

"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 intolerance of pop.

Whether they can supplant memories of Mick Jones' cranky petulance and offhand surmises 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 asshole, 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 brief. 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 a 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



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 Bansahee 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 Gothesborg 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."

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 suik."

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

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 chl-chi make-up people - don't break sweat, just wave your little finger around. I aim to outwork all those people and get rid of them. I dare to talk about spirit! I've had it with all that!"

It sounds impressive in the pub. Joe's face twists in agony, his voice scorching, his hands flail the air. Men in skirts cover. 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 diseases and battle fatigues?

A DOG IS BEING SICK ON YOUR FACE

STRUMMER'S BRAIN races around the indignities and wrongs that needle 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 haashe, corpulent white boms, ludicrous 'experiments', Clash ability 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 fisticuffa 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?

I DON'T SPEAK DOGMATICALLY

LISTEN, YOU hard man: You have this bitch over George and Marilyn and their wardrobes. They're doing what you want to — 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? Joe thins forward and we face it out. The singer 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 battle 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 nonsenses about to be subtle."

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

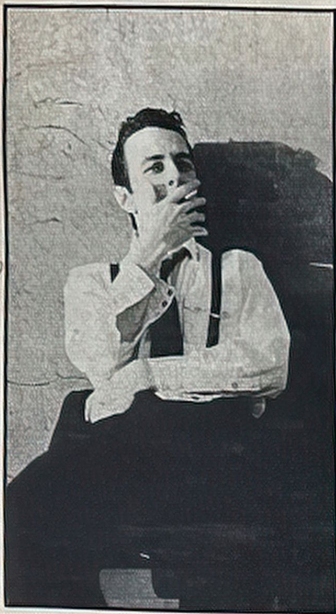
BLOW YOUR NOSE ON IT

"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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JOE CONTINUED



And where's that at?
I believe in socialism because it seems more humanitarian, rather than every man for himself and I'm alright Jack and all those arsehole businessmen with all the loot. But you can't bring socialism in with orders. I mean, look at the fucking Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. They just massacred and butchered the whole bloody country to make them do what they were told. That's ten times worse than the shit we've got going on here.
When I left art school, I took a dive: no future, no skill, nothing. So I just laboured and doled, fucked off around the place. Took a job when I was really skint. If I could get one, got fired every time for late timekeeping. The usual.
And I made up my mind from viewing society from that angle. That's where I'm from and that's where I've made my decisions from. That's why I believe in socialism. When I was on my uppers, every door was slammed in my face. Once I asked a lady outside a sweetshop in Hampshire to buy me a bar of chocolate. I'd been hitching all day and I was really hungry. And I just thought I'd turn round and try society on. And this lady came along and I said "Would you give me the rest of the money for this bar of chocolate?" And she just said "No, why should I?" Things like that annoyed me. **D'you want a drink?**
Nah, let me get it. I'm supposed to be the big pop star around here.

INTERVAL

I really think that we've got to devise a plan for this country. I'm not interested in the others, really. I mean, we put out records world wide, but 'home is where the heart is', it's really true. We spent a month in New York, recording in Jimi Hendrix's studios, and when we got back the sun was shining on Leicester Square, y'know? It felt great to be back, just to stand there.

We've gotta devise some kind of plan. Cos all these groups like the BM, they're using patriotism to recruit. And that's my number one guideline: if anyone gives me a patriotic pitch I know he's an arsehole. I know he's a rip-off merchant. I know he's trying to have one over on me.

"Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel!" It's true! I really is!

And yet there's something genuine there, too. Mmm, I've only been able to detect it in myself in the last couple of years. Whereas before, I'd been shat on by the system, as it were, and seen it from the underside — any patriotism at all made me wanna throw up. As far as I saw it, we're all earthlings, not English or French. And if we ever discover a new civilisation, that's gonna get more in perspective. I mean, just think of us all on this planet, fighting and shooting each other. You crack up thinking about it. That's how I used to think. I still do, mind, but I do feel patriotic, y'know, when England does something good. But what about Northern Ireland, how can you feel patriotic with all that going on? We gotta sort something out.

It's complex, but with The Clash you're accused of just sloganising problems — maybe you can't do anything else in a two-minute rock song?

I think that criticism belongs to someone else, perhaps Tom Robinson in his early days, or groups who followed our line, tried to crash in on our territory. Cos I always understood that you have to be personally involved. Or, you have to feel for something before you can write about it. If you really feel for something then you don't write slogans, you write truths. You're really on the ball. Obviously in a rock song the situation's gotta be simplified down from, say, a grand scale debate, when you can take into account all the nuances. But I just don't see why subject matter has to be so bloody bland.

