

WHETHER he courted the mantle or not, Joe Strummer is a true rock 'n' roll icon whose status was forever assured by his sudden death five years ago.

His music spoke to millions, but much more than that, the spirit of the man made us believe, question and seek our own answers.

Joe Strummer was many men. A generation's spokesman, defiant iconoclast, musical adventurer, band leader, actor and broadcaster; as well as – with varying degrees of success – a husband, father and friend.

But Joe Strummer was also the creation of one John Graham Mellor, the son of a diplomat, pupil of a minor English boarding school and diffident outsider. By the time his older brother David killed himself in 1970 he was ripe for reinvention – as proto-hobo hippy Woody Mellor.

These are the bare bones of the Joe Strummer story that long-time friend and film director Julien Temple has assembled in his roundly acclaimed biographical film, *The Future Is Unwritten*, that shows at Wimborne's Tivoli Theatre on Friday.

What the film may not touch on, but is explored more fully in *Redemption Song*, Chris Salewicz's exhaustive and at times brutally honest biography, is Joe Strummer's connections to the Dorset area.

As well as playing several gigs with The Clash in Bournemouth and Poole, he lived and worked on a farm near Blandford for a time and, in later life, would frequently visit Purbeck with his wife Lucinda and stepdaughter Elize from their home in Somerset.

Eric and Maggie Drennan, who run *Spill the Beans* in Wimborne and *Purbeck Wholefoods* in Wareham, were close friends of the singer up until he joined The Clash. Both were originally from Blandford, but gravitated towards London after leaving school, Eric to the prestigious Central School of Art, where he met Strummer on a foundation course; and, a couple of years later, Maggie to teacher training in Bexley Heath.

"Strummer was calling himself Woody Mellor then, we all thought after Woody Guthrie," says Eric.

"My friend Simon Winkes and I took out a tenancy on a three-bedroom house in Palmers Green and needed other people to help pay the rent. Five of us moved in, including Clive Timperley who went on to play in The 101-ers, the band Strummer had before The Clash, and, eventually, Joe.

"I remember the day he moved in – he came off the tube with his belongings

Memories of a legend

As a film of the life of Clash musician Joe Strummer comes to the Tivoli in Wimborne, Nick Churchill uncovers a Dorset connection



■ Punk pioneer Joe Strummer of The Clash

in this tall, thin cardboard box on the side of which he'd painted a nude portrait of Adolf Hitler doing a Nazi salute. We got stopped by the police, but that was Joe, he was a magnet."

Eric talks with heartfelt affection of his year or so sharing a home with Joe, or Woody. Skint to the point of destitution, the house in Ash Grove, Palmers Green became known as *Vomit Heights* – as a large sign on the front lawn bore neighbour-baiting witness.

"We'd get post addressed to *Vomit Heights*, *Hash Groove* delivered – it was a riot!

"Clive was the only one who was

working so there wasn't a great deal of drinking or drug taking at all. Usually we'd sit around listening to records or playing music. There was up to about 20 people living there and some were fantastic musicians. I don't think I ever saw Joe play, but he used to tap out rhythms or make up new words to songs – once he got a milk bottle half-filled with water and blew into it, that was his instrument."

Although driven by a fiercely energetic creativity, Strummer was as much a part of the community as any of the others, says Eric. They were young, strong-minded, left-leaning and passionate about the creative arts. The

real world went about its business as much for their amusement as anything else.

"We used to do things to confront the everyday world. I remember the film *Little Big Man* made a great impression on us and Joe assigned each of us a character from the film. I was *Little Horse*, the gay one. We used to dress up as Indians and go out. The Cambridge roundabout on the North Circular Road was designated as our reservation and we'd sit in the middle of it pulling faces at motorists.

"That was the thing with Joe, he was always inclusive and if nothing was happening you knew something would be soon. He was hugely generous in that way – he had nothing, none of us did, but he'd gladly give you half of it."

As well as Eric knew Joe – from art college in 1970, to when he and Maggie left London in 1976 soon after Joe joined The Clash, he knew nothing of the dreadful tragedy that underpinned his friend's life.

"It wasn't until I read the book that I knew he even had a brother, never mind that he had killed himself just a few weeks before we met. If he felt anything like I did about being accepted into the Central School of Art, though, he would have known it was something he had to do and the perfect place to come to terms with himself.

"I think it helps explain why Joe could live so completely in the moment; he was only concerned with the now, and had to fill it entirely. That way nothing from the past could encroach upon it. He didn't cling to things – when he announced he was giving up art studies he said to me: 'It's the end of an era, the end of an error', and that was that."

As Woody, Joe pursued his hobo idyll for a few months in Wales, while Eric

Redemption Song: The Definitive Biography of Joe Strummer – Chris Salewicz (HarperCollins, £20)

READING *Redemption Song* is like finally seeing Joe Strummer with the lights on.

Deeply flawed, contradictory yet still admirable, his weaknesses become his strengths, and vice versa.

The scars he left on himself and others separate the man from the

myth; his ruthless, controlling streak, his lack of consideration, his flamboyance and crippling shyness, humility tinged by arrogance – all of it underlines a heroic beauty.

Motivated by good intentions, his worldview was informed by things far deeper than punk rock. His background, his schooling and, above all, his brother's suicide coloured his adult self, adding to an

inate sense of isolation.

The hippy era gave him a spiritual aspect that is rarely credited and his immersion in the squatting community of the mid-70s sharpened his grasp of political practicalities.

It was perhaps the tension created as the characters of John Mellor and Joe Strummer sought reconciliation that formed the man that has – for once, deservedly – been all but

canonised in recent times. Saint Joe? He'd have hated it.

As Billy Bragg says in the book, it's a huge disappointment that buying Clash records didn't change the world, but for the fact that Joe Strummer gave us the belief to question everything, he deserves our love.

Dare to dream – and get on with it!

Nick Churchill