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CLASH TIME NOW

By Jack Basher

Lanchester Polytechnic is a college in a satellite city of Coventry, a couple hours north of London. In December, 1976 the Clash and the Sex Pistols did a gig there, just as the whole punk rock thing was starting to get sensationalized in the daily press. The committee that was running the show hadn't the faintest idea how to relate to the artists they had booked or to the kind of music they were playing. Dancing was prohibited—concerts were for sitting and *listening* to—and their generally condescending attitude towards "the punks" led to a series of arguments which ended with the two bands on the road back to London with no pay in their pockets. "Things like that used to happen a lot," according to Roader, at one time or another a roadie for each band.

Now it was just over a year later—Thursday, January 26, 1978. The Clash were at Lanchester Poly again, their last gig before their scheduled (and due to a bout of hepatitis for Joe Strummer, ill-fated) return to the recording studio. Several things had happened in the interim, things that insured the Clash wouldn't have to worry about not getting paid tonight. In March of 1977 the band signed with CBS Records, released their first single "White Riot," and then their debut album, which entered the British charts at 12. Since then they have established themselves as one of the most important new rock 'n' roll bands to come out of the whole New Wave phenomena. Their subsequent singles "Complete Control" and "Clash City Rockers" have been enthusiastically received by an ever-growing Clash constituency on both sides of the Atlantic. In fact, a poll in last February's London *Sunday Observer* (something like the N.Y. *Sunday Times*) saw them voted 2 Best Rock Band worldwide—sandwiched between Yes and Abba—which is the same spot (2) their LP won in this year's *New York Rocker Readers' Poll*. (Their immense popularity among American New Wave fans is probably only the tip of the iceberg since CBS has refused to release or promote any Clash material in this country—more on that below, don't worry.)

Anyway, so here I was, fresh off a 13- or 14-hour plane ride from San Francisco and here they were, maybe the best band to come along since the Stones, about to play in a college gym in the boonies. Their new producer, Blue

Oyster Cult/Dictators mastermind Sandy Pearlman, ushered me into the dressing room. It wasn't exactly an exclusive to-do. It must be common knowledge by now that backstage at a Clash concert is a more or less free-for-all proposition. Everyone's welcome. The room, in fact, was cluttered with fans and friends. The first thing I heard was Paul Simonon shouting, "Where's a fucking punk? I need a safety pin." (A minute later he could have opened up a concession.) A few minutes before the band went on some mellow tuxedoed guards politely stopped the in-and-out flow between auditorium and dressing room and some roadies asked everyone to leave. Everyone was very



Shahn Kermani

polite, very friendly—no macho backstage trips that plague American concerts and make backstage in L.A., N.Y., and Chicago such an ugly place to be. People seemed vaguely . . . gentle. Even out in the audience—I mean it was *uncanny*—people were friendly, polite, enthusiastic and . . . gentle.

Suddenly the band started playing. In a split second they had immersed the packed, 2500-capacity gymnasium in an intensely powerful musical barrage. After half a bar of music it was as if they had been playing for 15 minutes; it's like they *start* at an energy level that most bands have trouble building to. And the audience . . . the audience. Jesus fucking Christ—pardon my French—how do you explain a Clash audience? Look, the Clash are probably the best live act I've ever seen in my life, but, the audience is as important to the gestalt of the Clash show as are the four musicians onstage. That's what's so amazing. There's a certain unity-of-scene that has the fans putting out as much energy as the band and the people, onstage and off, get each other higher and higher until . . . well, I don't know if *every* Clash concert ends this way, but when there were too many fans up on stage the show just ended. Now "too many" for the Clash doesn't mean they get uptight 'cause half a dozen fans are doing a frenzied pogo onstage. *Au contraire*, my friends. It isn't until the audience has gone totally beserk and the stage is about to *collapse* that the band calls it quits. They seem to *thrive* on having a dozen or two dozen maniacs jumping all over the stage (Paul has even been known to proffer a mike to a would-be vocalist). But there comes a time when everyone in the band is drenched in affectionate spit (and let's face it, spit is spit, whether you're gobbed at in love or hatred), when the guitarists can't strum without elbowing someone in the stomach, and when people are beginning to get hurt. Then they stop.

