

From Rock's Backpages Music

Caroline Coon Fri 21 Dec 2012 09:00 GMT



Joe Strummer: 'I shudder to think what would have happened if I hadn't gone to boarding school'

To mark the 10th anniversary of the Clash singer's death - on 22 December 2002 - we visit Rock's Backpages, the world's leading archive of vintage music journalism. For this interview by Caroline Coon that first appeared in Melody Maker in November 1976



Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon on stage The Clash. Photograph: Roger Resemeyr/Corbis

Three weeks ago at London's ICA, Jane and Shane, regulars on the new-wave punk rock scene, were drunk, had kissed, bitten and, with broken glass, cut him in a calm, but no less macabre, love rite.

The Clash were not pleased. "All of you who think violence is tough - why don't you go home and collect stamps? That's much tougher," roared Joe Strummer. Then he slammed into the band's anthem White Riot.

"All the power is the hands/ Of people rich enough to buy it/ While we walk the streets/ Too chicken to even try it/ And everybody does what they're told to/ And everybody eats supermarket soul-food/ White Riot, I wanna riot/ White riot - a riot of my own!"

The Clash - White Riot on MUZU.TV.

The song, played with the force of an acetylene torch, is no less politically uncompromising than the other numbers in the band's repertoire - numbers like Deny, Protex Blue, Career Opportunities and 1977. To hammer home their impact, the Clash play with enough committed force to bring down the walls of Babylon, Jericho, Heaven and Hell if necessary. And their audiences go wild.

But, far from wanting people to hurt each other, Joe Strummer (vocals, guitar), Mick Jones (guitar), Paul Simonon (bass) and Terry Chimes (drums) insist that their aim is to shake audiences into channelling their frustrations into creative outlets. It's difficult, however, trying to maintain a balance between positive reaction and violence.

How easy it is, though, when you examine the Clash's background (one only too similar to that experienced by the thousands of young people who identify with the new-wave rock bands), to explain their emotional intensity.

Aware that, like the rest of the band, he'd rather not talk about his childhood, I asked Joe (22) where he came from. "That's the trouble, see."

He speaks fast, using words economically. "The only place I considered home was the boarding school, in Yorkshire, my parents sent me to. It's easier, isn't it? I mean it gets kids out the way, doesn't it?" Then he adds defiantly: "It was great! You have to stand up for yourself. You get beaten up the first day you get there."

"And I'm really glad that I went because I shudder to think what would have happened if I hadn't gone to boarding school. I only saw my father twice a year. If I'd seen him all the time I'd probably have murdered him by now. He was very strict."

While Joe is talking, Paul (20) is sitting next to him pointing and shooting a realistic, replica pistol - bang - at the posters on the walls - bang - at Mick across the room - bang - at Bertie the roadie's dog - bang, bang - anywhere at all.

"I get on all right with my parents," he says. "But I don't see them very much. They split up when I was eight. I stayed with my mum but I felt it was a bit soft with her. I could do whatever I liked and I wasn't getting nowhere so I went to stay with my Dad."

"It was good training because I had to do all the laundrette and that. In a way I worked for him - getting money together and that - down Portobello market and doing the paper rounds after school. It got me sort of prepared for when things get harder."

Paul liked school. "I never learned anything. All you done is play about ... there were 45 in our class and we had a Pakistani teacher who didn't even speak English."

Mick (21, like Paul) comes from Brixton. His father is a taxi driver and his mother is in America. "They kind of left home one at a time," he says. "I was much more interested in them than they were in me. They decided I weren't happening, I suppose. I stayed with my gran for a long time. And I read a lot."

"Psychologically it really did me in. I wish I knew then what I know now. Now I know it isn't that big a deal. But then, at school, I'd sit there with this word 'divorce, divorce' in my head all the time. But there was no social stigma attached to it because all the other kids seemed to be going through the same thing. Very few of the kids I knew were living a sheltered family life."

When he was 16, Mick believes he had two choices - football or rock'n'roll. He chose rock. Why? "Because he couldn't afford toilet rolls," quips Joe. Much laughter. Mick explains: "I thought it was much less limiting. And it was more exciting and, I got into music at a very early age."

"I went to my first rock concert when I was 12. It was free, in Hyde Park and Nice, Traffic, Junior's Eyes and the Pretty Things were playing."

"The first guitar I had was a secondhand Hofner. I paid 16 quid for it and I think I was ripped off. But, I tell you something - I sold it for 30 to a Sex Pistol." Everyone laughs again, gleefully.

