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A Clash Communique

By Cort Fernald
Of the Emerald

This is a public service announcement...with guitars.
Know Your Rights
Strummer/Jones

"And the hits just keep on happenin'"

Anonymous disc jockey on
an anonymous FM radio station.

The Clash just keep on happenin' also — in spite of the odds stacked heavily against them.

The Clash will be in Eugene to play MacArthur Court tonight. Tickets are still available priced \$10 and \$11 for the dance floor and \$9 and \$10 for balcony seats. The Crazy 8's are the opening act.

The Clash are the sole survivors of the 1976-'77 rock'n'roll revolt that splashed relevance and integrity onto the blanched face of British (and American) pop music. There were only three bands that had the impact to affect such a profound change. The Sex Pistols' career was short-lived, but so very important. The Jam's career was long, illustrious, but confined primarily to the other side of the Atlantic ocean. However, The Clash's influence was worldwide and they stay on — and on. The Jam's Paul Weller, interviewed after the dissolution of that group, compared The Clash to The Rolling Stones, predicting they would go on for 25 years, or more.

Clash fans can only hope Weller is correct.

The comparison with The Rolling Stones is particularly appropriate. The Clash have, since the late 1970s, been heralded as the only legitimate successors to The Rolling Stones' erstwhile title of "The World's Greatest Rock'n'Roll Band." With hits like "Rock the Casbah," "Should I Stay or Should I Go" and a history of songs like "White Man in Hammersmith Palais" and "Charlie Don't Surf" The Clash have shown the world they deserve such a title.

But this present Clash is not the original Clash. The only remaining members of The Clash's early line-up are Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon. The Clash line-up has, from the very first, been subject to change at a moment's notice. In the summer of 1976 The Clash were Simonon, Mick Jones and Keith Levine (later of Public Image Ltd.). Shortly after this Strummer joined as lead singer and rhythm guitar player. Terry Chimes, variously known as Tory Crimes, joined on drums. Chimes and Levine quickly called it quits. In January 1977 Nicky "Topper" Headon filled in on drums.

This line-up lasted for nearly five years, until Headon was dismissed for what was "officially" termed in a Clash Communique as a "difference of political direction." Insiders said the dismissal wasn't so much political as Headon's persistent problem with heroin.

Around this same time, on the eve of the release of "Combat Rock" and a British tour, Strummer took the proverbial hike, grew a beard and became a "free man in Paris." Strummer, who has called being in a group like being a robot, basked in the anonymity and went missing for a couple of weeks.

When Strummer returned, Pete Howard set up in Headon's place and The Clash toured the United States. This tour was capped by a headlining spot at the

US Festival for which The Clash shocked their fans by asking and apparently receiving \$500,000. What could be worse? The Clash opened for The Who on that group's farewell tour.

But that's just a summary of the troubled history of one of the best (perhaps "world's greatest") rock'n'roll bands. In a Clash Communique dated September 1983 it was announced Strummer and Simonon had "decided that Mick Jones should leave the group." The reason given for Jones' sacking was that he had, according to Strummer and Simonon, "drifted apart from the original idea of The Clash."

It looked like The Clash were no more. Although, music industry insiders said to look for a Clash "live" LP and for Strummer to go into the movies. This would have been the logical course, but Strummer was never one for the logical course. Early this year he and Simonon auditioned about two hundred guitarists, finally selecting Vince White and Nick Sheppard, two veterans of the late 1970s British "punk" movement.

And with this line-up secure for the moment The Clash have been touring Britain and the United States.

The Clash are currently winding up a 60-day 48-date tour of this country. The schedule is grueling — driving through long Midwestern nights, leaving cities like Columbus, Ohio, following the seeming endless staccato bursts of white line on the highway to cities like Dayton, Ohio or East Lansing, Michigan. Loading in, setting up — tearing down, loading out — loading in, setting up — tearing down, loading out...the glamour resides only in the fans' eyes.

Yes, The Clash will keep on happening. Strummer, who has been writing while on the road, has gathered enough material to go into the studio at the end of this tour. According to the band's New York office, they will be recording at the Pathe Marconi in Paris.

