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HANG HIGH

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The phrase "Give him enough rope, and he'll hang himself" is defined in several idioms dictionaries as "giving a bad person enough time and freedom to do as he pleases, and he may make a bad mistake and get into trouble".

The Clash picked a perfect title for their second album, maybe taking it from Episode 2 of the 60s US TV series The Green Hornet (which co-starred Bruce Lee). It niftily pre-empted the derision they expected to receive from press and diehards who would doubtless find it inconceivable to see life beyond three chords and a white riot. But legendary Clash road manager Johnny Green now cites 1978 as the group's pivotal year.

While this century has seen The Clash increasingly deified, especially after Strummer's passing in December 2002, they were relentlessly pilloried from the moment they signed to CBS. It is hard to believe now, with guitarist Mick Jones playing the old songs to rapt houses in aid of the Hillsborough Justice Campaign, but in 1978 The Clash faced barbed criticism at every release or mischievous antic. Strummer was even forced by gossip column sniping to downgrade his living quarters from a poky attic room in Sebastian Conran's so-called White Mansion to a pokier Marylebone squat.

Most common taunts were aimed at the group supposedly selling out the punk ideal, though they were the only band to turn down Top Of The Pops. When they brought in the hot-shot US producer Sandy Pearlman, Blue Öyster Cult's mentor, it was like a red rag to a bull, even within the group's own close circle.

Coming between their incendiary debut and the epoch-making London Calling, Give 'Em Enough Rope is often consigned to trough-before-peak status, dismissed as a record company ploy to break the US market, not even getting the honour bestowed on Sandinista! of being The Clash's great folly. From my view in the Clash camp, it was a robust progression from the first LP's Year Zero intensity, giving Mick the studio know-how to realise the following year's universally-feted classic – itself lambasted at the time in some quarters. It also attracted flak for Mott-style self-mythologising as The Clash reflected on themselves, the scene they'd stoked and their meteoric joyride, with all its foot-shooting, pitfalls and triumphs. Mick's panoramic guitar orchestrations shocked and horrified some but elevated the set into something deeper and brave for the time. In hindsight, these spanners which The Clash nonchalantly threw into their own works enliven a story which, at only seven years' duration, stands as one of rock'n'roll's most short-lived supernovas and best-loved fairy tales.

This quintessentially "difficult" second album started taking shape towards the end of 1977 as The Clash finished the Get Out Of Control tour with three nights at The Rainbow, North London, where they unveiled Tommy Gun and Last Gang In Town. In contrast to the first album's creation over three speed-driven weekends, Rope would take the best part of a year.

After the blitz of their debut, the singles released between the two albums showed the group progressing and expanding their sound. Complete Control, Clash City Rockers and (White Man In) Hammersmith Palais were a remarkable trilogy which presented each aspect of the band at that time, from defiant punk rush to their ongoing reggae fixation. Joe's maturing lyrics and razor-sharp observations now threw in lines from TV shows, current hits or newspaper headlines; Mick's rapidly-evolving studio expertise gave them a sparkling, supercharged backdrop, immeasurably bolstered by the arrival of Topper Headon on drums just before the White Riot tour earlier in the year.

Pearlman was initially sent a list of recent CBS signings by A&R man Dan Loggins, and recalled, "I was in Holland with The Dictators and got a call from CBS about four groups they were interested in us producing: The Only Ones, Vibrators, Cortinas and The Clash. I went to see The Clash in Manchester and realised they were the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world! There was no point going any further."

The Manchester gig at Belle Vue's Elizabethan Ballroom was a volatile affair, with punters storming and smashing the plate-glass doors, and Granada TV's So It Goes programme capturing the contagious manic energy firing the band. Knowing Pearlman was there, Joe announced, "We'd like to dedicate this next song to Ted Nugent... Aerosmith... Journey... and most of all, Blue Öyster Cult!" before a savage I'm So Bored With The USA.

Although manager Bernie Rhodes approved the move to work with the producer, it was alleged that CBS, which hadn't released the first Clash album in the US, was pressing for a cleaner, radio-friendly production. Pearlman was an adult-oriented rock big cheese but had also powered up New York proto-punks The Dictators' Go Girl Crazy album, knowing how to make guitars big and vocals decipherable. When I asked Mick about it back then, he sounded slightly trepidatious, but, buoyed by his own studio progress, reckoned he could retain the band's essence and spirit, while gaining further on-the-job knowledge.

Joe said in '79, "There's this big myth about a list of 10 producers, and we had to have one. All this could be true, but the only guy I considered was Pearlman, because he was the only guy we'd met. The reason we got anyone in at all was because we needed someone to be a third corner in an argument... I'm always going, 'Turn the vocals up,' and Mick's always going, 'Turn the guitars up.' It's irresponsible, like we're kids. The idea with Pearlman was to have someone a bit older... We got him first and foremost because of his technical expertise, because we wanted to try and get a sound."

