

This interview took place over three or four days in December 1980. I was a staff writer on the NME, and each day Joe would call into our Carnaby Street office and take me round the pubs and Italian cafes of Soho. (We had to call off one session, having awoken on 9 December to overnight news reports of John Lennon's death.) It was the cover story of NME's issue dated 3 January 1981. The photos of Joe were taken by the great Pennie Smith.

I.

It was just me, Joe Strummer... and the King of Corsica. We bought a few beers and pulled up some chairs. But it wasn't hard to see that Joe was uneasy, that he had something on his mind.

Trouble was, the King was full – the way that Soho pubs always are at that time of day – and Joe had to take a seat with his back to the door. And that was making him uncomfortable.

He says this is how they got Wyatt Earp in the end. The day the townsfolk told him to relax, he'd cleared the last gunman out of town, Earp took a drink in the saloon, back to the door. He never did finish that drink.

Well, the guns might not be out for The Clash, even if the reviewers have been using 'Sandinista!' for target practice. But according to Joe, "there's a lot of people would like to see us take a dive." Scorned by diehard punks for some supposed betrayal of the true faith, and sneered at by others for following a rock'n'roll stereotype – attacked for changing too much and changing too little – small wonder Strummer feels beset by negativity. It gets him down. But he'll fight back.

"We might not be so 'hip' and mean so much to all this 'push back the frontiers of modern music' scene – but on a world-wide scale we've fucking done a lot, and given hope to a lot of people. I live here. And I walk these streets, and I'm not gonna get pushed out of town. I was thinking about going to live in Birmingham, or Australia, all these crazy ideas. But I thought, 'Shit, I've always walked these streets, so why the fuck should I stop now?' I've only wrote the best songs I could..."

Say what you like about The Clash's fourth album – it's a complex, sprawling affair and we've all got our opinions as to how much and which parts really succeed – one fact remains clear. Joe Strummer is still one of the most valuable characters around. He speaks with warmth and candour, as honest and clear-sighted a spokesman as we're likely to get. So before you clamber aboard that anti-Clash bandwagon, listen in to the things he's got to say.

Over the King of Corsica's lunchtime noises, we begin the conversation with a brief retrospective.

What kind of 1980 was it for The Clash?

Really tough, actually. I remember at the beginning of 1980 we planned to have some fun with singles, a Clash Singles Bonanza, fire them off like rockets all through the year. And then we ran into that 'Bankrobber' business. When we passed them [CBS] the tape they said "We're not putting it out," so we shut down communications in a fit of pique, and that dragged on for the whole year. So there goes the Singles Bonanza.

We've had a tough time touring as well. I've been attacked by a mob this year, suffered at the hands of a mob.

Kids pissed off by 'London Calling'?

Yeah, that's right. In Berlin, there's some German skinheads and they were saying "Oh, my grandmother likes The Clash." Understandably, they were pissed off about that. But in Hamburg these kids attacked us, going "You've sold out, you've sold out." But I figured that **they** hadn't come to that conclusion, it was rather a trendy supposition that they thought "Oh, we'll follow that." I don't think they worked it out using their own brains.

A tough year. I mean, it's changed my mind a lot. That Hamburg thing was kind of a watershed, y'know?

You were physically attacked?

Oh yeah, for sure. It was like nothing you've ever seen. They were all down the front, and if they could grab hold of a microphone lead they'd pull, and it was a tug o'war. And then it started getting really violent – and that was my fault in a way. How much can a man take, y'know? I was playing and I saw this guy, sort of using the guy in front of him as a punch-bag, trying to be all tough. So I rapped him on the head with a Telecaster, I just lost my temper. And there was blood gushing down in front of his face. It wasn't much of a cut, but it looked real horrorshow. And the **howl** out of the audience – you shoulda heard it. From then on it was jump in and punch.

After that, after I'd been taken down the cop station and charged with assaulting a German citizen by striking him over the head with a guitar, I began to think that I'd overstepped my mark. And that's what I mean by it was a watershed – violence had really controlled me for once. I became very frightened that violence had really taken me over. So since then I've decided the only way you can fight aggro in the audience is to play a really boring song.

Also, we kind of made a few decisions this year. Like, we've been going on loads of tours and we just can't do it any more. I don't mind about the physical stress and strain. But financially it makes no sense. We're gonna have to work something else out.

