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new MUSICAL EXPRESS

Pics: PENNIE SMITH



CLASH

CLASH



Lester Bangs falls in love
(and sees the Promised Land)
Pages 31-34

THE EMPIRE may be terminally stagnant, but every time I come to England it feels like massive changes are underway.

First time was 1972 for Slade, who had the punters hooting, but your music scene in general was in such miserable shape that most of the hits on the radio were resurrected oldies. Second time was for David Essex (haw haw haw) and Mott (sigh) almost exactly two years ago: I didn't even bother listening to the radio, and though I had a good time the closest thing to a musical highlight of my trip was attending an Edgar Froese (entropy incarnate) press party. I never gave much of a damn about pub rock, which was about the only thing you guys had going at the time, and I had just about written you off for dead when punk rock came along.

So here I am back again through the corporate graces of CBS International to see The Clash, to hear new wave bands on the radio (a treat for American ears) and find the empire jumping again at last.

About time, too. I don't know about you, but as far as I was concerned things started going downhill for rock around 1968; I'd date it from the ascendance of Cream, who were the first fake superstar band, the first sign of strain in what had crested in 1967. Ever since then things have just gotten worse, through Grand Funk and James Taylor and wonderful years like 1974, when the only thing interesting going on was Roxy Music, finally culminating last year in the ascendance of things like disco and jazz-rock, which are dead enough to suggest the end of popular music as anything more than room spray.

I was thinking of giving up writing about music altogether last year when all of a sudden I started getting phone calls from all these slick magazine journalists who wanted to know about this new phenomenon called "punk rock." I was a little bit confused at first, because as far as I was concerned punk rock was something which had first raised its grimy snout around 1966 in groups like The Seeds and Count Five, and was dead and buried after The Stooges broke up and The Dictators' first LP bombed.

I mean, it's easy to forget that just a little over a year ago there was *only one thing*, the first Ramones album. But who could have predicted that that record would have such an impact — all it took was that and the ferocious *edge* of The Sex Pistols' "Anarchy In The UK," and suddenly it was as if someone had unleashed the floodgates as ten million little groups all over the world came storming in, mashing up the residents with their guitars and yammering discontented *non sequiturs* about how bored and fed up they were with everything.

I was too, and so were you — that's why we went out and bought all those shitty singles last spring and summer by the likes of The Users and Cortinas and Slaughter and the Dogs, because better Slaughter and the Dogs at what price wretchedness than *one more* mewly-mouthed simperwhimper from Linda Ronstadt. Buying records became fun again, and one reason it did was that all these groups embodied the who-gives-a-damn-let's-just-slam-it-at-'em spirit of great rock 'n' roll. Unfortunately many of these wonderful slices of vinyl didn't possess any of the other components of same, with the result that (for me, round about *Live at the Roxy*) many people simply got FED UP. Meaning that it's just too goddam easy to slap on a dog collar and black leather jacket and start puking all over the room about how you're gonna sniff some glue and stab some backs.

Punk had reaped the very attitudes it copped (BOREDOM and INDIFFERENCE), and we were all waiting for a group to come along who at least went through the motions of GIVING A DAMN about SOMETHING.

Ergo, The Clash.

YOU SEE, dear reader, so much of what's (doled) out as punk merely amounts to saying I suck, you suck, the world sucks, and

who gives a damn — which is, er, ah, somehow insufficient.

Don't ask me why, I'm just an observer, really. But any observer could tell that, to put it in terms of Us vs. Them, saying the above is exactly what they want you to do, because it amounts to capitulation. It is unutterably boring and disheartening to try to find some fun or meaning while shoveling through all the shit we've been handed the last few years, but merely puking on yourself is not gonna change anything. (I know, 'cause I tried it.) I guess what it all boils down to is:

- (a) You can't like people who don't like themselves; and
- (b) You gotta like somebody who stands up for what they believe in, as long as what they believe in is
- (c) Righteous.

A precious and elusive quantity, this righteousness. Needless to say, most punk rock is not exactly OD-in on it. In fact, most punk rockers probably think it's the purview of hippies, unless you happen to be black and Rastafarian, in which case righteousness shall cover the land, presumably when punks have attained No Future.

