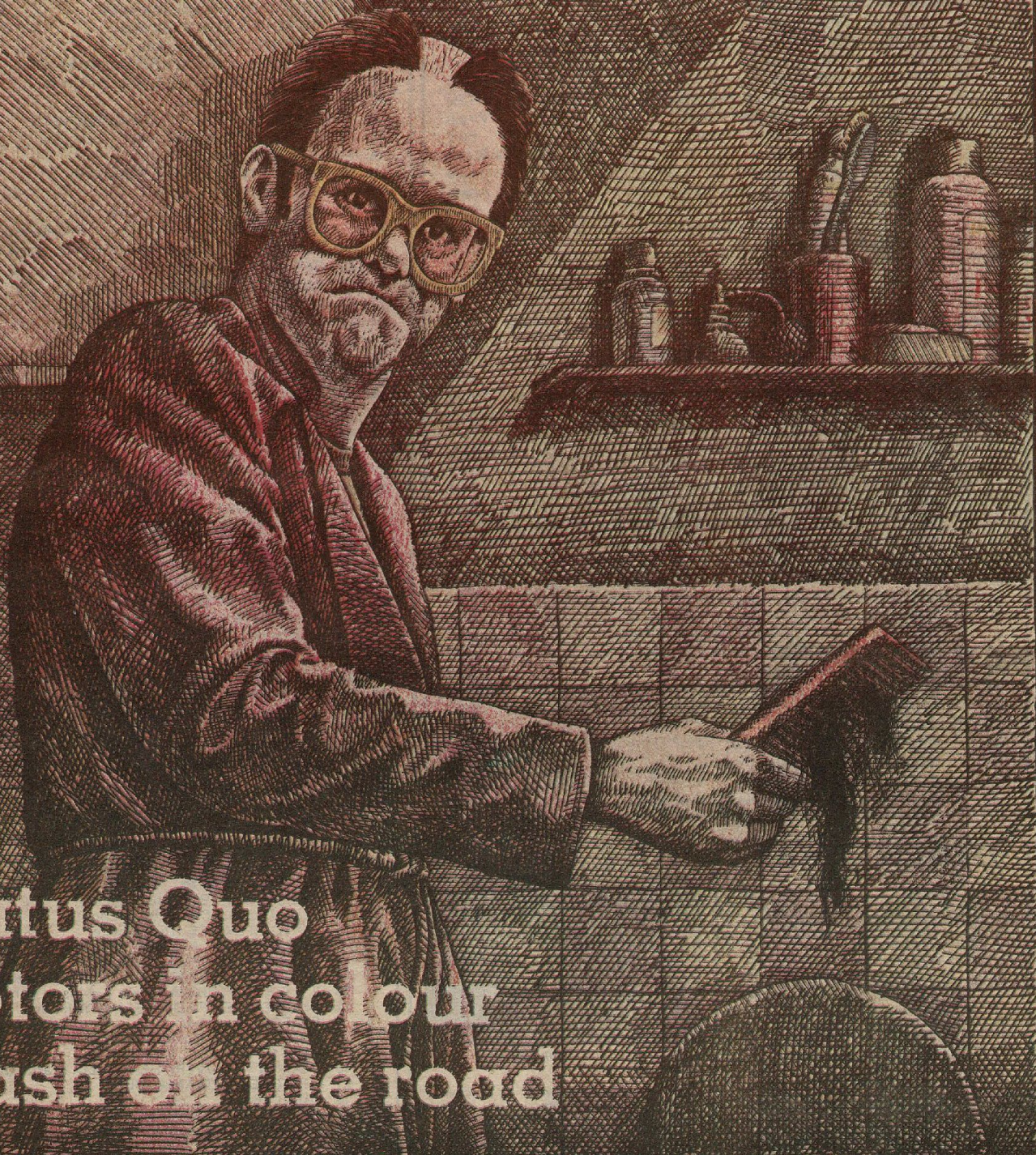


Record Mirror

ELTON REVEALS ALL



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Clash on the road

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HEAD ON CLASH

TIM LOTTS battles with Joe Strummer's boys and comes out dazed

MICK JONES fixed me with his limpid shark's eyes and without warning brought his heavy boot up into my unprotected crotch. Spitting and retching, I fell to the floor, doubled up in desperation. Jones, a thin smile on his dirty face, pulled his leg back for another crack. This time he glanced me on the side of the head, splitting the skin. I reeled again in agony and fear, sticky life substance dripping past my ear. "Gutless hnnnh?" spat Jones, shoving me onto my back, "who's gutless now?" Before I had a chance to

shield myself he vent an animal sound from the back of his throat and brutally launched himself forward, jumping three times on my unprotected stomach.

