Obituary: Joe Strummer of The Clash, dead at 50

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Joe Strummer, one of the most articulate voices of the British punk scene of the late 1970s, died of a heart attack on December 22, 2002, aged 50. With his band The Clash, he helped forge a lasting legacy: his restless musical curiosity gave the lie to the caricatured image of punk as a mindless two-chord thrash, while his acute lyrics set a benchmark for song-writing that tackled political and social themes.

Strummer was born John Graham Mellor in Ankara, Turkey, the son of a British diplomat and educated at a private boarding school in London. His artistic trajectory was in opposition to this privileged background, but it also helped shape the cosmopolitanism that was such a feature of The Clash and his later work.

Showing promise as a graphic artist, he studied art at the Central School of Art and Design in London and Newport College of Art in Wales. However, bands were increasingly occupying his time when he moved back to squat in west London. Known for a period as Woody Mellor, in honour of the great American songwriter Woody Guthrie, he played in a band called The Vultures before changing his name to Joe Strummer and joining The 101ers.

The 101ers mark a key point in the development both of Strummer's own sensibilities (musical and political) and also of the burgeoning punk scene. During the mid-1970s the main avenue for rejection of the pompous, over-blown monstrosity known as Progressive Rock being championed by the large record companies was in the rhythm and blues pub circuit.

The pub rock scene took its main inspiration from American r'n'b acts (the classic pub rock band Doctor Feelgood took their name from a song by Piano Red and played a staple of covers of songs by Bo Diddley and Little Walter), but was also inspired by some of the most articulate American songwriters of working class life. Guthrie was an inspiration; so too was Bruce Springsteen. The 101ers take on this was a particularly energetic brand of rock'n'roll, and it was here that Strummer honed the skills that would make The Clash the most exciting live band of their generation.

The 101ers were also the squatters' band par excellence. Every benefit for squatters' rights in west London saw an appearance from them. They were named from the street number of the squat in which they lived. Strummer lived his life as he wrote it. His politics were a type of confused radical leftism, sympathy for the working class and the oppressed, hostility to racism and support for what he saw as revolutionary political struggle, whether nominally guided by Marxist socialism, anarchism or movements of national liberation.

What changed his musical direction was the night the Sex Pistols supported the band. "It hit me like an atom bomb," he said later. Within a year Strummer had been poached from The 101ers to join a new band, The Clash. He took the aggression and the deliberately provocative fashion statements of the Sex Pistols and turned them into something even more highly charged.

It is important to remember the political background of the punk movement in the UK. The Conservative government of Edward Heath had been brought down in 1974 by a miners' strike, to be replaced by Harold Wilson's Labour Party, which immediately imposed IMF restrictions. This betrayal by a government that was supposed to represent the working class produced a wave of anger and political disorientation at a time of rising youth unemployment and social divisions. This was a world which seemed to offer nothing to working class youth. The Sex Pistols depicted this world with savage accuracy and a bitter humour. ("There's no future in England's dreaming".)

The Sex Pistols vision ended, however, at the nihilistic insistence that there was "No future". The Clash was different. Strummer and his writing partner Mick Jones wrote music as a call to arms—an appeal to stand up and be counted in the struggle against oppression. In his first interview with the *New Musical Express* Strummer stated, "I think people ought to know that we're anti-fascist, anti-violence, anti-racist and we're pro-creative."

For many youth of the time, The Clash was, as Strummer once boasted, "the only band that matters". They combined driving rhythm and blues with a host of other musical influences that perfectly captured the best elements of London street culture. The Clash's sound was cosmopolitan from the very first and had its roots in their west London home area of Notting Hill. ("The Sound of the Westway", Strummer dubbed it, referring to the major arterial road through the district). Here was a large Caribbean community, where Strummer and Jones were absorbing reggae and jazz influences to compliment their driven brand of rock and roll.

Throughout their career The Clash managed never to be parochial. Their first eponymous album was raw and of its time, but still rewards the listener today. There are many examples of high-energy punk rock, but this is blended with musical styles, extending to a cover of Junior Murvin's reggae classic *Police and Thieves*. The political alienation and urban chaos are there (*Career Opportunities*, *London's Burning*) but so is a defiance and

determination to identify injustice and unite against it. (One reason for the adoption of reggae was that so much of it in the 1970s was explicit in its rejection of the desperate social conditions existing in Jamaica). The album bristles magnificently even now.

