

# Clash leader back rocking and coping with 'the pressure'

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ASBURY PARK — Ambition finally caught up with Joe Strummer.

After five years of leading "the greatest rock 'n' roll band in the world," Strummer disappeared in April, reportedly spending more than a month re-examining his role as a socially concerned rock star.

Five years of struggling in a Catch-22 situation does take its toll.

When the punk movement arrived in 1977, it looked like the revolution had begun. The Clash was just one of a number of bands in a movement brewing in Britain that threatened the upheaval of the music business.

But only a couple of years later, it proved a false alarm. The bands either burned out (Damned, Stranglers), self-destructed (Sex Pistols) or were co-opted into the mainstream music they had railed against (just about everyone else).

Except for the Clash.

They were the one group that avoided the crash-and-burn or sell-out tendencies of previous superstars, turning accolades into fodder for songs: "Death or glory.... just another story."

Despite the Clash's success in the marketplace they refused to be absorbed by their record company, but kept up their guard and their ire.

But such greatness is not without its price.

After persevering through five albums, the age-old dilemma of success vs. integrity got even with Joe Strummer.

He left the group on the eve of the band's British tour and returned six weeks later, in time for one show in Holland and the American tour, which began last weekend in Asbury Park.

At a party in the Casino Arcade on the Boardwalk following Sunday night's concert, reporters crowded around Strummer. The inevitable question must have been asked at least a dozen times: "Why did you go, Joe?" And just about every

response included two words: "The pressure."

It wasn't spoken, but the meaning was clear: Pressure to perform, pressure to achieve, pressure to exceed even the most demanding expectations.

"I thought I'd bum around like in the early days," Strummer explained when he finally offered a longer answer. "What I missed most was being a bum.... Going on a bus tour with just a guitar and what I was wearing. If you play good, you eat.... It was very real, very electric."

But in Paris and Spain, where he spent most of his hiatus, "What I did mostly was drink," Strummer said. "I read French newspapers to learn French. I had a beard when I walked down the streets in Paris, so no one recognized me. But what I really did was drink."

Many a rock star has dissolved his self-doubts into the bottle, but Strummer came back.

"What else was I gonna do?" he asked. How about a book? "People listen to music. Nobody reads books," Strummer said.

"But I've got to give up before I'm a joke. I'd like to quit before we get like the Stones — they've had their day. I want to quit when I'm up, not like Jagger. He's way down."

Jagger wasn't the only rock institution Strummer criticized. During the concert, he made a sarcastic reference to Bruce Springsteen, right in the Boss' backyard.

Later he explained that "I slagged him off just to wind everybody up." Strummer then recited the opening lines to "Racing in the Streets," admitting it's one of his 10 favorite songs.

"He (Springsteen) gives away his best tunes," Strummer said. "Other people have hits with his songs. He's never had a big hit, has he?"

It was hard to tell whether Strummer spoke with envy, scorn or regret. His own success surprises him (the band's new album, "Combat Rock," climbed quickly to No. 2 in England), yet he boasts of the Clash. He speaks alternately with modesty and pride.



Courier-News Photo By Steve Libowitz

**The Clash's Joe Strummer answers reporters' questions following last Sunday's concert in Asbury Park.**

"I thought we'd make 40, maybe 20," Strummer said about the British sales of "Combat Rock." "But No. 2? We haven't been No. 2 in England since 1978. It must be the slack time of the year."

But in the next breath he's answering a question about the Clash not rocking hard enough these days: "I think we do it right!" What about being called "old farts" by a new wave of punks: "I feel that's pretty justified. They've got a right to say that. But they can't think of anything better and that's the rub."

Strummer was confronted with the charge that the Clash only pose the problems, without offering any answers. Strummer didn't hesitate to explain: "Part of the solution is that there ain't no easy answer to it. If the people don't figure it out then it ain't gonna happen no matter how much we say it. It ain't just up to us."

"It's not for us to provide the answers. We keep things in the public interest."

Still, the Clash and Strummer have plenty to say. "Combat Rock," includes a song about the Asian-American children soldiers left behind in Vietnam, telling them their heritage is "not Coca Cola, it's rice."

And Strummer didn't hesitate to respond to questions about the Falklands, which came up almost as often as his disappearance.

"It's shameful," Strummer said. "All the British people unified — I think it's a sickness, the old patriotism thing. The truth is 18 months before this happened, they refused the Falkland Islanders British passports on the grounds they weren't British enough," claimed Strummer. "Yet they're willing to send people out to die for them. It's the truth. But no one says that."

"Every Sunday in London they have a march (against the war) and it grows week by week. The more ships sunk, the more boys killed, it grows."

But Strummer wasn't involved in the protests, he said: "I was in Paris getting drunk."

For a fellow who had been on a drinking binge, Strummer appeared in surprisingly good shape in concert and at the party, where he turned down offers of "smoke," accepting only a couple of beers.

"It really felt good tonight," Strummer agreed. "It felt differently. I don't know why. As good as the old days."