They had a producer, now they needed songs. The first album had been a case of capturing the live set in the studio. Having spent 1977 touring and thinking in terms of killer singles, being asked to record another album almost caught The Clash with their paramilitary trousers down. "We just weren't ready," admitted Joe. Mick and Joe joked to Rhodes that they should go to Jamaica to write songs, an idea mooted by Lee Perry when he produced Complete Control earlier in the year. The pair were pleasantly shocked when told they could go to Kingston in January, which vexed Paul Simonon, who'd been into Jamaican music longer than anyone in the band. To douse his ire, his then-girlfriend Caroline Coon whisked him on holiday to Moscow. On arrival in Kingston and unable to locate Lee Perry, the duo tried to score some ganja near the docks, striding out of the Pegasus Hotel in

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their punky-military threads, escaping unwanted attention from local rude boys by being mistaken for merchant seaman. After a couple of rip-offs, they acquired some "lamb's bread" weed, and holed up in their hotel with their stash, not venturing out for the rest of the 10-day jaunt, emerging with Safe European Home and Drug-Stabbing Time. Towards the end of their stay they discovered all the action was at the Sheraton, 200 yards up the road.

In January, the Sex Pistols imploded after their ill-fated US tour, leaving The Clash as the leading survivors from the class of '76. Three "secret" gigs were hastily booked to road test new songs they'd been working up and give Pearlman another taste of what he was taking on; starting at Birmingham Barbarella's on 24 Jan, followed by Dunstable Queensway Hall, then Lanchester Polytechnic, Coventry. If Dunstable saw Pearlman experience The Clash in the extreme front line [see p81], Lanchester gave him a taste of punk justice when he tried to access the dressing room after the show, only to get thumped on the nose by acting security man Robin 'Banksy' Banks. He was Mick's school friend, fresh out of jail for armed robbery. I'd just given him a writing post on Zigzag.

"Oh no, you've hit the producer!" groaned Mick, as Bernie hastily mopped up the blood and the band stepped over him. The myth has been that Robin mistook the producer for an overzealous fan but he confirms now, "I knew exactly who he was and I'm glad I hit him! I took the first opportunity I got because he was a fucking MOR producer brought in for the American market. I knew this would be the most boring album ever to record. An ordeal of immense purgatory, so I whacked him in the face. Anyway, he looked like a dork." Pearlman generously saw it as his rite of passage into Clashworld.

Recording was due to start in February, but the sessions were postponed when Joe spent three weeks in St Stephen's hospital in Fulham Road with hepatitis B. The story is that he caught it by swallowing some of the nightly rain of fan spittle, but Chris Salewicz's Strummer biography Redemption Song blames a dirty needle while experimenting with speed or heroin. While Joe recovered, the other three continued working up new songs at Rehearsals Rehearsals, Rhodes' space under the arches in Camden Town; it's now the market but then it was a near-derelict British Rail warehouse which served as The Clash's HQ, rehearsal room and doss house.

On leaving hospital, Joe moved out of the White Mansion into a squat on Daventry Street, Marylebone, having had enough of the press sniping at his supposed palatial home. He was back in action in March as The Clash worked on future singles at Soho's Marquee Studios. It was here that I heard the backing track for a song called (White Man) In Hammersmith Palais, Mick overdubbing high, gossamer-thin guitar notes which effectively and deceptively carried the melody. "Going to be amazing when Joe gets to it," I thought. They also completed future B-sides, including a stonking version of The Maytals' Pressure Drop, Mick's The Prisoner (about Bernie, with lines about "The prisoner lives in Camden Town planning revolution") and hotwired the old tune 1-2 Crush On You. They also recorded a slinky version of Booker T & The MGs' Time Is Tight, from the Stax soundtrack Uptight. (It would later appear Black Market Clash.) It revealed how the group's "Chuck Berry is Dead" stance, which rejected the reverence given to old tunes, had gone out of the window.

The Clash had recorded their next single, Clash City Rockers, before Joe and Mick's Jamaican trip, with the title referring to the Jamaican rockers rhythm rather than leather-jacketed greasers. Released as a single on 17 February, it made No 35 on the UK chart. After it was found that Mickey Foote, sound man and producer of the first album, had sped up the master, he stopped working with the band.

Clash City Rockers supplied a template for the next album, being more complex, referencing the band and their city, continuing the self-aggrandising tradition which Jones' beloved Mott had borrowed from Bo Diddley. With Joe's vocal upfront, he displayed a new maturity in his word-play ("You owe me a move say the bells of St Groove... No one but you and I say the bells of Far-I"). Mick's riff took from The Who's I Can't Explain, and multitracked guitars into pyramids of sound. He was getting more assertive in the studio and wanted to produce the second album, a move vetoed by CBS.

Another element thrown into this hectic year came in the form of a film crew capturing recording sessions and gigs to join a fictional storyline based around fan Ray Gange, who becomes a roadie. The project was undertaken by producer Jack Hazan and director David Mingay and stretched into 1980, when it emerged as Rude Boy. By then, The Clash had released London Calling, so it was dated, but can now be appreciated as an invaluable chronicle of The Clash at this time.

The first gig they filmed provided a most memorable sequence: 30 April's appearance at the Carnival Against The Nazis, held in Hackney's Victoria Park by Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League. It was the band's first gig of the year, in front of 50,000 punters, who marched from Trafalgar Square and saw X-Ray Spex, socially-conscious reggae outfit Steel Pulse and Tom Robinson Band. Me and the Aylesbury Clash squad duly joined at Trafalgar Square, arriving as Spex were parping with gusto then. The Clash unexpectedly came on at 2.30pm. Joe was sporting his new T-shirt "Brigade Rosse", which spotlighted the Italian left-wing terrorist group as part of his bringing-things-to-attention ethos. It provided another target for the critics. Mick's rock star look had blossomed with a cap nicked from a TV show, topping his black ensemble. The band were in an incandescent mood, tearing through the set at breakneck pace. During White Riot, Sham 69's singer Jimmy Pursey steamed in, ostensibly to unite bonehead factions whose far-right inclinations were alarmingly overlapping into punk gigs. At this point the plug got pulled and scuffles erupted between Johnny Green and the stage crew, while a pissed-up Gange bellowed announcements.