The Emerald interviewed Strummer while The Clash were in Denver. He was approaching the last week of their 10 week tour and his voice betrayed signs of fatigue. Strummer spoke of The Clash's type of "rebel music" and volunteered some perceptions on contemporary music, the state of the individual in America, drugs and TV brainwashing. At the end of the interview Strummer admitted that his answers were less than candid. "I haven't been very forthcoming," he said, "but I'm a bit wound up for the gig and we're in the mountains in Denver and there's a thunderstorm."

Emerald: How are you doing?

Joe Strummer: All right.

Emerald: How's the tour going?

Strummer: Great.

Emerald: This is the last week, are you a little tired?

Strummer: Yeah, that's right. We started in Tennessee in March.

Emerald: You played Nashville. How was the reception?

Strummer: Great.

Emerald: Why are you calling this tour 'Clash Out of Control'?

Strummer: Well, you gotta call a tour something.

Emerald: One of your earlier tours was called 'Complete Control'.

Strummer: Well, we just feel that America's gone straight, but so has Britain. Everyone is so straight.

Not just another guy named Joe

Everything is down to a formula.

Emerald: And you want to breakdown the controls a bit?

Strummer: Yeah, it's just too (pauses) predictable. Emerald: The Clash first toured the U.S. in 1979, was it predictable then?

Strummer: Well, I dunno. It seemed like things hadn't been so finely analyzed, like hit radio and MTV and this and that. It seems to be very boring.

Emerald: Do you feel confined by these structures? In 1979 it was wide open, there were a lot of new bands and The Clash were happening big. But now you have to have a certain formula for the AOR radio stations and MTV play.

Strummer: Right, right — I think people are getting fed up with it at the moment. We just have to put up with it.

Emerald: How about you — do you get fed up with it?

Strummer: Oh, yeah, I'm fed up with it.

Emerald: The Clash are playing 'rebel music'... Strummer: In an attempt to differentiate it from the formula music... see, we feel that a lot of the music being made is merely whatever it takes to 'make it' — they'll do it. It has no self-respect or belief.

Emerald: You call it 'rebel music', but is it like roots rock'n'roll?

Strummer: Well, we only got guitars.

Emerald: There's been a spate of synthesizer bands and they all sound like clones.

Strummer: I agree... yeah.

Emerald: Why is it the British periodically come over and remind Americans what is the essence and integrity of rock'n'roll?

Strummer: Yeah, I think it's because... I think it's because (pauses) you watch too much TV. Seriously.

Emerald: And TV has dulled our minds?

Strummer: Well, not only that, I'm not sure it actually degrades the mind, but it certainly doesn't move it forward. Call it a kind of a limbo. And couple that limbo with the time spent in that limbo and what are you left with?

Emerald: Twenty minutes and then a commercial break. You feel that same way about drugs, don't you?

Strummer: Yeah, I mean we felt that they're so old-fashioned now, only hippies continue to take them with any honesty. Because hippies just say: 'Well, Hell, we're hippies.' They're still trying to replay the drugged '60s revolution. We feel that for anybody in the '80s — I mean there's been like 25 years of it — it's so old-fashioned and boring.

Emerald: Pretty damn dangerous also. Strummer: Yeah, you're (the United States) gonna feel the heroin, but we've already got it in Europe. In Europe there's more heroin — there's mountains of it.

Emerald: Have you been keeping up with the Democratic primaries?

Strummer: Yeah, I've been following it.

Emerald: Any thoughts on it?

Strummer: Well, I think the Democrats are gonna go for it. Like Mondale won't beat Reagan (pronounces it REE-gan). Possibly Hart wouldn't either. I mean, I don't know what they're gonna do. If I were them I'd nominate Jesse Jackson and just go for it.

Emerald: You're singing a lot with the addition of White and Sheppard doing most of the guitar work.

How do you like being the 'frontman'?

Strummer: It's pretty good fun. You can get quite crazy.

Emerald: Your voice is unique, a classic rock'n'roll voice.

Strummer: Well, it's OK if I use it right.

Emerald: Have you been pestered by the media about a reunion with Mick Jones?

Strummer: No, not yet. You're the first person in the world to suggest the idea.

Emerald: It seems a natural for that Beatles' reunion syndrome. The press haven't been asking?

Strummer: (reticently) Nope.

Emerald: How long do you think The Clash can go on?

