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JUST WHAT the world needs — another *NME* piece capturing The Clash On The Road Part 128, you say? -

Well yes and no, the writer demurs. Nothing lengthy in the Bangsian style of extended narrative, nor is there any grim detailing of spiralling trauma like Chris Salewicz depicted in his article penned during The Clash's last tour of Britain.

The tee-shirts printed for this current fling read in simple white lettering on a black background — "*The Clash — The Sort It Out Tour*" and although the person actually wearing the garment, a newly drafted Welsh roadie, will claim otherwise, that particular statement of intent is, it seems, being adhered to both practically and ideologically with a fair degree of success.

The gig I caught at Manchester's Apollo Theatre apparently fell into a linear focus for, as far as the opening stretch of a tour can gauge, The Clash's particular working policy is successfully being implemented.

Certainly as a musical entity, the band are in ripe old form, the current set kicking off with "Safe European Home" and seguing through a strong rendition of The Bobby Fuller Four's "I Fought The Law" and "Jail Guitar Doors". It manages to take in most of the "Rope" album with its sturdy detours like "Police And Thieves" denoting a more varied tempo allocation until the set's climax with a brace of the first album's little classics; basically "Janie Jones", "Bored With The USA" and "White Riot".

"It's that 'White Riot' that gets 'em up every time," growls one of the roadies after the set's conclusion, which tonight, like every other time, draws the front row of kids onto the stage itself on instinct — as though they were being physically impelled there by some perverse form of suction.

It's the band's expressed desire that the kids who've amassed on stage for the closing minutes of the set are allowed to remain there that appears to be causing dissension amongst The Clash road crew. And Caroline Coon, the band's new manager, will state this dilemma diplomatically to a surprised Joe Strummer at the hotel bar later: "They don't feel as though they're doing their job properly."

Mick Jones, however, balks at this latest problem and remarks jaundicedly about the roadies' apparent suppressed functions.

And so it goes. They still spit at bands up North, by the way — something I hadn't witnessed for a while and thus considered obsolete — and Strummer gets a good drenching for his troubles while Jones gamely sports a large white globule of phlegm on his current lacquered-back haircut.

"What can you do? Tell 'em to stop? Of course, it's repellent. We've always said that."

says Jones philosophically.

But after all, it's better than that very real cut-throat violence that the band were having to face up to at virtually every gig on the last tour.

WHEN our own Chris Salewicz ran into the band on that particular trek (in Glasgow) earlier this year the report he filed was a vivid, frightening documentary of a band totally out of control of its audience and becoming prey to all manner of random violence.

It turns out that Salewicz wasn't over-estimating anything either, as both Jones and Strummer reminisce over the daily trials and tribulations of that last escapade.

Jones, for example, recalls "breaking down in tears all the time" at what was going on around him — events which included a near-fatality (a personal roadie almost "offed" by Strummer in a car accident) and a cocaine bust for the guitarist himself.

"Two years ago we did the band's first interview," recalls Jones re the latter charge. "On Janet Street-Porter's *London Weekend Programme*, it was, and me being all young and naive, I blamed bands taking too many drugs for the great mid-70s drought in rock. I recall saying it really well. And a year or so later, I found myself doing just as many drugs as them!

"Y'know, taking drugs as a way of life, to feel good in the morning, to get through the day. And it's still something I'm getting over right now."

Now, however, instead of cocaine, or more pertinent to this band, amphetamines ("I was so into speed," states Jones, "I mean I don't even recall making the first album"), The Clash appear to be adhering strictly to a steady dosage of vitamins for maintaining energy.

Jones himself pinpoints the making of the second album as an important point of departure here. "It was really a question of me saying to myself, 'Well, do you really want to make a great album or what?' In which case, I knew that I had to be straight at least part of the time. Which I was."

The making of "Give 'Em Enough Rope" appears, from the outside anyway, to have been a period of much turmoil. Jones himself concurs by denoting just one of the pressures on the project from the internal hierarchy of CBS.

"It was at a point right in the middle of the mixing and Sandy Pearlman was getting this incredible rush of insecurity and sheer panic because CBS were calling him up and saying that the fist mixes were of absolutely no substance. And me 'an Joe were having to do this whole number on our side, telling him that this effort represented absolutely his last shot at any kind of aesthetic success.

