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## **JOE STRUMMER**

**The Complicated Truth**

by his biographer Chris Salewicz

**EXCLUSIVE**

plus

**ANTHONY  
PERKINS**

**SHIRLEY  
COLLINS**

**WAN  
LOVE**  
ANDREW COLLINS on  
**The Death  
Of Indie**

and **BADLY DRAWN BOY**

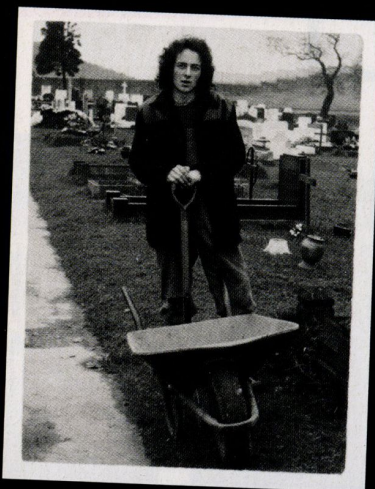
# The Last Prophet

The long-awaited new biography by **CHRIS SALEWICZ** reveals the complicated, melancholy truth behind the Joe Strummer myth. In this exclusive preview he describes the passionate self-doubting campaigner who found his fame an illusion and whose anger was driven by the suicide of his brother

**T**HE FIRST TIME I MET JOE STRUMMER, at St Albans City Hall on 21 May 1977 during The Clash's White Riot tour, we almost had a fight.

Before the gig Joe stepped into the dressing-room for a moment: he seemed wound up. He shook my hand briefly, but stormed off, evidently stressed, the backstage loner who would disappear to pace around a town before a show. ("You'd be amazed by how many problems you can sort out on a five-mile walk," he said to me.) As so often, Joe had something on his mind. During recent nights on this first headlining tour, which transformed The Clash into a top UK act, he had become angered by the amount of front-stage security. That night Joe Strummer insisted that none be supplied whatsoever. In mid-set – the usual possessed, transcendent explosion of performance art by the group – he made a kamikaze head-first dive into the audience. "He proved his point," noted Mick Jones after. "They didn't trample on him and they caught him. Of course, if they hadn't caught him he could have broken his neck. Joe has a very forceful way of proving a point."

Leaving the venue, I glanced into the dressing room. Joe was sat on a bench, surrounded by fans: being Joe Strummer, like some anti-Pied Piper, was a twenty-four hour job, leading the masses backstage, and discussing the issues of the day with them back at the tour hotel. I waved goodbye to him. Baring his bomb-site of dental decay, he snarled something, and I could pick out the word 'Goebbels' – very punk rock. I snarled back. He raised a fist at me. I raised one back. Then I turned and



'Woody Mellor' working as a gravedigger in Wales for £15.50 a week. His workmates thought he wasn't strong enough so he was demoted to collecting litter.

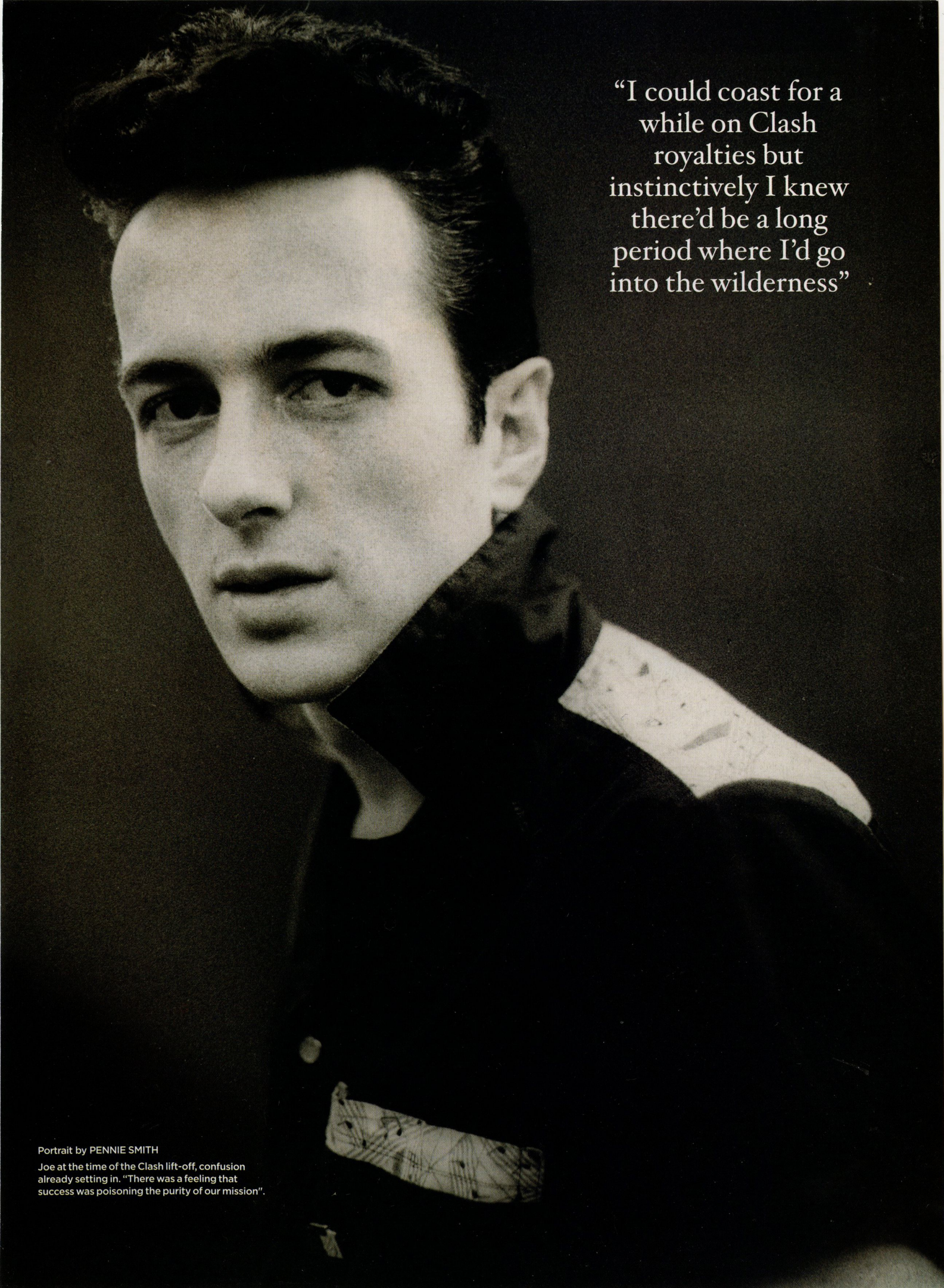
left, in good spirits despite the oddness of that brief moment. Years later I recalled this to Joe. He appeared shocked: "No, no, I can't believe that." I realised it was like one of those fights you'd almost have with someone at school, and then end up close friends.