Then came the pigeon incident. On the afternoon of 30 March, Paul, Topper, Banksy and brothers Steve and Paul Barnacle were sitting on Rehearsals' roof waiting for Mick, trying out Topper's new air rifle on pigeons flocking around the old buildings; blissfully ignorant that the birds they were popping off were prized racing specimens belonging to a workman from nearby warehouses. After the incensed pigeon fancier had chased Topper with a monkey wrench, the British Transport Police turned up; their offices were over the road and they believed the miscreants were shooting at trains. Terrorism was in the news, so a squad of CID officers, armed police, even a helicopter, arrived and carted them off. Bail was set at £1,500 per person, which Mick stumped up as Bernie stayed away. After Johnny picked them up from Brixton jail next morning, they had to sign in every day at Kentish Town police station.

"It was nothing really," says Topper. "Just four kids shooting at pigeons and someone pressed the red alert button. That's all. It was totally insane. When they realised it was just four kids with air guns they went nuts on us."

Bernie's lack of support precipitated further rumblings, Paul adorning a Rehearsals wall with a painting titled Bernie Is Odd, depicting the naked manager being shat on by pigeons, which dominated a makeshift, candlelit altar, before which group and crew genuflected and chanted "praise him".

Mick produced demos of new songs over two nights with Damien Korner [the son of Alexis]. They started work at Primrose Hill's Utopia studios, but didn't get beyond the first night after Topper rode his motorbike through a dirt track created from earth that Paul had turned out of a large plant pot. The band blamed Pearlman's engineer Corky Stasiak and potent US weed, which might explain why it's a dim but hilarious memory.

The Clash relocated to Basing Street studio, off Portobello Road, the scene of Island label classics by the likes of Bob Marley and

Mott The Hoople. It was immediately obvious that this wasn't going to be a speedy affair like the first album. Pearlman's methods were painstaking and rigorous, with tracks played repeatedly until the right take arrived. This didn't sit well with the group, especially Joe and his "first take, best take" ethos, while Paul called the sessions as "the most boring situation ever". However, Topper nailed his parts first take, earning the nickname "the human drum machine" from an awestruck Pearlman, who loved to recount how Topper rose to the seemingly-impossible challenge of playing the snare part on Tommy Gun backwards in two takes: "It was inconceivable. Nobody has been able to do that since!"

Knowing the band as I did, it was clear it would have taken time for them to accept the intense New York intellectual in a baseball cap – as both a person and someone bossing them about. I'd seen it when Lester Bangs joined 1977's Out Of Control tour; he survived being covered in salad and set on fire to emerge as a fave. Pearlman endured those riotous gigs and Banksy's knockout; a few more practical jokes and he was tolerated.

Mick was in his own world, watching over Pearlman's shoulder, learning the mixing desk, planning overdubs and the overall picture for each track – skills he would hone to uncanny levels within a year. The production process further defined the roles in a group which perfectly exemplified the immortal band template of different personalities combining to make a larger-than-life whole; Mick the studio force, Joe the spokesman/lyricist leading the charge on stage, Paul the moody, heart throb bassist, locking grooves with Topper, the mighty engine room and final piece of the jigsaw.

I went to the sessions a few times, but Robin was there every day, reporting for Zigzag. He'd made up with Pearlman but still got up to no good with Topper and Paul as sessions stretched to 16 hours. "The end result is not only going to come as a major surprise to many of the band's detractors, but to some of their fans as well," he wrote, continuing to ring me from the studio at all hours with progress reports. "At night the studio takes on an eerie dreamlike quality, the tiredness and strain of getting everything as right as possible evident in all the faces present," also mentioning Johnny's furniture-rearranging competition, while Joe reclined on the couch watching Scotland blow the World Cup. Paul procured World War Two movies such as The Battle Of The Bulge to project on the studio wall in a bid to get psyched out of the ennui.

One day in May, Pearlman and Stasiak (nicknamed the Glutton Twins after the Stones' Glimmers, referring to their fixation with local diners) were bemused to arrive at the studio and discover The Clash had gone to play a gig in Paris, organised by the Trotskyite Ligue Communiste Revolutionnaire and marking the 10th anniversary of the riots. The jaunt had been organised by Bernie Rhodes, who was at the '68 riots. This new event degenerated into fighting in the crowd, which cops attempted to quell with tear-gas. Joe didn't participate in the White Riot encore: he'd stalked off in disgust. The album's working title briefly became Rent-A-Riot.

The pigeon court case loomed, Paul and Topper facing possible prison sentences. The night before the final appearance, I went to The Speakeasy with Mick, Robin and Tony James of Generation X, whom Mick now shared a Notting Hill flat with. We ended up there after chucking out time, staying up all night to provide moral support.

