

Joe Strummer: The Future is Unwritten

Written by Dave Hoiward

The new documentary “JOE STRUMMER: The Future is Unwritten” is simply amazing.

In 25 years of watching films I have never gotten such a personal feel for a documentary's subject. The flick opens in New York and LA today (Nov 2) but it is available on VOD for those outside the area. When you see something on John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Billie Holiday... “they” tend to print the legend. With “Future”, you get an intimate personal look at the man behind the toothy scowl.

I

In 1985, my friend Missy was dating this guy. He was all Stray Cats cool with an apartment in the Haight done in early “you want this” and he was playing a record that just blew my mind. I remember asking “What the hell is this?” In a good way. He smiled, lit and passed a joint and said “This is Sandinista!” That was the first time I met Joe Strummer. I was introduced by the guy who dated Missy, eight years after the heyday. My Joe Strummer story isn't so great. Fortunately, Temple has put together the group of folks who knew him best.

This movie is not made for the fans of Joe Strummer. This movie is made for the friends of Joe Strummer. We, the lucky fans, just get to go along for the ride.

Crackpot Press recently sat down with the director, Julien Temple, to discuss this project. Typing this up I had to listen over and over to the tape of Temple. You may not hear it in the type but you hear it in the inflections.

Even after five years after his passing, Julien Temple really misses his friend.

How did you go about collecting all these people who knew Joe?

Well, I was a friend of his too, so I knew a lot of them anyways. We had a great researcher who found his school friends from way back. Then other people just heard we were making the film and they wanted to be in it; John Cusack, for example. We didn't have to go and hustle people too much because Joe was the kind of guy that people want to be involved in a film about. People gave the music, there is a amazing amount of music in the film which usually you can't afford to license. I mean Hendrix wanted \$186,000 ... so he's not in there.

The others, the Elvis estate and Dylan and you know gave their music because of Joe.

You saw about five minutes with Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) actually. Jack Sparrow has only done two movies "Pirates of the Carribbean" and "The Future is Unwritten." I don't know if he is gonna do anymore.....

In documentaries we have been accustomed to the "talking head." You opted to shoot everyone around campfires. Can you go into what the Campfire meant to Joe and why you decided to incorporate it?

I'll answer the second bit first. In making these movies you have got to take home the curse of the talking head. I figured in these movies or rockumentaries, I want to tell a story that's gripping. So I don't want loads of talking heads. Ya' know rockstars in armchairs with spotlights on them, hiding the truth basically. Anything that can break that down is a good thing. Ya know the flickering flames on people's faces and the light goes and there's no face there, then it comes back. That, to me, that is interesting visually. The camera is hidden behind the flame so you get a much more intimate sense of who these people are.

You have a great equalizing effect of the campfire.. by the campfire everyone is equal. It doesn't matter how famous you are. You're this human being who has the stars above you and the flames and in the beginning we're human beings and that's who you are. You are not the only things that haven't changed. You sort of have this spiritual aspect of campfires; which I like.

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Joe was the one who turned us all on to it again. In the last years of his life, he did them. He was mad. He come up and say "let's have a campfire" and I'd say "Joe we JUST had one last week and it lasted four days. I can't do another one this week." Five days, zombie walking Dawn of the Dead. Joe used to call it "Club Dawn." You and Me "Club Dawn" and everyone's still standing as dawn comes up.

But they were always worth going to because, like I said, it had this spiritual thing for Mad Max 21st century Apocalyptic edge at times. It did connect back to, strangely, the hippie period I suppose. Even stranger the boy scout thing. It was a very cool place. It made the music so beautiful. He just played endlessly different music, fantastic music. It fed into his Mescalero's ideas, it was laboratory of people. People from completely different backgrounds. A duchess talking to Cathy, why are they getting along so well. I think Joe brought that out in people. They could really estrange who they were. Regardless of who they were and their world views and became really fascinated with each other, the people around this fire.

How well did you know Joe?

I was pretty familiar with him because he lived down the road. We were neighbors. So I was pretty close with him. I knew a lot about him, or so I thought. When I made the film I found out a lot of things that I didn't know about him. ... I didn't know how many friends he had all around the world. Cuz I was a close friend in England in the country and in London but I didn't know that he led a parallel life in LA and In New York, Spain, Paris and in Tokyo, Japan. He'd go to these cities and be like an inhabitant of them, not a visitor. It was amazing for me as a friend to realize this. You got the sense that he was living three lives at a time.

Do you think there is an heir apparent to Joe? Does Punk even still exist?

Hopefully not. It should be different and worthwhile-- Not the same old thing. I think punk is a good challenge for people to do something better; as radical, as catalytic as punk. Punk had a great fallout on other cultures. Hip Hop has some elements of punk about it. But the idea of re-working punk and copying, is awful. It's not what it was about. There are people out there doing something of equal value. It's harder to get that across to the commercial mainstream, than it used to be. Because everything is so fragmented and to hit everything at once you have to be so Blando, Blando, Blando...

