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Paul Simonon: 'I was living off half Joe Strummer's dole money when he joined The Clash'

Bass player Paul Simonon revisits the early days of The Clash in a new interview – and says although they had no money, they sure had style

ADRIAN LOBB | 9 May 2023



The Clash's classic line-up (l-r) of Joe Strummer, 'Topper' Headon, Paul Simonon and Mick Jones in 1978. Image: Sheila Rock/Shutterstock

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Punk legend Paul Simonon, bass player for The Clash, has shared details about the DIY ethic and community spirit which characterised the band's beginnings and the London punk scene in the 1970s.

"We were fighting to survive," said Simonon. "I got kicked off the dole and when Joe [Strummer] joined, I had no income whatsoever. So I was penniless and living off half of Joe's dole money.

"That was really bonding. I remember me and Strummer talking about how mirrored sunglasses were cool and quite intimidating. An hour later, he came back with a pair. I said they look brilliant, and he'd got a pair for me as well.

"It says a lot about Joe as a person. That's called generosity. I try to live like that

too. So we walked around looking pretty sharp... but we were bloody starving!"

Paul Simonon was the bass player and artistic director with The Clash, bringing a working-class art school perspective to the punk pioneers that reshaped both music and style in the UK.

In a [new interview](#) for *The Big Issue's Letter To My Younger Self*, he describes those early years of The Clash – the inspiration, the struggle and the generosity of his bandmates.

Simonon, whose new LP with singer Galen Ayers is out on May 19, recalls how The Clash had a work ethic to back up their talent. He also describes how growing up in Brixton before moving to West London had influenced him.

"I would tell my younger self to just keep going. At the beginning of The Clash, we were following our instincts and passions. I wouldn't change anything," said Simonon.

"We worked so hard. It was all action for the whole period of The Clash. We never had a holiday – we were on a mission.

"We toured forever, which was the best thing in the world because travel is the best education. I was fortunate because in Brixton, with the Windrush generations, and then working down Portobello Market as a kid, it felt like the whole world was wandering up and down. So I grew up with broad horizons. It was exciting, enlightening, and made a deep impact on me."

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Simonon was also open about his lack of musical training before starting the band with Jones.

"I went to art school to be a painter. Mick Jones went to art school to put a band together," he said.

"My friend was invited to try out as drummer for Mick's band London SS, and I went to support him. They dragged me onto a mic and it was a disaster – but the story is that Bernie Rhodes suggested Mick get rid of his band and start one with me.

"It was the same way Bernie was responsible for getting [John Lydon](#) as singer in the [Sex Pistols](#) – mixing musicians with non-musicians. The magic was that Mick had the patience to teach me how to play bass. For a good period of time, Mick taught me everything – plus I played along with reggae records, which helped.

"I guess we're lucky. We just had a unique ingredient of personalities within the band. And the contribution by Mick, Joe and Topper is immense. When you've hardly played bass but you've got someone like Topper behind you on drums, it certainly hides a lot of mistakes. That was my jazz phase!"

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In a wide-ranging interview, in which he also discusses working with [Damon Albarn](#) in The Good, The Bad & The Queen and Gorillaz, his political awakenings, and the influence of his parents, Paul Simonon also talked through his style secrets from his time in The Clash.

"A lot of my style came from seeing the West Indian guys hanging out on street corners in Brixton," he said. "I remember a bloke in an orange suit with a Trilby who looked amazing.

"And I'd been to Italy for a brief time when my stepfather won a scholarship to study music (although he wouldn't let me anywhere near his piano, which was a gripe). So there was also Italian style.

"And [Dr Feelgood](#) were an influence, there was the mod thing and the skinhead experience. So the elements were all around us.

"But most of it came through living off secondhand clothes at Portobello market. We couldn't buy anything from [The Sex Pistols](#) shop – we didn't want to look like them.

"But the joy for The Clash was that everybody wore flares so secondhand shops were full of straight leg trousers nobody wanted. There was a bit of the mod thing, the skinhead experience, elements were all around us.

"And the Do It Yourself aspect was from art school. I was exposed to Jackson

Pollock and saw a lot of freedom in his work. I knew what paint to use – the Humbrol enamel paint you used to paint model planes with. So we'd splash our shoes or trousers. But you had to be subtle.

"I remember walking down Golborne Road with Mick and Joe. I just did my shoes and shirt, whereas they did everything and looked like they'd fallen into a paint shop. Add a bit of [Pop Artist Robert] Rauschenberg too – cutting up photographs of Haile Selassie and sticking it onto my shirt, and that was our style."

Paul Simonon and Gelen Ayers debut album as Galen & Paul – [Can We Do Tomorrow Another Day](#) – is out on May 19

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