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Redemption Song: The Ballad Of Joe Strummer



Synopsis

The Clash was--and still is--one of the most important groups of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indebted to rockabilly, reggae, Memphis soul, cowboy justice, and '60s protest, the overtly political band railed against war, racism, and a dead-end economy, and in the process imparted a conscience to punk. Their eponymous first record and London Calling still rank in Rolling Stone's top-ten best albums of all time, and in 2003 they were officially inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Joe Strummer was the Clash's front man, a rock-and-roll hero seen by many as the personification of outlaw integrity and street cool. The political heart of the Clash, Strummer synthesized gritty toughness and poetic sensitivity in a manner that still resonates with listeners, and his untimely death in December 2002 shook the world, further solidifying his iconic status. Music journalist Chris Salewicz was a friend to Strummer for close to three decades and has covered the Clash's career and the entire punk movement from its inception. With exclusive access to Strummer's friends, relatives, and fellow musicians, Salewicz penetrates the soul of an icon. He uses his vantage point to write the definitive biography of Strummer, charting his enormous worldwide success, his bleak years in the wilderness after the Clash's bitter breakup, and his triumphant return to stardom at the end of his life. In the process, Salewicz argues for Strummer's place in a long line of protest singers that includes Woody Guthrie, John Lennon, and Bob Marley, and examines by turns Strummer's and punk's ongoing cultural influence.

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Customer Reviews

This book has depicted Anna Mackenzie, Joe's mother, as an alcoholic and a depressive. Those of

us who knew her as a sister or an aunt want to challenge this portrayal. She was a quiet, dignified and private person who was also to us unfailingly warm, welcoming, kind and tolerant. She was the second child of nine, born on a croft and used to hard work from an early age. She became a nurse which in the 1930s was a job even more physically demanding than it is today. We are mystified by the references to her house as "shabby" and "run down". Neither she nor Joe's father Ron was interested in acquiring or flaunting household possessions. Nor did they sit about as if "they had been used to servants": Anna cooked and looked after the house while Ron was in charge of the garden and the DIY repairs and maintenance. When we visited her in Warlingham or when she was at home in Bonar Bridge, there was no sign of her drinking excessively. She was a social drinker who had one or two gins in an evening - a habit which she probably picked up in India. She recalled with astonishment and disapproval the large amounts of drinking by others that she had observed in the diplomatic communities. At home, she'd usually go to bed early, leaving her nephews and nieces talking with Ron. He wasn't an alcoholic either though he drank more than she did. Nobody in Anna's family that we've spoken to can understand why she's been portrayed in this way. There's no drinking culture among the Mackenzie women. Like most people, Anna had to cope with deaths in her family. Her older brother Donald died when she had just turned 17 and her older son David killed himself. She rarely referred to David and did not discuss how his death had affected her. That was not the Mackenzie way.

I have just finished reading this book and it took around 4 nights and a weekend. It is around 650 pages, the same length as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* but I don't know whether anything can be inferred from that. I cried some tears at the last page, being a huge Strummer and Clash fan. It was great that he reconciled with Mick Jones at the end and also with Gaby. Mick joined Joe on stage in November 2002 in a benefit concert for the striking workers of the fire brigade union. The book does a great job in filling us in on Strummer's "wilderness years" which lasted from around 1985 to 1998. Also it fills us in on much of his romantic escapades and his battles with depression. I almost came away wishing that I had not known some of this. If Strummer was still alive, I doubt that the biography would have exposed him so fully. He really has nowhere left to hide after this book. Salewicz clearly is confused when he recounts Joe's romantic associations during the Gaby years. He is unsure whether to moralise against Joe or to brush it to one side as just a great man's excesses of love for humanity. Although Salewicz comes off as somewhat confused and a fence-sitter, he does a fair job in tackling some difficult issues connected with his subject. The book presents many examples and stories of Strummer's genuine kindness and fraternal ethics.

Many of the stories are new. I like the story of Joe buying Simonon an extra pair of sunglasses when both were broke in 1976 and of how he later paid 30,000 pounds to one of Topper's drug dealers to save Topper's legs. Overall, I feel the perspective we gain of Strummer in the book is probably a fair and balanced one although it leaves him hopelessly exposed and more vulnerable in death than he was even in life.

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