

Albums



JOE STRUMMER OF THE CLASH

THE CLASH: "Give 'Em Enough Rope" (CBS 82431).

WAITING for God (oh) we get the Clash. Faced with the weight of expectation and a well-aided critical backlash, it'd be very easy to overreact here — one way or the other. Why should expectation be so intense? Other groups can release albums two, three years apart, and no one bats an eyelid: in this case, beyond the re-scheduling, beyond the acceleration of our media-dominated society accurately reflected by the latest youth cult, it comes down to the Clash's "cultural significance" to a generation.

The mantle that they sought frankly from the word go fell fairly and squarely on their shoulders: the weight is enormous — more than anyone could bear — and, from recent reports and the evidence of this album, it fits them ill. Time for them to relax and for the audience to relax on them.

Sure, the Clash have suffered from doing all their growing up in public, but then, they always wanted it that way. If the Sex Pistols were hoisted to fame by astute media exploitation, then the Clash weren't far behind: no slouches in that game. From August 13, 1976, when they played their first gig-rehearsal in front of the then relevant journalists — thus ensuring glowing lead write-ups and their place high in the pecking order — they never looked back as the quickly emergent and expanding "Punk Movement" took every word as gospel (ignoring any element of humour) and crystallised them into THE attitudes, THE catchwords, THE myth. Perhaps even more than the Pistols: for every kid who scrawled "Anarchy" on his ripped shirt, another read the press and took in all that stuff about "high rise living" and "The Westway" and "dole queue rock" and and and.

For a few months, for the idealistic, young, and needy, it seemed as though the Clash could combine the functions of fashion plates, politicians, artists and rock stars in a heady mixture (copied by the noticeably less talented — Generation X to name one) that would change the world.

When the world spun a few times and very little changed in real terms, the Clash started to buckle under the pressure. Their press coverage wasn't (and isn't yet) matched by record sales; much of that very coverage was sycophantic, written by camp-followers, or plain silly: the statement "The Greatest Rock 'n' Roll Band On The Planet," indefensible on any level, was said too often by those old enough to know better.

As the disparity between the ideals expected from them by the fans (and reinforced by the press) and the reality of the situation grew, they themselves relapsed into back-biting, self-justification, double-think and dull petty crime. From an all-encompassing revolutionary package into just another rock band: suddenly, to many they became ordinary. That strain is all over this album.

From the sub-Warholian grainy dayglo of the militaristic, spaghetti western cover, the general mood of the album, as hinted by the title, is pretty depressed. The Clash's view of the human condition, while imprecisely expressed, isn't very sanguine this time out. The sharp, direct attack of the first album, itself holding out hope by the accuracy of targets selected and hit, has been replaced by a confused lashing-out and a muddy attempt to come to terms with the violence of the outside world, which the Clash plainly see as hostile through and through.

Flicking through the titles, you catch the words repeated — "Drugs," "Guns" — and the general themes of

The Clash: War 'n' pizza

gangs and fights, all too rarely enlivened with the humour that marked the first album. They sound as though they're writing about what they think is expected of them, rather than what they want to write about, or need to. It's as though they see their function in terms of "the modern outlaw" — obligatory "rock 'n' roll" rebellion similar to the Stones — and conservatism of the punk ethos they so singularly helped to create.

None of all this would matter at all if this was a great album: that it isn't, in the end, is down to the music.

The first side is by far the superior, both in the quality of the individual songs and its playing as a whole. "Safe European Home" begins the album in confident and rousing fashion, where the Clash's penchant for singing about their own mythology — viz "Complete Control" — is continued. This time, however, they tell the story — the visit to Jamaica by Strummer and Jones — against themselves with wit and with no attempt to justify themselves. And perception: "Where every white face is an invitation to robbery"; the song itself is lilting and memorable, with great gabbled vocals from Strummer, a well-integrated reggae break, and irresistible motion. A broadening that's entirely successful.

"English Civil War," while hyper-tense, works in the context of the surrounding cuts, and because it reworks closely a song which can't fail to rouse. Strummer is one of the few rock vocalists who could carry it off successfully: the range and depth of emotion expressed by his voice is one of the few consistent things about the album and, is where much of the Clash's undoubted greatness stems from.

"Tommy Gun" is another emotional tour-de-force and a natural 45: in the break near the end the band works itself into a wall of sound as Strummer EIGHTS to be heard over the holocausts of noise and the band achieve the massive, general statement they want.

