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IN recent months the reputation of the Clash has suffered somewhat. Reporters have called into question the high ideals with which they began, so that their credibility is currently in doubt. Yet Joe Strummer was unmistakably eager to talk about the band and himself when I met him at their rehearsal rooms, just off Chalk Farm Road in London.

Although concealed behind a substantial pair of shades, Strummer looked surprisingly well for someone only discharged from hospital ten days ago after contracting hepatitis.

It was inevitable that the conversation should quickly shift from perfunctory opening gambits to his reaction to all the adverse publicity — that the Clash had sold out, and that Strummer was enjoying the kind of high life which he had always spoken against.

"Well, I don't know what they're saying at the moment," he began, "because I've given up reading the press. To start with, we were really hurt by what they said, but then we came to realise that they make the stuff up just to suit themselves, so we don't bother any more because they don't print the truth.

"You see, when we started we used to sit around and spend a lot of time talking about our songs. Some were real wimpy, like love songs, and we'd keep throwing them away. So in the end all we were left with were the heavy songs, the kind of stuff you heard on the album.

"We were really idealistic in those days, and we really believed in what we were saying. We did as well as we could — we stand by what we said. But things change, and you can't expect that the

things you were saying two years ago can hold good forever. Time passes."

As long ago as their signing to CBS there were mutterings that they'd sold out by associating with a multinational corporation. Strummer, however, sees it a different way.

"Listen, we want to reach a lot of people. If we put out our own label together we'd have only reached a few hundred or maybe thousand people. What's the good of that when you're trying to be realistic about these things? It's not kidding yourself. Basically, we decided to play their game, but on our terms.

"I'd been living loose since '71, busking and doing odd jobs for a few weeks, before we were signed up. I remember sitting here and wondering whether we'd blown our reason to live, now that we were being paid £25 a week. They were really just because we had enough money to go to the cafe and each have a meal rather than eating out of one plate, has nothing to do with it."

Nevertheless, hadn't success over the last 12 months undermined the band's politics?

"What do you mean by politics?" Strummer asks irritably. "All I was interested in, both then and now, is a social thing. We've got nothing to do with politics.

"A lot of people have misunderstood us. Songs like 'Hate And War' have got nothing to do with what we feel or want to do; that's what was being meted out to us at that time. And '1977', when it talks about stem guns in Knightsbridge, that's what everybody thought we wanted; it was what people wanted to do to us, it was

journalists trying to read something that wasn't even there.

"I just get speechless with rage about the press," he says, clenching his fists. "They're continually misrepresenting, picking up titbits of information and misusing when they don't know the full facts. I get speechless with anger. I have to control myself from going round and sorting some of them out."

Then what about the mansion overlooking Regents Park that he's currently reputed to be living in?

"That's the trouble. People believe everything that's written, like that big white mansion. Well, I've got one room, and all it's got to offer is a blocked sink. I don't even have a TV set or a stereo, and there's no carpet, just bare boards. All I have in there is a cassette player.

"But, you see, I never get a chance to answer back. I phone some of these journalists that write these stories to say come round and have a look, but they won't even speak. It's like to trying to get through to Howard Hughes."

Still, one can't help reflecting that to a degree the situation is of their own making. After all they set themselves up there in the first place, not the press.

"It's true that we have worked ourselves into a corner, and that for a while we couldn't move, but we're coming out of it now, and spreading ourselves around. We didn't want to be like all the pop stars; we wanted to remain accessible. I'm not talking about backstage passes and rubbish like that. It's a state of mind; the moment you start thinking you're a star, you're finished."

He then goes on to relate a story of how a couple of days previously he had been sitting at Marble Arch tube station, when a couple of punks spotted him and asked him why he was there and not riding around in a limo. "They had this picture of me riding 'round in some enormous car all the time and only setting foot outside it occasionally. I've only ever been in one, two or three times!"

Since the Clash from their very inception have always considered themselves to be a punk band, nothing more or less, with the advent of power pop one can't help reflecting, since the movement is apparently dying on its feet, whether the Clash will become less relevant.

"I don't think punk rock has even started yet in a commercial sense," he replied, "or for that matter in any other sense. When punk rock came in and kicked all those dull, boring lifeless rock bands out of the way, we had the first dose of realism for years. But from the biggest thing in the world, it became the biggest bore, as everyone slavishly began to follow that pattern."

At this point, as if to order, several members of Generation X appear in the cafe to where we have now moved to share a few steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Strummer finds it impossible to disguise his contempt. "You see that lot," he says, pointing across the room. "It's bands like that that make me sick. They don't talk about anything, they don't mean anything, — they're just a pathetic collection of wimps."

