Stubborn Survival and the Paradox of Permanent Revolution

THE Clash

Joe Strummer points at the rough-hewn crop of Mohawk hair that flares from the top of his head, his thumb cocked back like a hammer on a pistol. "You know why I did this, don't you?" he asks, leaning forward, a conspiratorial smile shaping his lips. We're seated in a dressing room backstage at the Hollywood Palladium, where the Clash are midway through a five-date engagement—their first appearances in Los Angeles since the group's 1980 *London Calling* tour. Strummer and his bandmates—guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Terry Chimes—are about to hit the stage for the afternoon's peremptory sound-check, but first Joe wants to share a little revelation about his

BY MIKAL GILMORE

BONNIE SCHIFFMAN

newly acquired headdress.

"I did it," he says, "to try to force some confrontation this time around. I wanted people to react to it, to ask me just *what the hell* I'm on about. I thought it might stir up a little *friendly* conversation, if you know what I mean."

"And has it?" I ask.

Joe gets a look that's part disappointment, part bafflement. "No, not much. Maybe people find it a little too scary, you know, too *serious*. Over here, you Americans never seem to know how to take matters of style. It's like you view it as a threat, as rebellion. In England, style signifies, um...like identity. I would never equate something as simple as a radical haircut with a true act of rebellion."

"So, Joe, then what *is* true rebellion? Because cultural revolt seems to be the signal thing the Clash stand for in a lot of people's minds."

Strummer regards the question in silence for a few moments, then fixes me with a level stare. "Cultural revolt ...I'm not sure that's it exactly. But I'll tell you what I've come to think *real* rebellion is: it's something more personal than that—it's *not giving up*. Rebellion is deciding to push ahead with it all for one more day. *That's* the toughest test of revolt—keeping yourself alive, as well as the cause."

PUNK PERSEVERANCE

Perseverance as revolt: the notion may seem a far cry from the brand of immediate, imperative, insurgent passion that made Joe Strummer's early exclamations seem so fearsome and world-wrecking—the youth-prole sentiments, stricken terrorist manifestos and iconoclast allegations that stoked incendiary rally calls like "1977," "Guns On The Roof," "White Riot" and "Safe European Home"—but at the same time, no other band in recent history has made stamina stand for as much as has the Clash.

Indeed, over the lightning distance of six years, four U.S. tours (and at least twice as many U.K. treks) and five album sets (comprised of eight LPs and a hundred songs), the Clash have managed to stake a larger claim on questions of cultural, political and moral effect—place greater weight and liability on the purposes of rock 'n' roll—than any other band since the Beatles, the Rolling Stones or the Who. Probably the only other band that compares with them in terms of social and aesthetic force these last ten years is the Sex Pistols—and their design, it seems, was simply not just to raze popular culture—by making it accommodate visions of moral terror and social murder—but also to level the world around it, themselves included. The Sex Pistols could never have made a second album, and chances are they always knew it—but then making records wasn't their long suit. For the Clash, making music is a way of making further possibilities of life, a way of withstanding inevitable defeats—a way of *"not giving up."*

Yet trying to live out revolt as daily ethos can be a steep act; for one thing, it means no doubling back. Since 1977, each new Clash release has sought to outdistance its predecessors in bold and irrevocable ways. *Give 'Em Enough Rope* (1978) magnified the band's musical force, while also broadening their sociopolitical focus, from the narrow obsessions of U.K. punk sedition to the fiery reality of the world outside—a world mired in tyranny and aflame in blood and mutiny. *London Calling*, at the close of the following year, carried revolt over to the means of style and the object of history—resulting in the band's most sharply crafted, popularly accessible effort to date. It also resulted in a resounding statement on how to live heroically and honorably in a world where such notions spell certain disillusionment and probable subjection ("Clampdown," "Death Or Glory"). And then, in 1980, the group issued their uncompromising, bulky masterwork, *Sandinista!*—an opus that tried to expand the vernacular and sensibility of popular music by melding rock's form with remote cultural idioms—like reggae, gospel, Euro-pop, American funk and rap—and unflinching social realities; in other words, by mixing dread with innovation, for matchless effect. Overall, what has emerged is a body of work that has upped the ante on punk—forced it to reach outward, to risk compromise, to embrace conflict, even it if means conflict with punk's own narrow presentiments.

