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**Remembering Joe Strummer's early visits to Ireland**

Joe Strummer in 1984 with his fellow Clash member Paul Simon. Picture: AFP/Getty

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Joe Strummer would have been 65 today. Dave Fanning and others recall his early visits to Ireland with The Clash, writes **Jonathan deBurca Butler**

TRINITY College had never seen its like before let alone Dublin. For a few hours on a Friday evening in October 1977, The Clash set musical fire to the old grey campus and the capital's youth were given their first real taste of punk. The music media, such as it was, lapped it up.

"What hit me, what happened, I still can hardly begin to calculate it," wrote Bill Graham of Hot Press. "Strummer is the gang leader working up a white heat of intensity... a sullen power-pack... where he draws his reserves of energy from I don't understand. Stamping, shouting, head reeling from side to side, his presence simultaneously draws in the fans and repels them."

Just months earlier, The Clash had released their eponymous debut album. Their songs were short, punchy and peppered with the new sounds of reggae while their lyrics, which Strummer barked like a crazed street fighter, were something devotees could rally round.

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The front man, who would be celebrating his 65th birthday today, was the band's totem, a ball of raging energy who sucked audiences in and spat them back out into the world utterly changed.

RTÉ radio producer Ian Wilson who was student union president at the time and was resident on campus remembers the band using his humble dwelling as a changing room.

"Myself and Paul Tipping, who was the ents officer had rooms in the college," he recalls. "They changed in there and walked across to play in the old exam hall. I don't think they knew how to take it. There were pictures of provosts from hundreds of years and this beautiful ornate organ facing them at the back. I don't think they knew what to expect. They were perfectly pleasant to us I have to say."

That a scheduled concert in Belfast the night before had been cancelled due to fears over crowd trouble was a godsend for the Dublin audience.

"He was very affable," recalls Paul Tipping of Strummer. "Easy to deal with. He was no prima donna; I mean they had come down from Belfast on the train. They were fairly disgruntled and he was there to do the business they didn't let him do the previous night. And f\*\*k me, did he do it."

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Strummer and company were, as Wilson puts it, "well wound up" and poured their energy into two "utterly manic" 35-minute sets.

Such is its place in the collective memory that a rare poster of the gig recently sold for €2,500 at auction.

Like many of punk's leading lights, Joe Strummer came from quite a well-to-do background. His father was a diplomat and as a result Strummer was born in Ankara, Turkey. Back then he was known as John Mellor Graham. He lived in Egypt, Mexico and West Germany before going to boarding school in England.

In true rock'n'roll style, he attended and subsequently dropped out of the London Central School of Art and Design. For a time he lived as a squatter and picked up odd jobs. He soon found that he earned more from playing music in Tube stations and it was here that he was given the name Strummer.

When he was offered £120 to marry Pamela Moolman, a South African citizen seeking British citizenship, he accepted it. Legend has it that he bought his famous Fender Telecaster with the money.

Strummer played with various bands and then in 1976 he heard the Sex Pistols, met guitarist Mick Jones, bass-player Paul Simonon, drummer Terry Chimes and formed The Clash. The group's first album reached the Top 20 in England in 1977 and it was around now that Strummer embarked on what would be an unfaithful 14-year relationship with Gaby Salter, then just 17.

The following year Give 'em Enough Rope reached number 2 in the UK album charts and by the time London Calling was released in 1979 and with the Sex Pistols out of the picture, The Clash were arguably the biggest punk band in the world.

"I was at that gig in Trinity and everyone remembers it as being great," recalls Dave Fanning. "But it was shit, at least the venue was shit. You couldn't hear a thing. Now two years later, they played The Top Hat in Dun Laoghaire and it was one of the best gigs of my life. It was the London Calling one and they were at the top of their game, even the mistakes sounded great."

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"I was a big fan of The Clash," says Fanning. "They were great and it was great to watch them as they developed. To be honest, Sandanista (1980) might have been a step too far but there was some great stuff on Combat Rock (1982).

"Later on, like most bands, they ran out of steam.

"There were problems with drugs I know, and by the last few albums they had had their time."

Combat Rock was the band's peak and included their biggest hit, "Rock the Casbah". Unfortunately, that hit's author and band drummer Topper Headon was fired from the band for heroin use. But by the early to mid eighties, the lipstick and powder were on the wall; New Wave was in, Punk was out and in 1985 The Clash were finished.

Strummer went on to a patchy solo career. He had a short stint with The Pogues in the early nineties and at the end of the decade, he went to form the raucous and relatively successful Mescaleros.

"I met him a few times and he was fantastic," recalls Fanning. "He was on the radio with me once and he was really good. And then I met him another time and it was a quick interview backstage at The Olympia. He had just come off stage with The Mescaleros and he was very annoyed that in all the years that he had come to Dublin he hadn't played The Olympia before then."

In 1993, Strummer began an affair with Lucinda Tait. That eventually ended his relationship with Gaby Salter and he went on to marry Tait in 1995.

Two days before Christmas 2002 after taking his dogs for a walk in the Somerset countryside, he died suddenly of heart failure. He was just fifty years old.

"He was brilliant," says Fanning. "I liked him. He was full of energy and venom and verve. He was just very cool and he kind of epitomised the whole thing of how very cool it can be to get involved in punk music and to keep going on."

• Joe Strummer, Aug 21, 1952 – Dec 22, 2002

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