and Paul Sillet, "Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten", *Socialist Review*, May 2007, http://www.socialistreview.org.uk/article.php?articlenumber=9968.

[33] The Clash themselves played at a benefit concert for the miners in December 1984.

[34] For a brief presentation of musical opposition to Thatcherism, see Denselowe, *When The Music's Over*, pp. 203–232.

The campaign against the Poll Tax between 1988 and 1991 was the last major event to mobilize large numbers of musicians for many years, although there was small-scale opposition to the extreme right (Cable Street Beat, for example[35]) and to the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, sections of which concerned raves. Widespread hostility to the 2003 war in Iraq led some musicians (such as Ms Dynamite) to take a stand against it, but this did not lead to the politicization of large numbers of performers. LMHR has yet to achieve the same success as RAR. For over three decades, relatively few British artists have been prepared to make political statements or support political causes of any sort. Seen from any point during this time, Strummer's involvement with RAR, limited though it may have been, is all the more striking, as is his opposition to racism in general. The depoliticization of the British music scene has thus contributed to strengthening Strummer's iconic status.

Contrary to the widely held view, the relationship between Joe Strummer and RAR was not particularly close and was not devoid of friction. The singer did not give unconditional support to the movement and attempted to maintain a certain distance from it, irrespective of the consequences for RAR. It would be more appropriate to describe Strummer not as an articulate activist, but rather as a punk rock star with an interest in political and social issues, such as anti-racism and anti-fascism. He had neither the time nor the inclination to be involved in conventional activism. Nevertheless, the Carnival Against the Nazis was indisputably an important episode in his career, giving him a distinctive image as a political punk. The participation of the Clash also allowed RAR to reach out to a broader audience and to attract other bands. The passing of time and the death of Strummer have allowed the creation of an image of him that corresponded only partially to reality. The case of Joe Strummer and RAR illustrates the problems involved in interpreting the political actions and commitments of musicians and in judging them in relation to apolitical artists or to seasoned political activists. Joe Strummer may not have been an anti-fascist activist or have started a "White Riot", but his contribution to anti-fascism set a precedent which other artists attempted to follow in the 1980s in the struggle against Thatcherism.

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[35] Founded in 1988 by members and sympathizers of Anti-Fascist Action, Cable Street Beat was clearly influenced by RAR, as its slogan "Love Music, Hate Fascism" suggests. It was revived in the 1990s but disappeared at the turn of the century. Interestingly, its publications make very few references to Strummer and the Clash.

Chapter 8
The Last Gang in Town: Masculinity, Feminism, Joe Strummer and the Clash

Maria Raha

> "If I didn't find [my Promised Land] at the end of my road with the Clash, I did catch a glimpse of it, on that road, in the way they acted towards their fans, towards me, towards people who worked for them, towards women, and ultimately towards themselves, every day. Meaning that even if we don't need any more leaders, we could do with a lot more models. If that's what the punks really amount to, then perhaps we actually do have the germ of a new society, or at least a new sensibility, that cuts through things like class and race and sex."
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> *Lester Bangs,* New Musical Express*,* p. 258.

It was 1977 when Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, and Paul Simonon, with their original drummer, Terry Chimes, introduced themselves to a wider audience as the Clash on record. Their first single, "White Riot", was slipped into a sleeve emblazoned with a photograph of Strummer, Jones, and Simonon with their backs to the camera and their legs spread, pressed against a wall as if caught in the middle of a pat-down by police.

The lyrics of "White Riot" were a call to action; a longing for a collective youth rebellion against traditional British mores, a demand for social equality and justice, and relief from the bleak social and economic mid-1970s recession in England that alienated working-class youth – which was widely credited in written and oral histories as a major catalyst for the punk-rock movement in London, and as a result, serves as the basis for British punk's legacy around the world. Beyond the single's picture sleeve, the racing, urgent sound and restless lyrics laid the groundwork for the future of the Clash: a band that liberated its audiences through social and political consciousness, raucous music, and populist ideas about capitalism, authority, and oppression.

The image of the band that was solidified by the single and its sleeve – three young men standing in opposition to authority – was the first in a parade of song titles, lyrics, imagery, media representations, and musical-history myths that constructed and reinforced both Strummer's, and the Clash's, public images as radicals, rebels, thieves, working-class heroes, hoodlums, wanderers, and outlaws. And that perception – perpetuated most notably by Strummer, but also by Jones and Simonon; their contemporaries and fans; and media from fanzines like *Sniffin' Glue* to music magazines and weeklies such as *New Musical Express*; and

eventually, British gossip papers including *The Daily Mail* – became a legacy of rebellion that followed Strummer throughout his post-Clash career, right up to his death in 2002 and beyond it.

This chapter examines the public perceptions of Strummer as the traditional, Western male rebel against his sense of social responsibility and far-reaching impact on women in punk, onstage and off, during the 1970s and throughout the ensuing decades. It also explores Strummer's embrace of myriad social and political liberation movements from the 1970s to the 1990s and his public neglect of one of the biggest Western social movements of that era: feminism. Since Strummer's legacy stems from, and is most prominent because of, his time in the Clash, this work vacillates between studying Strummer as an individual, and the Clash's collective activity when it is problematic to distinguish Strummer's individual decisions from those of the band.

It was not simply "White Riot" – or the mainstream fear of early punk rock, stoked by the sensational reports from British media – that solidified Strummer's and the Clash's rebellious reputations. They also worked to align themselves with the landmark books, music and films that glorified the Western, twentieth-century rebel since its surge in the 1950s. And while the Clash gave voice to the young working class of Britain, the rebel on which the band modeled itself was inarguably American: Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road*, films including *The Wild One* and *Rebel Without a Cause*, and rock 'n' roll musicians such as Elvis Presley represented youthful, male opposition to the middle-class status quo of monogamy and marriage, a burgeoning American suburbia, and traditional Western values. In the ensuing decades, those icons have continued to inform pop culture. *On the Road*, which celebrates freedom and experimentation from the point of view of exiled males who eschew work and stagnation in favor of music and travel, is consistently declared one of the best books of the twentieth century, as noted by *Time*, *The Observer*, and Modern Library, among others.[1] Polls by the American Film Institute have included *Rebel Without a Cause* – which depicts the terror of nonconformity consuming middle-class America – as one of the best 100 films of all time; and *The Wild One*, which examines small-town fear of the outcast, is widely heralded as a cult classic and kicked off the rebel trend in 1950s American film (Driscoll 30).

Despite the resistance to traditional middle-class life those earlier icons of rebellion represented, they also tend to embody a stoic, hyper-masculinity that reinforces the Western notion of a "real man". Jack Kerouac's radical drifters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty use women and toss them aside in favor of nomadic brotherhood (Raha, *Hellions* 33). Marlon Brando's Johnny Strabler in *The Wild One* walks out on a woman with whom he connects – and who longs to leave

[1] Though the popularity of these (or any) cultural works can be difficult to quantify, their longtime impact can still be seen in the cultural consciousness, from teen films of the 1950s, to biker films of the 1960s; in fashion trends of T-shirts, jeans, leather jackets, to the confrontational stance in rock 'n' roll and the radical and countercultural works of the 1960s, such as the film *Easy Rider*.

the small town he swoops in on. James Dean's Jim Stark struggles to connect with his emasculated father in *Rebel Without a Cause*, and Elvis Presley's then-shocking hip-shaking for thousands of adoring female fans symbolized unbridled sexual power. As Simon Reynolds and Joy Press write in *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*: "In the rebel imagination, women figure as both victims and agents of castrating conformity. Women represent everything the rebel is not (passivity, inhibition) and everything that threatens to shackle him (domesticity, social norms)" (3).

When the Clash released "White Riot" in 1977, a full-length, eponymous album followed one month later. The album artwork again foreshadowed the imagery and ideas Strummer, the Clash's main lyricist, stuffed into each racing song: Strummer, Simonon, and Jones crammed in a brick walkway, staring accusingly at the camera. Within the album sleeve, songs including "White Riot"; "Police and Thieves", a cover of a Jamaican song about corruption; and "Career Opportunities", which bemoans the lack of employment that plagued Britain during the mid-1970s; and the self-explanatory "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A." reinforced the urgency of the Clash's music and aligned the band with its contemporaries – frustrated and bored youth stifled by the economic crisis prevalent in 1970s England – while criticizing the culture that manufactured their celebrated rebel.

Strummer's own mythmaking is more prevalent in documents of the band than those of his band mates; he often relied on journalists to help stoke stories about his own, often overblown, rebellion. Chris Salewicz documents Strummer's most famous moments of self-mythologizing in *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*, throughout which the author underscores impressions of Strummer as a folk rebel hero. For example, though he was the son of diplomat Ronald Mellor, a boarding-school student and art-school dropout, Strummer buried such facts in favor of aligning himself with the restless, less-fortunate youth of 1960s and 1970s Britain. Additionally, Salewicz notes that while with his first band, the 101'ers, Strummer contended to have bought a PA from a drug dealer, though he had actually borrowed the money for it from the great-granddaughter of Winston Churchill (117).[2] And when he was beaten in a bathroom for misrepresenting his childhood, he "mythologized the incident" in *New Musical Express*, "claiming that he'd had a knife with him but realized that if he'd 'stuck it in him' he'd have gone to jail" (179).

As an extension, the Clash's sneers and leather, and the band's deceptively titled songs – "Tommy Gun", "Death or Glory", "Last Gang in Town", "Police on my Back"[3] and "Bankrobber", among others – indicate that its masculine rebel image was not a mere figment of the press' imagination; it was cultivated, celebrated, and encouraged by the use of cultural cues that could have been misinterpreted as the glorification of a very narrow version of masculinity. Onstage, the Clash topped

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[2] *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*, New York: Faber and Faber, 2006. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

[3] "Police on my Back" was a cover song; it was written by Eddie Grant.

off their sneering, wide-legged rocker stances with leather jackets, prison uniforms, pompadours, and sometimes, military gear.[4] Between their wardrobes and an often stoic intensity onstage, the Clash personified a montage of the 1950s American rebel.

If fans were not making such connections themselves, the media quickly picked up on Strummer's cues and named them explicitly – and repeatedly. In *New Musical Express*, Nick Kent's review of a 1978 Clash show included the description: "Strummer's stance sums up this band at its best, really: it's all to do with real 'punk' credentials – a Billy The Kid sense of tough tempered with an innate sense of humanity." Greil Marcus wrote in 1978, "Built like Bruce Springsteen, … with a James Dean haircut (no DA), black leather jacket, white T-shirt, … Strummer carries himself like a man who takes nothing for granted" (28). The band as a whole was subject to similar comparisons. "I figure if they had motorcycle gangs in the Soviet Union, the Clash are pretty much what they would look like," Mick Farren wrote in *New Musical Express* in 1981.

Of course, Strummer, the Clash, and their symbolism were much more complex than the simple masculinity of the past might imply. Their songs are infused with a joy for social consciousness ("White Riot"), an understanding of poverty and struggle ("Death or Glory", "Last Gang in Town", "London's Burning") and homages to people's movements ("Guns of Brixton", "Spanish Bombs") that would have never bubbled to the hardened surface of the characters of Kerouac, Brando, and Dean. Instead, through music that rallied for populism and people's movements, the Clash's new rebel hungered for a deeper sense of connection and focused on liberation for all, rather than only that of Western men from middle-class mores. As a result, Strummer's lyricism blurred the line between a deeper masculinity and its mythical mirage, complicating the predictable stoic loner with one who longs for community and solidarity, as is evident in "White Riot". Further, the deepening of the Western notion of the rebel complicates the transatlantic notion of British punk as a platform for one kind of struggle.

Misinterpreting Strummer's rebel image as a seething celebration of a shallow masculinity not only simplifies the Clash's complex imagery; it also kicks aside Strummer's long history of supporting and promoting female musicians. Though certainly jump-started by idle, unemployed, angry youth, British punk has often been misidentified as a male playground and a platform for working-class males, though women – and like Strummer, the middle class –were onstage from the beginning of the British punk scene. Among those first-wave women were Susan Ballion, also known as Siouxsie Sioux, a young woman with an otherworldly, space-age voice and a proto-Goth appearance; and the Slits, formed in 1976 by two teenage girls, Arianna Foster and Paloma McLardy. Hardly genteel, lead singer Arianna Forster (Ari Up) warbled, cuckooed, screamed, and shrieked, while her band mates – Paloma McLardy (Palmolive), Tessa Pollitt, and Viv Albertine – began by slamming sloppily and joyfully through their sets. Simply through their behavior, which just assumed the right to be individuals and criticize

[4] For exemplary performance footage, see Letts.

the femininity they witnessed and resisted in Britain, they challenged conventional female gender roles and expectations of teenage girls' beauty and behavior, such as remaining meticulously groomed, polite and submissive.

With matted, dreaded hair, ripped clothes, and resistance of the centuries-old idea of being "seen and not heard", the Slits forbade their audiences to ignore their raucously liberating, reggae-influenced punk. They created a confrontation to traditional femininity that lifted academic feminism – alive and well in 1970s London and thriving in the U.S. at the time – from tomes, textbooks, and middle-class life, and placed it squarely on the stage of a much more liberated and radical subculture.

Surely, a rebellion of gender roles embedded in Western culture for centuries was more rebellious than even the Sex Pistols' then-shocking opposition to British tradition and royalty. And though some punks might have been thrilled to face a stage full of teenage girls, as drummer Palmolive remembers, the Slits did shock the public at large. "[The general reaction was], 'How can girls do that?'" Ari Up said in 2003. "'How dare they! How ugly, how disgusting!'"[5]

Like their peers, the Slits refused restrictive labels, including feminism. Instead, their feminism shone in the way they lived and acted – in much the same way Strummer's own feminism did. He thoroughly supported the Slits' musical potential and their confidence as musicians and performers. At the time he was living with his girlfriend McLardy, he taught Ari Up and Viv Albertine to play guitar (Foster, McLardy).[6]

Beyond his encouragement of the Slits' self-expression, approximately 70 Clash shows featured the Slits as an opening act. In this way, Strummer and the band repeatedly introduced them to audiences in London and around Britain, Europe, and New York, actively challenging any old notions of gender roles that might have been lurking in the audience. Though fans might not dare to utter it at shows, it is highly likely some were still traditional about gender roles and women's place in music. Further, it took women in the U.S. and Britain another 15 years after both continents' first-wave movements to once again make serious and consistent headway as critically acclaimed rock musicians, even in the punk rock and indie music scenes and to be seen as more than vocalists or novelties. *Without* the perpetuation of ideas about what women's roles in music should or should not be – by fans and music critics alike – the trend begun by first-wave punk rock women would have held, and women would have long retained a consistent place onstage. But as punk grew more popular; as more of its fan base spread beyond those seeking different points of view and new communities shifted to include

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[5] These interviews were conducted for an earlier work, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*, Seal Press, 2005.

[6] That is not to imply that the members of the Slits did not have any personal agency. However, considering their very young age, and the dearth of female musicians throughout twentieth-century pop and rock, having the support and encouragement of a wildly popular band was beneficial and certainly helped their career.

those eager for a musical rush or physical aggression alone, women were once again more prominent as fans than they were as performers.

However, the Clash made room onstage for teenage girls who might have been seen by previous generations as fans of men, not music. Any early, landmark performances by Elvis Presley, the Rolling Stones, or the Beatles reveal how the contributions of most young women were perceived (or, at least, recorded) in the 1950s and 1960s. Such iconic footage of frenzied young girls screaming and fainting historically bound them to submission and kept them sexually prone (Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score* 24).

Instead, the Clash introduced their fans to a band that completely inverted the traditional view of teenage girls as rock's cheerleaders. Instead of staying on the sidelines, the Slits accompanied the Clash on the White Riot tour throughout Britain in 1977, opening for them 27 times on that tour (Savage 334).[7] They also performed 44 dates in 1978, on the Sort it Out tour through Belgium, Holland, Ireland, France, and the United Kingdom (The Clash). On tour, the Slits also bucked stereotypes in between shows. "The White Riot tour was a boys' club thing, where [they] were allowed to wreck the hotels, to totally be insane, doing whatever the fuck they liked, and that was okay for the [tour] bus driver", Ari Up said in 2003. "But we, who even didn't half as much carry on as the boys, the bus driver [had to be] bribed to get us on. [sic]"

Albertine observed the same kind of hypocrisy. "Everywhere we went, we had to almost be strapped to our seats, every hotel we had to be smuggled in [sic]", she told Jon Savage in *England's Dreaming*. "If we'd been men, it would have been, 'Ooh, aren't they great', you know, like the Stones or the Pistols" (335).

As Strummer and the Clash were more complex than their public images suggest, the Slits were much more than confrontational teenagers. Throughout their career, their lyrics reflected their own experiences, from sharp critiques of traditional femininity in "Typical Girls" to their examination of suburbia and consumption in "Newtown" (Reynolds and Press 308). The Slits had the political and social vision to dig deeper into women's experiences and question the narrow expectations of them that, at the same age as previous generations of rock's screaming female fans, they were already resisting. In that way, the Clash did not simply bring teenage girls onstage in order to exhibit a novelty; they also were creating and reinforcing spaces for honest and public female self-expression and experimentation.

Presenting female acts to their audiences was purposeful. In 1981, the Clash played a legendary string of shows at Bond's, a club in Times Square. Because tickets were oversold extensively, the band committed to performing often enough to honor every ticket. The resolution resulted in 17 consecutive live shows, for which numerous opening acts were needed. Instead of packing the stage with bands that either sounded similarly, would have been guaranteed hits with their audiences, or both, the Clash booked acts populated with marginalized musicians, and introduced

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[7] *England's Dreaming*, New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2001. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

their growing fan base to hip-hop, then a thriving subculture mostly relegated to black neighborhoods, such as the Bronx and Harlem. Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five and the Sugarhill Gang opened for them, as did Bad Brains, a popular black punk act from Washington, D.C.; Lee "Scratch" Perry, a legendary reggae and dub artist and producer; and their faithful show openers, the Slits. Strummer did not stop there; he actively sought other local opening acts. According to Annie Toone, a member of the New York City-based all-female act the Bloods:

> By that time my all-butch punkfunk band the Bloods as well as the nearly-all-girl Bush Tetras were riding high and getting noticed. … Joe invited us two downtown white-girl bands to open for them on the last night of the run. … I do remember that Joe was completely nonplussed about how butch [we] were. Not threatened, enamored. We wanted to be the girl Clash, or the girl Rolling Stones or something and looked it. We were bad boyz. He understood and encouraged us. [sic]

The Clash also booked ESG, a black, all-female, post-punk group from the South Bronx.

While the Slits sang about isolation from mainstream life, consumerism, and traditional femininity, ESG – four tomboys in jeans and baseball hats – performed danceable post-punk songs with vocals that strayed far from the smooth and dramatic vocalizing of the more well-known black female vocalists prominent in mainstream pop, disco, R&B, and soul music. And with punk-inspired, clipped vocals and tightly wound basslines, sporting short hair, T-shirts and jeans, the Bush Tetras challenged the images of made-up female pop singers who were "Typical Girls": those either demure in looks and content (such as Olivia Newton-John) or overtly sexual (like Linda Ronstadt). Perhaps, though, the most significant aspect of the women booked at Bond's was that they opted for truly independent self-expression and self-exploration.

