. . from the other side of the mirror . connecting the dots of what matters



Unpublished Joe Strummer Interview, Part-2

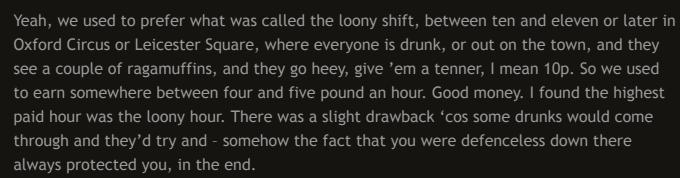
Here's the 2nd part of this apparently unpublished Joe Strummer interview circa 1988



To go back a bit, how did you get to be a busker?

I did that because Tymon Dogg, who was the musician of our community at that time, I went with him bottling as its called, because you're supposed to have a fly in a bottle in one hand and collect money with the other hand, and the musician knows that you haven't stolen any money if the fly is still in the bottle. It comes from Mississippi, that's why you're called the bottler when you're collecting. I used to collect for him. I knew I wasn't any musician, I was already about twenty one, and I never played, so I got a ukulele, and I used to play Chuck Berry songs on this ukulele. One day in Green Park, down in the tunnels, he said to me right, I've just heard there's a patch going at Leicester Square, you do this patch and I'll go off to the next one. And suddenly there I was alone, for the first time in my life, and a thousand people came rushing past, and I was going "Sweet Little Sixteen dingadingadingading" I thought, wow, I'm playing, and there's no-one here to help me!

Did you get any money?



It wasn't so violent then, though.

Not like it is now. It changes so slowly you don't notice.

So when did you leave school?

I left in June '70 at seventeen and went to the Central School of Art in the September, and then by June '71, that was it.

You did a foundation course?

Yeah. I applied to Stourbridge and Norwich and was refused by both. I remember coming back from Norwich I was apprehended on the train without a ticket with my portfolio, and slung of at this godforsaken place in the middle of nowhere, with this huge portfolio, so I dumped the portfolio in a skip and hitched back to London, and that was the end of my art career.

Did you not like it?

I was in boarding school, locked up really good for nine years, and all of a sudden you're staying at a hostel in Battersea, with no-one to say what to do, where to go. It was 1970, and there was drink and drugs, and by the end we were doing acid and I never went near the art school.

I went to university in '72 and the place was awash. I've still never seen so many drugs in one place. It was just that time.

Yeah it was an experimental time, it was great. It was bit much for a young guy to handle. By the end of the year we'd moved into this rented house in Palmer's Green, me and the most partying people on the course, we were getting really wild. We were examining the way to live.

Where did you go to school?

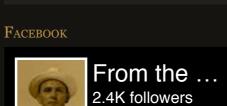
City of London Freemen's School. It's in Ashtead, about five miles south of Epsom. It was mixed. If it hadn't been mixed it would have been really hell. I ran away when I was nine. I didn't get very far. Me and this guy who was slightly older, Paul Warren, he said, come on, let's run away. I said yeah, let's go, and we left one Tuesday lunchtime. We were walking near Epsom and we saw this policeman and we knew it was the middle of school hours and he was bound to say what are you two doing, so we took this long detour, and while we were walking, the geography master came by in a car. Bundled us in, and back at the school this fascist guy shouting at us, how dare you leave school without your caps, and I remember thinking, what an idiotic question. We're running away, man, you don't run away with your cap on. It was only a couple of weeks after my ninth birthday. My dad was in the Foreign Office, so I think he was in Tehran, but the place they put me in was really horrible. Before that I hadn't been in England at all. I'd had a great life, in Egypt and Mexico and Germany. It was great. But suddenly it was like Tom Brown's Schooldays.

I went to that school, Rugby.

Oh my god.

So what did you do after you left Central?