What also results, though, is a kind of self-imposed state of contradiction that can, on occasion, seem to undermine the group's grandest designs. After all, it's one thing to start out to upend rock convention, and quite another to end up proclaimed as the World's *New* Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band. Yet the physical impact of the Clash's live shows, and the stimulative force of *London Calling*—incorporating, as it did, American symbols and symptoms as text, and American rock 'n' roll as context—had just that effect: it made the Clash appear as the last great hope, if not preservers, of the very tradition they had set out to thwart.

Yet the Clash have also tainted some of their best gestures with a maddening flair for miscalculation and self-importance. *Sandinista!* falls under that charge for many critics and fans ("Imagine," one writer friend told me, "the audacity, the waste behind believing that *everything* you record deserves to be heard; who do these guys think they are—the Keith Jarretts of punk?"), though for my taste, it's the Clash's strongest, best enduring work, an unrepressed paradigm of creativity.

Less successful, I think, was last year's late spring series of concert events at Bond's Casino in New York (eighteen shows in fifteen days), that seemed to indicate on one level the Clash's startling naiveté about audience prejudices and business concerns, and on another, their inability to adopt *Sandinista!*'s range and depth to a live format. (In true scrupulous fashion, the Clash, along with friend and filmmaker Don Letts, documented the whole debacle in movie form: *The Clash on Broadway*, due for release later this year.) More recently, there are the problems of *Combat Rock*—a heavy-handed, strident, guileful, muddled album about artistic despair and personal dissolution that derives *from* those conditions rather than aims to illuminate them—and, of course, Joe Strummer's widely reported defection—or "hiatus," as the group calls it—of a couple of months ago.

Not surprisingly, the Clash worked those setbacks to their favor. Strummer returned to the group after a month-long sabbatical in Paris (though by that time, virtually their entire U.K. tour had been blown out of the water), appearing stronger and more resolved than ever before. What's more, *Combat Rock* proved to be the band's most critically and commercially successful record in England since 1978's *Give 'Em Enough Rope* (not bad work for a band that had grown painfully, almost fatally, unfashionable in their own homeland).

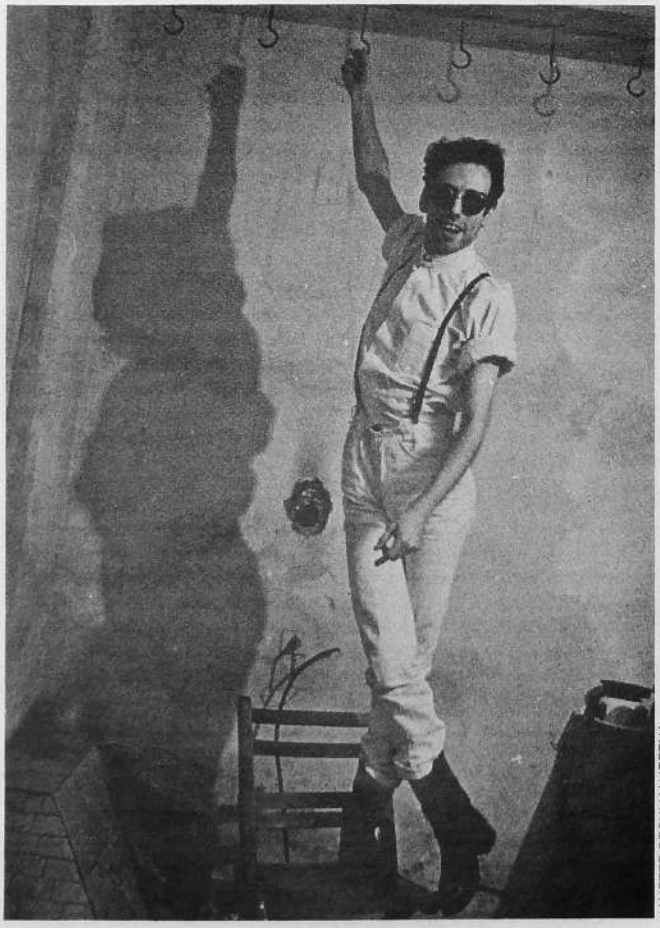
Not even the loss of Topper Headon—the prodigious drummer who had reportedly held great influence on the band's recent musical progressivism, only to bail out five days before their current American tour for reasons that may never be publicly explained—not even that could disarm the Clash's resurging spirit. Manager Bernard Rhodes and road organizer Kosmo Vinyl simply recruited original drummer Terry Chimes (once known, splendidly, as Tory Crimes) on a work-for-hire basis, and sequestered him, along with the group, for three days of relentless rehearsals. Forty-eight hours later, the Clash, the very same Clash that had recorded the group's resplendent 1977 debut album, were on tour once again in America—a bit battle-scarred, more than a little uncertain at moments, but playing with more mastery, unity and momentum than they ever had before.

