

# Time Out

## The Clash.

### Guerillas in retreat?

Joe Strummer believes in the 'spirit of the free world'. Meanwhile the group are touted as the Rolling Stones of the Eighties. Could these baleful superstars survive being loved? Also inside: the man who hatched 'The Andromeda Strain' and 'Coma'. We talk to visionary ex-doctor Michael Crichton.





# A Clash of

*Will success spoil Mick Jones, Paul Simonon, Topper Headon and Joe Strummer? Miles chronicles the decline of a movement and the rise of a rock band.*

It's been a long time since anybody regarded The Who as a mod band, the Beatles as exponents of Merseybeat, or Bob Dylan as a folk-rocker. Musical movements enjoy even briefer lifespans than the careers of the musicians that emerge from them, and bands that start life in the turmoil of a new departure either vanish when times change or find a direction of their own. This has already happened to the British punk movement, and a magnificent crop of new groups are now developing in very different ways: The Jam, The Stranglers, XTC, The Buzzcocks, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Only Ones, Wire.

The Clash are the punk band who've stayed closest to their roots, and by being the most uncompromising, they have retained most of that original hard energy. Now they're poised at that difficult stage between local artistic success (which these days means Europe) and a place in the global rock industry. They have embraced the advanced technology of rock and risked the pressures of the market and yet managed to retain their integrity. With a second album produced by the heavily metallic Oyster Cultist Sandy Pearlman and recorded in London, New York and San Francisco, The Clash no longer can feel at home in the dole queue. But they're still broke. The new album, 'Give Em Enough Rope', entered the British charts at number 2, the four punks stared balefully from the covers and centrefolds of the four rock weeklies, and even in New York City *Soho Weekly News* headlined its front cover 'The Clash, Britain's Best New Band'. Yet as journalists rushed to deem them the Rolling Stones of the eighties, the band themselves closed ranks against a flurry of lawsuits from erstwhile manager Bernie Rhodes.

The day after the press reception for the new album, vocalist Joe Strummer and drummer Topper Headon were to be found selling clothes at a cold open air stall in Dingwalls Market in Camden Town. 'We're broke, man, so you just have to do what you can,' Strummer shrugged. 'Bernie's kicked us out of our rehearsal studio and changed the locks.'



Headon

Not long ago The Clash filled the Rainbow Theatre three nights in a row and then had to take the bus home because they couldn't afford a cab.

Once upon a time punk really was the music of the unemployed school-leaver living at home with his parents in a high-rise council block, numbed by TV, harassed by the police and funded by the dole. The supergroup stars living in tax exile might just as easily have been living on the moon. Johnny Rotten: 'We have to fight the entire superband system. Groups like the Stones are revolting. They have nothing to offer the kids any more...'

Punk energy was negative energy, pure nihilism. A response born of poverty instead of sixties affluence cancelled the kids' subscriptions to hippy hopes of a counter-culture and replaced them with... nothing. They suggested no alternative, they saw no future at all. Perhaps not surprisingly this turned out to be a more universal message than anyone suspected. In Jubilee Week The Sex Pistols' 'God Save The Queen' made number 1 on the charts despite having no airplay and being banned by most large chain stores. Public school boys scenting doom in the dialectic pointed out that 'No Future' could mean even more to them than to the unemployed.

Lead guitarist Mick Jones recalls the community feeling that existed when

punk first started. 'In them days it was definitely more of a movement in terms of people working together with one aim. It's only since the record companies came in that all the competition and bitchiness started. Before, it was like all other art movements, you know? Like art movements didn't mind having their photographs taken together and they all worked together like one group and it was the *one group*.'

'All the people that used to be around were working for one aim. Some kind of change really, to do something more interesting and different from what we had at the time. Like, if you wanted to go out there was nothing for us to do...'

Joe Strummer used to go on stage with 'Hate & War' stencilled on his boiler suit. Not just because it was the opposite of the hippies' 'Love & Peace' dictum but because it was an honest statement of what is happening today in Britain with our personal Vietnam in Northern Ireland and ever growing racialism at home. 'Things will get tough,' Strummer says, 'I mean a fascist government. But people won't notice like you won't notice your hair is longer on Monday than Sunday... What I'm aimed against is all that fascist, racialist patriotism type of fanaticism...'