I've never encountered a band with a following as ideologically developed and dedicated as the Clash have. Besides going totally bonkers over their music, the fans seem to identify with them, even *believe* in them. I mean, Jesus, who believes in *anything* anymore? Huh? And that's part of the dilemma the Clash face as they prepare to go into the studio to record their second album. There are people who are so taken with them—with their straightforward honesty and chillingly incisive social analysis—that they actually expect this band to solve society's problems. Of

course, on the other side of that same coin are the sceptics and doubting Thomases who put the band down as "political" or "opportunists."

I mean, do you wanna go to a concert and have some band exhort you to *think!* God forbid! People go to concerts for fun: to escape, to take drugs, to find someone to ball. You know, sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll, right? Right—but there's more. First of all, I've never seen an audience have as much fun—active, red-blooded fun—at a rock 'n' roll show as I did at a Clash concert, or at least not since I used to go to Murray the K shows at the Brooklyn Paramount when I was a little kid. But the Clash offer, if you want it, something more: a direct, almost personal relationship with their audience, based on shared oppression and shared experience. In England it has made them a fave with the young people and a bit of a controversy in the press. The controversy has not gone unnoticed by the band.

"We always go on the defensive when confronted with this political stuff," explains Joe Strummer, lead singer. "We see it as a trap—a hole to get shut up in. We wanna *move*—in any direction we want, including a political direction. But if everyone is sayin', 'Ah, you're political,' then obviously you say, 'Well, fuck you; I'm gonna go down there and get drunk for seven days and seven nights and then I'm gonna go over there and get smacked out of my head and then I'm gonna go fall in a canal. Fuck your ideas . . .' and then shrug it off. It's just force of habit when anyone mentions the word 'politics.'"

True enough. None of them think "politics" (the word) is too cool. Mick Jones, wearing a Lenin badge that Paul brought him back from Moscow ("Yes, it's a John Lennon badge") is emphatic about his desire to write about his own experiences, rather than about any kind of preachy theoretical politics. "I wouldn't call it 'political rock.' It's just contemporary rock 'n' roll with contemporary lyrics. I wouldn't really say it was overtly political. The songs aren't devoted to any other motivation than making people think about their situation and making it better. It's just attitude to modern living. You could call it 'attitude rock.' People *do* try to push us into corners saying, you're a political thing.' Political groups have tried to use us for their own ends. Groups have tried to manipulate us from the right and the left. The National Front used to use our pictures on their posters—because when punk started they thought they could get hold of it and make it their youth movement. But they're the most abominable fuckers—just a bunch of thugs. All they ever heard was 'White Riot, I wanna riot.' You could have the Ku Klux Klan trooping up and down singing that. Of course it was the complete opposite of that. It's an *anti-racist* song.

"The people who purport to provide the answers," continued Mick, a Keith Richard look-alike, "are generally full of shit. I think the most honest thing to say is that we





don't know the answers. We try to be as positive as possible but we don't really know the answers. A lot of people look to the Clash and other groups to find answers. They should look to themselves first. But people spend their whole fucking lives looking for the answers. I mean they go to Tibet looking for the answers."

*Black men have got a lot of problems
But they don't mind throwing a brick
But white men have got too much school
Where they teach you to be thick
So we're content, we don't resent
We go reading papers and wearing slippers;
White riot! I wanna riot
White riot! A riot of my own
All the power is in the hands
Of people rich enough to buy it,
While we walk the streets
Too chicken to even try it.
And everybody does what they're told to,
And everybody eats supermakret soul food!*

Paul, the bass player for the band, says he finds politics "quite boring." Yet he is one of the most actively anti-racist, anti-sexist rock 'n' rollers (rock 'n' rollers, not dull old folkies, mind you) I've ever met. He believes intensely in a vision of the Clash greater than just following in the tradition of being another successful rock group. But he has no intention of turning into some kind of fuzzy-headed idealist, either. "What we're doing is similar to the hippies in the way that we're sort of protesting against certain things. But the way they done it was different—non-violent: peace and love and all that stuff. Whereas it's not peace and love now; it's sort of hate and war. It's more of an aggressive thing now. We're not saying, 'Flowers, man.' We're sort of pointing out the situation as it really is. I thought that whole hippie thing was like evading reality—all that spiritual stuff and all that sort of stuff. It's quite different now. *We're the revenge of the hippies.*"