There's a scene in Rude Boy where a cab pulls up outside the court, discharging the dirty stop-outs. I'm last out (seen paying for the taxi), before we join Paul, Topper and the others. Thankfully, no terrorism charges were brought, the police having failed to make necessary ballistic tests. The Camden Five were each fined £30 and ordered to pay the pigeon-fancier £700 and £30 legal costs between them. It was with some relief that the Clash crew hit the nearest pub.

In late June, the band left the studio to play the Out On Parole UK tour, airing new songs. The warm-up was held at Manticore, a former cinema on North End Road, now run as a sound stage by Emerson, Lake And Palmer. Appearing against Paul's newly-designed Messerschmidt/riot backdrop, a crowd of mates, press sympathisers and fervent fans were treated to the set which would napalm the UK until late July, a mixture of new album songs, recent 45s and white-hot first-album chestnuts near the end.

The Clash brazenly hired New York's Suicide to support on the tour (after Aylesbury). Since the early 70s, Alan Vega and Martin Rev had been confronting audiences with shattering electronic onslaughts topped with psychotic vocals, mirroring the New York streets that spawned them. Every night they faced relentless spitting and abuse from partisan Clash fans and skins. At Sheffield they were pelted with bottles, while Crawley was overrun by skinheads. Rev now compares it to the trenches, while Vega likens it to "being in hell. We thought we were going to die every night. Every day I had to go to a cleaners, bring in my suit and they'd think it was pigeon shit. [In Glasgow] I saw this fucking axe come flying by my head like one of those old 3D cowboy movies! It was unbelievable, man. No one would believe me."

Joe was full of admiration, declaring, "Vega is one of the bravest men I've ever seen onstage. No one in England had ever seen anything like Suicide... A bottle was thrown at his head. I saw him pick it up and throw it at his own head as if to say, 'You idiots, how about that?' He was brilliant. He'd face them off."

Also supporting was an infectious ska-punk outfit, The Coventry Automatics, on the bill at Joe's insistence. Bernie became their manager, keeping them under wraps for months before they emerged as The Specials. DJ was Barry Myers, then resident at Dingwalls, Camden, joining the tour at Joe's behest.

There were noticeable changes in the Clash dynamic since Dunstable, with a fully recovered Joe ditching the gruff snarl to start becoming the approachable figure of legend, mixing with the audience and at his friendliest to me since the early gigs. He now combined his leg-vibrating fever with old-school showmanship, recalling anyone from Elvis to James Brown, pouring every ounce of energy into manic stage displays, diving into the pogoing hordes, whom he still tried to accommodate in person after every show.

Mick seemed to have gone further down the guitar hero route, his hair longer while his clothes and demeanour shouted "rock star". Offstage he was coke-aloof and rather snappy, the old sparkle dulled by the bugle he continued to trowel up his schnoz; his image was now a collision between Clash paramilitary and early seventies Keef, topped with what The Clash camp called his "poodle" hairdo. Mick seemed to be living out every rock'n'roll fantasy he'd nurtured since childhood, from hair and leather to cocaine diva behaviour. I didn't tell anyone, but sometimes I was envious!

Maybe the revitalised Strummer was rebelling, even compensating, for Mick's new pose, taking the pure punk stance to an extreme – like he did with everything. Topper defends Mick's indulgences by admitting he was snorting coke too, adding, "We were all nightmares in our own way. We had the music in common, but we all had very different personalities."

But despite internal problems, the endless recording and management conflict, when The Clash took the stage, they still flamed into something truly monumental, nicely summed up by Johnny Green today. "If you're a messenger of change, it's a really nice feeling, and we were watching it grow," he says. "It was relentless and full of action and incident. It's hard to remember those times sometimes. How wild and how violent and how trouble strewn. It wasn't smooth and nor did anybody try and make it smooth. In fact, we loved it like that."

The tour was during the height of the gobbing monsoons, every night a wet riot. When fights broke out, or bouncers got too heavy handed, Joe stopped the music and intervened, later reasoning, “When you see somebody getting kicked by 30 other geezers you gotta stop. It was an unwritten law that we’d stop and sort the ruck out and then we’d kick right in again.” The situation got out of hand in Glasgow, where the bouncers turned on Joe when he leapt into the throng to try and defuse the situation. He wasn’t aware of the ongoing warfare between the Apollo’s notoriously psychotic bouncers and punters. Afterwards, Joe smashed a lemonade bottle in frustration and was hauled in by police. When Paul tried to intervene, he was nicked too; both were roughed up but pleaded guilty to avoid wrecking the tour. Joe was fined £25 for breach of the peace, Paul fined £45 for being drunk and disorderly. “That’s what we get for calling it the Out On Parole tour,” remarked Joe, ruefully.

ExPistol Steve Jones was getting up to jam in the encores at some gigs, later revealed to be part of a plot between Bernie and old mucker Malcolm McLaren to deal with the difficult and “not punk enough” Mick. Though Mick had been with Bernie when he started forming the group which became The Clash, he was now the band’s main rebel against the manager and his ideas of how they should proceed. While Joe tended to keep himself to the task at hand, Paul and Topper voiced their frustrations through pisstaking or jokes. Although 1978 saw macho photo sessions with guns and Joe’s fascination with terrorist factions such as the Red Brigade spreading to his Tshirts, one major aspect of life with The Clash was the surreal humour that accompanied many of their activities. The imaginary mutant animals craze kept band and crew in stitches through 197778, Paul sitting in the Ford Transit en route to gigs, piping up with something along the lines of “imagine a budgie with human arms” or “Bernie with the testicles of a goat instead of a nose”. Although the atmosphere inevitably darkened with Mick’s cocaine moodiness, picturing a fish with a horse’s penis still provided light relief for the others. “That was so surreal, like Dalí or something,” laughs Paul now.

