

The Burden of Mythology

BY JOE SASFY

THEY WERE THE BEST AND brightest of their generation. The Clash and Elvis Costello. Recently the most galvanic rock 'n' roll band and the most compelling singer-songwriter to emerge from England's punk upheaval came to D.C. If the Clash, with two guitarists replacing the fired Mick Jones, weren't really the Clash, the solo Costello never seemed more himself. If the two shows were instructive of anything, it was the burden of mythology.

The Clash performance at Smith Center revealed a mohawked, 31-year-old Joe Strummer insisting on his version of the Clash with the desperation of a silent movie star who knows the talkies are coming. Strummer's dismissal of guitarist Mick Jones was nothing less than a purging, an attempt to recapture the straightforward and passionate militancy that kindled a glorious if tenuous solidarity between the Clash and their fans in 1977.

According to Strummer, Jones had the audacity to conceive of himself, after eight years of playing and composing, as a "musician" and an "artist." To Strummer these were crimes against the Clash and so out went Jones and the diverse musical touches he brought. Strummer, now ironically in "complete control," told *Rolling Stone*: "I've been elected. I seriously believe I've been elected to say the truth and stamp out all the bull." Jones was obviously part of the bull.

It wasn't just Jones's presence, his guitar and whining vocals, or his charming pop songs (like "Stay Free" or "Lost in the



Post-purge Clash: more efficient, less profound. Inset: purged Clash—er Mick Jones.

Supermarket") that were missing from the Clash concert. It was the Clash themselves, the provisional alliance of music and ideals that Strummer, Jones and Simonon had forged into a great band. Together they embodied a sufficiently varied set of personal and musical backgrounds, and enough ambiguities and contradictions, to make their concerns real and moving. Strummer betrayed what was implicitly great about this band—that they were together at all, struggling with

themselves as well as the world. Rock pundit Robert Christgau nailed it on the head in 1977: "They are the Clash, not four guys who play in the Clash—not a star-and-support outfit or reconstituted supergroup."

Yet I have to admit that star Strummer and his support outfit played better and stronger at Smith Center than the real Clash did at the Ontario or Ritchie Coliseum, where they turned in sloppy, indecipherable, yet exhilarating performances. Maybe things are more musically ef-

ficient, if less credible or profound, with Strummer in charge. Every number—from the opening "London Calling" through "Clampdown," "Radio Clash" and "Armageddon Time" to "I Fought the Law" and "Brand New Cadillac"—was delivered with a simple, white-hot punk crunch.

Still, I was bored. The show seemed too easy and knee-jerk. Strummer's version of punk seemed not unlike the Stray Cats' rockabilly, both forms uprooted from their time

and place and both delivered with no awareness of the paradoxes inherent in their presentation. If Strummer needs a lesson on the pitfalls of mythic heroism, he should check Bruce Springsteen's increasingly preposterous career. Springsteen has been backed by his own dreams and those of his fans into a role that makes it impossible for him to release a record without spending months of anguished and obsessive seclusion in recording studios wondering if each and every song is



