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Fierce moralist who raged at the world's injustices

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Andrew Perry, Telegraph rock critic, remembers a rebel

Punk rockers were not supposed to get old.

They aimed to bring youthful energy to the dismal music scene of the mid-Seventies, but most have either died in wretched circumstances, or become bloated, money-grabbing parodies of themselves.

Joe Strummer, and his inspirational band the Clash, were the exception that proved the rule.

Right to his death, Strummer maintained a dignity rare among ageing rock musicians, and he was loved and admired for it.

Unlike many of punk's prime movers, the majority of whom were still in their teens during that turbulent summer of 1976, Strummer was 24.

He had travelled widely as his father worked for the Foreign Office, and had already achieved a level of notoriety on the pub rock circuit with an R & B combo, the 101'ers.

So when, after seeing the Sex Pistols, he jumped ship and formed the Clash, he quickly became the movement's most articulate spokesman, an elder brother figure who knew his onions musically and who brought penetrating, worldly-wise ideas to its political agenda.

The band's debut album, *The Clash*, was a vivid snapshot of those bewildering times of unemployment, strikes and inter-racial violence. Strummer's unique talent was to voice the many angers raging on Britain's streets, but to do so according to his own fierce personal morality.

He loathed all politicians, rallying against the hypocrisies of the Callaghan government just as vociferously as later he would those of Margaret Thatcher's.

He refused to become a remote rock star, spending hours before and after gigs philosophising with fans.

As punk turned into a circus of commercialism and silly clothes, the Clash was the band that never "sold out", who stuck by its principles, whose super-charged live shows would last for two hours or more.

In his apocalyptic song 1977, Strummer provided punk with its aesthetic slogan, "no Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones".

He intended it as a bitter critique of rock nostalgia, as a clarion call to tear up the history book and focus on the here and now, but he and his songwriting partner

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Mick Jones were disciples of all rock and roll, as long as it had feeling and oomph.

London Calling (1979), their third album, filtered rockabilly, jazz, New Orleans funk and reggae into a new sound, which was still punk but much more besides.

It was possibly their real masterpiece, but after Jones quit four years later, Strummer limped on for one disastrous album, ill-advisedly entitled Cut The Crap. He learnt his lesson, split up the band and actively retreated to the periphery.

When the NME interviewed him in 1989, he said that it was only right that young firebrands such as the Stone Roses should be afforded all the headlines and that he was happy to make a low-key appearance on page 28 of their paper.

There the interview appeared, and there, metaphorically, Strummer remained for the rest of his days.

Although a multi-million-dollar carrot was often dangled before him to reform the Clash in America, he never did so, preferring to tour energetically with his own band, the Mescaleros.

I met him one year at Glastonbury Festival. As a small group of us trudged miserably through the mud, we were summoned to a campfire by a man who turned out to be none other than Strummer.

He gave us each a beer and declared reassuringly: "We're going to beat this quagmire together." More and more people gathered around and eventually Strummer put on a Harry Belafonte tape and had us all singing Kumbaya at the sky to make the rain stop.

He was a lovely bloke, a man of the people, still angry at the world's injustices, but gentle, humble and heroic to the last.

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