*You wanna survive
You better learn how to lie
Don't use the rules
They're not for you
They're for the fools
And you're a fool
If you don't know that
So use the rules
You stupid fool*

Projecting as awesome an emotional intensity as they do, the Clash invite you to wonder about where they came from. What kind of environment produces this kind of fury and uproar? Strummer learned to stand up and fight for himself at age nine when his diplomat father went overseas and left him at a boarding school in Yorkshire, home of the pudding. "My dad's a bastard. I only saw him once a year after that. If I'd seen him all the time I'd probably have murdered him by now."

Joe did lousy in school, hated "the thick rich peoples' thick rich kids" and grew bitter and self-reliant. His brother, one year his senior, killed himself in 1971. On-stage Joe releases all the tensions and frustrations that have built up in him since childhood. His sense of making-it-on-her-own comes through in his lyrics and the power and violence of his emotions come through in his dynamic, even athletic, stage performance. The day after the show in Coventry, Joe was in the hospital with hepatitis, but at the show there wasn't a clue that he wasn't in the best of health—except for his yellow eyes and skin.

Jones' childhood was no bed of roses either. Growing up in a poor working class/black district of London called

Brixton, he was abandoned by each of his parents, one at a time. He lived with his grandmother and retreated into books, haunted by the spectre of divorce and a sense of powerlessness and inadequacy. The excitement of rock 'n' roll appealed to Mick at an early age and at 16 he had already bought his first guitar.

Paul Simonon, also from Brixton, came from a broken home as well. He lived with his father, who had him out working as well as doing the housework. There were only about half a dozen white kids in his school and Paul grew up listening to black music and fairly unaware of white rock 'n' roll. After he left school he worked in a factory until he was fired for taking days off to draw. He managed to win a scholarship to art school where he wound up "going around with rich girls—getting fed, nicking paints. All I wanted," he told us, "was a place of my own to work in. But they tried to get me painting squares and stuff like that all the time. I wasn't interested."

Meanwhile Jones was forever in and out of rock bands, most of which never quite made it out of rehearsal rooms. "I've always been a fan. I really liked the Stones when they were happening; I liked the Kinks; I used to really like Dylan. But Mott the Hoople—they were the ones that actually made me decide to kind of pick the guitar up. They were the group that were gettin' people to smash the seats up."

Mick was in the now-notorious London S.S. when a drummer who had the hots for Paul's girlfriend dragged Paul (and the gammer) to a rehearsal. "When I got down there," recalls Simonon, "Mick said, 'You're a singer, aren't you?' I said, 'No, I can't sing.' So he got me singing. It was really terrible. This was only about a year and a half ago. Then I used to hang around with Mick and he used to say to everyone, 'This is my bass player but he can't play.' I couldn't do nothing—I couldn't sing; I couldn't play instruments; I couldn't do anything; I was useless. Mick, in fact,

tougher the struggle, tighter the group. And this is one helluva tight one, lemme tell ya. A buddy of mine, rock crit Blair Jackson, wrote "Great rock 'n' roll will never change because it will always be defined by the same energy—it will always mean freedom, defiance and youthful independence, and it will *always* say, 'let the good times roll.'" There are no new bands that fit that description better than the Clash, although in fairness to Jackson I should say he used it to describe Tom Petty (whose LP was my #2 pick of '77—right after the Clash).

"I don't particularly feel I've got anything special to say," says Mick, "that the bloke down the road hasn't got. I happen to be the one who's doing it."

So why be in a band? Rock 'n' roll excitement? Rock 'n' roll? Well, I've heard rock 'n' roll defined as getting rich, getting famous, and getting laid. Not by Mick, though.

