

THE YEAR OF THE CLASH

On the brink of stardom,
Britain's rock radicals are finding it
difficult to sell their political ideas without
selling their souls

JOE STRUMMER, HIS PALE FOREHEAD creased with concern, is on the spot. Hunched at the base of an old boardwalk

BY PETER HALL

game in Asbury Park, New Jersey, the Clash's twenty-nine-year-old lead singer is surrounded by photographers and reporters who seek his opinion on topics ranging from the talents of hometown hero Bruce Springsteen to the increasingly dubious election tallies in El Salvador. But what they really want to know is why he went AWOL from the Clash in April, forcing the postponement of a British tour and very nearly scotching the first part of the group's two-stage U.S. trek.

After all, this was to have been the Year of the Clash, the one that put Britain's ever-evolving rock rebels over the top in the United States. Perhaps it still is: *Combat Rock*, the group's latest LP, has already outsold its predecessor, *Sandinista!*, and may well prove to be the band's most commercially successful album. But a string of internal crises—including Strummer's mysterious disappearance, mixing problems that delayed the release of *Combat Rock* for two months and drummer Topper Headon's abrupt departure from the group only two days after Strummer's return—suggests that the

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Clash are suffering from a case of cold feet, a profound ambivalence about success, a vulnerability that persists after six years of showbiz.

Earlier that evening, during the second show of the group's U.S. tour, Strummer dazzled a sold-out mob at Asbury Park's Convention Hall. Apparently out to prove that his self-imposed exile in Paris had not detracted from his commitment to the Clash, Strummer handled the fans with more than his usual degree of assurance and passion. And more than ever, Strummer seemed poised on the verge of stardom. His voice, well rested for once, was unusually supple, though it had lost none of its hoarse, barking qualities.

His colleagues were with him all the way. Although Terry Chimes—the drummer who played on the Clash's first LP and who replaced Headon for the tour only five days before it began—pounded the skins a bit too quickly now and then, the band's professionalism saved the day: guitarist Mick Jones, for instance, turned in an extraordinary vocal performance while racing to keep up with the drummer on "Train in Vain." By the time the group roared through a stunning coda to close "The Magnificent Seven," the dancing-room-only crowd was transfixed. The Clash seemed back on track.

Their odyssey toward stardom on their own terms was taking on a fresh air of inevitability. But can these rash, contentious young men maintain their edge without toppling over it?

Strummer harbors some doubts. Asked if he thought of quitting while hiding in Paris, he tells his knot of listeners, "Yeah, I thought about it. I thought it would be good just to go back to Spain and bum around like I did in the early days. I was a bum in Paris a bit—my beard was comin' on strong. And I felt that freedom, you know, like in a Hank Williams song." But he came back. "Yeah, I came back."

So why had he hopped a train to France while en route to the band's West London rehearsal hall? "For the hell of it, I guess," he shrugs.

"I used to hitch across Europe with just a guitar and one suit of clothes. If you played good, you ate," he tries to explain. Yeah, the crowd murmurs. Yeah. "Do you think you'll buy a mansion?" someone asks.

"I'M NOT ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO WON A TALENT contest at the age of five, went on the radio selling shampoo, television by age ten. Nothing!" Joe Strummer states emphatically. "Thrown out of the choir, failed at music, could only play 'Spoonful' on the guitar."

It is a misty, chilly November evening in a West London

pub. Elvis Costello wails born-again Nashville on the jukebox while some young women chat noisily by a phony fireplace in the corner. Strummer, sporting a beard, very slick hair and heavy eyelids from long nights brainstorming lyrics for *Combat Rock*, is complaining about how lazy he is, how torturous it is to write, how he longs to "find some fabulous groove and work it like a coal mine."

Strummer is fascinated by his roots, by the improbability of his success, by the fact that he barely escaped being just one more hopeless British kid in a time of industrial collapse, social decay, twelve percent unemployment and aimless gang violence.