"Joe was frightening in those days," said the writer Kris Needs. "When he was living in a squat he was very broke and not eating much. Then he was on speed and Special Brew right through that White Riot tour and he wasn't a nice person on it. He was very gruff and scary. The first time I saw him play live I was scared to talk to him afterwards."

"Joe drank a lot in those days," said Mick Jones, his songwriting partner. "He had come out of pub-rock, after all. Many's the time we had to carry him home. But people on the music scene used to drink a lot in those days."

An older man, born four years before Mick Jones, Joe Strummer had come to punk rock from a very different direction than most of the other participants, with the first single from The 101'ers – who had first played in September 1974 – released just as he left the group at the end of May 1976. "He was already doing it in The 101'ers," said Mick. "We were nervous of meeting him."

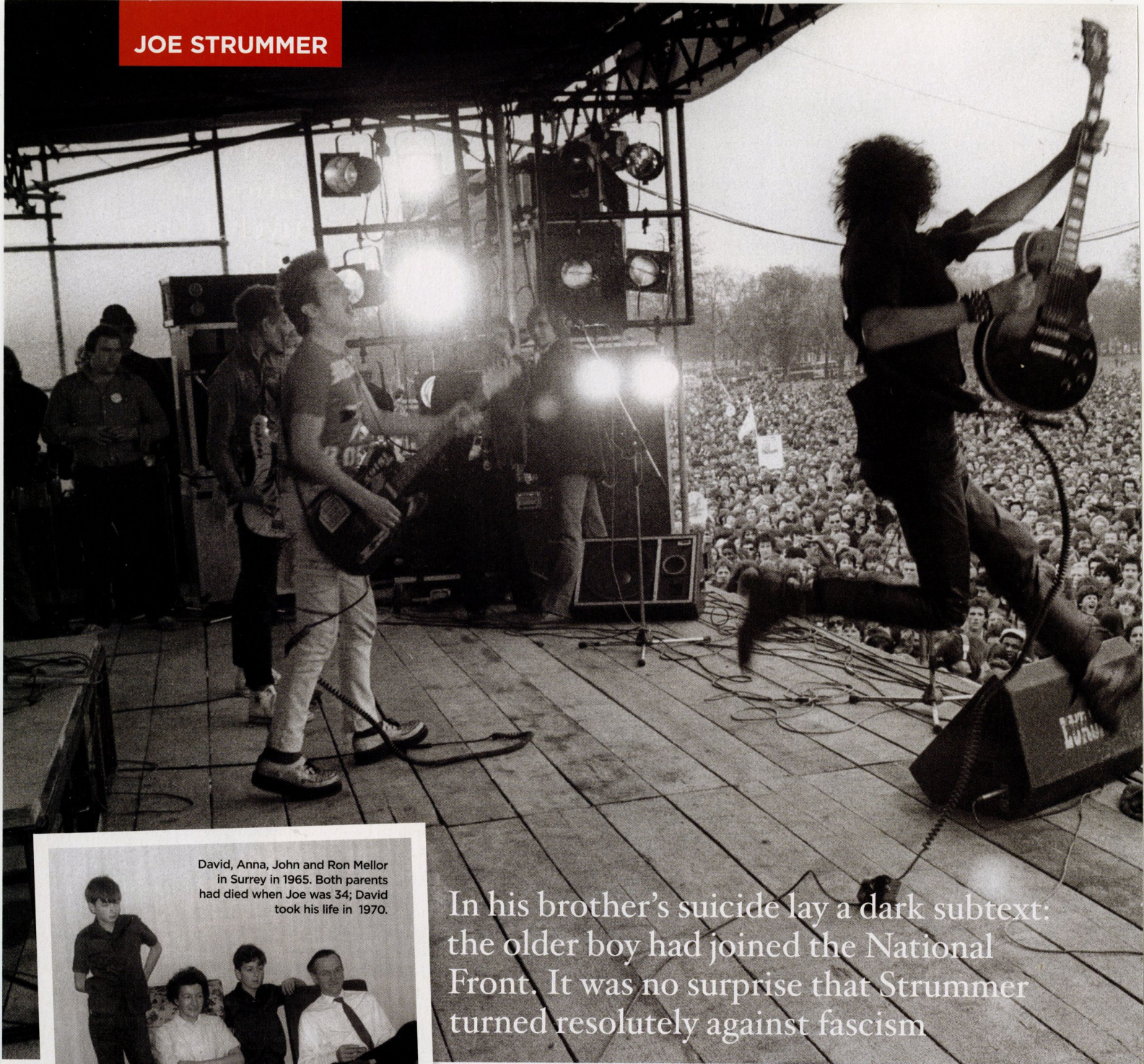
But wasn't he sometimes nervous about meeting himself, often not entirely comfortable in his role as Joe Strummer? At the time of the White Riot tour it was only two years since he had reinvented himself: midway through The 101'ers John Graham Mellor had become Joe Strummer, his friends forbidden to refer to him as "Woody", the sobriquet by which he had been known since he had >>



