

# GOOD CLEAN PUNK

For most people, 'punk rock' still means four-letter words, safety-pin jewellery, and a rude song about the Queen. After the Sex Pistols' infamous language on TV, concerts were cancelled, contracts torn up, and righteous outrage swept the land. Punk, it seemed, was sunk. But eight months is an eon in pop; the record companies, hungry for a genuine youth phenomenon, have swallowed their misgivings and re-opened their cheque books. Punk, deodorised and re-packaged as the 'New Wave', is here to stay - at least for half an hour. Report by Gordon Burn; photographs by David Montgomery



Above: assorted punk fans in Chelmsford on the 'White Riot 77' tour. Right: The Clash, most political of the 'New Wave' groups; left to right: Paul Simonon, Joe Strummer, Nicky Headdon, Mick Jones

The 'new wave' had made the charts - the Jam, the Damned, the Clash and the Stranglers all had albums in the Top 30 - but it was clear the reality of it still hadn't penetrated as far as Newcastle. It was a haphazard mob who crashed through the wall of undergraduate stewards at the Students' Union. Inside, they fell in a scrum before a platform dominated by a blow-up of last year's Notting Hill riots.

Their accessories were modish enough - paper clips, safety pins, of course, ripped shirts, plastic sandals - but they were thrown together in a way

that confirmed they had yet to be exposed to the real thing. Their idea of what was 'punk' was based on features in the music papers and banner-headline reports in the *Sun*. The rest of the audience was made up of the mildly curious, the openly sceptical, and some who obviously thought they had taken their lives into their hands and had come only out of a sense of daring.

'Punk rock' - 'this grotesque, insulting, anti-life festival of moral and spiritual anarchy' one commentator called it; 'puke rock' to the *News of the World* - had been labouring under an



almost total ban for six months, a direct result of the Sex Pistols' conscientious campaign of outrage.

The reasons for the punk explosion - bored and out-of-work teenagers kicking against 'super-groups' too old to identify with, concerts too expensive to attend, songs that were no reflection of their lives - had been widely put about. Still though, very few at the Students' Union in Newcastle had any real idea what to expect of a package optimistically, rather than provocatively, called 'White Riot - 77'. They soon found out.

The Slits are an all-girl group fronted by a 15-year-old who, when she isn't holding a dirty mac wide to reveal black latex tights and bikini knickers, is tating her hair up into tumbleweed with a pink plastic comb. The other girls, sweating inside their own sausage-skin bondage-chic, remain impassive in the face of Ariana's tantrums, which are almost as spirited on-stage as they are off, and her nicely obscene line in audience abuse.

The Subway Sect, on the other hand, in their dole-queue rags, determinedly anti-fashion, look like nice boys. When the mood takes them, however, they can be unpredictable. It's not unheard of for the singer to be two songs ahead of the rest of the group, though nobody can claim with any confidence to know when this is happening. And far from being bucked at the sight of an audience dancing, they have been known to stop abruptly and walk off.

"'Course it's not just the music, it's the total attitude. It's the clothes and the way we do things," Mick Jones, the Clash's lead guitarist, said later. "I feel a bit like a reason for a ritual." The abbreviated titles, committed at the last minute to a scrap of paper and taped into the curve of Jones's guitar - 'London-Pressure-Bored-1977-Hate and War-Cheat-Remote-Police-Career-Capital-Deny-Janie Jones-Riot' - effectively capture the spirit of the Clash's music. But it wasn't their articulation of the fears and frustrations of the so-called 'blank generation' that worked on the audience at Newcastle like a shorted circuit: it was the music. It is no accident that, of the words, only the title lines emerge like football chants from an onslaught that has been criticised for being 'screaming, venomous and

unrelenting', the very qualities that are, however, its strengths.

In the same way that the Skin-heads and football thugs were a reaction against the love-and-peace movement of the Sixties, so the primitiveness of the 'new wave' can be seen as a reaction against the artiness in rock music that the hippies came to represent. ('Hippy' and 'ageing hippy' are the punk vocabulary's standard alternatives to 'oldfart' and 'boringoldfart'.)

