

# This Life

Edited by  
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## The raging voice of punk rock

Joe Strummer  
Musician  
1952-2002

Joe Strummer, who has died of a heart attack at 50, was the lead singer of the Clash, the most political of the punk rock groups and, after the Sex Pistols, the most influential.

The band sprang from a west London squat, and allied musical eclecticism with a passionate socio-political stance. Their energetic live performances expressed outraged idealism on an almost heroic scale. With Strummer tearing incomprehensibly into his vocals, pounding his guitar like a man possessed and the band setting up a barrage of rage behind him, there were moments of musical affray when it seemed, both to their fans and some of their opponents, as if rock 'n' roll could challenge the established order.

But for all their commitment, the Clash fell victim to the strains of the music business. They experienced difficulties with drugs, management, contracts and personal and creative tensions. Strummer, spokesman for a generation of the dispossessed, could no longer cope with the contradictions presented by his own material success.

Strummer was born John Graham Mellor in Ankara, Turkey. His father was a diplomat who was posted to Cairo, Mexico City and Bonn before settling in England. Strummer was educated at the City of London Freeman's School at Ashted. As a punk rocker, he often found his father's occupation and his own education an embarrassment, and he told enthusiastic half-truths to journalists to maintain credibility.

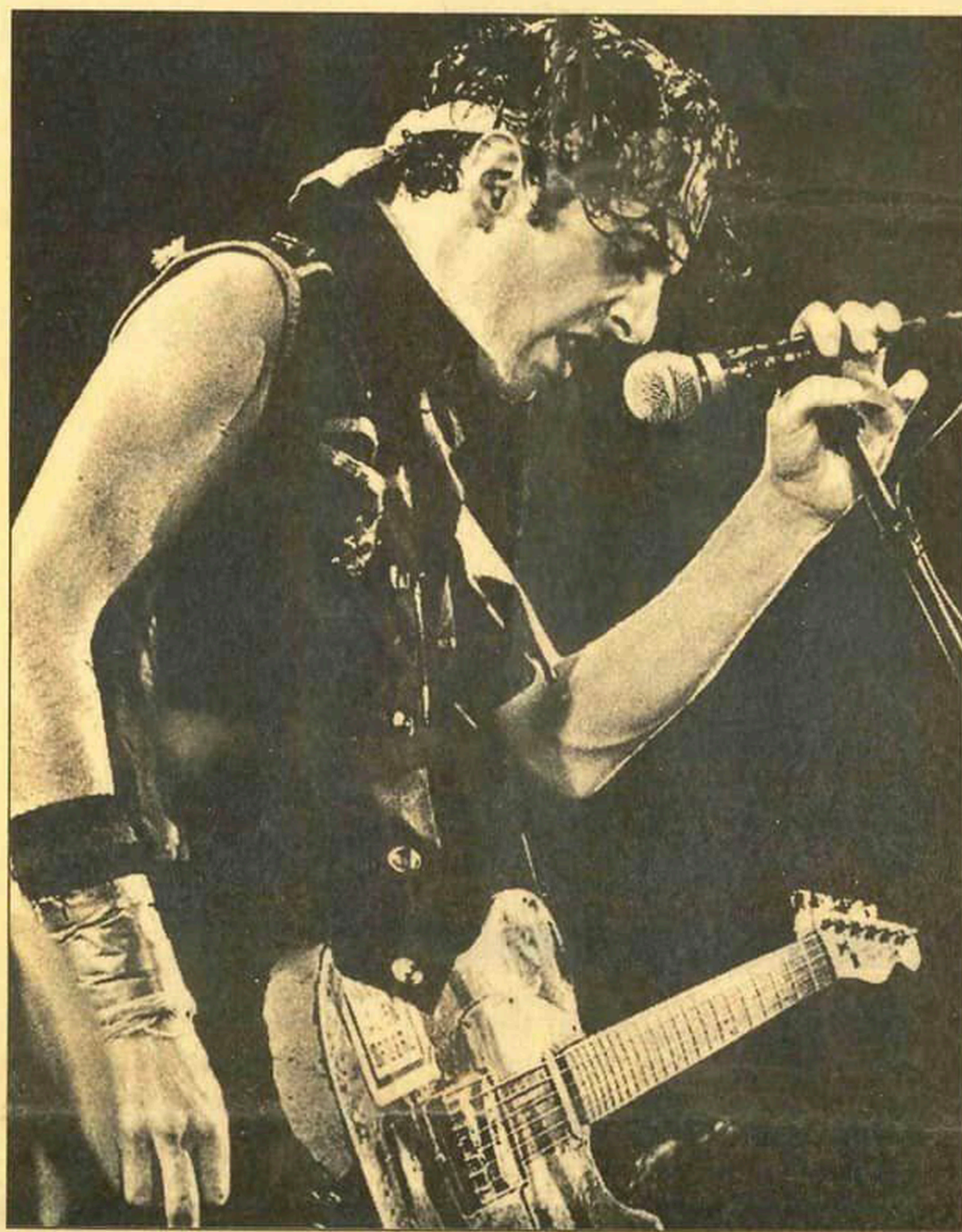
Unfettered by academic achievement but obsessed by music, Mellor briefly studied at London's Central School of Art, from which he was expelled, before changing his name and deciding to start a band.

