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# The Last Action Hero

On December 22, 2002, former Clash frontman Joe Strummer passed away. This is the story of the greatest punk rocker of them all...

Words: Ben Myers

**THEY SAID** it would never happen. Rumours that The Clash were about to reunite have circulated every six months since they split in the mid-'80s, always amounting to nothing more than wishful speculation among fans and press alike. While every two-bit punk band from the Sex Pistols downwards have tainted their legacy in the pursuit of money, the four members of The Clash – vocalist/guitarist Joe Strummer, guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Topper Headon – retained a dignified silence.

But recently, it looked like all that was going to change. On November 16, 2002, Strummer and Jones played together at a benefit show in support of the striking fireman at Acton Town Hall in West London – the first time the duo had shared a stage since Jones' acrimonious departure from The Clash in 1983. That same month, during an interview for MTV in the US, Joe Strummer was told that the band were to be inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame, an event at which inductees often perform live. Strummer seemed to be genuinely excited about returning to the stage with his former bandmates. "I think we should play," he commented at the time. "It would be shitty and snotty not to".

Tragically, it was not to be. On December 22, 2002, after a busy year writing and recording with his band, The Mescaleros, and other projects, Joe Strummer passed away suddenly and unexpectedly at his Somerset home. He was just 50.

Without Strummer, The Clash could never reform to play the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame show, but then they were not a band who needed recognition from the establishment. The Clash were rock 'n' roll itself. And for millions across the world, the death of Joe Strummer is more tragic than the early exit of John Lennon or Elvis Presley. The Clash were more than stars. They – and Strummer in particular – were one of us.

**JOE STRUMMER** was born John Graham Mellor in Ankara, Turkey, on August 21, 1952. His father was a diplomat for the Foreign Office, and the family's early years were spent in Cairo, Mexico City and Bonn, providing a wanderlust and sense of self-reliance that would manifest itself in Strummer's later work. Equally influential on Strummer's life was his father's job: such governmental work is typically middle class, something that the singer would understandably play down as he later presented himself as the voice of working class rebellion.

The children of diplomats are often sent to fee-paying boarding schools in order to enjoy a disruption-free education and Strummer was no exception. From the age of nine to 17 he attended the City Of London Freeman's School, a mixed-sex boarding school in Epsom, Surrey – an institution he later described as a place where "thick rich people sent their thick rich kids". He certainly wasn't there on educational merit – he consistently finished bottom of the class throughout his tenure, and only saw his parents during summer holidays. One of his close friends, Robin Croker, said of Strummer's background: "It caused Joe a lot of problems. In terms of his personality, it's always been a big dilemma for him. He's always been very torn, very guilty."

Music provided an escape, and Strummer became hooked on the raucous rock 'n' roll of Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley, as well as the Beach Boys, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. While the Swinging London of the late '60s was happening just 25 miles down the road, his spare time was spent with one ear to the radio while devouring the music press, or playing new treats like Captain Beefheart in his school study room. The year after his father was awarded an MBE in 1969, Strummer left school with 3 O-Levels and an A-Level in art and, in search of freedom, went to Central London School Of Art, dropping out after a tab of LSD made him realise "what a load of bollocks it was".

For two years he drifted through various London squats and busked on the underground, where he picked up the nickname Woody after politicised folk singer Woody Guthrie. Following a

girlfriend to Newport, he joined his first bands singing covers with The Rip Off Park Rock 'N' Roll All Stars and The Vultures. His playing was so bad his fellow bandmates wouldn't let him near a guitar. After a winter's employment collecting broken jam jars from the untended graves in Newport cemetery in 1974, he cut his long, woolly hair short and headed back to London.

**THE MOVE** back to London played a crucial part in Strummer's future. He moved into a squat in 101 Waltham Road, Maida Vale, a mere few hundred yards across the concrete Westway flyover from the high rise flat where guitarist Mick Jones lived with his gran. In the mid-'70s it was relatively simple to gain access to properties awaiting development and a strong squatting scene emerged, particularly in West London, where foreign students, artists and musicians congregated.