“I could coast for a while on Clash royalties but instinctively I knew there’d be a long period where I’d go into the wilderness”

Portrait by PENNIE SMITH

Joe at the time of the Clash lift-off, confusion already setting in. “There was a feeling that success was poisoning the purity of our mission”.



In his brother's suicide lay a dark subtext: the older boy had joined the National Front. It was no surprise that Strummer turned resolutely against fascism

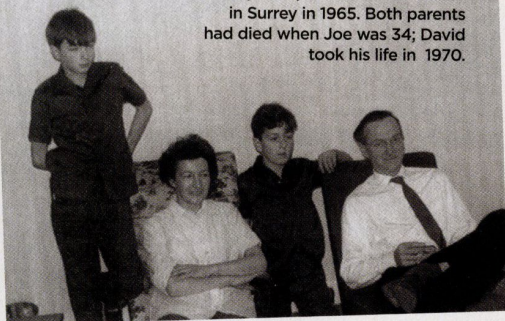
chosen life. He had decided to go for it entirely." In 1978 I asked Joe about his brother. David's death, he said, "happened at a pretty crucial time in my life. He was such a nervous guy that he couldn't bring himself to talk at all. Couldn't speak to anyone. In fact, I think him committing suicide was a really brave thing to do. For him, certainly. Even though it was a total cop-out."

Behind Joe's brother's suicide lay a dark subtext: the older boy had joined the National Front. Is it any surprise that Joe Strummer should have turned resolutely against fascism? From 30 April, 1978, when The Clash appeared at the Rock Against Racism concert in Victoria Park before an audience of 80,000 people, their front-man – returned to the fray from a reflective period in hospital following a bout of hepatitis, no longer drinking – was

clearly identified with the side of punk rock that dissociated itself from others' flirtations with swastikas. Joe changed that image of punk, righteous in his role of somewhat vulnerable spokesman. Aided by the demise of The Sex Pistols three months previously, that Rock Against Racism show – mythologised in the film *Rude Boy* – was the moment that Joe Strummer became King of Punk, a point underscored by the release six weeks later of the unexpected *(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais*, with its unusual themes and rhythm, Joe's favourite of all his songs.

"Fans always thought Joe ran the band," said tour manager Johnny Green. "That wasn't my perception. When he roused himself he could be extremely dynamic and forceful, but Mick was always on the case, always precise. Joe would lift his head up and go, 'What?'" It was

David, Anna, John and Ron Mellor in Surrey in 1965. Both parents had died when Joe was 34; David took his life in 1970.



entered Central School of Art in September 1970, less than six weeks after the suicide of his elder brother David, from which he clearly remained traumatised but which acted as a springboard for his entire success.

David had swallowed 100 aspirins on an island in Regents Park; it was his 16-year-old brother who identified his body – the worst day of his life, Joe said later.

Early in 1975, whilst squatting at 101 WALTERTON ROAD on Maida Hill in West London, he began living with Paloma Romano, who became Palmolive when – enraged by Joe dumping her – she founded The Slits. "He told me about David – he said that his brother had chosen death and he had

REX

Playing the Rock Against Racism rally in April 1978, a Clash triumph (the Pistols had just disbanded). Joe's public distaste for punk's flirtation with swastikas was fuelled by his brother's death.



that seemed to affect the song-writing. "At our height, around *London Calling* or a little after," said Mick, "Joe used to sit with his typewriter, typing it straight out. I'd be the other side of the table with my guitar. He'd whack it out like a newspaper man, hand it to me. I'd knock the tune out there and then. Lyrics tell you what the tune is a lot of the time. If the words already have that musicality, then it's a song."

An immensely sensitive and perceptive man, with an artist's graceful hands, Joe had an absurdist wit that brought levity to the most threatening situations. Joe didn't understand the 'political' tag so often given to The Clash, preferring 'awareness'. His Clash lyrics have the intelligence of a satirist. But Joe was also a fine example of Carl Jung's insistence that artistic development is always at the expense of other areas of the personality. How otherwise could he not have perceived that his irascible rock star tantrums were not worthy of this fine man who could be so considerate of the problems and pain of others? (Even when playing with The Pogues in 1990 he might break things when matters were not going his way: "The person I was friends with was John Mellor," said Jem Finer. "But when we played live he would become Joe Strummer, and that character wasn't as attractive.") From the start the band's drummer Topper Headon found Joe erratic and difficult. "He and Mick were running it, but you never really knew where you stood with Joe. One minute he'd be all over you, your best mate, and the next he'd be snarling at you."

"One thing that didn't change from the beginning, through to the end of The Clash," confided Terry Chimes, the group's first drummer, who returned to the drumseat after Topper's departure, "was that before each show Mick was always nervous, uncomfortable and stressed. But Joe was making jokes, very happy. Then we'd come off stage and Mick would be happy because it's over, and Joe would be sitting with his head in his hands, saying it was the end of the world – and that never changed at all."

