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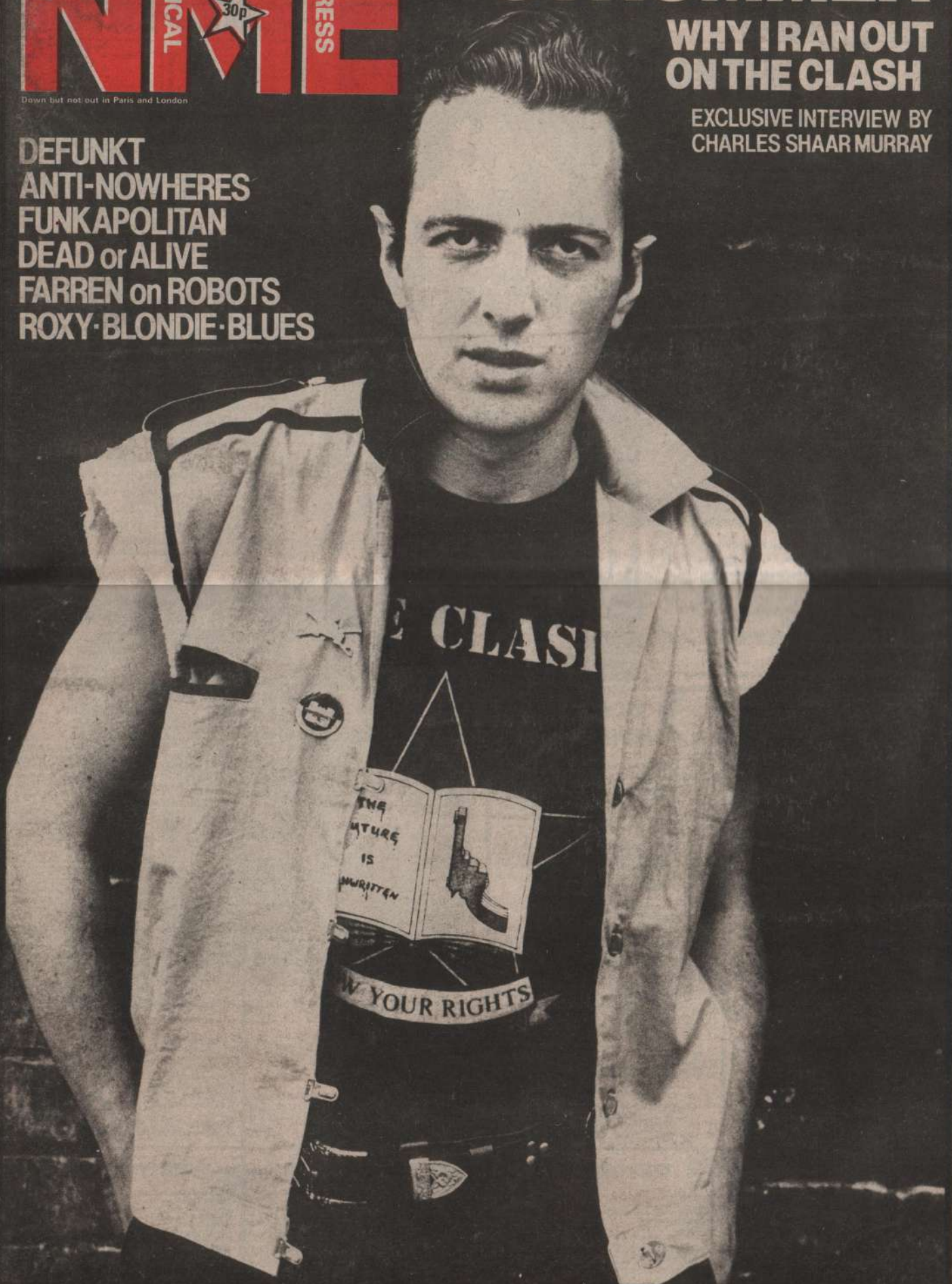
STRUMMER

WHY I RAN OUT ON THE CLASH

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW BY CHARLES SHAAR MURRAY

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Joe Strummer was a man who thought he was a loner/Photo by Anton Corbijn.

