

Remembering Joe Strummer

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We all think, at one point or another, about how we'll be remembered when we're gone.

It's been eighteen years since Joe Strummer—co-founder of The Clash and, later, a successful solo musician—died of an undiagnosed heart defect at age fifty in his Somerset home. Still, his name remains on the lips of music fans worldwide. A monumental musician in the UK punk scene, Strummer is best known for his vocals and rhythm guitar, and shooting his band to a legendary status throughout the seventies and eighties. What some listeners might not pull from another relisten of his contributing works, like *London Calling* or *Combat Rock*, however, is how much his impact extends beyond those iconic records.

In an essence, Strummer is still making himself loud and clear today.

A Song For Joe, an online benefit to help aid independent venues, streamed via YouTube on August 21, and served as a reminder of everything Strummer was and continues to be in memory. For the event, musicians and friends from all genres and walks of life came together to perform songs made famous by the British rocker, as well as vocalize their hopes for the music industry moving forward. Throughout the event, no style went unheard: The Interrupters performed a reggae-infused “Get Down Moses,” and Hinds conquered a lively version of “Spanish Bombs,” complete with an egg shaker percussion section. One could hear the awed silence during Lucinda Williams’ take on “Straight To Hell” from a home studio, and as Jesse Mallin and Grateful Dead guitarist Bob Weir came together for a heartfelt rendition of “Death and Glory.”

Interspersed between the performances were well-wishes and anecdotes from friends, bandmates, and past admirers of Strummer's work. Bruce Springsteen wished his old pal a happy birthday and cited him as one of his lasting inspirations. Albert Hammond Jr. spoke of how he'd missed seeing Joe by seconds when The Strokes played LA's Troubadour in 2001, but how he always cherished knowing that Strummer had come out in the first place. Former band photographer Josh Cheuse reminisced on running away from beatings and sitting with Allen Ginsberg alongside Strummer, always feeling welcome in the latter's presence. It's stated in an *Independent UK* article, the title declaring the singer “The angry young man who grew up,” that Strummer never wanted to leave a bar if there was somebody that wanted to talk with him—there was always room for more.

The livestream was more than just a birthday party for the late musician; it was a tribute to an artist who, if he were around today, would be fighting tirelessly for a better world. 2020 has not been kind: we are watching as activists fight for basic human rights, as a global pandemic steals lives and leaves economic and emotional destruction in its wake. Through the eyes of his admirers, one could

catch a glimpse of how Strummer might feel about all of this. He was someone who believed in decency, in spreading joy through sound, and standing up while others sat back.

In this way, Strummer is a trailblazer in more ways than one. He was an advocate for ending global warming, playing a crucial role in organizing Future Forests (now known as the Carbon Neutral Company) to plant trees worldwide, and became the first artist to release music carbon neutrally. As a loyal socialist, he used his position in punk to call on his white compatriots to dismantle economic power structures; the Clash's first hit, "White Riot," became an anthem in the name of knocking down all that oppresses. In addition, The Joe Strummer Foundation, set up in his name, aims to relieve poverty, provide instruments, and encourage positivity through music for all who may need it.

Coming back to the message of his birthday celebration, independent musicians need that extra push now more than ever. A Song For Joe raised over \$10,000 for the National Independent Venue Association (NIVA); a number that is no small feat in helping keep clubs alive for a new generation of driven and ambitious creatives. Like his beloved songs that fans are still screaming along to nearly fifty years later, Strummer's philosophies must also stay heard. We must carry them through.

You can rewatch the benefit concert on YouTube and learn more about NIVA and the Joe Strummer foundation on their respective websites.