

AN EXTRACT OF A CONVERSATION WITH JOHNNY GREEN AND DAVID MINGAY

J: When they first ran around onstage they used to bash into each other. But the more they did it, the more they missed each other. Like footballers who know each others moves inside out. Instinctively. And when you've got something like Strummer falling to his knees, or running back to the kit - which he only did once - they were completely unfazed by that. In fact, they'd actually pick up on that. They liked that.

DM: The audience was worried for Joe, but the rest of the group would carry on so efficiently with one man down. So it's like in a film: somebody's shot, and the rest of the regiment are up for even more.

J: And Mick really seemed to be the guy who was calling the shots around here. Which of course he was.

DM: And Joe imitates somebody in an Oliver Stone movie, crawling up the stage and leaping into the audience.

CLAMBERING UP THE SPEAKERS AT THE SIDE OF THE STAGE. A VERY EXAGGERATED CLIMB AS WELL. INCREDIBLY STYLISED, THE ARM MOVEMENTS.

DM: But meanwhile one of the roadies would have immaculately rearranged any microphone that might have got lost during all this falling over. And Joe would suddenly be back in front of the stage, holding the microphone.

J: It's a show, not men standing looking at their feet.

THE SPLIT -SECOND TIMINGS ONSTAGE WERE VERY GOOD.

J: Which make things look choreographed. But I would say, 'No.' It's instinctive: that's why it's good, because it's real. And when you see the dodgy Clash you know it cannot be manufactured.

D: The Mescaleros knew their place.

J: That's right: there was just one frontman. The point about the Clash is that there were three frontmen. However much you want to lay it all on Strummer now, and that's the poor devil's fate, at the time it was three front men. Always. And it didn't matter that Paul didn't sing as much. But through his movements he was a front man.

WHEN YOU'D FIRST GO TO SEE THEM, YOU'D SEE THAT LOTS OF THOSE BITS YOU THOUGHT JOE WAS SINGING WAS MICK SINGING.

D: The Beatles did the same thing.

WHICH IS WHY I ALWAYS THOUGHT THERE WAS A GREAT COMPARISON BETWEEN THE CLASH AND THE BEATLES, WHICH WAS HERESY TO MENTION. AND ALSO JOE WAS A HUGE FAN OF JOHN LENNON. THE WHOLE POSITIONING OF HIS BODY HAD BEEN COPIED FROM LENNON.

D: And Mick was a very precise musician.

J: And Mick could adapt to whatever was going on.

YOU WROTE ABOUT MICK SITTING LISTENING TO BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN. I REMEMBER MICK SAYING, 'THAT THIRD SIDE OF ELO'S ELDORADO IS QUITE GOOD.' THIS IS 1977 THAT I'M HEARING HIM SAYING IT. THEN I REALISED THAT HE HAD AN AESTHETIC UNDERSTANDING OF WHY IT WORKS. IT ALSO INDICATED HUGE KNOWLEDGE OF ALL FORMS OF POPULAR MUSIC. AND HIS RIGOUR AND ACADEMIC APPROACH.

J: Yes. Academic. He would see it all through. He's a stayer. I'm sure that must have been a terrible, terrible shock that he wasn't allowed to see it through.

D: How did it occur?

J: The Baker told me a story of discovering this. Of walking into a hotel to collect some money, and Mick was sitting there. And Baker says, 'What are you doing here?' And Mick said, 'Well, I've been sacked.' Whether that was London or NY, I don't know. It was this forlorn moment, sitting there. You see, I can't remember when Baker quit: I think he saw it more or less through to Terry Chimes.

THE US FESTIVAL WAS MICK'S LAST GIG, WHERE JOE SAID SEVERAL VERY CONTRADICTIONARY THINGS. THE PRESS CONFERENCE AT WHICH JOE IS DEMANDING THAT THE ORGANISERS GIVE MONEY TO THE LATINOS OF LA, WHILST THE CLASH ARE RECEIVING HALF A MILLION BUCKS. BUT NO-ONE IS CALLING THE BLUFF; NO-ONE IS POINTING OUT THIS CONTRADICTION. HOW DID HE GET AWAY WITH IT? BECAUSE THE BLUFF WAS SO GREAT.

