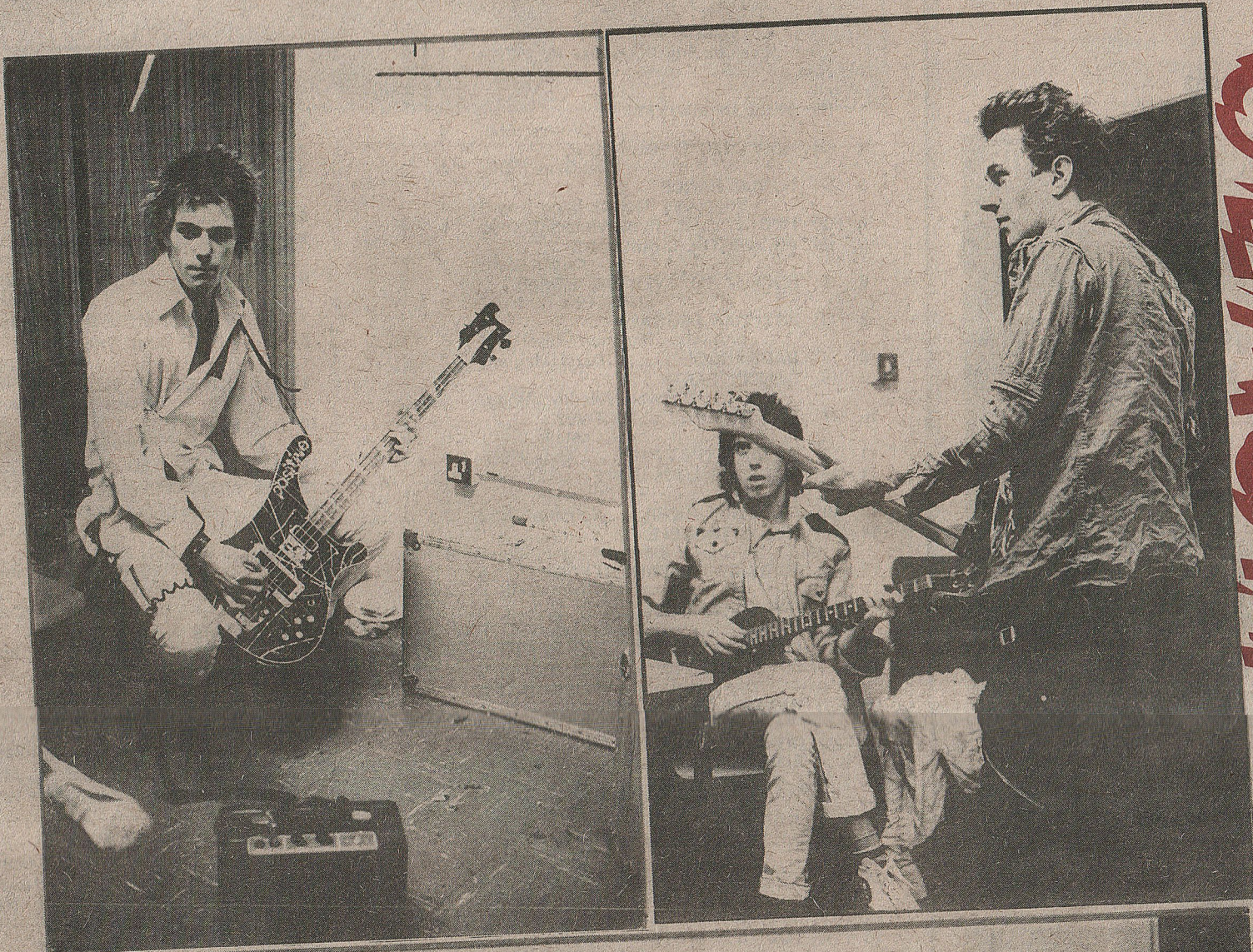


NORTON

Aus 35c NZ 35c SA 35c Den Kf5.5 Fr NF4.50 Ger Dm2.50 Malaysia \$1.10 Spn 65pts

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-ing 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.