Is 1981 going to be any better?

Yeah, I'm resolved to enjoy it more. I feel that groups like Madness enjoy what they've achieved. And we're not allowed to do that, in the amount of flak we receive. Like, a gang of punks that I see in the street, they're more likely to jeer than say 'Hi'. I'm gonna try and enjoy it more. I mean, what the hell, we work really hard.

Why do you think those kids are hostile to you?

Obviously they just turn on to the sound, and they wanna hear, y'know, DA-DA-DA, that burst of energy. And there's nothing wrong with that, but there's plenty of groups doing it. And that's what I always say to them: Well, you've got the Upstarts doing it, lots of groups. I mean, The Ramones probably don't get people coming up to them and saying "You've sold out", right? But I wouldn't listen a Ramones album unless you tied me to a chair.

Tell us about your new stuff, 'Sandinista!'.

We've carried straight on. We've done what the hell we've wanted to do. I mean, there's no 'musical direction', y'know? People in America, they go [*mimics earnest interviewer*] "What musical direction?". And I always think, Can't they see we're just a bunch of idiots who'll do whatever we wanna do?

'London Calling' went in about five musical directions.

Yeah well this time we've probably gone in about 36 different directions. We've tried things we weren't sure we could do.

Why so many songs?

Well we sat down, right, and after a while it became apparent that we were beginning to sit on a pile of tracks. So we thought, let's see how far we can push 'em – CBS that is – as far as price goes. Originally we were intending to make just the usual double, and we weren't bothered about counting the tracks. And then we found it was gonna be a jam fitting them all on a **treble**, a tight fit. So we decided to go treble.

And I remember thinking, Is this some kind of bloated arrogance? I could imagine some US group doing it, Styx or Foreigner, all them overblown outfits. But then I figured that if we could get it for the same price as one, then fucking more power to us.

But it only counts as one to CBS, your commitment to them?

Yeah, that's the trouble with having it at a single price... Basically, after we'd recorded all this we had to decide, Are we gonna take them to court, or are we gonna put a record out? And it's really hard when you've put your life and soul on to a bit

of tape to think it's gonna stick on the shelf for another year, and when it comes out it won't be worth nothing because times have changed – especially in the nature of the lyrics. I'm not writing moon-in-June stuff that'll sound the same in 50 years.

Why that title, 'Sandinista!'?

I was singing this song 'Washington Bullets' and I didn't have 'Sandinista' written down, and I got to a verse about Nicaragua. I just came out with it, I just shouted it out. And when I got out of the vocal booth Mick said "That's the name of the album" and I started thinking about it. I only found out about the Sandinistas through a friend of mine in San Francisco sending me literature – I'd never read it in the daily rag – so we figured we might as well use that space, it'd be printed everywhere. You could have some hip phrase like 'My Hair Is Backward', y'know what I mean, but I feel it's more use like this. It's something to find out about.

Are people going to like the album?

I don't think your average punk rock fan should bother to buy it, not if he wants sort of amphetamine rock. Maybe he should get the others, the new Subs or Rejects LP would be a better buy if he wants amphetamine rock. It's *music*, y'know?... The music's gotta change. I wish people would understand that more, and allow for it.

[More about that in a while. Talk turns to the independent companies, and Joe's belief that they represent the future...]

... Well I mean, I speak as one on the end of a spear, a giant corporate spear, y'know? I'm being roasted in the flames. There wouldn't have been any blues records if it hadn't been for independents in the America in the '20s. And I think that's what happening today. Like, look at CBS. I mean, *we're* a walking disaster once we get near them anyway. They don't *deserve* to do better. They go out for lunch, they have meals that you or I would probably freak out of we saw them on our table. Seriously!

These independents, the good ones, they're the ones who are really in touch. I hope the majors just die away. I think it would be amusing if CBS moved into the place just vacated by Rough Trade.

What would you say, then, to a young group who are offered a major deal?

I'd say *don't take an advance*. A lot of groups know this already, cos they're smart. But we weren't so smart when we started out. I know it now though, through bitter experience. If you wanna take a contract, great. But make sure they ain't gonna tell you what to do, they ain't gonna give you a producer you don't want, they ain't gonna hype or hang around the studios, all this bullshit that goes on, they ain't gonna tell you what to wear. We've never had any of that.

