



# JOYCE MILLMAN WRITES

ESSAYS ON MUSIC, TV & MORE BY JOYCE MILLMAN

## THE CLASH

### Joe Strummer at 60

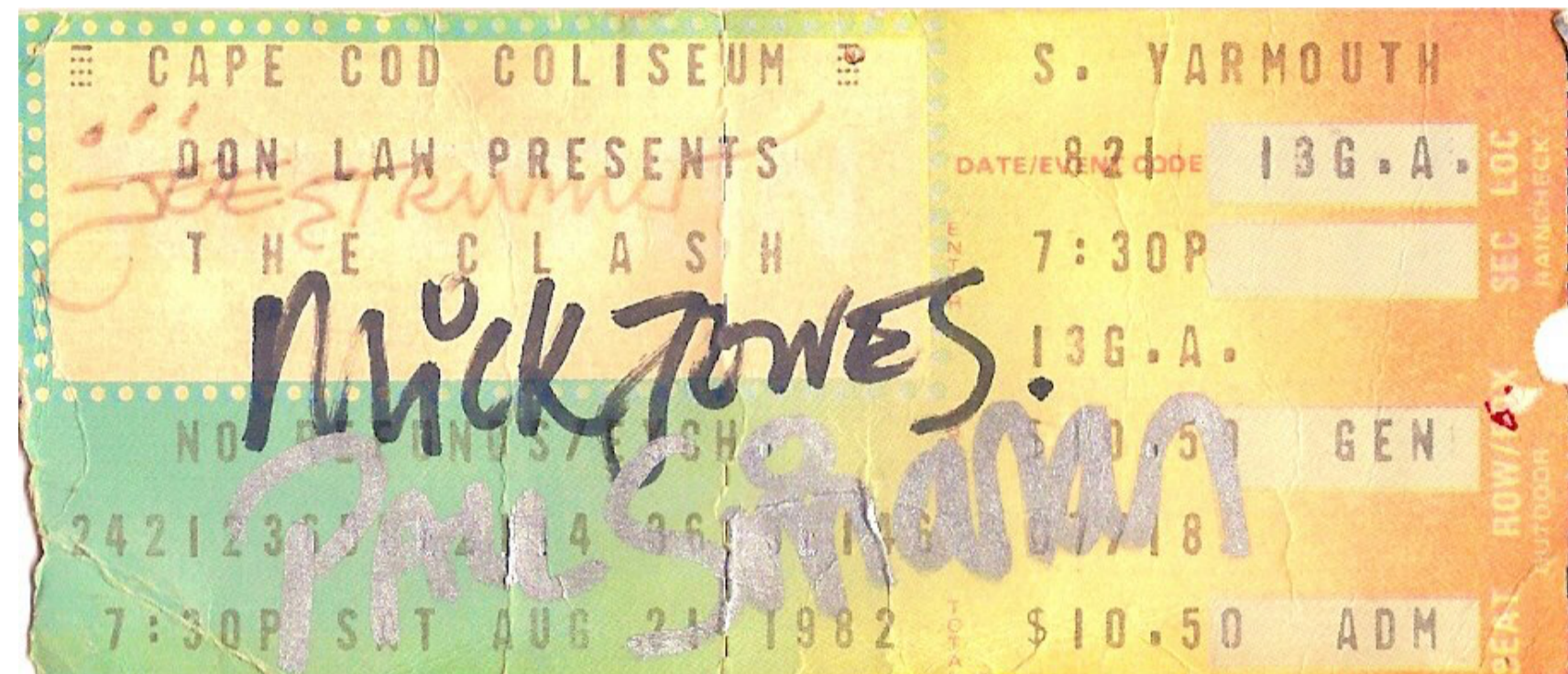
August 21, 2012 Joyce Millman 8 Comments

Joe Strummer would have turned 60 years old on August 21. That this vital, generous, tempestuous, brilliant, flawed, fearless man is not here to mark the occasion still feels like a punch in the gut.

In the decade since his sudden death at the age of 50 (of a congenital heart abnormality), there's been a tendency to pin angel wings on Strummer, which is the last thing he deserves. He was no savior, he was just a musician who wasn't afraid to speak difficult truths, who had a deep curiosity about cultures other than his own, who leaned proudly left and believed that music could be a consciousness-raising medium to combat inequality and oppression. He made a lot of mistakes; he let pettiness towards Clash mate Mick Jones ruin the only band that mattered. But the foundation that the Clash laid as a political band, and as a musical melting pot, remains solid. The world-shaking roots-rock-reggae punk charge Strummer, Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummers Topper Headon and Terry Chimes set on their first three records still sounds fresh, alive, shattering, today. The reggae and rap they championed (and incorporated into their sound) have become the dominant underpinning of pop music today. In the early '80s, I saw Clash fans boo opening act Mikey Dread, the band's dub reggae cohort, off the stage, and throw cups of beer at Grandmaster Flash opening one of the legendary "Clash on Broadway" shows at Bond's in Times Square. The children of those fans are now happily listening to dubstep and rap, and ain't karma one efficient bitch?