In fact, oddly enough, it's the hard-core potency of their current shows that may be the only thing to fault the Clash for this time around. From the opening edict of "London Calling" to the closing salvos of "Complete Control," "Clash City Rockers" and "Garageland," these are urgent, clamorous throat-throttling shows—as if the band had just jumped out of *Black Market Clash* and onto a stage, replete with ferment and sweat. But in that, they're also surprisingly prudent affairs. Missing are all the adventurous touchstones from *Sandinista!*, or even the off-center filler pieces from *Combat Rock*. The lamentable "Know Your Rights" and "Should I Stay Or Should I

Go?" were the staples here, with occasional game stabs at "Rock The Casbah," "Car Jamming," or the beautiful, mournful "Straight To Hell."

And yet...and yet, though this is the Clash's unabashed greatest-hits concessional tour, these were also the most moving, powerful and meaningful shows I've ever seen from this band. In part, that's because to watch the group now is to watch a fellowship of artists, ideologues and rockers who have finally come to know the full measure of what it means to live out their claims: that it isn't enough to intend to redefine or reinfuse pop culture or to connect it to an explosive real world unless you realize that with every new motion, every new offering, one has to make good and make better on one's original promises. It's also to watch a band that has come to realize that they can have those offerings denied, those motions deflated, as much by their own misintelligence as by any outside force. But mostly, it's to see a band—if not the greatest, then certainly the bravest—hell-bent on living out and passing along their hard-earned conviction of real revolt: keeping their cause deadly, but their effect life-giving.

MICK JONES: CLASH NOW



JANETTE BECKMAN/RETNA

For Jones, reality is not necessarily depressing.

"I'll tell you what makes these shows so strong," says Mick Jones, one late afternoon, over eggs and hash-browns at a popular Santa Monica Boulevard diner. "It's a celebration: we're out there celebrating that we *exist*—we made it this far, we made it another night."

Jones pauses for a few moments and pokes idly at his still unexplored breakfast. "Don't you think people just like it because they think they're getting the old Clash this time around—the Clash the way it should be? I bet that's what it is."

"No," I answer, "I think they like it because it seems like an explosive, unyielding show. Also, to be frank, because the band's never sounded more confident or better unified."

Mick ponders that for a moment as he watches the flutter and traffic of the the boulevard. "I think we *are* playing pretty good...I feel all right about the shows, but I don't feel it's as much fun as it used to be somehow. We used to kind of *explode*. We play better now but for me personally....

"I'm in a place now where I'm working onstage in accompaniment to what Joe's doing with the words. My part of it is to hold it all together, help keep the rhythm section locked. Joe stops playing the guitar a lot, you know, and those are moments where the instrumentation could use a bit of embellishment, so me hands are going all the time. But also, I'm just not going over the top as much these days, leaping about and all that. I'm trying to control myself a bit more."

"But," I say, "you have some of the show's most commanding moments, particularly your performances of 'Police On My Back' and 'Somebody Got Murdered.' In fact, 'Murdered' seems to get the best response of the evening. Every night, scores of people yell along on the line: 'I've been very hungry / But not enough to kill.'"

Mick nods approvingly. "The important thing about that song is that it isn't any particular person who gets killed—it's just *any*body. It's funny, in some places we play, where people live in extreme poverty—like Northern England—the audience seems to understand the line about *not killing* better. But in richer places, people understand the other part better, the part about 'Somebody's dead forever.' I think it's their way of saying that, even though they might have money, they understand they can still lose it all—not just the money, but their lives. But the audiences are more mixed here in L.A., aren't they?"

