

ALBUMS

THE CLASH Give 'Em Enough Rope (CBS)

First things first, the rock critic proclaimed, as with no further ado he proclaimed the very first track of this, the long-expected second Clash album, to be a veritable monster, a more than worthy third cousin to punk's other two bonafide sense-swerving blockbusters, The Ramones' "Blitzkrieg Bop" and The Sex Pistols' cataclysmic "Anarchy".

Entitled "Safe European Home", this opener knicks everything The Clash have achieved on record thus far into a cocked hat. For now, instead of the amylnitrate pulse of "White Riot" or, say, the excellent but still messily conceived "Complete Control", the band have finally found their wings.

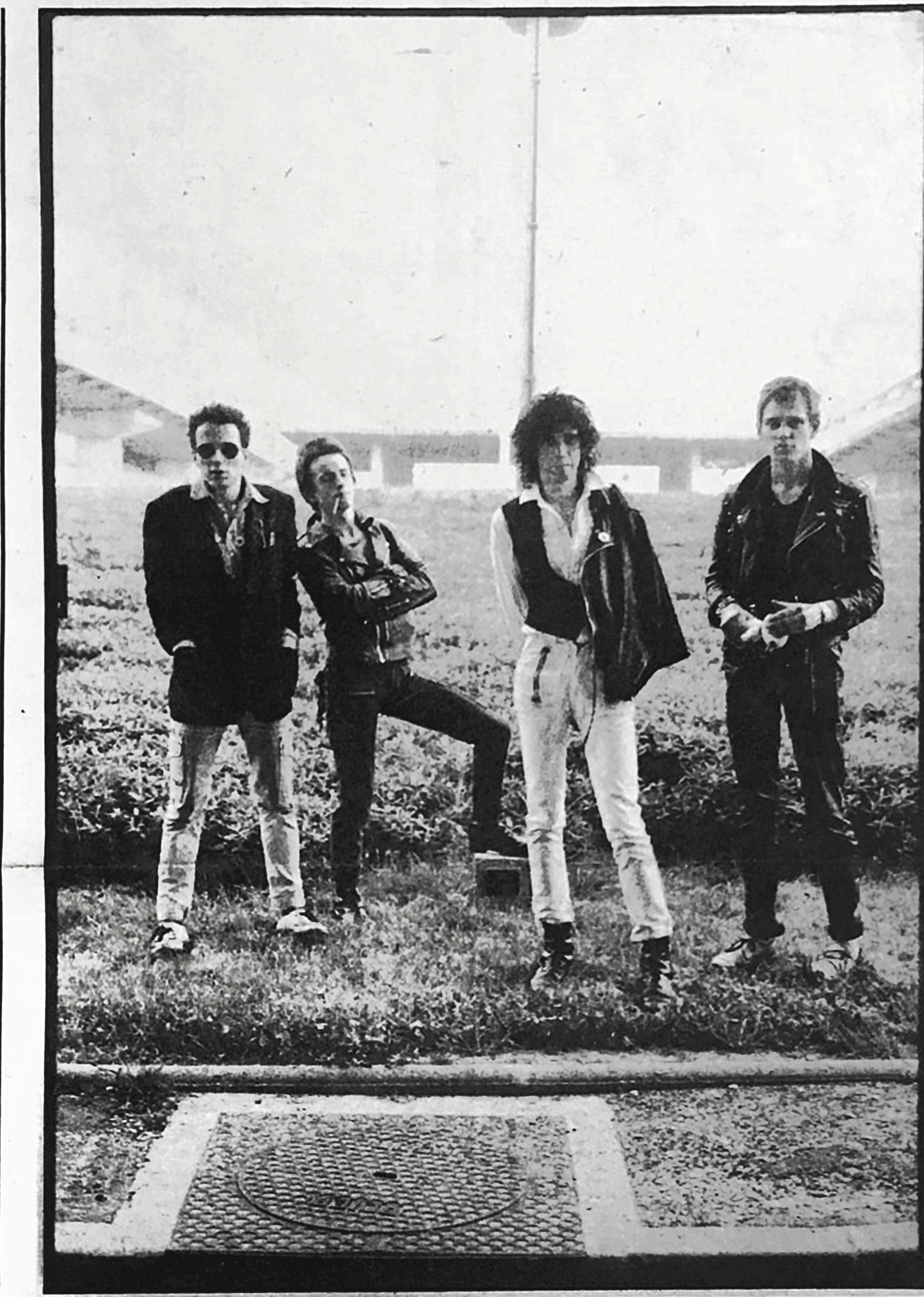
The ensemble sound surges forth in raging fettle, gorgeous power chord structures welded to Topper Headon's devilishly incisive drumming and Paul Simonon's kamikaze bassline. Even more pertinent, though, is the care that lies ingeniously disguised behind the adrenalin sweep of sound. The layers of guitar are subtly dovetailed to devastating effect which, in itself, only becomes truly perceptible towards the end of the song when a brusque respite from the rhythm section spotlights Mick Jones' holding a lockjaw reggae rhythm.

The savage momentum caught in its fullest ascendant on "Safe European Home" is held in check through to "English Civil War", a spry rock-dramatic updating and relocation of the old American Civil War song with Jones' fretboards packing a parallel punch to Strummer's histrionics.

"Tommy Gun" is the closest so far to vintage Clash with its thunderous pacing and one-dimensional construction. Not one of the album's more memorable moments, its main use is to enable interested parties to judge the full extent of producer Sandy Pearlman's achievements here.