"We were brought up to think of it as that, weren't we? You saw them and they were scoring and rich—looks great. And that's probably one of the reasons I got into it in the start. Man, everything you ever wanted was there. Then you kind of do get a bit of it and you feel that's not what it's really about at all. It's just continuous communication. It's to do with ideas—being able to stand up and have your say. It has to be *exciting*. Never did the money thing come into it. I just wanna be in a group, simple as that. God touched me! I was going up the stairs one day," he mimicked, "and God hit me on the head with a mallet and said, 'You be in a group, you cunt.' And I said, 'OK, God.' It was always the thing for me. It's the way you get ideas across *faster* than anything else. You don't wanna waste ten hours doing a painting—which may flop. You may destroy the canvas at the end of it and you don't get no buzz from it. This is, like, much more wreckless. You just go out and do it. The most important thing is the gigs as far as why would you wanna be in a rock 'n' roll band."

So they made the album for CBS, a company with which they have almost no contact. The album did well, but the



Sheila Rock

taught me how to play. Every note I hit—that's all from what Mick taught me. "We borrowed a bass from Tony James" (now with Generation X, once a member of London S.S.) "and I painted the notes on it so I could know where to put me fingers."

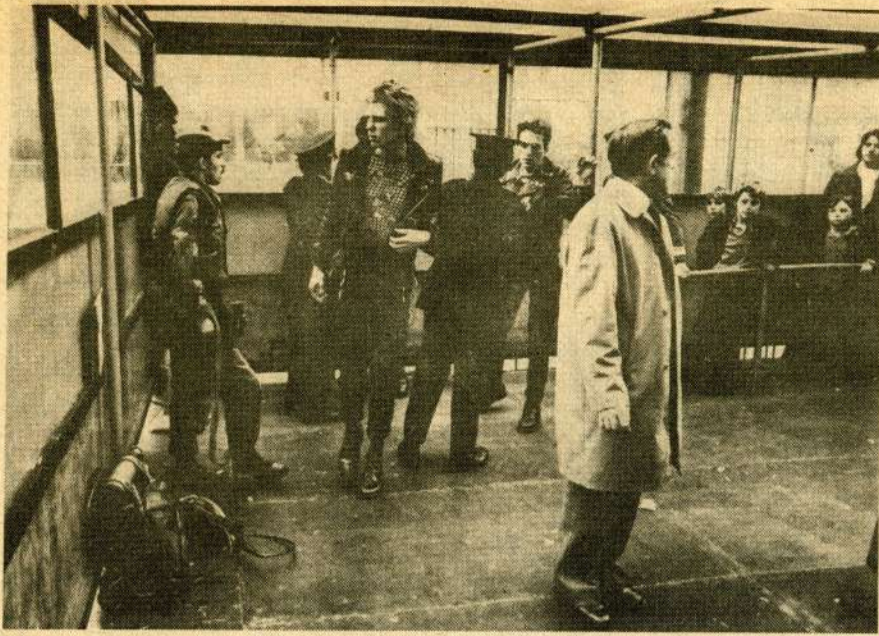
Mick says it was "the spirit" that made him pick Paul as his bass player. "It was a white leather car coat—a lady's car coat. We kind of went into this shop once—me, Keith Levine, who was in the group originally, and Paul—we all went in this shop and there were expensive, second-hand leather jackets and then there was this old 50-pence pile of old ladies' car coats and things. And we all didn't have the money to spend so we got these old pinks and whites and funny things and we just walked along the road with this kind of *look* and it clicked and I knew it was a group. 'This is a group.' We looked like a group—we're a group. It didn't occur to me that it had anything to do with the playing at that time. Now it has to do with the playing."

Meanwhile the Sex Pistols were gigging around and although they are getting virtually no attention from the music biz, radio, or the music papers, they were setting the scene in London on fire. It's the first rock 'n' roll band Paul remembers ever seeing. Joe saw them while he was lead singer in a band called the 101'ers. "As soon as I saw them," recalled Strummer, "I knew what a group was supposed to look like."