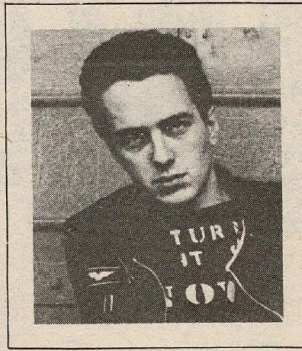
Through the haze my hand was on the edge of the open door. Gagging, I crawled through it. With one last hefty boot to the spine, Jones propelled me out of the room.

"KEEP OUT OF MY SIGHT," he mouthed contemptuously. Deliberately he slammed the door on my right hand, crushing it into uselessness. My career, I knew, was over. Broken, I crawled into the gutter, a wiser man. I wasn't about to mess with The Clash again.

THE JAR of the train as it pulled into Sheffield Station shook me awake. The vision continued to plague me. The Clash were a difficult enough band if you worshipped them — and everybody seemed to. I, on the other hand, had my reservations.

Crassness

Like a lot of their recorded stuff left me cold, particularly the new single, 'Complete Control'. One of the adjectives I'd used when describing it in review was 'gutless'. They weren't gonna like that. Their intensity, their apparent utter lack of humour, rankled me. "Look, the situation is far too serious for enjoyment, man," said Joe



Strummer in Sniffin' Glue, which seemed a remark of peculiar crassness and one that burnt friction against every hedonist bone in my body.

Still, they're a band uniquely worth going on the road with because (a) onstage they're phenomenal and (b) because they're an enigma despite their supposedly open-book interview.

I didn't want an interview; interviews are alienating and The Clash have said it all. It was an exercise in observance.

ALL THE best (and worst) on the road features start in the hotel bar, and usually end there too. Paul Simonon sits with a friend. His expression is habitually surly, his hair is stiff explosion — it always is.

The hotel is a good one, four-star, and Paul is about as congruous as a fart at a funeral. An ex-skinhead, he still exudes some of that primitive aggression that made the cult so frightening five years ago.

Hooliganism

Talking about hooliganism I used to steal road signs. Some people used to throw rocks off motorway bridges and kill people in cars.

"I can understand that," says Paul. "I used to throw bricks from the high rise flat I lived in." That was in North Kensington, westway-land. Simonon went to school in the miserable shadow of Trellick Towers, the ugliest building in London.

"Basildon's worse," says Paul. "It's full of uncles."

This is almost a nostalgic trip for The Clash. Their first gig ever was in Sheffield, more than a year ago. Not many people turned up. This time they've got a club full of fanatics, supporters — and the curious unconverted.

Dressing rooms are intimidating places. They are clique-bastions; inside you are still outside. Private jokes polarise and alienate, you're 100 per cent apart. It's hard to be a fly on the wall when you're so conspicuously out of place.

Joe Strummer has his eyes half closed and his words are slurred slightly.

"Thought you'd be taller . . . Lott . . . lofty . . . you wrote that review . . . we really laughed about that . . . 'gutless guitar solo' . . . Mick thought that was really funny."

Richard Hell comes onstage and I slip out to watch him. He's OK, streets ahead of his slipshod records.

Back in the dressing room, Mick Jones glares at me balefully and says nothing. They tune up. Suddenly the

I used to throw bricks from the high rise flats I lived in. We had to evacuate the school once because the top of Trellick Towers was crumbling' — Paul Simonon

most absurd thing happens. The door opens and in walks — this is the Top Rank dive in Sheffield remember — two chefs in full regalia, white hats and all. They hold full plates of fresh fruit high,

TOPPER: pot shots at the punters



"We had to evacuate the school once because the top of Trellick Towers was crumbling."

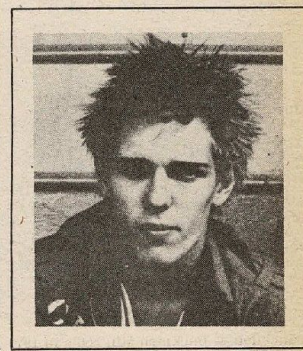
When will it fall? Simonon also used to push cars down hills and watch them smash.

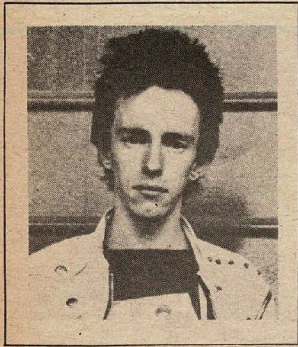
The rest of the band are "around somewhere". Nicky 'Topper' Headon appears, slight and palefaced, wrap-around black sunglasses falling to make him look at all menacing. He is one apart, teenage eyes and polite mouth. He has flu. His hair sticks up like a cock's chest.

Nostalgic

Headon is called Topper because he looks like the monkey in the comic of the same name.

The gig tonight is at the Top Rank, a converted disco. On the way Sheffield glares from high-rise land.





put them down and walk out. Strummer and Jones laugh incredulously. Anything can happen . . .

