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THE CLASH in the Combat Zone

By Cary Darling

THE CLASH IN THE COMBAT ZONE

"God, is it trendy or what?"

A wave of disgust passes across Joe Strummer's face as he talks about the current British music scene with the hardened rancor one usually reserves for the most vile forms of criminality; such as axe murderers. In front of him is this morning's

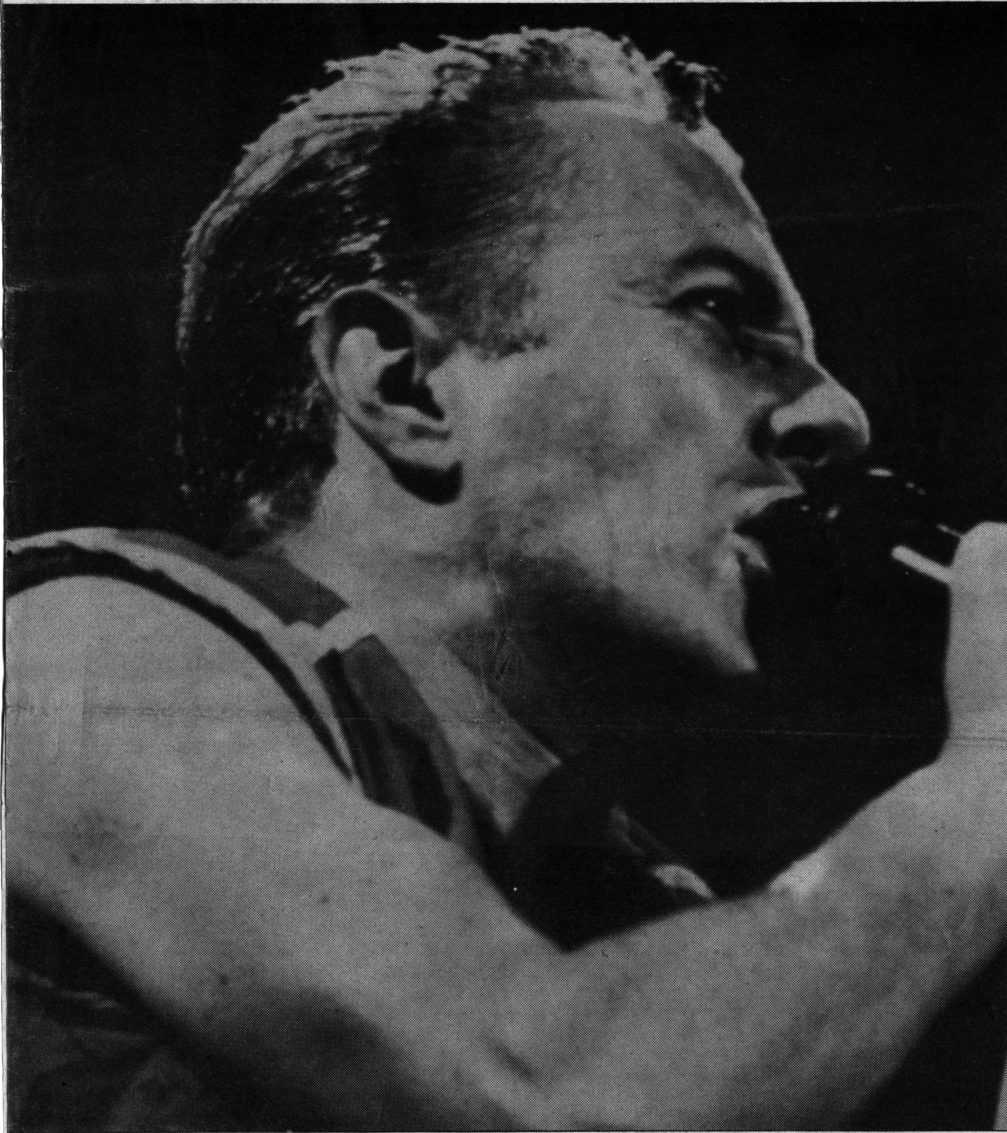
LA Times featuring a story on the latest androgynous London face, Marilyn, whose dreadlocked coiffe and rouge-dusted cheeks are rivalling those of Boy George himself in the image-mongering department. Those who want to know the whys and wherefores of The Clash, circa 1984, need look no further than any picture of Marilyn or any of the other scenemakers gracing the latest imported style sheets. For the 30-year-old Strummer, looking out of his hotel window into a warm, hazy Los Angeles day, it's all a bit too much.

