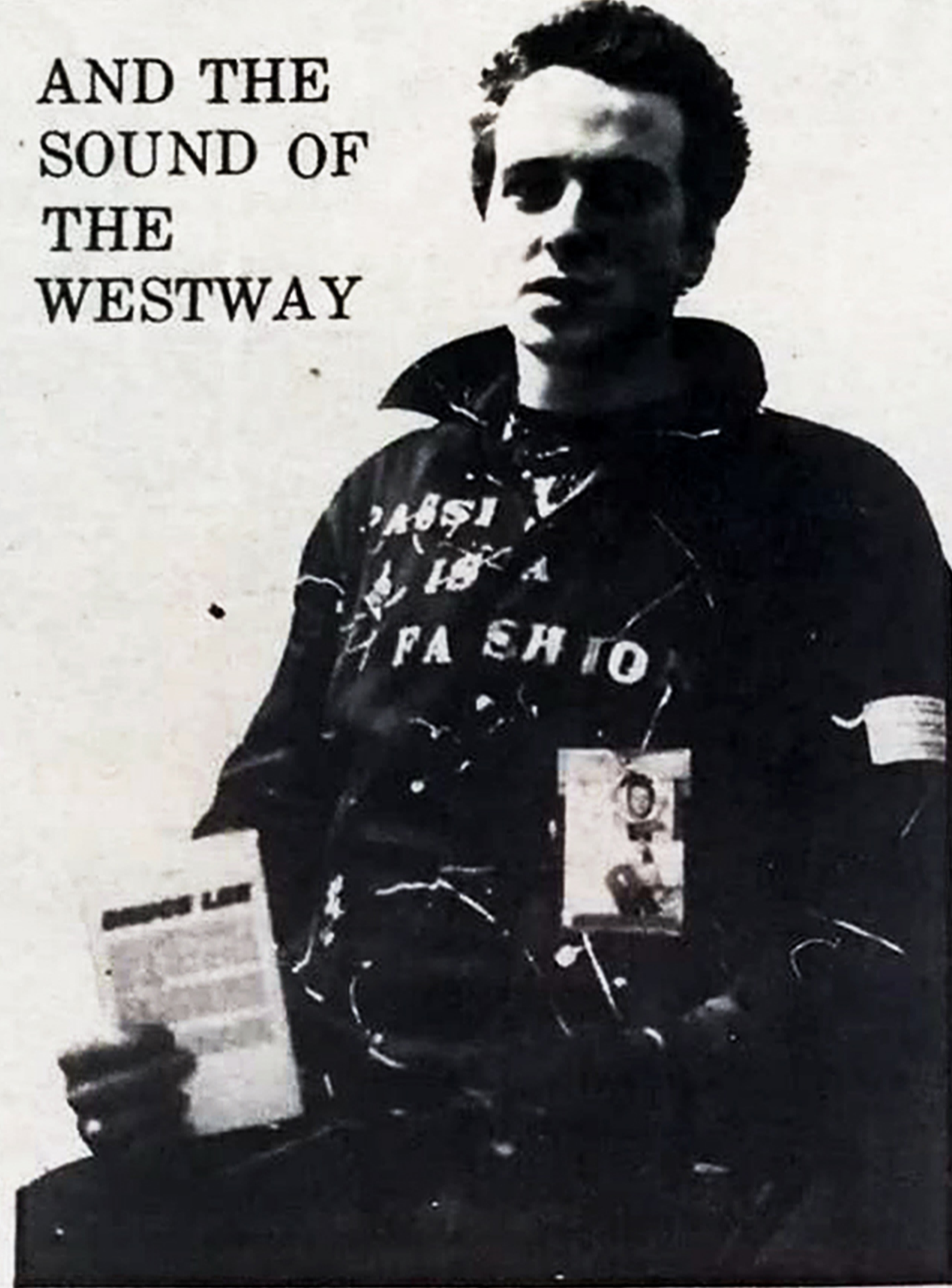


EIGHTEEN FLIGHT ROCK

AND THE SOUND OF THE WESTWAY



Joe Strummer: "I get my frustrations out on stage and by creating clothes."

PHOTO BY PENNIE SMITH

WHAT DO you think people ought to know about you?

Joe Strummer: "I think people ought to know that we're anti-fascist, we're anti-violence, we're anti-Racist and we're pro-creative. We're against ignorance."

Mick Jones: "We urge people to earn fast."