But as for the advance, don't take it, because it seems like easy money at the time, but you just spend the whole thing on touring, gear, studio. And it ain't money for nothing cos you *owe* it to them. You dig yourself into a hole. It takes a lot of guts to dig yourself out.

I'd also like to say to anybody signing a contract with CBS, we walked into this trap that we can't get out. They've got this trap, it works like this: this is the contract [*picks up a newspaper*] with this many pages, right? And here it says "This is three years plus two years company's option." And you think, "Five years, it's a long time, but I can make it." Back here, on *this* page, it says, "If at any time the company decide to call on seven extra LPs blah blah, they can." So you think you're signing a five-year contract, and it turns out you're in there for fucking ten LPs.

That might explain why so many groups split up. I mean, we were really tempted, I tell ya. We looked at each other and said, "How far are we prepared to take this? Are we prepared to destroy the group?" And we just couldn't do it, but we were really thinking seriously. Me and Mick Jones, we were really at the end of our tether.

So, is there life after CBS?

Well [*laughs*], I can't answer that. It's so far in the future I don't know if we're gonna be here still. We have talked about this of course. I wouldn't want to be involved in a big bullshit scene like Apple, where they said "Right, we're gonna start our company and we're gonna help new talent and it's gonna be wonderful" and of course it all turns out to be a load of freeloaders.

Y'know, I've got a mate who was fucked up by Apple, a bloke called Tymon Dagg, he sings a number on 'Sandinista!' ['Lose This Skin']. He was, like, the one they signed and couldn't do anything with. Paul McCartney wrote him this song and it went **[mimics prissy pianist doing inane ditty]**: "Good golly Miss Pringle / You make me go jingle" – and this is like, one of the heaviest songwriters I ever met!

But CBS – I just think it's really criminal. They're a business, a giant corporation. They're protected by the courts of law, they've got **sixty lawyers**. And yet they stoop to a trick like that and that's how they run their business. Like, if I was to get one in here and go "Don't you think that's a bit nasty?" **[the word Joe actually used was "cunt-ish", subbed out due to NME policy at that time]** they'd go "No, I don't see anything wrong." They're just... And then society moans about how people go cat-burglaring and shoplifting, and yet this is the protected code of business. It's such hypocrisy.

[Conversation wanders from businessmen to Bernie Rhodes, "ex Clash manager", to Johnny Rotten and PiL's live album.]

Huh, a live album. It's just a joke. I don't mind that they go on about "Rock'n'roll is dead and it's gotta be killed off"; that's just a load of words, what does it actually mean? Does it mean that I'm not allowed to write a song or what? Julie Burchill too is really into this "stab the dinosaur". It's all so boring.

We've always resisted the idea of a live album. I mean, don't you think that CBS have been on to us? In fact we've turned up at a gig and there'd be a mobile parked outside the gig. And all the gear would be miked up by the time we hit the venue for the soundtrack in the afternoon, and we come in and we go "What's all this about?" "Oh, CBS'd just like to get a live" and we'd just say "Get the mikes outta here, get that truck outta here." We've just refused to have anything to do with it.

You know that thing we were saying about PiL and Burchill; "Rock'n'roll's got to die" – I agree if they mean overblown masturbation on stage, passé drivel. But they never define their terms. Don't they earn **their** living from the rock-buying public? They do.

That aside, PiL are moving away from rock as it's sounded for years.

PiL sounds to me like Uriah Heep on Mandrax, that's the first thing I said when I heard them. But I'm no bloody expert on their music. Levene's a brilliant guitar player. He pretends he doesn't know any of them rock'n'roll solos but he does. I know, I've seen him play 'em.

Music's gotta change, though. Cos who wants punk to be like heavy metal? There's no difference, and who'd have thought that would ever come to pass?

Are The Clash innovative, musically?

Musically? I think we're learning to be, yeah. We're not afraid to play around. What we're doing now is experimenting. But I'll only put on a record if it's worth listening to. I hate music that's so concerned with being 'new' that it forgets to have any soul, y'know? We experiment, but with those limitations: it's gotta be worth listening to.

I'm sure a lot of groups don't bother to apply that. They want to be smarty-pantsy and they don't think what fucking use it is to a stoker in Aberdeen, is it going to make HIM feel better, or what?

