

ROSALIND RUSSELL takes tea with Joe Strummer in darkest Camden Town . . .

GEORGE MELLY once said that Camden Town was the Baghdad of London. Ha! Does it ever come down in buckets in Baghdad? Do they have a Baghdad equivalent of George's Cafe, a steamy refuge from the rain, which serves strong the in workers' thick white cups?

This was the exotic venue chosen for our meeting by The Clash's Joe Strummer. I arrived early and sat alone, self-conscious. Why were all these men staring at me? Even in my wildest fantasies I don't allow myself the luxury of thinking that hordes of men want to eye me up. I look down. The buttons of my blouse are undone and I'm giving a free flash show. Fortunately Strummer arrives fairly soon, allieviating my embarrassment.

Hepatitis

He drinks lots of tea, for two reasons: he's just had hepatitis and has to lay off booze for six months and besides, he's read somewhere that two cups of tea increases your mental energy 25 per cent 40 minutes after drinking it. We all have lots of tea and hope it's gonna make us really witty and speedy.

"It doesn't rain like this in Jamaica," remarks Strummer.

He and Mick Jones went there at the end of last year "to get away from everything and write the new album." It was supposed to be a holiday too, but they spent most of the time in their hotel room.

"It was a lonely time for

Clash of ideals

me and Mick," says Strummer. "We didn't know anybody. And you have to go everywhere in taxis, you can't just walk about, two white blokes. They'd knife you. We couldn't afford taxis all the time. It wasn't until the end we felt relaxed. I'd like to go back sometime, for about six months."

The visit to Jamaica was the subject of derisive abuse from ex Damned bassman Captain Sensible who is convinced The Clash light their fags with fivers. It certainly must have cost a bomb to fly the two out there for a fortnight, but Strummer doesn't know who it was paid.

"I only suggested it for a joke, to our manager," he says. "We wanted to get away for a couple of weeks and we couldn't go to Paris because we know

too many girls there and would have got distracted. So I said 'what about Jamaica?' and he said no. But a week or so later he came in with the plane tickets."

Strummer has blown all the royalties he got from the first album — about £1,000 — on "drink, taxis, I squandered it. I checked it out the other day and I've got about £20 left. Now I've learned my lesson and I might do differently next time."

Graves

He's never had much money, not from jobs like working for the parks department, or digging graves (but look what happened to Rod Stewart and he started out digging out final resting places). He drew out a crumpled



STRUMMER: blew royalties on booze and taxis.

cheque from his pocket.

"There's my wage cheque," he offers. £25 for a week's graft. Half the nation's poverty wage and exactly the amount he pays his landlady every week for his bed and breakfast. So how does he buy small necessities, like cigarettes?

"I smoke other people's. Well, why isn't he living in a flat which would be cheaper?"

"I was renting this bedsit from from Sebastian Conran and it started to get in a bit of a mess, with me being away touring all the time. Then I went into hospital and when I came out I just couldn't face it again. So I went to this place I know."

Strummer has a theory about his hepatitis: he thinks he got it from accidentally swallowing some gob that was spat at him while he was onstage. It's possible to catch the disease this way.

"I just thought of all the hours I've stood up there being spat at, it's horrible. When it dries on your shirt it makes it go crusty. And you can't help getting it in your mouth. And then some lands on the fretboard of the guitar and you haven't noticed and slide your hand up there. . . . Now I pick out the kid that's done it and I make an example of him."

It landed him in hospital for 11 days, within spitting distance of Stamford Bridge football ground, isolated behind glass panels and condemned to listen to the radio all day.

"Sometimes you forget your purpose y'know, people asking for your autographs and all that stuff, but lying there listening to the radio I realised what crap is being pushed out and how someone needs to release some decent records."

Well, there's always 'Clash City Rockers' . . .

"We'll never get a top 10 hit, they're never gonna play it. Take 'Clash City Rockers' — I don't like talking about it much cos I've got fed up with it — they won't play it and it won't be a big hit."

"What radio people (and record company people) want is mindless crap to keep the workers whistling at the factory bench. They'd rather we just went away, we lay down and died. I'd bet you that the single isn't on anybody's playlist. We're unpopular with them because we're against all this mindless humming along stuff."

Frighten

D'you think you frighten them?

"Yes, we do. I don't enjoy the reputation of being frightening. Did you hear about the Dunstable gig where the audience was chucking cans? They canned off both the support groups. But I have to admit that when things are running at fever pitch, you don't half turn in a good show, a blitz."

With the demise of the Pistols and The Damned, The Clash are just about the last remaining bad guys in punk. How does it feel to be out there on your own, is it lonely or scary?

"No, I like it. Change is supposed to be what it's all about. The punk thing got boring pretty quickly. When we started out, us and the Pistols, we said we wanted there to be lots of groups like us and that's just what we got — lots of groups EXACTLY like us. Everytime I went to see a group they sounded the same. We're the last surviving punk group and it feels good. Personally I liked The Damned and the Pistols and I wished they hadn't split up. I feel sad about that."

"But with the Pistols, it started when they kicked out Matlock. He was the one with the tunes and Rotten was the one with the words. The guy with the tunes is always a bit of a wimp. . . ."

Does Mick Jones come in for that description?

"Well, he can be that way inclined. Anyway, when they fired Matlock and got in tough old Sid, that was the beginning of the end."

What about the possibility of a Clash Split? After all, it's well known that the band doesn't always get on that well with each other.

"That could be possible. A lot of us don't get on, but we talk about it all the time so it keeps it out in the open."

Who don't you get on with?

"Everybody. With four people in a situation of being together all the time you're bound to get irritated some of the time. It happens to everyone. I could see us splitting up tomorrow, but funnily enough I think The Clash will survive."