He starts to pick gradually at his breakfast, now that it's good and cold. "A*meri*ca," he says, a thin tone of distaste in his voice. "The people here never really took punk or our kind of music seriously—always treated it like some sort of bloody joke. It's a shame that a group like the Sex Pistols had to come out here to the land of promise just to burn out. Come out here and act out their gross end—that Sid and Nancy play. America screwed them up. That's what we've tried not to have happen to us, going the way of the Sex Pistols—getting swallowed up by America."

"Still," I say, "it seems you spend as much time here as in England. In fact, all the press reports say that you're the one in the group who's insisted on doing so much recording in New York."

"Well, New York's pretty much like London. London's a great place—there's still more going on there musically than in America—but after awhile it can make you feel like part of the oppressed. It kind of drags you down. New York provides us with a freedom and spirit which London can't. Though I daresay that if Thatcher's stopped, I'd feel better about spending more time in England."

"It's interesting that almost all of your music since the first album has moved more and more away from strictly English concerns and styles. *Sandinista!* seemed like a rampart of Third World concerns."

"Yeah, well it was, and that didn't particularly win a lot of hearts and minds at the record company. We knew it was going to be difficult, because we kept meeting resistance with the idea, but we were very stubborn and went straight ahead. *Sandinista!* is quite special to me. It wasn't, as some critics say, a conscious effort to do ourselves in. Originally we'd wanted to do a single a month, then put out a double album at the end of the year, like *London Calling*. But CBS wouldn't have that, so we thought, "All right, three albums for the price of two it is. We probably could've gone without releasing another record for a year or so. I think people would've still been listening to it—there's enough there.

"*Combat Rock* is like the best of *Sandinista!*—a concise statement, even though it contains just as much diversification. There's an art to making one album as well as three, you know."

"Yet," I point out, "*Combat Rock* has also been received by some critics as your weakest effort. It seems kind of dissolute and death-fixated, what with all these tracks like 'Death Is A Star,' 'Straight To Hell,' 'Ghetto Defendant,' 'Sean Flynn'...."

"Music's supposed to be the life force of the new consciousness, but it's really dealt *death* as style. The poor junkie on the street has been led into it by rich rock stars and left to die with their style."

"All me favorite tracks!" blurts Mick with a delighted smile. "I know what you mean," he says after a pause. "Some critics are saying this record reflects the group's '*depression*' or '*confusion*,' but that's not true. I think it's really clear that we know where we're at—we're not confused at all. The problem is, a lot of people equate reality with depression, so they find this album depressing. I think it just touches on what's real. I wouldn't say it's exactly optimistic, but I wouldn't call it pessimistic either."

"But some critics, both here and in England, have found the Clash's brand of political rhetoric and realism just as naive as that jaunty romanticism of the pop bands."

Mick takes a sip of his coffee and regards me with a bemused expression. "You mean like the *Village Voice* calling us 'naive,' and *Sandinista!* a 'pink elephant'? Well, we are, and it is. It doesn't particularly discourage us, that kind of talk. It's important we stick to getting our point across. Not just because people will try to discredit us, but because somebody has to counteract all the madness out there, like the bloody war fever that hit England over this Falklands fiasco. It's important that somebody's there to tell them that there aren't any winners where there aren't any real causes. It may appear that Maggie Thatcher's won for the time being, but not because she's made the British winners. Instead, she's made them victims, and they can't even see it.

"So who's naive? We're not just another one of those bands out there saying, 'Join the party!' Don't get me wrong, we have our share of fun too, but these days, I don't know...it just seems all the parties are so far away."

"Do you think your audience understands that?" I ask. "Some of the people I've seen at your shows—both the punk contingent, plus the mainstream crowd that have adopted you as the new Rolling Stones—seem to miss the Clash's point by a mile. Slam dancing, not to mention spitting on and pelting opening acts like Joe Ely and Grandmaster Flash, doesn't seem much different to me than any other mindless party ritual."

Mick bristles mildly. "They're not really assholes, are they? They just don't know how to act. I mean, at Bond's it wasn't actually racism. At first, we sat around backstage thinking, 'What jerks!' But when we made it clear that we were having a rough time with the idea of them adoring us but hating the opening acts, it seemed to stop. I think it was just initial overexcitement."