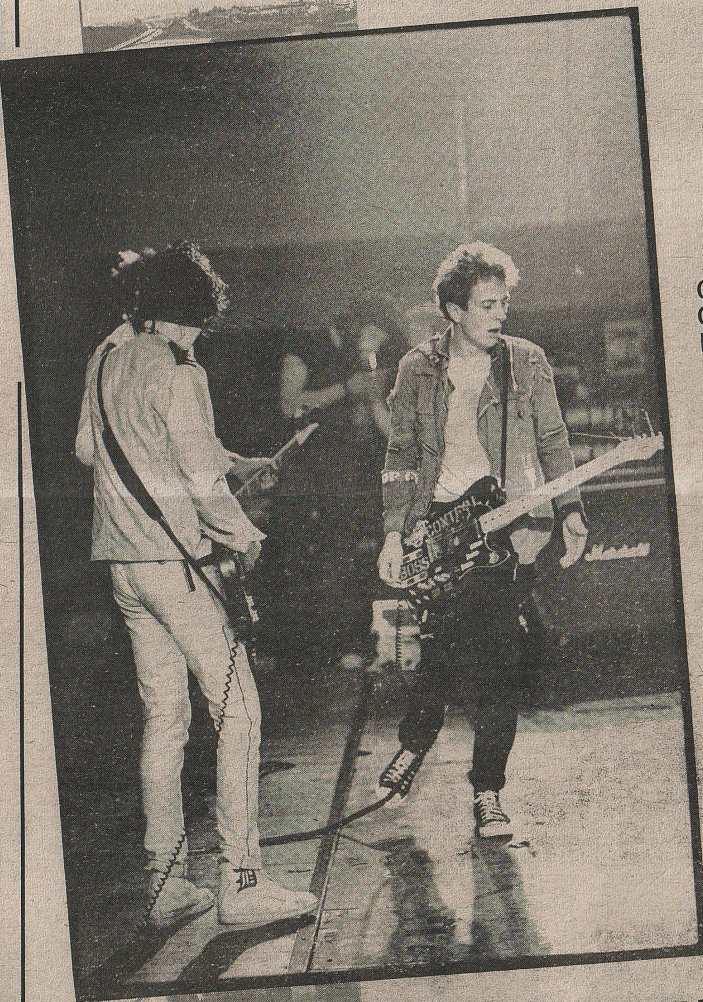
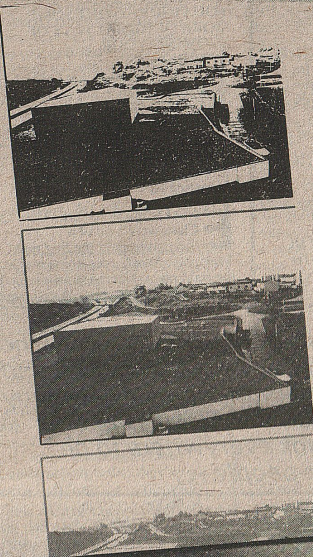
But more about that later. Right now, while we're on the subject of politics, I would like to make a couple of things perfectly clear:

- 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

● Continues over page

'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

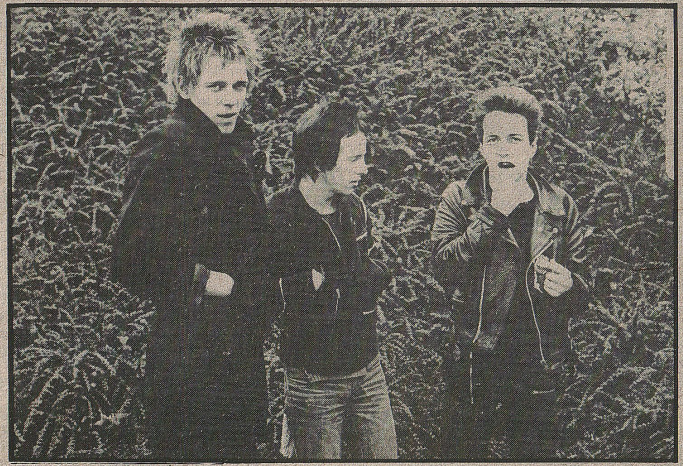
Actions speak louder than words, and the Clash are one of the very few examples I've seen where they would rather set an example by their personal conduct than talk.

From previous page
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.

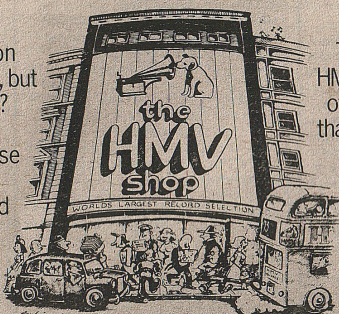
Somewhere in their assimilation of reggae is the closest thing yet to the lost chord, the missing link between black music and white noise rock capable of making a bow to black forms without smearing on the blackface, get me! It's there in Mick's intro to "Police And Thieves" and unstatedly in the band's 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.



They have to, because HMV have a very large selection of P**k and New Wave and that includes imports and 12" singles.

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."

The HMV Shop
THE WORLD'S LARGEST RECORD STORE
363 Oxford Street W1 (Next to Bond St. tube)

Would you believe there's MORE of this stuff
NEXT WEEK
Bangs finally gets to the point in another epic instalment (yawn) on Punko Mondo Anglo-Americana.