Punk Rock and Rebellion

There is an oddly declamatory quote on the back cover of this book. Posing a rhetorical question, the well-known singer-songwriter Billy Bragg asks, “Ever wondered why UK punk rock was political and US punk rock wasn’t?” and then answers: “Two words: Joe Strummer.” Aside from the fact that American punk, from Reagan Youth and the Dead Kennedys to the subtler sentiments of the Minutemen’s *Double Nickels on the Dime*, had a blatantly political streak, it’s also not really clear what the actual political content was of British punk. The Sex Pistols’ major “political” broadsides—*God Save the Queen* or *Anarchy in the UK*—provided two-dimensional wordplay rather than tangible statements, most especially when viewed from the perspective of Johnny Rotten’s latter-day degradation into a Trump and Brexit supporter. Other early British punk bands, whether the Buzzcocks or Sham 69, were essentially apolitical. And UK punk’s flirting with fascism—most famously with Joy Division—ostensibly an act of shock tactics, often slipped into actual sympathy for fascism among some fans.

Yet it is still definitely the case that Joe Strummer’s work with The Clash represents some of the most explicitly political, and explicitly left-wing musical output of British punk. But even then, what was the actual essence of Strummer’s politics? What kind of leftist was he, exactly? Gregor Gall’s overview of Strummer’s work wades into these kinds of questions, but the unevenness of Strummer’s own worldview seems to determine the inability of Gall to specifically nail down the type of politics in which The Clash were actually engaged. If even the singer himself could not decide, how can anyone else?

As Gall unpacks in one chapter, Strummer was “perceived” as a leftist and anti-capitalist musician, with journalists often labeling him “militant,” “rebellious,” “a true voice of punk resistance,” or “a thorn in the side of capitalism” (p. 38). Others called him a communist, an anti-capitalist,
a “Marxist,” or simply a “progressive” (p. 40). But the music magazines in which such labels were thrown around were hardly devoted to clear-headed political analysis, and there does not seem to be any direct connection between these easy labels and coherent, three-dimensional political viewpoints. At other times, it is apparent that journalists were finding their own politics in Strummer; they saw in him what they wanted rather than what might genuinely have been there.

Strummer himself was complicit in this looseness. He sometimes called himself a Marxist and even a communist, but remained chary of the official voices of such ideas in British politics, whether the Communist Party itself or the various Trotskyist groups that had grown in number in the UK across the 1970s. At other times he positioned himself as a fairly unremarkable Labour supporter, but could then turn around and dismiss all forms of parliamentary politics or rhetorically embrace Maoism or the Baader-Meinhof Gang. By the early 1990s, he was back in the Labour fold, only to break with them by the end of the decade when Blair took power and inevitably lurched to the right. Strummer flirted with the symbolisms of Irish Republicanism, but did not seem to have done much homework on the realities of Northern Ireland, earning the ire of both the Red Hand Commandos, a Loyalist militia that made a death threat against him, and the Stiff Little Fingers, perhaps the best-known punk band to emerge from Belfast; the latter’s lead singer, Jake Burns, dismissed Strummer’s “terrorist chic” as “naïve” (p. 110). Strummer may have advocated workers’ rights, “but this was little more than words” (p. 91). Strummer was more than willing to make feminist statements at concerts, but that sat uneasily with a marked machismo that continued to define the band’s image, as well as the fact that practically none of their lyrical content addressed feminist concerns. They were an antiwar band who also toyed with violent imagery. And not least, it always remained unclear how their anti-capitalism fit with their status within the excess and consumerism of the capitalist music industry. In addition, there is much evidence that band manager Bernie Rhodes was the source of this leftist imagery, for whom this was more marketing strategy than ideological commitment. The only seemingly coherent strand in Strummer’s work is an incipient environmentalism, present already in the lyrics of London Calling in 1979 (“The ice age is coming, the sun’s zooming in / Meltdown expected, the wheat is growing thin / Engines stop running, but I have no fear / ‘Cause London is drowning / And I live by the river”) and coming more to the fore in later years.

What, then, can actually be salvaged from Strummer’s music? Gall clearly writes with affection for Strummer, his music, and his popular influence. And yet, the inevitable conclusions reached across the entire book is that Strummer’s politics may have been primarily form with little actual content. Gall does seem to be willing to let him off the hook for his ideological aloofness. In the final two chapters, he assesses Strummer’s influence, jumping from his continued popularity on YouTube to a variety of figures on the contemporary British Left and in British culture—whether union leaders, playwrights, or other musicians—who have made clear and unambiguous statements about the impact Strummer’s lyrics had on their own political development. Strummer’s own sense was that his role was to elevate the political consciousnesses of his listeners and fans. In that sense, his political vagueness was more asset than liability, allowing figures as diverse as Angelina Jolie, Martin McDonagh, and Billy Bragg to see what they wanted in his image and lyrics.

Strummer was clearly a gifted musician, pushing punk into new places both lyrically and musically, but his creative flexibility is at odds with the often dry and even stilted prose style of this book. The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer circles continually around the topic, but it never really...
lands on a definitive answer as to what his politics truly were.

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