The innovative blending of musical styles continued to be a hallmark of their work. They replaced original drummer Terry Chimes with Topper Headon, a brilliant player totally at home with dub styles. Strummer was generous in his praise of Headon's contribution to The Clash's sound. With Headon in place, they were able to extend their musical scope. They were able to incorporate Strummer and Jones' wide musical visions, whilst still maintaining their sense of political and social outrage. Strummer never dressed up the state of the world—it is his baffled honesty which makes songs like *White Man in the Hammersmith Palais* and *Safe European Home* such powerful statements against those divisions foisted upon the working class.

Give 'Em Enough Rope had its problems because its hard edges were blunted in a misconceived effort to make The Clash palatable to a US audience. It was the double album *London Calling* that convinced a wider audience that The Clash really were the only band worth bothering about. (*London Calling* regularly features in lists of the greatest albums ever made, and topped a poll for best album of the 1980s). Here was rockabilly, ska and soul in songs about such diverse subjects as the Spanish Civil War, consumerism, and threatened apocalypse. There were covers of rock'n'roll classics (*Brand New Cadillac*) and traditional black American songs (*Stagger Lee*).

The band followed *London Calling* with their flawed masterpiece, *Sandinista!*, a triple album that pushed the band's musical boundaries further than ever, taking in rap and dub reggae, jazz, hip-hop and funk. Some tracks were more successful than others, but few were less than interesting. Its lyrics name checked Marx and Engels in the song *The Magnificent Seven* against a dance-hall beat that saw the track widely played on r'n'b stations in New York and elsewhere. Songs opposed US intervention against Nicaragua and Cuba, but also offered more personal vignettes about life, love and struggle.

The follow-up *Combat Rock* was to be the last Clash album proper. It included such massive hits as *Should I Stay Or Should I Go?* and *Rock the Casbah*, as well as songs of haunting beauty such as *Straight to Hell*.

The band was by now playing to sell out crowds in the US, but it had begun to tear itself apart. Headon had developed a heroin addiction that was out of control and Terry Chimes came back to fill in. However, other strains could not be fixed. Strummer and Jones were at each other's throats and the former became known backstage as The Great Stromboli for his rages. Strummer eventually sacked Jones and the band broke up.

Strummer tried to reanimate the band with a terribly disappointing album, *Cut the Crap*, while Jones formed the highly innovative and initially more successful Big Audio Dynamite.

Headon has spoken movingly of his distress that his addiction precipitated the break-up of the band. Strummer regretted sacking Jones, regarding it as an unpardonable breach of their relationship. But there was no attempt to cash in, to keep plugging away for the money. That would have been a betrayal of everything Strummer and Jones believed The Clash, and indeed their work more generally, should stand for.

Still the legacy of The Clash continues to shape what has been best in popular music. It was The Clash's pushing back of the boundaries for example that made possible (and helped shape) the ska revival of the late 1970s/early 1980s, one of the highest spots of political songwriting in recent British musical history.

Strummer continued to work and to look forwards. He released solo albums that had some interesting moments and steadfastly refused to simply trot out his old hits for the money. (In an interview just before his death he said, "I don't want to look back. I want to keep going forward, I still have something to say to people."). He did some film work as an actor, acquitting himself reasonably well in Jim Jarmusch's *Mystery Train*, and worked on several film scores. Having worked with The Pogues on Alex Cox's dreadful spaghetti western *Straight To Hell* (named after one of his songs) Strummer stood in as their vocalist when they sacked Shane MacGowan.

He had recently formed a band, The Mescaleros. Their two albums mark something of a return to form. The social concerns are still there, and the music is a distinctively Strummeresque blend of styles from around the world. His sincerity, as a songwriter and as a musician, prevented this from being the embarrassing mess such projects often are. His intensity focuses the music into something whole, and wholly his. (Asked to explain what the band play in the song *Bhindi Bhagee* he says "It's got a bit of ... um y'know Ragga bhangra, two-step tango, Mini-cab radio, music on the go! Umm, surfbeat, backbeat, frontbeat, backseat. There's a bunch of players and they're really letting go!", which is an accurate description of The Mescaleros).

Strummer had always rejected cash offers to reform The Clash, although there were rumours that a one-off reunion would happen for the band's proposed induction into the Rock And Roll Hall of Fame later this year. It is typical of him that he should have taken time off during the last Mescaleros tour to play a benefit gig for the striking firefighters in his beloved west London. It was his last performance in London, and he was joined on stage by Mick Jones for the first time since The Clash split up.

However confused his beliefs may have been, Joe Strummer remained sincere and passionate. He fought, always, against the injustices of the world, and strove to push himself forward artistically. But he will be remembered above all for the band that was loved by so many—"the last gang in town", The Clash—and rightly so. He will be sorely missed, but his music will continue to inspire.