Laughter is a cheap luxury when, like Clash, you never have the money for a square meal and when, like Joe, you live in a squat - or like Paul, you "crash" in your manager's vast unheated, rehearsal room (where this interview took place) with no hot water or cooking facilities.

After Paul and Mick left school, they both eventually ended up as casual art students. Mick was already in a group when a friend of his dragged Paul down to a rehearsal. "The first live rock'n'roll I can remember seeing was the Sex Pistols, less than a year ago. All I listened to before then was ska and bluebeat down at the Streatham Locarno."

"But when I went to this rehearsal, as soon as I got there Mick said: 'You can sing, can't you?' And they got me singing. But I couldn't get into it. They were into the New York Dolls and they all had very long hair so it only lasted a couple of days."

Ten days later however, Paul had "acquired" a bass guitar, Mick had cut his hair, they had formed a group called the Heartdrops (although the Phones, the Mirrors, the Outsiders and the Psychotic Negatives were also names for a day).

Then walking down Golborne Road with Glen Matlock of the Sex Pistols, they bumped into Joe.

"The meeting was auspicious. 'I don't like your group [the 10ters]," said Mick. "But we think you're great."

"As soon as I saw these guys," says Joe "I knew that that was what a group, in my eyes, was supposed to look like. So I didn't really hesitate when they asked me to join."

How did Joe first get into a rock'n'roll band? "Because I owned a drum kit. Someone gave me a camera and then I met this guy who had a drum kit in his garage and I had a go on it one day. And I thought: 'This guy's going to swap me this little camera for all that kit.' And I said, 'Here you are'."

"Then I went down to Wales and I ran into a band who had a drummer but no drum kit. But I didn't want to play drums because I wanted to be the star of the show, right? So I said: 'If you use my drum kit you're going to have me as your singer.' And they had no option but to accept."

Before Joe joined the band they were called Fleming Youth. He changed their name to the Vultures. They did six gigs before Joe decided to come back to London to form the 10ters.

Joe broke up the 10ters directly as a result of seeing the Sex Pistols. A few months ago he told me: "Yesterday I thought I was a crud. Then I saw the Sex Pistols and I became a king and decided to move into the future."

Today he says: "As soon as I saw them, I knew that rhythm and blues was dead, that the future was here somehow. Every other group was riffing their way through the Black Sabbath catalogue. But hearing the Pistols I knew. I just knew. It was something you just knew without bothering to think about."

What is it about punk rock which is so important to Joe? "It's the music of now. And it's in English. We sing in English, not mimicking some American rock singer's accent. That's just pretending to be something you ain't."

Continues Mick: "It's the only music which is about young white kids. Black kids have got it all sewn up. They have their own cultural music. Basically young white kids are relying on a different time to provide for their kids."

But what's so different about youth today, then? Silence. Joe stands up and, relishing the drama, he turns to reveal the stark, hand-painted graffiti on the back of his boiler suit. HATE AND WAR glare letters in red and white across his shoulders. It's the hippy motto reversed.

"The hippy movement was a failure," is Joe's explanation. "All hippies around now just represent complete apathy. There's a million good reasons why the thing failed, OK. But the only thing we've got to live with is that it failed."

"At least you tried. But I'm not interested in why it failed. I'll jeer at hippies because that's helpful. They'll realise they're stuck in a rut and maybe they'll get out of it."

The pervading, resentful feeling on the New Youth Front is that the older generation, squandering the opportunities of the late 60s, has left them with the shell of a disintegrating society. One of the reasons drummer Terry Chimes is notable for his absence is that he is having a serious argument with Joe. Terry wants to "get out" of the country while there's still time. Jo thinks he should stick around to see IT - the political chaos they see as inevitable - through.

What do they feel about society today? "It's alienating the individual," says Mick. "No one gives a shit about you."

Says Joe: "There's nowhere to go. Nothing to do. The radio's for housewives. Nothing caters for us. All the laws are against you. Whoever's got the money's got the power. The Rent Act's a complete mockery. It's a big joke. I just have to fuck off into the night for somewhere to sleep."

Adds Paul, with feeling: "At the moment what the government should do is put licenses on clubs so that kids can have somewhere to go. But they're clamping down on all that. But it's great because there's going to be kids on the streets. And they're going to want something to do. And when there ain't nothing to do you wreck up cars and that."

"The situation that is beginning to happen now is their fault. If we end up wrecking the place it's the Government's fault. They'll bring back National Service and we'll all be sent down to South Africa or Rhodesia to protect white capital interest. And then we'll all be slaughtered..."

