

PIXIES AND THAT PETROL EMOTION UK TOUR DATES - PAGES 2&3

# SOUNDS

## JOE STRUMMER A MAN AT WAR

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BIOGRAPHY

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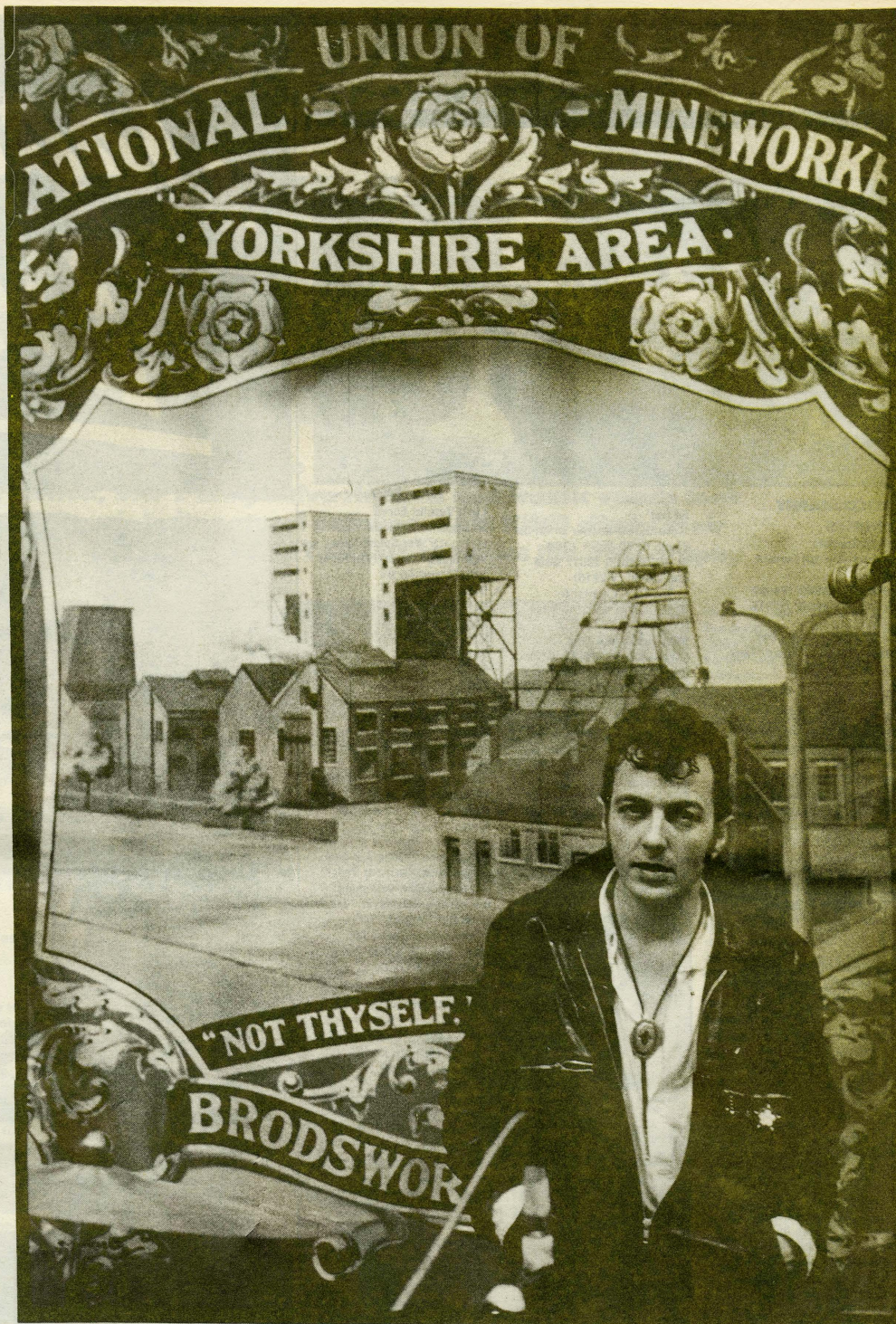
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JOE STRUMMER PHOTO BY PETER ANDERSON

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**For over a month, JOE STRUMMER has blazed a trail of passionate, powerful, politico rock across the UK with his LATINO ROCKABILLY WAR. ROBIN GIBSON joins the rebel-rousers' crusade and, in a heart-to-heart with Strummer, looks at the convictions and contradictions of the Rock Against The Rich tour. Pictures by PETER ANDERSON**



# YOUR MONEY OR YOUR LIFE!

# Stand and deliver

**Y**OU'LL FIND them in Hampstead, Isle Of Dogs and Holland Park.

Stalk them in the daytime, hurt them in the dark, with balaclavas, bricks and Dr Marten boots – it's got to be more fun than Trivial Pursuit!"

