

The Neve desk in Whitfield Street's Studio 3.

A prime example was the Clash signing a £100,000 contract with CBS Records in January 1977, even though the group had still played relatively few gigs, all as a support act for the Pistols, never as the headliner. By then, guitarist Keith Levene had departed the line-up and several

men had occupied the drummer's seat: Pablo LaBritain, Terry Chimes and Rob Harper, before

through the door. I'd be sitting there with no idea as to what kind of session had been booked — an avant-garde piano recording, jazz, classical, pop, spoken-word, you name it — and have to turn my hand to anything using the same basic tools. There were no special techniques that I applied to one thing that I didn't apply to another; at least, if there were, no one bothered to

teach me them. I just made it up as I went along, applying what I'd picked up from other people

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Simon Humphrey and the Clash in

the control room of Whitfield

Street's Studio 3.

Photo: Caroline Coon

Chimes rejoined in time for the group's initial recording sessions that February inside CBS



and, what with the variety of artists, every day was a joy."

CBS Whitfield Street had three studios and a mix room, as well

"Studio 1 was a huge room, used for classical, Studio 2 was the

Before Retro Was Cool

as several cutting rooms and dubbing suites.

Buzzcocks — at Islington's Screen On The

Green. It was a seminal event in the annals of the British punk movement, yet it didn't take

long for that movement to be undermined by

what many diehards perceived as some of its

Studio 3 on Whitfield Street in Central London.

"'White Riot' captures the quintessential sound

of the Clash and I think I had a lot to do with

that," says Simon Humphrey, who engineered the track as well as the band's self-titled first

company and at no point did I question the

engineers would have tried to polish that

one — and that's why it's great."

album. "They were given free rein by the record

validity of what they were doing. So many other

recording, and it isn't polished. It just is what it

is — a working-class riot, not a middle-class

A native of South-East London, 18-year-old

Humphrey landed a job as a tape-op/tea boy at

CBS Whitfield Street in 1973 and soon began

central artists selling out.

An Education

mid-sized room, and then up top was Studio 3, where I was placed as a junior engineer," says Simon Humphrey. "It had a very basic 25 x 25 foot live area — like a moderately large lounge, with no windows, no vocal booths — and an 18 x 15 foot control room with an old 30-channel Neve console that had been there since the late '60s, when the place was known as Bond Street Studios. Although the MCI desks downstairs were much more up to date, this one had a great heritage in terms of the artists it had recorded, but it also predated phantom power. As a result, Studio 3 only had valve microphones — mainly [Neumann] U67s and KM 64s — and so we were left to deal with a vintage setup that was pretty odd in 1977 when I recorded the Clash. "Back then, a desk that needed valve microphones was regarded as a bit of a joke. After all, when I started in the early '70s, valves were something that your granddad used. There

140 echo plates, supplemented by no less than four basement echo chambers. "CBS Whitfield Street actually owned a couple of Fairchild limiters and some parametric EQs, but as a junior engineer I wasn't allowed to use any of that equipment," Humphrey recalls. "There was a sort of hierarchy and you had to be a senior engineer to use that gear, so the choice of equipment in Studio 3 was very, very limited. "Without a doubt, the Clash were very deliberately booked into there. The record company wanted them out of the way, four floors up, where those unruly punks couldn't cause any trouble. The studio's management never went up there, but I loved it; almost like an attic that you could make your own, with no passing traffic and lots of privacy. The room itself was

was no fashion for them whatsoever. What's more, if you have 20 valve microphones running at the same time, two or three of them will usually pack up on you, so it was a very unreliable

setup. That's why Studio 3 was basically seen as the demo studio; not the best-sounding studio,

more of an afterthought. Of course, all these years later we love the old Neves and anything to

with all its heritage was just scrapped and thrown away. It was seen as having no value, which

is a shame, and all of those old microphones were packed up and put in a cupboard. Only 10