This he sees as the role of The Clash. '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.'

'We ain't no urban guerrilla outfit. Our firepower is strictly limited. All we



Simonon

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.'

The band may not be packing any pieces, but they do have an armoury of ideas—and they weren't welcome on the airwaves:

*'All the power is in the hands of people rich enough to buy it While we walk the streets too chicken to even try it.'*

(*'White Riot'*, their first single)

The Clash began in May 1976 as a drummerless group, rehearsing in a small squat near Shepherd's Bush Green. In the grand British rock tradition as laid down by John Lennon, Keith Richards, Jeff Beck, Jimmy Page, Ray Davies, Pete Townshend, Eric Clapton and David Bowie, they were all art school dropouts.

When guitarist and lyricist Mick Jones formed the band he was still at Hammersmith Art School. He comes from Brixton. His father was a cab driver and Jones lived with his parents until they divorced when he was 8. His mother emigrated to America and his father moved out, leaving Jones to live with his grandmother. When he wrote 'London's Burning With Boredom' for The Clash he was still living at his grandmother's flat on the eighteenth floor of a tower block overlooking The Westway. 'I ain't never lived under



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five floors. I ain't never lived on the ground.'

Jones asked Paul Simonon to join his group. Simonon had been playing all of six weeks, just strumming at a guitar but now he 'found' a bass and began playing. Simonon was also born in Brixton. His parents had split up and he lived mostly with his father. 'I had a paper round at six in the morning. Then I'd come back and cook me dad his breakfast. Then I'd cook off to school. Then I'd come back and cook me dad his dinner and do another paper round after school and then I'd cook me dad's tea . . .' He got a council scholarship to the Byam Shaw art school in Notting Hill. 'I used to draw blocks of flats and car dumps.' At the time of meeting Mick Jones the only live rock band he'd seen was The Sex Pistols.

Vocalist Joe Strummer was in an R&B pub band called The 101ers and had even made a single, 'Keys To Your Heart' (Chiswick Records), when he met Mick and Paul. The guitarist and bass player, together with Glen Matlock of the Sex Pistols, were just leaving the Ladbroke Grove social security office when Joe arrived on his bike. They had seen the 101ers play The Windsor Castle and recognised in Joe 'the right look'. 'I don't like your group,' said Mick, 'but we think you're great.'

'As soon as I saw these guys,' said Joe, 'I knew that that was what a group in my eyes was supposed to look like.' Almost immediately afterwards The Sex Pistols supported The 101ers at a gig and convinced Joe of what was happening. He broke up his group the next day. 'Yesterday I thought I was a crud, then I saw The Sex Pistols and I became a king and decided to move into the future. As soon as I saw them I knew that rhythm and blues was dead, that the future was here somehow. Every other group was riffing through the Black Sabbath catalogue but hearing The Pistols I knew, I just knew!' Joe's art school was Central ('A lousy set-up').

The first thing the band did was refurbish an abandoned warehouse in Camden Town, then, with Terry Chimes (nicknamed Tory Crimes) sitting in on drums, they began rehearsals. They played their first gig in Sheffield in June 1976. Since places like the Marquee wouldn't book punk bands they often had to create venues such as cinemas or playing The ICA.

The Clash signed with CBS Records,

controlled from New York by the mighty Columbia Records Corp. The deal, for something over £100,000, received a lot of press. But it wasn't, in fact, very good since it included no tour support and it is easy to lose £50,000 or £60,000 on a national tour promoting an album. The band remained on £25 a week, though times were better than in November '76, when they had returned to their cold warehouse after flyposting an ICA gig and desperately devoured what remained of the flour and water paste that they had used to put up the posters.

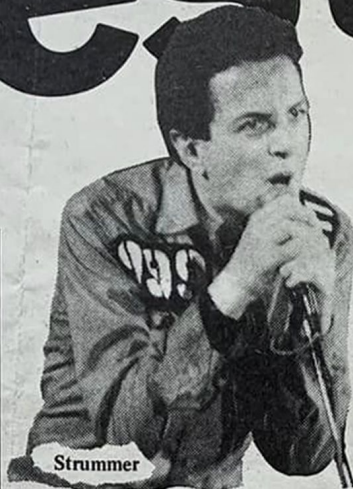
Then came the tour with The Pistols on their ill-fated 'Anarchy' dates and an album for CBS. They cut it in three weekends using their sound man as a producer. He'd never been in a studio before and the production was, not surprisingly, muddy. Despite this, the power of the music comes through and 'The Clash' remains one of the best punk albums ever made. It entered the charts at number 12 and sold over 100,000 copies in the UK. But Columbia refused to release it in the States because they thought the sound quality would preclude airplay.