J: Sounds a Bernie, doesn't it?

JOE'S ARGUMENT THERE WAS COMPLETELY FILLED WITH CONTRADICTONS AND HOLES. BUT NO-ONE WAS PINNING HIM DOWN ON IT.

D: Had Joe been told by Bernard to say that we don't want you in this group anymore?

I HAD THE IMPRESSION THAT DISCUSSIONS HAD BEEN GOING ON FOR SOME TIME.

J: I wasn't around, but even I could say that.

D: But he'd written all those songs.

J: Yeah, that was a slight error, wasn't it?

D: John Lennon left: he didn't fire McCartney, did he?

J: It's a big moment.

D: That to me is the most shocking thing I've heard. It's worse than Brutus.

J: What? Sacking the man who founded the group?

D: It's insane. My heart now goes out to Mick.

J: My heart goes out to Mick hugely, as a matter of fact. I would say Mick was a very honourable, moral man. And however difficult his behavioural pattern might have been, he was a pretty straighttalking sort of bloke.

D: Very straight. But he was absolutely impossible.

J: Well, I don't really agree with that. Once you learn the pattern of his irregularities, rather than trying to accommodate them into what you think is conventional behaviour, he was alright.

D: In one way, he was much easier to deal with than Joe.

HOW

D: Because you knew where you were with him

J: I was about to take those words out of your mouth, David.

D: I'm just saying what he was really like.

BUT YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHERE YOU WERE WITH JOE?

D: No. But on the other hand, sometimes the performance Joe would be giving you was amazing. I remember when we wanted to do that little song for the end of Rude Boy, and we said, 'Would you write a song for us?' And he pretended all the time that he didn't have it. In the end, he had it perfectly, all down, and the song was great.

The same with Mick actually, when he had to write a song for us. They did all these things, pathetically loyally. When Mick was in the group, there was this tension about arriving late. There was that period when he had a problem. And he didn't write anything, and they were scared the songs would dry up. But then after that he suddenly wrote thousands of songs. He seemed to be able to do it all in half an afternoon. And Joe was trailing.

I could understand the tension between them as being very creative. But the idea that if Joe was unhappy with Mick, the honorable thing to do would be to say, 'I'm going to be a solo artist. I'm leaving this group. Get another singer.'

J: This does not allow me to fulfil that which I want to fulfil.

D: But then to turn into a dictator, and kill off the man who helped get it all together, and did all the music and was a very intelligent and sweet person...

J: Would you suddenly say that this is spiralling out of control, you edit the material you project, and someone is also saying, 'You need a savage change of direction...' ...I'm trying to see where Joe's head was at then. Why does he do that? A very savage thing.

D: It was coming from Bernard, but was delivered by Joe.

THE BRUTALITY HAD BEEN SOMEWHAT SOFTENED BY THE FACT OF ALREADY HAVING DOEN IT ONCE TO TOPPER.

SO IT'S SORT OF BECOME LIKE A MATTER OF COURSE.

DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF TOPPER WAS PROBABLY THE REALLY HEAVY ONE.

J: The hard one to do. A terrible thing to have to do, because you know how good he was.

D: It's like Stalin.

I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT WHEN JOE GOT HIS MOHICAN IT WAS A BAD SIGN. HE LOOKED VERY STRANGE.

J: Well, isn't it like hookers? People say, 'How did you get into that?' and they'll say, 'Well, once you turn the first trick, it's easy.' The first one is the hard one.

AND IF YOU'RE RUNNING THAT IN TANDEM WITH MY THEORY THAT EVERYONE WAS GOING MAD, AND BERNIE IS WINDING THINGS UP, AND KOSMO...

D: Didn't Bernard think he might lose everything?