"Two weeks ago, I'd

have said otherwise, but I was depressed then. They didn't tell me at the hospital that I would get depressed when I got out, or I'd have been able to handle it better. I just didn't want to see anybody. I felt pretty low. Every paper I picked up — the music press — someone was saying how we were a rip off or something and I'd started to believe it. Now, I don't care what anyone says. If you start to take that stuff seriously it does your head in."

The Clash will have to change — like everybody else — to survive. And they're putting down all their new ideas at the moment for a new album. But Strummer didn't want to talk about it, because the group and the record company are having a disagreement over the first album.

"We're not going to record until CBS put out our first album in America," says Strummer. "They say it isn't good enough, that the Americans expect better quality stuff like Fleetwood Mac. They're nuts the Americans. It's ridiculous because it's selling like hotcakes on import. Anyway we want it released in the States because we think it's great."

Argue

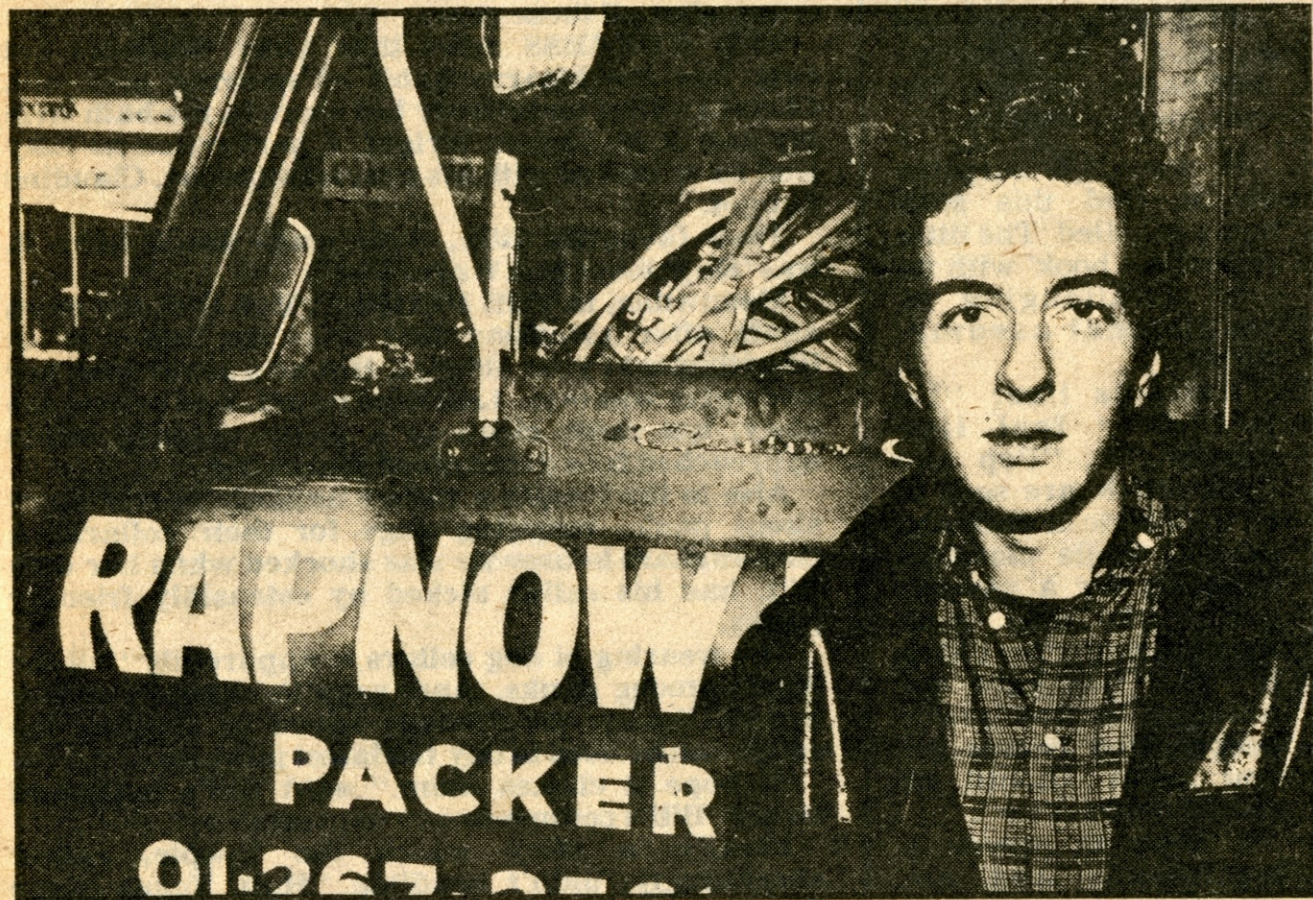
"We have plenty of time left to argue be because the the contract runs for another year."

While CBS will have difficulty in reshaping The Clash into a sleek, palatable and socially acceptable "product", the band isn't resisting change in other directions, changes they have formulated themselves. But what's this I heard about Joe Strummer wanting to be a pop star?

"I wouldn't mind being a pop star," grins Strummer. "But then I'm a pop star already. . . ."

Something to do with the Gene Vincent hair do, perhaps. He decides it needs trimming into shape so we set off down Camden High Street in the rain, looking for a barbers. Barbers in Camden Town are of the old fashioned school, who do resist change. The Gene Vincent snip you get there will be an original, because they haven't caught up with any fashion more recent than 1959.

But it's no good, everyone's closed: it's early closing day in Baghdad. Except for the two fishmongers, whose pungent odour colours the local air. By the way Joe, did your brain get that extra 25 per cent? Mine didn't. Perhaps it doesn't work in the rain.



"CBS America say our first album isn't good enough."

"Is this the end of our affair?"
 "Isn't it just the beginning...?"

VALENTINO