But, y'know, I'm getting more political as I get older. And I think there's gotta be a plan, and a party. I mean, I've always hated parties because I don't believe in toeing the party line. But there must be some way that we can get ourselves together, here, not let Thatcher walk all over us. Like, Foot's going on about unilateral disarmament — and what the fuck have we got to lose by disarming? As soon as they start the argy-bargy Russia's gonna dump missiles on us straight away anyway. I think Britain should show the way now. Kick Thatcher out. Get Foot or Benn in. Disarm.

Everybody's taken it for granted these days about doomsday. And all these fuckers getting bunkers together. I mean, big deal.

I'm getting kinda religious and all. I really don't believe that we just get born and die and that's your one shot and that's it. I really feel that we're individual spirits and souls. **What? But getting religion is usually the point where people get off being concerned about social matters, the here-and-now world.** But I'm not talking about 'born again' and 'saved'. All I know is that we gotta clear this mess up, here and now, by physical action. And I also know, I don't 'think', I know that when we die we go on. There's a difference between saying "I'm born again, Jesus is here to save me, and that's all I'm gonna talk about for evermore. Amen!" Bollocks! That ain't the case. I'm interested in every bloody thing, like how much people work for and why they should bloody bother, and who the fuck's

getting the profits, y'know? I'm into Karl Marx, really heavy.

(Joe runs quickly — and accurately — through Marx's Theory Of Surplus Value)

But there's no education going on in Britain at the moment. I mean, when I was at school I hated the entire thing, the boring way they put it over. And yet nowadays, now I'm 28, I find myself vitally interested in going to buy books that they were trying to give us at the school, but they just didn't put it right. There's something basically wrong somewhere.

We've got to educate the young, otherwise they'll just grow up with all this shit and see no way out. Then it just takes the fucking BM to come along and go "Blame it all on the blacks", and in fact it's not the blacks, it's the white rich people that are to blame, the white fat cats. The Stock Exchange and Wall Street. And yet, what does that skinhead from East Ham know about the Stock Exchange? And yet that's what's killing him off, and he doesn't know anything about it."

And now... the dreaded Clashbag. A collection of questions, posed by anonymous members of the NME team, hastily scrawled and thrown into a plain brown envelope, to be drawn at random by the man himself.

Starting with — Are you any nearer to opening the club you've been talking about for three years?

That's easy to answer — no (laughs). We did have a place sussed out, the Lucky Seven, but the landlord wanted to turn it into a snooker hall, and when it came to fighting them over that, we really couldn't beat their asses, — the because a snooker hall makes no noise — the clink of balls — and we were proposing perhaps I haven't got the clout I thought I had. Perhaps you need a ring of businessmen who can beat them at their own game.

What about unemployed kids be doing with their time?

I found my life was a drag until I linked up with other people by forming a group. Our life was lull from the moment we decided to do something. Whereas before we'd just been lying around Squat City. And I'd say if anyone was unemployed and bored out of their minds they should sit down and figure out what they think'd be great, then go out and try make it happen — cos there's plenty of other people out there.

To connect with other people and communicate with them, that's when things really happen and are really exciting. Like the beginning of punk, the whole place seemed to be crawling with people who had some idea of what they wanted to do. It's too easy just to throw years of your life away.

When I was younger I thought time was eternal, but growing up I begin to know how long a year is, and it ain't that long.

What can audiences and bands do about the British Movement threat?

Well, speaking for the bands, I'd say a very practical way they can help is by being very careful that what they write ain't misconstrued. Like, some people write a song slugging off the NF and they write it from the stance of 'I'm a Nazi and I'm a bloody idiot', but sometimes people don't quite get the subtleties and that's dangerous — I know I've done it.

And as for audiences, being British we have this thing where you leave people alone, that cool behaviour, not like Italians. And I think audiences have got to shake themselves out of it. An audience of 2,000 people will cheerfully let 30 people ruin the show. They don't want to get involved. But they're gonna have to get involved.

avourite bands?

I saw The Stray Cats just the other week, and they were really great. Just three guys playing their hearts out, no hype about it. I think 'Runaway Boys' is a great record — perhaps it even tops 'Ace Of Spades'! But apart from Stray Cats and Motorhead (laughs)... At the moment I'm really into Gregory Isaacs, great voice. So many of those reggae guys can really sing. We all shout over here, and they sing.

What painters/art movements have influenced The Clash?

