

MUSIC: JAMES JOHNSON meets the unlikely teenage hero who was born with a silver safety-pin in his mouth . . .



Joe Strummer, alias John Mellor.

AT THE age of nine, John Mellor was sent off to a private boarding school by his father, a high-ranking official in the Foreign Office. He graduated to public school and for a spell his family entertained hopes that he might follow his father into the civil service.

But John Mellor has distinguished himself in other ways. Some years after leaving school, he changed his name from John Mellor to Joe Strummer and emerged as the front man of the notorious punk group the Clash.

Now Joe Strummer has all the mannerisms and style of a bona-fide punk working-class hero. His accent sounds like it has been developed exclusively in Battersea. A sneer is frequently plastered across his face. Something seems to have gone dreadfully wrong with his teeth since they are chipped and yellow enough to suggest a severe dental problem.

As for the Clash, they have survived the initial punk boom to remain at the forefront of the new-wave. They continue to take a stance that is anti-authority in all shapes and forms while their name

sometimes appears to have been spray-painted by fans around every tower-block in Britain.

The bleak world they inhabit on the underside of British society centered around working-class teenage frustration and lack of opportunity was superbly captured in the film *Rude Boy*. Yet Strummer will admit that his family background might not initially suggest he was qualified to become a leading spokesman for the punk tribes.

Manual jobs

"I suppose my best known remark will always be 'I'm not really working-class at all,'" he says. "I've been thinking about this a lot lately and I've come round to thinking that in some ways only somebody from my background could be doing what I do."

"I had my chance of a bite of the apple and I turned it down. I could have gone to university and got whatever nice job people go to university for, but I didn't choose

to do that. Others in the group like Mick (Jones) and Paul (Simon) who are more working-class maybe at the back of their mind don't despise that kind of life so much because they've never had it offered."

"I dropped out of it on the day when I first decided to sit at the back of the class at school."

From school Strummer went to art college for a year then spent the mid-Seventies in a series of manual jobs before starting to busk in subways. He joined a couple of groups before helping to launch the Clash at the advent of punk rock.

Now, ironically, he could be seen substantially more than his father. The groups among these leading British rock invasion of the United States.

In New York, new clubs like *Harrah*, *Heat* and *Mudd* are attracting large crowds basically on a diet of New Wave music, while discs like *Xenon* or *Studio 54* are emptying or are closed. There is now the unusual spectacle of some new American groups attempting to sing in English

accents as if they were brought up in the East End. And the Clash's recent album, *London Calling*, is firmly planted in the American Top Thirty.

Says Strummer: "There always used to be argy-bargy between my old man and myself like between any children and parents. I think when I left school he thought I was a complete idiot and there was no hope for me and I spent about five or six years in the wilderness."

'Half-baked'

"Now I think he actually respects what I've done. Both my folks have become kind of rock 'n' roll experts. They read all the papers and can tell you all about the Sex Pistols or whatever."

The Clash tried to prevent the controversial *Rude Boy* from being released because they felt it was too long and because they felt some of the racial overtones put in by directors David Minges and Jack Hazzan were half-baked.

However, Strummer says he was

amazed when some film critics not only found the film distasteful but also appeared to raise doubts that it did not present an accurate picture of one section of British society.

He says: "All I can say to them is that they should get on a bus one day and take a look for themselves. Where do these people live? Do they just move forever between Fleet Street and Kensington? They could take a 20p bus ride from the centre of London in just about any direction and check out life for themselves. I mean the guys who made the film just let the cameras roll. They didn't take a block of flats and graffiti them up like they might in Hollywood. They just rolled the cameras around a graffiti in Brickton."

Meanwhile, for the Clash the philosophies that spawned the original explosion of punk rock still largely hold good.

"Maybe we were sometimes wet behind the ears, naive and stupid but I couldn't care less. The thing about punk was that before there wasn't any music for teenage kids and the music business was talking everybody for a ride."

The big groups were mostly touring Europe with three articulated lorries of equipment. They smothered themselves out of the market. Punk came along and said, 'we're going to bring it all back home'.