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you're not a human

being anymore. You're Britney Spears or Paris Hilton, that's not humanity is it? You're a joke.

I was surprised to see a lot original Joe Strummer cartoons in the movie. I never knew Joe was an cartoonists, was this a surprise to you or were you aware of it?

There all his drawing that we found in plastic carry bags in his barn. He kept them all from different eras of what he was like.. every doodle. I thought maybe he could have been a cartoonist. He's very good a drawing cartoons..(pause).. God.. too lucky. He did want to be a cartoonist at one point... I was saying "Here You ARE a cartoonists.. LOOK! You're drawings are moving." I've always liked cartoons. In the ROCK AND ROLL SWINDLE I had animation of the Sex Pistols when it was very, very sacrilegious to such thing. Only recently is there is a call to do Ramones cartoons. In those days making a cartoon of a rock star was like taking piss. Which is what it was meant to do. I've always loved animation and now it's much cheaper to do. When it was raining we would do the animation and when it was sunny.

There is a lot of previously unseen stock footage in your film. Even the stuff of the Stones, I don't think I have ever seen. IT almost seems like someone was following Joe around 24/7 with a camera...□

It was my mission to show stuff that had never been seen. I was very pleased with that Stones stuff cuz people think they have seen everything on the Stones. It's just great to see them that young in footage we haven't seen before. You realize what you are missing now. I was amazed at how much stuff of Joe there was. How often he had been photographed as a child and in school, how all his friends kept his photos and letters before he was famous. There was something obviously magnetic about this guy way before he became a star.

How does his music affect today's music?□

Yeah I think kids are very aware of The Clash. Unlike most bands from that era, they still have a lot to give to kids. The music still sounds very fresh and it cuts across cultural ethnic barriers. On the DVD there are more people than in the film. People from the barrio in New York and the hip hop guys talk about how much The Clash meant to them.

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They were important on Hip Hop in the early 80's. They would bring Hip Hop acts on to the stage in front of a white audience and hang out and exchange ideas.

He was a very exciting person to be with, he made you feel.. (pause)

a very life affirming presence.

The first “art” film I ever saw was a musical called “Absolute Beginners”

I seem to remember that one too.

Musicals have been making a comeback over the last few years. Any plans to make another fictional musical?

Actually I do have a project that is a musical. I'm hoping to try and make it. It is set in the future called “MCtropolis” about a world gone wrong. Mc- like McDonalds based on the (Metropolis) idea

Do you any Joe memories that you could share with us?☐

Errrrr.... some more sharable than others. I remember being in the riot in 1976 the black people in London had a riot. Joe wrote his song “I Want a Riot of My Own (White Riot),” and I was in that moment there. It was exciting because I saw this guy in this event and then, two days later, there is this song about this event you can sing together. And it was a great song. That's exciting to see someone reacting so spontaneously and powerfully about something that is

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going on around him. (Writer's Note: This song was misunderstood as a call to Nazism, [here is a video](#)). It was great.

What is the most surprising thing about him?

I can't really say. But he became a great father to his girls. His daughter didn't realize he wasn't the same age as her. Because he would act justy like her. If I was a father I would

In the movie, the people around the campfire have become Strummerville, that's a non-profit now?

Yeah it's a charity set up to help young musicians in recording and practicing. They set them up with places they can go and help them get started.

[Strummerville.com. Check it out.](#)

It's the fifth anniversary of his passing this December, we are going to have some concerts in LA at the Key Club and in San Francisco. .

From LA to Bridgewater, it's this little town in Sunset where Madness may play that. I probably shouldn't say that cuz maybe they probably won't now.

How did you meet Joe meet and what was your first impression?

Well, I know of him before I met him because he was one of the runners in the squats in London. Big empty houses that we all lived in. I had a squat around the corner from him. I remember there was always one house that had milk delivered. There would be two bottles of

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milk on the steps in the middle Squatland. That was insane. If you were up early enough, you would have that pint of milk. I remember seeing Joe walking up the street one morning with both. That was Joe.

In “Future” some of the other members of the band still seem pissed off at Joe.

There was good love for Joe. But I think they were trying to be honest which is good. They were telling what they didn't like about him as well as what they did like. Cuz' no one's perfect and Joe was at least honest enough to admit that. A lot of people think they're perfect.

Also, he was impressive. There was a Walter Mitty aspect of him, an impressiveness....

You've done the Sex Pistols and The Clash, whose next?

I haven't really thought of it. I think I'm gonna go on about the Kinks, I hope but not immediately. I don't know, I think you really have to engage the music and people to make a film of this kind. I was very passionate and engaged with these three bands. I don't mind doing music videos and stuff but with all the effort of putting together a film like this you really got to have a passion for that. And you have to have lived it to make it really good. With these bands I feel like I did that. There are others figures I would like to make a film about but it would be a different kind of film.