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THE CLASH

★ COMBAT ROCK ★

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THE CLASH

FIGHTING TALK!

For **THE CLASH**, the making of *Combat Rock* was a time of chaos and internal conflict. Yet 40 years on, its infectious mix of dub, funk, punk and hip-hop remains as glorious as ever. Here, collaborators, eyewitnesses, fans and contemporaries – including **JIM JARMUSCH**, **DON LETTS**, **JULEN TEMPLE**, **GLEN MATLOCK**, **PAUL COOK** and **MARK STEWART** – celebrate the last hurrah of Strummer, Jones, Simonon and Headon. “Knowing them, and what they were trying to do,” we learn, “this is the classic Clash album.”

Photo by PENNIE SMITH



Thaishtick: The Clash pose for Pennie Smith by a railway line outside Bangkok at the end of their Australia/Asia tour, March 1982





The Clash on April 21, 1982: three weeks later, Topper Headon (second left) would be out

FOR The Clash, the question in 1982 was: where next? 1980's *Sandinista!* had covered a lot of ground across its six sprawling sides. Now, as sessions for The Clash's fifth studio album moved from London to New York's Electric Lady studio in November 1981, their recently reappointed manager Bernie Rhodes anticipated a return to straight-ahead rock'n'roll. He couldn't have been more wrong. Covering dub, funk and hip-hop, and with guest spots from Allen Ginsberg and NY graffiti artist Futura 2000, *Combat Rock* was almost as diverse as its predecessor. "The city found its way into the music," says singer Ellen Foley, who was also Jones' partner at the time. Mixed by Glyn Johns back in the UK, singles "Rock The Casbah" and "Should I Stay Or Should I Go" were punched up for maximum chart impact. Nevertheless, *Combat Rock* arrived in shops on May 14, 1982 to a mixed reception. "In England people were like, 'Oh fuck, The Clash have sold out' – which was ridiculous," says filmmaker Don Letts. "In America, they were going from strength to strength." Yet despite the album's ambitious mix of styles, all was not well within the band. "They were falling apart," admits Letts. "Musical differences were happening. As demonstrated by Mick Jones' original *Combat Rock* mix [Rat Patrol From Fort Bragg]. I've still got the C90. It was more dance-orientated." Topper Headon had been sacked just days before the album was released, owing to his escalating heroin habit, replaced on the band's upcoming tour by original drummer Terry Chimes. "Topper was the fucking rock,"

says Letts. "Once Topper was gone, there was no proper foundation." As the title suggests, conflict was rife – and not just within the band. *Combat Rock* was released during the Falklands War. This gave many of Strummer's songs an additional urgency. "They feel like you're a war correspondent on the front line – or postcards from the edge," says The Pop Group's Mark Stewart. "Rock The Casbah" reached No 8 in America, as the band embarked on a stadium tour supporting The Who. "Paul Simonon said to me right at the beginning, 'If I ever get any money, Mark, I want a waterproof telly that I can watch in the bath,'" says Stewart. "When *Combat Rock* broke through, I hoped Paul got that telly." Such celebrations were short-lived. By 1983, Mick Jones had been sacked; the original Clash were no more. But even today, *Combat Rock* sounds bullish and brilliant. "They'd flown off into orbit, gone through their prog phase with *Sandinista!*," says Stewart. "Then they landed here. Knowing them, and what they were trying to do, this is the classic Clash album." "Forty years later," adds Sex Pistol Paul Cook, "I think *Combat Rock* gets stronger as time goes on."