Tymon Dogg saved him, Strummer tells me. The eccentric fiddler (whose "Lose This Skin" appears on *Sandinista!*) taught Strummer to play guitar back when the awkward twenty-one-year-old was passing the hat at Dogg's subway performances. "But I wouldn't play in front of people," Strummer recalls. "Sing in front of them? Forget it!" Then one day, Dogg told his sidekick to entertain the crowd while he worked a different station. "I was left in the tube on my own in the rush hour, with about eighty people watching," he gasps. "I hadn't believed I could sing, but that wrenched it out of me."

In a different era, someone from Strummer's background wouldn't have become a street musician; he might have joined the bureaucracy. Unlike Jones and Simonon, both of whom grew up in broken homes at the very bottom of London's rigid social order, Strummer had access to some of the better things in life—courtesy of a strict, Victorian father who grew up poor in India and climbed the civil servant's ladder to a low-ranking foreign ministry slot. Born John Mellor in Turkey, the singer traveled widely until he was nine, when he entered a boarding school in Epsom, fifteen miles south of London. But there were few silver spoons. His father had a tough time making ends meet on his meager salary; food was sometimes scarce, and that private school was no ruling-class playground. Strummer skipped a lot of classes and wound up working in a British rubber factory, where the chemicals caused his shoulder-length hair to fall out. His brother joined a right-wing political party and eventually took his own life. Strummer briefly attended art school, then took to the streets and squatted in an abandoned house. Eventually he fronted a respected pub band called the 101ers; the amateurish vigor with which he attacked his guitar strings brought him a new name.

Strummer's energy and ragged-chic style caught the eyes of Mick Jones and Paul Simonon, who, like him, had dropped out of art school. They convinced Strummer to join their band under the management of the politically oriented Bernard Rhodes. It was 1976, and life had suddenly become very exciting for the angriest and most imaginative generation Britain had seen in a long time. Punk burst upon a shabby, gray world of limited opportunity and screamed that it wasn't necessary to follow the rules. Jones could up and play lead guitar if he liked; Simonon, who would have preferred that role, took up the bass instead. Chimes came and went. Headon, who came from a middle-class family in Dover, took his place.

The Clash were hungry, bored and obsessed with the social inequalities that made them that way. So, following Rhodes' advice to "look at your situation and sing what really matters," they sang about cops, unemployment and Britain's decline. But there was far more to the songs that Strummer and Jones were writing than wistful yearnings for prosperity: with bitter irony, dollops of street humor and feverish walls of sound, the two offered their frustrated listeners pride in having survived—as well as insistent optimism that perseverance could fetch justice. Sounding like an angry Norman Vincent Peale, Strummer maintains that "we still need to learn that lesson well. You gotta believe in yourself. If you believed in yourself 100 percent, there would be no stopping you."

As their horizons broadened—Strummer has become a voracious reader—the Clash turned to American and third-world topics. But their complaints about the system retained a positive, even sentimental touch, hence the decision to name

their fourth LP in celebration of the Nicaraguan revolution, complete with an exclamation point. Yet Strummer and Jones have scarcely been cheerleaders for any political line. Their lyrics scorn governmental power brokers in Washington, London and Moscow alike, viewing virtually everyone else—rich or poor—as victims of a vicious hoax.

"I want to tell people they're being conned, that we're all being conned and we're lapping it up," Strummer explains. "Working people are born without anything—no house, no toys, nothing. Obviously, they want to get ahold of something, and when they think they've got theirs, they don't want to let it go. But neither the haves nor the have-nots are happy. The working class are trying to get where the upper-middle class are, and the upper-middle class are more scared than any people I've ever seen. If you sit back and look at everything, it's a big joke."

Not surprisingly, given their wits and hard work, the band members themselves have acquired certain comforts. Despite sparse radio play, squabbles with CBS Records and their idealistic insistence on selling records, T-shirts and tickets at budget prices, they lead modest, well-traveled lives in dreary, familiar West London.

