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Pop

Do you feel lucky, punk?

Yes he does. And so does the audience as Joe Strummer makes his comeback after 14 years' silence. It's more fun than a Clash reunion...

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Joe Strummer & the Mescaleros
London Astoria

Mick Jones's sublimely whiney harmonies were missed at times, but in most respects this gig was probably the most fun old punks will ever have short of a Clash reunion. In some ways it was better because Joe Strummer's musical resurrection, after 14 years' near-silence, came without the crippling hype and incipient sadness of a reformed band. Most importantly for Clash fans, there was no sell-out, no cosying up to the current nostalgia virus. This was like meeting up with your best schoolmate after decades apart and discovering you still have loads in common.

The stage backdrop is a pink banner decorated with dinky, multi-coloured Damien Hirst figures - the same image that adorns the cover of Strummer's new album, *Rock Art and the X-Ray Style* - and both the pinkness and dinkiness and that new album are crucial ingredients of Joe 99. In contrast to the ridiculously macho guerrilla-soldier chic which The Clash wore in their last years together, Strummer's image now is softer and more feminine. He still has the quiff and dresses simply in black T-shirt and jeans, but from his opening comments about letting short people to the front so they can see the stage, to a quip aimed at 'aggressive males', you can see that fatherhood and age have mellowed him in the most healthy and acceptable of ways.

But, however weird this sounds for a gig in which two-thirds of the songs were 20 years old, it was the new material that made the night. *Rock Art* is not a great album - it's more *Combat Rock* than *London Calling* - but it is better than anything you could have expected from a long-retired 47-year-old: fresh-sounding, intelligent, with plenty of old fire still pumping through the veins but enough wisdom to let in a little bathos. The Clash's new live album is called *From Here to Eternity*; the TV documentary on the band was called *From Westway to the World*; the final song on Strummer's new album is, more prosaically, titled 'Willesden to Cricklewood'. His sights have lowered, but his aim is still true.

From the adulatory, affectionate roar that greets his arrival on stage, it's

obvious that nothing has become Joe Strummer so much as his long-time disappearance. His reputation has grown with every crap album he hasn't released, with every million-dollar offer for a Clash reunion he has turned down.

The contrast with the Sex Pistols' 'Filthy Lucre' reunion tour two years ago could hardly be starker. Strummer and Lydon were always the twin poles of punk: the idealist and the nihilist, the hero and the zero. Growing up, I regarded Lydon's role as the braver and truer of the two. His cynicism seemed to prick The Clash's occasional pomposity. But after watching those four jowly, perma-tanned old men get bottled offstage in Helsinki by a crowd of drunk teenagers, then come back on to fulfil their contracts, I realised cynicism wasn't in itself a valid world view. In that moment, the Sex Pistols were outpunked by 200 vodka-bleary Finns.

At the Astoria, apart from a few stencilled jackets, no one mentions the word punk. There isn't a single Mohican in sight. No one spits at the stage. The predominantly grey-haired crowd is into it from the first moment, singing Jones's harmonies on a euphoric '(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais', grooving to 'Rock the Casbah', jumping and chanting through 'I Fought The Law'. The gig had a feel more akin to the return of Paul Weller in 1994. The disillusion and complacency that has attended Weller's subsequent return to commercial success may yet grip Strummer, but for the moment this resurrection is more than fine.

Like Weller, Strummer has surrounded himself with a tight, keen band half his age. The Mescaleros may be a terrible name, but they look and sound great, while guitarist Antony Genn and percussionist Pablo Cook take credit for co-writing some of the new songs. 'Yalla Yalla', in particular, has a hazy, electronic groove and uplifting hook that sounds exactly as you'd hope The Clash would sound in 1999. The incongruously titled 'Tony Adams' is a big, bombastic rock-reggae scorcher with apocalyptic lyrics straight from Born To Run. By contrast, 'The Road To Rock'n'Roll' is a wry look at the music's casualties that would happily grace one of Springsteen's later albums.

The other factor that saves this gig from the nostalgia trap is that The Clash's songs have, for the most part, aged as well as their author. 'Tommy Gun' and 'London Calling' are as enjoyably ludicrous as they always were, but 'Straight to Hell' could almost have been written about the Gulf war, while that infamous line in 'Hammersmith Palais' - 'If Adolf Hitler were here today/ They'd send the limos in anyway' - has the ring of prophecy, coming two days after Jiang Zemin's state visit. A punk prophet? Well, it leaves a sweeter aftertaste than the Pistols' hollow punk profits.