**D**AVID MELLOR'S DEATH cast a depression over the remainder of the lives of Ron and Anna Mellor, Joe's parents. They would never recover; and "Johnny" – as he was known – was similarly afflicted. Anna was born in 1915 in Bonar Bridge on the north-east coast of Scotland, into a family who were extremely 'close', which meant they didn't talk about things; Joe inherited that 'closeness'. Ronald Mellor, born in Lucknow in India in 1916, was of mixed Armenian and English stock, with a smidgeon of German Jew: both his parents died young.



Mellor as a French waiter (second from right) in a 1967 school play – he had one line. Harry Secombe's son Andy (third from left) sold him a drink.

John Graham Mellor was born on 21 August 1952 in Ankara, Turkey, where his father was a member of the British diplomatic corps. His earliest memory, he told me, was of his brother leaning into his pram, 'giving me a digestive biscuit'.

From Ankara they were moved to Cairo. The Mellor family took over a house vacated by spy Donald Maclean and his wife – Anna complained about their terrible taste in curtains. Ron Mellor would regularly have lunch, a bottle of vodka, with a friend of Maclean's called Kim Philby: you imagine they would have discussed politics, as Ron's leanings were almost Marxist, and clearly passed down to his younger son. Adept at ensuring guests were accommodated with a full glass and a comfortable seating position, Joe Strummer had learned his social graces at endless diplomatic social functions, where he and David would perform as waiters.

In 1956, Ron Mellor was transferred again, to Mexico City, it time for a devastating earthquake that hit the area. "I remember the '56 earthquake vividly," Joe told me, "running to hide behind a brick wall, which was the worst thing to do".

The next year Ron was posted to the British embassy in Bonn, the then capital of West Germany. "Germany was frightening, man," Joe told me, 40 years later. "It was only ten years after the war, and what do you think the young kids were doing? They were still fighting the Germans, obviously. We lived in Bonn on a housing estate filled with foreign legation families. The German youth knew there was a bunch of foreigners there, and it was kind of terrifying. We'd been told by the other kids that if Germans saw us they would beat us up. So be on your toes. And we were dead young."

Joe Strummer would later seem to dismiss the home bought by his father as "a bungalow in south Croydon". But this is exactly what it was, a three-bedroomed bungalow moved into in 1959 in Upper Warlingham, outside Croydon in the south-east of London. David and Johnny were sent to the local state primary school.

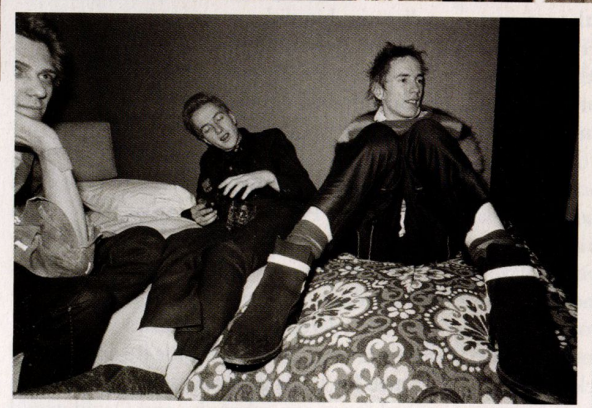
Then Ron Mellor – about to be posted >>>

Mick Jones, who wrote and arranged most of the music, who had formed the group – in Joe's relationship with him there seemed some element of sibling rivalry. The dynamics of the group were complex: after Joe Strummer had been poached from The 101'ers, he and bass-player Paul Simonon squatted together, while Mick Jones lived nearby with his grandmother in the council high-rise that gave The Clash their "tower block rock" tag – but which is only referred to in *London's Burning*, one of the few songs Joe wrote almost entirely himself (*Bankrobber* – about a girlfriend's father – is another). "Joe and I had an understanding between ourselves," said Paul, "that stemmed from when we were in that squat. Living with someone, you get to really know and understand each other. So there was a certain separation between me and Joe, and Mick." Not that

## JOE STRUMMER



Joe's belief in bonding with his audience knew no bounds - this shirt exchange was at The Rainbow in May '77; (below) with Rotten on the Anarchy tour in '76.



overseas to Tehran in Persia – took advantage of the free boarding-school education available to children of diplomats: just after his ninth birthday, the slight figure of Johnny Mellor, with David, was driven to Ashted in Surrey, to City of London Freeman's School. "On the first day," Joe Strummer said, "I was surrounded and taken to the bathroom where I was confronted by a bath full of used toilet paper. I had to get in or get beaten up. I got beaten up." During his first year at CLFS, Johnny Mellor tried to run away from the school. As time went by Joe worked out a standard line on his school days: "I had to become a bully to survive." His schoolfriend Paul Buck – later Pablo Labritain of 999 – dismisses this self-assessment: "He wasn't a bully. He was full of life and very funny." But the nine-year-old's sense of abandonment was acute. Although his parents really had no choice, even on his mother's deathbed in 1986 Joe was still berating her over this decision. "He was deeply wounded from it," said Gaby, his partner from 1978 to 1993. Joe partially blamed David's suicide on his having been sent to the school.