Simonon, the tall, quiet blond who first conceived the band's name and romantic, rebellious style, is a case in point. He inhabits a three-room, ground-floor flat in a racially mixed neighborhood near Notting Hill Gate, where he and Strummer threw stones at the bobbies during a 1976 riot. Laid out in red and black, with model submachine guns, posters of guns and a glass-topped table that features James Cagney, Robert De Niro and a bevy of other stars in armed poses, it's a fine home for one who once subsisted on a diet of marmalade and Marmite paste. But it's no pop-star palace.

"I've got enough money to get drunk if I want, or go to a cinema or take my girl to a restaurant," notes Strummer of his own lot. "People here don't have that, not even in a month. I think everyone deserves to own his own flat or house, or own a car, a hi-fi. They do it in West Germany."

How much wealth, then, does Joe Strummer want? "There's something I haven't achieved yet, and that's to feel like I'm earning money, putting it somewhere to set up things that couldn't happen otherwise," he replies rather vaguely. "Money is power; it can make things possible. But if I felt I was doing all this just to get as rich and as fat as possible, it just wouldn't be the same feeling."

"The trouble with this interview," he says, "is that you're interviewing me as though I'm a success, and I feel I'm a failure. I only see the disappointments. We're angry because everything we do turns to ash. We're not fulfilled yet. But there will be a time when our work is done."

THE CLASH WERE BRIMMING WITH FRUSTRATION AND tension last fall when they wrapped up a European tour and set out to become big-time—as opposed to underground—stars. "We feel we're underachievers," Jones, who has won considerable acclaim in England as an independent producer, confesses one afternoon in a London sound studio after their return. "I suppose it's because we care so much. We're all so kind of intense about it that we mess it up. You say, 'Hey, these guys are big successes,' but we want to be the successes that Van Halen are. We'd like to have those people's ears. We want to make them listen! We're not content. We want more, and I do and don't think we'll get it, but I suspect we'll have a good go at it."

Jones' fatalism is hardly surprising, given Britain's mood. Four years after the punks had threatened to stand England on its fading head, a sense of defeat infested London's gray air. Unemployment and inflation maintained their grim pace. And riots by black, white and Asian youths against joblessness and police oppression had served mainly to win the bobbies a new arsenal of expensive, high-tech weaponry. Punk, followed by New Wave and even last year's glitzy New Romantic movement had each faded in turn. The Clash, whose 1977 single "White Riot" had anticipated the street fighting, were slowly losing their proud, politicized constituency. In fact, the band was playing New York when Liverpool's inner city went up in flames. "We talked about heading

home," explains Simonon, "but then we thought, 'Who needs us?'"

That question had crept into the columns of London's music papers. As chic young Britons embraced slick, fashion-plate groups like Visage and Duran Duran, the Clash's Carib-jazz-funk rebel stance and self-importance seemed dated to some critics. Simultaneously condemned for opportunism and dogmatism, the Clash weren't hip anymore—except to the teenagers who flocked to see them. Alienated at home and fascinated by American culture and technology, the Clash pondered America's youth.

"They've grown up with a lot, and they're bored," Strummer observes. "I feel like, if I ever have kids, I'm going to walk into their room on their fifteenth birthday and say, 'All right, off it!' And I'd throw them out of the house. Maybe by the time they're twenty-one, they'd be real people—none of this inheriting your daddy's wealth, creating monsters and killing people off."

To boost their odds of cracking America's metal-bound airwaves, the Clash seemed ready to play the music industry's games more by the rules, or at least to avoid unnecessary penalties. Chaotic decision making and nose thumbing at CBS and its American branch, Epic, had proved unsatisfactory to both sides. CBS' refusal to release one of its singles had led the band to stop recording while *London Calling*, its third LP, was still on the charts. And the Clash's subsequent insistence on selling *Sandinista!*, a three-record set, at rock-bottom prices left them with virtually no royalties for a year. Even their reasons for producing a triple album had been a mite frivolous: "I don't care about all the artistic reasons," Strummer gleefully reveals. "That's all bullshit. We were having a joke because everyone said we were mad to release *London Calling* as a double, and then [fellow CBS artist] Springsteen put out *The River* as a double. So we thought, 'Right, Bruce. Suck on this!'"