Each night, the legal limit of attendees that Bond's could hold was 1,800 (Lee). At the time of those shows, *London Calling* had already hit the Top 30 in the U.S. charts in 1980. With such widespread popularity in the U.S., fans were bound to have a different sensibility than those who were attracted to punk when it comprised a small community of outsiders. Furthermore, larger U.S. cities with punk scenes in the early 1980s, such as Los Angeles and Washington, D.C., were less varied than punks of the 1970s. As the genre's sound grew less diverse – devolving from quirky experimentation to more predictable driving riffs and guttural delivery – so did its audiences. Many accounts of punk scenes in and around Los Angeles and Orange County, California, as well as in Washington, D.C., affirm that they became increasingly male and white.[8] Not only were Clash

[8] To read more about this specific evolution of punk in the U.S., see Azzerad, Michael, *Our Band Could Be Your Life*; Spitz, Marc and Mullen, Brendan, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*; Andersen, Mark and Jenkins, Mark, *Dances of Days*: *Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*. Additionally, these ideas were supported by

fans being exposed to more musical diversity than they were likely used to, they also saw and heard new expressions of race, class, and gender by women of differing backgrounds and sexualities. All of the women who opened for the Clash bucked the more feminine, and either fragile or glamorous, mainstream images of women in pop music in the early 1980s. For example, artists such as Juice Newton, Sheena Easton, and Kim Carnes held places in *Billboard*'s Top 10 during the months the Clash played Bond's (Whitburn 370).

But the audiences at the club were not as accepting of experimentation as the band they clamored to see. As *New Musical Express* reported, "ESG, a multi-ethnic band from the South Bronx got the hook from the hooligans when they opened the Friday show, and even the Slits found themselves experiencing something of a negative response … It seems that there is a hardcore [element] at the show who [sic] simply see the Clash as just another macho rock band and, if they are even aware of it, look on the band's political stance as just another gimmick" (Farren). Clearly, Strummer and the Clash had complicated and transformed the typical, predictable "cool" stance of their rebel ancestors even further by rebelling against their fans' notions of the band and opting to celebrate the truly marginalized and mis- or underrepresented over pop culture's outmoded definitions of Western male isolation.

Only one year after the Bond's shows, in 1982, the Slits broke up. Ten years after they dissolved, in the early 1990s, a host of female-fronted and all-female bands began rising up on punk and indie stages across the U.S. – most notably, in Olympia, Washington, and in Washington, D.C., the home bases for the groundbreaking feminist bands Bratmobile and Bikini Kill. Among other acts, Bratmobile and Bikini Kill used the punk-rock stage and sound as platforms for ideas about culture, misogyny, capitalism, sexuality, violence, and other feminist issues that had been largely neglected by the male majority in later punk and indie circles in the U.S. As mentioned above, throughout the 1980s, punk evolved into a musical style much more limited to speed and aggression, such as that of Minor Threat, or with guttural, staccato, distinctively male vocal styles, like those of Black Flag. Audiences mirrored that aggression. Diverse sounds that drew on numerous musical styles, like the Clash's and the Slits' heavy reggae, dub, and world-music influences, faded into the background. In turn, punk bands began to skew much more male overall. But eventually, in the early 1990s, women including Tobi Vail and Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill began repeatedly demanding that women be treated as equals at shows, and that women's voices be heard from a stage that had long lacked the rich differences that proliferated punk's first wave, from Blondie to X-Ray Spex to the Slits and beyond.

With a new feminist punk movement surging – which eventually captured the attention of mainstream U.S. music magazines including *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* – the Slits and the Raincoats, another post-punk, all-female act that included Paloma McLardy, were cited repeatedly as having been highly influential on those at the

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personal interviews with Tribe 8's Lynn Breedlove and the Avengers' Penelope Houston, which both occurred in 2003.

forefront of the new music movement that eventually flooded mainstream Western culture. For example, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana repeatedly cited the Slits and the Raincoats as some of his favorite acts. He wrote a worshipful piece about the Raincoats in the liner notes for the Nirvana compilation *Incesticide*, which spurred the reissue of the Raincoats' albums in the 1990s.[9] Kathleen Hanna – the lead singer of Bikini Kill who, however unwillingly, became the media spokeswoman for rock feminism in the 1990s – included the Slits' album *Cut* in a 2005 list of records that changed her life (Hanna 26). As a result of those and other such paeans, a music scene rich with feminist ideas and much-needed inclusivity catalyzed a new generation's appreciation for the Slits and inspired a flood of female musicians to make their own noise.

In 2005, Ari Up and Tessa Pollitt began performing as the Slits once again, recording *Revenge of the Killer Slits* in 2006 and *Trapped Animal* in 2009, and touring the U.S. and Europe in 2009. From the time of their first reunion until Ari Up's death in 2010, they played festivals around the world – including the 2007 Golden Plains Music Festival in Australia, the 2009 Offset Festival in England, and the 2010 Primavera Sound Festival in Barcelona, among others. Their resurgence officially introduced the band to yet another generation of women facing a mainstream music industry hell-bent on benign pop singers such as Mariah Carey, Beyoncé, Katy Perry, and Miley Cyrus.

These ripple effects not only generated new musical interest in the Slits and brought them more widespread recognition and acclaim; they underscored the band's – and, in turn, Strummer's and the Clash's – decades-long influence on female musicians. The new generation of rock feminists in the 1990s sparked a new network of 'zines and community organizing, loosely known as riot grrrl, and mainstream record labels released a windfall of female rock acts, including PJ Harvey, Liz Phair, Hole, L7, Garbage, No Doubt, and many others. By the mid-1990s, female singer-songwriters including Tori Amos, Alanis Morissette, Fiona Apple, Tracy Chapman, Sarah McLachlan, and many others released albums with major labels. For the first time since punk's beginnings, numerous female acts did not crop up briefly and fade away. In the past decade, independent music scenes and circles continue to be rife with female artists such as Sleater-Kinney, PJ Harvey, and Cat Power, who are taken seriously as musicians by critics and fans alike. All three of those acts, along with Hole, Björk, Arcade Fire, the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, among other bands with central female members, were included in Spin.com's 2010 list, "Top 125 Albums of the Past 25 Years" (Battaglia and Indrisek). Considering that for decades, such lists contain few nods to female acts that were not mainstream pop, their inclusion is a clear sign that gender is less significant – and less controversial – than it once was to rock audiences, record conglomerates, and rock media. Additionally, in the 2000s, most major cities in the US began hosting rock camps that teach girls from approximately eight years old through 17 years old how to play rock instruments, operate in rock bands, and

[9] Sonic Youth bassist Kim Gordon also wrote liner notes for the reissues (Press 16).

express themselves musically – something Strummer, Jones, and company did spontaneously for teenage girls nearly 30 years earlier.

Beyond supporting and showcasing marginalized musicians, Strummer was vocally supportive of social and political movements that addressed pressing issues around the world. Most notably, the Clash raised money for and educated their fans about the Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua in the late 1970s, naming their 1980 three-record epic *Sandinista!* in honor of the rebel movement. They also attempted to educate their audiences about the civil conflict in El Salvador in the 1980s, and were adamantly against racism, participating in a Rock Against Racism concert in Victoria Park in 1978 (Salewicz 73). The Clash also performed at the Concerts for the People of Kampuchea in 1979, organized by Paul McCartney in response to conditions in Cambodia brought on by war and genocide. Even after Mick Jones's departure from the band in 1984, a new iteration of the Clash played a benefit for miners on strike in London (374). Clearly, the members of the Clash, and their most prominent spokesperson, Strummer, were interested in grassroots rebellion of all kinds, whether or not the movements affected their own culture. It is a wonder, then, that their active, personal support of feminism – one of the most far-reaching revolts of the late 1960s and 1970s, and one that argued against oppression, violence, and fought for workers' rights and equal pay – was not publicly acknowledged either by Strummer or other members of the Clash.

By the time the band began performing live in 1977, Britain had already reached the first of many landmark achievements for women: The Equal Pay Act, the first women's shelter, and the first rape crisis center had all been established in the early 1970s. Feminism was at the forefront of the cultural discourse in the U.S., informing television programming like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and *All in the Family*, as well as gracing the covers of national news magazines including *Time*. Germaine Greer published her sensational, groundbreaking feminist classic, *The Female Eunuch*, in Britain in 1970, and women's positions in the workforce in both nations had begun to evolve. Feminists on both continents organized repeated political actions against sexism in the workplace and in the home, and brought awareness to issues surrounding sexual and physical abuse, among many other systemic problems that oppressed women. In Britain specifically, equal pay acts were passed in 1970 and in 1975, and the Sexual Discrimination Act was passed in 1975 (Kent 340).

In the same way that punk ideas and culture were disseminated through grassroots media, feminists in Britain established their own print publications, including *Spare Rib* and *Red Rag*. The women's movement there focused on four key goals: "equal pay, equal education and opportunity, free contraception and abortion on demand, and 24-hour nurseries" (Caine 256). And when women of color felt the mainstream women's movement in Britain focused too heavily on white women, they formed the Black Women of Brixton (Kent 342). Though the women's movement demanded equal opportunity and the right to work – not to mention that race and class issues had been embedded in Strummer's work and championed by him since the beginning of his career – there is neither a general

record nor written history of Strummer or his band mates publicly supporting the political and social work of women; their specific, work-based grassroots revolt; or the threat of sexual and physical violence under which women around the world continue to live.

While this does not in any way diminish their influence on female musicians of numerous generations, it is a glaring omission on the part of a singer and a band so committed to promoting people's uprisings against oppressive systems and governments. And though women might have been viewed as equals within the punk rock scene in the mid-1970s, they were certainly still fighting for equal rights in society as a whole. Feminism was a large part of the mainstream Western cultural dialogue during the mid- to late-1970s, when Strummer was most active and vocal in the public arena. The following 1978 overview of feminism in Britain sounds exactly like a movement he would have praised publicly, and with vehemence.

> Feminists have legitimately redefined the boundaries of power, work, political activity, and even such concepts as violence. They have helped to dissect further the structures of oppression and ideology under capitalism … .
> Because of the links between women historians, British socialist historiography, and 'people's history', working-class women have received considerably more attention here than in America. (Lambertz 138)

Such "power, work, political activity, and even concepts such as violence" are entirely in step with the movements Strummer aligned himself with, thrived on, and railed against throughout his life. In light of such political and social fervor, his silence about feminism is deafening.

Through album and song imagery, song titles, physical appearance, and through Strummer's mythmaking, he and the Clash touted an explicit outlaw image that celebrated the restlessness and lawlessness of iconic rebellion prevalent throughout the latter half of twentieth-century pop culture. However masculine such images were, Strummer and the Clash led their old rebel heroes in a new direction – one that did not simply reject the past, but aligned it with their definition of utopia: an authority-free, liberated, inclusive, global community.

Through their active support and longtime promotion of marginalized bands – particularly the Slits – the Clash helped infuse punk, and eventually, pop, culture with sorely needed female expression that challenged both the status quo and their audiences' perceptions of equality and gender, and inspired numerous generations of women musicians. In short, Joe Strummer imagined a new rebellion – and went on to live it.

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PART IV
Strummer on Broadway (and Sunset)

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Chapter 9
"I am so Bored with the USA": Joe Strummer and the Promised Land

Justin S. Wadlow

"I am Glad I am Not You": The USA Won't Listen

In the midst of a cold November night in 1999, in Portland, Oregon, Joe Strummer had a heart-to heart-talk with the members of his current band The Mescaleros, all young soul rebels fascinated by the aura of the former Clash leader, and this is what the cult figure told them: "I am so glad I'm not you, young guys, because you're going to be disappointed. People in America won't listen to us. I'm glad I not one of the young guys that are really hungry for success and fame because you're not going to get it" (qtd in Salewicz 582).[1] A fear already shared by legendary rock critic Lester Bangs when he first encountered the Clash in 1977, on British soil this time, before their first tour of the USA: "The Clash are so committed they're downright militant. Because of that, they speak to dole-queue British youth today of their immediate concerns with an authority that nobody else has quite mustered. Because they do, I doubt if they will make much sense to most American listeners" (Bangs 227).

Of course this was not true, and America would eagerly listen to what Joe Strummer had to say, as Joe Strummer would in return listen eagerly to the many different voices of America, from Funk to Hip-Hop and even to Country Music, maybe even more than he thought he ever would … A striking example of this ability to soak up various idioms is the totally improbable friendship Joe Strummer developed with the Country Music singer Joe Ely, whom the Clash met in San Francisco in 1979. Even if his music does sound a bit "light" when compared to the explosive "Spanish Bombs" and "Safe European Home", a close friend of the band, Kosmo Vinyl, goes as far as to describe this unexpected exchange in terms of "spiritual connection", probably referring to Joe Strummer's endless quest for a sincere and honest voice, which he discovered in Rap and Hip-Hop music and would also find, many years later, by working with a dying Johnny Cash on the song "Long Shadow":

> The presence of Joe Ely on the same afternoon bill as the Clash was significant. Joe felt Hank Williams music a lot, and Joe Strummer and Ely both found

[1] *Redemption Song*, London: HarperCollins, 2006. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

> something they longed for in each other: Ely wanted one of those crazy English rock'n'roll guys and Joe wanted that authentic Southern country guy. The connection with Ely was real. Ely is authentic, he's a country singer, out of Hank Williams and Buddy Holly. He's the real thing. A spiritual connection. (qtd in Salewicz 269)

A number of connections therefore take place between two extremes: on the one hand, the land which invented Rock 'n' Roll, Montgomery Cliff, and Broadway, and on the other hand, the nightmare described in "Washington Bullets" and "I am so Bored with The USA". A strange and profound dialogue which spans over 30 years and is made of incredible visions, movies, politics and songs. But a dialogue, as we will see, always heavily loaded with mythology. The land Joe Strummer discovers, from New York to Los Angeles, is as much the land he travels cruising from coast to coast as the one imagined, at home, before ever coming over. Joe Strummer deals with a country put together from various cultural pieces, sometimes contradictory ones, such as the time, in the early 1970s, when Joe, having not yet found his stage name of Strummer (the one who *strums*), called himself … Woody:

> I became known as Woody because, after busking around Europe and sleeping in hedges, being chased around Paris by the gendarmes and all that nonsense, I romanticized the whole thing into, 'Hey there were hobos out there in the Delta, too' and it became an affectation of mine. I decided to name myself after Woody Guthrie and I knew about the union-busting and the humanity of his music. That stuff was inspiring – it was a 'one day hopefully I'll be as good as him' nickname. (qtd in Peachy 33)

In many ways Joe Strummer's love of Woody Guthrie serves as a profound metaphor for what he would gather from American culture: a passion for folk music as it deals with everyday life and struggle, the blending of many different musical traditions Woody Guthrie managed from his numerous travels, a passion for political statements one could actually sing to, as Antonino D'Ambrosio writes in: *Let The Fury Have The Hour, The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer:* "Woody Guthrie's influence on music and politics was profound and serves as both the model and the foundation for all of Strummer's work. He was a cultural pioneer-mixing traditional music with emerging musical styles and forming compositions that were radical political lyrics taking on the cause of the dispossessed" (198). But, because of the many pieces it is made of, Joe Strummer's relation with the USA is a difficult and complex one: going from hatred to fascination, from a desire for emancipation to a discovery of the many possibilities the land has to offer, a trip from London to New York (via the West Coast) which also indicates a path from murder to reconciliation. As Joe Strummer testifies to *Rolling Stone* reporter Mikal Gilmore in 1979: "England's becoming too claustrophobic for us. Everything we do is scrutinized. I think touring America could be a new lease on life" (52).

A Tale of Two Cities

No other Punk band has ever been able to develop to such an extent, especially not the rival Sex Pistols, who, like an already sinking ship, wrecked themselves on the shores of the American West Cost, ending their career in San Francisco with a totally paranoid Johnny Rotten screaming to an unappreciative crowd "A-ha! Ever have the feeling you've been cheated? Good night". Or, as one of the uncooperative cowboys in the crowd puts it that fatal night, talking straight to Sid Vicious: "You don't even have a real job. You're a bunch of tough motherfuckers! What are you doing in America?" (Monk and Guterman 206).

More than any other city, New York embodies the highly ambiguous links between the USA and the British Punk movement: for the Sex Pistols, and especially Sid Vicious, the city would turn into a glittering but deadly *Sin City*, a place of drugs, murder and eventually death, while, for the Clash, New York would end-up being a savior from the small minded and often aggressive British press, bringing them both wide commercial success and renewed inspiration. As Mal Peachy puts it in the introduction to his book *The Clash*:

> The UK music press in general was unappreciative of The Clash spreading their sphere of influence around the world. But The Clash always had a global plan: they had a message to put across to as many people as possible. That they played 'I'm So Bored With The USA' and 'Career Opportunities' in front of 70.000 fans at Shea Stadium and even more at the Us Festival is proof of that. (33)

"I'm so Bored with the USA": American Influences, Anti-American Songs

In many ways, Punk music was, in 1976, a very American invention, born out of the New York downtown scene of the mid 1970s, heavily influenced by the Velvet Underground, Iggy and the Stooges or MC5 from Detroit. The word itself appeared for the first time on the cover of the magazine launched in New York by Legs McNeil and John Holmstron: *Punk*, in 1975, with precisely Lou Reed on their first cover, then would follow Patti Smith, Television and the Ramones. As Jon Savage points out in *England Dreaming*: "In 1975, England was nowhere, New York had already a well-defined culture with the CBGB, and a slogan: *Blank Generation*" (26).[2] The memories of the *Swinging London*, which had previously been at the heart of the 1960s, were now nearly absent, and London was nowhere on the map except for a few avant-garde bands such as Roxy Music and David Bowie. Most of the brutal energy which would give rise to the Punk scene therefore came from the USA. Glen Matlock, first and only real bass player for the Sex Pistols, doesn't hesitate to pay his tribute:

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[2] *England Dreaming*, Paris: Allia, 2002. All other citations in this chapter from this edition.

> Malcolm McLaren has just come back from the USA with these posters of *Television* with Richard Hell. There were these great songs, such as *Blank Generation*, which gave us the idea for *Pretty Vacant*. One of our first songs, was a tribute to Richard Hell's *Please Kill Me*, and was called *Kill Me Today*. (qtd in Savage 159)

For Joe Strummer in particular, another very influential band coming out of the early New York Punk Scene was The Ramones:

> It can't be stressed how great the first *Ramones* album was to the scene because it gave anyone who couldn't play the idea that it was simple enough to be able to play. Paul and I spent hours, days, weeks … playing along to the record. It was the first word of Punk, a fantastic record. (qtd in Peachy 73)

New York and its music was therefore seen, in many ways, as a father figure which had first to be killed and destroyed in order to give birth to a new aesthetic, make way for *rising suns* ... As Johnny Rotten explains when asked to comment upon his song *New York*:

> It's about imposters from New York, all those cheap ass-holes who call themselves poets and take themselves seriously, and all they're doing is destroying music in a ridiculous way. I just ruin everything. (qtd in Monk and Guterman 211)

Although, as we will see, some sort of reconciliation with the Promised Land was, in the end, possible. A reconciliation which, through time, will take on many various shapes: music, films, videos and even poetry.

"I Fought the Law": 1979, First US Tour

"I Fought the Law" (a cover of the 1958 classic tale of teenage rebellion by The Crickets) was the first Clash single released in the US, and it received quite a large amount of radio airplay, which helped create interest in a band whose first album had previously been available only as imported material, and, even then, in a slightly edited format designed for the US market, omitting for example such vivid songs as "Cheat" and "48 Hours". In *West Way to the World* Joe Strummer remarks, quite candidly: "We didn't realize how the first album sounded weird to Americans"; and Mick Jones adds: "They feared it wasn't fit for human consumption." Obviously, CBS thought both the lyrics and the music too crude for any US radio, and, with no hope of any hit, the company didn't even bother to put the record out, so *Give 'Em Enough Rope* (the Clash's second album) was therefore released first, giving the newly conquered American public a slightly distorted picture of what the Clash were actually trying to put forward, since *Give 'Em Enough Rope* is, in many ways, already concerned with post-punk attitude, in

such songs as "All The Young Punks" *(New Boots and Contracts)* or "Last Gang In Town", which were, to some extent, the Clash's own version of the Kinks' "Where Have All The Good Times Gone".