Broadsworth Miners' Welfare Hall, just outside Doncaster. Rock Against The Rich compere Welsh Ray Jones is committing his poetry to memory.

"Tory funerals, Tory funerals, can't get enough of those Tory funerals!"

Backstage, Joe Strummer has connected the kettle and is mixing a voluptuous brew of black coffee, Guatemalan honey and Three Barrels brandy.

Ah-ha! What's that called? "Carahillo. C-a-r-a-h-i-l-l-o," he says. "Mind you, maybe it's got a double 'r' in it. It's a toss-up."

Rebellion and romance. Strummer is back: supporting the one, pursuing the other.

**T**HIS ROCK Against The Rich tour is a real tour. For over a month, a bus emblazoned with the tour's skull 'n' crossbones logo, has carried Strummer and his Latino Rockabilly War, London reggae band One Style, Class War's Mat Ronacre, and only an essential, skeleton roadcrew, trawling punters from Brighton to Aberdeen, from Merthyr Tydfil to Doncaster.

It culls its support bands from each town and its crowds from those disillusioned with the pitstop visits of circuit-hugging stars.

It's the most exciting tour I've been in for years. We join it in Liverpool at the crumbling Royal Court: the scouse ticket touts wear Benetton and trainers.

It's a tour put together by an organisation for which no one claims to be organiser. Their newspaper *Class War* openly and gleefully campaigns for anti-rich and anti-police violence. It's completely serious, and funny too – one classic cover pictured massed rows of tombstones below a headline celebrating record numbers of new police homes.

The Latino Rockabilly War is a band for whom Liverpool, if my fingers serve me correctly, is only their seventh gig. They rehearsed for four days before the first, and already they're probably the best live rock band in the UK.

It's a tour which, along with numerous Green Wedge benefits, will leave Strummer "near the breadline". It's a mass of so-called contradictions and that's in character.

But with a clutch of new songs – from the *Permanent Record* soundtrack and beyond – and a real working band. Strummer is more relevant and powerful than he's been for ten years.

He's turned into an ageless rock 'n' roll protest singer, and his current activity focuses his concern and potency better than he could by himself.

It seems like the most relaxed band you've had in years.

"That's true. I've been studying the old times and the new times. And the old times were a bit too panicky. It all mattered a bit too much. I'm not saying it doesn't matter, but... what did they say? Take it easy, but take it. I think that was Woody Guthrie's motto, yeah. And that's the truth."

When I first saw the band, it seemed like it didn't matter that you were doing age-old songs, and covers. Things like 'Armageddon Time' seem even more in tune with 1988.

"Well, when I was reviewing my



THE LATINO Rockabilly War: Willie, Zander, Joe, Roberto and Jim

**"Hopefully I'll be able to negotiate something with CBS and we'll be able to record something. But if you're standing on one side of the sausage machine, you don't wanna jump into it. I'm buggered if I'm gonna get stamped into a serviceable bit of '80s pop. It's just not on."**  
– Joe Strummer

stuff, and thinking, Right, we're gonna tour, I began to think a lot of Muddy Waters... those guys had sort of... works.

"That was his thing, and it was one thing. And I thought, Well, if I look back at this concert in 20 years time... let's try and get away from the hysteria of the moment, of thinking, Oh, God, you can't do that song cos so-and-so's doing it or, Oh, God, we'll get a bad review. I just thought, Well, what the hell? It's my back catalogue!"

LRW gigs kick off with 'Oyeh Como Va', a seething, chopping Latin rattle. It's a perverse choice, and it works.

Then it's much the same brilliant, loose set as their London gigs.

Ramshackle covers of 'Brand New Cadillac' and 'Ubangi Stomp', the rejuvenation of such unlikely Clash moments as 'Junco Partner' and 'This Is England', a tumultuous 'I Fought The Law'. They hijack and ransack two BAD numbers, there are melancholy spaghetti Western numbers from 'Walker', and 'If I Should Fall From Grace With God'.