Springsteen probably paid little attention, but CBS was furious. Simonon, who was wrestling with the group's tangled finances, contended that the company deliberately failed to promote *Sandinista!* to teach them a lesson. The record's stylistic potpourri initially confounded critics and suffered weak demand; earlier this year, though, it was voted best album of 1981 in the *Village Voice's* national critics' poll.

The Clash nonetheless got the point. They put Rhodes back in control after a bitter, three-year feud. He promptly talked CBS into upgrading the band's contract. Kosmo Vinyl, the group's brash, shrewd aide-de-camp for the past few years, settled into the public-relations slot, a curious role that, as Jones puts it, involves "protecting us from Bernie as well as the press." Tough, scheming and dedicated to their clients, Rhodes and Vinyl are indispensable, but their slickness has tarnished the band's image as embattled working-class lads out to save themselves and the world from war, repression and despair. For Rhodes, who considers the system capable of any evil, the ends justify the means: "The Clash represent hope," he explains, "but we feel it's like trench warfare."

The need for opportunistic management in a corporate culture is not the band's only political problem. The Clash have long wondered whether their fans truly comprehend the group's anarchistic politics, which Strummer succinctly defines as "Death to the bosses! Equality in everything!" And they are puzzled by the apparent devotion of some of their American fans to politically conservative mainstream and heavy-metal bands. "We do it better than Styx or Foreigner. Maniac funk!" Strummer cried as he launched into "This Is Radio Clash" in Asbury Park.

Finally, the Clash don't want people to forget that they're a band. "It's music first and political thought next," Strummer says vehemently. "We wouldn't be here if we didn't like to play those guitars. Obviously we have a political bent, but the sound of music infects us. Then, when we're playing guitars, we've got to know what to say, and so we try to make good use of our space."

THE CLASH SPENT A BLEAK WINTER RECORDING *COMBAT Rock* in New York. They were eager to synthesize the



The Clash—Mick Jones, Paul Simonon, Joe Strummer and Terry Chimes—continue to contend with their contradictions, while their audience continues to grow.

disparate styles and sounds they'd toyed with on *Sandinista!*—and they intended to use Topper Headon's growing melodic and rhythmic sophistication to full advantage. The drummer, who spent years in traditional jazz bands around London, had quietly played a key role in the group's controversial evolution from rock to what he called "a more international type of music. This album will have the funk influences, the reggae influences, the jazz influences, but it'll be put into our form for the first time," he had predicted. "We don't believe in barriers or confines in our music, which means it's always interesting. We're always doing something new."

As if to illustrate those words, Headon spent an hour one

night at a studio piano composing "Rock the Casbah," a sardonic rocker about an Iranian ban on Western pop. He played all but lead guitar on the song, slated to be the LP's second Stateside single.

Just after Christmas, however, the diminutive drummer headed home, where he was searched and arrested for heroin possession. A judge with holiday spirit released him on condition he dry out, but the publicity about his \$200-a-day habit shook his colleagues, who had long pleaded that he kick the addiction. The band that had recorded "Hateful" ("Oh, anything I want, he gives it to me/Anything I want he gives it, but not for free/It's hateful/And it's paid for and I'm so

grateful to be nowhere") wasn't kidding.

A chastened Headon vowed to detox, but the incident heightened the band's customarily tense mood. With the Clash's first Japanese tour impending and Headon resting at home, Strummer and Jones frantically tried to mix the new LP on deadline. "We were working round the clock," recalls Strummer. "I had a set of engineers to mix with, then I'd collapse and Mick would come in with fresh engineers, and I'd have a sleep on the floor."