It was at 101 Waltham Road that Strummer formed his first proper band, The 101ers. It was here that the singer – then still known as Woody – unveiled his new name: Joe, as in 'Ordinary Joe', and Strummer because "I could only play two chords".

Playing a mixture of garage-rock, blues and South American roots music, they soon became mainstays on the London club circuit, receiving enough positive reviews to get noticed. While The 101ers were promising, they were essentially retreading a tried and tested route on the pub scene.

In April 1976 they were supported by an unknown band called the Sex Pistols. It was, for Joe Strummer, a revelation.

"If you go and see a rock group you want to see someone tearing their soul apart, not listen to some instrumental slush," Strummer later commented in a 101ers retrospective. "When I saw the Pistols I just *knew*."

It was after one such show that Strummer met his future bandmates, when Mick Jones and Paul Simonon offered their verdict on The 101ers: Strummer was great but his band was shit. Jones and Simonon, who had been playing in London SS, were scouting around for a livewire, stylishly attired singer and approached Strummer when they found themselves in the same dole queue. Within 24 hours he had left The 101ers, and joined the nascent Clash. Jones was a budding guitar hero and, while Simonon had zero ability, he did own a bass and looked cool in his proto-punk clothes. For someone keen on personal reinvention Strummer needed little persuasion.

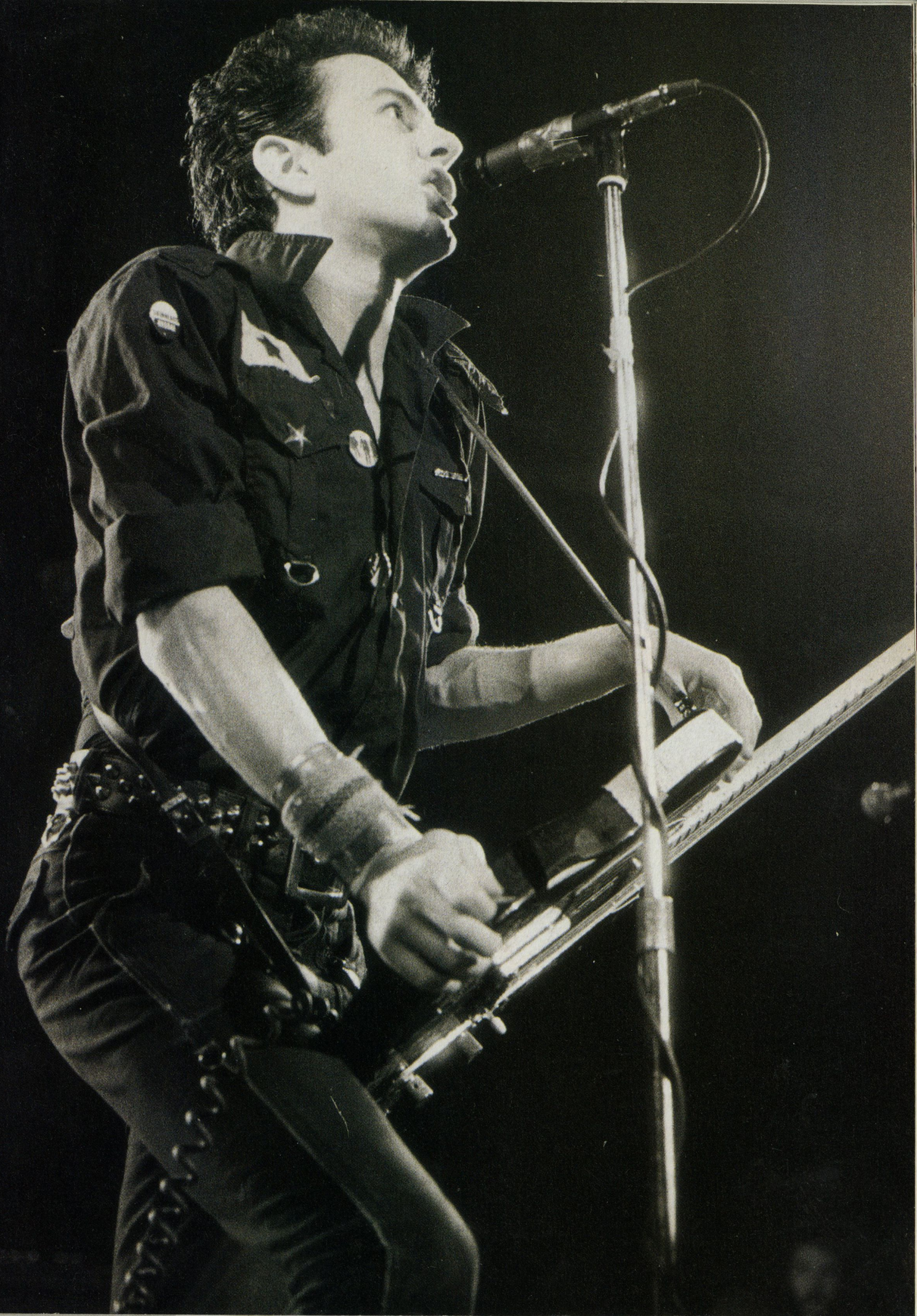
"He was in the gear and everything," Jones remembers of the band's first rehearsals. "He was already part of it. He was there."

