

IN THE past, Joe Strummer would return to his squat from the dead-end gloom of the Lisson Grove dole queue and come up with sneeringly cynical "Career Opportunities."

When he and Paul Simonon got caught in the racial no-man's-land between charging police and angry black youths at the Notting Hill Carnival riots, the experience was poured into another rock 'n' roll song, "White Riot."

More recently, "Hate And War" and "Remote Control" (written around the time of the banned Sex Pistols tour) were reactions to the general condemnation of punk music.

But, considering their formidably exciting stage presence and ever-improving technique, it was only a matter of time before a record contract lured the Clash away from their squat/starve/steal lifestyle. A pox on the irony!

With CBS's hefty six-figure advance and perhaps two years guaranteed security, what price songs inspired by street-level survival games now? Would they vanish as fast as ink dries on the dotted line?

"No" counters 24-year-old Joe Strummer, offering "Garageland" in evidence, "I never want that to happen."

"After our second gig, a critic wrote that we should be returned to the garage and locked in with a car motor running until we died. 'Garageland' is about that."

"I was trying to say that this is where we come from and we know it and we're not going to get out of our depth. Even though we've signed with CBS, we aren't going to float off into the atmosphere like the Pink Floyd or anything."

Admirable sentiments which cynics, no doubt, will find hard to believe. But, in truth, the band have changed little over the last six months.

In the early days, they returned to their rehearsal studio one night so hungry and broke that, over the one bar of their electric fire, they cooked and ate what remained at the bottom of a bucket of flour-and-water paste.

Today Joe Strummer, on a basic £25 a week, looks a picture of health but, if anything, an adequate diet has sharpened his reactive wit.

"The only person who played 'White Riot' (their recent single) on the radio was John Peel — and he's gone on holiday", says Joe, his voice a mixture of amused incredulity and frustration.

"You play our record against any of the other stuff and it just knocks spots off them left, right and centre. They must be c— for not playing it."

"I want to slag off all the people in charge of radio stations. No 1: Radio One. They outlawed the pirates and then didn't, as they promised, cater for the market the pirates created."

"Radio One and Two, most afternoons, run concurrently and the whole thing has slid right back to where it was before the pirates happened. They've totally f— it."

"There's no radio station for young people anymore. It's totally down to housewives and trendies in Islington. They're killing the country by having the playlist monopoly."

"No 2: Capital. They're even worse because they had the chance, coming right into the heart of London and sitting in that tower right on top of everything."

"But they've completely blown it. I'd like to throttle Aidan Day. He thinks he's the self-appointed Minister of Public Enlightenment."

"We've just written a new song called 'Capital Radio' and a line in it goes 'listen to the tunes on the Dr Goebbels Show'."

"They say 'Capital Radio, in tune with London'. They're in tune with Hampstead. They're not in tune with us at all. I hate them."

"What they could have done, compared to what they have done, is abhorrent. They could have made it so good that everywhere you went you took your transistor radio."

"They could have made the whole capital buzz. Instead, Capital Radio has just turned its back on the whole youth of the city."

Radio stations are not above criticism but what does Strummer think of the punk scene at the moment?

"I don't think there is one really. The only thing that could count as a 'scene' is the Roxy. And the Roxy is a DORMITORY. The last time I went I was

Clash personality

Joe Strummer talks to Caroline Coon

feeling really uppity.

"I stood in the middle and looked round and all these people were slumped around dozing! I threw tomato sauce on the mirror and stormed out. And I haven't been back there. I don't think I will go back. The sooner it closes the better."

However, bad vibes or not, surely it is better to have somewhere to play than nowhere at all?

"No, I think it's better to have nothing than have that," says Joe, acknowledging that his "selfish" attitude might have something to do with the fact that the Clash are temporarily out of action since drummer Terry Chimes decided to start his own band.

The social scene aside then, what does he think about the way the music has developed?

"All I care about is the groups. If there're good groups then it's got to be good. There's bound to be a lot of rubbish but I've changed my opinion of the Damned."

"I've seen them a lot and I think they're fun to watch. They play good. The only thing I have against them is that they can't play as well as us."