"Still, aren't there times when you wonder just who your audience really is, and if you're really reaching them?"

"All the time, all the time," says Jones, his voice quiet and museful. "For every example you get of people who you think are really into it, who have really got the message, you also run up against the people who are completely misinformed. We just do the best we can to contain those contradictions, and hope enough of our meaning rubs off here and there."

Mick glances at the wall clock. It's nearly time to head out to the afternoon's sound-check. I pose one last question: "When Joe disappeared, did you think it might be the end of the Clash?"

Mick smiles wryly. "That Joe—what a bastard, eh? If he ever does that again...um, yeah, for about ten minutes I sat down and died. I thought the group might be ending, and I thought it was a shame, but I wasn't about to let it stop me from getting on with living.

"It was bad timing on Joe's part, but it was also an admirable thing. It's very difficult to put your own needs first like that, but the only problem is, once you start doing it, it's easier to do again. Still, it made us ask ourselves what we were going to do. It *certainly* made Topper ask himself what was happening with him. I even thought about getting into something else myself, but it will have to wait now.

"We all decided we could start over with this band—Joe, Paul, me—and now, some nights, it's almost like we're a new group out there onstage.

"We should change our name, don't you think? How about Clash Two?" Mick mulls the idea over a bit more, then bursts into a titter. "No, wait, I've got it: how about Clash *Now*?"

PAUL SIMONON: NO RULES

TANNENBAUM/SYGMA

Simonon considers armed resistance at Asbury Park.

How *has* the Clash managed to hold together? After all, punk never offered itself as a breeding place for enduring comradeship.

Paul Simonon, the group's craggily handsome bass player (recently elected to *Playgirl*'s "The Year's Ten Best Looking Men" list), ponders that question as he picks his way through a bowl of guacamole and chips (all the band's members are vegetarians) shortly before leaving the hotel for that night's show.

"You're talking about things like corruption, disintegration, right?" he says in his thick Brixton accent. "I tell you what I've seen do it to other groups: drugs. I've been through all sorts of drugs; at one time I took them just for curiosity, and I *learned*—it's not worth it. It's like a carrot held in front of you, and it's the downfall of a lot of bands we've known.

"We just cut it out—we don't deal with that stuff anymore. I'd much rather use the money to go out and buy a record, or a present for me girlfriend, or phone me mum up from Australia."

"Do you feel comfortable sharing that anti-drug concern with your audience?" I ask.

Simonon shrugs and gnaws another chip. "Sure. I don't see

why not. I think that's part of what we're about, is testing our audience."

"Do you ever worry, though, about leaving the audience behind—worry that you might be growing in different directions?"

"Well, I think it's this band's natural course to grow. When we did *London Calling* we got a lot of flak, but that was just a warm-up. I think the real turning point for us came when we recorded 'The Magnificent Seven'; it was the start of a whole new music for us. I thought, 'This is going to wake people up, especially the ones who keep expecting us to do the same old thing; maybe it'll even make them chuck the bloody album out the window.'

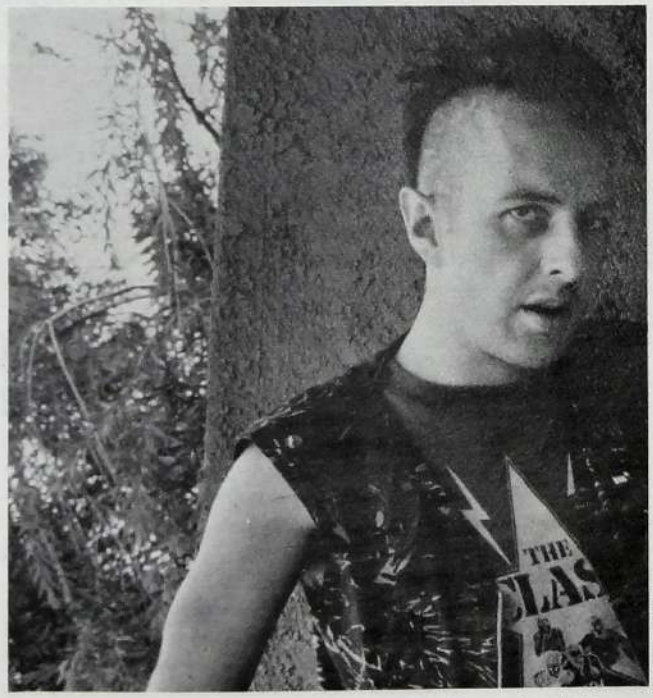
"But we knew that's what we wanted: to test the people who'd been listening to us. We didn't want to be dictated by anybody else's interests. That could've happened very easily after the first album, either way—we could've gone off in a more commercial style, because of what the record company people wanted or gotten deadlocked into a hard punk thing, because of what the fans wanted. We didn't do either one, and I suspect that's hurt us as much as it's helped. We certainly had an easy formula that would've carried us for awhile."