The 101ers, named for the address of their squat, played hard-edged R&B in the pubs of Ladbrooke Grove. In 1976, having released one single, they were supported by the Sex Pistols, whose scorching set was, Strummer felt, "like an atom bomb in your mind". He accepted an offer to join Mick Jones and Paul Simonon in the Heartdrops, swiftly renamed the Clash, who played their first concert two months later supporting the Sex Pistols.

Finding that Jones's melodic skills dovetailed with Strummer's angry lyrics, the group's songbook grew alongside their image. Spraying their guitars and clothes with paint, the Clash exemplified punk's confrontational stance.

Their eponymous first album, released in 1977 and hailed as an instant classic, was an assault of chainsaw guitar, explosive lyrics and raw belief which captured a sense of social desperation and urban decay. The closing track, *Garageland*, was a roar against the critic who had suggested they "should be returned to the garage, preferably with the motor running".

With the demise of the Sex Pistols, the Clash found themselves standard-bearers for punk - rock rebels in customised combat gear. They enjoyed their share of notor-



Joe Strummer, at the height of his fame, as an ideologue leader of a swaggering band, refused to be the traditional rock star: "I vote for the weirdo, the loonies."

iety and riots at concerts, and Strummer made court appearances for offences ranging from petty theft to drugs.

But throughout their music remained charged with total conviction. The rock writer Greil Marcus, writing in New York's *Village Voice*, expressed his "disbelief that mere humans could create such a sound, and disbelief that the world could remain the same when it's over".

This furious commitment was sustained over lengthy tours in Europe and, particularly, America, where the band built a large following.



'There were moments when it seemed as if rock 'n' roll could challenge the established order.'

The Clash, from left, Nicky Headon, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Joe Strummer.

But amid the raging tracks on the debut album, the band included a cover of Junior Murvin's classic reggae track *Police and Thieves* which gave an early indication of their future direction. Strummer's roots lay in R&B, rockabilly and folk; Jones's interests veered towards dance and funk, Simonon was obsessed with reggae, and their new drummer, Topper Headon, had a background in soul and jazz.

During punk, most of these influences lay dormant. But after their over-produced, water-

treading second album, the band began to explore their range. If they alienated their restricted constituency, which was still spiky-haired and bondage-trouserised into the 1980s, the Clash won over the critics with their third album, *London Calling* (1979), which was voted the most important record of the 1980s by *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Strummer, who had by that stage settled into the role of an ideologue leader of a swaggering band which was increasingly being cited as the world's finest, refused to slip into the role of the traditional rock star, telling one

expected rock and reggae crossover.