To call the music crude, though - and a lot of it certainly is - is, in a way, to miss the point. 'Dole-queue rock' has taken off the way it has because, for the first time in a generation, the performers are the same in every essential as the people who pay to come and listen. It was the "rawness" and "directness" of the Sex Pistols that prompted the 19-year-olds who have since become the Subway Sect to turn their backs on A-Levels in Barnet a year ago; and Paul Simonon of the Clash only recently removed the dots that guided his fingers along the neck of his bass guitar. "It only takes an hour to write a song," is Joe Strummer's line. "You can play everything inside three weeks. Everybody knows it's dead easy."

Strummer is the singer with the Clash and co-author with Mick Jones of all their songs, and it is his habit to talk to an audience. "Aren't you lucky?" he'd scoffed the night before in Middlesbrough, having read of ICI's plans to create more employment in the area. Next day, he would taunt the audience of St Albans with: "Rock Folks is on TV. You don't 'ave to come here an' look at us, you know."

Talking would have served no purpose in Newcastle, though, because it was bedlam from the word go. The 'pogoing' - a dance style that consists of going up to head invisible footballs - progressed naturally into punch-ups, and the wounded had to be hauled up laughing out of the crush. "I don't give a toss, they can kick hell out of each other," Mick Jones said when it was all over. "Most of them kids, they have a good time. They don't feel good unless they go home via the 'ospital . . . If I wasn't like this, I'd just want to be oblivious an' all. Down the terraces Saturday, Clash gig Friday night . . . Go an' bang yer 'ead against the wall." ➡

# PE



LOW TO MIDDLE



Keith Morris

Left to right, Dave Vanian, Captain Sensible, Rat Scabies and Brian James are The Damned, first of the younger New Wave bands to break big.

New Wave band to break big. Their first single on Stiff, 'New Rose', sold over 10,000 copies. (The Damned are abetted here by producer Nick Lowe who speeds up the instrumental backing track by 10 per cent before Dave Vanian puts on his vocals!) Onstage they present a totally berserk visual image without letting their high-energy music drift into chaos.

Unfortunately the politics of the New Wave seem to be getting rather incestuous. The managers of both the Sex Pistols and the Clash refused to let their leaders be photographed with representatives of the Damned and the Jam at the request of this magazine. 'Those groups are doing something entirely different from us,' protested Clash manager Bernard Rhodes, 'so we don't want to be associated with them. We're making a statement about how we see society, we're trying to do something about it. You can't say that about the Damned. They're just keeping the record companies fat.'

No one can doubt the authoritativeness with which many New Wave musicians know life at the bottom. Joe Strummer, singer with the Clash, was on the dole for so long that the Department of Employment wanted to send him to a special centre to rekindle his will

to work. Guitarist Mick Jones was eventually given a job by the Social Security - opening the mail during the IRA letter-bomb campaign.

*'Career opportunities*

*The ones that never knock*

*Every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock*

*Career opportunities*

*They offered me the office*

*They offered me the Shop*

*They said I'd better take anything they got.'*

Adopting the archetypal aggressive punk stance, Joe Strummer claims: 'I don't actually care what people think of what we're saying . . . I don't even care whether anybody listens or not. I don't give a shit if anybody tries to change society or not as a result of what we're doing, but I ain't gonna let anyone stop me saying what I feel about it . . . because I know that society stinks. The Clash ain't inciting *anyone!* We're just reflecting the truth that we see. It may not be very pleasant, but it is what we see. If our audiences are as angry as we are about it, then maybe they'll do something about it. But it's their responsibility.'

Whoever's responsibility it may be, Clash certainly don't do things by half-measures when it comes to venting their wrath. They approach

There's a Henkell of a difference  
between being alive and living.



You'll never forget  
what you were celebrating,  
celebrating with

recent avalanche of new wave fanzines like *Skum*, *Negative Reaction*, *Ghast Up*, *Ripped & Torn*, *Penetration* and *London's Burning*. Printed by the very cheapest methods, the pages are stapled together at the corners and the contents typed or hand-written direct on to the 'art-work' alongside bleached-out, monochrome photographs and the occasional crude line drawing.

