

The only bandleader that mattered

Atlanta remembers Joe Strummer
(1952-2002)

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Though The Clash played Atlanta only three times during its turbulent history, bandleader Joe Strummer made an indelible impression on the city's music scene during each visit. An outpouring of grief greeted news that Strummer had died of heart failure Dec. 22.

"He was a prince among thieves," says Andy Browne of the Nightporters, a contemporary local band who opened for the Clash at the English group's final Atlanta show in 1984. "Strummer is the reason I picked up a guitar and began playing. Only Dylan comes close."

Browne was among many who thrilled to the Clash's sonic power and aggressively political stance. Though they gained more radio-play with innocuous tunes sung by lead guitarist Mick Jones ("Train in Vain," "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"), it was Strummer's gap-toothed growl on anthems such as the caustic "I'm So Bored With

the U.S.A." that represented the band's true voice, and that most appealed to those who hailed the Clash as "The Only Band That Matters."

The Clash had first blasted through Atlanta during the late '70s, with a raw, powerful performance at the now-defunct Agora Ballroom. A live photograph from that show, depicting a crowd crushed up against the stage, appeared on the back cover of the band's classic 1979 album, *London Calling*. For years afterward, local concertgoers who could be identified in the murky image enjoyed the cachet of reflected glory.

When the Clash returned in 1982, the group arrived a day early and visited the city's best-known punk club, 688. A local performance-art troupe called the Wife-Swap Dancers was enacting routines choreographed to Clash tunes and, impressed, Strummer invited the actors to repeat their performance onstage at the Fox.

At the time, the Clash was riding on the commercial success of its relatively non-confrontational *Combat Rock* album. Still, protesters outside the Fox Theatre the night of the show brandished signs declaring, "If you're so bored with the U.S.A., go to England and pay *their* taxes!"

With tensions high, a confrontation between police and rowdy fans escalated to a full-scale riot, during which officers swept one side of Peachtree with billy clubs,

while a man in plainclothes cleared the opposite sidewalk by brandishing a shotgun.

"Everyone went completely insane for about three minutes," recalls Ray Dafrico, who was "smack in the middle" of the action alongside his Nightporters bandmates.

Alice Berry, later the lead singer of Georgia-based Hillbilly Frankenstein, opened for the Clash in Austin with her Texas rockabilly band, the Trouble Boys. "Strummer saw us playing in town," says Berry, "and specifically requested us to replace Stevie Ray Vaughn, whom the crowd had booed the night before."

Berry also appeared briefly, dancing beside the sheik, in the finale of the Clash's "Rock the Casbah" video. "The song being played was actually 'Clampdown,'" she adds, "one of my favorites."

The Clash's final Atlanta concert in April 1984 involved an even greater degree of local participation. "I met Joe in Nashville the night before," remembers Dafrico, "and waited by the tour bus to give him a Nightporters tape. When he came out, he had a huge 'Radio Clash' boombox on his shoulder. I told him we wanted to open for him in Atlanta. He said, 'Sure, mate!'"

Dafrico's phone rang at 4 p.m. the next day. "They said to have our gear at the Fox in an hour," he recalls.

The Nightporters proudly took the stage as the opening act, while the Clash's headlining performance unfolded in front of dramatic news-clip backgrounds prepared by local CNN editors. "I've got to say, that night was one of the best of my life," Dafrico observes. "Joe had this amazing commitment to what he was doing, and that was such an inspiration. I can't believe he's gone."

"Pure and honest, with Zen-like emotion, Strummer made it all make a little more sense," says Nightporters vocalist Browne. "I am absolutely stunned. My sleeves are wet. God bless the man, and someone up there please thank him."

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