

"POP WILL DIE... AND

"YOU DON'T TREAT your enemies better than you treat your friends."

Joe Strummer beads me across the pub table. Bottles are already starting to line up. With his face tilted slightly in profile his skull belongs to a malevolent elf, ears like neat handles, hair shorn to a trim red-blond mohican.

"If you're in a team you can't go round not trusting members of that team and still remain a part of it with honour. I thought he should've left himself. We only pushed him. He had to go. He had the attitude that we were trying to rip him off. It's a friend who tells you you've got BO, right? Instead of him saying, thanks, I'll go and have a wash he said—I'm not taking that off you! If you won't accept advice off the team, how can you go on being in it?"

Strummer's gaze dares me to disagree. Mick Jones is gone. In nin'een-ady-FORE The Clash are back again.

Do we want them back? Do we need them?

GO AND WRITE SONGS WITH YOUR LAWYER

WHILE THEIR last surviving contemporaries—Weller, Siouxsie, Lydon—are making the best of pop environments where hits and attention can be plucked like peaches, The Clash have once again declared themselves meat and potatoes. As these words are written they are tramping a British and European gig circuit with five performers on their stage, the old firm of Strummer and Simonon plus recruits Pete Howard (drums), Nick Sheppard and Vince White (guitars).

I stumble clumsily into the wetback trio as they leave Peter Anderson's studio. We don't speak, for they don't know my mission, so I watch as the three leathery tykes slouch away down a Shoreditch alley. The late afternoon is cold enough to freeze fingers and faces into chalk but they swagger and roar like schoolboys. They are going to have to be the engine room for what Strummer has determined will be a Clash that will flush away the indolence of pop.

Whether they can supplant memories of Mick Jones' cranky petulance and offhand surliness isn't bothering Joe. He only seems to remember the bad times where his former partner is concerned.

"We were begging him to come out of his hotel room. That kind of atmosphere."

"I had a stand-up argument with Mick for two hours when we were making 'Combat Rock,'" says Paul Simonon, sat at Strummer's side. "We weren't solving anything. There was just no compromise."

Was there a final blow?

"Yeah, there was, actually," says Joe. "It wasn't—you're an arsehole, get out! I'd been working on him for years. When he first started acting stupid I should've called the bluff right away. But in order to keep The Clash going I'd go around it, beg him to come to rehearsals and stuff. And it only increased the scale of the mind game."

"The final straw was when he went on about his lawyer. When we started out there was no lawyers in the room with us! Back in the summer he eventually said, I don't mind what The Clash does—as long as you check it with my lawyer first. I sat back and thought, hang on... And I said go and write songs with your lawyer. Piss off."

"When we were going to make 'Combat Rock'—'Sandinista' was too self-indulgent and long, and I thought we needed to get briefer. So I said, let's make the next record in England, and he said—good luck to you then 'cos I'm not coming to the sessions. If you do it in New York I'll show up. So we got a studio there, so the Emperor could attend. And after we'd done it, and it was getting as long as 'Sandinista', he turned round and said—I was only joking. I don't mind a joke, but not after the whole thing's said and done."

"In the end I lost all respect for myself. Why are we doing this? And I had to push him, in the end. We'd rather have a team with internal self-criticism. Every star surrounds himself with yes-men, the records get shittier and shittier 'cos there's no-one going, hey, that's a fucking terrible song. A lot more of that would cure all this boring music that's coming out. All the big stars..."

The New Clash Manifesto, Part 186: The Last Gang are back and shooting from the lip, but can they walk it like they talk it? Strummer and Simonon blast off about life after Mick, life without dope, and the art of staying snotty in the face of Kleenex pop.

Interview: Richard Cook. Photography: Peter Anderson



Hang on. You're big stars too. "Yeah, but we have self-criticism! Mick wouldn't have that!"

A TICKET TO THE MACHINE SHOW

"WHEN MICK LEFT I decided to examine everything we'd done, identifying our mistakes. Getting rid of Mick wasn't the end of our problems—it was the beginning of solving them."