The other not-so-state-of-the-art equipment housed inside Studio 3 included a Studer A80 16track tape machine, a Studer A80 quarter-inch machine for mixing and JBL 4350 main monitors,

along with Neve in-console compressors, Urei LA4 and 1176 outboard compressors and EMT

years later did another generation of engineers come along and dig them out of there."

do with valves, but that wasn't the case in the mid-'70s. Shortly after I left in 1979, that desk

a straight line, separated by screens, while Joe Strummer, Mick Jones and Paul Simonon could occupy the rest of the space that wasn't taken up by the acoustic piano." **Communication Problems** "The second time I met Joe, he came in and plonked his amp right next to Terry's drum kit. I said, 'You can't put your amp there, Joe, because we'll need to get some separation between you and the drums.' That was the

square, and it had a parquet floor and absorbent walls, so the sound in there was pretty dead.

Looking from the control room I could see the drums in the far-left corner, the bass amp in front of the drums and then the guitar amps at near left. This meant they were positioned in

standard procedure, but his reply was, 'I don't know what separation is and I don't like it,' said in that very aggressive, punky way. He later said that he did in fact know what separation was and he was just having a joke with me, and that's probably true, but all I can say is that the initial recording setup was me trying to wrestle with them in terms of how things were going to get done. I only knew what I had been taught and these guys were coming in with an attitude. "Joe knew I had recorded Abba, and the next conversation we had, very soon afterwards,

out, I also had to get on and do my job.



punk and this was new, but I also wasn't stupid enough to just go along with whatever they wanted. Still, it did stick with me, and so I subsequently had to figure out a way of recording them that would work for all of us. This meant jockeying for position early on, and the idea of not doing what I'd learned before was really at the heart of how I approached recording the band. I felt there was some relevance to what they were saying; they didn't want to sound like what had gone before and they certainly didn't want to sound like the sort of things that I had done before. Those mid-'70s drum sounds had been very dead, damped and ploddy, everything had been isolated, and I knew they didn't want that. Instead of separation on the instruments they wanted to kick doors down, but I also had to make a recording that worked. "As a house engineer, I wasn't allowed anywhere near a production credit at that time. So, they

brought in a guy named Mickey Foote who was essentially their live sound engineer and gave him the job of producing, acting as a sort of intermediary between me and the band. He was a communicator, someone they trusted, but I don't recall him having anything to do with what I actually did. I think they just used him as a foil. Until the mid-'70s, most musicians were very much expected to be on the other side of the glass and not interfere with what took place on our side. The Clash, however, wanted to look through the glass to the control room and see someone they knew, trusted and could occasionally communicate with. Mickey was that person, even though I don't remember him taking on the role of producer at all. In fact, after the initial sessions, once Mick and Joe had worked out I was someone they could communicate with and that I wasn't a dickhead, Mickey became surplus to requirements. "I have got nothing against Mickey. He's got his name on the album, he was a good friend to them and he was a good professional, but he didn't necessarily need to be there. The band

needed to record, they needed a studio and they needed an engineer, and so that was the

an established producer of the day because they weren't going to be told what to do.

important relationship that had to be cultivated. They absolutely were not going to work with

responsibility was on my shoulders. While they wanted to get on with it, I had no idea if they'd recorded before. All the evidence was that they hadn't and they were giving nothing away whatsoever, including the fact that Joe and Mick had previously been in other bands. And even if they did have prior experience, they didn't want to apply that knowledge to these particular recordings. They wanted them to be fresh and different, which is why I had to take

along and, having recorded Abba and been into very wellcrafted Californian harmony rock, it was quite a shocker in 1977 to suddenly hear this raw sound. Mick and Joe would play something in the studio, look at Mickey and me and shout, 'How was that?' They'd want a reaction but I genuinely didn't know if it was good or not. So, trying to be diplomatic, my default answer as an engineer was 'Well, it wasn't bad, but you can probably do better.' Their response would be 'Oh great, we'll keep it then!' They'd always try to second-guess you. If you said it wasn't very good, they'd almost certainly want to keep it, and if you said it was brilliant, they'd probably want to get rid of it. In other words, anything I liked was obviously wrong whereas anything I hated was obviously right. "After a few days, we reached the stage where I began to second-guess them. If Mick played a terrible guitar solo, I'd say, 'Yeah, that's great, Mick,' and he'd go, 'Are you fucking joking? It's