★ SIDE 1 ★

1 KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Dub-surf guitar backs Strummer's wry restatement of his rebel-rock credentials



JIM JARMUSCH: "Know Your Rights" is an ass-kicking way to start off the album, just Joe's inflection: "This is a public service announcement with guitar!" It's one of my favourite moments in all of

rock'n'roll. Strummer is a very clever lyricist, because it's really a warning disguised as a proclamation. He's proclaiming these basic human rights and then immediately undercutting their viability in a controlled world. These are your rights, but don't try to apply them or you'll get fucked. It's delivered in that vigorous, snarling vocal that contains so much indignation. Musically it's fascinating because the whole song is propelled by a kind of chugging, almost military rhythm section, so it's telling you what you're up against. Then at the very end, when the rhythm section is still marching along, you hear Joe go, "Get off the streets! Run!" Mick's guitar starts to run away from that incessant, martial rhythm that Paul and Topper have created. It seems so simple and yet that's a very complicated thing to have conceived. Right now, 1982 seems a long way back, but this song is almost more resonant in 2022, because of this authoritarianism expanding across the globe like shadows at sundown. Long live The Clash.

2 CAR JAMMING

Strummer's Beat-style lyric surreally mixes boomboxes, homeless Vietnam vets and film stars



ELLEN FOLEY: You'd go down to Electric Lady Studio and feel the vibe, which was very exciting. The neighbourhood kids were starting to breakdance to drums made out of paint cans. The band became involved with all these new genres and people like Fab Five Freddy and Futura. That was the great thing about The Clash, they attracted all sorts of really cool, creative people. It made them feel really creative in turn. I'd been with them in Kingston in Jamaica, London too, and then in New York. They were kind of vampires for wherever they were and who they were around. But they always maintained their own personality as a band. I remember Allen Ginsberg coming into the studio with his partner, Peter Orlovsky. I think Joe was influenced by all that on "Car Jamming". I can't say I remember much about singing on it, but it starts out so good, with Topper playing great drums and then Joe starts talking about Vietnam and New York City. It's a kind of rap, but it could just as easily have been a poem.

3 SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO

Mick Jones' ambiguous classic



GLEN MATLOCK: I remember playing bass for Mick while he was trying out potential singers for what then became

The Clash. We gave them their first gig,



The Clash open for The Who at New York's Shea Stadium, Oct 12/13, 1982



supporting the Pistols at the Black Swan in Sheffield. I like to think I helped them a little bit.

Musically, they became a lot better than they were originally. I wasn't a big fan of "White Riot". But I think the difference is that The Clash had room to grow and get better, whereas the Pistols started at the pinnacle and went downhill. Out of them all, I was more friendly with Bernard Rhodes, their manager, who worked with Malcolm in the really early days of the Pistols. I said, "What are you planning to do with The Clash?" And he said to me, "Well, I saw what happened with you and the Pistols", which he thought was wrong. He said he'd vowed to keep The Clash together. And they broke America!

So I can identify with "Should I Stay Or Should I Go" because what I read into that song was, whether it might be something to do with a girl, it also might be something to do with Mick's relationship with the band at that time.



Pressure dropping: Topper and Joe at a press conference in Sydney, Feb 4, 1982

I like the fact that it's got cross-references to something like The Yardbirds. You can see where Mick's coming from – I know he liked all kinds of music.

4 ROCK THE CASBAH

A thrilling pop arrangement courtesy of Topper Headon



PAUL COOK: When I first heard "Rock The Casbah" I remember thinking, 'Oh my God, where are they going now?' This was after the magnificently eclectic *Sandinista!*. I loved the fact that,

being a drummer myself, the whole song was instigated by Topper. He found himself in the studio one day when no-one else had turned

up, as the band were imploding at the time. I think it was all rather difficult. From speaking to Topper in the past, he told me he'd had this idea floating around for a while. So he put the drums down by himself, then added some keyboards and I think he played some bass and guitar. Then Joe put some lyrics down. Topper got sacked by the end of the album, because he was getting pretty out there. I remember speaking to him once and he said that by the time "Rock The Casbah" was climbing up the charts,

he was in rehab. I was always quite envious of The Clash, the way they held it together to make five albums when the Pistols couldn't even get a second one done. Full credit to them.