But innovative... we are in some ways. Like we were one of the first groups that dared play reggae. We've really fused some stuff. We are interested in mixing it up. I've gotta say that hearing stuff like 'Banana Republic' from The Boomtown Rats – it just makes me feel **ashamed**. And hearing 'The Tide Is High' [by Blondie] – those two make me ashamed about white reggae, make me wanna puke.

Of course, the other innovation is politics.

Yeah, and on that score we're getting a lot more political in our old age. As I get older my politics are clarifying themselves, becoming more pointed. More potent...

My politics are definitely left of centre. Yet I believe in self-determination. I don't believe in Soviet Russia at all, because there's hardly any choice. You've still got a ruling class riding around in big cars. Our bass player went to Moscow to see for

himself and he said that people walk around like this [*heads down*]. Tourists and party members have special shops, but your normal Joe Russian isn't even allowed in the bloody shop, never mind that he's got no dough to spend in them. And where's that at?

I believe in socialism because it seems more humanitarian, rather than every man for himself and I'm all right and Jack and all those asshole businessmen with all the loot. But you can't bring socialism in with orders. I mean, look at the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. They just massacred and butchered the whole country to make them to do what they were told. That's ten times worse than the shit we've got going on here.

When I left art school, I took a dive: no future, no skill, nothing. So I just laboured and doled, fucked off around the place. Took a job when I was really skint, if I could get one, got fired every time for late timekeeping. The usual.

And I made up my mind from viewing society from *that* angle. That's where *I'm* from and that's where I've made my decisions from. That's why I believe in socialism. When I was on my uppers, every door was slammed in my face. Once I asked a lady outside a sweetshop to buy me a bar of chocolate. I'd been hitching all day and I was really hungry. I just thought I'd turn around and try society on. And this lady came along and I said, "Would you give me the rest of the money for this bar of chocolate?" And she just said "No, why should I?" Things like that annoyed me.

D'you want a drink?

Nah, let me get it. I'm supposed to be the big pop star around here.

II.

I really think that we've got to devise a plan for this country. I'm not interested in the others, really. I mean, we put out records world wide, but "home is where the heart is," it's really true. We spent a month in New York, recording in Jimi Hendrix's studios, and when we got back the sun was shining on Leicester Square, y'know? It felt great to be back, just to stand there.

We've gotta devise some sort of plan. Cos all these groups like the BM [*the far right British Movement*], they're using patriotism to recruit. And that's my number one guideline: if anyone gives me a patriotic pitch I know he's an asshole, I know he's a rip-off merchant, I know he's trying to have one over on me.

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel."

It's true! It really is!

And yet there's something genuine there too.

Mmm. I've only been able to detect it in myself in the last couple of years. Whereas before, I'd been shat on by the system, as it were, and seen it from the underside – any patriotism at all made me wanna throw up. As far as I saw it, we're all earthlings – not English or French. And if we ever discover a new civilisation, that's gonna get more in perspective. I mean, think of us all on this planet, fighting and shooting each other. You crack up thinking about it. That's how I used to think. I still do, mind, but I do feel patriotic, y'know, when England does something good. But what about Northern Ireland, how can you feel patriotic with all that going on? We gotta sort something out.

It's complex, but with The Clash you're accused of just sloganising problems – maybe you can't do anything else in a two-minute rock song?

I think that criticism belongs to someone else, perhaps Tom Robinson in his early days, or groups who followed our line, tried to crash in our territory. Cos I always understood that you had to be *personally involved*. Or, you have to feel for something before you can write about it. If you really feel for something then you don't write slogans, you write truths. You're really on the ball. Obviously in a rock song the situation's gotta be simplified down from, say, a grand scale debate, when you can take into account all of the nuances. But I just don't see why subject matter has to be so bloody *bland*...

But, y'know, I'm getting more political as I get older. And I think there's gotta be a plan, and a party. I mean, I've always hated parties because I don't believe in toeing the party line. But there must be some way that we can get ourselves together

here, not let Thatcher walk all over us. Like, Foot's going on about unilateral disarmament – and what the fuck have we got to lose by disarming? As soon as they start the argy-bargy Russia's gonna dump missiles on us straight away anyway, I think Britain should show the way now. Kick Thatcher out. Get Foot or Benn in. Disarm.