"In 1975 and '76, I was a long-haired hippy whose favourite

band was Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young. Then punk came

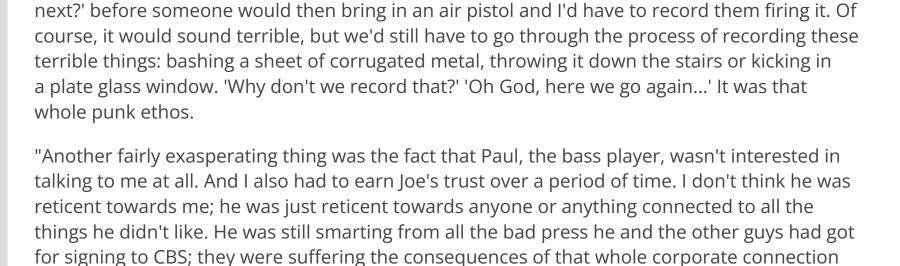
"Having been given the job of recording the band, that

on board all of their suggestions.

on what we were doing.

fun, it was hard work to get to the fun bit."

would explode in the late '70s.



and were therefore sparring with the likes of me because I was employed by a company. And their manager Bernie Rhodes was a fairly disruptive influence. He'd wander in, say something

controversial and just wind everyone up. Even Mick would tell him, 'Why don't you piss off?

You're just getting in the way.' So, there was a lot of posturing going on and, although it was

terrible!' That's how our relationship initially developed until, eventually, we learned to trust

each other. There were certainly tiring and exasperating elements to the whole experience, one of which was that the band had a lot of hangers-on and external people who'd want to angle in

"Sometimes one of them would come in and say something along the lines of 'What this needs

here is the sound of a machine gun going off.' I'd think, 'Oh Christ, what's going to happen

(Mostly) Smash The Conventional! Despite Joe Strummer admonishing Simon Humphrey to break with convention when recording the Clash, the latter took a fairly standard approach in terms of miking the instruments: an AKG D12 on the bass drum, a Neumann KM64 on the snare, Sennheiser 421s on the toms and valve Neumann U67s as overheads. The guitar amps were also close miked with U67s while the bass was DI'd and miked with a Neumann U47. A U67 was used to track Strummer's vocals. "Back then," Humphrey explains, "the attitude of a lot of engineers was 'You're the musicians, I'll handle the sound. If you've got a bad sound, I'll fix it. I'll take away your crappy amp and put a nice one in its place.' When it came to the Clash, however, the sound they made was what

I was going to record. There was no question of me saying, 'Your guitar doesn't sound

very early on that they wanted me to record them, warts and all, and that's what I did. "Joe had this Fender Telecaster which was like this beaten-up old rusty guitar — obviously his punk special; it was very much him — and he plugged it into this Fender Twin reverb. It made a horrendously toppy, hideous sound, and Mick said, 'God, that's awful.' However, we never, ever thought about trying to improve it, we just thought, 'This is what it sounds like and this is what we're gonna have.' I didn't try to change them. I was only interested in recording them the way they wanted to be: the truth of how they sounded and what they wanted to be, in the raw. As a result, that first album sounded raw beyond belief — shockingly raw — whereas the Sex Pistols' records sounded fantastic. They were very radio friendly and very well produced. Well, the Clash record didn't sound like that at all, but it did sound like them.