The Clash, England's most resilient punk band, haven't released any vinyl in two years, but things have been far from quiet in the combat rock zone. Over a year ago, drummer Topper (Nicky) Headon was told to leave the band, allegedly because of his bouts with heroin addiction. Then, last autumn co-founder/guitarist/vocalist Mick Jones was unceremoniously kicked out. Other news items: Strummer took up jogging and entered London marathons; "Should I Stay Or Should I Go?" and "Rock The Casbah," the latter a handclap-and-bass heavy dance track, became two of their biggest hits. Oh, and by the way, The Clash played the US Festival to over 500,000 people and for a heady amount of dollars, which were said to be going to help young, struggling bands.

However, for the true believers, the shenanigans were a farce. The Clash, the

BY CARY DARLING PHOTOS: RICHARD REELE

Joe Strummer



**"Every toot or sniff of drugs
Is for Ronald Reagan,
nuclear war and death.
That's all it reinforces.
It's old-fashioned. It's for
hippies. Drugs are for
hippies."**

— Joe Strummer

quartet which some said was "the only band that mattered," were being crushed under the weight of their own ideology. When The Clash formed in 1976, their white-hot blast of political punk let listeners know that these guys were *angry*. Along with the Sex Pistols, The Clash formed the core of a movement which appeared — to American ears at least — to come from the bowels of hell itself and served to overturn British music's status quo. Epic Records in the U.S. muttered a soft, "No thank you," when offered the first Clash album, *The Clash*. Coming out during the disco boom, it was very hard to dance, in the traditional sense, to such staccato bursts of white noise as "I'm So Bored With The U.S.A.," "White Riot," or "Complete Control." Epic subsequently released it a year later. Look out world governments. Record companies beware. The Clash had arrived to let you know your days were over. Well, not quite.

Punk turned into new wave. New wave turned to new romantic. New romantic turned into dance music. And The Clash turned with them. While always critical successes, the subsequent albums — *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, the brilliant *London Calling*,

Sandinista, and *Combat Rock* — moved steadily away from the skin-scorching caterwaul of that first album. And, for Strummer at least, they were all big, big mistakes.

"I regret them," Strummer spits. "Making a mistake and admitting it, it's not so bloody difficult."

For Strummer, The Clash had become everything they had once rallied against: bloated with drug problems, ego problems and even hit records. Strummer was so dissatisfied that, on the eve of a British tour, he took off unannounced for the streets of Paris.

"We'd become the people we'd set out to destroy," remembers Strummer. "I thought, 'Oh my God!' The road crew went up to Inverness to set up, and I went to Paris and walked around for three or four weeks."

Upon his return, he decided to clean house. "We sent Topper on a cure but it didn't work," he says. "I tried everything. I tried to be his mate. I got to be an expert at measuring people's pupils. I thought I had to be a bastard. None of it worked. In Australia, he told me that he thought that if he had responsibilities like his own band, it would shock him into reality. We fired him."

At the same time, a rift was developing between Strummer and Jones which would later widen into a valley. "He began to look down upon guitar playing as a passe thing suitable only for morons, and he's a damn good player," says Strummer. "I don't want him to play a synthesizer. I want him to play the guitar. You can't turn around and say, 'I'm an artist. I might hit a note occasionally but I want to twiddle this knob on this guitar synthesizer and suddenly have bagpipes squealing through them and have F-11 jets coming down in reverb.' All of that's fine and I like a bit of goofing off, especially on a dub or something. But first you take care of the central core of what you're dealing with. I don't believe in pretending you're an artist. It screws so many people over."

"I think David Byrne has gone through that and it hasn't done the Talking Heads' music any good. I think Paul Weller's going through it at the moment. I don't think much of what the Style Council is doing is worth tuppence. I've got a tape of 'Let's Get It On' by Marvin Gaye, I don't need to rehash it."

In fact, according to Strummer, The Clash's own flirtations with funk are over. "I don't know anything about funk. That was Mick's idea. He was very keen on that. He was hip-hop. He had a baseball cap backwards on his head. He thought it was all wacko, wildstyle and all that stuff," Strummer says with a sneer.

But aren't those Joe's vocals on some of those rhythmic anthems, most notably the urban sass of "This Is Radio Clash"? "I was seduced into following him a bit. But then I began to realize we were so busy ripping off other cultures that we'd lost our own culture," states Strummer in increasingly animated tones. "That first Clash album, you can say that is a London culture. Punk is a lifestyle, a culture; a real actual culture. We forsook all that, for what? More culture imperialism, that's what. I like a bit of crossover, cross-insemination, but these white English groups have completely blocked real funk, soul and reggae off the airwaves."