Strummer then continued

in this vein with unenthusiastic observations of the Adverts and the Tom Robinson Band. "It transpires that the only other band around for whom he feels a measure of respect is Sham 69.

But he returned to his consideration of punk. "I've been reading The Rise And Fall Of The Third Reich and Mein Kampf recently — and with a lot of attention. The whole movement started off with only a handful of people in one room. That's where

the whole Hitler movement originated from, eight or nine people. And that's happening now in this country with the National Front.

"So when people wonder when and why I don't go around singing wimp songs about 'the moon in June,' it's because there's that sort of thing going on. It's pretty obvious to me which is more important."

However, since in his own words Strummer can't recall

wandering around in his earlier days, seething with an anger and frustration which spilled over into many of his songs, one can't help wondering whether they'll be able to recapture that degree of passion.

"I don't think it'll make any sort of difference. We have rows almost every day, and we split up almost every day. We live and exist in this constant electric atmosphere. We aren't at all comfortable, mentally, together in our roles. So there'll be no problem in whipping up some more aggression. It's still there, if only in a different way.

"But I don't ever see us being well-off financially, and if we are, it certainly won't be for a very long time. We lost £28,000 on the White Riot tour. None of us had any wages for eight weeks. When we were reading how we had sold out, and we were flat broke.

"Then on the last tour we were much more careful. We didn't smash up any more hotel rooms like the first time, because we thought CBS would have to pay for it all, and we didn't find out till the end that it was us, and we still lost £10,000. So we won't have any money for a very long time."

It doesn't matter much, anyway, because my idea of ecstasy is to have a room, typewriter, an electric guitar and a TV. I haven't got any great wishes. I wouldn't mind having a car," he muses, "but then I can't drive so there isn't much point after that, what else can you do recently for £1,000?"

"I received royalties, but then I just frittered and wasted it away on nothing, so all I've got left is a few quid. But as I said, what else

do you want?"

I decided to switch the subject to reggae, since on their last tour they added "White Man In Hammersmith" to their set. With "Police And Thieves" still in there, one couldn't help wondering just how much further they intended taking the reggae influence.

"Well, we got swept up in that crossover reggae, too, but I've got over it, it's nothing more than trash reggae. I'm getting into early skanga and rocksteady now, that's far stronger."

Would they be taking things any further with Lee Perry, with whom they had recently recorded?

"No, definitely not, although Scratch, along with Joe Gibbs, is probably the best producer in Jamaica. It didn't really work out, or I don't suppose it did, because when he returned to Jamaica he didn't even bother to take a copy of it with him, and we ended up remixing parts of it anyway.

"No, our lyrics will be of the same intensity and similarly uncompromising, but the music will be more thoughtful. That's where the texture will come from, rather than from trash reggae, which doesn't sound too good.

"But whenever I hear a tape of a live show it sounds so terrible anyway. It sounds like a mad seal barking over a mass of pneumatic drills." He gave a sardonic smile. "When we play live, we're not necessarily trying to sound good, we're trying to whip it up, get some kind of atmosphere."

But what kind of responsibility does he feel towards his audience? "I only feel a responsibility to myself to say these things, not to

anybody else. And when I'm saying these things and getting them across, then I feel good and I feel fulfilled. When I'm not I get depressed, and go out and get drunk.

"What I'm aimed against is all that racist, fascist, racistist, patriotism type of fanaticism. I'm extreme in the other way. I haven't got any sense of responsibility. The world goes round and round, and sometimes I forget whole periods of time, maybe days, maybe weeks. I mean I'm capable of anything. I'm capable of disappearing right off the face of the earth.

"There's so much corruption — councils, governments, industry. Everywhere. It's got to be flushed out. Just because it's been going on for a long time doesn't mean that it shouldn't be stopped. It doesn't mean that it isn't time to change. This is what I'm about, and I'm in the Clash, so, of course, that's what the Clash is about."

"But we ain't no urban guerrilla outfit; our gunpower is strictly limited. All we want to achieve is an atmosphere where things can happen. We want to keep the spirit of the free world, we want to keep out that safe, soapy slush that comes out of the radio.

"People have this picture of us marching down the street with machine guns. We're not interested in that, because we haven't got any. All we've got is a few guitars, amps and drums, that's our weaponry.

"What we want to achieve is an atmosphere where an idea can grow and be passed around. It's a question, I suppose, of spirit and how people feel."