A dead loss, you know. A couple of the guys from art school who were as wild as I was, and like me hadn't managed to get in anywhere else, we ended up in a place called Dowhouse Farm in Blandford in Dorset cos Robert Basie knew Jeremy Cooper whose father owned the farm, so we worked the hardest that year on the farm. Then we moved back to London and got a horrible flat in Harlesden where there were about ten of us living. We hadn't discovered squatting yet. A lot of people were already squatting, but I got a job in an Allied Carpets warehouse, as a sign painter, which was quite a good groove for about three months, until they asked me, are you going to get into this seriously, and I said, you must be fucking joking, I was just doing it for money to keep body and soul together, and as soon as I said that I was back on the carpet cutting floor. Then I came back one time after I'd







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been for a drink at the Memphis Bell with this girl I was friendly with from the local supermarket, and I arrived back at the flat and there was this police car outside the flat, and all our stuff was being thrown out of the window. The Irish landlord had bunged the cops a few quid to get rid of us. Me and Tymon had found this black guy in the park who'd given us a fright, and being hippies we'd invited him back to our place to live, cos he didn't have anywhere to live. And as soon as the landlord found out we had a black guy living in the flat, he nicked our giros. I wasn't getting a giro, but some of the others were. We'd all been evicted, a gang of toughs had rushed in, beat everybody up, slung em out, he'd bunged the cops a few quid. It was when I started to learn about what was justice and what wasn't. I started learning about the Rent Act, but when I got back from the warehouse, all our stuff was in the road, and the cops were there, laughing at us.

Up to that moment I'd been doing it by the book - you rent a flat, you try and find some way to get along. I actually had a copy of the '65 Rent Act on me, and I went along to the cop and said you can't do this according to section whatever, opened it up and he went, don't fucking tell me about the law, Sonny Jim, you know? From that moment on, if we wanted a house we just kicked the fucking door in. We wanted electricity, we just jammed wires into the company head. Bollocks.

Had you lost touch with your parents?

From the time I went to London they freaked out, as people used to say. Obviously I fell out with my parents. But you know what it was like at boarding school, you had to become somebody on your own at the age of nine, and its hard to get back. I suppose I resented them without being aware of it. My parents were somebody I saw once a year from then on. They were five thousand miles away in Tehran. The Foreign Office paid for one flight a year, then Lord Plowden came out with a report that recommended they paid for two. So after a few years I could see them at Christmas and in the summer, but for the first few years I saw them in the summer. And at half term when all the other boarders were going thank Christ we're getting out of here, for me sometimes we'd go to Scotland and stay on my mother's farm. Pavlova Britain was my friend at school, he was the drummer in 999. Me and him were a deadly duo. He used to take me down to his father's farm in East Sussex. I fell out with my parents from the age of nine, I suppose, and freaking out in London didn't help.

How do you get on with them now?

They're dead. When the Clash became really happening, my father for the first time in his life was really proud of me. That helped. But you can't really heal a lifetime's just because your records are selling. It's not his fault, it's mine, I never really got off my high horse. I didn't know I was sitting on it, but I realise it now.

Men don't get off that high horse until their late twenties, early thirties.

Now, I'd be able to say to him, cor what a lot of shit we've been through together. But we were touring Italy when he suddenly took ill and died. I hate not having that final conversation with him.

So for eighteen months you squatted and had a good time?

Well no, I had another adventure. We were sleeping in Dave and Gail Goodall's flat in Edgware Road, they had a two room flat. This was in between Harlesden and squatting. I was holding down that carpet job, and what was the upshot of it? All our records were smashed. We were slung out of the flat illegally. I went to the Harassment Officer at Brent Council, I was the only one of our group who really cared to follow things through. I went to a hearing and they stitched me right up. There were these eight law students up at the back and I remember screaming at them, I'm not something to fucking study, this is people who've been done over. They hustled me out, it was a rent tribunal. Anyway me and Tymon were sleeping on this kitchen floor. I had acquired a drum kit through a swap in my last year at school, and it was in the garage in my parents' bungalow in Purley, and so I knew a friend of mine had got into art school at Newport in south Wales, so I hitched down there. I knew a girl at Cardiff art school and I went to see her and she said basically, piss off. I went to see Forbes in Newport and I thought I might as well stay in this town cos I can't make it in London, it was too heavy, there was nowhere to live and so on. I got the drum kit down to Newport and bartered my way into the art school group by swapping the drum kit. It was called The Vultures. We played the art school and the Kensington Club in Newport. We used to do 'Can't Explain', 'Tobacco Road', r'n'b. I took jobs there, I was grave digging there for three months during the winter of '72/'73. I was cutting grass on Malpas estate. I was the king of the fly-mo. But that fell apart after a while and I went straight into the squatting.

