Joe Strummer

(Filed: 24/12/2002)

Joe Strummer, who has died aged 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, like many others, fell victim to the strains of the music business. They experienced difficulties with drugs, management, contracts and personal and creative tensions.

On the cusp of global stardom, the band proved incapable of combining their increasing capacity for affluent lifestyles with the integrity of their music. Strummer, spokesman for a generation of the dispossessed, could no longer cope with the contradictions presented by his own material success.

Joe Strummer was born John Graham Mellor in Ankara, Turkey, on August 21 1952. His father was a diplomat who was posted to Cairo, Mexico City and Bonn before returning to settle at Warlingham, Surrey.

He was educated at City of London Freemen's School at Ashtead. As a punk rocker, his father's occupation and his education were an embarrassment, and he told enthusiastic half-truths to journalists to maintain credibility, once referring to his boarding school as "a kind of private comprehensive".

Unfettered by academic achievement but obsessed by music, Mellor paused briefly at London's Central School of Art, from which he was expelled, before embracing the life of a busker. When, upon his return to London from a European busking tour, his companion was charged with assaulting a police officer with a violin, Mellor changed his name and decided to start a band.

The 101'ers, who took their name from the number of the Walterton Terrace squat in which they lived, played hard-edged R & B in the pubs of Ladbroke Grove. In April 1976, having released one single, they were supported by the Sex Pistols, whose scorching performance was, Strummer felt, "like an atom bomb in your mind".

Realising pub rock had no future, he accepted an offer to join Mick Jones and Paul Simonon in The Heartdrops, swiftly renamed The Clash, who played

Related reports
Joe Strummer, political voice of punk, dies at 50

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, Pollock-esque drips sawing across stencilled slogans, The Clash exemplified punk's confrontational stance.

Their eponymous first album, released in March 1977 and hailed as an instant classic, was an assault of chainsaw guitar, explosive lyrics and raw belief. Capturing a sense of social desperation and urban decay, songs such as *White Riot and Hate and War* needed little introduction, while the closing track, *Garageland*, was a roar from the no-hopers 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 notoriety and riots at concerts and Strummer suffered court appearances for offences ranging from petty theft to drugs.

But throughout their music remained charged with total conviction. The rock writer Greil Marcus, reviewing the single *Complete Control* 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. Strummer later commented: "It was us against the world . . . touching the audience. You really think you are doing something and maybe for that moment in that hall you are."

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, who was recruited after 205 others had been auditioned, 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 own, restricted constituency, which was still spiky-haired and bondage-trousered into the 1980s, The Clash won over the critics with their third album *London Calling* (1979, US 1980), 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 journalist: "I vote for the weirdo, for the loonies."

The double album, which fused rock, reggae, rockabilly, jazz, dance and ska, was released for the price of a single album. The band insisted CBS released their records at low prices, paying the

difference in royalties, and refused to appear on *Top of the Pops*, complaining it was "manipulated".

They maintained, at great personal cost, the low price policy on the sprawling, six-sided, *Sandinista* (1981). Overlong, but extraordinary in its scope, the album encompassed genres as diverse as soca and gospel, along with the expected rock and reggae crossovers.

The Clash were increasingly criticised for failing to live up to their guerrilla 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 the ever-ascetic 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. Shorn of his songwriting partner, Strummer's compositions lacked texture, and his attempts to reignite its spirit with a busking tour met with indifference. The band folded in December 1985; all efforts to reform 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 gave the appearance of drifting, as he had in his busking years, partly because he was always, au fond, 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 soundtrack for Walker was a critical, if not a commercial, triumph, with Strummer's sensitive Latino/Country & Western score amazing reviewers, who had not imagined that "the man with the demon bark and three chord bite" might compose something so eloquent.

Subsequently he 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 Point Blank* (1997). Through Cox, Strummer became friendly with the director Jim Jarmusch, who cast him as a displaced English rocker nicknamed Elvis in *Mystery Train* (1989). But, although it was successful on the arthouse circuit, the film did not herald a career change for Strummer.

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.

The 1990s were a lean decade. Struggling 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, which was critically supported and enjoyed some chart success, and his first major tour for several years with his band The Mescaleros made 1999 a more successful year.

Strummer still gave no quarter in live performance, exuding "commitment" with pounding guitars, pumping limbs and by pulling expressive faces.

Although he was sometimes maltreated by the press, Joe 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.

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.