

IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning and dawn has just broken over Newcastle. Joe Strummer looks at the white haze on the TV and then at the dirty sky. He can barely tell the difference.

He is standing by the window of the hotel room, staring down at the mixture of road, roundabout, and high rise that is the only available view. He's tried to open the window and failed, pronouncing it 'suicide-proof'. Swaying by the glass, Joe watches a lorry load head under an underpass. All he can think of is insects. "How do people live here?" he cries out, knowing he has no answer.

Joe's voice is a mixture of exhaustion and anguish, the voice of a man who can take no more. The hour we have just passed is the hour of the wolf, that period of grey light that precedes the dawn. The hour of the wolf is the hour in which most people are born and most people die, the darkest hour of the night.

Strummer's despair is beginning to frighten me. He's muttering about 'con-tricks and lies' and he has the eyes of a man who has seen the skull beneath the skin.

"There ain't no asylum here," he sang at the City Hall seven hours earlier. Now he's rubbing his own nose in the fact. Joe's depression is an act of penance, of self-mortification. Sometimes it's better to pull the curtains and go to bed.

This solution no longer works for Strummer: "I can't sleep anymore. I'm still awake at 6.30 every morning, reading Bukowski. I've been like this for about six months, since I gave up dope. A joint's as good a sleeper as Valium and I'd been smoking for about 10 years. I had to stop. I'm in search of my memory, in search of my dreams. I want to be able to go to sleep and dream and wake up remembering what I've dreamt.

"There's one dream that haunts me. We're at a gig, as always in my dreams. The PA's broken down and everyone's freaking out, wondering how we can go on. There's a huge crowd out there and they're screaming for us, louder and louder, like a beast that's got to be fed.

"I'm telling the others that it's cool and not to worry. There's a great big camel onstage where my mike always is, stage centre. The crowd is howling for its money's worth and we rush out onstage. I tell the others that it's OK, that I'll sing up the camel's bum and the words will come out of its mouth amplified.

"I get behind the camel and go to sing 'Garageland' and instead of amplifying me to 4,000 people, the camel starts farting in my face . . ."

What does it mean, Joe?
"To me it means that there's very little of me left and that I'm willing to gamble the little there is on the Clash."

TWO MONTHS ago, Strummer fired Topper Headon from the Clash's drum seat and brought back Terry Chimes. Three and a half months ago, Strummer walked out on the Clash on the eve of a major English tour and the release of the Clash's fifth album, 'Combat Rock'.

When Strummer returned from his hideout in France, the Clash dusted themselves down and flew to America for five weeks. Five days after he rejoined the Clash, Terry Chimes was off on his first visit to America. Already Terry fits behind the kit and while he hasn't quite the power of Topper, he has the strength.

"I'd been with Generation X," explains Terry, "and when that folded I stopped being in bands for a while. I was doing some computer programming when I got the call-up. It's better to do something like that to bring in the rent than play in a band in which you don't believe. It was funny at first playing with the Clash again, like having a second childhood. I felt I was in some kind of time warp at first."

TERRY HAS held the Clash together in their hour of need. He's mastering the Clash's style as quickly as he can but, inevitably, his presence has obliged the band to return to their earlier songs, to leave out the dub improvisation and keep it short and sweet.

The Clash in Brixton fired on all cylinders and the audience went with them in a sweaty, heaving cry of joy. If rock is dead and the live show a thing of the past, what now will release us, take us over that sweaty brink to which the Clash have always led us?

The Clash in Newcastle died before an audience watching them as if from behind thick glass. This was not the audience to convince Strummer he was right to return from France . . .

"I do feel more trapped since I did the bunk because you can't do it twice. I came back because there's no way out and because I respect Paul and Mick. And yet tonight the crowd was so dead I was thinking we should quit — what's the point of this if we're not turning them on? I don't want to end up like the Stones. I find it terrifying that 100,000 people want to go and see them in this day and age. It's necrophilia.



THE CLASH: five years on

Doubt and desperation on the edge of town

From Garageland to hell with Joe Strummer of the Clash

"The only great audience is a young audience and our audience isn't the youth anymore. We should clear the boards for the young breed of savages that are here, never mind the young pop tycoons.

"I'm quite ready to be knocked off my perch but I'd like it to be by someone who cares, a younger version of myself, I suppose. But I'm not moving for the pop moguls . . . To me, it's 1962 again. We're like Gene Vincent, a bit ageing but still viable and Visage, ABC, The Human League are all Connie Francis, pop watering down and feeding off rock . . . the new rebels have got to surface!"

On the table in Strummer's room, there's a ukelele and a few books, the songs of Pete Seeger, the great American folksinger, a book about Nicaragua, another about the secrecy with which the British State is governed.

Strummer's dreams of change have collapsed and so has his belief that the Clash would be able to effect a change. He's left watching the pop moguls dance in the charts, left singing a lament: "There ain't no need for you, go straight to hell boys . . ."

"Pop moguls!" snorts Strummer in disgust. "What's that got to do with changing the world? Politics don't work, they tried it in Russia and it didn't work so you tell me what's to be done? I think people just want to go to heaven, that's why I'm drinking so much tonight, that's why people want heroin to get up there as quickly as possible, anywhere out of this world.

"We tried to do something else. We thought there was some truth to be said in music. We were definitely trying to usher in a new age and it hasn't happened. That's why we're dodos, anachronisms. Perhaps we've been blowing the trumpet where no note is called for, maybe all the western world has to offer is a pretty tune and a few words that don't mean anything . . . I feel high and dry and beached though I know we're still the best live band and we can still blow any band offstage . . ."

JOE STRUMMER is a man at the end of his tether. He feels there's a good deal left in the Clash while at the same time

feeling that they're already an anachronism. He's a man who believes in peace but simmers with violence towards the injustice he sees everywhere. He's a man who sees himself running out of beliefs but who has no belief in a world beyond good and evil. Joe Strummer is a moralist?

"I believe in good and evil and that what you do will be returned to you. If I didn't believe that I'd just go out and steal, become a cat burglar like those moguls. I believe in evil — it's violence and thievery, screwing your fellow man when he's not ready for it. It's when you think somebody's taking the piss and the feeling comes to get up and smash them in the face, to take the easy way. I've licked drugs; whatever drives me to drinking, that's the devil.

"Anyway," says Joe with a sudden smile, "mustn't grumble . . ."

Joe Strummer is 30, the Clash are five. Neither of them have changed the world, both are growing old and both are a little afraid of the fact. If the Clash are over the hill, how do you explain their performance at Brixton; how do you explain 'Go Straight To Hell', a song that has more sorrow and compassion than anything pop music could dream of?

When I left Joe at five thirty, I was afraid to leave him alone, Mohican bent, staring out at the wasteland of modern Newcastle. Somehow he deserves better.

Don't we all?

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