If anything gets Strummer irate, it's London's current "new music." "It's like 1974, except instead of ELP, we have Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet. The music has changed but the atmosphere is identical," he maintains. "Everything is so tame and controlled. The whole scene is a nightclub scene where they're using that Studio 54 door policy; the chic, 'I'm sorry chap, you don't measure up.' The live club scene is dead. We had a lot of small gig scenes in London, which was one of the reasons why punk rock happened. There was always an outlet, so musicians could rehearse up. The fear of

that first gig would really make them rehearse up. Now, video has taken over.

"The Boy George/Marilyn snooty club scene is not really a movement of the street. It's really manufactured, tame and safe. It's the industry's pet poodle. People in London like to dress up wild and weird. They're not scared to dress up wilder than people can ever imagine. But Boy George has taken the sting out of them by coming on TV — dressed up and looking pretty weird — saying, 'I'm just a nice person really. I like a cup of tea,' and all the mothers say, 'Ain't he lovable, ain't he cuddly?' Before, people would dress up weird to express something in their personality they couldn't find an outlet for. Now when they see a wacko style person, they just say, 'Oh, it's alright, it's just one of those funny Boy-George type people.' He took the danger out of the one thing that made their life bearable. Now they've been neutered. He didn't come out and say anything sexually dangerous like, 'I'll do it to anything that moves, whaddya think about that?' He said, 'I prefer tea, not sex.'"

Now, The Clash are back to square one with straight-ahead, blistering punk being the musical model. The recent California tour — of Santa Barbara, Stockton, San Francisco, and Los Angeles — and upcoming European tour were ordered to limber up musical muscles. (The fact that Mick Jones, according to Strummer, has slapped an injunction on all Clash earnings from *Combat Rock* and the US Festival, may also have sparked motivation.) Before recording the next album, Strummer and bassist Paul Simonon (the only other original member left in the group) want to test the new material on the road as well as the new members, guitarists Vince White and Nick Sheppard, and drummer Pete Howard.

"I've said, 'Okay, an end to cultural imperialism. Let's go back and find our own culture that we built.' I've stripped down what we're playing," he declares. "We're playing white punk rock. I've stripped it down as a backlash to overproduction; everything was produced. The high-hat had fifteen men working on it. I was thinking, 'Hang on a minute. I've got a lyric going on with a bit of a tune on it and a lyric that's saying something which deals with reality. We've got the drum pushing the lyric along. We've got a bass giving some bottom end to it. Then we've got a wall of punk guitar to give it that rip-roaring horrible sound to drive your parents out of the house with. The more I hear all these overproduced white fake records, the more I've got to strip it down further and further. I'm running the danger of driving the audience away, but we'll see how they want it or how tough the can take it. I'm going back to the first album and carrying on as if we just recorded it last week. We took a lot of wrong turns. We abandoned playing punk music in favor of experimenting. It became like 31 Flavors; here's a calypso one, here's a reggae one, here's a funky one, here's a Motown one. That's not a direction, that's confusion."

One aspect of the last six years Strummer does not regret is the large audience The Clash have built. Those who mutter "sell out" set a fire in his eyes. "You've got to break out and prove that rebel music — music that deals with reality and says something in its bloody words, that makes use of its time and space — can make it. Rebel music should be, and can be, fifteen times bigger than any of this other nonsense: Van Halen, Duran Duran, or David Bowie or any of this industry bullshit," he exclaims. "There's no point in telling me that I should play in a small club. I've played in the small clubs. If you want to moan at me, go down and find a small group and support them. Don't ghettoize it, because then you're just leaving it to Van Halen. Young people are going to grow up and say, 'Oh right, to make it I've got to be an industry lap dog.' If

we were kids in 1958, we'd be saying, 'Oh my God, listen to that Little Richard record!' We'd be inspired. I can't see that Spandau Ballet is going to inspire anyone."

Strummer also has little sympathy for Britain's Oi! bands, the third generation punk/skinhead groups who never abandoned the white noise cause. "That scene died because they were preaching to the converted in a very small circuit. That's ghettoology in a punk style. They were being so smug, self-congratulatory and purist and they didn't put any intelligence into what they were doing," he maintains. "They didn't take five minutes to write their lyrics, like, 'No government! No government! Is that going to make us have a blinding flash? What is that going to do for us?'"