We are in the Clash's huge, bare rehearsal studio in the railway yard near London's Roundhouse. Singer and guitarist Joe Strummer does most of the talking but Mick Jones, also on guitar, throws in some well thought-out opinions. Paul Simonon, the bass player, says less. Drummer Terry Chimes isn't there.

Strummer paces the room nervously. He wears boots and a boiler-suit painted with abstract expressionist slashes of colour. The group make their own clothes since they are too poor to buy any, transforming jumble sale shirts by painting on words and colours. Anyone can do it.

Joe directs his total attention to each question and I can see the boredom return to his face if I wait too long before asking another, like the shadows of clouds passing over a mountain, always changing. It introduces an un-nerving need for haste into speech and thought.

Mick and Paul seem more relaxed but are equally uncompromising in their answers, caring little for social niceties.

They talk of the boredom of living in the council high-rise blocks, of living at home with parents, of the dole queues and the mind-destroying jobs offered to unemployed school-leavers. They talk about there being no clubs that stay open late, of how Britain has no Rock 'n' Roll radio stations, of how there is nothing to do. They speak of how kids who like Clash will get beaten up because of how they look. Joe has even been thrown out of a pub full of hippies because he has short hair.

I asked how their music was a solution to all this:

Joe leapt at the question: "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 which is what Paul used to do. I get my frustrations out on stage and in creating something like clothes or songs."

"Number two is for our audiences, 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. I mean, we just really don't want the National Front stepping in and saying, 'Things are bad — it's the Blacks... We want to prevent that somehow, you know?'"

It was their lyrics which first attracted me to the group — they seemed to be the only people coming right out and singing about how things really are in Britain today for young people. One song in particular summed it up: It's called "Career Opportunities".

"Career opportunities / the ones that never knock / Every job they offer you / is to keep you out the dock / Career opportunities."

"They offered me the office / They offered me the shop / They said I'd better take anything they'd got. / "Do you wanna make tea / at the BBC?" / "Do you wan-na be, do you wan-na be — a cop?"

"I hate the Army / an' I hate the RAF / You won't find me fighting in the tropical heat / I hate the Civil Service rules and I won't open letter bombs for y-o-u!"

Like Mick says, "These songs couldn't be written in any other year."

Joe: "We want to sing about what we think is relevant and important."

Mick: "We want to bring things to the attention of other people to help them learn faster. That's the important thing... to try and understand what's going down."

Paul: "This group is the pulse of the movement."

Mick is from Brixton. "I ain't never lived under five floors. I ain't never lived on the ground. Now I'm in Paddington. I'm on the 18th now." He still lives at home.

Joe: "We got a song called 'London's Burning With Boredom' and we wrote it on the 18th floor, didn't we?"

Mick: "You can see the Westway. It's a celebration of The Westway... (an enormous inner London flyover — the Notting Hill riots took place beneath it).

"Up and down the Westway / In and out the lights / What a great traffic system / it's so bright / I can't think of a better way / to spend the night / than speeding around / underneath the yellow lights / London's burning with boredom, baby / London's burning down, 999 999."

"Now I'm in the subway / looking for the flat. / This one leads to this block / and this one leads to that. / The wind howls through the empty blocks / looking for a home / But I run through the empty stone / because I'm all alone."

MICK EXPLAINED how he sees the



Paul Simonon: "Suppose I smash your face in..."



Mick Jones: "I ain't never lived under five floors up."



Terry Chimes: No comment.

difference between Punk rock and Reggae. The music of The Clash has the emphasis on rhythm, just like Reggae but: "they all come from a sunny Caribbean island, right? They're all laid back. But our speed is the Westway speed."

"The speed of a car going down the Westway... adds Joe.

Mick "...ours is like, the only thing that's speaking for young white kids."

Joe: "We listen to Reggae, we get a lot off Blacks, right."

Mick: "We know they've got their thing sewn up. They're it. They got their own culture but the young white kids don't have nothing. That's why so many of them are living in ignorance and they've just gotta wise up."

I told Joe some people had thought that the lyrics to their song "White Riot" were racist. Joe lunged at the remark like a Doberman Pincher: "They're not racist! They're not racist at all! I'll tell you the verses, right? It goes:

"Black people got a lot of problems / but they don't mind throwing a brick. / But white men go to school / where they teach you how to be thick / So everybody does what they're told to / and everybody eats supermarket soul food."