THE HILL BACKWARDS

The Clash had become first accepted, absorbed, then declared quaint, safe, null and void. As soon as it became to like them and they started touring states, it then became 'safer' not to. It's a short step from American pundits to them as the new greatest rock band in the world — the new Stones! The new Who! British True Punks and post-rock. It's alike to regard them as just another American success story, like Costello who withdrew, or the Pretenders. Not enough for the Oi Polloi, too rockist for the proletariat.

mean they really show their roots: good old Greasy Joe with his military fetish, and Ranking Paul skanking the system, and Mick's *such* a poser, playing too loud . . .

all this romantic rebel guerrilla chic, all the snippets . . . hopeless, boys.

ss.

ouble is that — in the wake of 'Combat Rock' — none of that washes any more. Moore did the album all due honour a few weeks ago, so it only remains to say that it's a very *clear* album: the work of a band who know exactly what they want to do, and exactly how they want to sound.

virtually no 'hard rock': none of the rabble-rousing power-chord riffs left over from 'Give 'Em Enough Love', none of the musical tourism of 'Sandinista'. They united their sound and their vision perfectly since their first LP, though they've broadened almost beyond recognition in the intervening period.

to the way Strummer sings 'Straight Up' or 'Ghetto Defendant'. What you're not getting is not a presumptuous or impertinent attitude to associate with the alleged

Joe's back, Topper's gone. Bloody-minded but unbowed, The Clash tell Charles Shaar Murray why they still do it the hard way. Off the wall photography: Anton Corbijn.

glamour of revolutionary war or urban repression, but genuine compassion for the victims of organised human stupidity and greed; an expression of a desire to draw attention to intolerable circumstances and to mobilise public opinion towards eradicating them. I don't know about you, but I respect that compassion.

'Combat Rock' says that playtime is over. Strummer says that it's very hard being in The Clash, and if they are taking what they're doing as seriously as the album would suggest, then it sounds like he's right. It's also very hard being *around* them: not in the sense that they're unpleasant or antagonistic, but they carry an atmosphere of tension with them, just as they did when they were starting out. A very strong sense of purpose.

'Combat Rock' was — as is obvious to anyone with any knowledge of the logistics of record-making — written, recorded and designed and packaged long before the Falkland Islands represented anything to anybody who didn't have relatives there, but synchronicity is *not* a myth and this album isn't just selling because it's good product from a popular band. I think it's selling because a large and significant number of people want to hear what it says. There's an edge on the album and there's an edge on the Clash again.

Once again, they are a profoundly

unreasonable band. There is a lot of excellent entertainment about, and it is by no means all reactionary, but it *is* reasonable. The Clash aren't.

AND we're going to go over to New Jersey and start a four-and-a-half week American tour, and then we're going to come back here and do the British tour that we should have done before — that's if we can find a drummer. After that we don't have any plans.

Mick Jones: "After that, we all disappear." So what do The Clash want to do?

"We want to consolidate something — like us," replies Jones. "Coming together and then exploding out. Out of captivity, the captivity of people's expectations of us and of being contained by the music industry, that situation of not being able to get out."

So how do you get what you want out of them without them getting what they want out of you?

"Simple!" snorts Strummer. "Make sure that you're in a position to be able to say what you want, make sure that you're ahead. But as soon as you're not in a position to do that, if you're not independent enough to do that, if we couldn't keep this thing going to the right pitch, then we'd be . . . CBS were coming around to us saying, 'Right, we've got these

sure here and we've got a nice little number written by Andrew Lloyd Webber . . ." "And a nice idea for a new haircut," interrupts Jones.