"Do you think you still attract much of a punk audience in America or England—you know, the hardcore and 'Oi' types?"

"Yeah, a little, but by and large the music of those bands doesn't interest me. I've listened to it, but so much of it is just noise for its own sake. Plus the things they deal with, things like racism and getting drunk and slapping your girlfriend around the face—I don't have any use for supporting that kind of thing.

"You know, people ask me all the time if we're still *punk*, and I always say, 'Yeah, we're punk,' because punk meant not having to stick to anybody else's rules. Then you look around and see all these bands that are afraid to break the rules of what they think punk is. *We're* punk because we still have our own version of what it means. That's what it is: an attitude. And we'll stay punk as long as we can keep the blindfolds off."

JOE STRUMMER: ONCE A BUM...



DEBBIE LEAVITT

Strummer sports Mohawk, vehicle for friendly confrontation.

"Is it true that Bob Dylan was in the audience last night?" Joe Strummer asks, as we settle down at the bar at the Clash's hideaway hotel, a couple of hours after the next-to-last of their five-night engagements at the Hollywood Palladium. "Somebody told me that Sinatra came to one of the Bond's shows, but I thought that was a bit far-fetched. But Dylan...."

I tell him that yes, Dylan did come out to see the Clash, and from all accounts, seemed to enjoy what he saw.

Strummer just shakes his head, muttering in incredulity.

"Would that have intimidated you," I ask, "knowing that Dylan was out there?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, somebody told us he was up in the balcony, watching us, but you always hear those kinds of rumors. But if I'd known it was true, I'm not sure how I would've felt. Playing for Dylan, you know, that's a bit like playing for ...*God*, ain't it?" Strummer orders us a round of drinks—a Bloody Mary for himself; a rum and Coke for me—and continues his musings on Dylan.

"You know, me and Kosmo (Vinyl, the band's road manager and press liason), we're the only real Dylan diehards around the Clash. In fact, when Kosmo came down to Paris to take me back to London after I'd split, we went out celebrating one night at a French bar, with me playing piano, pounding out Dylan songs, howling stuff like, '*When you're lost in Juarez/ And it's summertime too....*'

"I realize it's almost a cliché to say it," he continues, "but we probably wouldn't have done the kind of music we have if it hadn't been for Bob Dylan. It's easy for all these cynics just to write him off, but they don't realize what he did—I mean, he spoke up, he showed that music could take on society, could actually make people want to save the world."

"There are many of us," I say, "who have put the Clash in that same league as Dylan, or for that matter, as the Rolling Stones. We see you as spokespersons, as idealists and heroes, as a band who are living out rock 'n' roll's best possibilities. In fact, we've even called you, time and time again, the World's Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band. Did those kinds of claims ever confuse the band's purpose—after all, you'd set out to play havoc with rock 'n' roll—or did they instead help you secure the kind of mass audience you now enjoy in America?"

"No to both questions," says Strummer. "First of all, we never took that 'World's Greatest' crap seriously. That's just a laugh. What does it matter to be the greatest rock 'n' roll band if radio won't even touch you? I mean, let's face it: we *don't* have the sort of mass audience in America that you mentioned, and it's because radio won't play our music. If you listen to the airwaves in this country, *we don't matter*—we haven't even made a dent, outside 'Train In Vain.'