It was very organised then as well. Didn't you have a squatter's union?

Yes we did. We had a lovely bit of paper printed: "This premises has now been occupied" We knew all the legal ins and outs. You'd go in there, bang, change the locks, yeah. Property is nine tenths of the law, we were really organised.

So you had the 101ers, and this club which was jumping. What happened then?

They were going to close the boozer down, 'cos it was getting out of hand. The cops were coming down every week. Some gypsies started to move in. When we were living at 101, on one side of us we had a house full of junkies, and they managed to put light bulbs in, but the council had been through ripping out anything, water, lights, smashing floorboards and so on. We'd go in there and rebuild them, the wires. We had an expert who'd come down, and he was the bravest guy. I saw him jamming wires into the company head, right into Battersea power station, I've seen him blown back across the room, showers of sparks thirteen feet long. These junkies had got their lights going but there was no switches, and I went round there to see this guy who played harmonica, there he was lying in this room with only a mattress in it, with this bulb burning away. There isn't any way of turning it off we have to unscrew the bulb. That was on one side, these junkies lying there with these bulbs burning away day and night, and on the other side there was a gang of really terrible alcoholics, you know those people who are usually in the park. God, the horrible fights and shit, it was the pits.

One day Dan Keller came to the door, and I went like this, pretending to hit him, cos he was a bit of a dozy boy, just for a laugh, and down the bottom of the steps this guy was walking by, and he pulled a hatchet out of his pocket, and he ran up the steps going Aaaaaaagh!!! I pulled Dan in and shut the door, but it had been kicked in hundreds of times and it was just cheap panels, and the hatchet came right through the door and he was screaming, YOU KILLED MY WIFE!!! One move, anything could happen. Eventually Alan Jones from Melody Maker, who's now the editor but at the time it was his first reporting job, I'd known him from Newport, he was a student at the college. I got him to come to the Pig Dog, hoping that we'd get a bit of press, and he wrote four lines at the bottom of their gossip column. Me and Big John took this four lines down to the Elgin and we showed it to the landlord, and he read it and said, right lads, Monday then. I'll give you ten pounds. That's when we got onto the circuit. That's when the Pistols first came across me. Sid Vicious - I don't think John did, but anybody who was anybody eventually turned up down there on Thursdays. Although we didn't realise it, we were at least playing very fast music.

I went to talk to Roger, and he said by that time the original pub rock bands got really boring. Dr Feelgood started it, but you had the rougher faster 101ers, the Count Bishops, people like that. I suppose that's true.

Those earlier pub rock bands disappeared up their own arseholes trying to play like Memphis Sweet Style, but we couldn't play at all, we knew how to bash the shit out of a number. By the time we hit the Elgin, it was Snakehips Dudanski on drums, Evil on lead guitar, me singing and Mole on bass.

When did Boogie come in?

After Boogie got out of prison, for some reason he was into the music, and he used to come down and say he could get us played on Charlie Gillett's programme. So we taped some music and sent it to him, and we all crouched round the radio in the squat. By now we were squatting over at Orsett Terrace, and Charlie Gillett goes, what's this, sounds like hundred mile and hour race along rubbish, and he didn't even play it, just dismissed it in

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half a sentence. What a crushing blow that was. Tiberi had said he could get us on the radio. I was the one who christened him Boogie, 'cos the first time he came round the squat he was smoking Winston and at the time a packet of Winston seemed rather glamorous, almost like having a Cadillac, so I called him boogie after the John Lennon, Dr Winston O'Boogie, remember? When he pulled out his fags I said, you must be Dr Winston O'Boogie. And the Boogie bit stuck.

With him and Mickey Foot helping us we started to become a real little operation. Mickey was a contact from Newport. He was attending the college of art.