This was the period of punk violence. During one particularly unpleasant gig when the spit, bottles and cans were falling like rain, Terry Chimes watched as a wine bottle smashed into a million pieces on his hi-hat. He quit. Life on the road under such conditions took its toll on the others as well. Mick Jones remembers making the first album . . .

'Two years ago we did the band's first interview. On Janet Street Porter's "London Weekend Programme" it was, and me, being all young and naive, I blamed bands taking too many drugs



Jones



Strummer

for the great mid-70s drought in rock. I recall saying it really well. And a year or so later, I found myself doing just as many drugs as them!

'Y'know, taking drugs as a way of life, to feel good in the morning, to get through the day. And it's still something I'm getting over right now. I was so into speed; I mean, I don't even recall making the first album.'

They auditioned 206 drummers and rejected them all. Number 207 was Nicky 'Topper' Headon, a friend who'd played briefly with them in the old days. Headon was born in Bromley. His father is a headmaster at a primary school and his mother is a teacher. 'I first played drums when I was 13. I was working at the butchers, cleaning up and I saved the money to buy a kit for £30.' After school he worked the Dover Ferries and then on the Channel Tunnel before moving to London.

With their lineup complete, The Clash began to tour Britain, always taking with them a number of other bands that they felt close to philosophically or musically: The Buzzcocks, Subway Sect, The Slits, Richard Hell & The Voidoids from NYC and The Lous, a French female punk band. The art-rock bands of the sixties took rock out of the dance hall and placed it, literally, in the concert hall. The Clash took it back to the dance hall again—partly by necessity since their audiences have been known to pogo as many as 200 seats per concert into oblivion. With replacement costs at £20 a chair, the band began to insist on seatless venues.

Nonetheless their concerts were banned by local watch committees, and the police continually busted the band for drugs and vandalism. They survived bomb threats in Sweden and found one of their most devoted audiences in Belfast, a town many English bands refuse to play. Everywhere they went dozens of fans were allowed backstage and their hotel rooms were always packed out with local punks crashing on the

floor because they couldn't get home.

After a month-long tour of Europe the band returned to discover that their everyday movements had become prime fodder for the music press. Anything that could possibly be interpreted as 'selling out' was jumped upon. Since the punk stars had not been imposed on their audiences (in the way The Bay City Rollers were) but had risen from their ranks, to 'sell-out' was not a concern that the band would lose artistic integrity and produce overtly commercial records, it was a concern that they would sacrifice community to commerce. And it was true, the band was feeling more and more distanced from its audiences. It was a subtle change: the scene's originally negative, yet communal, charge was unavoidably transformed into individual craft pride as the musicians became more professional. The very technology of rock, its expensive amplification equipment and studios, introduces the businessman into the musicians' lives. Playing becomes the band's work, performed while everyone else is at play. In 'The Sociology Of Rock', Simon Frith pin-pointed the problem perfectly:

'Their work is everyone else's leisure, their way of life is everyone else's relaxation, escape and indulgence. They work in places of entertainment. What for them is routine is for their fans a special event. Musicians themselves are symbols of leisure and escape, their glamour supports their use as sex objects, as fantasies and briefly held dreams.'

The Clash are now a long way from the squat in Shepherds Bush. They remain on a level of intimacy with many of their fans, perhaps a little too intimate at times. (A few months ago Joe Strummer got hepatitis from a well aimed gob of spit which caught him in the mouth.) But as their fame grows, particularly with the release of their new album in The States, the only way they will be able to express their original ideals will be through their music. That is now their job.

Joe Strummer: 'I think people ought to know that we're anti-fascist, we're anti-violence, we're anti-racist and we're pro-creative. We're against ignorance.' And their music is real fine as well.

*The Clash are at Tiffany's, Purley on Dec 18 and the Music Machine on Dec 19. They also play the Lyceum on Dec 28 and 29.*