But, even against all odds, gaining an American following meant a lot for the band, as Mick Jones put it: "I always thought that people would be really proud of us in England, because we'd almost made it in America when *Give 'Em Enough Rope* came out and we went on our first tour. Hopefully it was inspiring to people" (qtd in Peachy 161). The Clash did their first US tour in 1979, famously called the Pearl Harbor Tour, with posters showing the Statue of Liberty all bundled up in rope. And already the Clash's first encounter with the USA was deeply surrounded by the classic mythology of Rock 'n' Roll, taking along with them the legendary author of "Who Do You Love?", Bo Diddley himself, as support. At the same time, Elvis Costello was also choosing to tour with another legend of the bygone days: Carl Perkins, even though most shows had to be canceled due to Perkins alcoholic issues. Running around with the Clash, Bo Diddley seemed to enjoy mixing with a new generation of rockers, according to Sylvie Simmons in the magazine *Sounds*: "He stood up there with his square guitar and growled 'this feels like 1965 all over again', and almost everyone cheered and gave him standing ovations." and Joe Strummer marveled: "I can't look at him without my mouth falling open" (qtd in Salewicz 248).

The US audiences, although at the time mostly listening to such classical bands as The Eagles, Bob Seger or Steely Dan, responded welcomingly. Robert Hilburn wrote for example about Joe Strummer in the *Los Angeles Times*: "The band's strongest visual lure on stage spits out the lyrics with such alarming intensity that a life insurance salesman would think twice about writing him a policy" (qtd in Salewicz 249). For Joe Strummer, this blend of two countries, two very different musical cultures, sounded totally natural: "It never occurred to us that taking songs from London to America was odd. We'd go on to *Saturday Night Live* or *Fridays* on ABC and do our normal thing" (qtd in Peachy 162). When describing the incredible experience of playing Shea Stadium in New York in 1982 (just like the Beatles had done before them), in front of 70,000 people, Joe Strummer also reflects: "We played Shea Stadium with The Who and it was fun to play 'Career Opportunities' in a place like that, when six years earlier we'd written it in Camden Town. It's things like that, though, which make the world so interesting" (qtd in Peachy 218). The tour was quite successful, to quote Sylvie Simmons: "The Clash's first American tour is being felt by the press as the stimulating aftershock of the Pistols's US invasion a year ago or not at all." Although the Clash still had no real hit to their name (which would only come with "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" and "Rock The Casbah" a couple of years later), they were by far the first British Punk Band to deal with success on such a large scale. In New York, playing at the Palladium, the crowd was made up of as many downtown celebrities as possible, including: Debbie Harry from Blondie, David Johansen from The New York Dolls, John Cale and Nico from The Velvet Underground and Lenny Kaye who, at the time, played a key role working with Patti Smith. Reflecting on this

incredible situation Joe Strummer acknowledged: "We were presented with a situation that had escalated out of control, we were on the News. It was great checking into New York and finding yourself on the News" (qtd in Peachy 198).

But, already the Clash were doing business their own way, stepping out of the beaten tracks to incorporate political and social convictions into show business. If their first US concert ever took place at the Berkeley Community Center in Los Angeles (organized by legendary Hippie, Bill Graham), the Clash then insisted on playing a benefit gig for the homeless at the Geary Temple, in what had been previously the famous Fillmore West, which had done so much, ironically, to promote the anti-thesis of Punk Rock, with bands such as Grateful Dead or Jefferson Airplane. As Chris Salewicz puts it: "The second show the Clash played in the USA was a benefit, right from the start they nailed their colours to the mast" (248). In San Francisco the Clash also gave another benefit concert, in a majestic but now run down synagogue, to help and promote New Youth, a fledging organization aiming to keep ticket prices down, get larger percentages for the bands, and a place for Punk and New Wave acts to play. The tickets were therefore sold half price, while the band opened precisely with "I'm so Bored With the USA".

And this self-conscious political attitude would come-up again a few days later in Cleveland, where the Clash played an improvised benefit concert for a totally unknown Vietnam vet called Larry McIntyre, in a story typical of Joe Strummer's incredible openness of mind and love of the people, no matter who – a story which carries with it maybe just enough disorganization to keep this otherwise marvelous altruist gesture in touch with the original Punk attitude.

> This guy called Larry McIntyre lost both his legs in Vietnam, and when we went for a swim one day in the pool near his flat all the other residents banned him from the pool on the grounds that it was too disgusting so we agreed to play a show for him, helping his legal costs, but we don't get to meet him because, having forgot his name, I referred to him over the PA as "the guy with no legs". (qtd in Salewicz 250)

An interesting story coming from a band having written, just a few years before, the ultimate Punk song: "Hate and War", but which nicely depicts the profound care for the most vulnerable which is a constant in Joe Strummer's character, as when, in 1983, visiting Las Vegas, Joe met again with other war veterans: "I found myself walking along the Strip. It was pretty good. Then I started talking to Vietnam veterans who were drinking bottles out of brown paper bags. So I had an entertaining night" (qtd in Salewicz 372). An attitude Lester Bangs had defined, right from the start in 1977, as "persistent humanism":

> The reason they are righteous is that beneath their wired harsh sound-scape lurks a persistent humanism. To appreciate it in the Clash's music you might have to be the sort of person who could see Joe Strummer crying out for a riot of his own as someone making a positive statement. You perceive that as much as his

> music seethes with rage and pain, it also champs at the bit of the person system of things, lunging after some glimpse of a new and better world. (229)

This attempt at mixing show business with a strong political agenda would continue right up to the end, during the biggest concert ever for the Clash: their appearance at the US Festival in 1983, in front of 150,000 people. When Joe Strummer found out, a few hours before the show, that tickets were for sale at $25 instead of the promised $17, he refused to go on stage and instead improvised a press conference declaring that the Clash would not perform that evening unless Steve Wozniak donated $100,000 to send impoverished Latino youth of East L.A. to summer camps. And when the band finally did appear, they played beneath a banner that read, in bright red colors: *CLASH NOT FOR SALE*, which was rather ironic considering the huge fee they received for the festival destined to become "the Woodstock of the computer generation". Then, addressing directly the money that had made the event possible, Joe Strummer shouted to what seemed to him an awfully silent audience:

> I know the human race is supposed to get down on its hands and knees in front of all this new technology and kiss the microchip circus. But it don't impress me over much that there ain't nothing but You Buy, You-make-you-buy-you-die. That's the motto of America – you get born to buy it. All right then, here we are in the capital of the decadent US of A. This here set of music is now dedicated to making sure that the people in the crowd who have children there is something left for them later in the centuries. (qtd in Salewicz 370)

But this first US tour, because of its scale and the media coverage which exposed the band much more than in their native UK, was also destroying it, widening an ever increasing gap between Joe Strummer, clearly becoming the visible leader and spokesman for the Clash (using both his lyrics and the press to put forward a very political message) and Mick Jones, worrying he would be left too much on the side, only dealing with the guitars and not with the message being performed. As Salewicz puts it:

> Joe had the press buzzing around him and they weren't talking to Mick enough, even though Mick might be giving more interesting answers, because Joe's message was fairly monosyllabic. He was considered the prophet of his generation, which is weird, because Mick had more to say of interest, was always available and calm, and he could face failure, which Joe couldn't. (253)

It was therefore in the US, more than in the UK, that Joe Strummer clearly became the leader of the Clash, ignoring to some extent the importance of Mick Jones, who had for example sung on the Clash's first US hit single, "Train in Vain", in 1980, and would ironically give the Clash their biggest hit ever with "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" A gap which would eventually widen with every further visit

to the US: Joe Strummer becoming more and more interested in politics, while Mick Jones would become more and more silent, but nonetheless aware of every new sound coming off the streets. In a sense, both leaders would make a point listening to what the "oppressed masses" had to say, but in very different ways: while Joe Strummer would concentrate mostly on the words used, Mick Jones would pay more attention to the music in the background. As Salewicz points out in his biography: "Joe could make the cultural and social connection, whereas Mick would make the musical connection, almost to the point where it was too much for Paul and Joe. Mick had a great foresight to see where contemporary sounds were going" (378).

Contrasting portraits of the two leaders also drawn by reporters Gilmore for *Rolling Stone* in 1979 and Bangs for *New Musical Express* in 1977 emphasize this incredible alchemy between words and music, wit and commitment, soul and dissipation:

> According to the myth encasing this band, Jones who writes nearly all of the Clash's music, is the band's real focal nerve, even though the austere Strummer writes the bulk of the lyrics. In the best Keith Richard's tradition, fans see Mick as a sensitive and vulnerable street waif, prone to dissipation. (Gilmore 52).

> I found out that Joe Strummer had an abscessed tooth, and since the rest of the band draw their energy off him they were all suffering. […] Serious without being solemn, quiet without being remote or haughty, Strummer offers a distinct contrast to Mick's voluble wit and twinkle of eye. He is almost certainly the group's soul. (Bangs 229)

A difficult balance between rock and politics, which would unfortunately break up when Joe Strummer would dismiss Mick Jones as a fake.

This is Radio Clash: 1981, the Clash Take to the Streets of New York

For the Clash, 1981 represented a profound artistic crisis. Their latest album, the near utopian *Sandinista!* (a three-LP-sold-for-the-price-of-one tribute to the Nicaraguan revolutionary movement) had been a financial failure and had gotten mixed reviews, although being paradoxically better understood in the USA than in their native UK. As Chris Salewicz tragically points out, describing the mixed reviews from the British press after the release of the single "Bank Robber", insisting on the fact that Joe Strummer's father was "Second Secretary of Information" at the Foreign Office, and therefore not at an outstanding outlaw of any kind: "Scorn was heaped upon him. As their career trajectory moved upwards in the United States, the Clash discovered that their British critical honeymoon was nearing an end" (301).

The same disapproval had also been sensed right from the start, in 1977, by Bangs, when referring to his view of class system in England: "I guess it also has

something to do with another NME writer sneering to me, 'Joe Strummer has a fucking middle-class education, man!'" But Bangs widely dismisses the argument and concludes, looking at the art made, not the artist who made it: "The Clash are authentic because their music carries such brutal conviction, not because they're Noble Savages" (227).

Paul Morley, in his NME review of "The Call Up" (the latest single from the album *Sandinista!*) dismissed both the record and the band as "Americanized", "old fashioned", "too wrapped up in those used-up myths". Nick Kent, who had done so much to favor the Punk movement and had always been a big fan of the Clash, harshly presented the music as "ridiculously self-indulgent", hated the lyrics and described Joe's singing as "simply duff". Quite on the opposite, the American *Rolling Stone* gave the album a five-star rating and, ironically enough, *Sandinista!* went as far as number 24 in the US charts, finding a larger audience than even *London Calling*.

Joe Strummer's answer to all these criticism was, again, a proof of what was not understood by the British press at the time (trying to pigeon-hole the band in its former punk attitude): his openness of mind and his incredible capacity to take in any influence he would come across, always listening to what the world had to say, in any given form:

> Some of it is very American-sounding. But if you go somewhere then obviously it's going to leave its mark on you, and we did that American tour and stayed there for quite a while. I tend to absorb more, absorb what's going on where I am (qtd in Salewicz 306).

But the band was, by now, exhausted by endless touring as well as by the numerous internal tensions between Joe Strummer and Mick Jones. It seemed on the verge of breaking up and was desperately looking for inspiration. After having brilliantly incorporated Reggae, Dub, early Rock and even Jazz into their music, the Clash were left dry, starving for new influences. This desperate quest for something new came precisely at a moment, in the history of Punk Rock itself , where all the other leading bands were now developing highly individual paths for themselves, some of which would eventually lead to the Post Punk or New Wave movement: Johnny Rotten (who had by now taken back his real name of Johnny Lydon, after escaping both the Sex Pistols and Malcolm McLaren) was developing his very experimental band PIL, Siouxsie Sioux was reinventing herself as a magical gothic figure with the Banshees, Captain Sensible (from the pioneering band the Damned) was surprisingly turning his stupid caricature of disco music, "Wot", into a huge hit, and even Billy Idol was winning over the US market with his own down-played version of the original Punk music.

At the same time the Clash were being questioned by a now "third-wave" of Punk groups, such as: Black Flag, Hüsker Dü, Minor Threat and the Minutemen, aiming at restoring the original flame and anger for true believers. As Charlie

Bertsch puts it: "The pressure must have been overwhelming for a populist punk band like the Clash" (178).

Strangely enough for the Clash, in this highly challenging context, the solution would come from New York, rather than their native English roots of say, London, Manchester or Glasgow. While roaming endlessly the streets of New York, the Clash would fall in love with the vitality of up-coming Hip-Hop and Rap music, and end up incorporating into their music a wide range of influences, until then widely unknown to other Punk bands. Thus keeping in touch with one of the original goals of the Clash: spreading the news anywhere they went. Although not everyone seemed convinced at the time, as Joe Strummer himself points out, commenting on a statement by Mark P (the legendary founder of *Sniffin' Glue*, one of the first and most outstanding British Punk newspapers): "Mark P wanted us to stay home-made, to make our own records, which people do. But we wanted to break out of it, to reach America and be global. Somebody had to take that bull by the horns and shake it" (qtd in Peachy 112).

But, by this time, the original New York Punk/Downtown scene was nowhere to be found: Patti Smith had now retired to Detroit and was raising a family, the Talking Heads had moved towards more radical musical experimentations with Brian Eno, Alan Vega was making his move towards becoming a Steam Punk-Frank Sinatra, and even the original Ramones were turning more and more into a museum piece every day, while Television was lost to Rock Music. Energy and creativity would thus have to come from elsewhere: namely from Brooklyn and the Queens, where Hip-Hop culture was now spreading to the abandoned warehouses, invading the Block Parties and the MCs. As Joe Strummer himself marvels:

> It was the start of the rap thing happening in New York and we fell in with some graffiti artists who made us a big banner with The Clash on it, which we unveiled from the top of the building we were playing at. We got to see some of New York and feel a part of it for the first time. I quite wanted to stay. (qtd in Peachy 198)

One good example of this infiltration of New York sounds into the original British Punk music is the song "The Magnificent Seven", originally called "The Magnificent Seven Rap-O-Clappers". Mick Jones, his musical and cultural antennas always on the alert, had been extensively listening to all the Rap music now pouring out of Brooklyn and Queens. In what is now left from Don Letts documentary *Clash On Broadway* (which was basically improvised on a day-to-day basis always adding more footage as the days went by) we follow all four members of the band roaming the streets, having fun, listening to a group of black kids practicing a very primitive form of Rap by just clapping in their hands and chanting to the beat of their own voices, running along with graffiti artists spraying paint all over, easily mixing with a typical New York crowd made up of as many Latinos as Afro-Americans, kindly watching elderly people dancing in the streets to the sounds of Block-Parties.

In what looks like a filmed diary, we see Joe Strummer always carrying with him a huge ghetto-blaster playing all sorts of music coming out of New York. One piece in particular caught Mick Jones's attention, the brilliantly innovative 15-minute record "Rapper's Delight" by Sugarhill Gang, and the Clash were eager to invent their own blend. As Joe Strummer puts it: "That stuff we made the week after Mick came back from Brooklyn with those Sugarhill records – it all still rocks" (Peachy 198).

In return for this favor, a group of DJs performing under the obscure name of *Pepe Unidos* came up with a "The Magnificent Dance Mix" for the local Disco market, most of the black audience probably unaware that the original material originated from a white British Punk band. The Clash were therefore incorporating into their music the many new sounds of the city, and the New York sessions had an openness about them which made the songs recorded for *Sandinista!* the perfect blend of Reggae, Dub, Rap, Rockabilly and traditional Rock 'n' Roll. As Joe Strummer puts it, still marveling at this incredible artistic situation:

> I got into it, and it was an inspiration for me. WBLS (a pioneering radio in Rap and Hip-Hop) was blasting all over the city, we just got hooked into some of that vib and made our own version of it. We made one instrumental of 'Mag 7' once and WBLS played it to death. You couldn't go anywhere in NYC without hearing that … and that was us: weirdo punk rock white group doing the thing … Ah, Ah …!!" (Letts *West Way to the World*)

Furthermore, the Clash not only incorporated vivid sounds, they also brought along the colorful pictures of the streets, working on stage with graffiti artists Futura 2000 and Fab Five Freddy. The Clash would then bring them back to London, playing the Lyceum, where Futura 2000 would spray-paint a graffiti mural backdrop, and then leap down from his step-ladder to deliver his rap.

But, when faced with the very American constraints of show-business as first of all a business, again the Clash insisted on doing things their own way, setting their own pace, for example turning down the opportunity to play the massive Madison Square Garden, and choosing instead Bond, on Broadway and Times Square, a somewhat rundown former plush disco which turned out much too small for their audience, but which carried with it the sense of bohemia romance which particularly appealed to the Clash's taste for decadence, as would, the following year, the choice of Convention Hall, Asbury Park (NJ) to launch the first of a twenty-three-date tour of the US. Even once in Paris, the Clash would renew this experience by playing at the Theatre Mogador (an old fashion Italian theatre covered in gold and red carpet, which used to specialize in Vaudeville) rather than a bigger but unsurprising stadium on the outskirts of town.

When trying to underline this logic which compelled the Clash to refuse Madison Square Garden, where they could have made far more money for far less effort, Salewicz comes up with the interesting idea of "a cultural abyss": "Making far more money for less effort was not only the point, it was more like the anti-point" (316).

The Bond's stage was therefore transformed into a vast platform for various forms of expression, support acts ranging from the legendary Jamaican producer Lee "Scratch" Perry (whom the Clash had worked with in London) to innovative Rap musician Grandmaster Flash, and going as far as to include spokesmen from the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, which would introduce the Clash to Central American Politics and famously give its name to their following album: *Sandinista!*

During this time in NYC, one fascinating experience, which would grow to become a keystone in *Combat Rock*, was the first encounter with beat poet Allen Ginsberg, when the Clash were asked to back Ginsberg on *Capital Air*, something Ginsberg described as "a poem that has chord changes". After having worked with Bob Dylan and many others, Ginsberg himself felt honored to be included by the younger generation: "I don't know of any other band that would be willing to go on with a big middle age goose like me who might or might not be able to sing in tune" (qtd in Salewicz 320).

In New York the Clash therefore managed to connect with some of their cultural heroes, and both Paul Simonon and Joe Strummer got to meet cult-figure Andy Warhol, giving each their own point of view. In his appreciation, Paul Simonon blends brilliantly together London and New York: "He was kind of like David Bowie in a Warhol film" (qtd in Peachy 200) – a strange premonition since Bowie would end up playing precisely the character of Andy Warhol in the movie *Basquiat* by Julian Schnabel in 1996 – while Joe Strummer felt uncomfortable and out of place among the many fancy super stars of the *Factory*: "They were inspecting me as if I was an interesting coal miner they'd picked up on the highway" (qtd in Salewicz 251). Things would go much better with legendary William Burroughs, when Joe Strummer was invited by journalist Victor Bockris (who had been a close friend of Lou Reed and wrote the first Velvet Underground biography) to meet the great man at his secret hiding place at 222 Bowery. As Victor Bockris describes it: "As tribute to the great man of letters: six enormous spliffs, a bottle of whisky and a six-pack of beer were presented" (qtd in Salewicz 290).