It could be expected that a band of The Clash's stature would get new members from the ranks of already known groups. Not so. New guitarists Vince White and Nick Sheppard are veterans of the British punk scene but have no laundry list of chart hits to their credit. "We put an ad in the music newspapers saying, 'Wild guitar player required,'" Strummer recalls. "We recorded three backing tracks, each in a different style. We weren't actually there — because they would have recognized us — so we had Cosmo [Vinyl, friend/press coordinator/all-around-assistant] and Bernie [Rhodes, manager] actually see them. The musicians would say, 'Well, how do you want it?' We told them just to play how they wanted. If they'd known it was for The Clash, they would've gone blam, blam, blam and would've been conning us. We auditioned about 350 guys."

Strummer lets out a laugh, "But it was easy, because about 98% of the guitarists were heavy metal. The three songs were different but it didn't occur to them that their guitar playing should accompany the song, because they'd do the same thing on the second song as on the first."

In addition to playing in a style he prefers, the new members have an attitude which he likes. "They're both punks from '77 and people who went through that have an attitude. They don't moan, groan and sulk. They take care of their own problems. They have an independence which is great!"

Music as a vehicle for political change is Strummer's passion, and he calls himself a socialist; however, he is as disillusioned with socialist state systems as well as capitalist ones. In fact, The Clash were trying to do some dates in Poland and East Germany, just before Poland was put under martial law. "You have to submit a video, some tapes, and your lyrics to the State," he explains. "We got turned down by Poland and East Germany because we didn't have the right ideological stamp. America and Russia are more or less identical in a lot of ways. That does make me feel like, 'Why bother?' It does seem really futile but they're the extremes of the spectrum. Just because the extremes are identical doesn't mean that there's not somewhere in between where people can live in fairness. I just don't believe we have to have 32 million people below the poverty line in a rich country like this. What a swindle. The same is true in Britain; the same swindle."

But, come on Joe, is it possible to change anything with guitars, bass, and drums? "Yeah, and for one reason: novels, poetry, and painting ain't hip," he states. "Young people just can't be bothered with it. They'll listen to a three or four minute number. That's why you're a giant step forward before you start, because of that one fact. What else are young people tuned into?"

In one area at least, Strummer comes on like a raving capitalist: his support of British pirate radio, which operates as illegal competition to the established State and State-sanctioned commercial channels in Britain. "They tell us we can have only two radio stations because the ambulance service needs

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a frequency or the fire department needs a frequency. But then we go to Paris, there are 90,000 stations. In New York, there are a billion. LA's got five million. We're not going to take that crap in England where they say, 'Two stations is your lot, mate.'" Radio Clash, indeed.

Despite the number of radio frequencies in the U.S., he is dismayed by the narrow-mindedness of some American fans to other styles of music. The most famous incident occurred three years ago when rapmasters Grandmaster Flash, opening for The Clash during a week of riotous gigs at Bonds International in New York, were booed and pelted mercilessly. "Are we a right-wing country or what?" Strummer declares, sitting up in his chair. "They couldn't even dig Grandmaster Flash. I bet you those same Brooklyn Bridge 'n' Tunnel Kids — or whoever they were — were bopping around to 'The Message' three years later. I betcha! I bet they were down at the new wave club singing, 'You're all null and void like Pretty Boy Floyd' and saying, 'It's a good record, isn't it?' They were the assholes in Bonds a couple of years before saying, 'Boo, get off!' People are really fucked."

With that, Strummer slumps back into his chair and lapses into a silence, as if all the wind were suddenly blown out of him. However, soon he's talking again, as spirited as ever. He says, contrary to popular opinion, that he doesn't look down at his American audience or dislike all Americans. "Where there are people, there's hope," he explains. "If somebody's into it, they're into it. I've done whole sets for two people. I've had to go out on the street and get people to come in. Once you've been through that, you don't sneer at people who are filling your hall; you're thankful. Nobody has a right to take an audience for granted. In England, they're a bit snotty about selling yourself. They don't realize you just can't expect an audience to show up. Look at Mick Jagger leaping about the place and selling himself from every screen and magazine that comes along. He knows."

"What I am is anti-apathy. Half the people don't vote, don't think. The sheer laziness of it all; the 'Ah, you can't do anything about it anyway, so let's get wasted' ethic. Ronald Reagan loves every young person who says that. Every toot or sniff of drugs is for Ronald Reagan, nuclear war and death. That's all it reinforces. It's not hip. It's old-fashioned. It's for hippies. Drugs are for hippies. Anybody who takes drugs is a hippie, I don't care how groovy they are."

