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**News**

UK  
Europe  
World  
Business  
Digital  
People

**Sport**

Cricket  
Fishing  
General  
Golf  
Motor Racing  
Rugby League  
Rugby Union  
Sports Politics  
Tennis  
Football

**Argument**

Leading Articles  
Commentators  
Have Your Say  
Podium  
Regular Columnists

**Education**

News  
Business Schools  
Careers Advice  
Clearing  
Gap Year  
Higher  
Schools  
Student Money

**Money**

Property  
Personal Finance

**Travel**

News & Advice  
UK  
Africa  
Americas  
Australasia & Pacific  
Europe  
Middle East & Asia  
Themes

**Enjoyment**

Books  
Crosswords  
Film  
Food & Drink  
Music  
Photography  
Theatre

Home > [Independent](#)

## Joe Strummer

### Frontman of the Clash and eloquent spokesman for punk

24 December 2002

John Graham Mellor (Joe Strummer), singer and songwriter: born Ankara 21 August 1952; married 1975 Pamela Moolman (marriage dissolved), (two daughters with Gaby Parker), 1995 Lucinda Tait (one stepdaughter); died Broomfield, Somerset 22 December 2002.

The job of being Joe Strummer, spokesman for the punk generation and front man for the Clash, never sat easily with the former John Mellor. Always prepared to give of himself to his fans, he still felt a weight of responsibility on his shoulders that often made him crave anonymity, as much as the natural performer within him needed the spotlight.

But when – after a hiatus of almost a decade and a half – he returned to recording and performing with a new group, the Mescaleros, in 1999, it was business as usual: seemingly the same huge amounts of energy, passion and heart-on-sleeve belief that were his trademark with the Clash and that drew a worldwide audience for him and the group. After a show the dressing-room or backstage bar still would be crammed with fans and friends as Joe held forth on the issues of the day, in his preferred role of pub philosopher and articulate rabble-rouser for the dispossessed. (Even here was the endless paradox of Joe Strummer: he could argue the case for Yorkshire pitworkers or homeless Latinos in Los Angeles, but, if obliged to reveal himself through any interior observation, he would generally freeze. Even other members of the Clash would complain about his hopelessness at soul-baring.)

Yet when he played a show at the 100 Club in London two years ago, he was so exhausted afterwards that he had to lie down on the floor of the dressing-room: his Mescaleros' set included a good percentage of Clash songs, and you worried that the frenetic speed at which they were performed would test the health of a man approaching his 50th birthday. In an irony that Joe Strummer no doubt would have appreciated, his death the day before yesterday came not from the stock rock'n'roll killers of drugs, drink, or road accidents, but after taking his dog for a walk at his home in Somerset: sitting down on a chair in his kitchen, he suffered a fatal heart attack.

Neither of his parents had lived to a ripe old age. Joe Strummer, who earned his sobriquet from his crunchy rhythm-guitar style, was born in Ankara, Turkey, in 1952 to a career diplomat. Christened John Graham Mellor, he was sent at the age of 10 to a minor public school, the City of London Freeman's School at Ashted Park in Surrey. He had already lived in Cairo, Mexico City ("I remember the 1956 earthquake vividly; running to hide behind a brick wall, which was the worst thing to do," he once told me) and Bonn. Strummer's father's profession of diplomat didn't arise from any position of privilege – quite the opposite, in fact. "He was a self-made man, and we could never get on," said Strummer:

He couldn't understand why I was last in every class at school. He didn't understand there were different shapes to every piece of wood, different grains

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to people. I don't blame him, because all he knew was that he pulled himself out of it by studying really hard.

All the same, such a background was not especially appropriate in the mid-1970s punk world of supposed working-class heroes, which may explain why Strummer always seemed even more anarchic than his contemporaries. Mick Jones, like Strummer a former art-school student, discovered Joe when he was singing with the squat-rock r'n'b group the 101'ers, and poached him for a group he was forming called the Clash, becoming his songwriting partner: matched to Jones's Zeitgeist musical arrangements, Strummer's lyrics were the words of a satirical poet, and often hilariously funny – one of his first creative contributions on linking up with Mick Jones was to change the title of a love-song called "I'm So Bored With You" to "I'm So Bored With the USA". Verbal non-sequiturs were a speciality: his gasped aside of "vacuum-cleaner sucks up budgie" at the end of "Magnificent Seven", inspired by a newspaper headline on the studio floor, is one of the funniest lines in rock'n'roll.

Strummer had one brother, David, 18 months his senior. By the time he reached 16, the younger boy had become accustomed to his brother's far-right leanings – he had joined the National Front – and to the fact that he was obsessed, "in a cheap paperback way", with the occult. Was it this unpleasant cocktail that led David to commit suicide? Whatever, it was clearly a cathartic moment for his younger brother: Joe Strummer often seemed overhung by a mood of mild depression, a constant struggle.

After dropping out of Central College of Art ("after about a week"), he threw himself into the alternative world of squatting. Moving for a time to Wales, he spent one Christmas on acid listening to Big Youth's *Screaming Target* classic and so discovered reggae. One of the main themes propagated by the Clash was the rise of a multi-cultural Britain; in the group's early music reggae rhythms jostled with an almost puritan sense of rock'n'roll heritage; as the group progressed, it osmosed and absorbed Latin, blues, and early hiphop sounds, with Strummer's never-less-than-heartfelt lyrics making him a modern-day protest singer, in a tradition stretching back to Woody Guthrie.