The Clash were increasingly criticised for failing to live up to their guerilla rhetoric. And after fashion had moved on to the synthesisers and baroque clothing of the New Romantics, the band emigrated to America, where the mythologising of outlaws and rebels and the primitive musical vocabulary of the New World suited them better. Their final album, *Combat Rock* (1982), was their most commercially successful, making the top five there. But tensions were rising in the band: Headon was sacked for failing to control his heroin addiction, and Jones was dismissed by Strummer for having "strayed from the original idea of the Clash".

The Clash Mark II, which found Strummer and Simonon alongside three new recruits, proved unwise. The band folded in December 1985; efforts to re-form it, mainly engineered by Strummer, who never forgave himself for sacking Headon and Jones, were futile.

Strummer's post-Clash career was eclectic but rarely commercially successful. He seemed to be drifting, as he had before the Clash, partly because he was always in love with the American ideal of the open road; the stateless artist, travelling light.

A chance meeting with the film director Alex Cox saw him compose scores for, and take small parts in, the rarely-seen (and scarcely missed) films *Straight to Hell* (1986), *Walker* (1987) and the punk rock movie *Sid and Nancy* (1986). The sensitive Latino/country and western soundtrack for *Walker* was a critical, if not a commercial, triumph.

Subsequently Strummer wrote the music for *Permanent Record*, a bleak movie about a teenage suicide starring Keanu Reeves - Strummer's only brother had committed suicide aged 18 - and for John Cusack's black comedy *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997). Jim Jarmusch cast him as a displaced English rocker nicknamed Elvis in *Mystery Train* (1989).

He recorded an album, *Earthquake Weather* (1989), that was largely ignored. He toured with his band, the Latino Rockabilly War, both independently and, in a decision which caused considerable criticism, in support of Class War, the political movement advocating violent struggle. As ever, Strummer's intentions were sincere, but he was incapable of seeing through the contradictions of a wealthy musician touring under the "Rock Against the Rich" banner.

Subsequently, he fronted the Irish folk-punk band the Pogues, having produced their album *Hell's Ditch* (1990), after they sacked their singer, Shane MacGowan, shortly before a tour. Strummer also worked with Mick Jones's new band, Big Audio Dynamite throughout the 1980s, co-writing and producing several albums.

During the '90s, as he struggled with mild depression and contractual problems, Strummer's appearances were haphazard. He sang with Black Grape on their World Cup single, and on Roxy Music and Jack Kerouac tribute albums, in addition to several Amnesty International benefit concerts and South Park's "Chef Aid".

The belated appearance of a live Clash recording, a BBC screening of the Clash documentary *Westway to the World*, the release of his second solo album, *Rock, Art and the X-Ray Style*, and his first major tour for several years with his band, the Mescaleros, made 1999 a more successful year. Last month, he completed a British tour with the Mescaleros, and he was working with Bono and Dave Stewart on a track for Nelson Mandela's AIDS Awareness in Africa. His final concert was a benefit for the Fire Brigades Union.

Although he was sometimes maltreated by the press, Strummer was largely a victim of his own enthusiastic and often bombastic rhetoric. He passionately meant what he sang and (however ill-thought out) said. That the world remained resolutely unchanged did nothing, in his supporters' eyes, to diminish the power of his performance; he became a kind of treasure for the punk rock generation. Billy Bragg, the singer and songwriter who followed in the Clash's political footsteps, said in a BBC tribute that the Clash had given punk its "political edge". "Were it not for the Clash, punk would have been just a sneer, a safety pin and a pair of bondage trousers."

Joe Strummer married Gaby Salter, by whom he had two daughters. The marriage was dissolved and he married, secondly, Lucinda Tait. In addition, he married a fellow squatter in the early 1970s in order for her to obtain British citizenship. He thought that she was South African and called Pam.

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