The articles, record and gig reviews are about artists with bizarre and esoteric names that are now starting to filter through from their staunchly clandestine underground to the conventional music scene. The Clash, Stranglers, Damned and Sex Pistols have already dented the smooth veneer of the music business hit-machine, while the Buzzcocks, Adverts, Cortinas, Subway Sect, Prefects, Eater, Slaughter & The Dogs and dozens of others, are still working it out in garages and basements up and down the country.

Just like the underground press of the late sixties, all the fanzines are rather parochial and utterly biased. The editors' obvious enthusiasm for the subject matter tran-

**‘We’re just reflecting the truth that we see. If our audiences are as angry as we are, then maybe they’ll do something.’**

sends conventional publishing principles such as objectivity, grammar or sometimes even the merest pretence of literacy. Not that it really matters to the readers... there never was much cultural subtlety in rock'n'roll. The editorials and reviews are full of outrageous libel, much of it gratuitous; but, as Mark P. explains, 'The idea is to shock, to get people moving, get 'em up off their arses. Kids today ain't got much of a chance, the schools don't really try to educate you unless you live in a smart area and you've got money. And even if they did, what are you gonna do when you come out, work in some stinking supermarket or factory or, more likely, go straight on the dole? Mine's the best, but the thing is that anyone can produce a fanzine, and a lot of people do. The music papers can't really relate to what the new wave is all about, they just want a few groups to break into the charts...'

Not that Mark P. hasn't tried to improve the situation. In one issue of *Sniffin' Glue* he published diagrams of three guitar chords with the caption 'NOW FORM A GROUP!' Mark's editorial team

consists of Harry T. Murlowski (business manager and photographer) and Steve Mick. The magazine is produced in a cramped office lent to them by a rock promoter, Miles Copeland, off Oxford Street, although until recently it was put out from Mark's parents' council flat in Deptford.

Mark reckons that they just about break even, despite the 30p cover price and recent record company advertising at between £40 and 'whatever we can hit 'em for' a page. Distribution of *Glue*, plus most of the other fanzines, is handled by Geoff Travis, proprietor of Rough Trade Records in London's Notting Hill Gate. Rough Trade is something of a mecca for new wave records and ephemera, being one of the first shops to import the American punk records which musically, if not socially, inspired many of the British bands. While in America last year, Travis heard a lot of New York groups, and picked up copies of the original American punk rock mag, *Punk*.

Travis said: 'I loved the music 'cos it was such an exciting alternative to Top Twenty saccharine like Smokey and the Bay City Rollers. So when I came back I borrowed some money and opened this shop. It more or less coincided with the start of *Sniffin' Glue*, which we distributed to specialist record stores and bookshops. We'll sell absolutely any magazine that anyone brings into the shop. There's new ones coming out virtually every week, and I can't see the movement getting anything but bigger.'

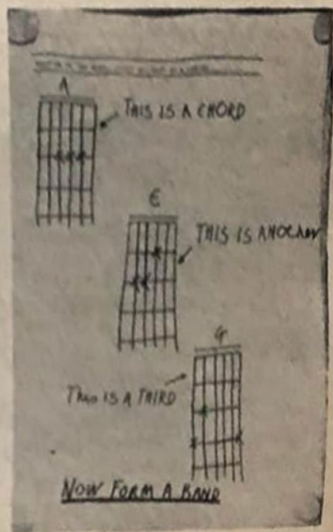
Ah yes, 'the movement'. We heard the same term about the hippies in 1967, but a decade of decaying social and economic values has changed the nature of youthful protest very considerably. In the first six months of 1967 there were just 71,060 unemployed under the age of 20. Today there are 252,328. Even more centres have been ripped out of our cities and replaced with lifeless concrete ringways and tower blocks. There's less money around, and less to spend it on in the way of recreation and live entertainment. Taxes are higher, opportunities fewer, freedom scarcer. The media of the day are not concerned with the gradual groundswell of confusion and frustration suffered by our younger citizens.