"Basically it was getting on with the job," says Simonon. "We wanted to get on with something. I'd drifted away from Mick for a long time. We didn't speak, didn't see each other except on stage. The good thing about me and Joe is we might have disagreements but we reach an understanding. With Mick, it

was do it his way or sulks."

Paul Simonon is still the handsome man of The Clash. His stare, almost neanderthal, eyes like mirrors, seems to pierce me whether he's speaking or not: it's as if he's putting the hard face to Strummer's motormouth rock rhetoric. But what's Joe saying now?

"I don't wanna be like that. We did eight gigs with The Who and I looked at them and thought—is that the end of the road? Four complete strangers, going on for an hour and then off? So many groups are like that."

Maybe 'groups' aren't worth bothering with. "Do you get off on these duos with tape machines? Look. Don't buy a ticket to the machine show. People is what makes it interesting."

Strummer's knack for the newly-coined tagline hasn't deserted him. It's soon apparent that his grudge isn't only against Jones. It's

against all of pop.

"I wouldn't cross the road to buy a record. Billy Bragg's one, maybe. But there's no effort. Listen to this (Culture Club's 'Memories' on the jukebox)—could we walk out there on the corner and whistle it? It's like trying to hold a fish in your hand. This is the sickness: over-production, no tune, no meaning..."

No tune? You're joking. How about 'Karma Chameleon'?

"Yeah, but it's ripped off from The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band."

"We like to have a meaning, a rhythm. I go back to our first record and I like the writing style on that record. It's lean. Trim! Makes a point, then another song starts. Imagine in your mind an ELP number. Then imagine punk rock like a blowtorch sweeping across it. That to me is what punk rock did, and that's what's got to happen again. I see all the numbers now,



The five rockers of the apocalypse. L. R: Pete, Paul, Joe, Nick and Vince. L&R: Simonon and Strummer, raw and roaring.

even Banshee numbers, and nobody's saying — this is over-indulgent muck. I've made it too, but I realise it's not enough. It's hippie music. It's like...

DRUGS

"RIGHT, the new fashion, as put down by The Clash today: if you take drugs, wear a kaftan. Be honest. Wear a bell around your neck. I've smoked so much pot I'm surprised I haven't turned into a bush. Thank the fuck I haven't."

You mean, I gape, you've given up drugs? "It's all rubbish! With Reagan and Thatcher strolling away to victory it's, it's... I can't... you see skinheads, right, and you think — they're not gonna stand any nonsense! But it's like — have you got any Rizlas, man? And you think — Oh, I've had it with that."

So many tangents, footnotes, asides. I steer back to Strummer's first beef. Surely there are any number of groups in answer to the synthetic lover boys who bruise an old new waver's heart — any number you want of 'punks' cleaving one chord in three and stabbing at meaning, at rhythm? Minimalism is alive and ill out there.

"OK. Suppose you're 14 and you come from Bad Gothesburg and music hits you. What

"IF YOU TAKE DRUGS, WEAR A KAFTAN. BE HONEST. WEAR A BELL AROUND YOUR NECK. I'VE SMOKED SO MUCH POT I'M SURPRISED I HAVEN'T TURNED INTO A BUSH."

have you got to look up to? Michael Jackson, AC/DC, The Police. Are we supposed to grovel round in small clubs and say how smug we are, or get up there and knock them out of the way? If it was 1950—something you'd have Jerry Lee Lewis or Little Richard. Now you've got the chi-chi make-up people—don't break sweat, just wave your little finger around. I aim to outwork all these people and get rid of them. I dare to talk about spirit! I've had it with all this!"

It sounds impressive in the pub. Joe's face twists in agony, his voice scurries, his hands fall the air. Men in skirts cower. I glance round and see the pub has emptied.

Alright, well, this new Clash—how will it be so different?