The Pearlman's and Clash pairing is a most decisively providential coalition, and an appreciation of the results will force those who cynically viewed the producer's allocation as a ploy to dilute the band's power to swallow their words at once. This has always been a controversial subject. The Clash's advocates had of course backed the band to the hilt for using soundman Mickey Foote for as long as they did. Myself, I found the rough-as-a-bear's-arse sound they attained on the first album (which succeeded in spite of its production shortcomings due to the unfettered ferocity of its music and vision) and in particular on the last two singles — the cloddish "Clash City Rockers" and the inexcusably tardy "White Man At Hammersmith Palais" — often bordered on the unpalatable and damned frustrating. The songs themselves obviously deserved more.

But now the state of play has been radically rectified, so that even an uncharacteristic composition like "Julie's Been Working For The Drug Squad", which at an earlier stage would have been nigh



Le Clash en Paris

Joe Stevens

White Punks On Rope

impossible to record, now comes over with roguish panache (and with no small thanks to an uncredited pianist). Even the slightest item on the record, musically speaking, "Last Gang In Town", gains an authoritative slant.

Pearlman holds the precarious balance between inspired amateurism and a tough, still barely nascent professionalism. The second side's spuriously conceived "Guns On The Roof" is saved by tenacious instrumental interplay whilst Strummer adds some vocal theatrics. And then "Drug Stabbing Time" follows, a splice of ear-strafing Clasherama with a simple hardrock hook spiced with minor chord blocking tactics and haywire

saxophone (again uncredited).

Meanwhile, there's Mick Jones' "Stay Free" to consider. Jones can't sing to save his life, but the song itself — addressed to an old mate and fellow gang member who ended up doing 3 years in nick whilst Jones went on to eventual stardom — is touching after a fashion, bearing as it does the ring of 'true experience' which Tom Robinson's bogus burlesque "Martin" simply did not convey.

Two tracks remain on "Rope" and their content coincides with my fathoming other aspects of the album. So far I've treated the record as a mere rock and roll offering, numbering its mostly excellent musical features and

enthusing about producer Pearlman's presence.

However, you punters out there are not going to be provided with a lyric sheet and, as usual, even with Pearlman on the desk, Joe Strummer's lyrics are not easily decipherable. Although innumerable rock classics have suffered from similar lack of definition, a perusal of both the album's package and the reviewers-only lyric xerox offer some disturbing insights.

The lyrics first. Those to "English Civil War", for example, read like pure future-shock exaggeration. To wit: "It was still at the stage of clubs an' fists / When that well known face got beaten to bits / Your face was blue in the light of the screen / As we

watched the speech of an animal scream / The new party army came marching right over our heads."

The new party-in-power is obviously the National Front and though I'm loathe to underestimate their power this sort of hysterical response simply does no-one any good at all. The lyrics here though are nothing compared with the quasi-offensiveness of "Guns On The Roof", a song sparked off by the thoroughly sordid incident (the Simonon and Headon airgun attacks on racing pigeons) which Strummer turns into a bizarre and sinister diatribe against . . . well, what? That's the problem, see, and it occurs again and again throughout. In "Julie" the lyrics are certainly witty, but

no moral stance is taken, while even on "Tommy Gun", again replete with some sharp lyrical studies of the mercenary mentality, one is never entirely sure just which side Strummer and company are supposed to be taking.

Things take an even nastier lyrical turn with "Cheapskates", a fine solid rocker, but Strummer is out for blood and he's aiming his vitriol squarely at the critics of his band: "Just because we're in a group you all think we're stinking rich / 'N we all got model girls shedding every stitch / 'N you think the cocaine's flowing like a river up our noses / 'N every sea will part for us like the Red one did for Moses".

OK, OK, Joe, but seeing that your guitar player did get busted for cocaine not so long ago — not to mention all these lawyers and accountants suddenly dragged in to quell the wrath of Rhodes — if I were in your shoes, I'd drop the bully boy stance in favour of a more sly and sardonic approach, one similar perhaps to the way in which the Stones rebuffed their denigrators with the lyrics of "Respectable".

Returning however to the absence of moral comment noted in a number of the lyrics here, the uneasy feeling that The Clash are simply using incidents like the Julie LSD bust, the Front, the mercenary trade, etc. as fodder for songs without really caring or even offering a cogent perspective of their own is alarmingly reinforced by the packaging of the album itself.

The cover is an air-brushed shot of a teeming army of Chinese (Red Guard?) cavalry, one of whom is staring impudently at the rotting carcass of an archetypal wild west cowboy, two vultures feasting on his festering corpse. The only logical conclusion to be drawn, this backed up by the Red Flags held aloft and the Clash logo scrawled in Oriental lettering, is the triumph of East over West.

Meanwhile, inside the record, a poster features on one side "The Clash Atlas" with photos of those responsible for either oppression or revolution appended to the particular countries concerned (the Red Brigade — for whom Strummer wore a t-shirt — representing Italy, the Baader Meinhof West Germany, and so on). America is represented by Son of Sam, a singularly daft and spurious connection.

What it all adds up to, I fear, is Strummer's totally facile concept of shock-politics and, even though I'd like to think he was sincere in his misguided and bloated manner, there'll be many more than myself who'll cynically mutter to the effect of The Clash appearing trendily militant. I only wish they'd toned down drastically.

God knows, Strummer and co. have made right prats of themselves often enough when asked to give out their views on politics. After all, at the heart of this stands a record that at its best fully justifies all the faith and fervour fans, reviewers, whoever have placed in The Clash.

"But go easy/Step lightly/Stay free". Those are words that now need to be heeded.

Nick Kent