"Previously, I had recorded the Glitter Band with [producer] Mike Leander, and to achieve his drum sound he'd quite literally place a blanket over the entire kit. That was the most extreme case of damping I ever saw, but in the mid-'70s most producers and engineers did do the same

in a slightly toned-down way, with two towels on the toms and that kind of thing. Everything sounded neat, tidy and damped, but I knew the Clash didn't want any of that, so I had to be

very hands-off. When I miked the kit, there was no damping, there was no tuning, and this

"The heavy damping of drums had stemmed from the Pink Floyd Dark Side Of The Moon

suggested what New Wave was going to be: the whole New York/Blondie sound. Drum sounds

acceptable so I'm going to give it a magical sound that will make you think I'm a genius.' I knew

sound, and that's what I'd spent the past few years trying to get right. Now, I was going for the exact opposite, and it was very exciting. Being that the room we were in wasn't particularly geared towards that, we ended up with a sort of thin quality, and while it wasn't fantastically sophisticated, it totally suited the mood of how the band wanted to sound. It's just so uncompromising when you hear it and just so unsubtle. Famously, the American record company wouldn't release the album because they didn't think it was technically good enough for radio. Yet, when the first single, 'White Riot', came out, it charted immediately in the UK, and on the radio it stood out because of what we hadn't done to make it sound 'nice' like everything else. It wasn't a case of what I did, it was a case of what I didn't do. **Rough Edges**

I don't think he spent more than 15 minutes doing any of the lead vocals. Two or three takes and that was it. When the Clash performed live on stage, Joe was a very physical performer, singing and playing at the same time, and when we'd ask him to do his vocals in the studio he couldn't do so without playing the guitar. He had to do both together. Being that he didn't sing when we recorded the backing tracks, he overdubbed the vocals on his own, and he had to face away from us as he didn't want to see the control room while performing the songs and playing the guitar at the same time even though it wasn't plugged in. If you listened to his isolated vocal tracks, you could hear his Telecaster being hit all the way through because he couldn't detach one from the other. "You couldn't take the guitar off him and I thought that was great. Other people might have

said, 'Listen, Joe, you've got to put the guitar down, learn how to use the mic and learn that connection between you and the microphone.' That's the stuff most singers learn, but Joe

wasn't interested in any of that. He just wanted to get the lyrics out and onto the record. It was

a physical process for him and he wanted it done as quickly as possible. All day long he'd be

"Joe was a brilliant frontman, a brilliant vocalist and I loved recording him. He just went for it.

drinking honey and lemon while moaning about his throat, and he'd always give it 110 percent. He was a great performer. When you listen to those vocals, what he was bawling out really comes across. I love it. "Joe wasn't interested in double-tracking or editing vocals. When you recorded a lead vocal with him, it was basically a performance from start to finish. Afterwards, he'd ask whether it was good or not and, based on the answer, he'd either do it again or he wouldn't do it again. You see, if I said, 'Maybe you could do that second verse better, Joe,' or 'Do you really think that was in tune at the end?' he'd immediately go, 'Great, we'll keep it.' I learned very quickly that he and the other guys didn't want the rough edges knocked out in any way, shape or form, so they all got left in and that's one of the reasons why what you hear is so great.

"The reason I was able to do that is because the record company execs never A&R'd the album at all. They simply left the band in the studio with me. We recorded it and mixed it, they put it

out, and not once did they question what we did. I wasn't asked to remix anything and not once

All of which is a bit puzzling since Mickey Foote was a novice producer with absolutely no track

Wednesday and asked, 'What are you doing at the weekend?' I said, 'I don't know,' to which he said, 'Right, I've just signed this band called the Clash. I don't know what they've got, but they've

got something. I'll send them 'round now to say hello and then on Saturday and Sunday you'll record and mix two tracks for the A and B sides of a single.' Robin never came to the studio,

record and Simon Humphrey wasn't yet a fully fledged engineer in the eyes of his CBS

"I knew this A&R guy, Robin Blanchflower," Humphrey recalls. "He phoned me on the

was I sent back into the studio to repair anything."

employers.

I never had to play him a rough mix and there were no demos. They just pressed the record, stuck it out two weeks later and it went straight onto the chart." That was in March 1977, when 'White Riot' peaked at number 34 in the UK. "No one was more amazed than the record company," Humphrey continues. "It had no idea what it had unleashed at that point. It was incredible, and I think I got the job because I was the

youngest engineer. As such, I was the least cynical engineer at the Whitfield Street studio; less

likely to complain and more willing to indulge the band members. The biggest fear they had

was that someone would come along and stick on harmonies or mix the record in such a way that it would sound cute when they wanted it to sound angry. They just wanted it done, and the

record company, to its credit, gave them free rein with that initial record and their first album."