Intensity

Onstage The Clash hypnotise me. I can't look away, look away from the unbelievable intensity, so limp in print, so astonishing for real.

Sputum and glasses fly. "If I wanna spit I spit on the floor," says Joe and when the spit starts hitting him, angrily, "If you're so tough, come up afterwards and wipe that off!"

This isn't any more a review than it is an interview but here's an appreciation: I haven't seen rock 'n' roll like it before, full stop. It tears you apart, it vibrates, it isn't angry so much as furious. It's real, I believe in it now.

At this point I become a Clash zombie, a tribal supporter.

Mick Jones doesn't know this of course. As I walk in after the set Jones grabs hold of me and pushes me, orders me to sit down. He asks what I thought and, dazed, I try to tell him. He gets the wrong end of the stick. Incredulity.

"You didn't like it?"

But I did, I craved it and fell for it. He changes, he sits down, the tension evaporates easily. If I'd been lying he would have known.

Ten minutes and. "Let the animals in," says Strummer and the girls, shy and stupid, pour in. Mick disappears to one corner and Joe sits getting his photograph taken by and with the worshippers.

Joe says later: "A lot of these girls, they're just a pain. I find it embarrassing. They don't really care and I don't know what to say to them, it's just embarrassing."

Following

And it is. The Clash haven't got a large female following in their audience, only in their dressing room. Joe and Paul just want to get away. It's pouring with rain outside and cold but they want to run back to the hotel.

Walking out to the Top Rank lobby, about 20 girls tag on. Joe and Mick make a dash into the freezing wet, and a few limpets follow. In a masterly escape stroke they head out to the central reservation of the road, and suddenly vault over the barrier, leaving all stranded. Legs pumping, singing a crazy song . . .

"I don't wanna be an apple . . ." They stride towards the hotel. Pacing with them, it occurs that The Clash aren't at all what I thought them, i.e. dour politics mongers, inflicting their so-intense social opinions on whoever would listen. They're trying to have fun too, some enjoyment, despite Strummer's comments in Sniffin' Glue.

I find no dislike in me for them at all yet I felt certain I would, hating intellectuals and poseurs alike. The Clash are neither, just honest and sometimes serious, not philosophising machines.

Parasites

At the hotel the girls soon catch up. Joe talks to a fanzine writer . . . "somebody always wants something off you." Paul holds court to an array of boring women, Topper plays with a plastic gun and Mick disappears.

Feeling like a parasite among all the other hateful parasites, I finally go to bed.

About three o'clock in the morning there's an unbelievably loud hammering at my door for about five seconds. A lynch mob? When I answer there's nobody there.

THE GIG at Bradford has been cancelled — backlash still rools in 1977 — so it's off to Birmingham today. Joe

comes down to the bar with a girl who looks about 14.

"I have them in my room sometimes," he said the night before, "but I never sleep with them."

Did someone cough? After hanging around the bar for about two hours we just manage to fit into the tour bus. Suddenly promoter Dave Cork comes running out. "Put your foot down."

Unfinished

Confusion as a besuited man comes running out of the hotel looking furious.

"Put your + + + + + foot down," he urges again and we screech out backwards, then forwards and away, leaving the man white-faced and helpless.

Some "unfinished business" is apparently the reason for the Bonnie and Clyde antics but when I ring the hotel later in the week they say they have no record of any unpaid bills and won't even admit that The Clash stayed in the hotel. Discreet, that's Trust House Forte.

Topper and Paul have gone back to

'A lot of these girls, they're just a pain. I find it embarrassing. They don't really care and I don't know what to say to them, it's just embarrassing' — Joe Strummer

London and Mick and Joe sleep on the bus, though Mick wakes up for a chat about murder, poisoning, junkies and monster babies. One occupant of the coach says he's seen a baby in a jar at a hospital, half-human half-dog.

"Nah, s'impossible," says Mick. "They can't . . . what is it . . . cross fertilise."

Mick is a Bowie freak and wants to know if Bowie said anything more about John Glenn, the astronaut who told Bowie, "Earth is not alone." I have to disappoint him.

The tape player churns out Kraftwerk, The Kinks, Bob Marley and a tape of last night's Clash gig.

The Central Hotel, Birmingham, is blacked out, as is the whole city centre. In Mick's room, as it gets darker and darker, Dylan plays on a tiny tape player — Mick loves Dylan — as it gets blacker and blacker. No room service. Joe wanders in, attracted by the sound and promptly falls asleep. They smoke a few joints — how untrendy! — and the completely static air makes a noise in our ears and nothing moves.

Eventually Joe is gone and Mick is gone and the chapter's finished.

There is no closed ending, no snap conclusions. This is a tape recording, this is fax. Don't fall into the trap I did and guess wrong; The Clash are more — or rather less — than they seem.



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