The band as a whole even manages to get a small appearance in Martin Scorsese film *The King of Comedy*, where they are supposed to look like a menacing street gang annoying Robert de Niro as he walks down the crowded streets, busy having an argument with Dianne Abbot. But most of what we see on screen is actually the back of their heads and a bit of Joe Strummer's smile, trying to look more like Sid Vicious than ever. At the time Scorsese (who had been listening extensively to the Clash while on the set of *Raging Bull*) was actually thinking of using the Clash for his next grand project on violence in the city: *Gangs of New York*. But, unfortunately, this would never happen.

The Clash also improvise, on a day to day basis, a film with Don Letts called, ironically, *Clash on Broadway*. But most of the footage got lost somewhere along the line, actually abandoned by the band's manager Bernie Rhodes in a storage house in New York, although a small portion of the film now appears in Don Letts

documentary *West Way to the World*, and shows a happy-going band discovering Hip-Hop and Rap music in the streets of New York.

Far from the symbols of death and chaos that New York had embodied for the Sex Pistols, for the Clash the city represents a wonderful and lively opportunity, both from a commercial and an artistic point of view. In many ways, this allowed the band to get in touch with a mythology that had been with them since the very start. Paul Simonon and Joe Strummer especially see themselves as a new brand *Rebel Without a Cause*, and insist on staying at the Iroquois Hotel off Times Square because that's where their hero used to live: "We stayed at the Iroquois Hotel, which is where James Dean used to stay when he was in New York. Just off the lobby was a barber who claimed to remember cutting Dean's hair. Joe and I used to get our hair cut there, of course" (qtd in Peachy 198).

For his part as Joe Strummer points out, discovering a mythology he would spend the rest of his life exploring in all possible directions: "When you've been into American music as long as I have, to go there and ride across the country on a bus is a real trip. To go to places you've only heard of in songs is fantastic" (qtd in Peachy 159). As Salewicz puts it: "Manhattan was a perfect backdrop against which a group of former art students in love with the switchblade ethos of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* could perform" (317).

"Combat Rock": The Clash Live and Die in NYC

Combat Rock, the Clash's most successful album (which was to be their last one as well) was first recorded at the beginning of 1982 in West London, but pretty soon everybody moved to Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* studio in New York and, in many ways, the songs on *Combat Rock* embody the perfect blend of American and British influences, probably more than the masterpiece *London Calling*, especially in such classics as "Overpowered by Funk" and "Ghetto Defendant". On the video Letts makes for the single *Radio Clash*, we see a band happily going about town spraying paint all over the walls, as if a bunch of wild kids were redecorating their parent's flat in their absence.

Mick Jones describes this improbable mixture of London Punk and New York graffiti movement (which Blondie would also develop later in their classic *Rapture*): "It was the start of the rap thing happening in New York and we all fell in with some graffiti artists who made us a big banner with the Clash on it, which we unveiled from the top of the building we were playing at" (qtd in Peachy 199).

A special guest during the making of *Combat Rock* was again Allen Ginsberg, now as much at ease with Joe Strummer as Ginsberg had been with Bob Dylan in the early 1970s or many West Coast Jazz musicians in the late 1950s. At the group's invitation, he flew in from Boulder, Colorado, and joined them in the studio for over a week, working on lyrics, telling wonderful stories and showing them around town. As Kosmo Vinyl pointed out: "He wanted to get The Clash to back him up on a record he was going to make, but he ended up on our record

instead" (qtd in Salewicz 327), developing his own input, collaborating with Joe Strummer (much more than with Mick Jones or the others) on some lyrics, as well as providing backing vocals as "The Voice of God". A little later, Allen Ginsberg would also appear on stage with the band, playing two nights at Pier 84 in New York, where he chanted rather than sung his own lyrics on "Ghetto Defendant", in front of a mixed audience of 8,000.

Although totally fascinated by Allen Ginsberg ("You're the greatest poet in America. Can you improve on these lyrics?") Joe Strummer manages none the less to brilliantly incorporate into his own writing the complex words of Allen Ginsberg:

> I asked Ginsberg for a word once, but it was just one word. He wrote his own bit for Ghetto Defendant but he had to ask us what the names of punk dances were and said 'Well, you've got your slam dance'. He did it on the spot; it was good. (qtd in Peachy 212)

As with many other aspects of American culture (movies, Rap music, or graffiti art) the links Joe Strummer creates in New York can be best described as a game of give and take, a clever balance avoiding two misleading attitudes Strummer has seen developing around him: first, a form of copy-cat, as in the case of British musician and producer Nick Lowe, who went as far as to recreate in his own studio the exact sound and equipment of the famous *Stax* productions of the late 1960s; then, maybe worse in a way, the deep contempt and sarcasm of Johnny Rotten and the Sex Pistols, for example in the song *New York*, where he sneers especially at the disproportionate pretentions towards literature of the New York Downtown scene: "Think it's well playing max's kansas/you're looking bored/and you're acting flash/with nothing in your gut/you better keep yer mouth shut."

In this sense, Joe Strummer tried to be as honest and open-minded as possible, respectful of a culture he both loves and rejects, trying to find his own middle ground; as Kosmo Vinyl points out: "People have said that Ginsberg was Joe's lyric coach on that record, but I think that's a bit overplayed" (qtd in Salewicz 358). But Joe Strummer would now have to pursue a dialogue with America without the rest of the Band, having first fired Topper Headon for heavy drug use, the dissentions with Mick Jones became just too strong to overcome. In a way, these dissentions have a lot to do with the state the USA was in at the start of 1980s, now facing the rise of the conservative revolution and the increasing power of Reaganomics: on the one hand, we face Joe Strummer's loyalty to a strong political commitment (in a day and age when this was becoming precisely more and more difficult); and on the other hand, we find Mick Jones bending towards a brilliant but less politically committed cultural mix.

Two opposite views embodied in two very different songs from *Combat Rock*: "Know Your Rights" and "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" The Clash were by then incapable of choosing between a strong political statement and just a *fun* Pop Song, As Kenneth J. Bindas explains: "Joe Strummer wanted to keep the Clash

musically simple and lyrically radical. Headon, like Jones, wanted to expand the band's appeal, or as Jones said: 'people prefer to dance than fight wars'" (76).

It is true that, by 1982, the Clash were experiencing a widening of the gap between their ideology and the aims of mainstream US audience, which was by then gaining more and more weight in the war the band had launched against its record company: CBS. While economic conditions in the US continued to worsen, the American audience was paying less and less attention to the Clash's working-class-anti-imperialist ideology, and turning more towards other types of music: disco was still very popular, and providing a clear escape into a Dionysian (not political) world, and middle-class youth was increasingly adopting Heavy Metal. If any social consciousness was needed it was to be found more in Bruce Springsteen's songs, such as "Darkness on the Edge of Town", than in the Clash's "Washington Bullets". In other words:

> Within a society they believed to be rapidly declining, the Clash were convinced that hope could only be restored through the direct intervention of humans. As musicians, they felt empowered to facilitate this transition, but found that much of their American audience either missed the point or did not want to think about it.[3]

Peter Hall therefore points out in *Rolling Stone*: "The Clash were confused by their American fans' political conservatism. Their listeners all dressed like Punks, but few embraced the Clash's ideals. The audience seemed, to them, apolitical" (qtd in Bindas 85). In a way, there seemed to be less and less difference between a crowd attending a Clash concert and any other regular concert: the audience was predominantly male, middle-class and white.

The tour to promote *Combat Rock* in America, called *The Down The Casbah Club Tour*, would therefore be the last chance for the band to rub against the mythology of the USA, now extensively touring the Deep South, visiting such places as New Orleans, Dallas and Houston, even playing five nights at the Hollywood Palladium in Los Angeles, where, on the opening night, Bob Dylan and his whole family came along. Despite the heavy tensions between Mick Jones and Joe Strummer, Don Letts nevertheless managed to shoot the video for "Rock the Casbah" in the desert outside Austin (Texas) where the band plays, all dressed up in combat boots and military outfits, in front of oil wells, symbolizing the US's increasing involvement in the Middle East. But Mick Jones resented the whole idea so much that he voluntarily kept his head covered in rags and dark shades during the whole performance, until Joe Strummer is forced to tear down this improvised mask. In the end, nonetheless, the video would be broadcasted extensively on the newly created MTV, helping the position of the band in the US charts, and further strengthening Joe Strummer's position as leader/vocalist.

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[3] Kenneth J. Bindas, *Op.cit*. 85.

Combat Rock's success definitely gave the Clash a rock star status and strengthened their position on the US market, hence giving them worldwide commercial credibility … maybe too much so …? The question was widely debated whether the Clash had actually sold out to the American market and whether global success, as so often, meant that that they had betrayed their early ideals of rebellion, and squandered their independence for "a pocket full of mumbles". But one can easily argue that the whole point of Punk music was precisely to push rebellion up the charts, to change the system from the inside, as much as from the outside. In other words, the Clash also achieved what the Sex Pistols had so brilliantly managed to do by becoming number one with *Anarchy in the UK*: sell rebellion to middle class youth and get the capitalist to invest in chaos. This is exactly what Joel Schalit, of *Punk Planet*, discusses with Joe Strummer in a 2000 interview:

> I have very mixed feelings about the selling out thesis, particularly in the case of Combat Rock, because it was the most explicitly political record to top the American charts since the late '60s. For god's sake, any record that combines spoken word rants with funk and sneaks in Allen Ginsberg into a top-ten album is pretty subversive in my book.

Although the Clash's US tour was meant to end in September by one last show in Boston, the band was made an offer they couldn't possibly refuse: to support The Who on what was scheduled to be their last tour ever, since they were supposedly retiring at the time. Joe Strummer's old room-mate from the days of the 101'ers (who had worked as publicist for The Who) describes this in terms of one generation taking over another: "Towshend was handing The Clash their mantle. He was deliberately positioning them to take over from The Who" (qtd in Salewicz 359).

Even if the sets were short ones for the Clash (45 minutes, on-off, all the hits) they were a great opportunity to expand their audience, performing in front of crowds of 80,000 people. On October 12 and 13, for example, the Clash played the Shea Stadium in NYC, and Don Letts famously included the arrival of the band in a magnificent white Cadillac as part of his video for "Know Your Rights".

But, in many ways, this success would also be the end of the band, now having to cover an impossible ground between political commitment, social awareness and the burden of success brought along by the music industry. As Nick Sheppard (who took Mick Jones's place for a short lived-version of the Clash solely led by Joe Strummer) sadly admits:

> I went into the situation thinking, The Clash is a humanitarian band. They care about people. That's what Joe was always spouting on about – he's got this socialist thing going. But the reality is the complete opposite. There was a lot of bullying, and it was run more or less like any kind of corporation, with a very rigid political hierarchy. (qtd in Salewicz 383)

"Love Kills": Joe Strummer after the Flood

The Clash finally bitterly broke up in 1984, among other reasons, because of a growing misunderstanding between Strummer and Jones over the newly acquired success the Clash were witnessing in the USA, as Greil Marcus puts it bluntly: "Strummer detected a spiritual flaw behind the style; despite the punk attempt to destroy the star system, Strummer announced, a pop star was all Mick Jones had ever wanted to be. He was a fake, a revisionist; he had to go" ("Last Broadcast").

Following the separation, Joe Strummer became a sort of homeless musician, roaming the world in search of roles to play, lost souls to connect with and projects to be part of: spending some time in London with his family, but mostly traveling extensively, not necessarily to tour anymore (since his career had come to a standstill) but just to discover people and places. Among his two favorite destinations were Spain and the US: pursuing the ghosts of both Lorca and Muddy Waters, eventually adding Bob Marley along the way.

Life after the Clash was not an easy one, and some would go as far as to consider Strummer as artistically irrelevant past these glorious days, as for example Amy Phillips who brutally dismisses any possible achievement: "Growing up a punk fan in a post-Clash world, I've been conditioned to think of 1976–1982 as a Golden Age, and Joe Strummer an immaculate saint (let's forget anything after '82)" (167). But, even if lacking the vast commercial success the Clash had previously enjoyed, Strummer would turn to acting, score writing and continue the innovative blend of Rock and Latin music he had undertaken with "Rock the Casbah" with his band, The Mescaleros. Eventually, Joe Strummer would come out of this period as a true cultural hero, now influencing by his integrity, blend of social and musical vision, many contemporary bands such as the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, System of a Down or Jane's Addiction. During this process, as we will now analyze in more detail, the USA, much more than his native UK, would play for Joe Strummer a crucial part.

In the middle of all this traveling, New York especially would always remain a driving cultural force, and when Joe Strummer and Mick Jones eventually worked together on some songs for Big Audio Dynamite's second album, *No. 10 Upping St.*, they once again settled in New York to try and recapture the magic of the city, feeling as close as possible to the current trends, both musically and artistically: "We did it in New York because we wanted to be like good vegetables – fresh", Mick Jones even adding, "This was Joe's revenge for my own insistence on recording *Combat Rock* in Manhattan, using the expensive Hit Factory" (Salewicz 419).

Joe Strummer would always remain true to New York, up until the very end (even if no longer playing the Shea Stadium or the Bond) and this especially in times of great tragedy, such as this anecdote, told by Salewicz, is sufficient to prove:

> New York after 9/11. Everybody was canceling their shows. On October 3rd Joe Strummer was due to appear on the show *Late Night* with David Letterman, the first salvo of a series of American dates. At first he thought of canceling, but

> then said: 'I am not cancelling. I am going to New York and I am doing it for the firefighters' (because his great friend Steve Buscemi used to be a firefighter), I am doing it for the firemen. If no-one turns up but the firemen, then that's good. (615)

New York City would also be the place where, with his new band The Mescaleros, Strummer decided to shoot both his first and his last video. On "Yalla Yalla", we see again Joe Strummer carrying his ghetto blaster all over the streets of NYC, mixing-up with all sorts of people along the way; and, on one of his last videos, the moving cover of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song", we witness this time the creation of a beautiful fresco in Joe Strummer's honor, down in the Lower East Side, with some of his closest friends (Steve Buscemi and Jim Jarmusch) gathering around and lighting small candles.

After having completely abandoned the idea of keeping a watered-down version of the Clash artificially alive (avoiding what Malcolm McLaren had sadly done with the Sex Pistols) Joe Strummer's first move would be to re-invent himself through a new form of art: movies, going from singer to actor, from rock star to score writer. The first opportunity which showed up was to work with Alex Cox on his own version of a Punk tragedy: the movie *Sid and Nancy*, drawing on the scary story of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen. Although the resulting song, "Love Kills", has nothing of the previous brilliance of the Clash (it nearly sounds as a self-caricature in an already ridiculous film) it allows Joe Strummer to connect with his new passion, and brings him on to Alex Cox's next project: *Straight to Hell*.

Straight to Hell would be an even wilder mix of all sorts of American sub-cultures, ranging from *Mad* comics magazine, 1940s gangster movies, Sam Peckinpath's *The Wild Bunch* and even spaghetti westerns. In what resembles a brightly colored road movie which actually goes nowhere, Joe Strummer plays a romantic but deadly killer, called Simms who, after having pulled a bank heist is now on the run across the desert, carrying along with him a young and not so naïve Courtney Love in a ravishing pink dress. When attacked by a totally improbable gang played by all members of the band the Pogues, Joe simply replies: "I am bad energy, man."

Although shot in Spain, the film keeps in touch with many of Joe Strummer's interests in American mythology, as it manages some wonderfully funny and parodic appearances by such heroes of US counter culture as Dennis Hopper, playing a fake sales representative in ranch style homes, John Cusack as a lonely-hearted fragile folk-singer, Grace Jones as a very beautiful as well as, of course, very dangerous woman, and somebody who was to provide at last one of Joe Strummer's most significant parts: film director Jim Jarmush, appearing in the movie as an elegant gangster in white suit and black gloves.

If, looking back on *Straight to Hell* nowadays the movie may seem more like a private joke made by a bunch of wild teenagers than a real masterpiece in a Quentin Tarrantino tradition, it did allow Joe Strummer to meet with Rudy Wurlitzer. Wurlitzer had previously written the script for one of Joe's favorite pictures, Sam Peckinpath's iconoclast *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, and was now due to work on a mysterious project by legendary Swiss photographer Robert Frank.

After having rewritten the American myth in his 1958 classic *The Americans* and directed the banned *Cocksucker Blues* documenting the *Rolling Stones* on tour, Robert Frank, living now most of the time in near seclusion, was mostly working on low budget films. *Candy Mountain*, shot in Canada during the autumn of 1986, tells of the search for a legendary guitar maker, who eventually ends up burning his final production, rather than selling out. Alongside many other musicians, such as Tom Waits, Leon Redbone, Professor Longhair and David Johansen from the New York Dolls, Joe Strummer plays Mario, a security guard lost in the middle of the wilderness. As Rudy Wurlitzer puts it: "He could be a great star, a major leading man" (qtd in Salewicz 420).

Joe Strummer's next step would be a crucial one: his first full film score, a step which would in a way bring him back to his former Clash days. *Walker*, again directed by Alex Cox, tells the true but little known story of William Walker (beautifully played by Ed Harris) who, in 1855, shipped an army to Nicaragua and proclaimed himself president, ruled the country until 1857 before being overthrown and finally murdered in 1860. Like a humorous part in a Shakespearian tragedy, Joe Strummer plays Faucet, a cook in Walker's army, who mostly drinks and chases half naked women washing clothes in the river.

The film describes the madness of a man opposing every form of power, from money to religion, on the grounds that he is the embodiment of manifest destiny, presenting a character somewhere between Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now* and Aguirre in Werner Herzog's movie. But the music provided by Joe Strummer brings, by contrast, a very nostalgic feeling(made up primarily of acoustic guitar, marimba, violin and piano) it manages to blend traditional Spanish folk music with Hollywood needs, often providing an interesting contrast to the violence depicted on screen. So overtaken by his job, Joe Strummer actually recorded much more material than needed, just pointing out: "We're making a soundtrack album, they can cut it up and use it in the movie." Surprisingly, this very subtle sound track sold over 15,000 copies in the USA and was generally well received by critics, as by Gavin Martin in the *New Musical Express*: "You may be a little stunned and staggered at first (I was) to find the man with the demon bark and three-chord bite has composed every note here. But from lustrous samba percussion, through flamenco horns, and country inflections, it's all gorgeously effective and superbly detailed" (qtd in D'Ambrosio 140).

The experience also meant for Joe Strummer the opportunity to discover the country he had done so much to popularize: Nicaragua. Refusing to join the rest of the crew in the luxurious Hotel Intercontinental in the capital Managua, he shared a house with his friend Dick Rude in a small town called: Granada. Joe Strummer was in fact even offered Nicaraguan citizenship, which he nonetheless declined.

But Joe's most significant part as an actor would come in 1989, with Jim Jarmusch's dangerous tale of nostalgia and renewal, his wonderful pilgrimage into the lost land of American rock heroes: *Mystery Train*. For one thing, the story brought Joe Strummer to the birth place of rock 'n' roll's mythology: Memphis, home of the King and of so many other ghosts. The friendship between New York

independent film director Jim Jarmush and Joe Strummer had grown steadily since they had first met in 1986, and when in London, Jim Jarmusch would, for example, stay at Joe's Strummer's house, so their working together seemed natural enough. As Jim Jarmusch himself describes it:

> I wrote that part only for Joe. I wasn't going to cast that character. Joe was interested. One of the main things, I think, was that it was set in Memphis. Joe loved Memphis, and that really sold him on it. When it was time to leave, he cancelled his flight four days in a row, just to stay one more day. He was having a good time. I think he was very happy. (qtd in Salewicz 455)

Mystery Train is divided into three parallel stories, taking simultaneously place over 24 hours in Memphis, and depicting the very special relationship various groups of individuals (foreigners, outcasts, outsiders …) develop with the city that was the home of Elvis, ranging from morbid nostalgia to total hatred. Each story intersects at some point, and all gather in a hotel that counts the demon-like author of "I Put a Spell on You", Screaming Jay Hawkins himself, as a silent and vaguely intriguing night watchman.

