

Strummer

Still rocking the casbah By Ruby Boukabou

“Joe (Strummer) made you feel better about who you are and what you can do with your life,” says British Filmmaker Julien Temple. In *The Future is Unwritten*, released by Dendy on September 20, four years after Strummer’s death, Temple explores the life of the frontman of the Clash, contemporary and friend.

“I was born in the same year as Joe, lived through the same time and made some of the same moves,” says Temple who is currently in Sydney working on a left of field opera-on-the-streets film project. “The film would not be made if he was still alive. I wish he’d come back and trash it and throw it under the nearest bus... But having said that I thought I could make a film a few years after he died ‘cause I thought it could be good to get everybody back together, ‘round a fire. Because everyone was wandering around like headless chickens. It was a big blow for us when he died. It was good for me to make the film as it got me out of a bit of a jam, headspace wise. I thought if we got involved in the film it may be good- to say something about what Joe was about.”

Temple first came across Strummer in the mid 70s as was living in a neighbouring squat. “There was a house ‘round the corner that had milk delivered,” says Temple. “So if you were up early or late enough you could go and get a pint of milk. I’d often notice this guy, Joe Strummer, slurping off with the milk...”

“When I finally did get to meet him, he was asleep under a table in Camden where The Clash rehearsed. He was very annoyed because I pulled the table cloth up and had a camera in my hand.”

Temple had gained permission to film by their manager (which provides perfect footage that weaves through the film) and filmed them quite intensely for four months, before being forced to choose between the Clash and the Pistols. “It was ‘either us or them’ so I was ‘well I’m with them’. I saw Joe a few times - we weren’t ‘friends’ - though not public enemies.” Then in the mid 90s by chance, Strummer turned up at Temple’s house in the country “with my wife’s best friend from school who he’d married which was very odd. Then we became very good friends.”

The process of putting together the film began with sorting masses of photos, sourcing extra footage and cutting up his own archives also with a more creative spin with Animal Farm references, drawings and animations. Because he’d shared a lot of the experiences, Temple says that he felt that he could inject ideas from a subconscious level and not worry about not getting it right. But in general, he felt pressure in making the right piece about his late friend. “It was very hard. I couldn’t mess it up,” he says. “I owed too much to Joe and his friends to fail with it. After about a month I realised I wasn’t getting anywhere and I was manically depressed.” How did he get over the bump? “Joe kept saying ‘never give up’ and I kept remembering it.”

Within the work though, the hardest part, Temple says, was “not the content as much as the pitch: getting the right balance of humour and piss-take and reverence”. The film journeys through the serious moment of band members’ drug addictions, ideological inner battles of Strummer, humorous and endearing groupie tales involving a comic

The Future Is Unwritten



open window pile in to the dressing room during backstage TV filming on tour and humble rejoicings of the moment where Strummer discovered a teenager who'd never heard of The Clash, which gave him a new sense of freedom and possibility of new identity. We see him with his family, with the masses, hammering the American press for hassling a sick band member and strumming in the rehearsal room back in the early days.

A large part of the film is made up of Strummer's friends talking, individually, by the open fire. Their honesty of depicting the good, the bad and the ugly of Joe is impressionable. Not only do we hear about his generosity and positive, encouraging words and actions to friends and public, we hear the less angelic sides quite blatantly. In terms of technique to get his subjects to open

up and feel comfortable to not just praise their friend whom they obviously missed and loved, Temple used an oldie but a goodie. "I used quantities of red wine," he admits with a chuckle. "We spent 15 hours around the fire with people having a good time, and then they would talk. The fire was good as you could hide the camera behind the flames and you weren't really aware of being interviewed in that horrid rockumentary/documentary way. One person did fall in the fire but will remain nameless!"

In fact, all the subjects, from Bono to Strummer's wife remain nameless in the film. "I wanted people to watch a film about Joe Strummer and not read a whole lot of names," Temple says of this creative decision against adding titles. "With this film you would have titles every two seconds. It

seemed quite fun to have people going 'oh what's he got to do with Joe'. I wanted it to be uncompromising like Joe... it was like Joe's campfires - it was 'who's that? They're really interesting'. But you didn't know their name. And sometimes you never found out."

Temple's aim with *Strummer*, he says, is to make audiences feel "as if they'd sat next to Joe at one of his camp fires. I want it to inspire people who didn't even know him to make something of their lives. Whatever cards you're dealt, you can become something you're not expected to be, that's the message from Joe I think."

What: *Strummer: The Future Is Unwritten*

When: In cinemas Thursday September 20