THAT'S A PROBLEM, BECAUSE IT'S VERY HARD TO FIGURE OUT WHAT BERNARD WAS THINKING.

J: How much did Bernie really believe when he took that McLarenesque line that he didn't care about the music?

McLaren's records were novelty records.

D: It's like someone saying, 'Oh, Tolstoy is nothing.' It's stupid. It's culturally ridiculous. (OF MICK)

BUT I DIDN'T BELIEVE THAT ANYWAY, BECAUSE BERNIE HAS QUITE GOOD TASTE IN MUSIC.

D: Bernie believed in avante-garde things, but also in jazz. Much more than Malcolm: Malcolm is just a twat.

J: So are we then saying that Bernard is the brains behind them? Bernard was always interesting, no matter how much he was going to rant about something, I would always listen to him.

D: Did Bernie turn into some Stalinist figure who was going to purge and purge and purge....

J: Alright, if you're going to say that then, and if you are then going to say that the strain of all this - Joe Strummer, the man of the Clash, which was the public perception at that point - is a terrible, terrible burden, which I'm sure it was, then if you have some Stalinist figure who is prepared to take that off you, what a wonderful, wonderful release. Isn't that hugely attractive? In the middle of all this madness.

AT THAT POINT YOU ARE NOT GOING TO THINK CLEARLY.

J: And also where you are all operating more separately, more and more. Rather than as a unit. The final act is of a unit. But the construction of that final act is done for you.

AND PHYSICALLY ONSTAGE IT LOOKED LIKE THAT AT THE END. THE COMBAT ROCK TOUR AT BRIXTON ACADEMY.

J: It was looking like that to me when I quit. It wasn't just that I wanted to go to Texas. For me the writing was on the wall: it felt different. Already at that point.

D: For Joe to stay rather than for him to leave was still a little dishonorable. I'm questioning the character of Joe.

J: Is that what he meant when he said to me, those few years ago, I should have gone when you did? Because I would have told him that. In other words, he shouldn't have got into a position where he was sacking people.

D: No, he shouldn't have done that. If he leaves, that is another matter.

J: Precisely.

D: The result is the same. I'm not saying the results are different.

J: So maybe you do these things, and you accept those sort of things in that state of shock. You do the wrong thing.

D: The way you do the thing would bring out all sort of psychological or character flaws. And different people would do it in different ways. But if you've been told to sack someone you don't go along like a little stooge and do exactly what you are told.

J: You only do that if you agree with them.

D: They could have just given him a shock and asked him back.

J: But if you think it is fundamentally over, then it's like walking out on a marriage, isn't it?

D: It is completely devastating to do that to people. If you go and talk to them and say, 'Oh, I don't think this is working out,' then that's different. But to say it in that way is so devastating that the person can do nothing but leave the room, and walk out. And once they've left, they have fucked themselves: they have stood down. It's a way of killing someone.

IS THIS A CONTINUATION OF WHAT HAPPENED WITH BERNIE? DO WE KNOW WHO SAID WHAT TO BERNIE?

J: I'm not being coy here, but I don't actually know what happened with Bernie. Hiring Coon was obviously a majority decision in some form, but I don't know what happened.

D: He'd go corporate for about five minutes and then return to being this layabout: a man who could never make a decision and who never knew anything about money.

J: When I was down in Hampshire, talking to him about my book, he said, 'Publishing: make sure you go through every contract with a fine toothcomb. Because otherwise they will do you. Make sure you do it, Johnny. Make sure you do it.' I was cockahoop: a book contract - I'd jump through any ring of fire to do it. And there was this very worldweary advice coming.

SO HE HAD WOKEN UP, OBVIOUSLY.

D: Yeah, yeah.