Joe scraped enough 'O' and 'A' levels to get into the prestigious Central School of Art – his portfolio included photographs of the

apples in his father's orchard that he had painted blue. Although Joe Strummer later claimed to have been at Central "for about a week", he lasted the entire first year. At Central he introduced himself as "Woody", a sobriquet not derived from a love of Woody Guthrie, but a mutation of "Woolly Census", with which he had renamed himself at school. Joe Strummer persistently handed out new monikers to friends and acquaintances, simultaneously deeply affectionate and controlling. After seeing the film *Little Big Man*, he and a friend decorated their faces with Cheyenne-like war-paint markings. So attired, with blankets draped around their shoulders, they sat cross-legged for two days on small rugs on the grass opposite the Houses of Parliament.

Flunking his first year exams, Woody was suddenly on his uppers, collecting money for his flatmate Tymon Dogg, once signed to Apple Records but now busking on the tube. Eventually Woody got up the nerve to perform himself, Chuck Berry played on a ukulele. But – as so often – Woody Mellor was led by his heart. Moving to Newport in South Wales to be near a girlfriend who had gone to college in Cardiff, he became a gravedigger. Here he joined his first group, as a singer. "I'm playing in a rock and roll band called the Vultures," he wrote to a friend. "It's a funny sort of band, one minute we'll be hating each others guts and splitting up the band, and the next we'll be as close as brothers getting drunk together. At the moment we're in one of the former states. I'm doing a few cartoons and a bit of writing." Returning to London in 1974, he moved into

his first squat, which was at 101 Waltherton Road.

During the early days of The Clash Joe had only one focus – to make the group as big as possible, as quickly as possible, a steel-hard ambition and vision he shared with Mick Jones. They were absolutely single-minded about what they were doing with their lives, certain where the group was going.

But even after *London Calling* had been a worldwide success, Joe returned to squatting, moving with Tymon Dogg and his characteristic carrier-bags of possessions into a property close to the British Museum. Joe was continually conflicted by his own accomplishments and the financial reward they brought: in the summer of 1985 he told me he was intending to sell the four-storey terraced house he had bought in London's Notting Hill, to

replace it with a small flat. Eventually he hung on to his house. We were drinking champagne in 192, a chic Notting Hill bar that was the polar opposite of the nearby down-at-heel Warwick Castle, where Joe would carouse with the lads, to whom he was the Godfather of Notting Hill. Towards midnight, he turned to me: "I've got a big problem. Mick was right about Bernie." Two years previously Joe had fired Mick Jones from The Clash, as he had also dismissed the heroin-addicted Topper Headon 15 months before that. It had been Joe who had insisted on bringing back Bernie Rhodes – fired, against Joe's wishes, by The Clash in the autumn of 1978 – as group manager at the beginning of 1981. Initially this reinstatement was a success. Under Rhodes they had played several seasons in prominent cities around the globe, beginning with the legendary 17 shows at Bond's in Times Square. The international Top 10 album *Combat Rock* had spawned the similarly successful *Rock The Casbah* and *Should I Stay Or Should I Go* hits, culminating in The Clash's stadium dates in the USA supporting The Who, and their bill-topping performance in May 1983 at the Us Festival in California before 150,000 people, where Joe delivered a diatribe against American consumerism, perhaps his finest hour.

But the Us festival was also Mick Jones's final show with The Clash. Joe slung his song-writing partner out of the group. Later Joe said that Mick had been behaving "like Elizabeth Taylor on a bad hair day". But there was an element of projection here, as Joe was equally capable of unacceptable behaviour. "Mick seemed to be enjoying the success, and Joe was uncomfortable with anyone in the band enjoying success in that way," said Terry Chimes. "There was a tension between Mick being

more pop star-ish and Joe feeling the success is poisoning the purity of our mission. If Mick asked for a special meal to be sent to his room, the hairs would go up on the back of Joe's neck, and he would think that sounds like someone from Pink Floyd. But when you are on the road, hungry, it's OK to do that. But Joe would get upset about that kind of thing."

Joe told me later about this hazard of touring. "That scene in *Spinal Tap*, my favourite film, where he's complaining about the sandwiches, is serious. We didn't do anything as stupid as that, but it's in the ballpark. You become so stressed out. This is why rock singers have tantrums: so many things are demanded of you you've got nothing left to give, and you overboil. You start complaining that the smoked salmon doesn't fit the bread, and throw a fit about nothing."

"Musically Joe didn't like Mick making lots of weird noises," said Terry. "He had these boxes guitar players have that make funny noises and it always frustrated Joe. He wanted to sound like Chuck Berry. There was a gig in America when Mick was doing a lot of his funny sounds, and Joe ran over and put his hands on the strings to stop the noise. Mick was unhappy. "He actually put his hands on the strings to stop them." I was acutely aware of the tension between them going up a gear that night."

In interviews later Joe would rail about how, at the end of his relationship with Mick in The Clash, they had been posting songs to each other. But, said Mick, it was Joe who was doing the posting: "He'd send me lyrics, and I'd put music to them and then take the tape up to the rehearsal studio. It didn't seem like it was a big deal."