June also saw the release of (White Man) In Hammersmith Palais, perhaps their greatest song (which made No 32). At the backing track phase, everyone knew they had something special, compounded when Joe added lyrics inspired by a night at the now-demolished venue in question, where the hardline reggae he’d hoped for turned out to be lover’s rock. His disappointment became a launch pad for a state of the union address on punk and the nation.

The song stands as the embodiment of everything great about The Clash then, from the loping rocksteady swing of Paul and Topper’s rhythm to subtleties such as Mick’s slurred harmonica. Joe’s impassioned, sensitive performance caressed some of his most incisive lyrics to date. They tried rerecording the song at Pearlman’s request, but some kind of oneoff, nottoberepeated magic had already happened.

“We weren’t supposed to come up with something like that,” said Joe. “We were a big, fat riff group... when we came out with (White Man) it was really unexpected. These are the best moments of any career.” At gigs, he announced, “For this one you move your arse sideways instead of up and down.”

The song came third in Zigzag’s fave Clash track readers’ poll (after Complete Control and White Riot), while the mag’s first annual readers’ poll placed The Clash as Best Group and Best Live Act, Complete Control was Best Single. We had our detractors, who called Zigzag a Clash fanzine, but many more appreciated the unashamedly enthusiastic insider bulletins.

In August, Pearlman invited Joe and Mick to San Francisco’s Automat Studios on downtown Folsom Street for final overdubs on the album now called All The Peacemakers (after a line in Police And Thieves). Staying at a hotel in Chinatown, Joe and Mick became close again, experiencing for the first time the country they’d both worshipped from afar since childhood. It also served to remind Mick how much The Clash meant to him, as they talked about how Bernie’s divideandrule tactics were fraying the bonds of the group’s united front. Rhodes increasingly opposed the drawnout recording sessions, which were just as much Mick as Sandy in the overdubbing stages. Mick’s recent behaviour could have been a way of rebelling against this unlikely father figure – wasted rock royalty being one of Rhodes’ pet hates – but he would soon rein in the bugle, shear his barnet and instigate his sacking.

Joe was just happy to be in the land that spawned rock’n’roll and the roots music he was getting further into. While assuaging his fears about being turned into Fleetwood Mac, the trip gave The Clash a future classic in the form of the Bobby Fuller Four’s I Fought The Law, which got hammered on the wellstocked Automat jukebox.

After three weeks’ graft, Joe and Mick were given a week off. The former took off with a friend called Pete Opinga in a 1956 Chevy pickup truck. It was a Kerouacstyle road trip across America... with the radio on. Mick hung out with Pearlman in LA, meeting local punk bands such as The Dils and going to see Blue Öyster Cult.

The Clash pair met up again in New York, ready to finish the album at the Record Plant at 321 West 44th Street. One of the city’s top studios, it had played host to the likes of Springsteen, Bowie and Hendrix after opening in 1967. First, Mick put the final blocks in to his swelling guitar pyramids, favouring the 1954 Les Paul he’d acquired in California (for most of the recording, Joe’s famous Telecaster was in the repair shop, so he mainly played a hired Gibson semi-acoustic). “There’s more guitars per square inch on this record than in anything else in the rest of Western civilisation,” declared Pearlman.

On 21 September at Max’s Kansas City, Mick took part in a “welcome” gig for Sid Vicious, who’d just made his doomed move to the city with girlfriend Nancy Spungen. With a band composed of Johnny Thunders and assorted Heartbreakers and New York Dolls, they played around five songs in 20 minutes, The Clash pair were shocked at the heroin use, sensing death hanging in the air.

With CBS now set on having the album crack the US market, A&R bigwigs Dan Loggins and Muff Winwood fretted that Strummer’s voice would confuse American listeners. Press reports mentioned tension between band and producer, describing Joe as being “derisive” to Pearlman. Joe justified the prickly relationship, saying, “You want someone there who doesn’t hear what you hear all the time.” In late September, Topper and Paul flew in to hear the final mixes. The whole group investigated New York’s joys, including cheap shopping and Johnny Thunders’ recommendation of a store called Hudson’s for the motorbike boots soon to become part of the Clash image.

While Joe cultivated his quiff, Mick had his hair cut for the first time in two years. He came back loaded down with records, cool clobber and his Les Paul, on a new kind of buzz. “That happened with Mott The Hoople,” he reflected later. “They came back from America all full of it, with guitars, records you couldn’t get here and stuff. That first trip had a definite effect on me. I’d been gearing up to go there my whole life.” Getting away from London, experiencing America for the first time and learning so much while finishing the album had rebooted his enthusiasm. He had his sparkle back.

Between Give ’Em Enough Rope being finished and released, The Clash sacked Bernie Rhodes, on 28 October. With Mick back on the ball, the implications of the Steve Jones power play filled the band with resentment. They were also horrified to find they now owed CBS around £250,000. The longer the album process dragged on, the less Rhodes was present and Johnny Green’s role increased, the latter recalling, “As that relationship faded, the less they had to do with [Bernie] and the more I did. I was acting as an intermediary. He was very critical of the rock’n’roll lifestyle.”