"We don't deal with drugs, so all the drug people can screw off. And we know when we make rubbish, and therefore we ain't gonna come out with any rubbish, and therefore we

REBEL ROCK WILL RULE



ain't gonna waste your time, and therefore you're gonna do ten days' work in ten minutes when you deal with us. We'll smash down the number one groups and show that rebel rock can be number one. What the world tells you is, if you really wanna make it, sand down the rough edges. Use the studios full of clever-dick guys who'll put you a hundred miles from your music. The greatest records on my shelf are the ones made with a couple of microphones.

"And another thing..."
Joe flies off again. I think, for a moment shut down by the Strummer gob: how will they get on the radio? Is there nothing in between dresses and battle fatigues?

A DOG IS BEING SICK ON YOUR FACE

STRUMMER'S BRAIN races around the indignities and wrongs that need it. NME has no musical policy. The

grapevine is rusty. Peel's play-anything policy is like a dog being sick on your face. The Clash abandoned punk with 'London Calling' because there was too much inferior shouting—but that was a mistake. People screamed for information but writers would only talk about the psychotic nature of their underpants.

His maze of blind tunnels and real questions resembles The Clash's tortured set of records; a gigantic junk sculpture pillaged for energy until its shape is unrecognisable.

From 'Give 'Em Enough Rope' onwards The Clash have been an intermittent disaster on record. For every moment of exhilaration without shame ('London Calling'—the song—and 'Know Your Rights') there are a dozen ethnic hashes, corpulent white boms, ludicrous 'experiments', Clash shitty rockers. Strummer owns up that the "brazen stupidity" of 'Sandinista' was hopeless, that 'Combat

Rock' was half-half-good, half-awful.

So much nonsense has been talked about Clash records—the virtually unplayable 'Combat Rock' hailed as radical fisticuffs from an 'underground' band on its release—that it seems not merely tempting but imperative to deflate vinyl that shows an impossible gulf between aspiration and achievement. Or: The Clash's records are crap.

If The Clash are to be new, they must start with their records. Why not, then, a torrent of stunning singles to begin with? *Why are The Clash so slow?*

"Yeah, singles, rapid-firing from a machine-gun... we tried it. The second blitz. It ended with six months of complete non-communication with the company. They wouldn't release things."

From here, Joe and Paul brood further on company boardrooms, big stars and their bad

records, why punk was important in sweeping it aside. I begin to realise why this slowness has clogged The Clash. There they are, a pinprick of energy made improbably huge: where do they start?

IDON'T SPEAK DOGMATICALLY

LISTEN, YOU hard men. You have this bitch over George and Marilyn and their wardrobes. They're doing what you want to do—changing people's attitudes, as a fundamental—and because they go about it in an insidious way you can't see it. What you've done is try and smash people into the face of it (whatever 'it' is) and it hasn't worked so far. Has it?

"I disagree," says Strummer. "I've changed more people's lives than you'd ever believe." How have you done that? Jog jeans forward and we face it out. The saloon grows a little quieter.

"I've made people take political science courses at university. I've made them stop jumping out of the window, go back and do their exams. Changed the whole direction of their lives. World-wide. Hong Kong. Wellington, Arizona. Manchester. Dublin. Lyons. There's been too much masquerading as insidious. Look at us!

"I take your point that a lot of hard core punk groups won't make any difference. They'd rather call the kettle black when we all know it's black. A Clash song is insidious in its own way. I don't try and speak dogmatically. I understand you have to attract people first. But it's a fine line between dogma and saying nothing, and there's too many neon nonsense about to be subtle."

Joe wrestles with truth. Here I interject: hey, The Clash, the CBS-sponsored bandits, the Central American desperados. Whether you like it or not, Joe, The Clash are not only up there, they've been sussed too.

"You mean like the October anti-nuclear marches? We just figured that was a release. But if you say, oh, they're still doing songs about South America and that—the one good thing about the 'Sandinista' album was its title. In America that's become a crucial issue. People have come up to me and said that was the first time they'd heard of it, and then they found out this, and this, and they're working with these people, and leafletting this area of San Francisco..."