It's kinda hard to put into mere mortal words, but I guess I should say that being righteous means you're more or less on the side of the angels, waging Armageddon for the ultimate victory of the forces of Good over the Kingdoms of Death (see how perilously we skirt hippiedom here?), working to enlighten others as to their own possibilities rather than merely sprawling in the muck yodelling about what a drag everything is.

The righteous minstrel may be rife with lamentations and criticisms of the existing order, but even if he doesn't have a coherent program for social change he is informed of hope. The MC5 were righteous where The Stooges were not. The third and fourth Velvet Underground albums were righteous, the first and second weren't. (Needless to say, Lou Reed is not righteous.) Patti Smith has been righteous. The Stones have flirted with righteousness (e.g., "Salt Of The Earth"), but when they were good The Beatles were all-righteous. The Sex Pistols are not righteous, but perhaps more than any other new wave band, The Clash are.

The reason they are is that beneath their wired harsh soundscape lurks a persistent humanism. It's hard to put your finger on in the actual lyrics, which are mostly pretty despairing, but it's in the kind of thing that could make somebody like Mark P. write that their debut album was his life. To appreciate it in The Clash's music you might have to be the sort of person who could see Joe Strummer crying out for a riot of his own as someone making a positive statement. You perceive that as much as this music seethes with rage and pain, it also champs at the bit of the present system of things, lunging after some glimpse of a new and better world.

I know it's easy to be cynical about all this; in fact, one of the most uncool things you can do these days is to be committed about anything. The Clash are so committed they're downright militant. Because of that, they speak to dole-queue British youth today of their immediate concerns with an authority that nobody else has quite mustered. Because they do, I doubt if they will make much sense to most American listeners.

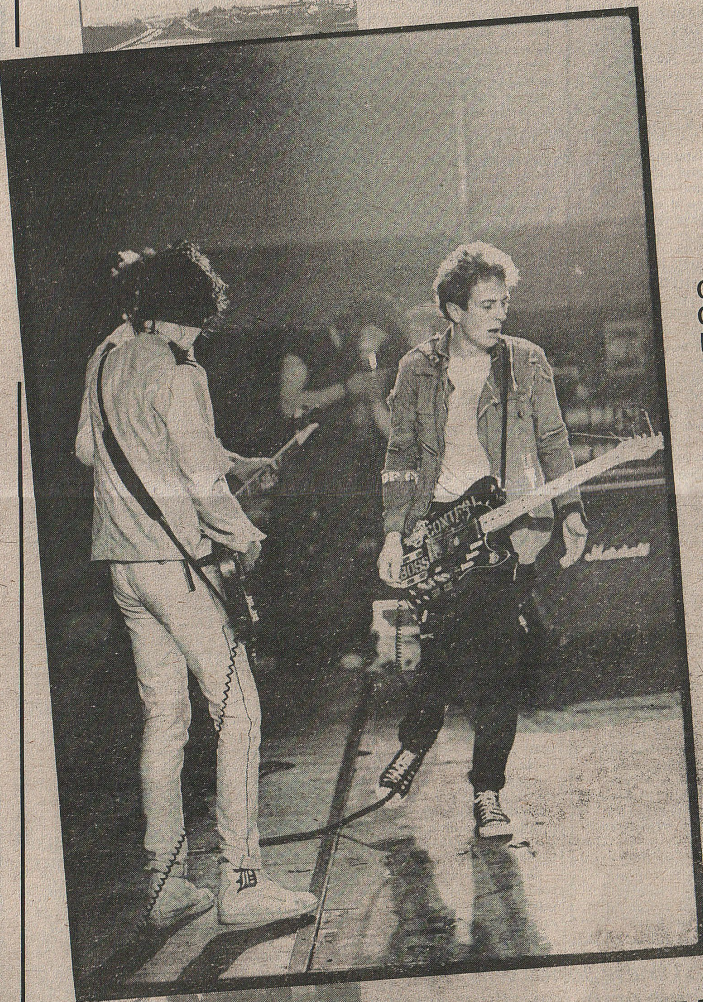
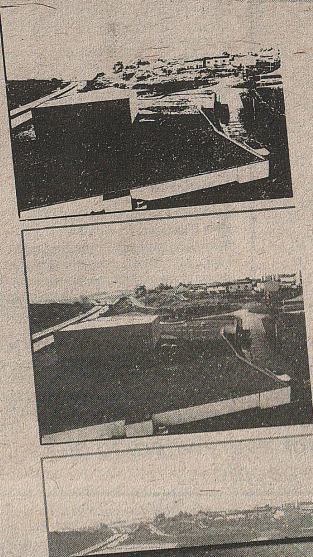
But more about that later. Right now, while we're on the subject of politics, I would like to make a couple of things perfectly clear:

- 1. I do not know shit about the English class system.
- 2. I don't not care shit about the English class system.