There's 'Trash City' and 'Nothin' 'Bout Nothin'' (from *Permanent Record*) and 'Shouting Street' – a two minute 58 express train of a song – but the highlight is their brilliant treatment of 'Straight To Hell'.

It captures the essence of the righteous fight in which Strummer has always been engaged, and the essence of the tour. It's his best moment, better than ever.

It's a great gig. And for the jubilant, 850-strong crowd, the very nature of it – dirty, sweaty, angry and honest – is a statement of intent. Meanwhile, in the dressing room after the show, its financial status is becoming clearer.

"Have a beer," says a happy Strummer, picking one from a very few. "It's quite warm," he adds with the air of a connoisseur.

Outside, he's pinned against the wall, talking to fans and scribbling on their

jackets. His attitude is uncommon these days. The old bugger will talk to anyone.

After the gig we retire to a curry house. Finishing the meal, we notice a Liverpool hen party trilling, "Why are we waiting?" behind us. Light banter follows.

Then they hear the accents. "You rich southern bastards, come up here and keep us waiting!" they heckle.

It's bittersweet evidence of the battle Class War are fighting. There are two halves of this country.

**N**EXT DAY in Doncaster, the big picture descends. The venue – the Miners' Welfare Hall – is a hardline NUM branch. Above the stage is a beautiful NUM banner; the hall hosts posters like 'Smash Capitalism For Workers' Power'. It's a trip to the real world. Out the back, thick-throated Yorkshiremen are playing Crown Green bowls. The hall window display is straight *Spinal Tap*, with the RAR tour announcement taking poor second billing to a forthcoming Fresh Meat Auction.

"If I've told you once," bellows guitarist Zander Schloss, "I've told you a hundred times! It's Latino Rockabilly War, then Fresh Meat Auction!"

It turns out there's been a mass riot and jailbreak at the nearby Lindholms Prison. Three men still on the run: a strange tour for Strummer's Latino Rockabilly henchmen to start their assault on Britain. But they seem happy.

Bassist Jim Donica has played in everything from a heavy rock covers outfit to The Ventura Symphony Orchestra, and was playing for a jazz outfit called The David Becker Tribune when Joe stumbled across him in a Hollywood club.

When Strummer approached, Jim gave him the wrong phone number to get rid of him.

"Well, yeah. Cos he just looked like a street guy. His hair was greasy and, ah... he just didn't look too good!"

But he was finally enlisted. "Well, you know," he says, "number one I'm here to play with Joe. Class War, I understand some of their principles, and I agree with some of 'em and disagree with a lot of 'em, to be honest. In the end, anything against anything just perpetuates the conflict."

Jim only learned that Joe was a minor legend when he started to work with him.

Guitarist Zander Schloss and drummer Willie MacNeil – the former worked with Joe on *Straight To Hell* and *Walker*, between stints on bass for The Circle Jerks, the latter was in one of the midwest's first punk groups, Abuse – were more *au fait* with the situation.

Zander is the most wholeheartedly supportive of the cause.

"Yeah, I think it's really good to be doing something that might possibly

have an impact. Rather than just wankin' off onstage and makin' money. I can't see people being displaced like that, in any country. It's ridiculous – yuppies. I'll fight against a yuppie any day. Haha!"

"It's hard to say, really," says Willie. "But I met the guy who was running for Class War (in the North Kensington by-election) at the pub, and he seemed pretty cool."

"He only got 60 votes, but that's pretty cool, huh? I heard somebody only got two. It's good to stand for something..."

One by one, they all affirm that they would love to make an album and hang together for as long as it works out.

Their crucial percussion player, Roberto Pla has his own band, but sums up the commitment.

"Well, you tell me what time I have to be at the studio, you know, and I'll be there!"

**F**OR STRUMMER, Rock Against The Rich is a typically atypical return.

"Hopefully," he says in the dressing room as roadies chink around him, "I'll be able to negotiate something with CBS and we'll be able to record something. But if you're standing on one side of the sausage machine, you don't wanna jump into it. I'm buggered if I'm gonna get stamped into a serviceable bit of '80s pop. It's just not on."

No other ageing rocker would attempt this sort of thing.

