

THE SECRET IN THIS SECRET HISTORY

For the cover of *London Calling*, Strummer selected a photo from Smith's concert sheets, and Ray Lowry's design mimicked the layout of Elvis Presley's debut album. Gruen, a long-time friend of Smith, regarded the photo with affection: "I wish I had taken it. It's a great picture." For Griffin, who played a key role in the good-spirited rivalry of the punk scenes in London and New York, the photo registered personally, "It was cool," she said, "that that was a New York shot."

Simonon's recollection focused on the feedback offered by the New York audience. At the Palladium, the press occupied the orchestra pit, as a rule, and thereby served as a buffer between the band and the audience—which, at most Clash gigs, pressed up against the stage. "The Palladium had fixed seating, so the audience was frozen in place," Simonon said. "We weren't getting any response from them, no matter what we did. I'm generally good-natured, but I do bottle things up and then I'm like a light switch, off and on, and it can be quite scary, even for me, when I switch, because it's very sudden."¹⁷

A key question emerged in my review of the antecedent conditions of that historic night: did the biographers of The Clash have the right date? Given the available information, is it possible that Simonon's outburst—and Smith's brilliant photograph—took place on September 20? Smith indicated that her categorization of proof sheets and images was by tour and year only, as she was not called upon to identify particular images by date. (Most images provided the necessary clues to identify location.) The dating, in this case, was delegated to Strummer, who first saw the proof sheet in mid-October and then provided the date for the photo's caption in Smith's gorgeous and brilliant *The Clash: Before and After* (1980). When asked, Smith replied, "If Joe's dated it in my book, then Joe's right." Once that date emerged from the ranks of The Clash, no one bothered to cross-check it. Eyewitness accounts are helpful to get the conversation started, but as Smith told me, "All I know is that if the amount of people who've written they were there on that night were there, then all of America was there." In the intervening years, then, has the ubiquity of Smith's image led an inordinate number of Clash fans to believe they witnessed Simonon's sacrifice to the rock gods? It's possible, I suggest, that previous Clash chroniclers have unwittingly embraced the adage offered by Maxwell Scott in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Bells*: "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

That possibility deserves consideration, if simply to add another playful topic to the mix for the nutters and fanatics. The pertinent elements include, to begin, the non-musical segments from the WNEW broadcast, which were excluded from the *Guns of Brixton* bootleg. These tracks include Richard Neer's pre-concert commentary during the playing of Sinatra's "High Hopes," the interlude ahead of the encore and, after the encore, his conversation with Pam Merly. Second, Strummer's memory for iconic events in Clash history was not foolproof. For a March 1979 issue of *NME*, Strummer's diary included his report of the band walking out of a photo opportunity with Epic brass in Los Angeles. Their protest actually took place in Berkeley, after their American debut, two nights before.¹⁸

Third, while Simonon's rationale for his outburst has varied over time, he reprised most frequently the theme of insufficient audience response. Their response, of course, hinged on a number of factors, including the enthusiasm generated by the band, and the proximity of the audience to the stage. On September 20, Strummer himself was off-kilter, according to Ray Lowry, "Joe was having a bad day," he recalled. "I remember he got really upright and hurtled an ashtray across the dressing room for some reason." Critics sensed the angst, concluded that The Clash (and the opening acts) sounded flat on the first night, and rebounded triumphantly on the second night. In subsequent interviews, Simonon highlighted the problem of separating the real fans from the stage by an orchestra pit full of press, and affirmed the band's commitment to having fans up against the stage. During a two-night residency, such problems could be fixed. "If we had two nights somewhere, and there was a problem, we'd fix it," according to The Baker. "We would have gone in the second day and said, 'Now listen: we ain't havin' all these fuckin' press people up against the stage. We want the audience. We wouldn't have done two shows and put up with it. There's no way.'"

The bootleg itself testifies to the band's prowess on September 21, and video clips from that night show fans pressed tight up against the stage. The missing tracks from the *Guns of Brixton* bootleg indicate that neither Neer nor Merly sensed that anything was amiss, either. The audio recording of their eyewitness account is the most reliable source in general, and about the fans' enthusiasm and their proximity to the stage in particular. Prior to the encore, Neer regarded the event with sober senses, and registered for at-home listeners the impact of the