

SMASHED HITS Pop lyrics re-appraised by the Magazine

The Hammersmith Palais, which closes this week, was immortalised by The Clash's (White Man) In Hammersmith Palais, a song Joe Strummer ended his gigs with right up to his death in 2002. But what's the song all about?

The Britain of The Clash is no longer with us. "I live by the river" was the clarion call of the dispossessed in their 1979 hit London Calling, nowadays, it's the boast of a Thameside double-mortgage condo-dweller.

And the scene of the previous year's (White Man) In Hammersmith Palais is now to be demolished for an office-and-restaurant complex.

In 1919, a former tram shed in west London became the Hammersmith Palais De Danse, the beginning of thousands of nights of jazz, swing, pop, rock, bhangra and ska - as well as the School Disco phenomenon.

And it's a reggae all-nighter at the Palais that Clash frontman Joe Strummer's describing in the track.

Reggae DJ Don Letts had thought the event would be up the Clash's alley, but lyric starts from the seething Strummer's disappointment at the apollitical poptiness he witnessed - "onstage they ain't got no roots rock rebel".

Strummer had hoped for reggae to be the voice of struggle, like other white British youths before and since - the reason we have the coinage "rustafarian" being that many of them are, like Strummer, public schoolboys and/or diplomats' sons.

But then the lyric takes an unexpected turn into gonzo repertoire with a cast including Robin Hood, Paul Weller and Adolf Hitler. What it's "about" depends on who you ask: the death knell of punk? A call for racial unity? An attack on gun culture?

This ambiguity was unlike punk's previous stark messages - Tom Robinson saw it as The Clash realising that they could "afford to admit the contradictions that we all face."

Certainly, there's disillusionment and fear of futility in there. The Jam take a pasting for their off-the-peg jackets and "turning rebellion into money" (a barb some thought was literally rich from a band signed to CBS for £100,000) and the new "solution" proposed ("Why not phone up Robin Hood and ask him for some wealth distribution?") strikes the same ambivalent note as the various versions of The Beatles' Revolution.

What makes it fun?

There's ambivalence, too, about violence. On the one hand, the White Man is isolated and scared of guns - "please, Mister, leave me alone", on the other, Strummer took to ad-libbing "and good for you" after the verse about UK punk rockers "fighting for a good place under the lighting" - at least until sideman Mick Jones persuaded him that the band had hosted one too many skinhead invasions-cum-bloodbaths.

So the White Man sees a problem, but can't tell what to do. How is a song about isolation and confusion so well loved, so often covered, and so much fun?

The answer's partly given in another piece of onstage patter - Strummer liked to introduce the song with the advice "for this one, you move your arse sideways instead of up and down."

Sonically, this was a new noise from "a big fat riff group", as Strummer described the 1976-77 Clash.

Phased hi-hats, acoustic guitars, harmonica and backing vocals play off the "sideways" reggae rhythm - it's undeniably a London song, but it's a London where ska and hippies and punk and rock melt into one another - and so there's playful joy there too, clearer in the music than in the words.

Punk's Gettysburg

What we get from the lyric is a journey. Early on, Strummer despairs that the "many black ears" are listening to pop rather than a rebel message. Then, as if anticipating Don Letts' later rejoinder that for Jamaicans, "the ghetto is something you get out of", he weighs up the pros and cons of armed resistance, gives up on his fellow punks, and gets a rise out of himself, "the all-night drug-prowling wolf who looks so sick in the sun".

What makes White Man stand out is that the journey carries on after it 4021 are up. Former NME journalist Danny Baker calls it "punk's Gettysburg Address" - and while the UK has changed, this song has weathered better than some of punk's starker 45s.

In 2007, modern-day Strummers lambast hip hop for being more interested in bling than in civil rights, "punk" groups are far faker than they were in 1979 and still the "youths" haven't agreed on a "solution". La lucha continua! - solidarity over time - as the South American Strummers say.

The wrecking ball is still headed for the Palais, though - and with the London Astoria going the same way, there's a lot less space for a certain kind of gig: the kind between the pub backroom and the pocket-emptying stadium event.

Punks may be cheered that (White Man) In Hammersmith Palais will echo around the shell for a while, following a farewell gig from The Good The Bad And The Queen with The Clash's Paul Simonon on bass. Don Letts is DJing, Mick Jones is expected - and Joe Strummer? He won't be there for obvious reasons, but perhaps he'd have had more fun at this concert than at the one that spawned the song.

Smashed Hits is written by Alan Connor

Send us your comments, using the form below:

The last gig at the Palais is actually by the Fall on Sunday, the true inheritors of Strummer's mantle. Albarn's supergroup venture would have left him cold, I suspect.