"It's a bit rickety," he chuckles, savouring the word. "Rick-et-ee! I recognised I was pretty rickety at guitar. No matter how much I practise, it's almost a waste of time. I've achieved a certain crudity, and that's where I stay. And there's not a lot you can do about that's slick!"

"I read some band called The Railway Children reviewing the singles. They had 'Trash City' and they said, 'Must have cost a fortune to get that cheap sound! The cynic! I just thought, Wow, people are really cynical. I recognise that I'm that cynical.'"

"You know, I could've said that. I could. But really, we just turned the tape machine on and kicked the song in."

So what about this tour? Does the basic, no-rules, no-limits, rabble-rousing element of Class War appeal to you?

"Yeah. It makes it easy to do things. It stops people laying down trips on each other, some *heavy line*... but, ultimately, they're espousing an anarchist philosophy, a wish for a lifestyle. I don't see why that shouldn't be taken as seriously as Keynesian economics..."

"Ultimately, we'd all like to live in a land, or a world, without nuclear weapons, without spoiling the planet, or lootin' it, or radiatin' it..."

An Englishman's vote is his own private kingdom of course. But it won't take much guesswork to figure who scrawled one of those 60 Class War crosses in Kensington.

Strummer is aware that he's back as a non-aligned but political rock 'n' roll animal. But he's wary of saviourdom.

"Yeah, really wary. Cos you know you're not worth it – that's the sick joke. You know that you're just a lousy slug like everyone else. For two pence, you'd lie down on a deckchair rather than dig a trench on a sunny day."

CONTINUES OVER

# JOE STRUMMER

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"Perhaps people like Gandhi really are it, you know. Completely all the way there. They're the sort of people we should be seeking out."

But you still identify with this cause? National Anti-Yuppie Day, bricking BMWs and f\*\*\*ing coppers?

"Well, I can certainly identify with the feeling that generates it. But, you know, whether it's back to Gandhi, or whether violence gets you anywhere, is the age-old question."

"They are expressing themselves. And people will express themselves - like in '81, all those riots happening. That was pretty surprising."

Britain's just not a revolutionary country, by nature.

"Yeah - then BOOM! Maybe our trouble is that we shoulda had a revolution along with the French..."

Perhaps this is something the gang of veteran punks we run across in a Doncaster pub would agree with. They've been keeping the beacon blazing with their annual reunion.

They call the Latino Rockabilly War "That teddy boy group" and want to know what songs they play.

"Do they play 'White Riot', then?"

Nope.  
"Good. It was shite anyway!" beams my interrogator.

**F** ANY of the escaped convicts made it to the gig, they must be non-violent offenders. There's no security and no trouble. As Strummer points out afterwards, it's "just the right side of loony".

The Miners Welfare Hall has no licence. Instead they make everyone buy a book on the Miners' Strike, which comes with a raffle ticket and an instant prize of two litres of beer.

Inside, there's a jubilant air that no size at Wembley could cultivate. People are moshing in pools of beer, and the band attack the set with glee: a triumph.

Strummer's longtime girlfriend Gabrielle shows me the leaflet that's being circulated by Doncaster's autonomous Class War branch, berating the recruitment of a middle-class rock star to the cause.

I ask Ray Jones what he thinks.

"A load of old shite, that," he spits at the leaflet.

That'll do for me, from a Tory funeral aficionado. Of course there are contradictions here, but they're overridden by the honesty of the whole package, and its commercial lynchpin.



STRUMMER: "MAYBE we shoulda had a revolution along with the French."

After the gig, Strummer is pleased as punch and hauls out the Three Barrels to prove it. Touring, he says, tops it all, as the bus rumbles back to their B&B accommodation.

"Yeah, we knew what we were doing tonight. We weren't so worried that we would f\*\*\* it up. And we knew it was a wild crowd, specially wild, and we had to deliver, and no messing. It was a great crowd, that."

Do you ever worry about fashion, as opposed to style? I mean, among that crowd there were a bunch who'd just held their annual punk reunion...

"I don't really think about fashion. It always seems there's no point to it. We just came to this more with a Hey, hey, f\*\*\* it."

"I expected Jim to show up with a pony-tail halfway down his back and a huge walrus moustache. That's what he looked like when I left him. But I never rang up and said, Cut your hair."

He takes another slug of brandy.  
"That's what we drink before we go on. We don't drink until just before, and then we have a tot of brandy."