"I see The Clash as needing to balance. In the national press to hold down a job you've gotta be a right-wing bigot. You'll be fired from the British Nuclear Energy Service unless you believe in pressurised water reactors. There's no debate. There's no sanity."

A fruitless argument ensues over press responsibility. One thing The Clash might do well to grasp is how their audience might have altered. Their dismissal of a *Smash Hits* crowd—an extremely sizeable slice of young record-buyers—doesn't suggest astute market research, and when in the next breath Strummer says there's too much intellectualism in pop talk he blows his other option.

When I insist that they will be forced through

"THE CLASH WERE ELECTED TO DO A JOB AND IT HASN'T BEEN DONE. BECAUSE WE WERE TOO SELF-INDULGENT AND MADE EVERY MISTAKE IN THE BOOK."

BLOW YOUR NOSE ON IT

"MUSIC IS THE only channel going for young people," reasons Paul. "People don't care about art or poetry any more but they care about their records. It's the only thing."

Strummer: "We're touring without a record, without anything to sell, 'cos we're not going to make a record until we know we can do one that'll last ten years."

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Death, doom and destruction in *The World At War* (C4, Sunday)

mood when what he is really thinking is KILL THE RICH BASTARDS!! (LWT)

SUNDAY FEB 26

Jack's Game. Garbage on stilts Jack Charlton kills things that are better than he is. (C4)

The World At War. Part 19, Pincers — August 1944 to March 1945. Even knowing the ending can take nothing away from this masterpiece. Here the Allies are closing in on the cornered Reich and coming to grief at Arnhem, the Poles rise up and are crushed down in Warsaw, the Germans take the offensive in the Ardennes Forest and that ends in failure too. By March

is very much in the mood, mode and manner of *The Persuaders* with Nyree Dawn Porter playing the Roger Moore role of Action Aristocrat; this week boasts Tom Bell and Georgina Hale as beasties but the real star is, as ever, the Bondesque, Biblical theme as performed by Tony Christie. Let me hear you say, "In the AVENUES AND ALLEYWAYS! Where the SOUL of a MAN is easy to BUY! Every city's got 'em, can we ever stop 'em? SOME OF US ARE GONNA TRY!" You will be both shaken and stirred. (LWT)

MONDAY FEB 27

Here's Lucy. Wacky Lucy hires Richard Burton, disguised as a

phantom (Penguin, £1.25) — and that makes it unmissable. (C4) Bewitched. Elizabeth Montgomery — the face that launched a thousand crushes back in the schoolboy '60s — shakes her stuff to devastating effect. (C4) Grange Hill. Pogo explodes, Shewport goes wiggly under O-Level pressure and has to be coaxed back into the exam room by Bridget "The Midget" McCuskey, and the much-anticipated nude model for the art class turns out to be an aged Scotsman (guest appearance by Teddy Taylor, MP). Penultimate episode of current series of near-perfect post-pubescent drama. (BBC1) Tom Keating On Impressions. I don't know much about art but I know what I like and two of the things I like

CLASH

FROM PAGE 13

"THE ALARM? THE WRAPPING ON A CHOCOLATE BAR. THEY'RE THE IMITATION OF A SHADOW OF THE CLASH."

And what about the here and now? What if I want to hear a record that sounds great, this instant, that was cut for today?

"The Kleenex scene. Blow your nose on it and throw it away. I'm not interested. If it sounds like Brinsley Schwarz then don't tell me it's new, it's today."

Joe is speaking of Mr Weller's Style Council. Have they never thought of a similar throw at pop entrepreneurship?

"He got his arse burnt, didn't he? I understand and respect that he wanted to create something. I respect that he's a doer. But if it's a load of crap there's no point in doing it, is there? I understand his noble aims but it's too hopeful. If he wants to compare himself to Motown... those records were great because there was no room for screwing around. It was all so severe. They didn't go with a 'that'll do' attitude."

Even though that company attitude is what the majors are doing again, the same grooming for a faceless — or rather, faceful — stardom. Strummer replies that it's going from the outside in. But Weller's dissolution of The Jam for a shot at something else — haven't they ever thought of doing the same thing with The Clash?

