

ing to note that new guitarist Vince White, who joined up after answering a blind ad looking for "loud, wild guitarists," had felt, as many Clash fans had felt, that the band's sound was getting "too wimpy" during the last three albums, "London Calling," "Sandinista!" and "Combat Rock."

"Yeah," Strummer readily agreed. "I was worried that in our experimental self-indulgences in the studio we had lost a real hard direction—a ghetto direction, a direction of the sidewalk, of concrete and of hunger."

**A** "ghetto direction" was what had drawn Strummer to rock 'n' roll. The son of a British foreign service diplomat, he rebelled against his middle-class upbringing after he heard the Rolling Stones' version of "Not Fade Away" at age 11. From that point on, "school did not exist," he said. He later quit school and bummed on the streets, often running from police who kicked him out of subway stations, where he used to sing Bob Dylan protest songs.

"I ended up in a squat [tenement] with a bunch of other no-hopers, and we got a hold of an electric guitar and stole microphones and ripped off some equipment. We literally came out of 'Desolation Row.'"

An avowed socialist, romantic idealist and "spunky character" who has run three marathons without training, Strummer quickly became known for his militancy. When he and the Clash played their first American gig at Harvard Square Theater in Cambridge, Mass., in 1978, he had the audacity to open with "I'm So Bored with the USA," a caustic song written "because I was so bored with the importation of American culture and the way we in Britain buy every damned show you have. Whatever you've got, we get it one year later. I was feeling suffocated." He used the same song to close the George Washington University show and was met with great applause.

Now, however, Strummer is mature enough to admit that his militancy sometimes has backfired, especially when the Clash tried to force its CBS record label to put out 1981's three-record album "Sandinista!" for the price of a single album.

"The label put the record on the back of the racks," Strummer said. "I'd even go so far as to say they sat on it so it wouldn't sell. They're the same label that has Michael Jackson; so they don't need us."

It was a lesson for Strummer. So when CBS then wanted the tapes of "Combat Rock" remixed, Strummer complied, causing a rift with guitarist Mick Jones that was never repaired. The Clash had spent 18 hours a track trying to mix "Combat Rock" because it was an "unholy mess." But outside producer Glyns Johns was brought in and mixed each track in 40 minutes, resulting in the band's biggest selling album to date.

"I'm not a Don Quixote type who's going to tilt at windmills forever," Strummer said. "I'm a finite man, and I've got a finite time at the top. I've got finite opportunities; so I thought, 'What an honor it is to stand in the spotlight! Don't

blow it."

"The issue is not to make fun of the record company because the record company doesn't care. The issue is to get your music out to people, not to sit on it. And that's the lesson I learned."

Jones has formed the group TRAC [Top Risk Action Company] with ex-Clash drummer Topper Headon but also has sued the Clash, claiming it owes him money. A pending court case has frozen the band's assets, including the \$500,000 it accepted for a single date at the United States Festival, much of which was slated to go to charities.

"I don't believe in lawyers," Strummer said. "I think it's a dishonorable way to go. We used to be a gang, a team, and I'd like to think we're [he and Jones] blood brothers beyond lawyers. But no, he wouldn't have it. So I told him, 'Okay, get out, get lost.' And I don't regret it."

Concurring in the decision to eject Jones was charter bassist Paul Simonon, who said that he and Jones had fallen out long before, even though Strummer was trying to mediate between them.

Despite this sully of the Clash's spirit, the group's batteries have been recharged by the three new members. None has played with well-known bands; so their enthusiasm is all the greater.

Drummer Pete Howard said, "I've been in a lot of bands that were just trying to get in the charts, but the Clash are trying

to do something important, and that's really unusual."

Guitarist Nick Sheppard, who contributes his own licks and does not imitate Jones slavishly, added that "this is a real rock band, so much better than that synth-pop rubbish."

White, the other new guitarist, praised the Clash for just giving him a chance. He told the funny story of going to an audition "full of hippies playing Dire Straits licks," but when it was his turn he just got up and walked.

"I was getting more and more bored because I had taken a day off from my warehouse job and was in a bad mood. So I just played some really angry stuff, and they called me back. From a warehouse to an American tour. I still can't believe it."