Although Joe Strummer was in Memphis for three of the five weeks of shooting, he does not appear until the final tale, entitled *Lost in Space*, where he plays the character of *Johnny*, a typical Brit caricature of a 1950s rockabilly outlaw. Johnny, who also goes by the name Elvis, has lost both his job and his girlfriend and, very sad and a little drunk, accidently shoots his brother-in-law, played by someone who would always remain a close friend: Steve Buscemi. The part is both realistic and totally mythological, and Joe Strummer manages to bring his working class attitude to the heart of Country Music land.

In 1988, in a bold move, Joe Strummer finally decided to move completely to the US (where he would stay, on and off, until his death in 2003) bringing his wife, Gaby, and his two daughters, Jazz and Lola, along. The whole family moved into a beautiful wood-framed house off legendary Laurel Canyon, near Los Angeles, in a way managing to blend together two of Joe's favorite places: the South of Spain and America. The house was an open-house where many visitors came: such as Sean Penn, Bob Dylan's son Jesse, and Flea, of the band Red Hot Chilli Peppers. Flea would even end up playing bass on the improbable "It's a Rockin' World", a song specially recorded for the provocative *South Park* cartoon in 1996.

Joe Strummer worked well in these new surroundings, always listening to various sorts of music coming out of his huge ghetto-blaster, and endlessly dealing in new projects. As his wife Gaby puts it: "When we went to LA, he lightened up, and the times we spent in LA were a lot better. But that was because when he was there he was always working on a project" (qtd in Salewicz 492).

Joe Strummer's new band, The Mescaleros, perfectly made sense out of the multi-cultural blend the Clash had so brilliantly achieved, developing their music into a modern and electric folk, and voluntarily refusing the idea of sounding like a British band in exile. As Joe Strummer points out in an interview with *Sounds*

magazine: "There are people that successfully go out there and live, but they always like an expatriate colony. And there's always something a bit sad about standing in an English pub on Sunset Strip where everything has been carved deliberately trying to look like a boozer" (qtd in Salewicz 459). The City of Los Angeles, with its own mythology of private detective, would-be movie stars and rundown palaces, its personal mixture of lust and crime, was a strong inspiration for Joe Strummer, who loved to walk around the city and wonder off in different directions. Latino Rockabilly War guitarist, Zander Schloss, tells his own story of how the City of Angels inspired Joe Strummer to write:

> When it was time for him to sing and the lyrics weren't written, he'd have a favourite cab-driver he would call, and the driver would drive him around the city for a couple of hours. I can't tell you how the lyrics he wrote related to what he saw out there on the street, but somehow it would obviously stir up his juices. (qtd in Salewicz 463)[4]

But what Joe Strummer saw in America was maybe not enough to compensate for the loss of that special alchemy the Clash had obtained by mixing brilliantly Mick Jones's musical genius, Paul Simonon's Reggae roots, Topper Headon's wonderful sense of timing and Joe Strummer's hard-edge, powerful lyrics. When Strummer's solo album *Earthquake Weather* was released on September 1989, Robert Christgau, the self-proclaimed "Dean of American Rock Critics" wrote in New York's *Village Voice*: "A man without a context, Joe digs into Americana up to his elbows, up to bebop, up to Marvin Gaye, cramming obsessions and casual interests into songs as wordy and pointless as Ellen Foley" (qtd in Salewicz 472). Although Christgau's comment does seem to miss the point (Joe Strummer was trying to extend Americana by blending it with many other influences rather than just copying the original version), it nevertheless emphasizes one aspect of Joe Strummer's relation to the US: *all this wasn't for real*.

"The Right Profile": Joe Strummer and the American Mythology

"The Right Profile", a song from *London Calling*, presents us with famous Method actor Montgomery Clift, or rather with the legend of the actor, as reflected in the eyes of an English teenager growing up watching too many American movies: "New York, New York, 42nd Street/Hustlers rustle and pimps pimp the beat/Monty Clift is recognized at dawn/He ain't got no shoes and his clothes are torn." And, in a way, most of what Joe Strummer saw in the USA was mythology, a series of icons made up of words from books, pictures from movies and music from songs. No matter where Joe Strummer looked, legends appeared in front of his eyes.

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[4] Chris Salewicz, *Op.cit* .463.

This was the case when, roaming the Monterey area outside San Francisco, the Clash went out of their way to check into a typical motel called the Mission Ranch, and this was the case, again, when looking at the scenery around, Joe Strummer would marvel: "This is Steinbeck country", while paying a visit to legendary cowboy Clint Eastwood. When playing Chicago 1978, Joe Strummer paid his own personal tribute to Public Enemy Number One John Dillinger, visiting the alley where he was shot to death in 1934, and running his fingers around the bullet-holes left in the wall. When promoting *Combat Rock* in New York City, in 1982, Joe insisted (unsuccessfully) that the whole band adopt a Mohican hair-cut, his own personal homage to Travis Bickle (Robert de Niro) in *Taxi Driver*. For their performance at the Shea Stadium, we therefore see Joe Strummer driving a beautiful old fashioned open-topped white 1956 Cadillac with his Mohican hair-cut way above all the other members of the band, like a movie character acting out his persona in real life. Gilmore, in *Rolling Stone*, also describes his first encounter with Strummer, in 1979, in terms of cinematographic mythology, using a scene straight out of the *Godfather*: "Strummer, wearing smoky sunglasses and a nut-brown porkpie hat, resembles a roughhewn version of Michael Corleone" (52).

As with many teenagers growing up in the early 1960s, movies, and especially American ones, played a vital part in shaping up their personality, and Joe Strummer seems to have naturally brought part of this mythology to rock 'n' roll, as D'Ambrosio writes in *Let The Fury Have The Hour*:

> As a teenager, Strummer became fascinated with cinema including Hollywood gangster and cowboy pictures as well as politically radical films like Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*. Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, and George Raft were a few of the screen actors who would later serve as models in helping shape The Clash's rebel persona. (132)

Joe Strummer's view of America, a land both hated and deeply loved, is therefore one based on a dream, the dream of a young British teenager growing up in the 1960s to the wild sounds of rock 'n' roll and to the vivid images of Hollywood, and, later on, a musician seeking to actually encounter this dream. Along the way, Joe Strummer wrote some of the best Rock songs ever, but never quite found what he was looking for … or did he?

Once, in Las Vegas, in an old fashioned casino called The Golden Nugget (the kind of place where Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin would have typically hung out) Salewicz tells of a drunken Joe Strummer writing down some wild ideas on paper napkins: "One from that night always struck me: 'The shards of America'" (586), as if, having at last made peace with the promised land which gave birth to rock 'n' roll, Joe Strummer was now trying to put together the many pieces of the American dream. As Jim Jarmush fondly puts it in an interview with the *New York Times* about *Broken Flowers*: "I really miss Joe Strummer. Even though he's dead, I still get advice from him. He's very good at telling you to stick to your

guns. I have Nick Ray, Sam Fuller and Joe. I have some great spirits when I need guidance" (Hirschberg).

And today, walking down East Seventh Street in New York (not London or Sheffield), one might encounter a large mural painting dedicated to Joe Strummer and meditate on the picture of a rebel rocker with the words "Know your Rights" and "The Future is Unwritten" painted in red and gold, which also happen to be the colors of Reggae Music.

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Chapter 10
Culture Clash: The Influence of Hip Hop Culture and Aesthetics on the Clash

Walidah Imarisha

Public Enemy emcee Chuck D wrote that the first time he heard about the Clash was in 1981, when he went to a show in Manhattan put on by emcee and producer Kurtis Blow. "The crowd was rough. People from different camps were there – the hip-hop people and the punk rock people. They even started throwing tomatoes at Kurtis, that's the type of wild kids who were there. But the Clash completely broke it that night. It was an awakening for a New York cat like myself" (qtd in D'Ambrosio xix).

Unlike other white artists who poached from Black music culture without acknowledgement or any compensation for those who created it, the British punk rock group the Clash attempted to bridge punk and hip hop beyond just on wax. Chuck D continued on to say, "I had great respect for [lead singer] Joe Strummer. How he used his music – incorporating a lot of Black music like hip-hop and reggae – was very different from the guys who invented rock 'n' roll: He always paid homage to those who came before him" (xix). Chuck D goes even further than giving respect to Strummer and cites the punk rock warlord as one of his musical and political influences: "Public Enemy is an American group but we address the same issues – political, social, musical – on an international level [as the Clash]; we take our conversation worldwide. I learnt the importance of that from Joe Strummer" (xx).

In Jason Tanz's book *Other Peoples' Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America*, he explores some of the history and parallels of hip hop and punk, specifically focusing on the revolutionary hip hop group Public Enemy, who rose to national prominence in the 1980s. Like Afrika Bambaata's music before them, Public Enemy sampled from a huge range of sources, and the soundscapes they created would have often sounded more at home in a mosh pit than a hip hop cipher. "The music was no[t] eas[y] to digest, composed of squealing air-raid sirens, stutter-step drums, claps, and unrelenting aggression. The producer, Hank Shocklee, has said that his goal was to be 'music's worst nightmare'" (111). How punk is that?

Tanz compares Public Enemy to both the Clash and other British punk icons the Sex Pistols, saying all three "deftly blurred the line between activism and entertainment, creating unignorable art with the passion, urgency, anger, and [an] anti-authoritarian attitude" (113). Ultimately, though, Tanz settles on the Sex Pistols as the better comparison with Public Enemy, because of the shared

difficulty of both groups to navigate being signed professional musicians who are at the same time challenging the very system of power that cuts them a check.

While an interesting juxtaposition, Tanz is off the mark here. A much better analogy is between Public Enemy and the Clash, and especially between Joe Strummer and Chuck D's roles in their respective music cultures in their later years. Exhibit A is just the reality stated by Bill Stephney, Public Enemy's original producer, that in formulating Public Enemy, he hoped to develop a group that was "equal parts Run DMC and the Clash" (qtd in Chang, *Can't Stop* 246).

But the comparison goes much deeper than that. Public Enemy, self-proclaimed "Black Panthers of Rap", who described its music as "a wake-up call for the nation", has secured its place in the pantheon of hip hop icons. While the other members of both Public Enemy and the Clash contributed much to the groups, Chuck D and Joe Strummer were respectively the voices, literally and figuratively, of their bands. Chuck D is still deeply involved in political issues, choosing a path that led him not to fame and riches, but to be the moral compass for a hip hop industry and community that many felt and feel has been led astray. Joe Strummer played that role for punk music. After the Clash dissolved, Strummer reformed with The Mescaleros and focused not on playing music that would pay well, but playing music that embodied his radical aesthetics and that created space for a better world. The last show he played, with original Clash members in their only reunion, was a fundraiser for a firemen's union.

While Public Enemy, the Pistols, and the Clash all tapped into and embodied the rage of their times, Public Enemy and the Clash wanted to do more than just revel in the bollocks; they wanted to transform it.

> While the Sex Pistols opened Pandora's box, negating, just as the Dadaists before them, the very ground on which their art form stood, it was the Clash who would, just as the Surrealists alchemized the Dadaist energy and turned it into something enduring, with their grounding in the specific moment of the rebellion of pre-Thatcherite English working-class youth, transform the pure negation of the Sex Pistols into an animus that would continue to rebound and grow to eventually take in hip-hop and then the worldwide expansion of a globalized multiethnic revolutionary youth culture. (D'Ambrosio 155–6)

Or as singer Billy Bragg put it more simply, "Were it not for the Clash, punk would have been just a sneer, a safety pin and a pair of bondage trousers" (qtd in D'Ambrosio 298).

Though today punk and hip hop music and culture is shown as almost antithetical in mainstream media, segregated strictly along racial lines, the history of the Clash's engagement in and intersections with Black music, Black politics, and Black rage on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean highlight not only a shared history, but a shared set of rebel aesthetics.

The Magnificent Three

> When we came to the U.S., Mick stumbled upon a music shop in Brooklyn that carried the music of Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five, the Sugar Hill Gang … these groups were radically changing music and they changed everything for us.
>
> Strummer, "Let Fury Have the Hour"

During the summer of 1980, the British punk band The Clash was on tour in the United States. At the end of it, they decided that instead of taking a break and relaxing like most bands, they would go straight into the studio. They booked time at Electric Lady Studios, created by Jimi Hendrix, and began a frenzy of creativity. "What we did was go to the core of what we are about – creating – and we did it on the fly and had three weeks of unadulterated joy", Joe Strummer said of those times (qtd in Salewicz 277).[1] One of the creations manifested there would solidify the intersections of what would become two of the most influential, controversial and contagious music forms of all time: hip hop and punk.

Surrounded by the manifestations of a hip hop culture that had just burst into mainstream consciousness only a year before with the Sugar Hill Gang's single "Rapper's Delight", lead guitarist Mick Jones, who always had an ear to the street for new musical influences, was the first to pick up on rap music in New York. He even carried around a boombox labeled "Whack Attack". He introduced these new sounds to the rest of the band, and Strummer embraced them fully. There, in the Electric Lady, the band improvised a funky track because "Joe says he wants to do a rap". Listening to the looped riff, Strummer, in true hip hop fashion, freestyled his lyrics onto the page, and then onto the track (Salewicz 278). That process echoes the creation of the four elements of hip hop, which value and praise ingenuity, improvisation and thinking on your feet (sometimes literally, in the case of breakdancing). Strummer's way of creating these lyrics (and the majority of his other songs) embodied both a punk rock and hip hop aesthetic, one that focused on being completely present, responding to what is before you and around you, and spontaneously channeling that through a microphone.

The resulting track, "The Magnificent Seven", was written in honor of the Sugar Hill gang and other hip hop progenitors like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. It represents the first attempt by a punk band to perform hip hop, and the first major release white hip hop song, predating Blondie's "Rapture" by six months.

The lyrics of "The Magnificent Seven" speak to the experiences of the South Bronx Black and Puerto Rican young creators of this new culture. The devastation of inner city communities like the South Bronx by the flight of capital, massive unemployment and a policy of what conservative politicians inaccurately called "benign neglect" was all too clear. "Here was the unreconstructed *South* – the

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[1] *Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*, New York: Faber and Faber, 2006. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

South Bronx, a spectacular set of ruins, a mythical wasteland, an infectious disease and, as Robert Jensen observed, 'a condition of poverty and social collapse, more than a geographical place'" (Chang, *Can't Stop* 17). A South Bronx neighborhood clinic director, Dr. Wise, referred to the South Bronx as "nothing less than 'a Necropolis – a city of death'" (16).

Strummer's stream of conscious lyrics explore the life of a person who is inundated every day through mass media with images of the next great thing he has to buy, while he is struggling to keep from drowning in a predatory capitalist sea. Even though Strummer's character has a job, which is more than 60–80 percent of Black youth in the South Bronx could say, he still captured the feeling of life on a razor's edge: "Churning out that boogaloo/Gets you up and gets you out/But how long can you keep it up?" The feeling of his song sums up much of the attitude of hip hop of the time – there were no jobs, and if you continued to try to play within the rules of a system that had failed you, you would not survive: "You're frettin', you're sweatin'/But did you notice you ain't gettin' anywhere?"

Perhaps the reason Strummer was able to tap in so quickly to the ethos of the newly birthed hip hop is because it resonated with his existing punk framework. These conditions of no work, of governmental neglect, of racism and exploitation, were not new topics for the Clash – their earliest songs document these themes, and put out a clarion call to action. To many Clash fans, "The Magnificent Seven" lyrics must have sounded like an echo of their 1977 "Career Opportunities": "Career opportunities are the ones that never knock/Every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock/Career opportunity, the ones that never knock".

"Career Opportunities" sprung directly from the socio-political landscape of England at that time, "a Britain which offered little to its working youth and was in the process of de-industrializing, that is, of offering less" (D'Ambrosio 156). Strummer, Jones and Paul Simonon who rounded out the Clash trinity all involved themselves deeply in the rebellion of working class youth happening in England at that time, so similar to the landscape of the South Bronx. But like in the South Bronx, England's economic devastation was also racialized – poverty disproportionately wore a Black face. The Clash, as three young white men from a variety of class backgrounds, struggled to recognize and lift up that reality, and to form connections with Black British working class through the avenue they knew the best – music. Their spirit of rebellion was fueled "not just by white working-class consciousness but also, and crucially, and most adamantly among all the punk groups, by Strummer and Jones's lasting interest in Black forms, particularly reggae, and, in the deeper sense, by their interest in uniting, finding a rapprochement between, not only Black and white musical forms, but also Black and white working-class consciousness" (D'Ambrosio 156). To which Bill Adler, driving force behind Def Jam Records, adds "Rap reintegrated American culture" (qtd in Chang, *Can't Stop* 245).

This attempt at an understanding of a common working-class consciousness, that spans continents, can be seen through exploring two incidents: the 1977 New York Blackout, and the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival Riots. Both were an

expression of directed and aware working-class rage, the first politicizing hip hop's progenitors, the other solidifying a racial justice analysis for many, including Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon.

On July 13, 1977, New York suffered a massive power loss, and the entire city was plunged into a Blackout. And across the ghettoes and barrios of the City, those who had been locked out of any benefits of a declining capitalism, mostly Black and brown, took the opportunity to gain some of those material possession Strummer had shown to be out of their reach in "The Magnificent Seven". For 36 hours, there were thousands in the street, looting from businesses. One car dealership had 50 cars driven out of the showroom. Thousands of fires blazed across the city.

And yet this wasn't the case of a community eating itself. As Jeff Chang reported one resident saying in *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, "That particular night, one thing I noticed, they were not hurting each other. They weren't fighting with each other. They weren't killing each other". In fact, more than not hurting each other, people saw this as a political statement and an indictment of a system that had left them to die. "'It was an opportunity for us to rid our community of all the people who were exploiting us', graffiti writer James TOP told historian Ivor Miller. 'The things that were done that day and a half were telling the government that you have a real problem with the people in the inner cities'" (15). These quotes are reminiscent of the Watts 1965 uprising in Los Angeles, "the most violent urban outbreak since World War II", and raged for four days, resulting in thousands of arrests, dozens of police being shot by police and National Guard, and millions of dollars of property destruction (Abu-Jamal 41). Observers commented on the "tactical sophistication" of Watts, commenting that the plan of action reminded observers of the Viet Cong's guerrilla warfare style against the United States military during the Vietnam War. Also present was an economic strategy: "In the larger stores, department stores and clothing stores the first target was the credit records. These were destroyed before the place burned" (Horne 65).

Watts and the New York Blackout are not to be taken out of context either: according to Abu-Jamal, in 1967 alone there were 123 uprisings or "outbreaks" (41). This was the political movement birthed by hip hop – spontaneous, rebellious, confrontational, and rooted in the lived experiences of the most marginalized. And yet devastation turned into something hopeful – the art of hip hop alchemy, turning nothing into something. "Give them an apocalypse, and they would dance" (Chang, *Can't Stop* 19).