R. Totale, West London

That song is a legendary, iconic song that I have heard well over a hundred times and I will listen to a hundred more. that clash are the greatest band to have ever lived. rest in peace joe strummer 1952-2002 Joe Wilson, Aylesbury

Actually the line "they've got Burtons suits they think it's funny, turning rebellion into money" was aimed at Power Pop groups such as the (long forgotten) Pleasers and Advertising who were being hyped up by sections of the music press at the time as "the next big thing" rather than the Jam. That's according to an interview that Strummer gave to the NME at the time.

jimmy , Salford, UK

It's interesting to see how attitudes have changed and yet, at the same time, remained exactly how they were when this song was written. Everyone still complains about the violence, the 'youths', the drugs and everything else, and yet we still do nothing about it. The fake bands are still outselling the bands with a harder message and yet the fake bands will be the ones that are forgotten sooner. Joe was one of the great preachers of his era, and although some of the Clash's songs were very bleak, he still had enough honesty to say 'we're making money from this'. Hopefully his songs will be remembered for the a long time yet.

Heather, Wolverhampton

Yet another piece of history being destroyed for the benefit of the few! and a clear indication of how society is still going to lead long into total meltdown in regards to entertainment enjoyment by those who enjoy a different culture of music.

Mike gregory, Reigate

The venue Strummer sang of attained a mythic status quite quickly after he penned the song, but the type of gig and event he went to there was already long over more than 25 years ago. So whether it is torn down or not doesn't really matter me (nor to the majority of music and Clash fans. I suspect)because never having been to the Hammersmith Palais, I only have a snapshot of what it was like in my head at that point in time thanks to Joe. I doubt very much whether it was actually ever like that or would have been if I had seen a gig there. If bands still wanted to play there and fans still wanted to see them, promoters would be clamouring to book it and it would be thriving. This is not as much of a kick in the teeth as say CBGBs in NYC being re-developed. It was still breaking new bands and still held the magic and appeal of the legendary 75-77 era, when it was re-developed last year.

MikeB, Dundee

Reply to David Ely - Yes mate Joe Strummer was one of those middle class punks, but bless him anyway he was a good musician and social comminator. Rest in peace Hammersmith Palais - expensive apartments going up in its place?

robert martin, Glasgow

There will be some other Hammersmith Palais. Rebellion has more energy than conformity. Long Live Those Who Are Not Like Me! (Seriously)

Nigel Macarthur, London, England

It's just a song, a very good one. Why do people always have to read politics into music.. Just enjoy it for what it is, entertainment.

Bob, uk

The Hammersmith Palais is also the subject of a song by a short-lived punk-rock group featuring former Hanoi Rocks singer Michael Monroe. Their name? Demolition. Does anybody else see the irony?

Ian, Dundee

Saw The Stranglers there in 1979 and a big shame it's being torn down but The Clash being held up as an iconic sybol in mentioning the name of a venue in music they "ripped off" from another generation - what did they know! Anyway, as the classic cliché goes: "All there songs do sound the same".

Dominic Maher , London

Following on from Heather's very well-made point, it's funny that 30 years on, people are still discussing Clash lyrics. At the time we used to sit around for hour discussing them. Well, first trying to decipher them, then discussing them.

Adrian, London

Mr Connor and the comments are very indicative of how self-centred and navel-contemplating are a particular age group. The Hammersmith Palais was a wonderful social centre to help people feel better about their hum drum lives: they could go out and dance. Then later it was where real bands could play rather than the derivative noise makers like Clash, bands like the most famous British and American jazz musicians. I am pretty sure the Beatles first headlining concert in London was there in December, what, 1964? or 1963? I know the Yardbirds played before them and played the Beatles off the park. Some fellow from New Jersey played his first concert in England there, Joe Cocker came back to life there in, perhaps, 1982. I saw the Rumble in the Jungle there, live, when stiff 50 year old City Slickers in pinstriped suits and navvies like me hugged each other in tears when Ali won. This is history!

Andrew Johnston, Boston USA

Saw my first ever concert at The Palais - The Undertones A great venue which will be sadly missed.

Mike Jones, Windsor England

Oh come on people! This is the Hammersmith Palais we're talking about. Whatever glorious days it might have known have, in recent years, largely given way to old-skool garage and hardcore raves and... School Disco! The latter's only worthwhile contribution to music having been to set new standards for irony in pop music, as thousands of people almost young enough to be still wearing compulsory school uniforms from 9am-3.30pm (whilst resenting it and trying to modify it) danced around in a school uniform to tracks they are too young to remember in the name of nostalgia that they won't appreciate for another decade. The fact that they are being tricked into conforming with this uniform mentality to a few 80s anti-conformist punk hits, in the very venue where their parents saw the bands live is just the icing on the cake.