"The last time I talked to you," he continues, "that time in London, just before our first tour here, I think I pissed off the idea that America might really matter to us. But now I understand just how important it is: you can reach more people here than anywhere else in the world, and I don't mean just record buyers. I mean reaching real *people*, making them wake up and see what's happening around them, making them want to go out and do something about it."

"But do you think that's what's really happening, Joe? Do you think people are coming to your shows to be galvanized by your message, or just to see the Clash—this generation's Rolling Stones? Aren't there times when you look out there and wonder who your audience actually *is* at this point, if their ideals are really the same as yours?"

"Yeah," he says softly, "every night. You have to figure you're really only playing *to* a few of them, and just playing *for* the rest—you know, entertaining them—but that's not so bad. I reckon each show we reach some new ones, *really* reach them. It's like fighting a big war with few victories, but each of those victories is better than none.

"But I'll tell you who we're really playing for: it's not the critics, who already have their minds made up and are all hardened against the world anyway—it's the young ones out there who haven't been spoiled by life yet; they carry more hope for the world than a few critics or cynics. You know, we get accused all the time of sounding naive, or pandering to naiveté, but I *believe* in naiveté—it's a good breeding ground for changing things, for getting fired up. Those naive kids who go away from our shows with a better idea of a better world—at least they haven't written it all off yet. Their ideals can still be inspired."

Joe tosses back the rest of his drink and signals for a fresh round. The liquor's starting to do its work. We're both feeling voluble. "Let me tell you," he continues, "if you can't find cause for hope, then go *get* some somewhere. I mean, I've had some bad times, dark moments when I came close to putting a pistol to my head and blowing my brains out, but...." Strummer lapses into a private silence, staring fixedly at the remains of the drink before him. "But screw that," he says after a few moments. "I think if you ain't got anything optimistic to say, then you should shut up—*final*. I mean, we ain't dead yet, for Christ's sake. I know nuclear doom is prophesied for the world, but I don't think you should give up fighting until the flesh burns off your face."

"But *Combat Rock*," I note, "sounds like the Clash's *least* optimistic record."

"*Combat Rock* ain't anything except some songs. Songs are meant to move peple, and if they don't, they fail. Anyway, we took too long with that record, worried it too much."

"Still, Joe, it does have sort of a gloomy, deathly outlook. All those songs like 'Death Is A Star,' 'Straight To Hell'...."

"I'll tell you why that record's so grim: those things just have to be faced, and we knew it was our time. Traditionally, that's not the way to sell records, by telling an audience to straighten up, to face up. The audience wants to get high, enjoy themselves, not feel preached to. Well, why not, there's little enough hope in the world. I don't want to kill the fun, but still...."

Strummer hesitates in thought for a few moments, then leans closer. "Music's supposed to be the life force of the new consciousness, talking from 1954 to present, right? But I think a lot of rock 'n' roll stars have been responsible for taking that life force and turning it into a death force. What I hate about so much of that 60s and 70s stuff is that it dealt death as style, when it was pretending to deal it as *life*. To be cool, you had to be on the point of killing yourself.

"What I'm really talking about is drugs. I mean, I think drugs ain't happening, because if the music's going to move you, you don't need drugs. If I see a sharp looking guy on a street corner, he's alive and he's making me feel more alive—he ain't dying—and that's the image I've decided the Clash has to stand for these days. I think we've blown it on the drug scene. It ain't happening, and I want to make it quite clear that nobody in the Clash thinks heroin or cocaine or any of that crap is cool.

"I just want to see things change," he continues, hitting a nice verbal stride. "I don't want it to be like the 60s or 70s, where we saw our rock stars shambling about out of their minds, and we thought it was cool, even instructive. That was death-style, not life-style. Those guys made enough money to go into expensive clinics and get their blood changed—but what about the poor junkie on the street? He's been led into it by a bunch of rock stylists, and left to die with their style. I guess we each have to work it out in our own way—I had to work it out for myself—but the Clash have to take the responsibility to stand for something better than that.

"Like I say, I don't wan't to kill anybody's fun. But certainly there's a better way of having fun than slow suicide." Strummer takes a long sip at his drink, and an uneasy expression colors his face. "Suicide is something I know about. It's funny how when you feel really depressed, all your thoughts run in bad circles and you can't break them circles. They just keep running around themselves, and you can't think of one good thing, even though you try your hardest. But the next day it can all be different."

