

The Rock & Roll Public Library: Mick Jones of The Clash's memorabilia

Former Clash guitarist Mick Jones is putting his peculiar and very personal collection of artefacts on show.

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This week, a deeply unusual exhibition has been opened by one of punk rock's surviving legends. Mick Jones was the Clash's lead guitarist, and co-wrote their songs alongside the late, legendary Joe Strummer. Thereafter, he enjoyed success in the Eighties fronting Big Audio Dynamite, and recently resurfaced in a new combo, Carbon/Silicon.

All the while, Jones, an obsessive hoarder of pop-cultural bric-à-brac, has been collecting mementos and promotional items from his own career, as well as thousands of books, records, VHS cassettes, comics, action figures and – one of Jones's favourite pieces – a range of toy soldiers depicting a battle scene from the film, Zulu.



Mick Jones, former guitarist and chief songwriter with The Clash, has made his archive of collectables available to The Chelsea College of Art and Design. Photo: PAUL GROVER

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For 17 years, Jones has stored this cache of memorabilia in a warehouse space on an industrial estate in Acton, west London. Two years ago, I met Jones there, and he paused to show me a tattered old poster for one of the Clash's first gigs, supporting a long-forgotten Midlands pub-rock band called the Suburban Studs.

"There's probably only one of these still in existence," he pondered, lovingly smoothing out one of its dog-eared corners. "I must do something with all this stuff one day."

His exhibition, The Rock & Roll Public Library, is that idea come to fruition. In a moderately proportioned gallery, the Chelsea Space, situated just behind Tate Britain, he is displaying a small but enticing sample of his treasures.

As the final few crates of hardbacks were being installed, Jones explained that he was galvanised into action after watching a BBC4 documentary about the film director Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick had assembled hundreds of boxes of

personal possessions, which came to light only after his death, when his estate donated them to the London University of the Arts.

"When I saw how enigmatic Stanley was with his boxes," Jones says, "initially I thought, well, yes, you can just have a private collection, but then I came around to thinking that the point is to share the stuff, so that other people can enjoy it. It's still by no means properly sorted, but this is a start."

Many of the artefacts on display will be a mouthwatering sight for Clash fans. The corridor, as you go in, is lined with posters and photos, including a screenprint for Strummer's first band, the 101'ers, and some scruffy photocopies from the fateful summer of 1976.

In the main room, there are gold discs, flight cases stencilled with the Clash's name, backstage passes, badges, magazine covers, handwritten lyric sheets, custom-tailored stage garments, and the odd memo on hotel notepaper from Strummer. "Hello, Mick," says one. "It's Joe. Okay, I give up, you win. Call me. Love, Joe".

"I can't remember if it was important," Jones shrugs, "but the Clash stuff is just part of this. It's about Brooke Bond tea cards as well. It's a shame they don't do cigarette cards any more – at least there would be some point to smoking." He takes a heave on his ever-present roll-up, and giggles. "Look here," – he points to another curious *objet* – "it's Charles de Gaulle in a pen made out of ivory.

"Some people might think all this stuff has no value whatsoever. Others might think of it as a major cultural document." Jones himself is certainly warming to the latter notion, if always with a mischievous grin. He's also keen to fight against our eBay-driven obsession with financial valuation.

"It does raise questions about categorisation. Is it art? I look at it as one artwork, the whole collection – one piece of art, which I'm continually working on and updating." Against the advice of the Chelsea Space's curator, Donald Smith, he wants visitors to be able to "engage with" his exhibits, to take videos down from the shelves, to leaf through books, and so on.

"Am I worried that people will half-inch things? I don't want that, obviously. I think, if you do that, shame on you. But if it ends up as a free-for-all, so be it. The thing is, this stuff is not for sale. This is to look at and enjoy."

The Rock & Roll Public Library is a wonderfully lurid pop experience, a timely reminder of all the colour and creative design we're missing out on, by storing our pop these days on iPods and mobile phones. In times of looming austerity, it is also gloriously ephemeral, and philanthropic – entrance is free.

Jones hopes that this first run will lead to a full-scale, permanent exhibition. To that end, he invited the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, to the preview (he didn't show up).

"We're looking for funding, an Arts Council grant – whatever's going, really. If someone just wants to give us a building in west London, we'll do the rest. I know it's a mad idea, because no one's really done it before. It's this crazy life, where you just do creative things and you feel excited all the time by the stuff around you."

His eyes take on an idealistic twinkle. "If loads of people could feel like that, things would change."

- *'The Rock & Roll Public Library' runs at the Chelsea Space, London SW1, until April 18.* Info: www.chelseaspace.org (<http://www.chelseaspace.org>)
- A video for Carbon/Silicon's latest recording, 'Reach for the Sky', featuring close-ups of several hundred exhibits, can be seen at: www.carbonsiliconinc.com (<http://www.carbonsiliconinc.com>)

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