He did the Black Arrows amongst all that as well.

Him and Bernie were a right little team for a while, after the Clash started. Bernie needs to have a lieutenant

Malcolm had Nils, and then Boogie.

Mick Jones sacked Mickey Foot for speeding up 'Clash City Rockers'! I suppose Cosmo took over that role. But it wasn't bad speeded up, I think Mickey was probably right. There are few honourable men in these stories, but Mickey was one of them.

Did you meet the Pistols first, or Bernie first? How did it all happen. You're with the 101ers, you're doing well.

We're doing well, we've got a single out, but I got a feeling that we were invisible, we were working very hard, loading the van, driving up north, unloading, playing the gig, loading it up again, driving down again, unloading again 'cos we didn't want to get the gear nicked. We did twelve gigs in fourteen days in places like Sheffield, and we couldn't afford to stay up there, it was up and down every day. We were invisible, we weren't getting anything in the papers. Then one day the Sex Pistols were supporting us at the Nashville, and that was when I first saw them. I walked through the corridor, and we'd done our sound check and in came these Sex Pistols people, I remember looking at them as they went past: Rotten, Matlock, Cook, Jones, McLaren, and coming up the rear was Sidney, wearing a gold lamé Elvis Presley jacket, and I thought groups in those days didn't talk to each other, it was extremely cut-throat. You fought for gigs, but I thought I'd talk to them, and I said to Sid, that's a nice jacket you've got there, mate. He looked at me and went, yeah, it is, I got it down at Kensington Market. We were humans, talking. Then I walked out onstage while they were getting their sound check together and I heard Malcolm going to John, do you want those kind of shoes that Steve's got, or the kind that Paul's got? What sort of sweater do you want, and I thought, blimey, they've got a manager, and he's offering them clothes! To me it was incredible. The rest of my group didn't think much of all this, but I sat out in the audience, there can't have been more than forty people in the whole boozer, they did their set, and that was it for me. The difference was, we played 'Route 66' to the drunks at the bar, going, please like us. But here was this quartet who were standing there going, we don't give a toss what you think, you pricks, this is what we like to play, and this is the way we're gonna play it. Regardless of whether you like it or not. That was the difference.

Did Lydon say anything to the audience?

Yeah, he pulled out this huge snot rag and blew his nose into it, and he went, if you haven't guessed already, we're the Sex Pistols. Really, come on, you know, and they blasted into 'Substitute', or 'Submission', or something.

The material they were playing at first wasn't that different from what you were doing, was it?

No. They were doing 'Stepping Stone', which we did occasionally, but they were light years different from us. They were on another planet in another century, it took my head off. I understood that this was serious stuff, they honestly didn't give a shit. John was really thin, and kept blowing his nose between numbers. That's almost all he'd do between numbers. The audience were shocked. That's when I fell out with the rest of the group, 'cos after that I started going down to Tuesday nights at the 100 Club, it started happening there. That's when Bernie came up to me and said, give me your number, I want to give you a call about something.

That was it, the last few gigs that we had booked, the Pistols took them over. We had supported Kilburn & The High Roads at some north London college or other, and a couple of Nashville slots, but I split the group up, cos Bernie called the squat and Dan Keller the bass player at the time pretended to be me, and that's when I said, it's not happening. Evil was wearing Hawaiian shirts, and I was saying, look at what's happening, we've got to move with the times, and they thought I was going mad. They were probably right, but it was certainly more interesting than what we were doing.

You were suddenly faced with the present. And the future, and you had to make a decision, it was an emotional thing.

It was a case of, jump that side of the fence or you're on the other side. It sorted people out. That t-shirt that Bernie designed, Which Side of the Bed? Brilliant, but it was so clear.

I thought that was the finest thing he ever did.

That t-shirt was the reason that Mick Jones first spoke to Bernie. They were in the Nashville, again. Mick was looking for a piano player for the Hollywood Brats, or whatever was the name of the group he was in at the time, and he thought that Bernie might make a good piano player cos he had an interesting t-shirt.

That's how they first conversed, over that t-shirt.