I've heard about it, understand. I've heard it has something to do with why Rod Stewart now makes music for housewives, and why Townshend is so screwed up. I guess it also has something to do with another NME writer sneering to me "Joe Strummer had a fucking middle class education, man!" I surmise further that this is supposed to indicate that he isn't worth a shit, and that his songs are all fake street-graffiti. Which is fine by me: Joe Strummer is a fake. That only puts him in there with Dylan and Jagger and Townshend and most of the other great rock song writers, because almost all of them in one way or another were fakes. Townshend had a middle-class education. Lou Reed went to Syracuse University before matriculating to the sidewalk of New York. Dylan faked his whole career; the only difference was that he

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'IT'S GREAT TO BE BACK IN YOUR LI'L OL' COUNTRY AND I THINK YOUR PUNKS ARE WONDERFUL' SAYS LESTER BANGS (AMONG OTHER THINGS).



CONTINUES OVER

SIX DAYS ON THE ROAD WITH THE FOREMOST GARAGE BAND IN THE LAND



FAB PIX: PENNIE SMITH

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used to be good at it and now he's stuck... The point is that, like Richard Hell says, rock 'n' roll is an arena in which you recreate yourself, and all this blathering about authenticity is just a bunch of crap... authentic because their music carries this brutal conviction, not because they're noble Savages.

HERE'S a note to CBS International, you can relax because I liked The Clash as people better than any other band I have ever met with the possible exception of Talking Heads... Here's another one... Lester Bangs... Okay, you know that all that's out of the way, there we go...

There's a superlative for ads: "Best band in the UK!"... Here's another one... Lester Bangs... Okay, you know that all that's out of the way, there we go...

was sitting in the British Airways terminal in New York City on the eve of my departure... I was looking up just in time to see a crippled woman in a wheelchair a few feet away from me... I looked up again and we said hello to each other.

She was a very small person about 30 years old with a pretty face... I like the people in America so much better... "Christ, it's so nice to be someone where people recognize that you exist in England... if you're handicapped no one will look at or speak to you except old people... And they just pat you on the head."

It is four days later, and I've driven from London to Derby with Ellie from CBS as my... manager Bernard Rhodes for the first of my projected three nights and two days with the band... I've still got jet-lag... I have been averaging two to three hours sleep a night since I got back to London with a routine in the course of which we were stopped by provincial police in search of dope and forced to empty all our pockets... I had to tell me "You look like 'Night Of The Living Dead'..."

Nevertheless, I make sure after checking into the Derby Post House to hit the first night's gig, whatever my condition, in my most thoughtful camouflage... You see, the kind of

In a flash I knew Jones was right. Here was I, a grown man, travelling across the Atlantic ocean and motoring up to the provinces of England to ask a goddam rock 'n' roll band for the meaning of life.

reports get over in the States about your punk rock scene had led me to expect something... I figured the chances of getting a great story were better if I happened to get... I took off my black leather jacket and dressed as straight as I possibly could... (I thought) being a blue promotional sweater that said "Capitol Records" on the chest... I should mention that I also had a little red and white checkered... I desperately need before leaving the States on the not-so-slow chance of being taken for a bribe... out of my room and Ellie and photographer Pierre Smith saw me, they laughed.

way down through the popping masses, right into the belly of the beast, and stood there waiting... the Lou and Richard Hell and the Voidoids' sets, through the dog soldiers of anarch-apocalypse... I need I mention that nothing of the kind transpired... I would take up arms and march on the media centers of Merrie Old, NME included, and trash them beyond recognition... I experienced, this first night and all subsequent ones, everything so far from what we Americans've read in the papers and seen on TV that it

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Each, they like to pogo... the subject of this odd tribal rite... I found English punk everywhere they went... I found British punks everywhere they went... I was in the middle of a dying nation with all these funny looking children who didn't even realize the world was coming to an end...