. . . and that would become what we were putting out. It wouldn't be anything to do with us. You have to be independent enough to remember what you were there to do in the first place, or you're fucked. They've all got their lawyers and their legal scene well worked out before we were even born. It's very hard to go in there and not go under. I mean, the whole game is to get you so that you owe them so much money so that you can't say, 'No, I don't wanna do that' without them saying, 'So how are you gonna pay this?'

Bernard Rhodes at this point launches a high-velocity dissertation on the subject of Control In The Media and the fact that The Clash don't seem to reap the benefits of the airplay shop-window. (This is, after all, only right and proper. I, for one, don't want a load of depressing rubbish about knowing your rights and not heeding the call-up on my shiny yellow airwaves).

. . . in fact," Jones sums up. "We've written a song about it. It's called 'Complete Control' and we hope to have it out for the summer."

Well, you can by-pass the radio if people will buy your singles whether they get airplay or not.

"We can do that because we've always put singles out whether they got played or not. People have said that we should just do albums, but we like singles too! But since 'Capital Radio' haven't been played on Capital Radio," Mick doesn't sound too surprised about that, as it happens.

"I never thought we'd be Number Two in Britain, I really didn't," Strummer muses. Rhodes quietly tips a slug of brandy into Joe's cup of black coffee. "There really seems to be something against us here . . . over the last few years, since we started going round the world."

"People don't understand," Simonon interposes fiercely, "what 'Bored With The USA' was about. They haven't got a fucking clue. If people say 'Oh, The Clash did 'Bored With The USA' and they're always going over there' . . . they don't understand the bloody song in the first place!"

"I think that Britain is really insular," Strummer — "They don't realise that there is a world out there. People who spend any amount of time in London can't believe that anything outside London exists. I like to travel . . ."

This would appear to be the case.

Another new factor in the existence of The Clash is the removal of one of the all-time great millstones: their financial debt to CBS Records. This liberation is due to the much-abused and admittedly unwieldy

'Sandinista!' — which has quietly and unsensationally continued to be purchased by approximately 157,000 people in this country alone. They are now out of stock for the first time, a state of affairs which they find highly satisfactory. It is, after all, at least as valuable in terms of independence as cash.

Kosmo Vinyl recounts that nearly every American college he had visited last time round had featured a bulletin-board offer to tape anybody's choice of an hour's worth of 'Sandinista!' for around \$3. American release of 'Combat Rock' has been delayed so that the sleeve can be reprinted without the 'Home Taping Is Killing Music' health warning. "We don't care how many people tape our records," he declares proudly.

What The Clash are in the process of becoming is — in spite of CBS Records — a genuinely Underground band (I am choosing, thoroughly arbitrarily, to define an 'underground band' as one which is denied access to radio and TV exposure for reasons other than unpopularity). This means that their music actually has to be *sought* out. To see The Clash you have to go to their gigs (whenever they happen to be), and to hear The Clash you have to buy their record (or tape it off someone else who's bought it).

Embarking on this course means an awful lot of hard work: it means that the band have to stay in touch with their audiences and keep their interest — and in the case of The Clash, that also means retaining their trust — in order to make sure that their work continues to be sought out. Especially in the current climate, one is unlikely to hear 'Know Your Rights' or any of the vital album tracks on daytime radio or down the pub.

Current pop wisdom sayeth as follows: in order to create a popular success, something shiny must be dangled in front of people's eyes via electronic media. The only other way is via discos and the club scene, and The Clash are no more welcome there (apart from isolated breakthroughs like 'Magnificent Seven' and maybe 'Overpowered By Funk' from 'Combat') than they'd be on a Capital playlist.

Doing it The Clash's way on a worldwide basis therefore demands an insane amount of gigging, and as a famous '60s smart-ass who got very little airplay himself once remarked, "Touring can make you crazy." The danger of thereby developing intermittent strangeness of the mental process would seem to be substantially increased by this policy, which would also deliver them right back into the got-to-tour-to-sell-the-records / got-to-sell-the-records-to-finance-the-tour noose that they've just got themselves out of.