Two Guitars Better Reportedly produced on a £4000 budget, The Clash was recorded in February 1977 over the course of — as Humphrey now recalls — between eight to 10 days before another three were spent on the mix. "Joe didn't show much enthusiasm for overdubbing," Humphrey says. "His vocals largely consisted of single takes, he played his guitar live on the backing tracks and there was very little fixing of the bass. When we put a track down, the drums, bass and two guitars were played live

and they mostly would have been retained. However, the person who very quickly learned the

double track and add other guitar parts. Of course, he didn't tell me he'd been in another band, recorded before and probably knew this stuff anyway, but I got the sense that, over the course

art of overdubbing was Mick. He was the one who clocked that you could drop in and out,

of recording the Clash album, he really got into the concept of layering guitars and what that could do to the sound of the record. As a result, it was embellished more by his work than by anyone else's.

some of the parts.

Prog Off

and helped everything step up a gear."

"Mick started to use other guitars and other amps while looking for other sounds. He was interested in what the studio could do in terms of tracking. From my perspective, that was dangerously close to going away from the original philosophy of it all being totally raw. But then, everybody knows that, most of the time, two guitars are going to sound a lot better than one, so it didn't make sense to tell Mick, 'Hold on a minute, you said we couldn't do this

because Abba double-tracked guitars.' Once he understood that more guitars made a louder record, we went in that direction and he more or less took over the production by making the

studio a creative space." Joe Strummer and Mick Jones wrote and composed 12 of the 14 tracks that appeared on the UK release of the Clash's eponymous debut album. The exceptions were 'What's My Name?' which they had co-written with Keith Levene and the reggae number 'Police & Thieves', recorded by falsetto singer Junior Murvin in 1976 after he had written it with producer Lee 'Scratch' Perry. "The Clash were very well rehearsed," Simon Humphrey continues. "Aside from 'Police & Thieves', all of the songs ranged from under two minutes in length to just over three minutes and they had them down pat. Joe and Mick were feverishly writing lyrics in the studio — most of the songs' lyrics had already been half-written and they were knocking them out on a daily basis. However, the music was pretty well rehearsed, the songs went down quickly, and

although a lot has been said about Mick Jones playing the bass instead of Paul Simonon, I can

"Mick was a pretty competent guitarist by that time. He knew what he was doing. He was the

absolutely assure everybody that Paul played all of the bass and that Mick just taught him

musical side of the band and none of them were amateurs. For his part, Terry Chimes did

a perfectly good job, but I don't think I really did him any favours in terms of the drum sound. When I listen to the record, the drums are quite lightweight, and that's partly because of Terry's kit and me being told to not do anything special to it, and it's also because it was quite obvious that he was more a session man than a member of the band. So, he was just doing his job before Topper Headon came in and really crystallised everything by giving the Clash a different sound. It's not that Terry was a lesser drummer; it's just that Topper came in with an attitude

of charging police officers was taken during the August '76 Notting Hill Carnival insurrection that inspired 'White Riot'; a song that was accorded different recordings for the versions that were issued on the album and as a single; the former (running time 1:55) commencing with Mick Jones' "one-two-three-four" count-in, the latter (running time 1:58) with a police siren grabbed from a BBC sound-effects record. Ditto the subsequent, anarchic sounds of an alarm bell and breaking glass, while that of stomping feet was contributed by assorted friends in the studio. "When I engineered the single — the first recording that I did with the Clash — I didn't know that they had already recorded another version at the National Film & Television School in

Departing the Clash soon after the sessions for the album ended, Terry Chimes wasn't featured

in its front-cover photo — taken in an alleyway facing the band's Camden rehearsal studio and was acerbically credited as 'Tory Crimes' for his efforts. Meanwhile, the back-cover photo