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YOU FIGURED OUT SOME MORE ORIGINAL WAY OF OPERATING... (After the second night I asked Mick Jones about it and he looked like he was going to puke... But doesn't it add to the general atmosphere of chaos and anarchy? I wondered... Listen, if I were you I would take up arms and march on the media centers of Merrie Old, NME included, and trash them beyond recognition... I experienced, this first night and all subsequent ones, everything so far from what we Americans've read in the papers and seen on TV that it

END OF moral lecture. The Clash were a bit of a disappointment the first night... they played so well, everything so far from what we Americans've read in the papers and seen on TV that it

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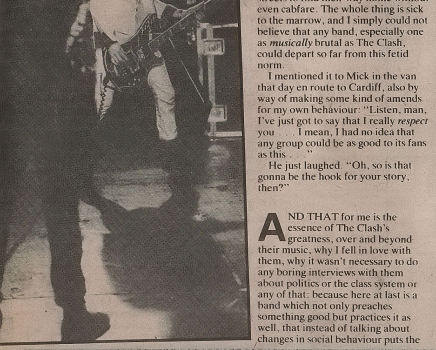
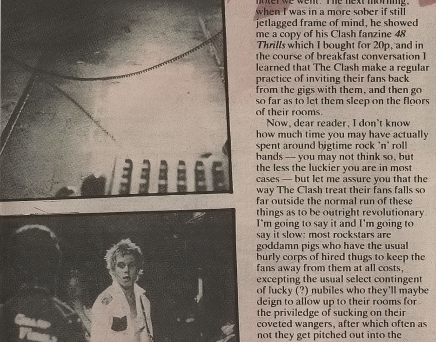
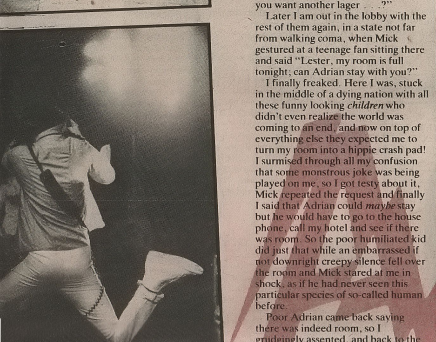
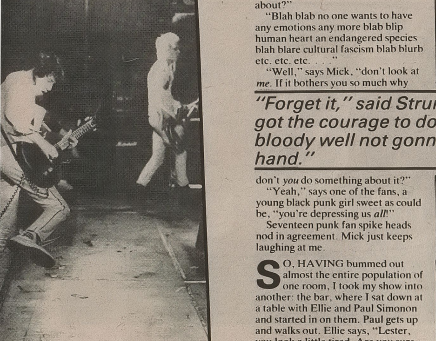
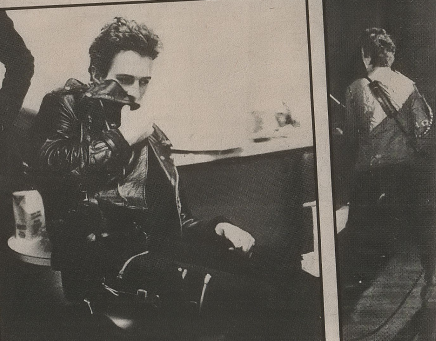
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model of a truly egalitarian society into practice in their own conduct... "What in the fuck are you talking about?"... "Blah blah no one wants to have any emotions any more blah blah human being an endangered species blah blah cultural fascism blah blah etc. etc."

"Forget it," said Strummer. "If they haven't got the courage to do it on their own, I'm bloody well not gonna lead 'em by the hand"

democracy has got to begin at home... that is the everlasting and totally disgusting walls between artists and audience must come down, elitism must sink, cro-magnon, blindfold man, Cardiff giant

S O, HAVING bumped out almost the entire population of one room... I took my show into another... the bar, where I sat down at a table with Ellie and Paul Simonon and started in on them. Paul gets up and walks out. Ellie says, "Lester, you look a little tired. Are you sure you want another lager?"