Anyway, Bernie called me at the squat and Dan pretended to be me, and didn't tell me about the call, we had a gig that night at the Golden Lion, Bernie and Keith Levene came down. By this time I'd fired Evil, and had Martin Stone on guitar, and I saw Bernie and Keith and went outside and spoke to him, and I decided to go with him at that moment. The next day or two I met him at Paddington and we drove to Shepherd's Bush to the squat where Paul and Keith and Mick and Viv Albertine were staying, and put the group together.

So that story about Portobello Road wasn't true?

Lisson Grove Labour Exchange? You see I was gigging around, and I'd just done a gig at Acklam Hall with the 101ers, it was a really good one, and the next morning I was signing on at Lisson Grove and I was aware that there were these people staring at me on this bench, and as I was queuing I was thinking there was going to be a ruck. It was Paul and Mick and Viv, and they'd seen me, in the weeks that Bernie had pulled Mick and Paul out of London SS and put them together, and they'd seen me at gigs around the manor, and that's why they'd been staring at me. I didn't talk to them, if they'd have come up to me, I'd have probably swung at one of them. Get it in first, 'cos when people stare at you that long, y'know, and Lisson Grove was the worst place on earth. I'd seen them but never met them, and it wasn't until Bernie drove me round.

What was it like, that squat?

Their squat was a bit nicer than the ones round here, it was above, there was an old biddy living down below, and the electricity was still in place. It looked slightly more like a normal home.

Didn't you play your first gig in Sheffield?

Yeah, the Mucky Duck at the Black Swan, supporting the Pistols. It was really funny. We had a number called 'Listen', which started with an ascending progression of a couple of bars which began the set for some reason, and Paul had never played a gig in his life, and he got up, nervous, and went right up the scale.

Why didn't you come in?

I wasn't much of a musician myself, and I was waiting for the D note or something, and he started to go up the frets one by one it threw us right off, we all just collapsed laughing. For a while the Pistols didn't see us as a threat, cos we were mates and all part of the same scene. Craig Hoyer on The Original Hipster Dict...



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And the Bernie and Malcolm connection, I suppose.

By that time Malcolm and Bernie had fallen out over the swastika thing, not the chaos armband but the swastika armband, 'cos Bernie was a Jewish refugee from the oppression in Europe, or rather his mother was, so it was close enough for him to take that seriously, whereas I don't know where Malcolm came from

Malcolm didn't give a shit, he was selling Nazi memorabilia in the shop, and I also heard that Bernie was upset about the little boy t-shirt.

I agree with Bernie, it was messing with things they didn't understand. At the 100 Club when Siouxsie asked to borrow our equipment for her first gig, Bernie said no, not unless you take off that swastika armband.

What were the Pistols like at the Black Swan? I get the impression they were really brilliant at those northern gigs in the summer.

They were brilliant, they were firing on all strokes. We had a sort of Roxy Music audience. The Pistols had had a few Jonh Ingham articles, right, that one in Sounds, but it wasn't a lot for people to go on. It was a Sunday and I remember being amazed that at least two or three hundred people turned up. Girls in leopard skin overcoats, the tail end of that Roxy thing, sharkskin suits, that type of thing. They were very receptive.

That must have been the best time for them, cos they were beginning to find their audience, and they didn't have all the hassle.

Yeah, they weren't expected to be Rotten. They were enjoying their music, and they were being very courageous too. Like, new numbers were coming up.

Did you talk to them much at that time?

Me and Rotten never got on. Couldn't be expected to, really. I got on very well with Glen and Steve. I still get on well with Paul. He's a nice geezer. But what impressed me with Steve, we'd have this game going where he'd come up to me with his guitar and go, what's that? He'd be holding down a chord, and I had to look at his fingers and go, its a C ninth. That shows that Steve had probably stopped nicking them and started playing them only a year before, and yet he could do much more exciting chords than I could, I was still into, just slide your fingers up and down like that. But Steve was already into jazz shapes and inversions, he really knew his fret board. It was brilliant. And he got that sound, straight into a Fender Twin Reverb, no pedals, it was the way he hit it.

Part 1 here and Part 3 here

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