Paul Simonon's our resident artist, he left art school the last. I used to enjoy pop art. They had a great exhibition about ten years ago at the Hayward Gallery, and that was mind-boggling. Paul though, obviously he's really into Jackson Pollock. He's really into customising his bass. He'll unscrew his scratchplate and lay it on the floor; he kinda walks around it for an hour, and then he just goes flick with a bit of blue, and then another hour, and then flick with a bit of red — he's an artist.

The Clash: What went wrong/what went right?

What went wrong was we didn't realise exactly what the structure of the business was. And what went right was that we could handle that, and not give in.

Many things went wrong in the early days. Like that day we turned up for rehearsals and Terry Chimes said he was leaving. I could have hit him over the head with a spade...

And then we fell out with Bernie (Rhoades). Bernie lost control of us. His scene was not to give us any money in case it ruined us, which is the way you deal with kids — which he thought we were. But he underestimated us. Like people say Bernie wrote our songs, but that's not true at all. All he said was "Don't write love songs, write something that you care about, that's real." And it's a pity we fell out with him cos we made a good team.

But he got really funny when The Clash all started to happen. We wouldn't see him from

week to week. If he wanted to communicate he'd just send a minion — inferring he was too busy elsewhere to deal with us.

You know 'Complete Control' which Mick wrote about the record company, in fact we got the phrase off Bernie one night in that pub in Wardour Street, The Ship. I remember him going — he'd obviously been talking to Malcolm and was trying to be the master puppeteer — going "Look, I want complete control, I want complete control." And we were just laughing at him.

But what went right was that we didn't explode, or implode. It was desperately hip at one point, when the Pistols jacked it in, everyone was going "Of course they did, man. That's the ultimate end to the ultimate group." And I was thinking, that's just a cop-out.

What happened to the TV show you were planning to launch?

I haven't found anyone who's interested. I think The Clash exist very much outside the society of this town — I mean the people who run the TV, even the music industry. We're really outside of it, no communication with anybody. Like, things happen, and I read about it afterwards. When they have a big bash and it says "Anybody who was anybody was there", I find out about it when I buy the paper the following week! And I think that's pretty good for us, it helps us appreciate the realities of the situation rather than be lulled into any false sense of everything's cool man, let's have a party. I'm glad we're outsiders in that respect. But this is where it falls down, whenever it comes to getting anything together, getting a businessman to take you seriously. It's very difficult.

And you won't do Top Of The Pops.

There's this farce that's been going on for ten years, where they take the group into the studios to re-record the backing track for TOTP, they take the BBC engineer down to the pub for a drink, meanwhile they swap the tapes with the original tapes of the single, and they throw away what they just pretended to record. I mean, this goes on in 12 studios in London every week, the same charade is played out — which we haven't had to go through not having been on the show, nor ever going to be either.

Last question: how have The Clash stayed together, when everyone else splits up?

Hooray! Something good, something I can boast about! It's not often you get a question like that. I feel a warm glow all over me, I really do. It's like I was saying: walking out is a cop-out. And that's the way we've always thought, and that's why we haven't done it. It gets rough a lot of the time, but we've just been really open with each other, and we know that to say bollocks and storm off is a cop-out. We've often felt like it.

And perhaps there's another reason, I know this helps. Sometimes you think "That's it! That's the last straw! I never wanna hear the word Clash again!" Then you go home and you think "Hang on a minute. We're not gonna leave it to The Jam, are we?" I know The Jam aren't the Be-all and end-all, and I'm gonna stick around to prove it.

THROWN OUT the pub at closing time, we

make our way to an Italian cafe on the edge of Soho. Pessimistically, Joe ponders the commercial rewards of a life in showbusiness. The Clash's stance on record prices — such as insisting that a triple album be sold for the price of a single album — is not shared by their record company. Accordingly, the financial sacrifice involved falls largely on the group. When they sell 200,000 copies of "Sandinista!" in Britain, then their total royalties will amount to 30 pence. Publishing royalties will also be payable on the basis of a single album. Recently Joe was refused a mortgage.

Not have the LP's prospects been greatly helped, he feels, by its December release date — just in time to get buried by the Christmas rush. "There's only two categories of people that put records out in December," he says, stirring and staring into a cup of cappuccino. "That's lunatics — and superstars."

And which category are you lot, then? Joe laughs quietly. "The first," he replies. "Definitely the first."

“ Stuff like 'Banana Republic' and 'The Tide Is High' make me ashamed about white reggae... I hate music that's so concerned with being 'new' it forgets to have any soul. ”