**EMBARKING ON** a regimental work ethic that they would stick to for the next 10 years, The Clash moved quickly. Managed by Machiavellian Malcolm McLaren associate Bernie Rhodes, they spent the next six months living, writing and rehearsing in a railway storage space at Camden Market.

If art school graduate Simonon provided the band's heart-throb good looks and paint-splattered Jackson Pollock-style aesthetic, and Jones the musical talent, then Strummer provided The Clash's political ideology and an energy source that today's punk bands are still attempting to replicate. He used the stage not for hero worship, but to preach and proselytise, to share ideas, to inspire. Working first with drummer Terry Chimes (aka Tory Crimes), and then, from 1977, sometime jazz/soul drummer Nicky 'Topper' Headon, The Clash penned a set of politicised songs in response to a recent Sex Pistols statement for a scene of "more bands like us". Along with the Pistols and The Damned, The Clash gave birth to punk rock in the UK. Although inspired by The Ramones and New York's CBGB's scene, British punk was a grittier and angrier reflection of the times.

"In 1977 we had some ridiculous things in England," said Strummer in 2001. "There was the three-day week, two channels on the TV. So through the long nights people were really moving around and talking to each other, writing tunes and getting into





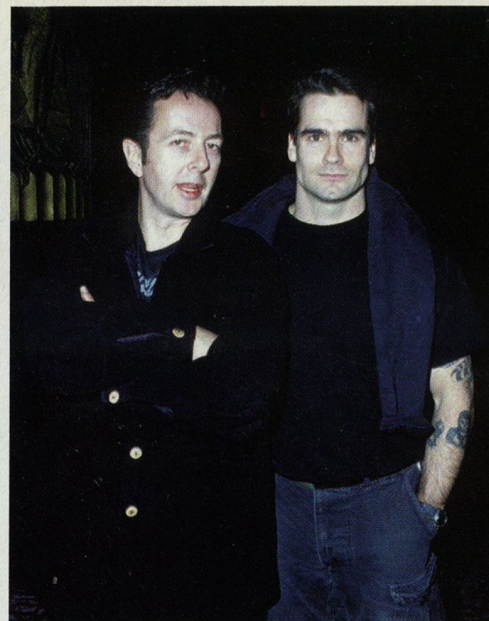








**Left: The Clash** – (l-r) Joe Strummer, Topper Headon, Paul Simonon, Mick Jones – doing what they did best. **Above right** – Joe Strummer with Henry Rollins



## “If I had to go back and do it all again, I wouldn’t change a thing.” Joe Strummer

► the whole thing in a big way. Every night you could see something completely berserk.”