So once again the kids are galvanising their outbursts of energy behind popular heroes and media of their own, but this time they're not holding flowers and loosening up their psyches on hash and LSD. Instead they're stamping their boots and taking the only drug they can afford, when they can get it, which is speed - amphetamine sulphate. (The current street price continues)



Keith Morris

Outside his council flat home in Deptford, *Sniffin' Glue* editor Mark P. 'The idea is to shock.' Below, his magazine, first of the punk papers.



for marijuana is around £35 per ounce, while a gram of sulphate costs £10-£12.

Under such circumstances society's normal reaction is a policy of benign tolerance. The Press reflects many of the more obvious aspects with varying degrees of sobriety - while the rest of the Establishment usually follows suit. The net result is a dissipation of the spirit that started the ball rolling, thereby keeping the status more or less quo.

It didn't take the National Front long to see the political potential of the New Wave with its swastika insignia and seditious undertones. But Mark P., invited to attend a meeting, didn't even bother to reply because he thinks the Front are 'frightening', and Joe Strummer, of the Clash, goes much further: 'We heard the National Front were putting out pamphlets urging people to support us 'cos we were into the same thing as them. Well if they think that they can shove it up their arses 'cos we ain't fascists, and neither's any of the other bands.'

Mark P. displays the same utterly disarming belief in his own righteousness as Richard Neville in his heyday with Oz. Naturally enough, Mark denies that society will swallow him up but Geoff Travis is more objective: 'Someone brought a professionally produced punk magazine into the shop recently, proper typesetting and layout I know, but I wouldn't sell it. It's the kids who made this shop and although I ain't making a fortune, I'm grateful to make a living out of

**‘The sheer blind energy of what's happening in the New Wave casts doubts on the ability of the Establishment to dish out its usual prescription of bemused entertainment.’**

it. So I'm not going to let some smart publisher rip them off, although I suppose other shops won't be so fussy.'

The New Wave is news, and everyone, from the National Front to the managing director of CBS ('The largest recording company in the world'), would like to think they are behind it. Perhaps the first man to realise this was an affable cockney of Polish extraction, Andy Czeowski. He rented a gay disco in Neal Street, Covent Garden, last December, and turned it over to these crude bands and an unlikely black DJ called Don Letts.

The Roxy Club immediately at-

tracted a unique audience. The music business began to check out the commercial possibilities of these raucous rock 'n' roll bands from the unfashionable suburbs of East and West London, and the Press homed in on the weird, unfathomable hairstyles, safety-pin jewellery and waste-bin fashions. Aimless unemployed kids in search of some sort of corporate spirit were not disappointed, neither were some vicarious observers who secretly envied the self-consciously aggressive teenagers, jumping up and down to the machine gun music and congregating in the wrong toilets as Ray Davies of the Kinks sang six years earlier in the prophetic *Lola*. *Girls will be boys and boys will be girls*, *It's a mixed-up, shook-up, troubled world*.

The music they were locked into owed much to American punk bands like the Ramones, Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers, most of whom had in turn paid lip-service to the inspiration of Lou Reed and John Cale. It was more than 10 years ago in the States that Cale and Reed formed the Velvet Underground under the 'direction' of Andy Warhol and began their histrionic, bitingly accurate observations of drug addicts, transvestites and perverts of every kind.

British bands speeded up the tempo of the original performers, wrote lyrics which tended to reflect political rather than sexual or criminal anomalies and weren't too concerned about musical finesse.

CBS Records signed the Clash for an alleged £100,000, Polydor gobbled the Jam for not a lot less, and both EMI and A & M had their much publicised and very expensive honeymoons with the Sex Pistols. But the smaller companies nurtured the New Wave - not that they haven't been rewarded for the risk. Island Records signed Eddie and the Hot Rods over a year ago and have since had a hit single and an album ('Teenage Depression') with the band. United Artists jumped aboard with the Stranglers, and their album 'Rattus Norvegicus' promptly zapped to the upper reaches of the charts.