But new blood aside, Strummer remains the band's focus. "I give my life to this because you have no home life when you're in a band like the Clash," he said. "My father died this year, and I should have been at his bedside having that last conversation with him, but that was denied me because we were in Milan on tour playing before 12,000 people for two nights."

As Strummer finished his beer and the interview, he got up for a moment while Clash aide-de-camp Kosmo Vinyl marvelled from a distance.

"I don't know how Joe does it," Vinyl said with a shake of his head. "He's always given everything he has."

Boston Globe

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# ROCK



Clash today: Nick Sheppard, Pete Howard, Vince White, Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon.

## Grrrrrr—The old fight is still there in the angry, reconstituted Clash

By Steve Morse

It was after 1 a.m., and Joe Strummer, lead singer of the intensely political British band the Clash, was walking along a deserted stretch of sidewalk on Pennsylvania Avenue, only five blocks from the White House.

Strummer's black leather jacket and combat fatigues, together with coldly fixed eyes and a stark Mohawk haircut, formed a fierce impression as he strutted toward a nearby bar. His methodical stride was broken only when he looked up in shock to see nine derelicts sleeping under tattered blankets and sleeping bags, lying side by side behind pillars that front a glamorous hair salon.

"What is Reagan doing about people like that?" Strummer snapped tersely, referring to President Reagan, whom he later labeled in a barroom interview as a member of the old guard who prefers to spend money on nuclear power instead of people.

Strummer has just turned 30 and has just fathered his first child, a daughter, Gabbie, but it is clear that he has not mellowed. Although he does not read Karl Marx by candlelight, as some have claimed, he still believes that rock 'n' roll is a force that should change the world, not succumb to it.

"Rock 'n' roll is ours, not theirs," he said, differentiating between the young and old, between punks and the Establishment, between the Clash and Ronald Reagan.

"That's the vital part of rock 'n' roll; it's got to be ours and not theirs," he said, plopping

into a seat in O'Henry's Bar, where most customers glared at his Mohawk, although a bold few asked for his autograph.

"Young people have got to feel that, and that's why I don't agree with the new British invasion—the Boy Georges, the Duran Durans, Spandau Ballets and even the Eurythmics. I don't agree with it because it's not ours, it's theirs. But the record companies love it. It's video-hyped. It's controlled. It's predictable. It's two good songs on an album with eight fillers. It's a ripoff. It's for 10-year-olds."

Obviously, Strummer is not pulling any punches. A man with a mission, he is leading the Clash back from a nearly two-year absence, during which it has fired charter guitarist Mick Jones, who since has sued the band; hired guitarists Vince White and Nick Sheppard and drummer Pete Howard, all of 24 years old, and begun a key American tour, ranging from college gigs to arena dates. The group will be in Chicago Thursday at the Aragon Ballroom.

Although the Clash sold more than a million copies of "Combat Rock," its most recent album, and had a big dance hit in "Rock the Casbah," a humorous swipe at Ayatollah Khomeini's ban on rock music, it is touring this time without a new record and without much publicity or record-label support. A new album will be out in the autumn.

But the tour is just fine with Strummer, who only wants to prove that the reconstituted Clash is as committed or more

so than the vintage Clash that kicked the punk movement into high gear in the late '70s and was hailed as the "rock band that mattered the most."

"We don't accept an audience; we fight for an audience," said Strummer, whose words pour out in a grimly determined rush. "We realize you can't be a stuck-up — in London congratulating yourself. You have to scream for an audience if you seriously want to make an alternative to heavy metal and devil worship and all this generic rock."

"We know we've got to fight. I mean, whoever thought Little Richard's rock 'n' roll could lead to the generic accountants and lawyers playing lead guitar? It's unbelievable, but it's here."

Earlier that night the Clash had overpowered 4,000 hollering fans with a red-hot show at George Washington University. All three new members played as if their lives were on the line, while Strummer barked out six new tunes that marked a turning back from the artiness of recent years to the raw impatience of the band's early days.

Such new songs left no doubt as to Strummer's renewed stridency—"Are You Ready for War?," a blast at capitalistic economies that promote aggression; "This is London," a critique of London as a "human factory farm," and "Sex-Mad War," a defense of women who have been raped.

On the topic of winning back early Clash fans, it's interest-