5 RED ANGEL DRAGNET

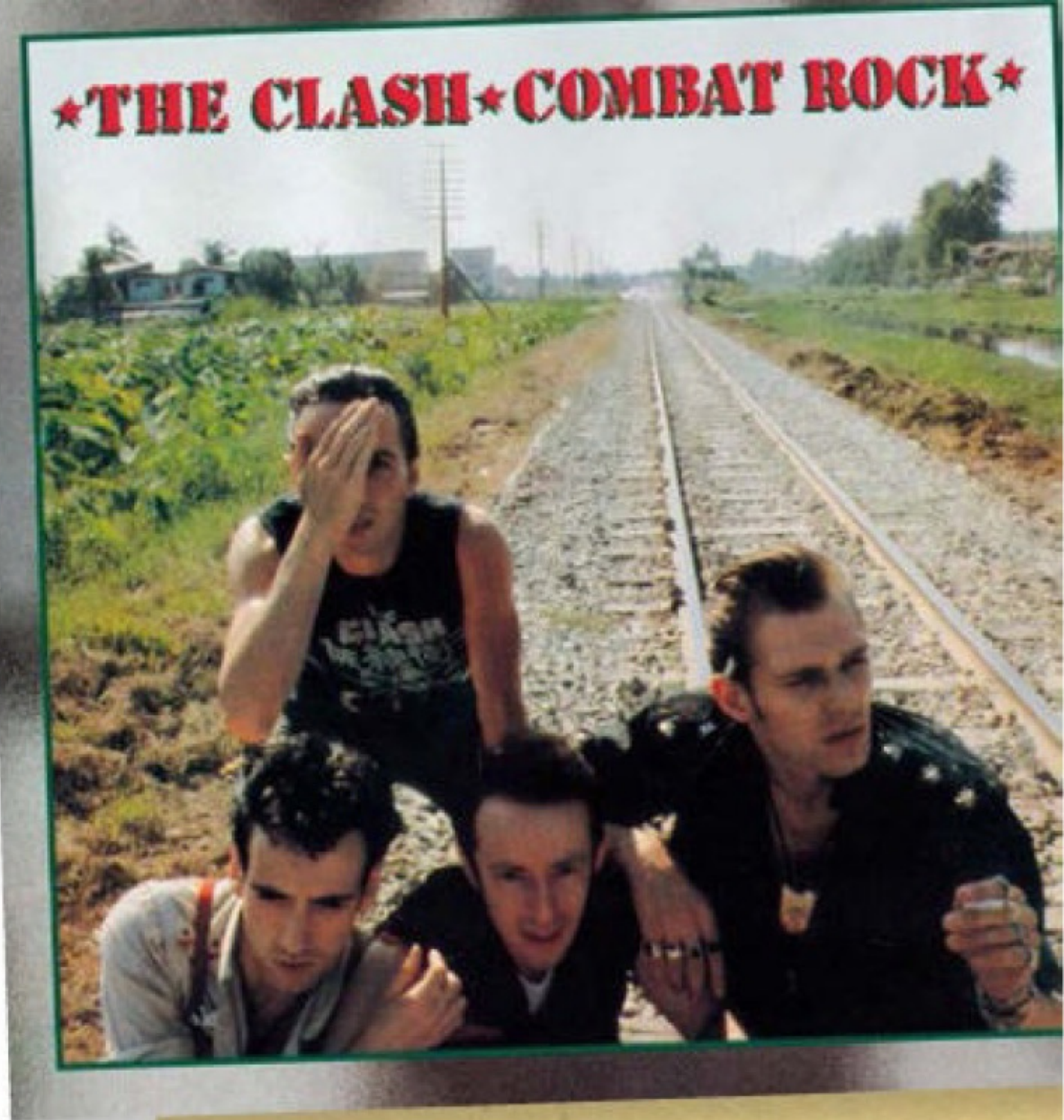
Real life repurposed as punk noir, enhanced by Kosmo Vinyl's *Taxi Driver* speech