Joe broke up the 101'ers and joined Mick, Paul, Keith and drummer Terry Chimes (Tory Crimes). The band had no money and no gigs and they had to think a lot about getting from day to day. Looks to me like a struggle for survival helped weld them into a tight group—you know,



Sheila Rock



Bob Gruen



Anya Phillips

band started getting banned as part of that "punk rock thing." The drummer left and after a while they found Nicky (Topper) Headon, who had played for a short time with Mick in the London S.S. (First they had to convince him that the "stigma"—his word—of "politics" wasn't what he'd have to deal with, and that they really were a rock 'n' roll band just writing about their own experiences.)

Then American CBS decided to pass on the record's U.S. release.

"I think CBS didn't think it was good enough or something," explains Paul. "I don't really care what they think. They've got no idea, them people. Generally all record companies are pretty much the same. Look at this." (He pulls out a magazine with a quote by a CBS A&R man calling punk rock a passing fad.) "They were even thinking of getting somebody to write songs for us—getting somebody to write songs for us! I mean, we've got loads of material."

Of course, that may be just the problem: CBS just isn't interested in their loads of material. Now, the functionaries at CBS Records claim that their decision to suppress the Clash (who have sold over ten times the number of imports in this country as the more traditional, less threatening Vibrators, whose LP was released) was not based on any antipathy to the band's political stance. Middle-level functionaries of giant corporations, after all, usually know what's good for da boss, even if they don't *consciously*

know what they're doing. And any fool can tell ya da boss don't need bands like the Clash stirring up disenchanted youth and getting them to *think*. But, in fairness to the liberals who run CBS, here's what they had to say when they initially turned down the Clash LP. A&R man Bruce Harris told *New York Rocker* that "the group are just not captured on vinyl. There's an overall sloppiness in production, and overall this is an album with an inferior impact. Radio is just not interested in this record, so to put it out would be fruitless. The Clash record is also impossible to decipher lyrically. Listeners would have to pay attention much too much and they just wouldn't give it a chance. Politics was definitely not a factor. If people here thought it would sell, they would put it right out."

Now calm down, Clash fans. *New York Rocker* does not advocate the demolition of the CBS building (at 52nd Street and Sixth Avenue). First of all, the label—after much pressure—is putting the album out after all. Second, they let the Clash pick a top-notch producer who could satisfy the needs of both band and company for the second LP: the fabulous Memphis Sam Pearlman, producer of albums by the Blue Oyster Cult, the Dictators, and Pavlov's Dog and one who considers the Clash album to be one of the great rock 'n' roll albums of all time but *does* relate to the problems CBS talks about. (At this point I am being forced to mention—by R. Meltzer—that CBS is a stickler for their so-called artistic ideals and that they have refus-

ed to release an LP by Michel Pagliaro, CBS' top seller in Canada and, according to R., "the best non-New Wave person alive.") Anyway, Pearlman pointed out to Simonon, for example, that he'd definitely get a better sound if he played his bass through a bass amp instead of a guitar amp—and things like that, which CBS thinks is swell.

As for the company's lame excuses about radio, we ask a few modern-type radio big shots for their reactions. Beverly Wilshire, music director of KSAN, perhaps the most consistently trend-setting radio station in the U.S., told us that the Clash album "is just the kind of exciting rock 'n' roll our listeners go crazy over. I get requests for 'Police and Thieves' and 'Complete Control' all the time—much more than for Joni Mitchell or Abba. They're one of the great rock 'n' roll bands in the world." Similarly, Don Wright, program director of KSJO, an AOR station more mainstream than KSAN, told us that he feels the first Clash album is "one of the best rock 'n' roll albums of last year. We play it a lot and our listeners seem to be pretty enthusiastic about it, especially for an import album. I think a lot of people in the industry fear this stuff. They shouldn't, though."

Well, whether they should or they shouldn't is something else again. But as things stand now, we'll soon be seeing a U.S. version of the first album, followed by the second album—the one Pearlman is working on with the Clash in London right now—and, pretty soon, at least a N.Y.-L.A.-S.F. tour. Then we'll all be in Clash City—ROCKERS!

Paul Coerten





JOE STRUMMER