The side sags with the amusing yet lightweight "Julie's In The Drug Squad" — referring to the recent huge LSD busts in Wales — where the sound is thin and some of the asides gratuitous. Things pick up again with "Last Gang In Town": the Clash's sometimes ambiguous fascination with gangs and gang warfare is laid out for all time. Built around a basic rock 'n' roll riff, the song misses making a "statement," but is remarkable for Strummer's deep compassion (already in evidence on the "Hammersmith Palais" 45) and the genuinely taut and chilling chorus.

Side two is more problematic. "Guns On The Roof" unhappily mixes one of Strummer's best vocals with the Clash at their most tendentious. The intro rips off "Clash City Rockers" which rips off "I Can't Explain" which ripped off some old Kinks song I can't remember. While most pop is about plagiarism in this instance it seems to signify lack of inspiration and an over-reliance on the tried and trusted. The lyric extrapolates from their conviction for shooting pigeons — very "creatively violent" — to take in an attack against the legal system and then world-wide violence. How this is managed is unclear, even from the lyric sheet, but the song continues this habit the Clash have of justifying their actions by making tenuous general externalisations thereon.

"Drug-Stabbing Time," however, is another great moment: beginning with a flashy rock riff, the band break fast into the chorus, driven by cowbells and fat sax; the lyric tells you what happens when the car comes to take you away.

From here on in it's downhill. "Stay Free" is embarrassing in the failure of Mick Jones' vocal to carry the weight of the song, overburdened by "tasteful" arrangements and the attempt at personal dedication. Both "Cheapskates" and "All The Young Punks (New Boots and Contracts)" show the difficulty (and pain) of the Clash's adjustment to the pressure placed on them and the failure of "punk": both are depressing and sad — both unintentionally and intentionally — and not much fun to listen to. "Cheapskates" is irritating in the assumption that the lyric ("We're cheapskates/Anything'll do/We're cheapskates/What we s'posed to do?") absolves them from any mistake or any failure; "All The Young Punks" attempts a hymnal "All The Young Dudes" feel and ends the album on a very downbeat, if touching, note.

In some ways, much of the musical and social development of the last 18 months might never have happened as far as this album is concerned. Musically, the Clash stray rarely from rock 'n' roll roots and basic Who/Kinks/Mott models. Jones' guitar work is best when concise and using drones: several times on the album he stretches out in a manner which suggests he thinks he's better than he is. Simonon's bass work at times seems to drag rather than pump, adding to the leaden air of cuts like "Cheapskates": it's best on moments like the chorus of "Last Going". The only consistent elements are Strummer's singing and Headon's drumming; this is occasionally over-emphasised by the curious production, tampering as it does with the general sound, without performing a general overhaul throughout — appended rather than integrated. An unsatisfactory compromise, illustrating the well-publicised vacillation that went into the album's making.

Socially... It's hard when you define a period so accurately. The Pistols broke up and neatly avoided the issue. Here, the Clash seem locked in time, stranded on their conception of what the problems are, where solutions are to be found, and what problems face their audience. They have an audience which is loyal to a point of fanaticism; enviable but dangerous — they often seem to relate to each other on the basis of mutual reinforcement: trapped in this circle, the Clash's solution is to rock 'n' roll. From being radicals, they become conservatives.

It is NOT being "cynical" to say that punk does not "rool OK"; what's needed now is a recognition that the problems are more complex and must be met, not with facility, but with adaptability: often the refusal to adapt is justified by strict "loyalty," to some ethos whose time and circumstances have passed, as an end in itself. It now takes a medium less "talented," sharper than pop music to define the problems that face us; the solutions can only be worked for in the real world.

Here even the Clash's function as basic consciousness-raisers can be called into question: it's often hard here to work out what it is exactly that they're articulating, even more so when they aim at "statements."

Vague yet constant allusions to gun violence, drugs and militarism in the lack of clear articulation can appear, if taken wrongly, to smack of terror and militarist chic — which they already, remembering the Belfast pi, been misunderstood on — and which can be seen as simply irresponsible.

And still the double-think: the promo pic is a classic example — time-honoured cute "rock star" poses in front of a Russian propaganda poster or painting, Mick Jones with a Red Star appliqué — which as far as real politics goes just seems kindergarten.

And so on and on: signing to CBS and then blithering non-stop, going to the USA to finish an album which, in its allusions to drugs, four letter words and determinedly English patois, would seem to have very little hope of American airplay. So do they squander their greatness. — JON SAVAGE.