KOSMO VINYL: In Newark, New Jersey, on New Year's Eve 1981, a 26-year-old Guardian Angel named Frankie Melvin was shot dead by

a policeman. The New York media's coverage of that event kickstarted Joe's lyric to Paul's tune on "Red Angel Dragnet". I think Joe's writing developed in tandem with the man

himself. It was incredibly important to him and he was always pushing himself to improve. One day or night – there was little difference when The Clash were in the studio – Joe told me he wanted me to record my Travis Bickle *Taxi Driver* speech for the track. My immediate reaction was I didn't want to do it, but Joe was in one of his "Don't fuck me about, we're trying to make a record here" moods. He told me it was a speech he'd heard me recite too many times to count and now he needed to cut it and I was being a prima donna. I didn't know much about method acting, but I did know method actors tried to keep it real, so in order to get my Travis Bickle on, I poured some cheap Wilson whiskey over a bowl of cornflakes and ate the lot. Then they rolled the tape.



"THEY WANTED TO REMOVE HIS COLON"

Pennie Smith on shooting *Combat Rock's* cover



"I'd been out to Japan with them, then I got a bizarre phone call saying, 'We forgot to do the album cover, can you come out

to Thailand?' Basically, the whole world was an adventure for The Clash. They weren't pop stars. They were people exploring the planet.

"So you go to Thailand and you go Thai boxing – we went to the bridge over the River Kwai. It was full-on learning. Like when we had a meal in some godforsaken little hut. Paul managed to get what he thought was some kind of bug; he then got whisked into this hospital run by nuns that looked like something out of a Somerset Maugham story, with rattan furniture collapsing into the atmospheric banana tree, next to the mosquito-infected pond. They wanted to remove two-thirds of his colon. Meanwhile, Joe's befriended some of the Buddhist monk lads. He found out they didn't have showers, so he volunteered Paul's. So Paul's laying there half-thinking he's dying, and he's got these Buddhist monks traipsing past him to use his shower. I mean, that's Thailand.

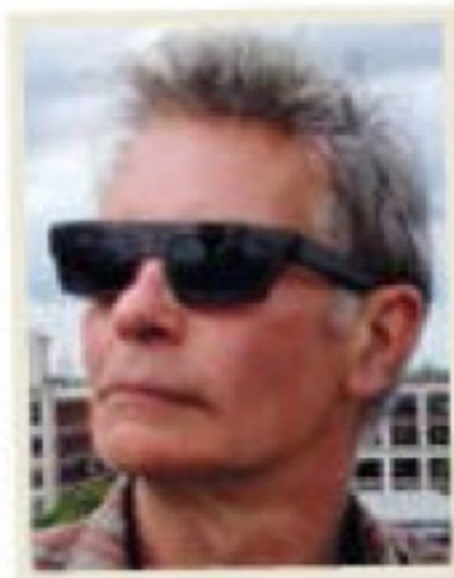
"The gig there morphed into the life. Then, having shot them for seven years, they looked wrong on what became the cover photo. It's a fleeting thing, and isn't indicative of the whole shoot. I've got stuff where they're wandering down the rail track, or drinking a Thai version of Coca-Cola on a balcony, chatting away quite happily. Probably Joe's covering his face because smoke got in his eye! There's another shot where they're walking through a bloody great bonfire haze, and you can barely see them! It's just the body language on the cover shot didn't feel right. And I thought of that when I realised that they were collapsing, months later."