The Clash’s early, amphetamine-fuelled live shows quickly redefined the word ‘berserk’, the quartet ripping through their raw, three-chord anthems with Strummer’s ‘electric leg’ pumping as he spat out barely coherent commentaries through bad dental work, before cutting to their own rendition of Junior Murvin’s war-torn reggae hit ‘Police And Thieves’. Right from the off, The Clash displayed a willingness to explore styles while commenting on their culture. Following their involvement in the brutal riots at the Notting Hill Carnival in 1976, Strummer penned ‘White Riot’, a flashpoint document of racial oppression.

“As soon as I heard ‘White Riot’ I knew they were a great band,” says Ramones guitarist Johnny Ramone. “It was the best band I’ve seen to this day. Of all the punk bands, I felt closest to him than anyone else from that era.”

The Sex Pistols’ infamous Bill Grundy TV appearance introduced the nation to punk rock, and, in January 1977, The Clash signed to CBS for £100,000, maintaining they would retain ‘complete control’ over their careers. One month later, they recorded their self-titled debut album over three consecutive three-day weekends. With songs like ‘London’s Burning’, ‘I’m Bored With The USA’ and ‘Garageland’, Strummer’s lyrics covered subjects as diverse as street violence, American cultural imperialism and rock stars’ motivations, while demonstrating a pure and visceral return to musical basics. The album was met with predictable cynicism from the bearded old guard of the music press, but the people who mattered – the young punks and the young writers – embraced it. ‘The Clash’ went straight into the album charts at Number 12.

**AS THE** Clash’s stature grew, so did Strummer’s ability. If their debut album was a hastily-produced, phlegm-flecked statement of intent, follow-up albums ‘Give ‘Em Enough Rope’ (1978) and ‘London Calling’ (1979), established Strummer as the most important spokesman of his generation. The Clash toured heavily, Strummer in particular making it a policy to break the boundaries between artist and audience by sneaking kids through windows into sold-out shows or talking to them about their problems and ideas; an ethic still at the root of punk and hardcore today. Long after the short-lived Sex Pistols imploded, Strummer was the man most responsible for taking punk rock in new directions. Trips to Jamaica, where they heard their beloved dub and reggae at the source, or riding the freeways of America on the back of ‘London Calling’s’ breakthrough, opened his eyes to world affairs – particularly rabble-rousing left-wing politics ranging from marginalised Nicaraguan factions to the Spanish revolution to unemployment-addled Britain. They dipped into rockabilly, funk, dub and country and by 1981, when they enjoyed a riot-inducing seven-night run at Bond’s Casino in New York’s

Times Square (where The Clash filmed a cameo in Martin Scorsese’s ‘King Of Comedy’), they were even incorporating the first rhythms of black NY hip-hop into their white rock sound.

“Joe Strummer was a brilliant lyricist and the electric focal point of the greatest live band of all time,” says guitarist Tom Morello, who, with Rage Against The Machine, most effectively brandished the rebel-rock gauntlet thrown down by The Clash. “He played as if the world could be changed by a three-minute song, and when I saw the Clash play, my world was changed forever.”

Although not their strongest album, 1980’s ‘Sandinista’ best reflected Strummer’s attitude – a triple-album for the price of a single, bursting with more ideas and styles than it can contain. By the release of ‘Combat Rock’ (1982) The Clash had transcended punk and were a bona fide rock ‘n’ roll band, scoring radio hits the world over. Always a volatile entity and worn out after years of constant touring and recording, the differences between Strummer and Jones became apparent and the guitarist was ejected. Strummer later regretted the move, but The Clash – minus Jones and a heroin-addicted Headon – limped on until 1985 with the release of the piss-poor ‘Cut The Crap’ and a busking tour which merely served to show how great the original Clash had been.

