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Thursday, 2 January, 2003, 17:11 GMT

Billy Bragg: The Joe I knew



Joe Strummer was a massive influence on Billy Bragg

By Billy Bragg

Musician and songwriter

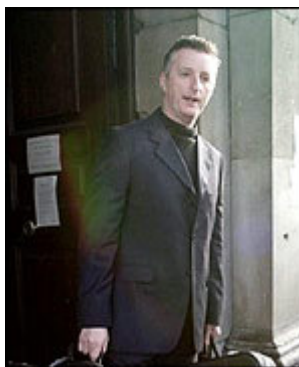
The Clash were the greatest rebel rock band of all time. Their commitment to making political pop culture was the defining mark of the British punk movement.

They were also a self-mythologising, style-obsessed mass of contradictions.

That's why they were called The Clash.

They wanted desperately to be rock stars but they also wanted to make a difference.

While Paul Simon flashed his glorious cheekbones and Mick Jones threw guitar hero shapes, no-one struggled more manfully with the gap between the myth and the reality of being a spokesman for your generation than Joe Strummer.



Billy Bragg: Politically inspired singer-songwriter

All musicians start out with ideals but hanging on to them in the face of media scrutiny takes real integrity.

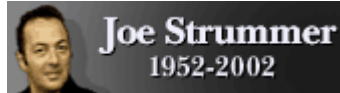
Tougher still is to live up to the ideals of your dedicated fans.

Joe opened the back door of the theatre and

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Musician Billy Bragg
"He walked it like he talked it"



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let us in, he sneaked us back to the hotel for a beer, he too believed in the righteous power of rock'n'roll.

And if he didn't change the world he changed our perception of it. He crossed the dynamism of punk with Johnny Too Bad and started that punky-reggae party.

Radical band

He drew us, thousands strong, onto the streets of London in support of Rock Against Racism.

He sent us into the garage to crank up our electric guitars. He made me cut my hair.

The ideals that still motivate me as an artist come not from punk, not even from the Clash, but from Joe Strummer.

The first wave of punk bands had a rather ambivalent attitude to the politics of late 70s Britain. The Sex Pistols, The Damned, the Stranglers, none of them, not even the Jam, came close to the radicalism that informed everything the Clash did and said.



The Clash were a huge success in the US

The US punk scene was even less committed. The Ramones, Talking Heads, Heartbreakers and Blondie all were devoid of politics.

Were it not for the Clash, punk would have been just a sneer, a safety pin and a pair of bondage trousers.

Instead, the incendiary lyrics of the Clash inspired 1,000 more bands on both sides of the Atlantic to spring up and challenge their elders and the man that we all looked to was Joe Strummer.

Inspiring form

He was the White Man in Hammersmith Palais who influenced the Two Tone Movement. He kept it real and inspired the Manic Street Preachers.

And he never lost our respect. His recent

albums with the Mescaleros found him on inspiring form once again, mixing and matching styles and rhythms in celebration of multi-culturalism.

At his final gig, in November in London, Mick Jones got up with him and together they played a few old Clash tunes.

It was a benefit concert for the firefighters union.

One of the hardest things to do in rock'n'roll is walk it like you talk it.

Joe Strummer epitomised that ideal and I will miss him greatly.

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