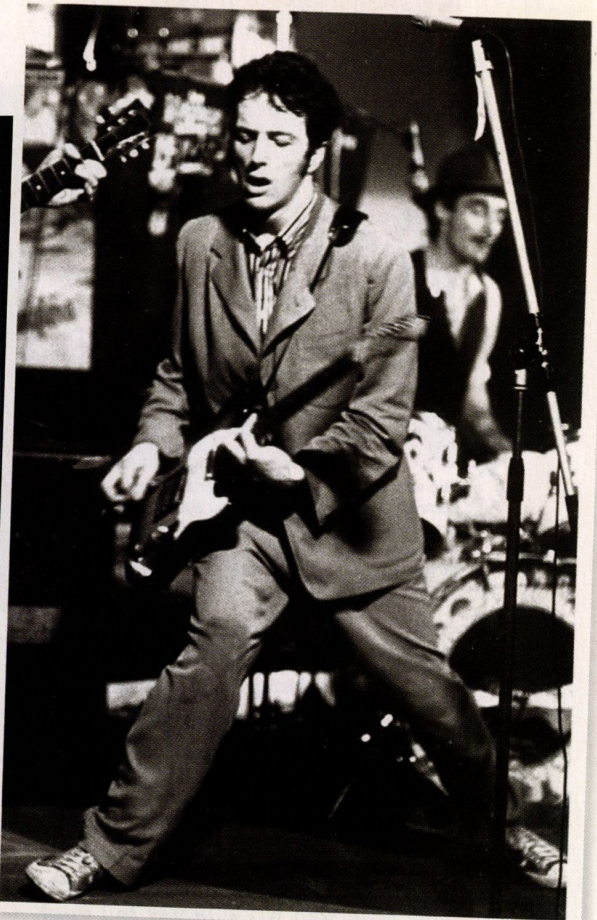
Bernie Rhodes claimed to be aware of the fragility beneath Joe's bluster: "Joe lacked confidence in himself and I spent days and days trying to build him up. I knew the bit of Joe people loved. Later he would blame me, but he didn't own up to chucking Mick out."

There was a fundamental flaw in firing Mick Jones that no one seemed to have thought out: with the exception of Topper's *Rock The Casbah*, it was Mick who wrote almost all the music, so getting rid of him was madness. By dumping Mick, a problem may have been solved for Joe, as he perceived it. But another was about to be introduced. Bernie Rhodes was about to take charge of the music. Replacement guitarists were brought in, and the 'dodgy' Clash – as I heard them referred to – toured and began recording the *Cut the Crap* album.

That night in 192, Joe told me he'd walked out on the project earlier in the year and had hardly spoken to Bernie since. "What do you think I should do?" He should see Mick Jones, he decided, and tell him what he had realised. Within a month, he had flown out to Nassau where Mick Jones was on holiday, having completed the first Big Audio Dynamite album. Arriving at his hotel, Joe brought him an ounce of grass as tribute. But when Mick



(Right) Woody – now reborn as Joe Strummer – indulging his Chuck Berry obsession with The 101'ers in May 1976. He resurfaced with 'Ignore Alien Orders' stencilled on his guitar (above).



## Joe was a fine example of Jung's insistence that artistic development is always at the expense of other areas of the personality

played him his new record, Joe tactfully responded, "It's no good. You need me." A year later, they were working in the studio together on the second BAD album, *No 10 Upping Street*, Joe co-producing and co-writing songs.

But now death overhung Joe's life. Whilst on tour in February 1984, his father suddenly died. Almost immediately his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer – she finally succumbed to it just after Christmas 1986. Earlier that year Gaby's brother had committed suicide in the basement of their house. Depression overtook Joe: you'd walk round a corner in Notting Hill and run into him, spiky pain and anger flashing off him. "No one ever seemed to address the fact that Joe's father had just died and his mother was dying," said Pearl Harbour, Paul Simonon's then wife. "I think he was in hell. But even though Joe was obviously in this state, he wouldn't come over and say that he felt terrible."

Joe Strummer was experiencing a fall like that of a Shakespearean king, some of it self-created through hubris, some by external events. What had gone on? In the relentless upward drive of The Clash, he had moved at such a pace he hadn't seen what was really happening, making expedient decisions that turned out to be disasters.

Now he was effectively without a gig. Although there were assorted creative endeavours, some were more successful than others.

*Straight To Hell*, the Alex Cox spaghetti thriller, was more fun to make than watch; and you can blink and miss Joe's part in Cox's disappointing *Walker*; but Joe's soundtrack for the movie was a small masterpiece in which he had dug inside himself and come up with the essence of his creativity. Then he worked on the soundtrack of *Permanent Record*, drawn to by its subject of teen suicide: he was in tears at the screening, but Joe seemed to cry frequently, a release, it seemed, from general exhaustion.

Depping for Phil Chevron as rhythm guitarist in The Pogues in late 1987 got Joe back up onstage. "I thought it was great the way the Pogues invited him in," said his friend Matt Dillon, who had grown up on Irish music. "That was great for Joe. Because certainly there was a part of him that was having trouble finding his niche. He did that beautiful score for *Walker*, but musically he was like a soldier without an army. He didn't have his cannon." The Pogues' dates were a precursor to Joe finally treading the UK boards again as a billtopper in the summer of 1988, bringing his group, The Latino Rockabilly War, over from LA – Joe loved the palm-fringed city, and was spending much time there. The UK dates formed the Class War Rock Against The Rich tour, replete with the kind of contradictions that were ideal for the endlessly paradoxical Joe Strummer. Later that year he played a fine role in the great Memphis-set *Mystery Train*, >>



Joe with Mick Jones and Don Letts: when Jones played Strummer the first BAD album, Strummer told him "it's no good, you need me"; (right) with Warhol and over-excited pal at The Palladium in New York's Palladium, 1980.



(From left) Mick, Paul Simon, Topper Headon, Joe; at their creative peak, Jones tore the lyrics straight out of Strummer's typewriter and set them to music.

directed by Jim Jarmusch: "I became close with him during a period when a lot of the time he was really down. He had a dark cloud over him. I used to call him Big Chief Thundercloud. But he was still generous and spirited and uplifting to be with." The film was an art-house commercial hit. Then Joe finally went into the studio in LA to make his own record, the splendid *Earthquake Weather*, songs filled with lyrical beauty and tough melodies, but a commercial disaster: worldwide it sold only 7,000 copies. Shocked and hurt, and not appreciating that his tide had simply temporarily gone out, Joe retreated within himself even more. There was a consolation prize, however – early in 1990 *Rolling Stone* named *London Calling* their Album of the Decade (it was released in the US in January 1980). Producing The Pogues' *Hells Ditch* album in the summer of 1990 kept Joe's juices going. Then in the autumn, to his surprise, Joe found himself replacing Shane McGowan on a Pogues' world tour.