Off the rails: outtake from the *Combat Rock* cover shoot, Thailand, March 1982

6 STRAIGHT TO HELL

Strummer's mesmeric refugee anthem



JULIEN TEMPLE: I first got to know The Clash when I was at National Film School and we smuggled them in for their first recording session. I don't think anyone really saw punk as a long-term thing, it was more of an assault on the citadel. But The Clash moved further away from it, more broadly and more deeply, than any other band that came out of that moment. "Straight To Hell" is emblematic of just how far the band moved away from the very narrow punk attack of their beginnings. Joe and the band had this kind of connection with a global way of thinking. So the song is about people who are fucked up all over the world: underdogs and immigrants and disaffected kids. It's very prophetic, it's very relevant. It has a very Brexit kind of anger about the crucial importance of immigration. It also reminds me of Joe being in the room with you; his voice is so in your head. So whenever this song comes on, anywhere, it just reminds me, viscerally, of him. And how much I miss him. All the people who knew Joe miss him, it's still a sort of open wound for a lot of people.

★ SIDE 2 ★

1 OVERPOWERED BY FUNK

Breakbeats and funk guitar reflect nights spent in New York's clubland



FUTURA: I got to know The Clash when they came to New York in 1981 for the dates at Bonds. Everything was clicking and the guys were in town, vibing

on the energy, whether it was breakdancing or rap music or graffiti. They asked myself and some friends to paint this banner, which is featured in the "This Is Radio Clash" video. We were just surfacing as this group of graffiti writers, looking for exposure, and that initial experience continued into *Combat Rock*. Joe was very much like an older brother figure for me, very wise. When he spoke, I listened attentively. I totally didn't expect to be on "Overpowered By Funk". That's all down to Joe. They had this song and asked if I'd like to embellish it, so I wrote a few lines in there, like "*The TA blew forty mil' they say/We threw it down by night and they scrubbed it off by day*". It's interesting,

because the other tracks on the album are all distinctively different, but this is more of a beats-per-minute thing, more dancey. I didn't realise that Joe was pulling me into a project that was going to be around in perpetuity. I'm so proud of that.

2 ATOM TAN

Simonon's bass groove underpins Strummer's investigation of American culture



PEARL HARBOUR: We were all staying at the Iroquois hotel, which was one step above a fleabag, and right by Times Square. A few homeless people were lying around there passed out. Joe used

to always stick money in their pockets. Joe was always really sweet about that. The Clash loved New York, it was full of crime and violence and interesting things. Joe's relationship with America was more love than hate, too. He always hated American politics, especially with Reagan in charge, and he liked poking fun at Americans' excessive ways. I'll never forget them ordering a large pizza, expecting it to be the size of plate, not a table. With "Atom Tan", Joe was just writing about all the crap that happens in America that gets washed over or ignored, especially in New York. You see crime all the time and you see people ignoring crime all the time – oh, another murder, another guy bleeding to death on the street. Joe's comparing that to what you see on the news, which is mostly sugar-coated and a lot of bullshit. He was just observing and being disgusted by certain things that he saw, in New York and America in general.



Ringmaster: Paul Simonon in Tokyo, January 1982



Hooking up on a dubwise howl against injustice: Joe Strummer, NYC, 1982, and (inset) Allen Ginsberg



Pistols used the curse word on TV and the press went crazy about it. I think that the Sex Pistols inspired people to scream and rage, but The Clash gave people the reasons behind it. The Sex Pistols tended to look back with anger, whereas The Clash looked to the future with

hope. In that way, The Clash were always inspiring to me.

5 INOCULATED CITY

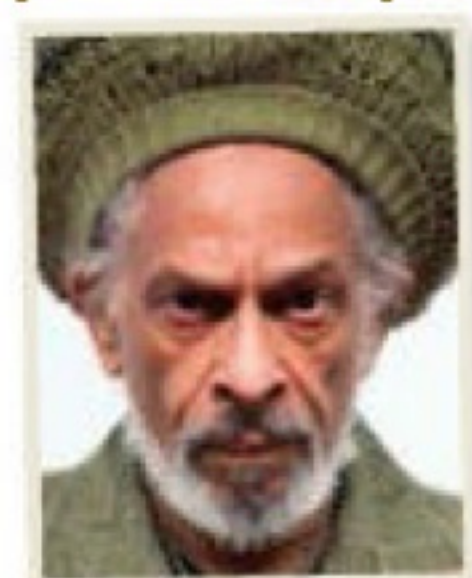
A breezy tune offsets this penetrating broadside at war and propaganda