But the most intriguing example of recording-biz initiative must be that of Stiff Records - 'The World's Most Flexible Record Label.' Stiff is an oasis of insanity. Director Jake Riviera - who as press officer signs himself Vinyl Mogul - explains: 'I'm just interested in signing lunatics. History proves that the best art comes from crazy people.' On this philosophy Stiff put out singles by such no-hopers as the Tyla Gang, and neo-Hell's Angels Motorhead.

With the exception of the Sex Pistols, whose media antics nipped their success in the bud, the Damned were the first 'genuine'

continued



Photographs by Erica Echenberg

**THE JAM:** As the most inventive band of their genre, the Jam attract criticism because they balance their act with '60s favourites. They can exude the same sort of perceptive insights that established the Who as the spokesmen of the Mod generation; the Jam's neat black mohair suits and tab collar shirts copy that era. They eschew the current revolutionary fervour as being 'too trendy by half'.



**THE BUZZCOCKS:** Good scratchy music from a bunch of lads who don't compromise on decibels. Pete Shelly handles lead guitar and vocals, Steve Diggle plays rhythm guitar, Garth is on bass and John Maher drums. Original leader Howard Devoto left shortly after their first EP because, 'I don't like music, I don't like movements'. Nevertheless, the Buzzcocks have honed their act into a well orchestrated cacophony.



**GENERATION X:** Blonde-haired Billy Idol fronts a band who come from the same stable as the Damned, having once shared the former Roxy Club luminary Andy Czeowski as manager. Strong on arrangements but invariably beset by poor PA systems, Generation X are likely candidates for the big time. No recording contract at press-time.



**EATER:** Possibly the youngest group in the new wave, this unpleasant little crew are managed by 13-year-old drummer, Dee Generate's mum. The vocalist rejoices in the pseudonym of Andy Blade and despite their rather limited musical acumen, they once claimed to be the band 'that would take over the Sex Pistol's audience'. Not yet recorded, but this can only be a matter of time - surely Eater must be the Osmonds of punk.



**THE ADVERTS:** Thanks largely to the good looks of their lady bass guitarist, Gaye Advert, this band accompanied the Damned on the recent UK tour. Singer TV Smith and girlfriend Gaye played in their schoolband in Devon: they met the rest of the group in London. In a world where sexuality is largely redundant, Gaye rates highly on the droolometer with both boys and girls. When she learns to play her instrument and move around onstage, she'll probably get arrested for lewd behaviour. One Stiff single thus far, entitled, with admirable honesty, 'One Chord Wonders.'

It was all good news for the promoter, Dave Cork, an indomitable young entrepreneur from Wolverhampton who had also stepped in as tour manager. "Look at that, eh? All them pound notes walking in," he'd said to Joe Strummer, but Strummer had refused to see the joke. ("Tour managers," Jones said, "they stink. They ain't talking my language. Same as record company people. If any of 'em show up round here I ain't got nothing to say, 'cause they ain't talking the same language as me. I'm not interested in them at all.") Cork was organising the tour for nothing on the basis that the Clash, very soon, were going to be very big. Not that money, he wanted to make quite clear, was his only concern. "I'm just pleased there's something new," he said. "I'm 25 now, been in the business since I was 18, and I'd seen it all before. It was dead. But now, all of a sudden, the excitement is there, the way I remember it in the days of Hendrix and the Cream."

Cork says he lost a lot of friends through his association with the Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' tour. And there had been some fears that 'White Riot' might face the same sort of bans when the audience at one of the first shows, at the Rainbow in London, resurrected the old ritual of seat slashing. But once on the road, the tour had progressed without major incident. A basic wage of £25-a-week for each of the four members of the Clash, and a bare subsistence allowance for the other groups, plus a blanket ban on room service and the disconnection of all bedroom telephones - precautions insisted on by Cork - had more or less seen to that.

The porter, though, who patrolled them at the hotel after the concert was convinced that the youths littering the lounge were the Sex Pistols, the only group he would claim to have heard of since the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. But, significantly, it wasn't a member of any group who most conformed to the punk stereotype but a wasted boy with Vaseline-up hair, the Clash's chief roadie. 'Rodent' (a nickname derived as much from his real name, Rodney, as from any resemblance he might have had to a ferret) had been moved to rip his arms open one night with the ragged edge of a Coke can to demonstrate his boredom with a



"Most of them kids, they have a good time," says Mick Jones of the Clash

roomful of students. To relieve the tedium of the road, he occasionally added to these bloody scars with the serrated edge of a table knife. His background, as far as he'd admit to one, seemed to be public school and prison.