They may knock society, but they're all on the dole, aren't they? "Yeah. We get a little freedom from social security. Otherwise I'd have to spend 40 hours a week lifting cardboard boxes or washing dishes, or what ever I done in the past."

"But because we're on the dole - which is £9.20 a week - I can get a rock'n'roll band together."

"If I got up at 4am and went to Soho and joined a queue I could get a job as a casual washer-upper. That's the other opportunity I've got. Or the opportunity to work in a factory!"

But someone's got to work in a factory? "Why have they?" demands Mick. "Don't you think technology is advanced enough to give all those jobs over to a few people and machines."

"There's a social stigma attached to being unemployed. Like 'Social Security Scroungers' every day in the Sun. I don't want to hear that. I cheer them. You go up north and the kids are ASHAMED that they can't get a job."

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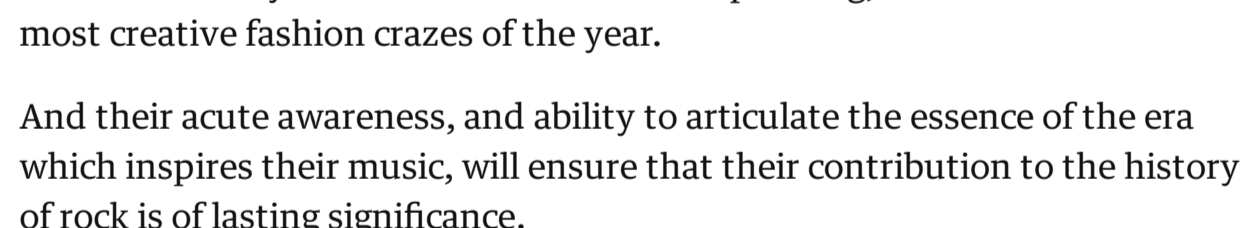
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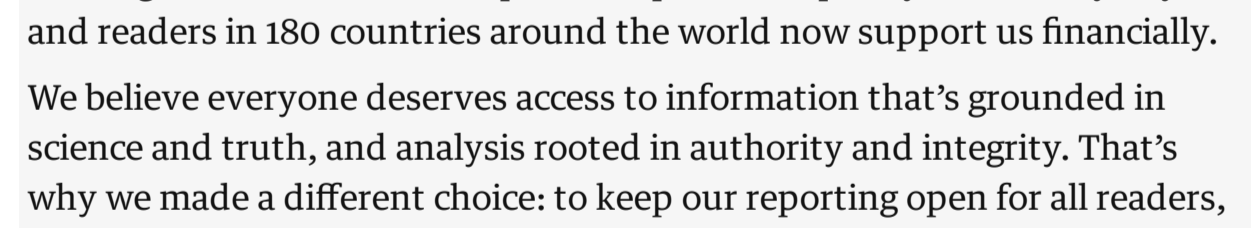
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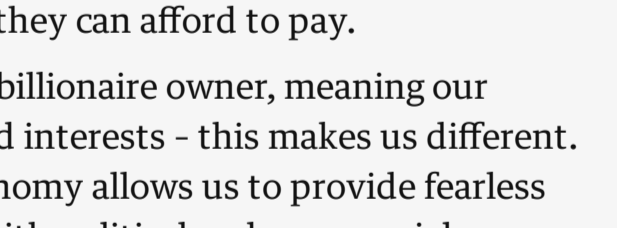
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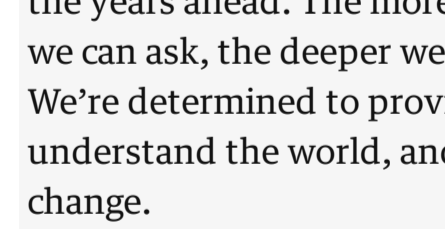


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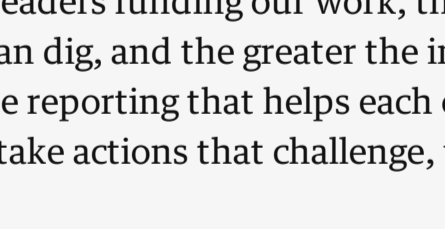


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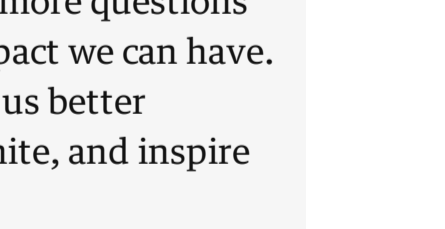
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