These days, it always seems like you have to make a case for the defence with rock 'n' roll. Some would say you don't count because you're not doing anything 'new'...

"Ha ha! Yeah, it's true. That's why I brought in the Latino thing, because we knew we were gonna make some rock music as opposed to 'Walker'. But I didn't want turgid slabs of old rock 'n' roll that's no use to man nor beast..."

**S**TRUMMER WOULD like to make a LRW LP as much as his compadres would. But it's only now he's got a group on the road and is writing rock songs again that the green light from CBS is

beginning to glint at the end of the tunnel.

Does he ever wonder what would have happened if he hadn't signed that notorious CBS deal (he still owes three albums)?

"I often think about that. With a big smile. In hindsight, it's easy to say, but the benefit of the deal was that they gave us a really great international distribution network, and maybe that made The Clash important..."

"But who knows. Sometimes I wonder if Mark Perry was right after all... Probably, in the long run, he was."

The last Alternative TV record stiffed, though. It was good, but it was on Cherry Red and no one heard it...

"That's a worrying thing, you know. In the future, I don't really expect to get much chart action, just cos of the way it is. And for me, that's a drag. But it's more of a drag for every young group coming up, trying to get through."

"The music's being made, but we're just not getting to hear it. And now you hear they're bringing in tougher laws against the pirate radios, like they're gonna swag your record collection! They just don't know when to stop..."

He shifts into overdrive.  
"If I was Thatcher, I'd call that lot, the Department Of Public Prosecutions, bugging the pirate radio, and tell them to back off!"

"Imagine, you're f\*\*\*ed in the ghetto, you've got a little pirate radio thing running, it's the only thing to get up and live for, and they're ripping off all your records! It's too much. They're asking for something."

Can you see riots going up again?  
"I can certainly see it happening. Cos

I feel that we've just skirted round problems, that the French faced 200 years ago, like the aristocracy, and the same 50 families running the country, passing it round in their own world... you know? Where's that at?! And we've just had all that madness in Kensington..."

I almost expect people like Tony Benn to join the Greens.

"That would be cool, you know! He won't win that struggle, will he? They'll bat him down. I would love Labour to get in, like a lot of people. But they haven't really taken the lead. There's no inspiration, maybe."

"So, I'm kinda digging Green politics, with Green Wedge, and thinking, I wish Labour would make that a number one thing in their manifesto. Everybody cares about that... even diehard Tories must feel bad about the ozone layer, or acid rain, or children in Cumbria, getting leukaemia."

"God!" he blurts, "the world's mad! I reckon, if you held a referendum here, and you said, Alright, we're gonna do away with nuclear power stations, but for two days a week, you can't have power in your house, I'd say, Yeah!"

"You know, because when you argue with a nuclear guy, he goes, Yeah, but you play electric guitar, you have a lifestyle, and it's hard to argue against. But when we were living in Nicaragua, the water and the electricity were cut off twice a week. And you just accommodated it."

"It's not like, Oh, God, all fall down and freak out. You just get a candle out... wash tomorrow! I'd much rather live like that than have these time bombs ticking away, pumping that filth out."

Strummer grinningly reminds me he was once "a junior hippie".

"It's a very close thing, really. Punks were just more aggressive hippies, but their hearts are in the same place. And I think in a year or two, we're gonna see... well, one shouldn't prophesy into the future, but..."

**J**UST HERE the tape runs out, the bus grinds to a halt and, with Culture's 'Two Sevens Clash' ("when reggae was killer") blaring out, he loses the track.

The best thing, really. Outside it's pissing down.

Only a few months ago, I wrote a *Retro* piece on The Clash. It was just after *Walker* came out, and Strummer looked like he was settling back into relaxed, mid-career dabbling. But I did point out it would be stupid to write off the contrary bastard just yet.

I was right. The man does try to find percussion players by strolling off to London's West End in search of "Little Havana" ("of course, there isn't one"). But he's raising more thunder (against yuppies, for the Greens, or just for the sheer bloody hell of it) than anyone has in ages.

He's also playing the most inspired and exciting music in the country.

He hasn't heard Public Enemy but he does think there's not much point in being anything but a punk rocker or a hip-hopper.

"You'll notice I'm still wearing my leather jacket."

Enough said. Enough to make you believe in rock 'n' roll...

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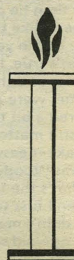
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