(A punk-in-the-making, to be seen backstage at Clash concerts in the London area picking up points of style, is a spindly boy called Conran, son of the Habitat millionaire and Shirley 'Super-woman'. An extempore equipment humper with a single ear-ring and the beginnings of a proletarian drawl, Sebastian was 'blooded' by being thrown into a swimming pool fully dressed one morning at five. But Strummer likes him: "He's got a very high-class voice, but he means well.")

For themselves, the Clash's clothes, onstage and off, betray a familiarity with the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, the American Pop painters, that they don't feel inclined to discuss. Although their recent histories all include squatting and the dole, three of them went to art school, as did their manager and even their sound engineer; but, in keeping with their anti-intellectual stand, they proclaim a profound disinterest in 'art'. Joe Strummer hates the recent translation of 'punk rock' into the more respectable-sounding 'new wave',

almost as much as he hates the persistent gossip in the music press about him being a public school boy. ("It wasn't a public school," he has explained succinctly. "It was a school where thick rich people sent their thick rich kids.")

"I hate those two words," Strummer said, "'new wave'. I much prefer to call it punk rock. It sounds tougher. Don't know why they use the other words. 'Spouse they think it sounds artistic."

Not given much to socialising, Strummer had whiled away the afternoon in his hotel room, stencilling letters that would finally read 'High Tension' across a lime-green shirt to which he had added some black patches and an arm band. It was in a feckless attempt to emulate the Clash, the most innovative and probably the most 'committed' of all the groups to be thrown up by the 'new wave', that Chelsea had just put out 'Right To Work' and the Cortinas were making their bid for the charts with the very catchy 'Fascist Dictator'. But Strummer, who claims to read only the *Sun*, says he knows nothing at all about politics.

"I don't know anything about it," he said. "I don't know anything about Marx. I mean, to me, it's just a big snore, because who wants to know about all that back-stabbing? People say our songs are political

now because we deal in things that affect daily life, but I ain't got no major plan to save the world. 'Just think about who's doing what to you and what you're going to do about it,' is all we're saying. 'Think for yourself.'"

As an illustration of their "personal politics", the Clash were carrying all the other groups on the tour, thanks to their two-year contract with CBS, reputedly worth £100,000. And Strummer, for one, was feeding people out of his own £25-a-week allowance. Inevitably, though, they were being heckled at their concerts for selling-out to 'the system'. "Geezer down 'ere says we sold out," Strummer would announce at St Albans. "Well, if we hadn't signed with CBS none of you lot would've heard of us. So stuff that down your gizzard."

"The world's full of people who think you've got to adopt the hippy ideal, make everything Alternative, and ignore all the existing structures. Which is a ridiculous idea . . ." He was rummaging in one of the plastic carrier bags that made up his luggage. "Look, it's all business, I know that. They only do it for business. Take you down there, sign you up, buy you a drink . . . If they didn't think they were going to make money out of it, they wouldn't give you the time of day."

Groups are forming and realigning and being snapped up by the major labels faster in 1977 than anyone can remember since the beat-boom of the early Sixties. The Damned have already appeared on children's television; the Jam and the Stranglers have graced Top of the Pops, and Paul Weller, 19, singer with the Jam, has said he intends to vote Conservative at the next election. Next stop Weybridge, summers on Mustique, partying with Mick and Bianca? What was going to make them any different?

"I don't know." Mick Jones was lounging on a single bed and his eyes never left the ceiling. "I don't know the answers. You see, the whole thing we're involved in is full of contradictions. And now compromise is rearing its ugly head. So we contradict and we compromise. So I'm just, like, trying to keep my wits about me, and hopefully . . . you can learn from other people's mistakes. I can't quit yet, just because it's getting big," he said. "Can I?" ●