The final break between The Clash and Rhodes came over a gig at Harlesden Roxy, booked by the latter for 9 September – when

Joe and Mick were in the US. They saw it as an attempt by Bernie to reassert his authority. With the show cancelled, Rhodes put out a story about The Clash being "on strike" over not getting radio play. In turn, they didn't honour the rescheduled date on the 23rd either. The Roxy was rebooked on 14 October – cancelled at the last minute because the venue had sold 1,600 tickets for a 900-capacity venue, The Clash turning up to quell disappointed punters. By the time the gigs took place on the 25 and 26, Bernie was gone, Mick and Paul outvoting Joe, who still rated his edginess and ideas as genius. Rhodes instigated legal proceedings against the band to take money he claimed they owed him, asking the High Court to freeze their earnings (while taking a £25,000 payoff). The band counter-claimed that Rhodes' lack of accounting breached managerial duties.

The Clash had rapidly evolved from an open canvas, on which Rhodes could splatter his Situationist schemes, into a fully-fledged rock'n'roll band. Like Mick's beloved Stones, the group would now go through phases where, as per Jagger and Richards, either Strummer or Jones were the dominant figure, never mind the manager. With Joe laid up, Mick had steered the band during the first half of the year. By Combat Rock, Joe would have enough clout to back a reinstated Bernie in throwing Jones out of his own group. For now, Paul's girlfriend Caroline Coon, a major player in the 60s London underground scene, who helped drug offenders with her Release organisation, took over while lawyers and accountants pored over the books. If the group wanted money they went through Bernie's accountant, Peter Quinnell. Other candidates for the management post included 60s underground journalist Miles, NME writer Chris Salewicz and CBS press officer Ellie Smith (who also looked after Dylan, that year impressing him with the first Clash LP and, at Joe's suggestion, taking him to Dalston reggae hotspot the Four Aces. Dylan loved it but the outing nearly cost Smith her job).

Caroline found a new agent in Ian Flukes at Derek Block's agency. They would have a professional road crew for the first time, with tour managers, along with Johnny and Baker, Topper's drum roadie, who also left Rhodes' employ to go with The Clash. Obviously, they had to vacate Rehearsals, but the gropup had a new, positive spirit.

The album had cost around £150,000 to make (the first cost £4,000), bumped up by Pearlman's fee and flights to Jamaica, San Francisco and New York (Concorde for the producer). The sleeve art, designed by Gene Grief, was derived from a Chinese government postcard called The End Of The Trail, showing a dead cowboy being picked by vultures as the Red Army rides in.

The LP was unveiled to the media at a lunchtime bash in a Soho porn cinema: an old-school lig with freebies and booze flowing. I'm ashamed to admit that Robin, Topper, Johnny and me took a few boxes around the corner to Cheapo Cheapo, the used record emporium on Rupert Street, then hit the pub. Luckily, Mick now sees the funny side. "That was so funny! The record was in Cheapo on the Thursday and it wasn't released until the Monday."

The promo package is one of the most desirable Clash collectibles, boasting folder, Joe's group history, photos and The Clash Atlas Of... Give 'Em Enough Rope: a map featuring the world's trouble spots, including Cambodia, Northern Ireland, Brazil, South Africa, Nicaragua and Afghanistan. The UK was represented by a riot photo and the NF's John Tyndall, while the US is indicated by a neutron bomb. It was going to be given away with the album until someone noticed Pennie Smith's large photo was printed backwards.

Though whimpered at by critics and punk fundamentalists, Give 'Em Enough Rope still entered the charts at No 2 when released on 10 November 1978 (and No 124 in the US, the country it was supposed to crack, the following April). The Clash might have been a complex web of personalities, but it has to be remembered that these were four men in their early 20s, suddenly allowed to pursue their fantasies while growing up in public. The violent imagery and posing with guns backfired with the pigeon incident, but Pennie Smith summed the group up perfectly when she described them as like "the Bash Street Kids attempting a commando raid".

According to Robin Banks, the inspiration for Stay Free, Mick Jones benefited enormously from making the album. "He learnt all the technicalities off Pearlman. It was a conscious thing, which meant he could go on to produce London Calling. The songs transcended the production, which neutered them to some extent, but I'm so glad that experience happened. It's probably the main reason for the dynamism of London Calling. They bounced back. It wouldn't have happened without Sandy Pearlman."

"You gotta realise that Mick Jones is our ace up the sleeve in the studio," stressed Joe the following year. "I'd just turn the drums way up, and a lot of guitars, and then stick the vocals on top... but he's got a kind of musical vision. When he suggested we use an organ and a saxophone, I agreed because I trusted his vision, but it was like, 'How are we going to tell the others?' It was like suggesting bringing in the Philharmonic Orchestra! Soon we felt any sound could be used."

Their next burst of activity was promoting the album on the cryptically-named Sort It Out tour, which ran from 13 October to London's Lyceum on 3 January 1979, where the last Rude Boy footage was shot. It was fantastic to have Mick back to his funny, friendly old self, the tour blessed by a much looser atmosphere (and The Slits making their startling first appearances with new drummer Budgie). Next stop, the USA, Cost Of Living EP and London Calling.