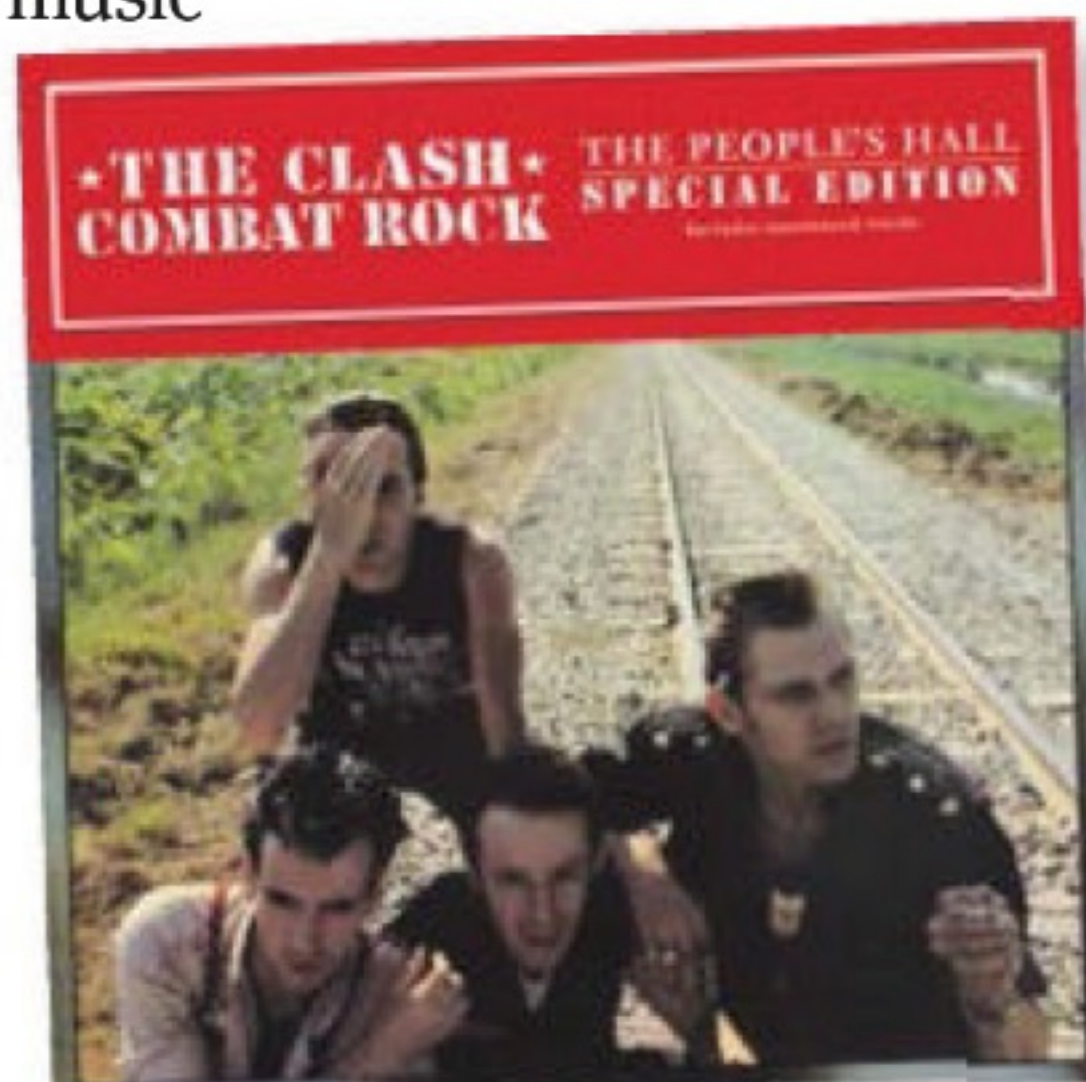
MARK STEWART: "Inoculated City" is a really interesting title for now. That song is like Dylan, if you look at the lyrics – which are about war and the officer class and feel so prescient. Each line is like a haiku. The music's very bright with a poppy bounce, which is sugar on the poison. If you have a point, you should want to reach as many people as possible. The song talks about the whole social hierarchy – "*The general bows to the government/To obey the charge you must not relent*". Incredible. It's like what Shelley wrote on Peterloo – a folk tale for today. The album came out at the time of the Falklands, but it still sounds so of the moment. The song's interrupted by an ad for toilet cleaner, which is that William Burroughs thing of overhearing and interposing weird lines on the telly. Somehow this verse about 2,000 flushes becomes appropriate to a general culture that is anaesthetising people to a war situation. Joe was like Phil Ochs, but not as patronising or oppositional. He was a decent fella in his own life and he's pointing out these facts in a humble way. He's not preaching. For me, he lifted the veil.