I later found out in the lobby with the rest of them again, in a state not far from waking coma, when Mick gestured at a teenage fan sitting there and said "Lester, my room is full tonight, can Adrian stay with you?"

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Now, dear reader, I don't know how much time you may have actually spent around big name rock 'n' roll bands... but the less the luckier you are in most cases... but let me assure you that the way The Clash treat their fans falls so far outside the normal run of these things as to be outright revolutionary...

around most of them... Something unpretentiously moral, and something both self-affirming and life-affirming... as opposed, say, to the simple right to allow up to their rooms for the privilege of sucking on their coiled wangers, after which often as not they get pitched out into the streets to find their way home without even cabfare...

B UTEOUGH of all that the highlight of the first day's bus... I discovered myself having other ideas... a lot of bread and egg salad ideas whizzing to split right in the back of my head to look around and confront a solid wall of innocent faces...

He just laughed "Oh, so's that gonna be the hook for your story then?"... "What in the fuck are you talking about?"... "Blah blah no one wants to have any emotions any more blah blah human being an endangered species blah blah cultural fascism blah blah etc. etc."

And THAT for me is the essence of The Clash's greatness, over and beyond their music, why I fell in love with them, why I wasn't necessary to do any boring interviews with them about politics or the class system or any of that... because here at last is a band which not only preaches something good but practices it as well, that instead of talking about changes in social behaviour puts the

fellow. Namely that HE LOOKS LIKE A MUPPET... I'm not sure which one, some kinda composite, but don't that brooding visage in his eyes... I'm not sure which one, some kinda composite, but don't that brooding visage in his eyes...

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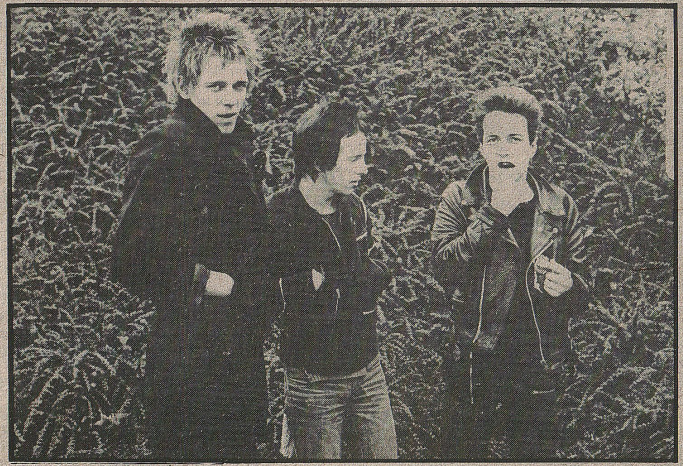
Actions speak louder than words, and the Clash are one of the very few examples I've seen where they would rather set an example by their personal conduct than talk.

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hypocritical "diplomat" I can be. I mean their simple, straightforward honesty, their undogmatic insistence on the truth and why worry about stepping on people's toes because if we're not straight with each other we're never going to get anything accomplished anyway.

It seems like such a simple thing, and I suppose it is, but it runs contrary to almost everything the music business runs on: the hype, the grease, the glad-handing. And it goes a long way towards creating that aforementioned mood of positive clarity and unpeachy morality. Strummer himself, at once the "leader" of the group

(though he'd deny it) and the least voluble (though his sickness might have had a lot to do with it), conveys an immediate physical and personal impact of ground-level directness and honesty, a no-bullshit concern with cutting straight to the heart of the matter in a way that is not brusque or impatient but concise

If rock'n'roll is truly the democratic art form . . . the walls between artists and audience have got to come down. The stars have got to be humanized.



Nicky Headon finally gets his pic taken.

and distinctly nonfrivolous. Serious without being solemn, quiet without being remote or haughty, Strummer offers a distinct contrast to Mick's

voluble wit and twinkle of eye, and Paul's looney toon playfulness. He is almost certainly the group's soul, and I wish I could say I had gotten to know him better.