"The only thing we're saying about the Blacks is that they've got their problems and they're prepared to deal with them. But white men, they just ain't prepared to deal with them — everything's too cozy. They've got stereos, drugs, hi-fis, cars..."

Mick: "We're completely anti-racist. We want to bridge the gap. They used to blame everything on the Jews, now they're saying it about the Blacks and the Asians... everybody's a scapegoat, right?"

Joe: "The poor blacks and the poor whites are in the same boat... They don't want us in their culture, but we just happen to dig Tapper Zukie and Big Youth, Dillinger and Aswad and Delroy Washington. We dig them and we ain't scared of going into heavy black record shops and getting their gear. We even go to heavy black gigs where we're the only white people there."

"We'd just like to bridge the gap between the two things. I'd like to have black people coming to hear us, right, but primarily we gotta be concerned with young white kids because that's what we are. But we ain't nothing like racist, NO WAY."

On stage Clash are dynamite, a continuous buzz of pure energy. They play for 45 minutes but it seems like 30.

Joe: "We don't want to be indulgent. We take a certain song and we do the subject for what it's worth and then we get on with the next one. We don't hang about."

Some people have made the connection between the high energy output of the punk rock groups and violence. The Clash rise up united. The kids, they say, just feel really bored and frustrated, get really drunk and then become violent.

Mick: "But we ain't advocating it. We're trying to understand it... It ain't hip. We definitely think it ain't hip. We think it's disgusting to be violent." He recalled their recent gig at the ICA where Jane cut up Shane's earlobe: "On that gig, it put me an' you off, didn't it? I mean, when I came off stage I didn't feel particularly good."

Joe: "but it's energy, right? And we wanna channel it in the right direction."

Paul Simonon had the words "Creative Violence" stencilled on his

painted boiler-suit. Since I wanted to know about violence Joe explained further: "Suppose I smash your face in and slit your nostrils with this, right?"

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."

"And this sort of paintwork is creative violence too, right?" He points to Paul's white stencils and clashing colours.

Coming from the concrete jungle, they see society disintegrating, but instead of sitting back like Bowie and waiting for fascism to arrive and "save" the, they are fighting back. When Paul Simonon names the band The Clash, he meant it:

"In 1977 / There's knives in W11. Ain't so lucky to be rich. / Sten guns in Knightsbridge / Danger, stranger, you'd better paint your face / No Elvis, Beatles or Rolling Stones in 1977."

MILES
All lyrics © 1976 The Clash

SO YOU THINK YOUR SCHOOL'S TOUGH HUH?

WHEN LITTLE Amy Carter, daughter of Jimmy, begins the best days of her life at a Washington state school in the New Year, she may find out that there's more to life than the White House and the Bicentennial.

Despite Mr Carter's well intentioned democracy — or condescending publicity stunting, depending on your point of view — he's not being too smart in sending his kid to any state school, especially one in Washington D.C.; "Jungle Warfare Training Camps", as they're popularly known. Ordinary kids have to contend every day with knives at their throats; what the President's daughter will have to put up with is anyone's guess.

In Washington D.C., violence is such a mundane occurrence that half the ambulances in the city spend their time in the vicinity of various schools.

In Detroit — with an average of one thousand murders a year — a 26 year old female teacher clashed with a 15 year old hood. After storming out of her class he hid in an alley and raped her as she walked home that evening. Attacks like these are considered the norm, and armed guards stalk the corridors of every school in the big cities.

Teachers have taken to carrying a pen size transmitter called a "SCAN". That stands for "Silent Communication Alarm Network", and sends out an ultrasonic signal to an armed guard when a teacher feels he's being threatened.

In Washington, a 12 year old pupil brandished a .38 revolver at the umpire when he disagreed with the result of a 'friendly' baseball game.

Last year, five thousand kids between the ages of fifteen and 24 were murdered. Many of these took place on school premises, and hardly any of the killers were caught. In such a milieu, the blueprint for survival is silence.

In Chicago, two schoolboys suspected of giving information were taken to a basement and strung up. Other boys slowly cut pieces of flesh from them until they died.

Another boy who cheated in a game of dice was carried by the arms and legs to the top of an apartment block and thrown down the lift shaft, actually landing on the roof of the lift. The button was pushed, and the boy was crushed to death at the top of the shaft. Onlookers did nothing.

Amy Carter has a lot to look forward to.

JULIE BURCHILL

LONE GROOVER

BENYON