After their return from the Far East late in March, Rhodes retained veteran British producer Glyn Johns to help remix the package. After a reportedly testy start, Strummer and

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Johns—who has worked with the Rolling Stones, among others—got along famously. Four songs that Jones had wanted to include on a bonus EP were relegated to B-side-single duty, and numerous other cuts were made. What remains are twelve tunes that, like those on *Sandinista!*, merit repeated listening. The album's funk is so subtle, and the politics are so finely tuned, that Americans who enjoyed "The Magnificent Seven" and "London Calling" might quibble at first. Two songs feature guest performers: beat poet Allen Ginsberg recites an urban nightmare to open "Ghetto Defendant," and New York graffiti artist Futura 2000, who designed the sleeve, climaxes "Overpowered by Funk" with a vigorous rap about writing on subways. But the album's biggest surprise guest was Britain's war with Argentina. The Falkland Islands crisis, which erupted shortly before the band packed the tapes off to CBS, inadvertently drifts through the tracks like artillery smoke. Strummer and Jones, primarily concerned with the growing U.S. intervention in El Salvador, wrote reams about far-off colonial wars and death, little suspecting that new analogies would arise. "No one mentions the neighboring war/No one knows what they're fighting for/We are tired of the tune/You must not relent," goes the chorus of "Inoculated City." The sweetest, most powerful and relevant song for Americans is "Straight to Hell," in which Strummer details the plight of Vietnam's postwar Amerasian orphans, then sadly questions their yen to come to "druggy-drag rag-time USA": "It could be anywhere/Most likely could be any frontier/Any hemisphere/No man's land/There ain't no asylum here/King Solomon he never lived 'round here/Go straight to hell, boys...."

May 18th, when Vinyl's sleuthing led him to the singer's door. Two days later, the Clash surprised some wet fans by appearing at a rainswept show in Holland.

So many questions remain. Does Chimes' temporary status imply that Headon might rejoin them, even though he says he's tired of the group's politics? If not, does his departure mean that the Clash might turn the volume back up? The Asbury Park show at times hearkened back to their early American tours—and let loose much of the vitality inherent in their increasingly abstract recordings.

Meanwhile, the Clash contend with their contradictions. For one, they declined to appear at the June 12th nuclear disarmament rally in New York. Admitting that the group would have won broad public acclaim and scads of free publicity if it had performed, Rhodes nonetheless asserts that antinuke activists should form a political party or directly block weapons production. "We'd rather be on the road playing to a few committed kids in nowhere-land than try and exploit the fact that there's bombs being made. It was great that everybody got out to Central Park, but last year it was Simon and Garfunkel."

However logical, the analysis is bleak. It implies that the Clash have become too fatalistic, too world-weary, for activism—which, after all, rarely succeeds anyway. Rhodes contends that the Clash will soon prove that their dreams persist, that they can thrive with integrity. But isn't it just as likely that commercial success will strangle them? "That's a hard question," he admits. "Whether it's solvable, or whether people understand the problem are two different things. We understand the problem, but we can't figure out a solution. We've gone through a very difficult period. We're convalescing. But," he insists, "a solution will come."

SO WHY DID STRUMMER FLEE? FOR one thing, he was exhausted. The band hadn't had a proper break for almost two years and was about to begin a grueling British tour that would have ended six days before the American tour began. And he must have been disturbed about Headon's drug problems and disgusted by the war fever that swept London. Tired, insecure and frustrated, he showed—if nothing else—that he cares more about the quality of his life and work than he does for that old maxim about the show going on.

Strummer claims that, while in Paris, he had consumed a good bit of alcohol, reflected on his life, run a disappointing pace in a marathon and decided to return to London by

Strummer's disappearance showed just how much that question troubles him. It also hinted at how far he might go to preserve his identity from the destructive stresses of fame and fortune. You could say, in fact, that his flight to France was a practice run. Asked in Asbury Park if he ever suspects that he's trapped—that the system has already pinned him down—he glances up sharply. "Yeah," he states flatly, "but I'm going to give up before I'm a joke." How would he know? "I guess that's for me to decide." Then he brightens. "I really enjoyed it tonight, I felt good. I felt I could have gone on for hours!"

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