

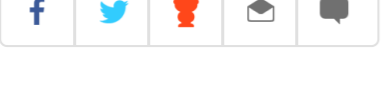
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# "They were really horrible"—filmmaker Jack Hazan on the Clash and the making of Rude Boy

by Adrian Mack on July 15th, 2016 at 9:57 AM



Joe Strummer and Rude Boy star Ray Gange enjoy a swift half and a spot of dialectical materialism.

Way back in 1982, I bootlegged the movie *Rude Boy* using two clanking and primitive VHS top-loaders connected by a cable thicker than your arm. Then I distributed virtually unwatchable dubs to a small circle of friends because we were wild about the Clash—the only band that mattered, at the time—and this was their film.

Except that it wasn't. *Rude Boy* was disowned by the the Clash and dismissed by critics when it finally crawled into a handful of theatres in 1980. We didn't care. The extensive live footage in the film was priceless (even if it was overdubbed, as it turned out) and it offered mesmerizing behind-the-scenes access. This was the dreary, two-channel analogue world of Britain in the '80s. Where else could we see Joe Strummer tracking "All the Young Punks" in a lonely sound booth? Paul Simonon relaxing to "Johnny Too Bad" in a fungus-stained motel room? Topper Headon shitticking an unfortunate roadie while decked out in a replica of Bruce Lee's *Game of Death* tracksuit?

We weren't getting anything like that on *Top of the Pops*, let alone the searing, unspeakably thrilling image of Mick Jones stomping towards the camera, mid-song, his livid expression framed inside a blazing corona of spittle and hair as he stares directly into the camera and screeches: "GET OFF THE FUCKING STAGE!"

"Yes, Mick got angry with me at one point," recalls Jack Hazan, who stalked the band with a humongous 35mm camera on their late '70s Sort It Out and On Parole tours. Hazan is Skyping the *Straight* from his home in the London suburb of Richmond, a *Rude Boy* poster hanging on the wall behind him. It's an unexpected detail given the filmmaker's apparent ambivalence toward his own film, which he photographed and directed with David Mingay.

"I don't know if it's art," he says, his tone perhaps acknowledging our silent consensus that *Rude Boy* is anything but art, "but as far as a document is concerned—it's real. It really reflects the time. It's probably the best representation of the time of any document."



The Clash at the Rock Against Racism concert, Victoria Park, Hackney, 1978

Your mileage may vary with that last statement, but there's no arguing that with *Rude Boy*, Hazan and Mingay provide an indelible image of Britain at its most revolting (in all senses). Vast unemployment, epidemic poverty, massive civil unrest, rampant state violence, extremism on both ends of the political spectrum—these were the same conditions that gave rise to the UK's version of punk (not to mention, 40 years later, BREXIT), and the very stuff that Mingay and Hazan originally set out to capture.

"David said, 'C'mon, let's film on the Kings Road in Chelsea, 'cause there's lots of riots going on, the police are chasing these strange looking youths,'" recalls Hazan. "This was 1977, I think. In no way was it plain sailing at any point, but we just wanted to capture what was going on, so we'd film these happenings, these demonstrations in the street where you had the National Front being protected by the police. We were just finding out what was going on because we weren't sure what was going on."

At some point, somehow—nobody is too sure about this, either—the two filmmakers "were introduced to the Clash and their maddening manager, Bernie Rhodes," and the chaotic and ultimately dissatisfying process of making the heavily improvised *Rude Boy* was under way.

Hazan operated the camera; Mingay took on the trickier job of dealing with the talent. "They were really horrible to virtually everybody," is Hazan's basic memory of the band, pointing, for example, to their penchant for torturing CBS Records head Mo Obergstein's dog or tying Mingay's shoelaces together ("Stupid, childish things like that," he tuts). But, occasional stage abuse aside, the veteran cameraman was drawn to Mick Jones—"You could approach him. Mick was Mick"—and he was fond enough of drummer Topper Headon to take him to see Elvin Jones and a few other legends at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club. "He was a nice boy and he never bothered me," says Hazan, further praising Headon's impressive gifts behind the kit. "They were his gods. He emulated these jazz drummers, no doubt."