"Number One for me at the moment are the Subway Sect. They've got some good ideas. The Slits are good too. Palmolive on drums! She's the female Jerry Nolan. But like everyone, they need to do 30 gigs in 30 days and they would be a different group. Then they'd be great. The same with us."

How has Joe been affected by the ban on punk music, which has effectively kept the Clash off the road since Christmas?

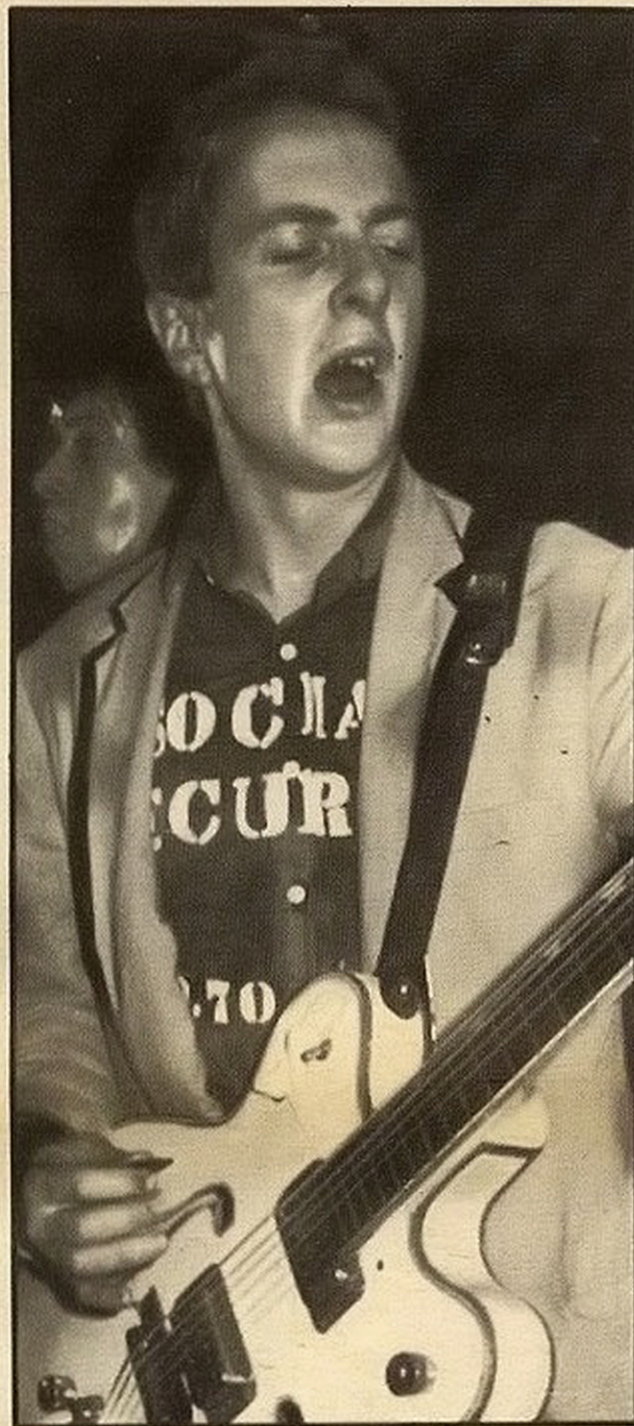
"I feel really bitter. We've tried our hardest and we've worked and slogged at it. Then we've had drummers quitting, which was just what we didn't need. We wanted to get going and move forward."

"All that business on the Pistols tour! I hated it. I HATED it! It was the Pistols' time. We were in the background. The first few nights were terrible. We were just locked up in the hotel room with the Pistols, doin' nothing."

"And yet, for me, it was great too. We had the coach and we had hotels and we had something to do — even though they didn't let us do it that often. We did it about eight times. It was good fun."

"But when I got back to London on Christmas Eve I felt awful. I was really destroyed, because after a few days you get used to eating. We were eating Holiday Inn rubbish, but it was two meals a day and that. And when I got off the coach we had no money and it was just awful. I felt twice as hungry as I'd ever felt before."

"I had nowhere to live and I remember walking away from the coach, deliberately not putting on my woolly jumper. I walked all the way up Tottenham Court Road and it was really cold but I wanted to get as cold and as miser-



JOE STRUMMER: 'There's no radio station for young people anymore. It's totally down to housewives and trendies in Islington'

able as I could.