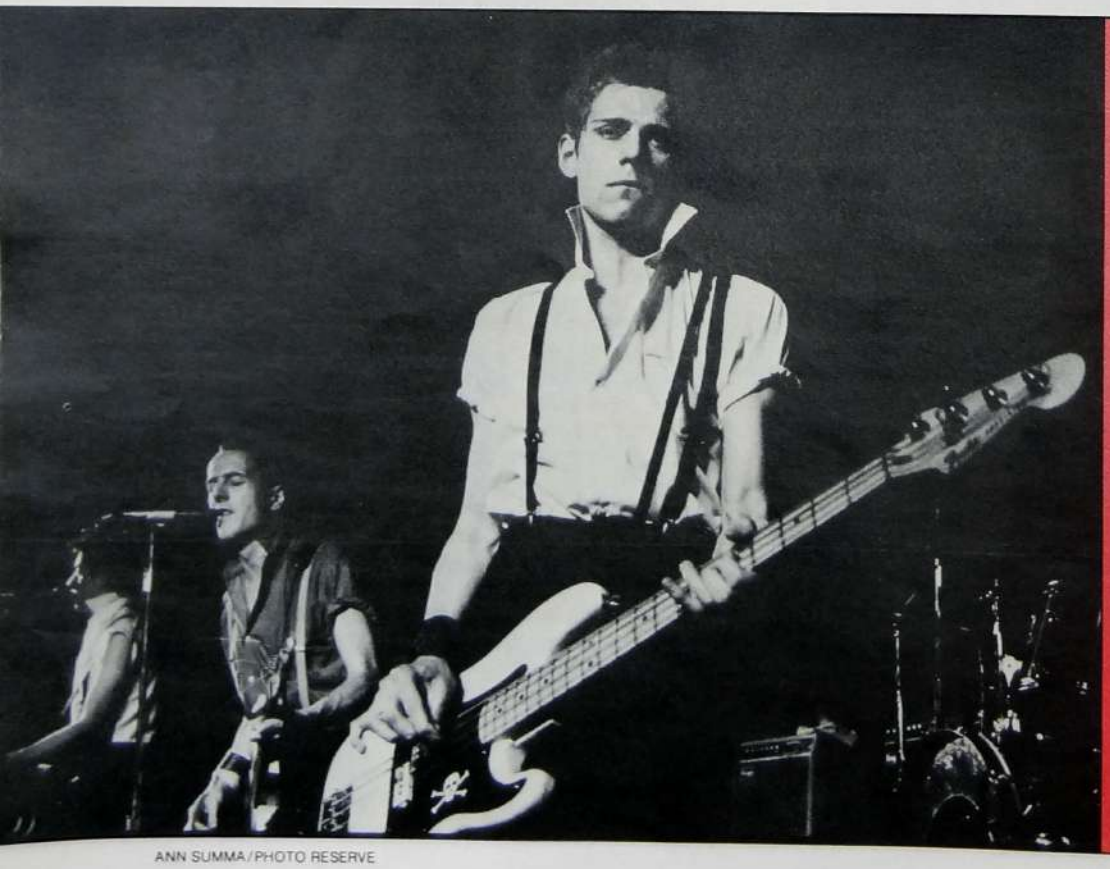
I'm not sure what to say for the moment, so I let the mood hang in the air, as palpable as the liquor. Finally, I ask if Joe's sudden disappearance to Paris was a way of working himself out of a depression.

"It sure was," he says quickly. "It's very depressing in England these days—at least it can get that way, it can get on top of you. But I had a personal reason for going to Paris: I just remembered how it was when I was a bum, how I'd once learned the truth from playing songs on the street corner. If I played good, I'd eat, and that direct connection between having something to eat and somewhere to stay and the music I played—I just remembered that.

"So I went to Paris and I only got recognized once, but I conned my way out of it. I'd grown a beard and looked a bit like Fidel Castro, so I simply told them I was my hero. I didn't want to be recognized."

"While you were gone," I ask, "were you worried it might

continued on page 114



"We all decided we could start over with this band. Some nights it feels like we're a new group onstage."

ANN SUMMA/PHOTO RESERVE