"A long time ago I realised my stuff was never going to reach a wide audience," he told me then. "That's a hard thing to realise, and to come to terms with, especially after you've been big. Some years have to pass before you get perspective on it, and you realise you've got to approach life differently, that it's another stage. So I just decided that I would try and do interesting things. I'd keep my lifestyle at a low enough level so I could coast along for a while on Clash royalties. I instinctively knew there'd be a long period where I'd have to go into the wilderness."

To Jem Finer, the engine-room of The Pogues, Joe wrote a letter: "I've helped you out three times, man. But this time you gotta let me go. I gotta go out on my own and find it." Joe would find it, but it would take him longer than he might have expected. And now he really would have to go into the 'wilderness'. He would come to refer to his time in the first half of the 1990s as The Wilderness Years.

**WHEREVER HE WENT SUPPLICANTS** would clamour to hear Joe's 'message'. But what exactly was it? Joe had a series of instinc-

tive complaints about society – against racism, inequality, oppression, corruption – but there was never anything especially specific in his satirical grumbling, apart from "Get on with it!" But now this supposedly wise man was craving reassurance and validation.

Although his spirits were so long that he may not have noticed it always when it came. In March 1991, for example, The Clash enjoyed their first ever UK number 1, when *Should I Stay Or Should I Go* – sung by Mick Jones, of course – was re-released on the back of a Levi's commercial in which it featured; a follow-up re-release, *Rock The Casbah*, got to 15. But this retro success was overshadowed by the Godfather of Notting Hill moving out of London to the Hampshire countryside. Joe's relationship with long-term girlfriend Gaby was breaking down, part of his ongoing angst.

Soon he met Lucinda Henderson, née Tait. "He was down," said Lucinda. "He said he'd put his heart and soul into *Earthquake Weather* and that he'd come back home after the tour and felt like a failure. He was really down." On 31 May 1995 Joe and Lucinda were married at Kensington and Chelsea Registry office on the King's Road. One wedding present was a pair of tickets to that year's Glastonbury Festival, which would turn into a life-changing experience for Joe.

Joe followed up Glastonbury with a visit to that year's WOMAD. "I was introduced to Joe by Keith Allen at WOMAD," said the artist Damien Hirst. "At about four in the afternoon I was twatted on all manner of stuff by the campfire and I lay down. Joe put a pillow under my head and a duvet over me. Joe turned into a hero. He was the only one who lived it like he talked it, through and through. My first question to Joe was, 'Why aren't you doing something?' He avoided it."

What Joe did do shortly was to work with Black Grape and Keith Allen on *England's Irie*, the unofficial, very funny anthem for the 1996 European Championship. The single reached number 6, Joe finally obliged to appear on *Top Of The Pops*, from which The Clash had banned themselves.





“He actually put his hands on the strings of Mick Jones’s guitar to stop the noise. I was acutely aware of the tension between them”



The next year Joe and Lucinda moved to Somerset. Tucked away in a red-soiled valley in the picturesque Quantock Hills to the northwest of Taunton they had found a beautiful home. Damien Hirst lived nearby. “Damien was very important to him,” said Lucinda. “I think he really recognised himself in Damien. Damien challenged him and stimulated him. Damien was irreverent and is hugely talented. Joe needed to spend time with peers, not mates.”

With a new base, and a happy home life, Joe could start again. In 1995 he had begun working with The Grid’s Richard Norris, attempting to fuse his dance style with Joe’s



Making Alex Cox’s ropey spaghetti western *Straight To Hell* in 1987 with the 22-year old Courtney Love.

rock and roll. “Joe said to me, ‘I want that loud, banging, relentless techno-drumming that is real rock and roll.’” One song, *Diggin’ The New*, expressed how he had come to understand dance music – “when you get it, you don’t forget it” – after taking his first ecstasy at Glastonbury.

Now, even though he and Norris had stopped working together, Joe made a decision to take this work to its logical level.

Through his friends Bez and Pablo Cook, a percussionist who worked with Pulp, Joe had met Antony Genn, a guitarist and keyboard-player, who had been working with Elastica. ‘Ant’ was a blend of talent, charisma and energy, capable of moving a creative endeavour upwards. “At the age of six I stood outside Sheffield Top Rank on the London Calling tour to get the Clash’s autographs. I knew who Joe Strummer was – he’d changed my life. I see Joe in Notting Hill in January ’99. I said, ‘You’re Joe Strummer, for God’s sake. The world needs you.’ To which he said, ‘OK, man. I’m going to go in the studio with you.’ And he knew who I was.”

Antony Genn was a heroin addict of long standing. In the light of the demise of The Clash following the sacking of Topper Headon, and Joe’s self-recriminations over this, his choice of new co-worker had an almost bewildering significance: was the paradoxical Joe making an unformulated penance to the errant Topper?

“He’s already seen this movie. He knows >>

how it ends," said Ant. "The next day I got a phone call from him. We booked time at Battery Studios in Willesden."

From these sessions came *Rock Art And The X-Ray Style*, the first album from The Mescaleros, the group that Joe and Antony Genn formed, top-notch young British musicians. "You learn more about Joe Strummer from looking at the things he loved," said Ant. "The guy loved music. He loved art, he loved excellence, he loved brilliance, he loved a man that could mend a shoe. That was the poetry in Joe for me: the tiny detail."