This rebellion against the machinations of power can also be seen in the Notting Hill uprising. Taking place at the biggest festival for Black, predominantly Jamaican immigrant Brits, it began when a phalanx of police tried to arrest an alleged pickpocket. The predominately Black youth, already dealing with economic degradation and police brutality on a daily basis, fought back. "The police grabbed dustbin lids to protect themselves from the bricks and debris raining down on them … Over one hundred police officers had to be taken to hospital after the riot" (Letts 86). Strummer and Simonon had come out to the carnival because of their interest in Black music, especially reggae. They ended

up participating in the uprising, lobbing projectiles at cops and trying to set a car on fire ("The Clash and Grandmaster Flash").

It is important to view both of these events in a social and historical context that allows one to engage with the political intent behind these actions. The 1950s and 1960s saw decolonization and revolution move from an ideological fantasy to the everyday global reality. In Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, colonies and neo-colonies rose up against the controlling imperial country, often utilizing armed resistance, to win their independence.

This rebellion was echoed from within the United States and European nations, as people of color began to conceive of and frame their racial, economic and political struggles in the same language former colonies were using in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the US. "We said that we joined with all of the other people in the world struggling for decolonization and nationhood, and called ourselves a 'dispersed colony' because we did not have the geographical concentration that other so-called colonies had" (Hilliard 185).

The Civil Rights Movement focused on ending legal segregation and securing the constitutional rights guaranteed to citizens for Black people specifically in the South, who faced harassment when going to vote or involving themselves in other forms of public life. Nowhere was the Civil Rights Movement more successful than in Birmingham, Alabama, where the anti-segregation organizing movement in 1963 set the stage for President John F. Kennedy's proposal of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, seen as the Movement's national crowning success. While this is true, historian Robert Widell Jr. has shown the successful southern campaign did little to change the lives of working class Black people even in Birmingham. "[T]he 1963 demonstrations ended with concessions that left unresolved many of the issues of importance to a working-class base acting as 'foot soldiers' in the effort" (Lareow 141). Watts Civil Rights Commissioner John Buggs stated that the Civil Rights Movement "never involved nor did it really include the Negro of lower socio-economic status … [In LA] it is a middle class movement for middle-class people … with middle class goals" (Horne 65).

This unchanged terrain in Birmingham resulted in the creation of the Alabama Black Liberation Front, a radical organization that styled itself after the Black Panther Party (and even attempted to become a chapter of the national organization). "By 1970, the year the Alabama Black Liberation Front emerged, deindustrialization, urban renewal, and persistent white racism had rendered lack of jobs, scarce housing, and poor medical care a continuing plague on Birmingham's African American community" (Lazerow 141).

Huey Newton, founder of the Black Panther Party, wrote, "An unarmed people are slaves or are subject to slavery at any given moment … There is a world of difference between 30 million unarmed submissive Black people and 30 million Black people armed with freedom, guns, and the strategic methods of liberation" (qtd in Hilliard 137). This formed the ideological foundation for the Party's advocacy early after its founding in 1966 of legally carrying guns to practice self-

defense, specifically against police who the Panthers' viewed as an occupying force in the Black community.

In 1974, The United Nations passed Resolution 3246 concerning "the rights of peoples to self determination and of the speedy granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples for the effective guarantee of observance of human rights" (United Nations). The resolution spells out explicitly the right of colonized people to utilize any means of resistance in their struggle for liberation from colonialism, including armed struggle (United Nations).

This is the contested racialized political landscape in which the 1977 Blackout and the Notting Hill Carnival uprising occurred. Both the 1977 Blackout and the Notting Hill Carnival uprising involved clashes between established power structures and communities that had been purposefully abandoned economically, socially and politically. The participation of folks who would go on to shape both hip hop and punk explains the commonality of some of the ethos of both cultures – they were both forged in fire.

The Notting Hill riot served a quintessentially politicizing moment for Strummer specifically and the Clash in general. They in fact used an image from the uprising as the back cover for the first Clash album, and for the front of "Black Market Clash". "We were there at the very first throw of the first brick", Joe Strummer says in the film *Westway to the World*.

> This was one time when people kind of went, 'We've had enough and we're going to say so now'. And that's what gave rise to the [Clash] song 'White Riot'. Because we participated in the riot but I was aware all the time that it was a Black people's riot, i.e. they had more of an axe to grind and they had the guts to do something about it … It was a helluva day.

There has been much written about the song "White Riot" and the fact that it was appropriated by white supremacist groups; audiences often weren't clear about the racial justice message of the song. But reading the lyrics of the song, there are sections that could clearly apply to both 1976 Notting Hill and 1977 New York: "All the power's in the hands/Of people rich enough to buy it/While we walk the street/Too chicken to even try it." Lyrics like this and others by Joe Strummer inspired Puerto Rican punk singer and emcee Not4Prophet to write, "That's what moved and inspired one raging rican would be rockero who knew that brixton was right next door to brooklyn" (qtd in D'Ambrosio 296).

This is the history and foundation the Clash brought to their collision with hip hop in 1980. And while it was Mick Jones who originally gravitated to the rhythms of hip hop, Joe Strummer saw something powerful (and familiar) in the raw and rebellious spirit of hip hop. It is Joe Strummer, in all his complexities, contradictions and audacity, whose life reflected the intersections between hip hop and punk cultures and philosophies.

A Clash on Broadway

The Clash did two more hip hop songs in addition to "The Magnificent Seven": "Lightning Strikes (Not Once But Twice)" and "This is Radio Clash". Both are hip hop not just because of the music utilized, but because of the content of the songs. "Lightning Strikes" is a survey of life in New York in much the same way songs like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" described the social landscape of the city, exploring similar themes like the use of illegal substances like marijuana and legal ones like alcohol to numb the pain of living daily in deprivation of "Harlem slums" where someone is "lying under every stone". It ends with the lines" Lightning strike! Old New York! Everything's light! Strike!", linking the energy caused by a natural phenomenon like lightning with the energy caused by the dispossessed joining together to strike back together at those who created this reality.

"This is Radio Clash" is a much more explicitly political song that is hip hop in form, in the way it chronicles the systemic imbalances of power, and also in its exhortations of listeners to seize power themselves: "Interrupting all programmers, this is Radio Clash from pirate satellite." The song explicitly links urban communities to Vietnam, and calls out white supremacist power as the impetus behind both communities' positions. American critic Eric Schafer says not only is "Radio Clash" the first British hip hop record, but:

> [i]t is a magnificent, daring, challenging record that was years ahead of its time; one of the great rock records of the 1980s, it has never been given its just credit. Twenty-eight years after its debut, were it released today it would still burn up the radio (qtd in Fletcher 365).

These were the follow-ups to "Magnificent Seven". But in 1981, "Magnificent Seven" was a hit on New York's Black radio station, WBLS. The Clash used that notoriety to engage more deeply with the creators of hip hop in the city. They attempted to form a real musical bridge of solidarity that crossed racial boundaries while still acknowledging who bore the brunt of the system's oppression. Joel Schalit has written, "the Clash helped give punk radicalism its first overtly multicultural set of artistic sensibilities" (qtd in D'Ambrosio 213). Unfortunately for the Clash and even more so for the hip hop acts they engaged with, their commitment to racial justice was not a value firmly embedded into the larger white punk movement.

This is quite evident with the widespread use of white supremacist imagery, like the swastika, throughout early punk, used even by some Jewish punks and punks of color. Many defended it, saying the use of the swastika was not about racism, merely about shock tactics, the very essence of punk. Danny Fields, former manager for the Ramones and the Stooges, said, "It wasn't, 'Oh, I'm a Nazi and all you Jews better watch out!' It wasn't anything like that. It wasn't political, it was sexual. I know that some people have trouble making the distinction nowadays, but it wasn't a racial threat" (qtd in McNeil 236). However, this erases

the political context these acts were happening in: the sharp rise in popularity of white supremacist groups such as the Aryan Nation and the National Front (whose slogan was "Keep Britain white"), as well as reactionary political machines that gained ground by criminalizing and vilifying poor people and people of color.

Not4Prophet, a Puerto Rican punk singer and emcee who grew up in the Lower East Side, echoes of the South Bronx, detailed finding a copy of *Sandinista!* in a Manhattan used record store and how he read the Clash's racial politics as a child of hip hop:

> Black folks had created all kinds of amazing sounds, from jazz to rock n roll, to funk to reggae, to salsa to hip-hop, and been ripped off by ofays wit attitude every time. But I figured if The Clash were cool enough back in 1980, to name an album after a Latino armed rebel organization that the US hated and tried to destroy, then, hey, they couldn't be all bad, now could they? (qtd in D'Ambrosio 293)

Not4Prophet went on to explore in more depth the ideas of white privilege, cultural appropriation, solidarity and mutual aid that all collide around Strummer and his band.

> Yeah The Clash knew they were white, and the legacy that entailed, and they knew that the days were racial tension and the nights were racial fear, and that London was burning and Brixton was already ashes. But precisely because (or in spite) of this, they also knew that something had to give, and so they tried to give something in the hopes that perhaps they could play a part … the Black (market) planet was in revolt, so these white boys asked for a riot of their own. (294)

Of course, this is not to say Strummer existed without ego about his role in hip hop, nor did he see his involvement solely as a supporter of the culture.

> Don't forget our entry into hip-hop culture was back in 1980 with 'Magnificent Seven'. It was a huge hit in New York that summer on WBLS. I want to point out that because we always get passed over in these hip-hop histories. Whoever puts together these accounts just hasn't done their onions … 19 years ago we entered into hip-hop culture. *Nineteen years ago!* So lick upon that! [laughs] (222)

But then again, ego is the first rule for any b-boy or b-girl, emcee, dj, or graf artist – if you don't think you're the best, no one else will either. World-renowned breaker Zulu King Alien Ness said:

> You know what? I *am* cocky! I *do* have a ego problem! I *do* got a big mouth! But it's part of the game. That's what keeps me grounded. That's what b-boying is about! Do you enter a battle to be diplomatic? … No! You enter a battle to win! (qtd in Chang, *Total Chaos* 31)

So by telling everyone how hip hop he is, Strummer is perhaps becoming even more hip hop.

The Clash attempted to enact their principles of racial justice and challenge the history of white appropriation of Black music during their series of 1981 New Bond's International concerts by engaging the hip hop community and using the concerts as a platform to showcase the cultural work that wasn't getting widespread media attention at the time.

The Clash heralded their arrival at the venue by unfurling an incredible banner painted by graffiti artist FUTURA. Even though Futura knew nothing about The Clash, he accepted their offer to join them on stage and paint graffiti live while they performed.

Opening night, the band had hip hop progenitors Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five open for them.

> In another example that marked the Clash's commitment to challenging social conventions, they enlisted several New York City rap groups to join their huge *Clash on Broadway* tour. At the time, this was extremely controversial since it was widely believed that combining the two disparate audiences and musical genres would result in racial mayhem. (D'Ambrosio "Let Fury Have the Hour")

It turns out those who expressed worry had ever right to be. Though the Clash hoped their audience would be able to see the shared aesthetics between the acts, instead the Five spent their brief set opening night shouting over the boos of the sold out crowd, and avoiding a hail of beer bottles and spit. They returned on the second night, only to receive the same treatment. As they left the stage, Five emcee Melle Mel tried to tell the crowd about itself: "Some of you – not all of you, but some of you – are *stupid*" (qtd in Chang, *Can't Stop* 155). Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five did not return to the Bond's shows, though they did tour with the Clash in Europe as their opener, where they received only a marginally better reception.

The Clash, especially Strummer, did not take well to this treatment of the soon-to-be hip hop legends. He castigated the crowd both nights, and he and other Clash members continued the tongue lashing of their fans in print during interviews. Their later openers for the Bond's shows, The Treacherous Three and ESG, received a slightly warmer reception (or at least one with less spit). But, as Jeff Chang has noted, "in 1981, the American punks clearly wanted the riot to remain exclusively their own" (*Can't Stop* 155).

The Clash tried again in the future to shift the political and musical mindsets of their mostly white punk audiences, as with the Five on their European tour, and the Kurtis Blow debacle detailed earlier by Chuck D. In 1983, they collaborated with rapper and graffiti artist Futura 2000 again, this time on his record *The Escapades of Futura 2000*. They also released one song featuring Futura, "Overpowered by Funk". In "Overpowered" they again use hip hop as a musical platform to take a snapshot of the larger political landscape, critiquing racist governments that wage wars while people starve. Marc Campbell wrote that though Futura's album is

not particularly stellar musically, the collaboration between him and the Clash is something incredibly important, and is part of the history of "hybridization of punk and Black street culture. White/Black, we were all living in the ghetto, whether it be a council flat, the Lower East Side or the South Bronx. We were united by poverty, anger, music and art and looking for a riot of our own" (Campbell).

The Terrible Twins

> Reflecting on the group's influence, I suggested to Strummer that hip-hop has replaced punk rock as the dominant political pop cultural force in spirit, vitality, and creativity. He responded, 'No doubt about it, particularly in respect to addressing the ills of capitalism and providing a smart class analysis, underground hip-hop, not the pop-culture stuff, picked up where punk left off and ran full steam ahead'.
>
> D'Ambrosio,"Let Fury Have the Hour"

The Clash was not the first punk band to recognize the power of hip hop. In New York there was a history of hip hop and punk connecting, through the downtown art and music scene. Nowhere was this co-mingling more evident than in the explosion of graffiti in the New York gallery scene.

In a biography of punk graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, Phoebe Hoban writes that nothing captured the imagination of attendees of the infamous 1981 New York/New Wave show of "punk art" more than the pieces by a dozen graffiti artists, such as Lee Quionnes, Fab 5 Freddy, Daze, Rammelzee and Futura 2000.

> Cortez had hung some enamelized sheet metal up in the gym area for the graffiti artists to work on. They were doing their tags and collaborating on a portrait of [punk lead singer] Debbie Harry … One thing was eminently clear: this was to art what punk was to music. Self-consciously in-your-face fun, anarchy without ideals, the work without work. (Hoban, 66–7)

The music scene also felt the transformation of fascination hip hop and punk had with each other in the early 1980s. Marc Campbell writes:

> The coming together of the uptown rap scene with the downtown punks was the beginning of a melding of musical movements that had previously just observed each other from a distance. Uptown and downtown innovators started collaborating in New York and on an international scale. Bands like The Beastie Boys, Gang Of Four, Rip Rig Panic, The Slits, Bush Tetras, Liquid Liquid and PIL fell under the influence of dub, reggae, funk and disco. Even college kids like Talking Heads got into the action.

A short time later, you have Aerosmith collaborating with Run-DMC on a 1986 remix of "Walk This Way", an incredibly lucrative collaboration neither group was purportedly actually very interested in being in, but one that helped propel hip hop into a mainstream phenomenon. ". . . [Run-DMC] despised the song, and … the seemingly mutual admiration between Run-DMC and Aerosmith was a grand illusion" (Tanz 86). This was clearly a partnership built on record label pressure and money, rather than authentic cultural exchange and solidarity.

More bizarre was Ramones bassist Dee Dee Ramone's 1987 foray into rapping. Under the name "Dee Dee King", he released an album *Standing in the Spotlight* which music critic Matt Carlson said "will go down in the annals of pop culture as one of the worst recordings of all time". Ramone apparently saw this as an opportunity to continue, as the title implies, his time in the spotlight after the dissolution of the band. When it failed, he went back to short-lived punk rock projects. In the Ramones documentary *End of the Century: The Story of the Ramones*, Dee Dee Ramone admitted that his foray into hip hop was a failure. Rather than critiquing his lack of true authentic connection and respect for the culture and the history that created it, he instead decides, "Maybe it was because I'm not a Negro".

These two less than stellar examples of hip hop/punk and rock collaborations help to highlight the political integrity Strummer and the Clash attempted to embody when they engaged with hip hop. It also highlights that this is not just about a shared timeline, a similar political landscape, or a simple act of combining two music genres; the connection between the Clash and the best parts of punk and hip hop are rooted in shared aesthetics and values. It is an understanding that punk, hip hop and reggae are all much deeper than just music forms – at their best, they become cultures and ways of moving through the world.

> A letter written to hip hop as if it was a person opined, You were the terrible twin of punk, Afrika Bambatta in a "Never Mind the Bollocks" t-shirt and afro-hawk, Ramalzee and Lee and the urge to get free, Dondi as a spray can splash Gandhi, Grand Master Flash and the Clash, both poles of Basquiat, painting primal anti-products on barrio billboards. (Berger 66)

The authors clearly feel that beyond sharing space in the downtown scene, hip hop and punk held a connection that was almost familial in its intermingling of aesthetics.

The influence of reggae in this melding of musical forms (what Not4Prophet refers to as "genre-cide") clearly can't be underestimated. What hip hop was to Black folks in the South Bronx, reggae was to Black people from Jamaica to Brixton. Don Letts is a filmmaker who was very close with Strummer and has done several films about the Clash. He said of reggae in the 1970s:

> This is what roots and culture does, it's literally musical reportage. Sound system was a way of imparting information; spiritually, politically, culturally … It seemed a whole lot more attractive and a whole lot more relevant to my situation in Britain where I was feeling alienated, downtrodden and oppressed.

> I was experiencing the end result of racism, being pulled up every fucking day on the streets. (68–9)

Or as Public Enemy front man Chuck D said more succinctly, "Hip hop is Black people's CNN".

Michael Franti, front man for both political punk, reggae and hip hop groups, says this is exactly what the best of punk and the best of the Clash did. "Strummer's music was always uplifting, albeit the issues he was singing about were startling and distressing. My message is clear … even though things seem hopeless we must keep struggling … that is what is at the root of Strummer's music and at the root of my music" (qtd in D'Ambrosio 273). Reggae legend Bob Marley himself pointed out the natural connections between punk rockers and rastas in his song "Punky Reggae Party" (where he gives the Clash a shout out).

This focus on communication of reality that exists in punk, hip hop and reggae is different than other music genres and culture. There is an almost obsession with reporting the reality, the lived experiences of those around you. This stems from the fact that the people producing this music so rarely saw themselves reflected in the mainstream media, and certainly not reflected accurately. There is a desire to see and to be seen, but also a commitment to truth-telling, in all the beauty and all the ugliness as well. This is not about producing a glossy version of the surrounding community, or even of the artist themselves. As Matthew Shenoda has written, "the poet seeks then to tell a truth, not in the sense of an absolute truth for all of humanity, but the truth of the moment, of the daily experiences and complicated nuances of the people, places, and ideas being represented in the writing" (5).

And because a mainstream media is often hostile towards hearing the real complex and sometimes contradictory voices of those it has oppressed, aggressiveness and rage are often shared aesthetics of punk and hip hop. As the zine *Profane Existence* wrote, "We also publish with the intent of crossing the barriers of alienation which keep society as a whole separated and pacified. If our politics or attitudes somehow offend you … tough shit!" (O'Hara 68). Dr. Dre of the gangsta rap group NWA felt the same: "I wanted to make people go: 'Oh shit, I can't believe he's saying that shit.' I wanted to go all the way left" (qtd in Chang, *Can't Stop* 318).

Another of the shared aesthetics is around utilizing materials other consider worthless or garbage, and creating something of value (at least to you) out of it. Shaheen Ariefdien and Nazli Abrahams, two South African hip hop heads, wrote:

> We see hip-hop as the resilience of the human spirit, that process of transforming yourself and your environment … Imagine the oppressive conditions caused by the barbarism of Ronald Reagan's neoliberal economic strategies. The youth of South and West Bronx had little resources, were systematically marginalized and alienated, but filled with an audacity and inner capacity to want to rock the planet. No musical equipment? Well, then beatbox! We've heard many heads equate hip-hop with producing something from nothing. We disagree. Hip-hop

> is about seeing the *something* in what we are often told is nothing. (qtd in Chang, *Total Chaos* 262)

The Clash embodied that aesthetic of rebellious alchemy.