The Clash are almost messianic in their intensity when it comes to 'providing an alternative' on the US live circuit. "Maybe they'll just think we're Van Halen with short hair," Strummer will surmise grimly. "Maybe they'll just be grunging out on the bass and drums and guitar."

"Maybe we could put on false beards and stovepipe hats and stick pillows up our T-shirts," suggest Mick Jones helpfully, "and put out a nice country and western song to get on the radio there . . . then we could do some dance stuff for the hipper areas . . ."

Three the hard way. I mean, up the hill backwards isn't half of it. In terms of conventional careerism, The Clash are nuts. They are a gang of loonies. They are out of their fucking minds.

They have created an objective which — virtually by definition — debars them from utilising crucial means necessary to achieve it. If they doubt their ability to get successful without getting sucked in, then they'll set it up so that they won't succeed. In other words, not getting sucked in is more important than succeeding on any but the most stringently proscribed terms.

To reiterate: The Clash are totally unreasonable. They work on the principal that the distinction between method and objective is artificial and spurious, and that therefore compromise must be kept to a minimum (noises off: rising murmur of 'CBS! CBS! Train In Vain!' etc). The thing is that the amount of compromise necessary to get a single as hard as 'Ghost Town' or 'Going Underground' on the air does not appear to have been crippling.

However, I admit to the Clash's intransigence, and the best of 'Combat Rock' is as powerful as anything they've done for a while. Long may they continue to piss everybody off.

to distract attention from the home front and wave a few flags around, an entire British Clash tour was cancelled and rearranged, and 'Combat Rock' had reached number two in the album charts.

Obviously, there are a few things to discuss.

First Topper. Why'd he go?

"It was his decision," Strummer replies. "We're squeezed into a booth in the corner café. Strummer hunched in the corner, Simonon and Jones opposite, Kosmo Vinyl at an adjoining table and Bernard Rhodes leaning over Strummer's shoulder anxious to answer the questions first."

"I think he felt . . . it's not too easy to be in The Clash. It's not as simple as being in a comfortable, we're just entertainers group, and he just wanted to do that, just play music. He's a brilliant multi-instrumentalist — what used to be called that — and it's a bit weird to be in The Clash at the moment. Well, it was. He has to sort of strike out in another direction, because I don't think he wants to come along with us. There are things that we all want to do . . ."

"Well, I felt that anything he does is all right," replies Jones, staring out from under his cap. "Obviously we were disappointed that we weren't going off on tour and everything, and we were disappointed that some of our fans would be disappointed, but — I said this before while Joe was away — I felt sure that whatever he had was a good reason. And he's such an extraordinary person that it was fine: we could handle it. Hold the fort was what we did."

Were you in contact while Joe was away?

"No," volunteers Simonon. "We knew he was all right because he phoned his mum. He'd told her to keep schtum but I think Kosmo wore her down."

While you were away, did you consider not coming back at all, doing the full vanish?

"I don't think I had the . . . it's pretty hard to do that, to disappear for ever."

"Bernie was saying," says Jones, indicating in the general direction of Rhodes' manic grin and impenetrable shades. "Now this is like Brian Jones or Syd Barratt or something, now you're one of these group' so it is possible to vanish forever. Okay! We're The Pink Floyd now! And," he continues, warming to his theme, "Joe was Syd, Barratt."



"Nah, couldn't be."

"It's very much like being a robot, being in a group . . . Rather than go barmy I think it's better to do what I did . . . I just got up and went to Paris."

JUST NOW there was almost a minute of uninterrupted gunfire on the radio, and the sound was almost too nearly set off by a police siren outside. Right now everybody's supposed to be jacked up to the back teeth with war fever, but just the same there's that dippy song about peace from the Eurovision Song Contest as Number One single last week and 'Combat Rock' mashing up the album chart.

There was a song I wanted to hear just then, but it wasn't on the radio. It was just: "It could be anywhere. Any frontier. Any hemisphere. No man's land. There ain't no asylum here. Go straight to hell, boys."