Positive light to the darkness of the Sex Pistols, the Clash released an incendiary, eponymously titled first album in 1977, the year of punk, a Top Ten hit. With Strummer at the helm, the group toured incessantly: at a show that year at Leeds University, he delivered the customary diatribe of the times: "No Elvis, Beatles or Rolling Stones . . . But John Lennon rules, OK?" he barked, revealing a principle influence and hero of his own. The next year, after a night spent at a reggae concert, he wrote what he himself felt was his finest song, "White Man in Hammersmith Palais", a blues ballad that opened up the musical gates for the future of the group.

In that song, however, was contained the seeds of a paradox that would become more and more uncomfortable for Strummer: one line spoke of "new groups . . . turning rebellion into money". Through writing such outsider lyrics, he became a millionaire; his problem was one common to many radical figureheads: how do you remain a folk hero when you have succeeded in your aim and are no longer the underdog?

As they toured the country that summer of 1978, the group's concerts were shot for a feature film, *Rude Boy*, directed by David Mingay and Jack Hazan. "He already seemed to be suffering terribly from the notion of being Joe Strummer," said Mingay:

He wasn't exactly lying back and having a great time. Joe was always full of contradictions, one of which was that he managed to be both ultra-British and anti-British at the same time.

With *London Calling* (1979), their third album, the group achieved commercial American success. *Sandinista*, a sprawling three-record set, followed (1980). When it became clear that the album was commercial folly, Strummer demanded the return of their original manager Bernard Rhodes, a business colleague of Malcolm McLaren and someone with whom Mick Jones had always had an awkward relationship. With Rhodes's sense of wily situationism powering the group, the potential disaster of *Sandinista* was turned into a triumph after the group played 16 nights at Bond's in Times Square, New York. The group were the toast of the town, and only a big commercial hit stood between them and superstardom.

That came in 1982 with *Combat Rock*, a huge international success, selling five million copies. Strummer bought a substantial terrace house in London, in Notting Hill, yet seemed to feel obliged to justify it by explaining that it reminded him of the houses he used to squat. By 1984, the Clash had begun to disintegrate; the heroin-addicted drummer Topper Headon was replaced; then, extraordinarily, Mick Jones was fired, Strummer having gone along with Rhodes's perversely iconoclastic desire to get rid of the group founder. New members were brought in, but the Clash finally fizzled out in 1986.

Strummer's sense of guilt over the sacking of Jones developed to a point of almost clinical complexity. In the late summer of 1986 he asked me to go for a drink with him. After much alcohol had been consumed, he suddenly announced: "I've got a big problem: Mick was right about Bernie [Rhodes]." He had finally realised he had been manipulated. He caught a plane to the Bahamas, where Mick Jones was on holiday: an ounce of grass in his hand, he sought out the guitarist's hotel, and presented him with this tribute, asking to get the Clash back together. But it was too late: Jones had already formed a new group, Big Audio Dynamite; although Strummer ended up co-producing BAD's second album, his own plans came to nothing.

A familiar figure on the streets and in the bars of Notting Hill, Joe Strummer was mired – as he later admitted to me – in depression. He tried acting, with a passable role in Alex Cox's *Straight to Hell* (1987), and a minor part in the same director's *Walker* (1987), for which he also wrote the music; he made a much more significant impression in 1989, playing an English Elvis-like rocker in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*. That same year he released an impressive solo album, *Earthquake Weather*, and toured. But, apart from briefly filling in as singer with the Pogues, he was hardly heard of again. For a time Tim Clarke, who now manages Robbie Williams, attempted to guide his career. "He was obviously in bad shape," Clarke told me:

He'd turn up for meetings the worse for wear. You could see he was going through a bad time, but you also felt there was probably no one he could really talk to about it.

After moving out of Notting Hill to a house in Hampshire – he had become worried about his two daughters, he said, after one of them found a syringe in a west London playground – he split up with his longterm partner Gaby. In 1995, he married Lucinda Tait; moving to Bridgwater in Somerset, Joe seemed to find a relative peace. He formed the Mescaleros and began recording again, releasing two excellent albums, *Rock, Art and the X-Ray Style* (1999) and *Global A Go-Go* (2001), that title a reflection of his interests in world music, about which he presented a regular show on the BBC World Service. Strummer was once again touring, incessantly and on a worldwide basis: he was playing to sold-out audiences, with a set that contained a large amount of Clash material. "All that's happening for me now is just a chancer's bluff," he told me in 2000:

This is my Indian summer . . . I learnt that fame is an illusion and everything about it is just a joke. I'm far more dangerous now, because I don't care at all.

One of Joe Strummer's last concerts was at Acton Town Hall in London last month, a benefit for the Fire Brigade Union. Andy Gilchrist, the leader of the FBU, was apparently politicised after seeing the Clash perform a "Rock Against Racism" concert in Hackney in 1978, and had asked Strummer if he would play the Acton show. That night Mick Jones joined him onstage, the first time they had performed live together since Jones had been so unfairly booted out of the Clash. "I nearly didn't go. I'm glad I did," said the guitarist, the poetry of that reunion clear to him.

Bitterly critical of the present Labour government for betraying its former ideals, Joe Strummer was delighted at the show for the firemen; a smile came over his face at the idea that, if only tangentially, his former group was still capable of causing discomfort for those in power. His death, however, comes as a deep shock. After considerable time in the wilderness, Strummer seemed to have reinvented himself as a kind of Johnny Cash-like elder statesman of British rock'n'roll, a much-loved artist and everyman figure.

"I still thought he'd be doing this in 30 years' time," said his friend the film director Don Letts.

**Chris Salewicz**

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