Everybody's taken it for granted these days about doomsday. And all these fuckers getting bunkers together. I mean, big deal.

I'm getting kinda religious and all. I really don't believe that we just get born and die and that's your one shot and that's it. I really feel that we're individual spirits and souls.

What? But religion is usually the point where people get off being concerned about social matters, the here-and-now world.

But I'm not talking about 'born again' and 'saved'. All I know is that we gotta clear this mess up, here and now, by physical action. And I also know, I don't 'think', I **know** that when we die we go on. There's a difference between saying "I'm born again, Jesus is here to save me, and that's all I'm gonna talk about for ever more. Amen." Bollocks! That ain't the case. I'm interested in every bloody thing, like how much people work for and why they should bloody bother, and who the fuck's getting the profits, y'know? I'm into Karl Marx, really heavily...

[Joe runs quickly and accurately through Marx's Theory of Surplus Value.]

But there's no education going on in Britain at the moment. I mean, when I was at school, I hated the entire thing, the boring way they put it over. And yet nowadays, now I'm 28, I find myself vitally interested in going to buy books they were trying to give us at school, but they just didn't put it right. There's something basically wrong somewhere.

We've got to educate the young, otherwise they'll just grow up with all this shit and see no way out. Then it just takes the fucking BM to come along and go "Blame it all on the blacks" and in fact it's not the blacks, it's the rich white people that are to blame, the white fat cats. The Stock Exchange and Wall Street. And yet, what does that skinhead from East Ham know about the Stock Exchange? And yet that's what's killing him off, and he doesn't know anything about it.

[And now... the dreaded Clashbag. A collection of questions, posed by anonymous members of the NME team, hastily scrawled and thrown into a plain brown envelope, to be drawn at random by the man himself. Starting with ...]

Are you any nearer opening the club you've been talking about for three years?

That's easy to answer – No [laughs]. We did have a place sussed out, the Lucky Seven, but the landlord wanted to turn it into a snooker hall, and when it came to fighting them over that, we really couldn't beat their aces, because a snooker hall makes no noise – the clink of balls – and we were proposing mayhem. It was no contest really... I dunno, perhaps I haven't got the clout I thought I had. Perhaps you need a ring of businessmen who can beat them at their own game.

What should unemployed kids be doing with their time?

I found my life was a drag until I linked up with other people by forming a group. Our life was full from the moment we decided to do something. Whereas before we'd just been lying around Squat City. And I'd say if anyone was unemployed and bored out of their minds they should sit down and figure out what they think'd be great, then go out and try make it happen – cos there's plenty of other people out there.

To **connect** with other people and communicate with them, that's when things really happen and are really exciting. Like the beginning of punk, the whole place seemed to be crawling with people who had some idea of what they wanted to do. It's too easy just to throw years of your life away.

When I was younger I thought time was eternal, but growing up I began to know how long a year is, and it ain't that long.

What can bands and audiences do about the British Movement threat?

Well, speaking for the bands I'd say a very practical way they can help is by being very careful what they write isn't misconstrued. Like, some people write a song slagging off the NF [**the National Front, another far right party**] and they write

it from the stance of “I’m a Nazi and I’m a bloody idiot”, but sometimes people don’t quite get the subtleties and that’s dangerous – I know I’ve done it.

And as for audiences, being British we have this thing where you leave people alone, that cool behaviour, not like Italians. And I think audiences have got to shake themselves out of it. An audience of 2,000 people will cheerfully let 30 people ruin the show. They don’t want to get involved. But they’re gonna have to get involved.

Favourite bands?

I saw The Stray Cats just the other week, and they were really great. Just three guys playing their hearts out, no hype about it. I think ‘Runaway Boys’ is a great record – perhaps it even tops ‘Ace Of Spades’! But apart from Stray Cats and Motorhead [laughs]... At the moment I’m really into Gregory Isaacs, great voice. So many of those reggae guys can really *sing*. We all shout over here, and they sing.

What painters/art movements have influenced The Clash?