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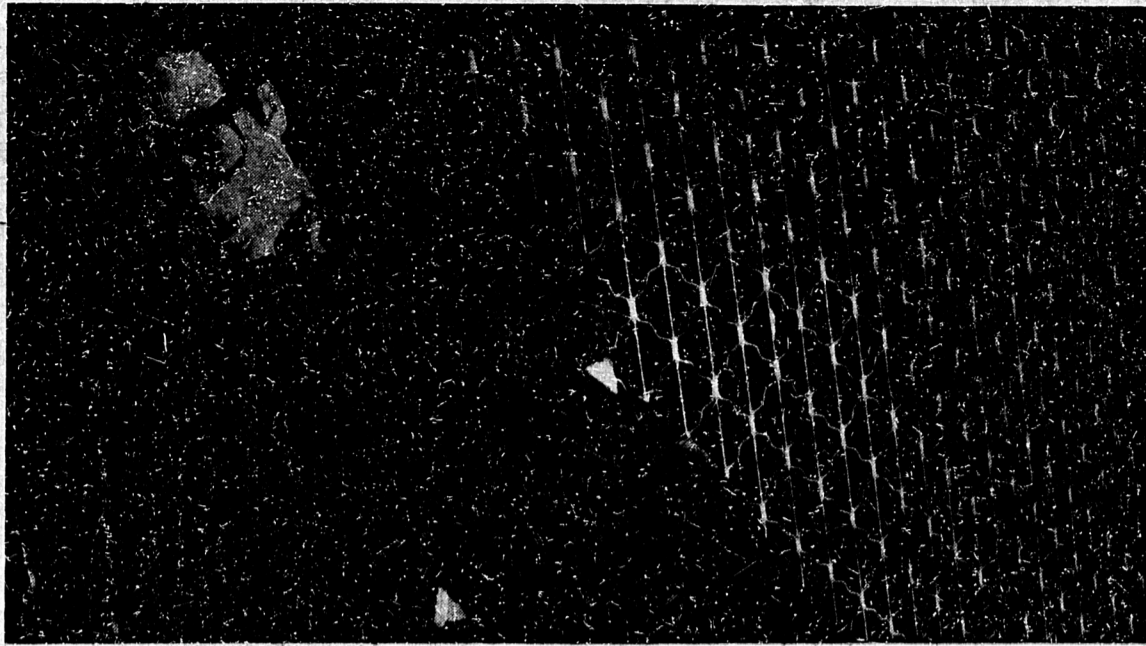
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"heavy enough" to sustain the myth.

While the Clash took the stage to a hyped-up introduction and sold T-shirts along with anthems, Elvis Costello took the stage with no introduction and gave his songs away syllable by syllable. His show at Constitution Hall was brilliant in a musical sense and an artistic affirmation of growth and maturity that implicated his devoted audience along with the artist himself.

Before the opening applause had died, Costello was into "Accidents Will Happen," crooning "Oh, I just don't know where to begin." The 29-year-old Costello never looked more like a comfortably aging, slightly frumpy Tin Pan Alley tunesmith. Throughout the set, he moved from guitar to electric guitar, from piano to electric piano, and from song to song with only a brief pause or comment. He performed many of his most difficult compositions, slowing tempos and emphasizing his intricate wordplay and endless melodic inventiveness.

All night, Costello steadfastly avoided the catharsis he could have provided by rocking out even briefly. There was to be no "Mystery Dance" or "Pump It Up." It was to



Costello grows up: once a terror, now a tunesmith.

the audience's credit that they hung on every song with the sure knowledge that, despite the absence of any venomous rock, the man was worth listening to no matter what he did. Costello proved it over and

over, presenting four new originals including a gorgeous '50s-style ballad, "The Only Flame in Town," and ending his third encore with a stunning anti-war number, "Peace In Our Time."

While his records have evidenced diverse stylistic preoccupations and a range of arrangement and production approaches, the solo Costello blew away those distinctions. The songs, whether the soulful "Every-

day I Write the Book" or the countryish "Stranger in the House," all gained a timeless pop character that emphasized the quality of lyric and melody. Cole Porter wouldn't have felt out of place. The result was that Costello affirmed his creative identity independent of rock 'n' roll and his great rock band, the Attractions. In many ways, this solo concert was just one more imaginative act of demythologizing (like his C&W album, *Almost Blue*) designed to keep him free to create again, to find new inspiration and new medium for his ideas.

It was particularly moving to hear Costello sing Dylan's "I Threw It All Away," a sad and beautiful romantic tragedy that dissipated Costello's angry nurd image in one warm and caressing refrain: "Love and only love, it makes the world go around." A wise person noted about punk bands in 1977 that the music had a problem. The problem was that the very youthful alienation and self-centeredness that gave punk its power couldn't continue to hold its meaning. Whether the music or musicians grew up or not, *they would get older*. I think Costello figured that out and Joe Strummer didn't.

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