On 5 June 1999, Joe Strummer opened his first UK tour for almost ten years.

"Joe was very excited by the Mescaleros," said Lucinda. "He had real, proper musicians. He liked being the elder statesman. I think he felt he had earned that position and he was comfortable with it. He definitely thought about being the elder man. And he worried about having a bit of a belly, and he worried about not being able to do leaps and jumps. But the energy was still the same."

Released in November 1999 *Rock Art And The X-Ray Style* got great reviews – as the live shows had. That month in Las Vegas I asked Joe what he had learnt out in the wilderness. "Any pimple-encrusted kid can jump up and become king of the rock and roll world," he said thoughtfully. "But when you're a young man like that you really do glow in the light of everyone's attention. It becomes a sustaining part of your life – which is something that is rotten to the core: you cannot have that as a crutch, because one day you're going to be over. So obviously I learnt that fame is an illusion and everything about it is just a joke."

With Martin Slattery and Scott Shields, who Ant had brought in, he made the next record, *Global A Go-Go*, a mélange of musical styles that mirrored the world music series Joe was hosting on the BBC World Service. While recording *Global A Go-Go*, Joe had sent Mick Jones a set of lyrics, which his old songwriting partner had quickly set to music and returned to him, believing they were for the new Mescaleros' record. Mick was surprised when none of them appeared. At a party for photographer Bob Gruen's book of Clash pictures in September 2001, Mick asked Joe what had happened to the songs he had sent him. "No, they weren't for *Global A Go-Go*," Joe corrected him. "They are the next Clash album."

Between 1993 and 1995 there had been efforts to put The Clash back together. But then Joe seemed to change his mind. "We were sitting in the pews next to each other at a rave in the Union Chapel in Islington, talk-

ing about it. Suddenly he came out with: 'Perhaps we shouldn't bother.' I said: 'Okay,'" Mick laughed. "And that was the end of that. That was probably the last time we were about to get back together again. One good thing was that we remained close friends. We never got back together again, but our friendship remained."

By autumn 2002, the now 50-year-old Joe Strummer and The Mescaleros were absolutely steaming. A tour of Japan – where Joe's star was at its highest – was a triumph. Then he learned that the following March The Clash would be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. If they accepted the



(left) With Lucinda Henderson, the woman he married in 1995; (above) the last time The Clash were in the same room, at The Ivor Novello Awards in 2001.

## “Joe had a lot of trouble finding his niche after The Clash. He was like a soldier without an army. He didn't have his cannon”

award, the group would be expected to perform. "Joe was very excited about the Hall of Fame for five minutes. He was in the middle of recording and touring and all that," remembered Lucinda. "He said The Clash had to play as how awful it would be to have other people playing your songs while you sit and watch. He did also say that he wouldn't do it if Topper didn't do it."

Joe had a British tour booked in the kind of hard-to-reach venues that The Clash would consciously play. A long-booked date was a benefit at Acton Town Hall on 15 November, for the striking workers of the Fire Brigades Union.

It was the appearance onstage during *Bankrobber*, the first encore, of Mick Jones that cemented the evening in the legend and mythology of rock and roll, the first time the guitarist had played onstage with Joe Strummer for nineteen years, since the Us festival. Although he had not meant to necessar-

ily play with the Mescaleros at the benefit. But as soon as he heard the opening chords of *Bankrobber*, he felt "compelled" to join Joe onstage. The chemistry and interaction between the joyous Mick Jones and Joe – as band-leader more consciously in control of the moment – was instant and spontaneous; it was as though no one else was on the stage. Joe had a laugh in his voice, as though he was immediately freed up. The Spinal Tap-like cliché of this onstage reunion only added to the innocent joy. "That was for the Harlesden and Willesden Fire Companies," said Mick Jones after *Bankrobber*. "In the key of A," Joe bellowed to his group. "Look at him," he gestured to Mick. And the group pounded into a stupendous *White Riot*, before performing the only set-closer they could: *London's Burning*. The magic of the occasion – not all of which could immediately be recognised – was compounded by the event itself, a non-profit righteous act of defiance, unsullied by ego. That Mick Jones should have gone onstage with Joe at his last London gig before he died is a testament to the mystique of The Clash.

"When he saw Mick, Joe's face was like a kid," said Luke Bullen, The Mescaleros' drummer. "He was genuinely chuffed." "Mick grabbed a guitar," said Lucinda. "He did say to me, 'I knew he was never going to ask me'."

**ON HIS ANNUAL VISITS TO** Glastonbury, Joe would plot up in the backstage area, bedecking it with flags of all nations, and playing choice sounds non-stop. The centrepiece of his Glastonbury scene was a large campfire, which he personally constructed. Joe's Glastonbury campfires were levelling experiences, reducing the egos of all participants until they could truly communicate. In the summer of 2002, Japan's annual Fuji Rock Festival astutely had paid for Joe and his entire Glastonbury crew to fly out to the event, importing that campfire vibe. Joe told his friend Julien Temple, the film director, that he believed his true legacy might well turn out not to be The Clash but a global campfire scene. "Joe totally believed in God," said Lucinda. "He just hated any form of organised religion. He said to me, 'I believe that mankind is inherently good, and that good will always triumph.' He believed in the goodness of people."

A little after 3pm on December 22 2002, Joe Strummer sat down on his couch at his home in Somerset to read *The Observer* and suffered a heart attack. He was 50 years old. ■

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