"No! Because The Clash were elected to do a job and it hasn't been done. Because we were too self-indulgent and made every mistake in the book. Listen. Mick Jones wants to sue us. If his lawyer wants to say he's the lead singer of The Clash I don't give a damn. We'll still roll on."

More reminiscences — Jones and Headon rehearsing on their own, Strummer and Simonon in a corner wondering how they fitted in; Guy Stevens insisting that the flawed final version of 'Brand New Cadillac' was great and full of soul; the silence since 'Combat Rock'.

"Useful in a way," muses Joe through the fog of cigarette smoke. "What we've got to do now is outwork everybody. Outwork heavy metal bands."

It's a heroic manifesto, a tidal wave of

convictions. We heard it all at the time of Strummer's return from his sabbatical and it came to nothing. They haven't been anywhere — Simonon says they spent two years arguing with Jones in a rehearsal room in Camden Town, and the Clash coffers are now all tied up in injunctions — and they haven't done enough to suggest that people will bother with more Clash warcries. Yet their tour has been a lightning sell-out. This is Strummer's boast. He denies the strength of Black Flag and Bad Brains in calling them "closet cases. You have to have something with an impact, that'll be number one."

Will the new Clash be number one? Who are they?

"We've had it all with that Kenny Jones, Ron Wood stuff, dusting off old lags. All comers, that's how we did it. Then 300 heavy metal guitarists turned up..."

"They didn't know what group it was for. They had to play along with three numbers on a tape. Vince didn't know from the moment he walked from the pub into the rehearsal room. He thought it was for Tenpole Tudor! They were picked from the way they played."

"It's risky. But we're a group that takes risks," deadpans Simonon.

Will the new boys criticise you?

"We don't wanna slave syndrome! They won't hold back. You'd be surprised how quickly they speak up for themselves. How Vince said to me we had to play 'Police and Thieves'."

AN IMITATION OF A SHADOW

IT SEEMED to me that 1984 should be the last year of The Clash. '1977' and that sudden stop — FOUR! — a gasp into oblivion.

"Yeah, good one," grins Strummer. "But this is like Round Two. How many have run the course? Slouxsie? She's doing *Beastie* numbers. The Stravinsky overture and the dry ice. Do we have to live through it all again?"

Joe is groaning. Whose generation is this? "The Alarm? The wrapping on a chocolate bar. They're the imitation of a shadow of The Clash."

"That's why we're back. We're needed back."

And maybe Strummer is right. Reviewing these words, there is so much sightless bluster, belief in infamy, faith in the discredited terrorism of rock 'n' roll — so much to sneer at. Yet through this fervour, this flight from entropy, The Clash could still be useful. Even powerful. Even —

This is their last chance. Their opportunity, at a time when pop is in its most lachrymose and indulgent doldrums, is to recreate their epiphany. To do so they have to wipe the slate of years of their own torpor. They have to make astounding rock 'n' roll records, iron-hard music.

If I'm prepared to give them the chance, it's because I remember the blistering charge of their Brixton set two years ago, at a time when I thought rock shows a dead and dismal phenomenon; because of the spirit of their few giant records; because when pop has retreated into a pantomime of gesture and a palpable, frightening despair, there has to be a soapboxer in the clearing.

It doesn't matter that Strummer's a rhetorician, a bit of a rock 'n' roll clown, a London man whose heart beats so heavy inside him it wants to burst out of his skin. I liked him a lot. I want to see him try again. I think we need a loudmouth bastard like him just as much as we need a boy in braids who says be yourself. Listen:

"I'm saying stop the drugs. Vote. Take some responsibility for being alive. I'm prepared to dive back down to the pavement again — give me an old guitar and a pair of shoes and I'll fuck off. I will not go on bickering when The Clash has been elected to do a job and it's been neglected. I'd rather have a stab at it with a fresh team. That's the path of honour for me."

Is 1984 the year of The Clash?