Strummer claims his current dislike of drugs stems from his experiences with Topper Headon. "I just feel that Keith Richard and everybody else sold heroin to the people on the street as the ultimate glamor trip. So many people I know in London have died from heroin or are completely unreachable. London is drenched in heroin. You might think I'm exaggerating but I'm not going far enough," he points out. "People think they're



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dabbling. They think it's glamorous, cool, and decadent. Rock and roll sold that to people."

One of The Clash's harshest critics is, ironically, a fellow conspirator in the punk movement, John Lydon. However, Strummer is somewhat muted in his criticisms of Lydon. "He did contribute a lot," Joe admits. "When a movement happens, the pitch of the times becomes intense and it makes people say, write, think and do things they would never do otherwise. When Rotten knew he was leading a movement, it helped him put down stuff that still sounds great today. But that dropped off; The Damned went on *Top of the Pops* and we went out and did the White Riot tour. Malcolm McLaren (the Sex Pistols manager) kept the Pistols off the road in order to build up their mystique. They got jealous of the fact we were rocking around the country and having a good time. They came out and verbally attacked us. Also, he got afraid of it all. When he was assaulted at the Pegasus Car Park in Green Lane, he got scared."

Strummer is great at splashing the vitriol. Everything and everyone from Margaret Thatcher to the state of American radio are within his aim, and he

savages them with the gusto at which the British seem especially adept. However, Strummer isn't all sour, punk anger. Getting him to talk about one of his newest passions — staying fit — makes his eyes widen.

"See that Chinese house?" he asks, pointing out of the window to Yamashiro's (in actuality, a Japanese restaurant across the way). "That's how far I made it this morning. That hill took it right out of me. There's nowhere to run in this town! I don't want to run down that freeway (Highland Ave.), I'd be dead by the time I got around the corner."

"I'm not too much of an athlete," he admits with a smile. "But I do like those marathons because it's so exciting. It's good in London because the whole town turns out. Everybody actually speaks to each other for a change. I'm not much of a consistent jogger though. I much prefer swimming."

However, this detour off heavier topics doesn't last long. "I think it's good to be fit because I've seen my band fall apart by not being fit enough to undertake what we're trying to do," he lambasts. "Topper was talented, not only on drums but on anything you put in his hands. I'd give both arms to be able to do that. He just ended up not fit enough to do the work. No one's got any high standards anymore. Songs are rubbish. Lyrics are rubbish. Performances are rubbish. Videos are rubbish. It's all rubbish."

Another one of Strummer's seemingly few likes is Australia, a country he was enamored with when he toured two years ago. He laughs, "I thought it was going to be a few people standing in a dusty street going, 'No poofters here, Bruce.'" In fact, one of the few bands he has respect for is Sydney's Midnight Oil, whom he labelled as "pretty intense."

Strummer also admits some admiration for some of the California hardcore bands, such as the Dead Kennedys and Black Flag. In fact, he's taking a page from their notebook by reverting to an underproduced sound.

"That guy in Def Leppard took eighteen days to record one vocal. Eighteen days," he exclaims. "Do you know how many dollars that is? It's all gone mad! I'd record it in the bathroom and get a waiter from the nearest takeaway to produce. I'd rather listen to Elvis, a boy from a shack in Tupelo with three hillbilly old farts behind him and one microphone in a garage in East Memphis. That to me sounds ten times better than the mass-produced heavy metal album for which they flew in sukiyaki from the Coast and had Persian carpets laid on the walls. What a load of nonsense!"

However in a final twist of irony, Strummer ends up defending Marilyn and others involved in the London style wars, in a back-handed way. One of his complaints about America is that nearly everyone is, well, styleless. "In England, we had the destruction of style through the hippie thing and we're almost fanatical in our hatred of it. We can't stand anything that ain't sharp. It's an effort that's worth making," he reasons. "We think that America had one of the strongest codes of style in the 1950s with the clothes, hair, music, cars, even the neon signs. Every aspect was so strong on presentation and style. All that was abandoned in favor of The Beatles, hippies, and the drug scene. It was such a wrong turn. That's why we're so crazy on style in England."

Despite his constant bursting of cultural bubbles, in a strange way Strummer possesses a patriotism as wide as the Union Jack. Before he fled for Paris in a fit of desperation two years ago, the final straw had been that none of the public seemed interested in The Clash's planned British tour. Strummer says quietly, "That gets to me because I come from England. That's where I am and where I always must go back to." □