> Much like Black and Latino kids who turned a hopeless situation in the South Bronx into a worldwide phenomenon known as hip-hop, The Clash understood punk's potential for turning misery into art. Instead of the typical fuck-the-world punk approach to life, The Clash realized their revolutionary sonic aesthetic could serve as bedrock to carry their politically charged assault on everything from the aristocracy to Western imperialist agendas … They were the true embodiment of punk's rebellious anti-establishment approach to life. ("The Clash/Supreme")

This is the essence of real punk, according to *Profane Existence*.

> The driving ethic behind most sincere Punk efforts is DIY – Do It Yourself. We don't need to rely on rich business men to organize our fun for their profit – we can do it ourselves for no profit. We Punks can organize gigs, organize and attend demos, put out records, publish books and fanzines, set-up mail-order stores, distribute literature, encourage boycotts, and participate in political activities. We do all of these things and we do them well. Can any other youth-based counterculture of the 80s and 90s claim so much? (O'Hara 153)

While there is much cross over and respect between hip hop and punk historically, the end of this quote speaks to the minimization and erasure of the impact of hip hop as a global force, often due to racism and classism. But of course we know that Joe Strummer himself would set the record straight and answer an emphatic "yes" to that question.

White Noise and Black Rage

Profane Existence's question is not entirely without basis, given the turn hip hop took in the 1980s. The Reagan era was one where the already unbearable conditions of the 1970s worsened. "During the last two decades of the millennium, neoconservatives – with the acquiescence of 'moderates of both parties – turned back a half-century of liberalism … It was not just about survival of the fittest, but gratification of the fittest" (Chang, *Can't Stop* 220). The response across the nation was by and large an abandonment of the hope for creating larger change and a closing of ranks to protect the little that people already had. Looking at Los Angeles, we see that while the city's official unemployment rate was 11 percent, unemployment for South Central youth, predominantly Black and Latino, was at least 50 percent.

> By any index, conditions had deteriorated for the generation born after the Watts uprising. What the South Bronx had been to the 1970s, South Central would be for the 1980s. It was the epitome of a growing number of inner-city nexuses where deindustrialization, devolution, Cold War adventurism, the drug trade, gang structures and rivalries, arms profiteering, and police brutality were combining to destabilize poor communities and alienate massive numbers of youths. (Chang, *Can't Stop*, 315)

It is hard to imagine any communities being able to withstand such a conflagration of crushing forces. And yet the South Central Black community survived. But they survived not by harnessing the rage and channeling it into resistance that the Clash did after 1976, or the South Bronx hip hop artists did after 1977. There was no Joe Strummer or Chuck D for Watts. Instead, more akin to Sex Pistols' nihilism, South Central birthed NWA, the creators of "gangsta rap", named after member Ice Cube's quintessential song, even if Cube would have preferred people paid more attention to the reality-telling aspect of his music, rather than the sensationalism forced upon it. "The moniker stuck, naming the theatrics and the threat, the liberating wordsound power and the internalized oppression, the coolest rebellion and the latest pathology, the new Black poetry, and the 'new punk rock'" (Chang, *Can't Stop* 320).

NWA's music, and that of early gangsta rap, reflected the abandonment Black communities felt, in Los Angeles and across the country. Born in a post-liberation movement time frame, they rejected the idea that marching and protesting against the system was likely to change it. After living through the Black Freedom movements, theirs was the first generation in a half century to face downward mobility. Just as many of the early punks believed that "[i]f Punks were born into this world to be the sons and daughters of America, they have instead become orphans of a fucked up society" (O'Hara, 40–41), NWA held up the truth that for Black America, they had always been orphans, and it didn't look like that was going to change any time soon. So if this was all there was, you better get as much out of it right now while you can. "Excess was the essence of NWA's appeal. These poems celebrated pushers, played bitches, killed enemies, and assassinated police. Fuck delayed gratification, they said, take it all now" (Chang, *Can't Stop* 318).

Public Enemy stood in direct opposition to nihilism in hip hop, just as the Clash took a stand against it in punk rock. Moreover, the stance taken by the Clash, and fueled by impetus from Joe Strummer, was that solidarity and hopefulness embodied, however naively and however misguided, in "White Riot". It was the idea of taking strength from the defiance of those most oppressed, learning from it, and working to engage where you are to further the collective resistance.

> One powerful impulse in early punk … is the fierce effort to break from earlier forms of music. This could be a spur to creativity. But it was also sometimes racist – what the great rock critic Lester Bangs called 'white noise supremacy'. Raw distortion abolishes melody. Speed replaces rhythm. And simple nihilism

> (a hatred of everything) defeats the much richer emotional spectrum that rock inherits from blues, soul, and country" (McLemee).

That emotional spectrum was also coupled with an awareness and understanding of historical and socio-political power dynamics worldwide.

> Based loosely around Strummer's concept of what he called an 'urban Vietnam', *Combat Rock* was a highly overproduced but nonetheless jarring record that tried to see the emerging world order of the 1980s through the eyes of the African-American ghetto. It was a colonial battlefield, where the American military acted as world gatekeeper and the experience of Vietnam was being repeated in all of the world's ghettos. (D'Ambrosio 214)

This viewpoint of the oppression happening redrafts the oppressed from victims to agents of change, from the powerless to the organized, and it shifts the frame from that of a hopeless cause to a historical reality that sometimes David does beat Goliath.

The Clash's music clearly and constantly challenged that nihilism born out of white privilege. Channeling the emotional complexities from Black music cultures into songs like "Ghetto Defendant", with Allen Ginsberg, Strummer was able to take the immense pain and the complicated nuances of everyday life that Shenoda talked about, and turn it, not into defeat, but into tragic beauty. It's a tragic beauty that stirs not resignation and hopelessness, but a tear-soaked anger to change those conditions. Lines like, "It is heroin pity/Not tear gas nor baton charge/That stops you taking the city, express the lived realities of those the culture was created to give voice to, loud angry defiant voices that will not be silenced – that is as hip hop and as punk as you can get."

In the letter written to early hip hop (or is it about punk?) stated:

> You were our ten-point program, our list of demands, a declaration of existence, our statement of resistance, a shout (out) from those whose tongues had been previously tied by the shitstem, a voice for those who were not supposed to be seen or heard. Because you existed, we persisted. And you were as rebellious as a riot. (Berger 66)

Sex Pistols and NWA were random shots fired in all directions while screaming at the top of your lungs. Public Enemy and the Clash were the precision of a surgeon's scalpel.

Critiques are made today of mainstream hip hop, which many from eras past contend has lost its soul and is now focused on selling the worst aspects of commercialized caricatured Black culture to a global audience.

> [W]hen corporations began to understand the global demand for post-white pop culture, hip-hop became the primary content for the new globally consolidated

> media, the equivalent of gold dust in the millennial monopoly rush. The tensions between the culture's true believers and the captains of industry intermittently flared into open, polarizing conflict. (Chang, *Can't Stop* 440)

However, there are still beacons of principle lighting the way forward, new school artists as well as old school heads like KRS-One and Afrika Bambaataa. Bambaataa's organization the Universal Zulu Nation, started to transform gang members into positive forces in the community, is now not only national but international, with chapters in Japan, France, England, Australia, South Korea and South Africa (Zulu Nation).

And, of course, there is 53-year-old Chuck D, who could be described as the moral compass of hip hop. Chuck D has continued to stay active through the creation of political hip hop, releasing both solo albums and work with Public Enemy (their twelfth studio album *The Evil Empire of Everything* released in 2012, and they toured nationally and internationally in 2012). But Chuck D has continued his work as a political activist, speaking out on issues that affect the constituents of hip hop. He was one of the main artists who spoke out in support of peer-to-peer mp3 sharing during the infamous 2000 Napster attacks (unlike the heavy metal band Metallica, whose 2000 lawsuit against the file sharing website alleged piracy, and helped to further criminalize peer-to-peer file sharing). Chuck D, who left his record label after disputes about the then new digital distribution plan, has been a long time supporter of artists releasing music online independently, to maintain control both of their finances and their music's content. "We should think of (Napster) as a new kind of radio – a promotional tool that can help artists who don't have the opportunity to get their music played on mainstream radio or on MTV", Chuck D wrote in an opinion article published in *The New York Times* on May 1, 2000 (Borland).

In addition to digital musical access, Chuck D has challeneged blood diamonds and materialism in hip hop, racial profiling and anti-immigration laws, police brutality, the prison industrial complex, spoken out in support of gay marriage, and he serves on the board of TransAfrica Forum which works on issues that affect the African diaspora worldwide.

In 2004, Chuck D organized a conference to harness and mobilize the transformative power of hip hop into a concrete political agenda.

> Most recently D has been working to leverage the power of the hip-hop musical culture to build a political movement and an electoral force. In June, he was the keynote speaker at the first-ever National Hip-Hop Political Convention in Newark, New Jersey, where delegates representing 30,000 hip-hop voters created a five-point agenda for urban America, including full funding for schools, prison reform, and an end to tax cuts for the wealthy. (Chang, *Mother Jones*)

This is the critical role that Joe Strummer played for punk, to be the irritating rough-voiced Jiminy Cricket on the shoulder of the genre – punk, like hip hop, may

not have always listened, but that moral conscience was lodged in its conscious. Hip hop is lucky enough to still have Chuck D for its moral compass, but one must ask the question, where will the seas of corporate industry wash punk rock off to, without Joe Strummer as its radical rudder?

Chapter 11
Mystery Train: "Joe Strummer" on Screen

Chris Barsanti

What's in a Name?

His name wasn't Joe Strummer. How could it have been? *Nobody* has a moniker that is so perfectly suited to their profession. If names didn't matter in the business of show – and let's be frank here: all art, no matter how visceral and sincere and "real", is always still resolutely an entertainment, a razzle-dazzle to some extent – then the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and the seats at the Academy Awards would all be filled with John Smiths and Ruth Adamses.

If he was going to be a star, then a proper stage name was called for.

This isn't to say that John Graham Mellor was an implausible choice. But the new label that he ultimately used to present everything that he had to offer just rolled off the tongue that much easier. It was that simple. *Joe*: It's an honest type of handle with an aw-shucks ease to it. Then *Strummer*: Not just the musicality of it, the connotations of fingers flying across guitar strings with practiced and unpretentious ease, but also how it summons the idea of a profession and not just a talent or hobby. A Strummer was who he would be, a street-busker at the start of and near the end of his career. He never sought to portray himself as anything other than a worker, a moderately-talented tiller in the fields of music. A "hack", even, who didn't want to be seen as getting above his station (*Let's Rock Again!*).

In reinventing himself as this down-to-earth persona, Strummer was opened to charges of fakery. But he was due for that anyway, given the British music press's penchant for tearing down artists who thought they could slough off their accreted histories. Perhaps it's a symptom of living in society where class is almost as micro-analyzed and difficult to escape from as in the most rigidly caste-bound corners of India. Perhaps it's also no surprise that British society would produce so many rock stars with a yen for reinvention.

Lester Bangs, as the outsider American, was clued into the absurdity of this reflexive petulance against any who tried to step outside their allotted sublevel in the socioeconomic strata. In one of a series of linked pieces written after going on tour with the Clash, Bangs explicated why the particulars of a musician's background were considered so all-mighty important:

> I guess [the English class system] has something to do with another *NME* writer sneering to me, "Joe Strummer has a fucking middle-class education, man!" I surmise further that this is supposed to indicate that he isn't worth a shit, and that

> his songs are all fake street graffiti. Which is fine by me. Joe Strummer is a fake. That only puts him in there with Dylan and Jagger and Townshend and most of the other great rock songwriters, because almost all of them in one way or another were fakes. Townshend had a middle-class education. Lou Reed went to Syracuse University before matriculating to the sidewalks of New York. Dylan faked his whole career; the only difference was that he used to be good at it and now he sucks.
>
> The point is that, like Richard Hell says, rock 'n' roll is an arena in which you recreate yourself, and all this blathering about authenticity is just a bunch of crap. The Clash are authentic because their music carries such brutal conviction, not because they're Noble Savages. (227)

If we take Bangs at his thesis, then the following shouldn't matter one bit: Joe Strummer, the snaggle-toothed punk warlord (as he once, joking and yet not, asked to be identified) and onetime squatter who raised the standard high for social justice and revolution and plain old common republican (lower-case "r") decency, is one and the same as John Mellor, the son of a career diplomat who, yes, went to boarding school and then later art school before undergoing his self-styled chrysalis.

The stirring humanity and potency that is shot through the lyrics of the Clash like so much rebar changes not a whit whether it is listed in the credits as being done by John Mellor, Joe Strummer, or even Woody Mellor, the *nom de guerre* he used in his art school days and while performing with the pub-rockers the 101'ers.

There is no saying why Strummer put such effort into the creation of different personas. An extended psychoanalytical explanation involving the suicide of his older brother David in 1970 is likely unwise, though given the trauma that this inflicted upon Strummer's family it could very well have been a part of the reason. Maybe he just wanted to escape. Perhaps Strummer created himself as a way of denying somebody else that honor.

Or maybe he just wanted to be in the movies.

His movie, at least.

Oi, Woody!

> I thought he looked like Woody Woodpecker. Now I didn't know he had been called Woody before. And I said, 'Oi, Woody!' And he went, 'Don't ever fucking call me that'. And I thought, 'God, he's sensitive'.
> (Topper Headon, drummer, the Clash, in *Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten*)

After coming out of art school and spending the early-1970s at odd jobs like grave digger, Strummer fell into the squatters' community in London, occasionally busking in the Underground. Up until the moment when a landlord had the cops kick him and his friends out for having a black guy living with them, Strummer

said he'd been playing it "by the book". But after that point: "If we wanted a house, we just kicked the fucking door in" (Savage 252). With that same sense of abandon, Strummer gathered up a few like-minded mates in 1974 and started playing at a pub as a group called the 101'ers, after their squat. In not long at all, they were among the hottest pub-rock bands in the city.

He did this as Woody Mellor, the persona he adopted after starting at London's Central School of Art and Design in September 1970, less than six weeks after David's suicide. Biographer and friend Chris Salewicz noted his change in voice: "the accent he came up with [sounded like] an Englishman trying to emulate Bob Dylan's laconic Midwest cadences" (Salewicz 113).[1] As Woody Mellor, Strummer came into his own, or at least an early version of his own. With his Guthrie-esque name, Dylan-esque voice, and unmistakable fervor, Strummer was able to emulate all the early-era American rock pioneers who inspired him so.

But the critical juncture in his career had more than a little to do with an unrecognized, non-musical talent of Strummer's: zeitgeist-spotting. In 1976, the 101'ers opened for the Sex Pistols, and Strummer recalled later for Don Letts' near-definitive documentary *Westway to the World* that he knew within five seconds that "we were like yesterday's papers. I mean, *we were over*".

Strummer saw how the culture was going to be changed by what Johnny, Sid, and the boys were doing up on stage with their well-crafted stage personas, faux-Situationist theatricality, fashionably ragged togs, assaultive bang of sound, and snarled lyrics. Not only that, Strummer was savvy enough to appreciate how he could graft that slicing anger and pose onto his own passions to create something: a uniquely hybridized new form.

Following his punk revelation, Strummer dissolved the 101'ers by fiat. Immediately upon leaving he was recruited into the band that manager/svengali/would-be political provocateur Bernie Rhodes was putting together to compete with the Pistols, being managed by his former boss Malcolm McLaren. In later years, Strummer rarely, if ever, admitted to any feelings of regret over this autocratic decision to chuck the 101'ers for the Clash – in fact, his more controlling side (commented on by many who knew him) seemed almost to enjoy it.

Once in the Clash, Strummer changed everything. Gone were the flared trousers and frizzy, woolly shag of hair. Like many of the first-wave punk bands, the Clash were tuned-in to not just how they should sound but also how they needed to look. Just as Johnny Ramone insisted on his band's uniform of jeans, leather jackets, and moppy haircuts, and Generation X were brutally honest about auditioning new members more on their look than anything else, the Clash manufactured their own look. As various Clash members pointed out in *Westway*, the Sex Pistols could get all their fashion needs met through McLaren's shops like Sex – Strummer and the Clash had to manufacture their own idea of what punk was, slashing paint over

[1] *Redemption Song, the Definitive Biography of Joe Strummer*, HarperCollins, 2006. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

their clothes and guitars and stenciling titles like "Hate and War" onto the backs of their jackets. If nothing else, it put their art-school backgrounds to some use.

The cover photography for their first, self-titled album gives an idea of what the band came up with. A piercing glare of a stance, short hair, and a quasi-militaristic look, as though they were some youth militia rampaging about London. That couldn't have been further from the truth, of course. The Clash weren't some gang intent on destruction. For all Strummer's early lyrics about riot and guns and strife, he was there to make music, not war.

For one of the standout songs on the Clash's first album, "White Riot", Strummer writes not as the bomb-throwing anarchist that many punks yearned to be, but rather as a yearn-filled viewer of revolutionary activity. It mixes a desire for taking part in a damn-the-police assault (the chorus plaintively repeats "I wanna riot") with a realistic assessment of the narrator's self-fulfilling limitations ("All the power's in the hands/Of people rich enough to buy it/While we walk the street/Too chicken to even try it"). Somewhat ironically, not long before his death in 2002, Strummer and Mick Jones played "White Riot" before a delirious crowd at a benefit for firefighters (Salewicz 603) – the same people who would have been called in to clean up after the imagined urban uprising that Strummer was ultimately too well-behaved to take part in.[2]

Nice boy or not, Strummer's desire to make epochal music during that crucial 1976–77 pivoting of music and culture, to be something more than second-comers behind McLaren's Pistols, meant that his entry into the Clash wasn't taken on as some lark, it was a complete and utter repudiation of everything he had previously been. "We were Stalinist", he says in *Westway*, evoking an image of radicalized revolutionaries charging into the future and burning bridges to the past.

For a man who so idealized American roots music, this slashing of ties to history was not only inevitably short-lived – it was only 1979 when the Clash recorded a cover of Bobby Fuller's 1966 song "I Fought the Law" – but also just another stage in Strummer's evolving presentation of himself.

This presented self of the streetwise punk barnstormer tended to butt up against reality. The Clash were barely a cohesive band when word started to get around the London scene that Strummer's father, Ronald Mellor, worked for the Foreign Office and that Strummer himself had attended public school. This contrasted with the image that many in the scene had invented for themselves of scrappy working-class types battling the Tories and the police. In order to keep the fiction alive, ties were often cut.[3]

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[2] Strummer was a frequent undercutter of his own outlaw, bloke-of-the-world image. His lyrics for "Safe European Home" – based on a particularly uncomfortable visit to Kingston, Jamaica – are, like "White Riot", both self-deprecating and unusually race-conscious: "I went to the place where every white face/Is an invitation to robbery/Sitting here in my safe European home/Don't wanna go back there again."

[3] Marcus Gray writes: "As he had severed links with this part of his past several years before he threw in his lot with the nascent punk movement, Joe found it annoying that it

Given Strummer's strained relationship with his parents, this act of disowning may not have been as difficult as it seemed. Strained relationship or not, however, his father Ronald could at least display pride in what his son had become. When Letts' *Punk Rock Movie* premiered in 1978, with the Clash's incendiary concert footage as some of its most thrilling moments, Ronald took a diplomat friend of his to a screening. Told at the theater that it was sold out, his high-ranking companion demanded that the ticket-taker seat them: "Do you know who this is?" He yelled. "This is Joe Strummer's father!" Chairs were produced so the two government officials could watch Ronald's son spit out his anti-establishment lyrics, free of charge (Salewicz 244).