It was over.

**WHILE THE** late ‘80s and early 1990s saw Strummer engaging in lower profile duties – scoring soundtracks, acting in Alex Cox’s ‘Straight To Hell’ and Jim Jarmusch’s ‘Mystery Train’, temporarily replacing Shane MacGowan in The Pogues – his widespread influence became immeasurable. Without The Clash, it’s doubtful that the likes of the Dead Kennedys, The Prodigy, Fugazi, Rage Against The Machine, Manic Street Preachers, Green Day, Rancid, The Wildhearts, Fatboy Slim, Sum 41 and hundreds of others would ever have existed. Even the collective last-gang-in-town swagger of The Hives and The Strokes has been directly influenced by The Clash’s sartorial style.

Strummer released a solo album, ‘Earthquake Weather’, in 1989, before the surprise success of re-released single ‘Should I Stay Or Should I Go’ gave The Clash their first Number One – albeit a posthumous one – and instigated the first round of reformation rumours. Despite lucrative sums being bandied around, Strummer declined all offers.

In the mid-‘90s, enjoying the rural life and local cider in Broomfield, Somerset, Strummer put together a new band, The Mescaleros, a typically diverse mix of styles, subjects and cultures that nodded to his days in The Clash without ever retreading them.

“We’re a band and everybody contributes,” said a typically democratic Strummer upon the release of last year’s ‘Global A Go Go’ album (released on Bad Religion guitarist and Clash devotee Brett Gurewitz’s Epitaph

label). “My name’s out front because I formed the group and have been around the longest. Playing jazz or punk or anything else, you have to fight against the purists who want to narrow the definition. That’s what kills music because it stifles it to death.”

Strummer also continued his political interest by supporting various causes including firemen striking for a pay increase and better working conditions, and was due to attend a Nelson Mandela-sponsored AIDS charity concert in South Africa in February.

**THREE WEEKS** ago, Joe Strummer died at home in Somerset from a heart attack after taking his dog for a walk. Winding down for Christmas the music world was stunned. Of all the punks Strummer had aged the least and seemed the least likely to pass away so soon. He had previously run the London marathon, had never courted a drug addiction and appeared only marginally less wiry than his younger self. His death came a mere three weeks after a successful UK tour.

A private service for Strummer took place on January 1, 2003 in a West London crematorium, and was attended by his former bandmates. The cortege passed The Elgin pub where The 101ers and The Clash played early gigs – the place where John ‘Woody’ Mellor became Joe Strummer.

My personal experience of Strummer was a brief one. It was the final day of a particularly apocalyptic Glastonbury festival four years ago when I had the chance to meet the very man whose music had a direct impact on my life and the millions like me, whose mythologising of London in songs like ‘Guns Of Brixton’ and ‘White Man (In Hammersmith Palais)’ was the main factor for moving here as a teenager.

Thinking about how to encapsulate all this in a witty and engaging one-liner, “I like your music”, somehow seemed to fall a little too short. I remembered punk’s hatred of hero worship and backed away, leaving Strummer on his knees in the mud painting a slogan on a banner with a group of kids. He didn’t need to be told the effect he’d had.

In the days following Strummer’s death, message boards, chat rooms and pub conversations around the world swelled with messages of condolence. Within days the first musical tribute to him appeared on-line in the shape of Mick Jones’ ‘Sound Of The Joe’.

“His idealism and conviction instilled in me the courage to pick up a guitar and the courage to try to make a difference,” says Tom Morello. “Joe Strummer was my greatest inspiration, my favourite singer of all time and my hero. I already miss him so much.”

The final word, though, should be left to Strummer himself. In ‘Westway To The World’, Clash associate Don Letts’ acclaimed documentary on the band, he could be seen pondering the past.

“If I had to go back and do it all again,” he shrugged, before bursting into a trademark cackle, “I wouldn’t change a thing.” ●