

could play rock'n'roll, and writers at *Rock Scene* and *Green* wrote warm-and-fuzzy reviews of their shows. Before long, writers at *NME* and *Melody Maker* joined the choir. The Ramones signed to Sire Records, recorded their debut album in seven days in the winter of 1976, and waited for the world to catch on.<sup>3</sup>

The formula proved infectious: start a band, learn to play (but not too well), and rely upon critics and audiences hungry for the sonic alternative to “the ruling coalition of 10cc/Queen/the Stylistics/Stevie Wonder/Boz Scaggs adult-oriented rock medicine shows.” As one writer expectantly noted, “The ideology of the garage band is an attack on the star system.” That ideology reflected the DIY spirit, which inspired deejay Pam Merly’s quest for sonic justice at FM stations in Connecticut and New York. It inspired the publishers of *Trouser Press*, *Punk*, *New York Rocker*, and *Swiffin’ Glue*, respectively, to foment the death of somnambulant rock and document the glories of punk. And it inspired Joe Strummer to join The Clash, pen a host of great tunes with Mick Jones, and to assemble one of the best debut albums since the demise of the Roman Empire. (St. Augustine’s *Confessions* is right up there, too.) In downtown Manhattan, reporters on the rock’n’roll beat expanded in terms of numbers, tastes, and literacy, and contributed to the steady transmission of print (and vinyl) between New York and London (and back again). If year zero for punk was 1976, it secured a critical rate of exposure, in clubs and in record shops, in print and on the airwaves, in 1977.<sup>4</sup>

## THE BLITZKRIEG BOP

*The Ramones* hit record shelves on both sides of the Atlantic on April 23, 1976—the same day as the second 101ers/Sex Pistols billing at the Nashville Room, and the same weekend as the premiere of *The Blank Generation*. In Tony James’s estimation, “The Ramones were the single most important group that changed punk rock. When their album came out, all the English groups tripled speed overnight. Two-minute-long songs, very fast.” Captain Sensible of The Damned agreed. “I don’t know what the British punk scene would’ve been like if the Ramones hadn’t come over in ’76 . . . We took their influence when we recorded *Damned Damned Damned*—we deliberately under-produced it to keep it energetic and not over-glossy.”<sup>5</sup>

The courtship of Joe Strummer for the not-yet-named successor to London SS was equally frenzied. On May 25, 1976, Strummer and Bernie Rhodes

attended The Sex Pistols’ performance at the 100 Club and, after the show, Rhodes invited Strummer to meet the members of the band he assembled to rival the Pistols. The following Friday, Levene and Rhodes pulled Strummer aside after a 101ers gig and gave him forty-eight hours to decide. On Sunday, outside of a rehearsal space in Acron, Strummer stepped out of Rhodes’s car, made his way over to Jones and Simonon, and asked, “So you got a few tunes then?” Strummer’s last gig with The 101ers took place the following weekend.<sup>6</sup>

For the previous six years, the nickname of Joe Strummer (né John Mellor) had been “Woody.” His moniker had morphed from “Ollie,” to “Woolly,” to “Woody,” and it established a fortuitous link to Woody Guthrie, with whom he shared a background of modest privilege, and the childhood loss of a sibling. Charley Guthrie was a prosperous real-estate speculator in oil-rich Okemah, Oklahoma, whose eldest daughter Clara died in a coal-oil fire. Ronald Mellor was a British foreign-service diplomat, whose eldest son David died at his own hand, at age nineteen, a victim apparently of undiagnosed depression.<sup>7</sup>

With the hire of drummer Terry Chimes, The Clash were complete. Chimes turned twenty in 1976 and, like Ringo Starr, imagined that rock’n’roll might provide a nice diversion before embarking on a more stable vocation—in Starr’s case, as a flower shop proprietor; in Chimes’s case, as a doctor. In June, Jones, Simonon, Levene, Strummer, and Chimes began playing at Rehearsal Rehearsals studio, sometimes seven days a week. On July 4, The Clash and The Ramones made their UK debuts: The Clash at Sheffield’s Black Swan nightclub, and The Ramones in London’s Roundhouse, to an audience of two thousand. At Dingwalls the next night, members of Clash-de-camp joined members of the Pistols to check out The Ramones. “In England we were treated like stars,” recalled drummer Tommy Ramone (né Erdelyi). “It was very exciting—meeting the up-and-coming English punk bands that came to our soundcheck.”<sup>8</sup>

After dabbling with different band names, including The Psychotic Negatives and The Weak Heartdrops, they settled upon Simonon’s suggestion of The Clash, which was a popular phrase in London’s *Evening Standard* and fit the ethos of the group. Rhodes delighted in the moniker, and took particular joy in testing the band members’ individual mettle. “Are you here for a goal or are you here just eating a cucumber sandwich?” Rhodes would sneer, according to Chimes. “He had a way of wording things to make you feel stupid, and get you to do things his way.” Rhodes’s freedom from sentimentality resonated with his