By contrast, Hazan "loathed" Paul Simonon and considered his then girlfriend Caroline Coon "a pain in the arse". As for Strummer, he's none too keen to contribute to the anointing that followed the musician's death in 2002. Predictably, Strummer is the film's magnetic centre, and *Rude Boy* comes alive whenever the frontman is on-screen, notably during a barrelhouse rendition of "Let the Good Times Roll" performed in the band's fetid-looking rehearsal space. Hazan doesn't dispute the man's charisma.

"Undoubtedly," he says. "It's amazing. And this broken tooth he had at the time, at the front—extraordinary. Very, very attractive. But that doesn't mean he's a good guy. He was completely amoral, I think. Nobody knew him. He was an enigma. He wanted to keep it that way, I believe. Very attractive, but you didn't know who he was."

It's probably worth pointing out that Hazan was a jazz aficionado who was roughly 20 years older than the unruly gang of West London punks he found himself working with. A creative slump inside Clash-world couldn't have helped with the mood, with a year of writer's block, roiling internal strife, legal trouble, and the eventual ouster of manager Bernie Rhodes bracketing tortuous work on their weakest album, *Give 'em Enough Rope*. As Marcus Grey suggests in his book *Route 19 Revisited*, *Rude Boy* presents an unintended picture of the grim, fallow period that preceded whatever anima of wild inspiration was channelled for *London Calling*.

"Rudie Can't Fail" and a vocal-free rendition of "Revolution Rock" adorn the film's soundtrack, in fact, reluctantly provided late in production and thereby signalling the coming changes. The reinvigoration of the band might explain the distance they put between themselves and the movie. Gray also notes that Strummer received death threats from Ulster Loyalists on the eve of *Rude Boy*'s release, making it prudent to reject the aura of terrorist chic that had made its way into the film (if the sight of Strummer washing his Brigade Rosse T-shirt in a motel room sink could be considered *chic*).

Perhaps even more significant are the substantial parts of *Rude Boy* that aren't about the Clash. Hazan says he doesn't remember if it was Mick or Joe, exactly, who "loathed poor old Ray Gange," the putative star of the film. It doesn't really matter; everybody who's ever seen *Rude Boy* loathes poor old Ray Gange.

"He got pissed off with us in later years because he thought we'd used him and he got nothing out of it—which is silly," remarks Hazan. I'm prepared to argue that Gange takes an oddly noble role in *Rude Boy*, electing to embody the confusion and inarticulacy of his generation, not to mention the period's casual racism. But he is acting, a fact that's lost inside the not-quite-documentary format Hazan and Mingay had pioneered a few years earlier with *A Bigger Splash*, their "portrait" of the artist David Hockney (released in 1973).

That film enjoyed a better reception than *Rude Boy*, but it also came with similar problems. Hockney, reports Hazan, "was so shocked when he saw the end product that he went into a depression for a couple of weeks. It was awful. I felt awful. And then he asked if I'd destroy the negative for a certain amount of money." Having been asked to improvise a character who roadies for the Clash and then spends the rest of the movie annoying the shit out them—a narrative that ended up being mirrored in real life—Gange felt no less burned.

Hazan says that he and Mingay had reached a creative impasse with "fly-on-the-wall shit and cinema verité"; they wanted, with Gange's eager contribution, to "shape" their material into something different. "And I think it reached a dead end with that film," he remarks. "I think it might have reached a dead end before with *A Bigger Splash*. We shouldn't really have carried on in this way, and we did, and *Rude Boy* was the consequence."