Paul Simonon’s our resident artist, he left art school the last. I used to enjoy pop art. They had a great exhibition about ten years ago at the Hayward Gallery, and that was mind-boggling. Paul though, he’s obviously into Jackson Pollock. He’s really into customising his bass. He’ll unscrew his scratchplate and lay it on the floor; he kinda walks around it for an hour, and then he just goes *flick* with a bit of blue, and then another hour, and then *flick* with a bit of red – he’s an artist.

The Clash: What went wrong/what went right?

What went wrong was we didn’t realise exactly what the structure of the business was. And what went right was that we could handle that, and not give in.

Many things went wrong in the early days. Like that day we turned up for rehearsals and Terry Chimes said he was leaving. I could have hit him over the head with a spade...

And then we fell out with Bernie [Rhodes]. Bernie lost control of us. His scene was not to give us any money in case it ruined us, which is the way you deal with kids – which he thought we were. But he underestimated us. Like people say Bernie wrote our songs, but that’s not true at all. All he said was, “Don’t write love songs, write something that you care about, that’s real.” And it’s a pity we fell out with him cos we made a good team.

But he got really funny when The Clash all started to happen. We wouldn’t see him from week to week. If he wanted to communicate he’d just send a minion – inferring he was too busy elsewhere to deal with us.

You know ‘Complete Control’ which Mick wrote about the record company, in fact we got the phrase off Bernie one night in that pub in Wardour Street, The Ship. I remember him going – he’d obviously been talking to Malcolm and was trying to be the master puppeteer – going “Look, I want *complete control*, I want complete control.’ And we were just laughing at him.

But what went right was that we didn’t explode, or implode. It was desperately hip at one point, when the Pistols jacked it in, everyone was going, “Of course they did, man. That’s the ultimate end to the ultimate group.” And I was thinking, that’s just a cop-out.

What happened to the TV show you were planning to launch?

I haven’t found anyone who’s interested. I think The Clash exist very much outside the society of this town – I mean the people who run the TV, even the music industry. We’re really outside of it, no communication with anybody. Like, things happen, and I read about it afterwards. When they have a big bash and it says “Anybody who was anybody was there”, I find out about it when I buy the paper the following week! And I think that’s pretty good for us, it helps us appreciate the realities of the situation rather than be lulled into any false sense of ‘everything’s cool, man, let’s have a party.’ I’m glad we’re outsiders in that respect. But this is where it falls down, whenever it comes to getting anything together, getting a businessman to take you seriously. It’s very difficult.

And you won’t do Top Of The Pops.

There's this farce that's been going on for ten years, where they take the group into the studios to re-record the backing track for TOTP, they take the BBC engineer down to the pub for a drink, meanwhile they swop the tapes with the original tapes of the single, and they throw away what they just pretended to record. I mean, this goes on in 12 studios in London every week, the same charade is played out – which we haven't had to go through not having been on the show, nor ever going to be either.

Last question: how have The Clash stayed together when everyone else splits up?

Hooray! Something good, something I can boast about! It's not often you get a question like that. I feel a warm glow all over me. I really do. It's like I was saying: walking out is a cop-out. And that's the way we've always thought, and that's why we haven't done it. It gets rough a lot of the time, but we've just been really open with each other. And we know that to say bollocks and storm off is a cop-out. We've often *felt* like it.

And perhaps there's another reason. I know this helps. Sometimes you think "That's it! That's the last straw! I never wanna hear the word Clash again." Then you go home and you think "Hang on a minute. We're not gonna leave it to *The Jam*, are we? I know The Jam aren't the be-all and end-all, and I'm gonna stick around to prove it.

III.

Thrown out the pub at closing time we make our way to an Italian café on the edge of Soho. Pessimistically, Joe ponders the commercial rewards of a life in show business. The Clash's stance on record prices – such as insisting that the triple album be sold for the price of a single album – is not shared by their record company. Accordingly, the financial sacrifice involved falls largely on the group. When they sell 200,001 copies of 'Sandinista!' in Britain, then their total royalties will amount to 30 pence. Publishing royalties will also be payable on the basis of a single album. Recently Joe was refused a mortgage.

Nor have the LP's prospects been greatly helped, he feels, by its December release date – just in time to get buried by the Christmas rush. "There's only two categories of people that put records out in December," he says, stirring and staring into a cup of cappuccino. "That's lunatics – and superstars."

And which category are you lot, then?

Joe laughs quietly. "The first," he replies. "Definitely the first."