If the ambitious and widescreen Give 'Em Enough Rope catalysed Mick's studio education before The Clash could move on to their next great phase, Joe had spent 1978 shaking off illness, lifestyle stigmas and musical tunnel vision to crystallise his emergence as the greatest writer and showman of his generation.

Joe died nine years ago on 22 December. Give 'Em Enough Rope can now be seen as a crucial part of a year-long trial by fire, ending with The Clash solid again and firing on all cylinders – ready, willing and, most crucially, able to take on the world... on their own terms.

ROPE BURNS

The lengthy recording journey of Give 'Em Enough Rope started as nine tracks on a demo, six of which would make the final album, joined by four more to make the common vinyl configuration of five tracks per side. Three demo tracks didn't make the album: Groovy Times, Ooh Baby Ooh (it's Not Over), which would sprout wings rewritten as Gates To The West on 1979's Cost Of Living EP, and One Emotion. Listening to these initial sketches now, the songs and arrangements were fully formed before they were properly recorded, ready-made skeletons waiting to be fleshed out in a process oddly paralleling the Stones' Exile On Main Street. What got released lined up as...

Safe European Home

Supercharged, thermonuclear skank written during Joe and Mick's December 1977 Jamaican trip, which surges on the high-tensile interplay between Topper's fierce accents and Mick's multi-tiered guitars, topped by Joe's vivid observations on the perils of going "to a place where every white face is an invitation to robbery". The deceptively-complex arrangement and Mick's subtly intricate backing vocals were already there on the demo, but this instant hit was further elevated by production touches such as the false fade out.

The English Civil War

Amping up the American Civil War standard, When Johnny Comes Marching Home, which Joe sang at school as a kid, this was the second single off the album, released in February, 1979, reaching No 25. Joe had added new words in response to the escalating profile of the National Front at that time, declaring, "War is just around the corner. Johnny hasn't got far to march. That's why he is coming by bus or underground." The sleeve was taken from the animated film of Orwell's Animal Farm.

Tommy Gun

Topper's armour-piercing snare-blasts herald slamming power-chords before the group pile into the album's most immediate Clash track, released as the album's first single on November 24, providing their first Top 20 hit when it reached No 19. They turned down Top Of The Pops but Don Letts' video introduced lyrics about Middle Eastern terrorism discussion to cult Saturday morning kids' show Tiswas.

Julie's Been Working For The Drug Squad

The first indication that The Clash were embracing wider musical pastures came with this swinging collision between juke blues and New Orleans' second line rhythm, Joe expounding on Operation Julie, a massive police bust which had recently uncovered one of the world's biggest LSD manufacturing chains in Wales. Imagining undercover cops tripping, Joe sets up the song by referencing Lucy In The Sky With Diamonds. Mick and Joe recruited New York lounge pianist Al Field to add honky tonk flavours, but Pearlman had Blue Oyster Cult's Allen Lanier re-record the part.

Last Gang In Town

One of the album's most criticised tracks, from its Eddie Cochran twang to supposed self-mythologising in the lyrics. "I never for one minute imagined that we were the last gang in town", explained Joe. "Every day I was hearing about new groups... I just wanted to take the piss, you know? So we invented this mythical gang."

Guns On The Roof

Obviously inspired by the pigeon incident, Joe also rails about global arms dealing and corruption over another I Can't Explain heist, surrounded by swarming guitars and counter vocals. Joe bust a blood vessel doing the vocals in San Francisco, hence the "blood in my mouth" reference.

Drug Stabbing Time

Often-overlooked rocker unleashes a high-energy swirl of Mick's overdubbed guitars, dropping to chugging soul vamp on the home stretch. Joe's most animated performance on the album, complimented by braying sax from Stan Bronstein of Elephant's Memory.

Stay Free

Mick's sensitive vocal track was also lambasted by the punk purists. "It's like our ballad," he said of this Mott-style melodic reflection on his teenage years, inspired by school-friend Robin Banks, who recalls, "Mick came round with his acoustic guitar in a case and said, 'I've written a song about you.' He sat me down and played Stay Free. It was amazing... very nice of him!" The fade-out clip from the Stones' Sweet Black Angel is the perfect touch of youthful memory.

Cheapskates

One of the album's darker-hued comments, sniping at detractors over one of the album's densest productions, like a richly marinated sequel to the first album's Garageland with lines like, "Just because we're in a group, you think we're stinking rich, 'n' we got model girls shedding every stitch, 'n' you think the cocaine's flowing up our noses". Joe later described both songs as, "kind of fumbling attempts to come to grips with what's happened to us".

All The Young Punks (New Boots And Contracts)

Mistakenly listed as That's No Way To Spend Your Youth on early sleeves, this was unsurprisingly believed to be a 1978 update of the glam anthem which Bowie wrote for Mott but, rather than swaggering defiance, The Clash dispense almost poignant melancholic reflection. Mick didn't see The Clash directly carrying Mott's torch, "but Ian Hunter has definitely blessed our band. He was there when we did Police And Thieves; he was in London for the making of the second album and we conferred. He's always been there; one of my great spiritual guidances... You can call that number anything; it's kind of a statement, like Garageland. It's our message of what's happening with us."

SLIGHT RIOT Two memorable Clash nights that bookended 1978

Dunstable Queensway Hall, 25 January

The three "secret" January gigs sold out by word-of-mouth and local advertising, with Zigzag finding itself with an exclusive on the new songs. My report turned into a despatch from the front line in what turned out to be one of the most senselessly violent, wildest, even frightening shows I've ever witnessed.