6 DEATH IS A STAR

Pretty, cabaret-style piano and fragile poetry sung alternately by Jones and Strummer bring their partnership to a poignant close



DON LETTS: I was living in New York when they recorded *Combat Rock*. In the same way we had the punky reggae thing going on in London, it was a punky hip-hop thing there. So it was a really exciting time, man. Songs like "Death Is A Star" help create the album's emotional highs and lows. It's a beautiful piece. Tymon Dogg plays that jazzy sort of piano, and Topper's brushing the drums – it could be a *Sandinista!* outtake. It sounds like a downbeat number, but it's got an underbelly. Because it's about our fascination with darkness, and how we like to rubberneck life. And Joe typifies that by going to the cinema as an example and actually paying to see sex and violence. But you can't take anything at face value with Joe. Never mind double meanings, his words are way beyond that. So in the bigger picture, it could be a comment on the choices we make, and why we make them. And ultimately, when you dig what the song's about, and with it being the last track on the album, it feels like Joe's comment on The Clash, and where they were at in this period. So in that way it's double deep. 🍷



Interviews by Nick Hasted, Rob Hughes and Sam Richards. *Combat Rock: The People's Hall Special Edition* is released on May 20 by Sony

TO HELL AND BACK

Horace Andy on the afterlife of "Straight To Hell"



IN 2016, Horace Andy paid "Straight To Hell" the ultimate compliment for a Clash song, turning the mournful dub original into a classic,

Studio One-style reggae tune, distinguished by his high, sweet croon. As he tells *Uncut*, he took some persuading.

"Honestly, The Clash weren't on my radar," he admits. "The first time I really heard about them was when 3D from Massive Attack asked me to sing that same song, 'Straight To Hell'. And I told him I didn't like it! In Jamaica, I loved The Rolling Stones and Tom Jones and Harry Belafonte. But we never listened to that ang-ang-ang [punk] music! But I listened to it and listened to it, and eventually I said, 'OK, I like it, I'll do it.'"

It was a much later second version that saw release. "I responded to the lyrics," Andy adds. "An elegy for immigrants? Yes, that's right."



Joe Strummer had also encouraged Andy to cover "Straight To Hell" one day, when the two men collaborated in 1999. "When I heard 'Straight To Hell', I'd been saying he couldn't sing!" Andy laughs. "I didn't tell him when I saw him!"

"But I tell you from my heart, man, Joe was a really nice person. He was very respectful. He wrote a song for me, 'Living In The Flood', and I went round to his house in Somerset to record it. We talked, and he gave me a big spliff! And I liked where he was living, in the country. Outside it was so dark – real dark, like Jamaica. I love those kinds of places, where you get to meditate. Joe had a really good place to sit down, before we went inside to make music."

"I wanted Joe to write more songs for me, but he was busy and then it was too late."

Midnight Rocker by Horace Andy is out now on On-U Sound