"Christmas was here, and me and Micky Forte, our sound man, had our little bags in our hands and I just felt like the worst thing in the world that the tour had ended. I wanted it to go on and on. The coach had been like home in a way and I didn't want to get off it."

On stage, Strummer wires himself up into an inhuman dynamo of sweaty, trembling flesh, fearful enough to have one wondering when the ambulance brigade will rush to his rescue with a straitjacket.

While he tilts his bullet head at acute angles, his agonising face screwed into an open wound, he wields his Telecaster like a chainsaw. His magnetism is totally original — more like an Olympic strong man forcing all his energy into a final record-breaking lift than anything seen on a rock 'n' roll stage before.

Offstage, he's the Clash member with the lowest profile. Guitarist Mick Jones (21) is the most verbal. Bassist Paul Simonon (20), who was educated at schools in Brixton and Notting Hill, where 90 per cent of the kids were black, communicates more easily with animal physicality than with words.

Much has been made of punk music's tough roots in

modern urban dereliction. But, Joe is not working class, is he?

"No, I'm not working class at all. My father was born in India. His father died when he was eight and so he was an orphan and he went to an orphan school."

"Then, because he was so smart, they gave him a scholarship and he went to university, and he was really proud that he'd come from nothing, with no chance, to having a degree — even though it was from the poxy University of Lucknow."

"He came to London and joined the Civil Service as a junior bum. Then he became a not-so-junior bum and then he reached his high point and became a diplomat, going overseas."

"That was my lucky break. He was dead proud of it and he really wanted me to be like him. But at the age of nine I had to say goodbye to them because they went overseas to Africa or something."

"I went to boarding school and only saw them once a year after that — the Government paid for me to see my parents once a year."

"I think I was dead lucky. I was left on my own and I went to this school where bullying was really in."

"It wasn't a public school. It was a school where thick rich people sent their thick rich kids — another perk of my father's job, it was a job with a lot of perks — all the fees were paid by the Government."

"When I was eight he made me sit all these exams for these flash public schools. But I failed the lot. Finally I got into this semi-crummy school where they have this thing going where if your brother passed the entrance exam, me, his brother, was let in too."

So Joe has a brother?

"No. I did have, but he's dead. He committed suicide in 1971. He was a year older than me. He was a Nazi. He was a member of the National Front. He was into the occult and he used to have these death heads and crossbones all over everything."

"He didn't like to talk to anybody and I think suicide was the only way out for him. What else could he have done?"

The Clash are being attacked for their "intellectual" approach to music. They certainly appear to be the most politically aware of the new-wave bands. But I'm suspicious. Until recently, Paul thought David Steel was Tommy Steele's brother. Does Joe read at all? Does he know who the Prime Minister is?

"Yeah, I do!" he replies patiently. "I'm up to page 984 of The Rise And Fall Of The Third Reich (the hardback edition has 1245 pages). And I've read everything that T. E. Lawrence wrote. He was my hero."

"And Jim Callaghan, right! You know, I got a TV recently and the other day I was punching between him on one channel and Jimmy Carter on the other. Well, it struck me that Jimmy Carter had more going for him than Jim Callaghan."

"I don't know whether this is true, but I heard that Fidel Castro, when the mood takes him, just goes to the market place and starts babbling. All the people gather around him and listen to him and he talks for five hours and walks off again. And that to me sounds as if he's got something to say."

"Whereas c— like Carter and Callaghan have probably got 50 people telling them what to say. They're just robots. They haven't got any personal zing. Like Hitler. He wasn't a robot, whatever you say about the c—. Although, look what he did."

Joe defends the band's "politically aware" stance then?

"Well, the trouble is the word political. I just leave it as awareness. You get all these smart-alec young groups coming out — and more power to their elbow — sneering 'The Clash, they're too political — who wants to care about that —!'"

That's like the flash thing to say now. But I sit back and think about it and it strikes me as rubbish.

"I don't think about Jim Callaghan any more than the newspaper vendor does. Politics, as the word describes itself, means Grey Boredom Talk Long Words Impossible Sentences — rubbish."

I don't think about that stuff. I just think about who's doing what to me and what I'm going to do

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