From the instant we hit the hall for the sound-check we all sense that tonight's gig is going to be a hot one. The place itself looks like an abandoned meatpacking room — large and empty with cold stone floors and stark white walls. It's plain dire, and in one of the most common of rock 'n' roll ironies the atmosphere is perfect and the acoustics great.

that I have never seen a band that *moved* like this: most of 'em you can see the rockinroll steps choreographed five minutes in advance, but The Clash hop around each other in all configurations totally non-self-consciously, galvanised by their music alone. Jones and Simonon changing places at the whims of the whims coming out of their guitars, springs in the soles of their tennis.

Strummer, obviously driven to make up to this audience the loss of energy suffered by the last two nights' crowds, is an angry live wire whipping around the middle of the front stage, divesting himself of guitar to fall on one knee in no Elvis parody but pure outside-of-self frenzy, snarling through his shattered dental bombsite with face screwed up in all the rage you'd ever need to convince you of The Clash's authenticity, a desperation uncontrived, unstaged, a fury unleashed on the stage and writhing in upon itself in real pain that connects with the nerves of the audience like summer lightning, and at this time pogoing reveals itself as such a pitifully insufficient response to a man by all appearances trapped and screaming, and it's not your class system, it's not Britain-on-the-wane, it's not even glandular fever, it's the cage of life itself and all the anguish to break through which sometimes translates as flash or something equally petty but in any case is rock 'n' roll's burning narrow.

MEANWHILE BACK in the slaughterhouse, another thing occurs to me while The Clash are warming up at their soundcheck. They play something very funky which I later discover is a Booker T. number, thus implanting an idea in my mind which later grows into a conviction: that in spite of the brilliance manifested in things like "White Riot", they actually play better and certainly more interestingly when they *slow down* and get, well, funky. You can hear it in the live if not studio version of "Police and Thieves", as well as "White Boy In Hammersmith Palais," probably the best thing they've written yet.

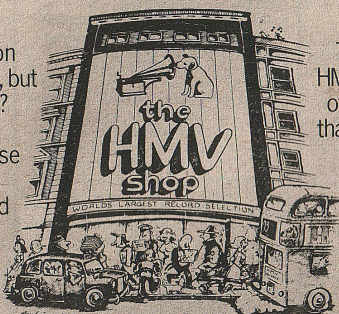
Somewhere in their assimilation of reggae is the closest thing yet to the lost chord, the missing link between black music and white noise rock capable of making a bow to black forms without smearing on the blackface, get me! It's there in Mick's intro to "Police And Thieves" and unstatedly in the band's whole onstage attitude. I understand why all these groups thought they had to play 120 miles per hour these last couple of years — to get us out of the bog created by everything that preceded them this decade — but the point has been made, and I for one could use a little funk, especially from somebody as good at it as The Clash. Why should any great rock 'n' roll band do what's *expected* of 'em anyhow? The Clash are a certain idea in many people's minds, which is only all the more reason why they should *break* that idea and broach something else. Just one critic's opinion y understand but that's what god put us here for.

In any case, tonight is the payload. The band is taut terror from the instant they hit the stage, pure energy, everything they're supposed to be and more. I reflect for the first time

It was one of those performances for which all the serviceable critical terms like "electrifying" are so pathetically inadequate, and after it was over I realized the futility of hitting Strummer for that interview I kept putting off on the "politics" of the situation. The politics of rock 'n' roll, in England or America or anywhere else, is that a whole lot of kids want to be fried out of their skins by the most scalding propulsion they can find, for a night they can pretend is the rest of their lives, and whether the next day they go back to work in shops or boredom on the dole or American TV doldrums in Mom 'n' Daddy's living room nothing can cancel the reality of that night in the revivifying flames when for once if only then in your life you were blasted outside of yourself and the monotony which defines most life anywhere at any time, when you felt supra-alive, when you sipped on lightning and nothing else in the realms of the living or dead mattered at all.

gabba gabba gabba hey?

Ever been in a situation where you remember a tune, but not the title or the group? It happens a lot with P**K and New Wave, because every week there is so much good stuff developing and being thrown out that it takes a lot of keeping up with. HMV can help. They really know their stuff.



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So why not give us a try? Incidentally, if you're still wondering about "gabba gabba hey" check out "Pinhead" from the album "The Ramones Leave Home."

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NEXT WEEK
Bangs finally gets to the point in another epic instalment (yawn) on Punko Mondo Anglo-Americana.