Looking back at Strummer and the Clash through the prism of time, I find that I can't separate my fan feelings from my critical judgment. They were a thrill of sound and righteous fury and, yeah, I admit it, weird sex appeal. My memories of Strummer now are a jumble of images, emotions, events imperfectly recalled. The way his left leg pumped in time with his furious down-stroke strumming. His piercing, shining eyes and Dickensian teeth (when he got them fixed, it felt vaguely like selling out, but in fairness, maybe the guy just wanted to be able to chew his food). That gruff voice that crackled with anger and humor, often at the same time. My first Clash show, March 9, 1980, Boston's Orpheum Theater, and how dangerous and transgressive it all felt to be attending this riot set to music, which was like nothing I had ever experienced before, or since. A crazy adventure in New York seeing the Clash play the steaming sauna of Bond's, which felt like (and looking back at the media coverage, was) the center of the universe that night.

There were back-to-back shows on the *Combat Rock* tour, Sept. 7 and 8, 1982, riding the Orpheum balcony as it bounced up and down from the vibration of stomping feet. Weekly trips to the out of town newsstands in Boston for the British music papers for Clash news, and indie record stores for their latest import singles. And a night at the decrepit Cape Cod Coliseum in 1982, when I met the Clash for the first and only time and was too wobbly to say anything of substance, not that it mattered. Strummer was silent and either exhausted or stoned; his eyes were hooded and evasive. I still have the ticket stub that they signed for me. Strummer's signature, in ballpoint pen, has faded away and is barely readable next to the brighter permanent Sharpie autographs of Jones and Simonon. As I look at it now, I realize something: The date of the show was August 21, 1982. It was Strummer's 30th birthday.



#### The Best of Joe

1. **"London Calling"** (from *London Calling*, the Clash). "The ice age is coming/ The sun's zooming in ..." Within an apocalyptic vision of a world on the edge of collapse from war, greed, environmental folly, Strummer tries to rally a ragtag opposition — an Occupy Movement before its time? — with his cawing, spine-tingling rebel yells.



2. **"(White Man) in Hammersmith Palais"** (from *The Clash*). Strummer speaking the unvarnished truth about youthful indifference to history, both musical and political. But rather than merely point fingers at others, Strummer saves the harshest sneers for his own predicament. Is it possible to retain your integrity when you're "turning rebellion into money"?

3. **"Safe European Home"** (from *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, the Clash). Joe and Mick go to Jamaica and find that, despite being ganja-and-reggae-besotted musicians, they're still white Englishmen. What it's like to be looked at as an outsider in a culture that you love; a lesson in racial sensitivity for all concerned. And, damn, those guitars are ferocious.

4. **"I Fought the Law"** (from *The Clash*). One of the greatest cover versions ever. The Clash's punk essence boiled down into 2:38. Louder than hell.



5. **"Armageddon Time"** (single, The Clash; also on the anthology *Black Market Clash*). A cover of Jamaican musician Willi Williams' song, released in versions of various lengths, in which the band falls headlong into dub reggae. Strummer sounds fierce and committed within the hypnotic groove, crying, "A lot of people won't get no supper tonight ... A lot of people won't get no justice tonight ..."

6. **"Straight to Hell"** (from *Combat Rock*, the Clash). A powerful, mysterious "Amerasian blues" about the human cost of imperialism that's completely fresh and musically relevant today. And the picture it paints of the most powerful country on earth closing its doors to would-be immigrants is even more heartbreaking.

7. **"The Magnificent Seven"** (from *Sandinista!*, the Clash). Irresistible old-school, boombox rap, circa 1981, from the massive, brave, eccentric, forward-looking *Sandinista!*.

8. **"This Is England"** (from *Cut the Crap*, the Clash). One last gasp of greatness from Strummer's otherwise depressing post-Jones version of the band. An amazing song, really, a passionate blast of hard truth aimed at the UK's deeply ingrained racism in an increasingly multi-cultural society.

9. **"Get Down Moses"** (from *Streetcore*, Joe Strummer and the Mescaleros). Strummer's last studio album with his post-Clash roots-folk-world-music outfit is filled with gems like this one, a nimble reggae-grooved rejection of fundamentalist religious dogma.

10. **"Clampdown"** (from *London Calling*). An anti-fascist, anti-capitalist workers' anthem that needs to be sung long and loud in Strummer's honor. "Let fury have the hour/ Anger can be power/ Do you know that you can use it". Hell, yeah!



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From *The Belladonna* (9/27/18): Brett Kavanaugh Calendar Entries from the Summer of 1982 that Were Definitely Not Written By Someone in 2018 Pretending to Be a Teenager in the Summer of 1982

From *McSweeney's* (6/4/18): I'm a Copy of "Born to Run" in a Bed Bath & Beyond and I'm Pulling Out of Here to Win

From *The Belladonna* (4/22/18): Donald Trump Is Pleased to Announce the Very First Pollution Day! (Formerly Known As Earth Day)

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From *McSweeney's* (5/19/17): Dream Vacations for People Who Can't Take Another Day of this Trump Nightmare

From *The Village Voice* (4/18/17): 'Veep' Persisted

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From *The Village Voice* (11/3/16): Her Majesty

From *The New Republic* (9/21/16): Outside Baseball

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From *The New Republic* (6/10/16): Maya & Marty: A Courageous Throwback

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From *The Toast* (10/10/13): Stars, They're Just Like Me

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