Perhaps inevitably, Strummer's dissociative take on his roots led to his being a performer not just on the stage but on screen.

Rude Boys

There are those who believe that *Rude Boy* has something to offer the world. They are incorrect. It is a casualty of the times, a woeful attempt at capturing a moment which slipped through its fingers all too easily. This was also the first real screen performance of "Joe Strummer", the sage of the punk movement.

As Johnny Rotten was punk's cocky irony dispenser and Joey Ramone the somnolent clown, Strummer's heartfelt lyrics and loudly declaimed stances had typecast him as punk's radical thinker. Of all the bands who played at the massive 1978 Rock Against Racism concert, it was the Clash's set that is remembered for its blistering energy and righteous optimism about the possibilities of an open society. Strummer's omnivorous appreciation of music from all cultures and disciplines, possibly an aftereffect of his being raised in a diplomat's house in many countries, made him punk's great messenger of inclusiveness, once he got over the extremist limitations of his initiation into the movement.

It was this persona that began to be crafted in *Rude Boy*, a film in which Strummer – nobody's idea of a great thespian, particularly then – outshines the film's other uniformly clumsy performers. Shot in the late-1970s, but not released until 1980, this would-be *Medium Cool* of British agit-punk attempts to repurpose the authentic energy of the moment into a thinly-thought-out fictional film. The filmmakers include documentary scenes of two warring components of the early British punk scene, socialists and members of the racist National Front, clashing on the streets of London, along with some electrifying concert footage of the Clash. This is grafted onto a thin storyline about an unnamed punk hanger-on

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was coming back to haunt him. Rather than dismiss it as irrelevant, though, he – like Mick Jones and Paul Simonon – opted to defend himself on punk's own decidedly Stalinist terms. This meant not only distorting the truth about his upbringing, but in his case also effectively disowning his family and pre-punk friends" (81). *Return of The Last Gang in Town*, Helter Skelter, 2003. All other citations in this chapter are from this edition.

(Ray Gange) who flits between wanting to be a roadie for the Clash and being attracted by the National Front's separatist violence.

The Clash operate in the film as a distant phenomenon, the filmmakers happy to catch as much concert footage of them as possible and jamming Gange into momentous scenes (the street protest, hanging out backstage while the Clash play the RAR concert) whenever possible. Strummer himself shows up only a few times, most substantially in a scene where he tries to counsel a falling-down drunk Gange. Irritated with political punk bands, Gange expresses his sole desire: to get filthy rich. Strummer plays a *version* of himself here, reading (assumedly) scripted dialogue in order to perform the role of "Joe Strummer". It's a fractured and alienated scenario, but also one that contains a germ of honesty.

Instead of jamming his finger in the face of Gange's intolerant character, Strummer quietly remonstrates with him. Although still in his mid-20s, Strummer registers as the calm, cool, and collected uncle, telling Gange to forget about mindless materialism, that "there's nothing at the end of that road". Strummer makes the kind of call for collective, human unity that typified the wounded optimism of his later years: "It's all of us or none." Strummer would make almost precisely that statement many times in life.

The wary and thoughtful Strummer of *Rude Boy* seems miles different than the provocative sloganeer of early magazine interviews, the one who always had a declamatory statement to make or a call to action to proclaim. He seems to be someone becoming acutely aware of the distance between the person he's creating and the person he is, or at the very least the confusion over which is which.

Years later, musing to director Dick Rude about the breakup of the Clash in an outtake of *Let's Rock Again!*, Strummer pointed out the irony of a former squatter touring arenas and being "professionally paid to be a rebel".

Intelligently, the Clash later disowned *Rude Boy* when it finally showed up in theaters as a poorly-considered *Forrest Gump* of early punk. Regardless of its aesthetic appeal, though, at the very least the film now provides a glimpse, albeit brief and awkwardly manufactured, of the real Joe Strummer – or at least the real image of the Joe Strummer whom John Mellor had crafted by this point.

The Clash on Broadway

The Clash were hardly the first rock group with an affinity for film. Various Beatles and Rolling Stones have served their time behind and in front of the camera for films ranging from teenybopper folderol to fascinating might-have-beens[4] and bands like Radiohead and Sonic Youth create music that's so cinematic it seems a foregone conclusion that some of their members would turn to soundtrack work.

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[4] Witness Mick Jagger's abortive starring role in Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*. Some of Jagger's unused scenes were included in Werner Herzog's 1999 documentary *My Best Fiend*.

Punk musicians have less of a track record in film. Outliers like Fear's Lee Ving playing a heavy in the comedy *Clue* or Johnny Rotten's curious turn as a psychotic cop-killer in *Order of Death*, a 1983 Italian *giallo,* were in large part predicated on the early-1980s media preoccupation with punks as symbols of the impending collapse of society.

Joe Strummer's cinematic legacy was of a different sort entirely. He was an artist who was always inspired and fascinated by film. Cinematic imagery, both of a general and specific sort cropped up in his lyrics and image-making time and again. While recording the Clash's second album, *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, the band screened a steady diet of World War II films that certainly helped contribute to the songs' atmosphere of violence. The band's gangster look that can be seen in the video for *London Calling* was heavily inspired by the film *Brighton Rock*. On *Sandinista!*, the song "Charlie Don't Surf" gave tribute to *Apocalypse Now*. While touring in Thailand, "the ensemble's sense of cinematic romance" was piqued by a visit to the real Bridge on the River Kwai (Salewicz 323). It is difficult, in fact, to look at Strummer's quasi-military outfits during the *Combat Rock* stadium tour and not see it as some ill-considered Rambo/Mad Max mash-up.

Was this fascination with film on the part of the band and particularly Strummer, their acknowledged leader, a result of an obsession with surface and image that would be unseemly for a musician so associated with authenticity? Strummer didn't seem to think that there was any contradiction there. As he told one interviewer, "American films between the '40s and the '70s *were* art. They were mass entertainment, but they were also art" (Schalit). Or was his affection for the cinema in fact another aspect of Strummer's habit of gleaning cultural influences from wherever they could be found? Either way, there were some who found the band's strong linkage between music and film to be excessive.[5]

In the summer of 1981, when the Clash came to New York to play their epochal run of 17 shows at Bond's Casino in Time Square, they brought along frequent collaborator Don Letts to film it all. The footage that survives from that shoot has never quite been pulled together into a proper film, though it was repurposed for the "This is Radio Clash" video and serves as the visual spine for Letts' heavily talking-head documentary *Westway to the World*. It's perhaps more fittingly seen in these impressionistic bits and pieces, which present a vivid snapshot of a grimy brown and ready-to-blow earlier New York. It is also prime cinematic mythmaking, with Letts shooting the bandmembers as they bomb around town, seemingly in the thick of it all. Letts intercuts the band with footage of graffiti artists, breakdancers,

[5] In Chris Knowles' *Clash City Showdown*, he writes: "One of the most frequent criticisms of the Clash was that they were too obsessed with the movies … This particular aspect was squarely in line with what I believe they really were, namely multi-media performance artists."

ready-to-riot crowds outside Bond's, spraypaint-bombed subway cars, tightly associating them with the whole perceived hustle and danger of the era.[6]

Strummer's New York sabbatical also linked him very closely with the world of film, and not just because the band would come on stage every night to the strains of Ennio Morricone's squalling theme from *For a Few Dollars More*. During that time, Strummer became friendly with Robert De Niro and was hailed by the likes of Martin Scorsese (Salewicz 305). The musician found something to like in these performers from a different discipline. In later years, the circle of friends Strummer would ring up when arriving in New York was heavily laced with actors and filmmakers like Jim Jarmusch and Matt Dillon, many of whom can be seen testifying before Julien Temple's flickering campfires in his 2007 elegy, *Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten*.

In fact, Scorsese's inspiration by the Clash's street-fighting sound almost led to a very interesting combination of styles, as he talked about in 1998:

> The last thing I got really excited about was punk rock. I thought that was interesting because it was still angry. *Gangs of New York* was going to be set in the 1840s and I was going to use the Clash on the soundtrack … It would be interesting to have that beat. (255)

Instead, Scorsese put Strummer and the band on screen for the briefest moment as "street scum" in *The King of Comedy*. Just as Scorsese fed off the Clash's energy – he would listen to them in his trailer to rev himself up while shooting *Raging Bull* and later used "Janie Jones" for a climactic scene in *Bringing Out the Dead* – so too Strummer paid respect back to the great director by shaving his head into a Travis Bickle-esque mohawk during what Antonio D'Ambrosio termed the band's "punk rock guerrilla phase" (135). It is perhaps testament to the power of cinema that it would take a film to convince one of punk rock's founding lights to come full circle and finally adopt the hair style so associated with his music in the mass media.

Spaghetti Westerns and Elvis

While a film didn't break up the Clash, it certainly didn't help. In 1983, as the band was feuding and sniping as musicians cooped up too long together tend to do, Strummer decided that what he really wanted to do was make a movie. Strummer later recalled the experience in unusually succinct but typically self-mocking manner:

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[6] Mythmaking or not, there was some truth to Letts' imagery. According to Strummer in *Westway*, at that time the band was soaking up every influence they came across, and then slapping it down for the sprawling behemoth that was *Sandinista!*. Whatever one thinks of the album, you can hear some version of what the Clash found on the streets of New York in those songs. For better or worse, it is a document of a time and place.

> I have directed a film myself. It was called *Hell W10*, a black and white 16mm silent movie and it was a disaster … I managed to shoot it without a script. God knows what it was about. I was the only other one who knew and I'm not telling. But when I get the bug back, I might try another one.
> (qtd in Johnstone 89)

Unfortunately, Strummer's directorial debut lives up to his undersell. It's nothing more than a baffling lark starring all the members of the band and some of their friends playing at being gangsters. There's a blind piano player, Mick Jones playing an underworld crime boss, and a generally chaotic lack of purpose that could be read as echoing the state of the band at the time. The soundtrack was a point of contention between Mick Jones and Strummer, with Jones taking it in a more modern, hip-hop-influenced direction than Strummer wanted (Salewicz 349).[7] It was one of the band's last and most curious gasps – with drummers Terry Chimes and Topper Headon already gone and the mechanics of Mick Jones' expulsion in the works, the shooting of a silent film oddity is hard to see as a priority. Unless the artist in question is Joe Strummer, of course, and he had always wanted to make a movie.

It took the breakup of the Clash, in fact, to bring about the most film-centric period of Strummer's career. Strummer himself referred to the post-Clash and pre-Mescaleros time as his "wilderness years". This wasn't just a time of musical dead-ends and a stalled career, it was a time when working on and in films managed to sustain a great artist. It was also the fulfillment of some long-held fascinations for Strummer, who had avidly devoured gangster and cowboy flicks, "as well as politically radical films like Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers*" (D'Ambrosio 132).

Strummer's great collaborator in this time was Alex Cox. In Cox, Strummer would find a filmmaker who combined both a radical agit-prop sensibility while still harboring a deep love for the hoariest of Hollywood genres. Cox was also someone who didn't mind making grandiose statements in his words and his art; in other words, a brother spirit. Strummer's meeting up with Cox in 1986 "opened a series of doors which enabled him to keep running for much of the next seven years" (Gray 438).

Cox had released *Repo Man*, his deadpan Southern California punk take on *Kiss Me Deadly*, in 1984 as the Clash were still spiraling downward. He asked Strummer to contribute some of the music for his second punk epic, the heroin romance of Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, *Love Kills* – later renamed *Sid & Nancy*. (There doesn't seem to have been much reflection on the leader of the Clash being asked to work on a film about their greatest musical rivals.)

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[7] When *Hell W10* finally appeared in 2003 as an add-on to the CD-DVD greatest hits and odds-and-ends compilation *The Essential Clash*, its soundtrack turned out to be previously-released Clash tracks only tied to the on-screen action in the most tangential fashion.

After *Sid & Nancy*, Cox went to the Spanish desert to shoot his take on the spaghetti western, *Straight to Hell*. With an all-buddies cast that included the Pogues, Jim Jarmusch, and Elvis Costello, and a script that dished out beloved genre clichés (blood, dirt, sweat, guns, repeat) with a loving ladle, it was in some sense *Hell W10* writ large. The tattered and confused half-satire that showed up on screen isn't half as much fun as it seemed to have been to shoot (Banner 71).

However, *Straight to Hell* did provide Strummer with his first real jab at a starring role. Playing one of a trio of hit men who show up in a small town where trouble awaits,[8] Strummer went method, sleeping in a car at night and refusing to wash his increasingly begrimed and sweated-through black suit. All his effort wasn't for naught; in fact, Strummer acquits himself as well as any of the more professional actors do.

Almost immediately afterward, Strummer took a small role in the little-seen *Candy Mountain*, along with other musicians like Tom Waits, Leon Redbone, and Dr. John. The writer and director was Rudy Wurlitzer, a friend of Cox's who had actually written Cox's next film – one in which Strummer would play a crucial role.

Although *Straight to Hell* was no success, it was correctly viewed as a joyride for everyone involved and mostly forgotten. *Walker* (1987), however, was a multi-million dollar epic charged with political controversy and featuring actual Hollywood actors; when the studio left it to die a lonely death in a few lonely theaters, it became the film that essentially (if wrongly[9]) ended Cox's brief rein as one of the decade's indie cinema stars. For Strummer, however, as the composer of the almost universally acclaimed soundtrack, it was one of the brightest creative moments of his wilderness years.

A mock epic satire of Manifest Destiny and the Reagan administration's Contra policy, the film was based on the true story of William Walker, a mid-19th-century adventurer who conquered and ruled Nicaragua from 1855 to 1857. This job was Strummer's biggest musical departure, as it required him to compose and record an instrumental soundtrack that mixed county-and-western motifs with Latin American folk sounds.

Although the *Walker* soundtrack suffered the same fate of the vast majority of instrumental soundtracks (nobody bought it), it was not for lack of effort on Strummer's part. In addition to composing all the music, he also played at least one instrument on each track (though contractual trickery meant that he couldn't be credited for it). Moving from peppy music-hall sambas to haunting instrumentals, it was a singularly unique and fully-realized work, the likes of which Strummer had not put down on vinyl since at least 1980's *London Calling*.

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[8] The other two being Cox regular Sy Richardson and Strummer friend Dick Rude, who later shot the elegiac Strummer-on-tour documentary *Let's Rock Again*.

[9] Cox's mix of gonzo slapstick, anachronistic satire, starkly anti-Reagan critique, and epic slow-motion bloodshed were probably doomed to not gel into something coherent. But *Walker* is a film that's worth reconsidering, not just for its manic ambitions, but for Strummer's ghostly, affecting music.

The soundtrack's artistic success was noted in numerous corners, with David Byrne – who won the Academy Award in 1987 for his soundtrack to *The Last Emperor* (D'Ambrosio 140) – saying that Strummer deserved the Oscar instead. In an interview included on the Criterion DVD release of *Walker*, Cox himself took issue with one lonely critic who took the music to task, the director arguing that Strummer's work was easily the equal of that which Bob Dylan did for *Pat Garrett & Billy the Kid*.[10]

If nothing else, the album enabled Strummer – who, in the Clash, had always handled the lyrics side of things, while Mick Jones took care of writing the music – to come out from under Jones's shadow as a composer. The knock from some quarters on Strummer's breaking-up of the band had been that without Jones there to serve as his musical backbone, Strummer wouldn't be able to hack it on his own. The post-Jones music produced by the ever-shifting Strummer sideshow labeled "the Clash" was not the kind of art which held up to serious scrutiny, even at the time. It pained Strummer when the *Walker* soundtrack sold only 15,000 copies (Salewicz 422). After all, it was an album not only written in the heartland of the Sandinista revolutionaries he had named the last true Clash album after, but also one composed in a swirl of Latin American musical traditions that he had no organic connection to. But while critics (some of them previously quite hostile to the Clash) admitted that Strummer had proven himself as a true musician and creative force (Gray 441), not just the lyricist and lead shouter, the financial failure of the project as a whole seemed to keep him from being able to take much solace in it.

Not long after *Walker*, Strummer took on his last notable acting job, in 1989's *Mystery Train*. Again, it was for a friend (Jim Jarmusch), but this time it wasn't a case of adopting some absurd genre caricature. In *Mystery Train*, Strummer crops up opposite Steve Buscemi as a rootless Briton at sixes and sevens in nighttime Memphis. Strummer's character wears his hair in a great greasy D.A. and favors vests and curled lips, and so is nicknamed "Elvis" by the bemused Americans. In the course of a few short hours, his character gets roaring drunk, guns down a liquor-store clerk, and alienates just about everybody he comes into contact with.

Strummer's performance is wobbly at times, but it has a confused vulnerability that registers as genuine. Most immediately, his presentation of the Englishman adrift in America, which he's both fascinated by and deeply critical of, does not feel so far removed from Strummer's own situation in these years. When his character gripes with a black friend of his about why the hotel they're in doesn't have any pictures of black musicians on the walls, just Elvis, it feels like precisely the sort of well-past-midnight theoretical grumbling that the real Strummer would have proffered.

While his work in *Mystery Train* is at the least credible, and likely scratched some type of itch the film-obsessed Strummer must have had to do a proper acting job at least once in his life, there wasn't much of a future in it for him. Rather, it

[10] It is also worth pointing out that Bob Dylan and Joe Strummer were mutual admirers, and that Strummer was perhaps intentionally walking Dylan's footsteps when he signed up for *Walker*, as it shared Wurlitzer as a screenwriter with *Pat Garrett*.

was as a musician that film would call him back. With a rough-and-tumble backing band called The Latino Rockabilly War, Strummer knocked out a number of songs for the 1989 teen-suicide drama *Permanent Record* (Salewicz 423).[11] Strummer would do odds and ends of other film compositions over the following decade, most especially for John Cusack's hitman comedy *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997), but in the main his career in film ended with *Permanent Record*.[12]

The Right Profile

Strummer didn't make sense. He was a star with no looks and classically bombed-out British dentistry, a singer with much more determination and soul than natural talent, a rock rebel who knew how to pose, knew that the pose was *important*, and yet could be utterly sincere about the fakery. Being an actor, a performer, is always to some extent a lie, but in the lie, the truth hides in plain sight.

> You have to remember, this is show biz … It's not as if we're novelists who can hide in our studies like J.D. Salinger and never have our photos taken. It's easy for those people to say what the heck. You don't know what it's like having photos taken of yourself all the time. (McKenna)

Like many performers, Strummer was somebody not entirely comfortable being himself (Salewicz 285). Thusly the changing of names and the chameleon persona shifts from hippie to punk to arena rock-star to grimy method actor to vagabond world troubadour. Strummer needed the pose of cinema and the stage – all that fussing with his hair and clothes through different phases from old-style gangster to 1950s rocker to nouveau punk brigand – to get his message across. If the message didn't get across (it being best to remember that to many, the Clash is just that band who did "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"), then at least he could use it to help deliver a bomb of emotion and the idea that, for one brief moment in a concert hall or listening to a song in one's room, we could all be together. It's why people go to the movies, that feeling of being lost together. And "Joe Strummer" could make it happen, even if John Mellor couldn't.

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[11] While a straightforward drama like this could seem a curious choice for Strummer, compared to the idiosyncratic nature of his other film collaborations, his personal connection to the subject reportedly left him bathed in tears after watching a rough cut.

[12] Although as the years passed, more and more filmmakers began to license Strummer's previously recorded work. After Ridley Scott saw Strummer perform the beautiful march "Minstrel Boy" with The Mescaleros, he made canny use of it in *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

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