Strummer: I'm not sure — until we feel irrelevant and as long as it's relevant.

Emerald: And the music remains relevant?

Strummer: Yes. Once it's just going through the motions, that's it.

Emerald: You've been writing on the road — is that the place you like to write?

Strummer: It's not the ideal place — no.

Emerald: How do you go about writing a song?

Strummer: I think you gotta do it at all times. You don't have to have a guitar with you at all times. I mean you can whistle, you got lips, or you can beat your hands against the back of a chair.

Emerald: Do you get a melody line first or do you get a lyric and put a melody around it?

Strummer: First you have to care something about something.

Emerald: What have you been writing about lately?

Strummer: (pointedly) It's none of your business.

Emerald: (embarrassed laugh) I didn't mean to pry. Do I have to wait until it's on record?

Strummer: Yeah.

Emerald: I understand that you'll be going into the studio in the summer.

Strummer: Hopefully so.

Emerald: You've been out of the studio for a long time — are you looking forward to it?

Strummer: Yes and no. It's really hard not to doze off in a studio. They're all designed for the '70s drug trip, you know. It's very hard to remember that the real world still exists when you're in a studio.

Emerald: Like the situation Jean Luc Godard filmed in '2 plus 2' with the Rolling Stones practically living in the studio.

Strummer: Yeah, right.

Emerald: You're going to Paris to record?

Strummer: That's the plan.

Emerald: Is it (the Pathe Marconi) the same room the Rolling Stones like?

Strummer: (emphatically) I fucking hope not.

Emerald: Will you be recording with the same line-up (White, Sheppard, Howard, Simonon, Strummer)? Clash has been so flexible over the years.

Strummer: True, true, but that's the way it is at the moment.

Emerald: Do you like to do songs in one or two takes?

Strummer: I think that is definitely the method.

Emerald: Not too many overdubs?

Strummer: Definitely. There's too much

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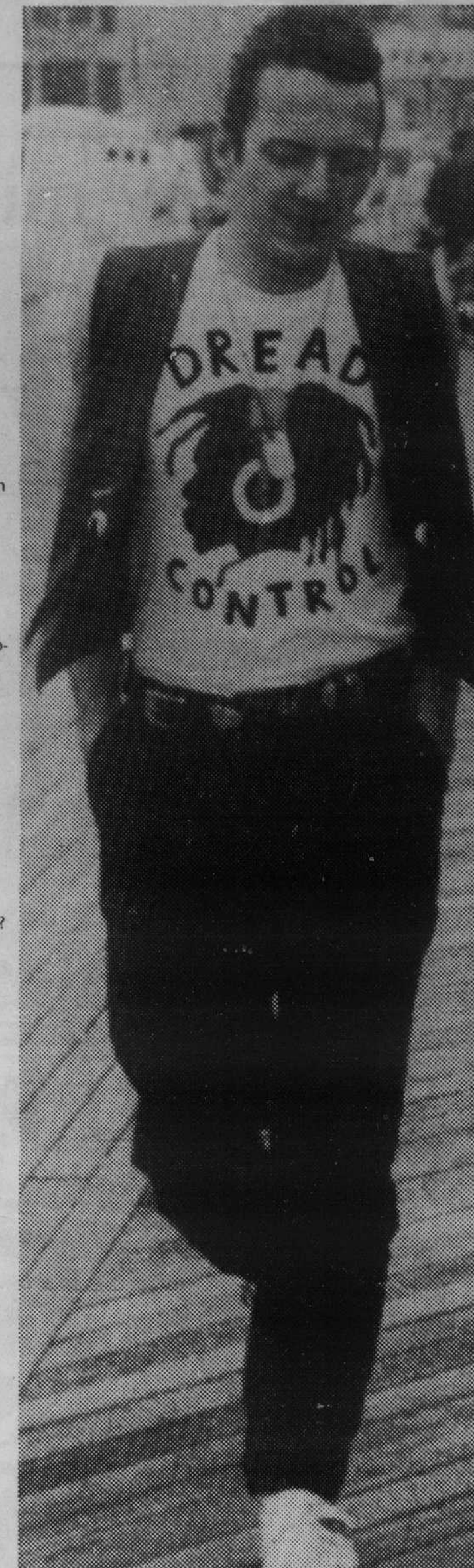


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