Though it brought out the chaos-savouring beast in The Clash, many of those thousand or so young punks, jostling, spitting and often fighting, seemed like a manifestation of the tabloid press's shock-horror reports. Support band Model Mania were pelted with spittle and beer cans, necessitating a plea for peace from Strummer, watching horrified in the wings before jumping into the mosh pit. Then French female band The Lous got the same, prodding Topper to come on and clobber the worst culprits with a mic stand. By then, police were in the building while ambulance crews tended to blood-soaked punters.

Backstage, Joe wrapped his traditional "strum-guard" around his arm in gaffa tape, contemplating doing the same all over for protection. From the moment they launched into Complete Control, it was obvious this was going to be one of those supercharged special gigs which spurred The Clash into becoming the most exciting band on the planet. Its members seemed oblivious to the cans that continued to rain around them, Strummer contorted like a man possessed.

"Here's another new song you won't like, it's called Last Gang In Town," he growled. A full-but-opened can of beer whizzed past his ear, depositing its frothy contents over the already foamy stage. (I know, I was standing in it.)

After more new songs, including Tommy Gun, English Civil War and Guns On The Roof, and some recent singles, the fireworks soared several notches with Janie Jones and Garageland, as limp crowd victims were carried out. Topper crashed through his snare skin, Joe dropped his guitar, Paul ripped strings off his bass, while Mick ran about with a devilish grin on his face. The power Strummer held over the crowd that night was frightening. If he'd told them to burn down Dunstable, they probably would have. He started Career Opportunities as a gentle, unaccompanied ballad, the crowd taking it up terrace-style, before the group crashes in. Predictably, White Riot broke what's left of the dam, around 100 punters suddenly appearing on stage. Mick and Paul could only climb on the drum riser, guitars held aloft, while the crowd really did start a riot of its own. Joe joined them, beaming with delight as they momentarily bask in one of the most unbridled, no-holds-barred, fuck-the-consequences rock'n'roll moments I've ever witnessed. Afterwards, as Mick bathed a can-gouge in his cheek, the hall resembled a battlefield; another venue about to ban punk.

Sort It Out Tour, Bournemouth Village Bowl, 22 November

At the other end of the year with the album done and personal problems momentarily vanquished, The Clash lay into this huge, indoor car park of a venue with the rampant energy and attack of old, battling technical hitches to career through their catalogue and a blistering new version of Bobby Fuller's I Fought The Law. During their first encore, Complete Control, Mick's guitar lead packed in, the replacement was a dud and all I could see are his arms flailing yards of tangled cable around in the air like an octopus, while the band played on without him. After he ran off to get a replacement, a bouncer, thinking he was another stage invader, wouldn't let him back on and tried to strangle him. Paul and Topper exited in confusion, the latter scattering his kit to escape fired-up incoming punters and roadies fighting to save the equipment, which left Joe singing London's Burning solo. As the set hit a chaotic close, the welcome feeling of that old Clash magic having struck again pulsated in the air.

Afterwards, the dressing room was packed with fans let in by Johnny Green, the group signing and chatting until every last one has left. Mick started reading the latest music papers. Unimpressed by the reviews, we adjourned to a nearby Greek restaurant, where he announced, "I'm going to be a drunken idiot tonight!" and ended up dancing on the tables. Before that came a lengthy heart-to-heart, mainly about his recent coke dalliance, which he described as "the black cloud", admitting it made him a moody tosser and that it wasn't worth falling out with Joe over. Those reviews did hurt, especially with him being a long-time NME reader. I wish I could've told him that 30 years later Dylan would be playing Tommy Gun on his Theme Time radio show. KN

Posters courtesy John Brett of Bamalama Posters, a shop and gallery specialising in music and movie posters from the 60s, 70s and beyond: 55 Leather Lane, London EC1N 7TJ. 020 7404 6512, www.bamalamaposters.co.uk

Reviewed by Kris Needs

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THE COLLECTOR

17 May 2016

Mark Moore is a DJ and founding member of the group S'Express. He is regularly credited with being one of the first DJs to introduce Chicago house and Detroit techno to the UK club scene. He has remixed tracks for Prince, Erasure and Soft Cell, among others. The first record he owned was Ennio Morricone's soundtrack for The Good, The Ba...

The Good, The Bad & The Collectable

21 September 2007

2007 finds the entity we know as Blur in an envious position. Britpop battlers, vaudevillian music hall parodies, lo-fi tourists, baggy survivors; call them what you want, but their musical vision, stylistic shapeshifting and all-round musical hummability has seen them endure where countless other acts who first sprang up nearly 20 years ago have s...

WILLING SINGER

30 March 2017

The last time I saw Dave, I passed him in the street and I said, 'I never want to speak to you again as long as I live!' which was harsh," Marc Almond says with a self-deprecating grin, his gold teeth glinting. "I do regret that now."

Dear Astrid, cheerio George...

11 August 2013

The Beatles' time in Hamburg is one of great significance. John Lennon stated: "I might have been born in Liverpool – but I grew up in Hamburg," such was the effect that this place had on the five lads, which, for their first visit, included Pete Best and John's best friend, Stuart Sutcliffe.