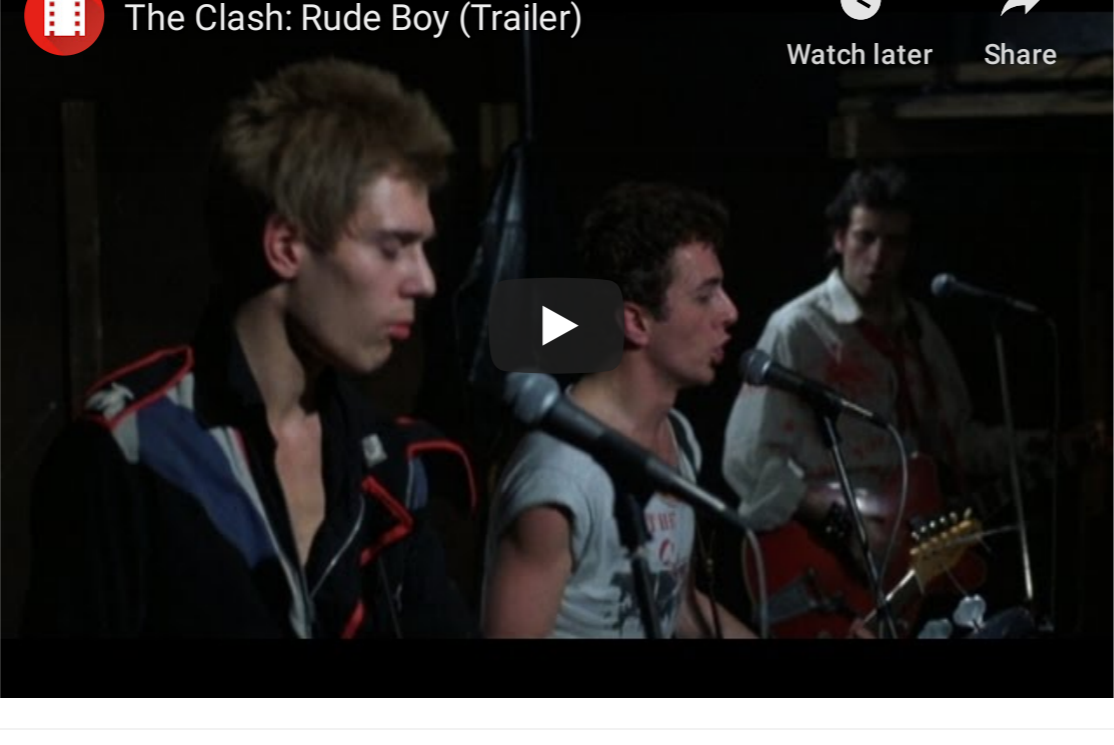
Its many problems aside, including a free-floating subplot concerning a couple of pickpockets, *Rude Boy* has grown in stature over the years. Hazan seems bemused by the care put into a recent Blu-ray edition released by Fabulous Films, scanned from the negative and bestowed with a new, simulated 5.1 surround-sound upgrade. But he allows that the film is "very, very relevant" to its admirers, who remember when Britain was under heavy manners. "People who grew up in the punk movement and were influenced by it enormously and still are—they revisit this film quite a lot," he says.

One wonders, meanwhile, if the historic antipathy toward *Rude Boy* is inversely proportional to its X-ray vision of the band. This is not the heavily mythologized Clash of Pennie Smith's *Before and After*, nor is it Clash on Broadway, or Clash at Shea Stadium, staying when they should have been going. This is its acne-pocked origin story, and it's ugly as fuck, and deeply true.



"They're viewed neutrally, I think, which is extraordinary," offers Hazan. "They were no more special to me than anybody else I might film in some documentary situation. They meant nothing to me, and their music—it was just rock 'n' roll, which I don't like! And that's not bad! Because you're looking at them objectively, yeah? So you get something real. I wasn't their slave, and that's *fantastic*."

The restored version of *Rude Boy*, provide by Jack Hazan, screens at Cinema Salon at the Vancity Theatre on Tuesday (July 19), with an introduction by Adrian Mack.



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