J: Do you remember when he shifted Nineden publishing to Riva? The big joke about that was that that was Rod Stewart's publishing house. That's funny, isn't it? 'But they are big, aren't they?' That's what they said. That's an odd response from people who could go anywhere really with their publishing. It's peculiar, and their response is peculiar. 'Well, it's Rod Stewart's, innit? Hahaha.' But what's that got to do with it? More importantly, what is the contract about? What are the details? This is serious stuff. The naivety is extreme: they are more concerned that Rod Stewart goes through it, than what's the deal for us. They thought it was odd, a bit silly. But this was a Bernie move: they already had a publishing deal, but Bernie shifted it.

THEY FELT VERY HARD DONE BY EARLY ON.

J: And we had that little yellow Fiat to drive them round that Bernie got them. His idea of making that good was to put one of the stickers from the first album on the driver's door. Which he got because he had links with Harry's Motors down in the yard there. So is this done for money, or is it done to knock them back? Certainly it ain't done for practical reasons because you can barely get us three in that car, let alone four plus guitars.

IT'S A BERNIE ANTI-LIMO JOKE...

J: Not only are you not getting your royalties, but you are getting your nose rubbed in it.

D: Psychological warfare.

J: Absolute psychological warfare, and Bernie knows full well that Gen X have been bought - with their money admittedly - a big Volvo estate. And this is coming round to pick Tony up in the morning, while Mick is waiting for this little Fiat, painted bright yellow so you can't ignore it.

D: More of Bernie's psychological warfare. He's well into that, isn't he?

J: I think people are attracted by imbalance. So if you say, 'Mick is fuckin' impossible. Look at the way he carries on: he gets up late, wakes up screaming. Joe's our man: he's a solid dependable bloke. That's who I'm into.' And then you suddenly find this man is a walking bag of inconsistencies. What he says yes to this morning, he says no to tonight. Where are we going to go: to see Paul, to see Topper? But isn't this something that they learnt at the school of Bernie? How to destabilise people, how to throw people off kilter? That's one of Bernie's greatest strengths.

ABSOLUTELY BAFFLING PEOPLE.

J: But they do it in their own way. And it turns out Mick isn't quite doing that, although he appears to be: he makes such a fuss and storm of it all, flouncing into a room.

D: Then you find he's absolutely charming, and does everything and more that you want him to.

J: And he's remembered what you said to him. Whereas with Joe you'd probably have to remind him.

D: Mick and Keith is a similar dynamic, isn't it? It's what a group turns into, especially if you have a joint authorship.

ESPECIALLY AS THE CLASH IS A 24-HOUR JOB, EVEN WHEN THEY'RE NOT ON THE ROAD.

J: Well, it always was. I don't know how it was at the end there. They couldn't run it any other way.

D: You don't fire a key person. You have to leave. Well, only if you play by morals. If you play by ruthlessness...

D: Then you have to say that that man is ruthless.

J: Who's saying he's not?

D: At the same time so many people are saying he is one of the greatest specimens of humanity there is to know. Is there some feature of his Anglo-Indian make-up we don't know. In the same way that the black crisis is based on something so deep, and yet appears to be the opposite of what you see on the surface? The hostile and rather frightening person is inside often very weak. Owing to their position in society...

SO THERE IS THE NEED TO FIT IN...AND I THINK THE FAMILY THING OF THE CLASH IS IMPORTANT TO JOE. HE'D FOUND A GOOD FAMILY.

D: A lost boy.

J: I think they all were. I think that's true of me. I was washed up on my way to the Gulf. I was adrift at that point. I was on the loose. I was looking for something, and it wasn't just kicks. I wanted something to surround me and consume me.

D: Joe is a drifter like a James Dean character.

J: You have to put in about his drive. What is it makes you succeed in any context? Drive. He had huge drive at that point: maybe he couldn't sustain it.

Topper always said he got the gig because he hits the drums hardest. He didn't get the gig with London SS because he didn't hit them hard enough. He'd remembered that: so when he went for the Clash audition he hit them as hard as he could. It became his trade-mark. But he also says that regarding that sacking, he was hauled in for a band meeting, and told to stop mucking around with the road crew. By the band. He was given a trial gig to see how he did the job properly. And he got really out of it. That's how he went.