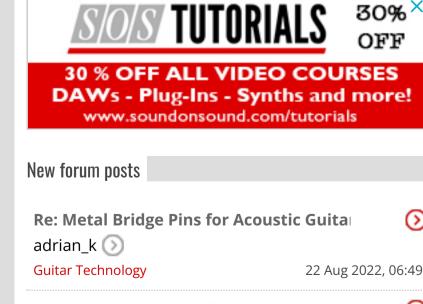
Beaconsfield," says Humphrey. "That live version, which had been recorded on eight-track for a very early video, was the one that they decided they wanted on the album, even though the record company would have never put it out as a single because it was terrible in terms of its technical quality and the band agreed. I think it was just one of those punk/New Wave ideas to give the fans value for money... Or maybe they were just trying to be perverse, undermining the record company, because they did genuinely say, 'God, this sounds a bit ropey.' It was below demo quality. In the punk spirit, it was a case of 'This is what we sounded like when we went to the film studio,' and so I remixed it for the album to try to bring it up to spec. It was so horrible, it perfectly suited punk."

of The Clash, issued after the band's second album Give 'Em Enough Rope. This was in the wake of CBS deciding that the original UK album, despite reaching number 12 on the chart following its 8th April 1977 release, was too raw and unsophisticated to garner radio airplay in the US... only to see it become the best-selling import of the year there with sales of more than 100,000 copies. "Having had no previous affiliation to punk, working with the Clash was a real education for me," says Simon Humphrey whose other credits include anyone from the Vibrators, XTC, Tom Verlaine and David Byrne to Culture Club, the Beach Boys, Bros and Smokie, and who now

Recorded and mixed within three days along with the non-album B-side '1977', the single

version of 'White Riot' also appeared on the altogether different 1979 North American release

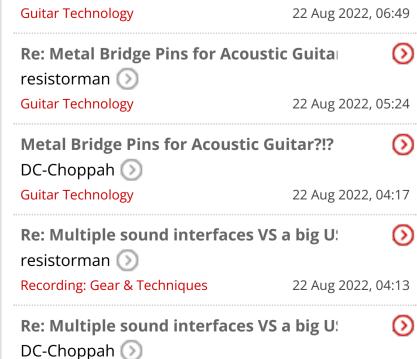
resides in Yorkshire, where he is resident producer at the ChairWorks studio complex and delivers music production lectures at the University Of Leeds. "Once I saw what was possible with the band, a light went on in my head and I thought, 'Blimey, maybe all this prog rock stuff that I love is a load of bollocks. The Clash were the total antithesis of that and I could have easily recoiled from working with them, but fortunately I just got on with it. I respected them, and I think I really contributed to that first album by not screwing it up for them whereas a lot



of other people probably would have done."

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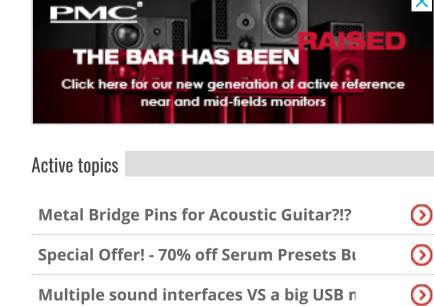
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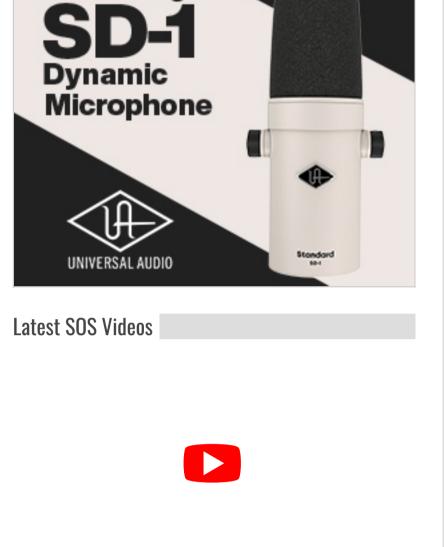
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