Alex Blanco, Hammersmith & Fulham, London

Never went to the palais, but the song was the Clash's best - sheer brilliance. Joe may be gone, but what a legacy he left.

Ken, Brussels

All this "right on" ageing punk stuff is OK; but what about Motorheads "No Sleep Til Hamersmith" Tour Album.

Chris Toms, Kirkbride Cumbria

Many a great nite spent at the Palais.Went to my first gig their (without telling my mum & dad)Good Times!!!! All the old haunts of my youth are sadly disappearing.!!

Angela Maisey, London

Saw Talking Heads there in 1980 supported by U2! Haven't been back since but I'll be there on Sunday for the last Palais gig!

J. Temperance, NW Essex

RE: Hammersmith Palais It shouldn't be all about the Clash. Wot about the days in the Palais when it was Joe Loss and his trio of crooners, Larry Gretton, Ross McManus and Ross Brennan, very likely the greatest compendium in live appearance. No moshing then. I remember that I spent every Wednesday night along with hundreds of other young folk swinging and jiving and swaying and hugging!

Dickie, NY USA

"Motorhead's 'No Sleep Til Hammersmith' album"...? Some of you are confusing the Palais with the Hammersmith Odeon - Doh!

Alan G, London

Sadly people start to believe things that are not true. Whilst Andrew in Boston would like to think that Bruce made his debut at the Palais, it was actually down the road at the Hammersmith Odeon.

Neil Osborn, London

The Television Personalities song Happy Families includes the words (quoted from memory, "Mr & Mrs Strummer are having a party to celebrate the birthday of their baby everyone's invited, don't be late half past eight, Hammersmith Palais"

No Sleep Til Hammersmith is about the Odeon, a different venue altogether.

gladhops, London

How sad! I saw James Brown there in 1985, my first trip to London! With all the GOV support of the arts, can't this historic be added to the same subsidy list as the pile of straw across the river? (Shakespeare outdoor theater)

Doug Thoms, NYC, NY

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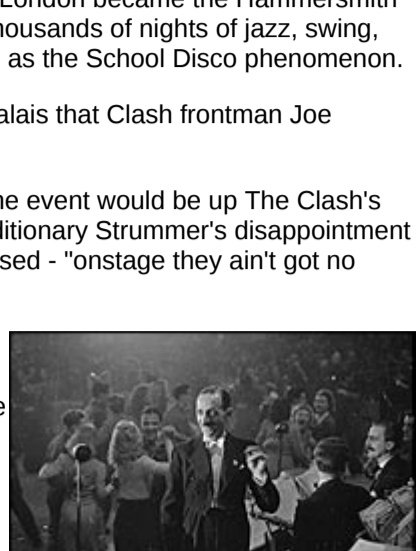
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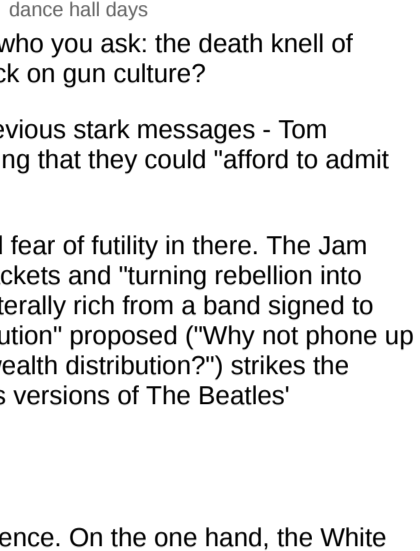
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The Palais history dates back to the old cinema hall days



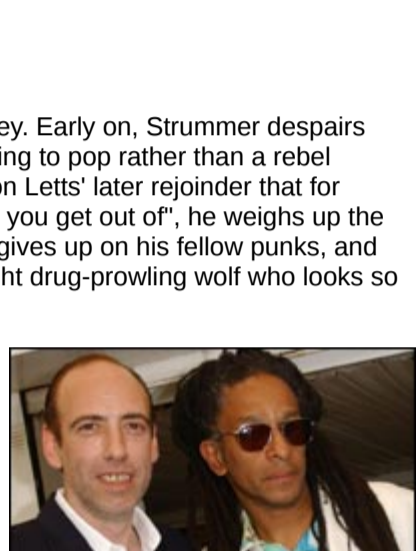
Don Letts, right, with former chair guitarist Mick Jones



Joe Strummer, centre



Joe Strummer, centre



Don Letts, right, with former chair guitarist Mick Jones



Joe Strummer, centre