"Meanwhile, unbeknown to us, two geezers from CBS — Muff Winwood and Jeremy Ensall

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— were taking the tracks, doing their own fuckin' mixes and going back to CBS saying, 'Well look what we've done — it's much better than Pearlman's efforts.'

Finally, in order to placate the opposition, and keep their creation from being wrecked by extensive tampering, the band conceded to a deadline which they narrowly held together. The immediate result is a satisfied Mick Jones, who laughingly claims that he wouldn't even mind seeing Pearlman on a social level again.

"His big thing is that he invented the word 'Heavy Metal'," Jones comments on Pearlman, again with tones of hilarity not entirely absent, before describing a fairly noxious aspect of the Blue Oyster Cult's one-time theorist which manifested itself through a desire to employ a somewhat ghoulish dwarf as a gofer.

"Joe and me had to really keep checkin' him over that. Like, keep on at him about this fuckin' guy being around and all."

TALK OF gofers moves perhaps a touch too coincidentally onto one of the primary Clash 'pressing issues' of the present moment, which equates itself into the little matter of former manager Bernie Rhodes becoming 'persona non grata' amongst the band members whom Rhodes himself claims he "took off the street".

The 'official' Clash line on this little chapter has the group democratically muttering "No hard feelings" as a display of good diplomacy in the face of the purportedly aggrieved Rhodes.

Indeed, the last 'official' interview I read with Messrs Strummer and Simonon — in *Melody Maker*, just before the onslaught of this latest tour — had the latter at least agreeing with Rhodes's "I-took-them-from-nothing" side of the story whilst also filling in details of the split by claiming that Rhodes's ideals had become redundant in the light of the band's progress and consequent need for better technology.

Mick Jones, however, allowed for some of the 'unofficial' essence to be sucked into print here.

The 'unofficial' side, mostly manifested through rumour-mongering, has several barbed pointers in the recounting of the latter days of the Clash-Rhodes pairing.

It was certainly a well-recounted story of the time that Malcolm McLaren, just before his interests were all-consuming by the latest Sid Vicious drama, had gotten in touch with Rhodes again and was buttering up his former partner-of-sorts by slyly informing him that The Clash had 'betrayed' Rhodes.

The McLaren Sex Pistols and Rhodes Clash aspect of the situation has always, apparently, been crucial. There was this terrible feeling — manifested implicitly in the very origin of McLaren and Rhodes's quarrel — would be immediately second-best to brother Malcolm's treasure.

Mick Jones was very aware of his feeling of being second-best at one time. He admits that The Clash were made to feel that, in the shade of the Pistols' all-pervading lustre, they were very much immediate runners-up.

He also admits that at the time — up until somewhere betwixt the creation of their two albums, Jones reckons — the seeds of dissention were force-fed by this awareness.

"There was this time when that feeling of being second-best was really getting to us. And, of course, Malcolm would help it along by throwing in some story like, oh Christ, there was this time when we heard that the Pistols had come over and nicked some of our gear. As a gesture of contempt, so to speak.

"So we'd immediately be up in arms . . . like, y'know, 'let's get 'em, let's go over to their rehearsal place and rip off their microphones', always something petty. Like there was this time — the first time — the Pistols actually slagged us off in print, in a *Melody Maker* interview, I think it was — so, right, we got off together and confronted John (Rotten) in a pub (laughs), and John was pretty shocked, probably because he saw how petty we were all becoming, fighting among ourselves, just stupid squabbling when there was a very real enemy out there probably laughing its head off." (*Ian Penman? — Ed.*)

Jones recalls that when the feeling of being 'second-best' to the Pistols suddenly lifted, "it didn't even matter anymore" — which he goes on to prove by expressing a kind of dolorous awe at the Pistols' greatness, and great pity at the way they came to career-termination.

However, it's dubious whether McLaren has ever gotten over this in-built feeling of superiority. It's a moot point, for example, that he thought of The Clash as an 'easy pickings' second division to the still intact Pistols.

Thus, last Christmas, when matters came to a head, it was 'assumed' that Paul Simonon would be available for transfer to Pistols-prominence, although the bassist was doubtless never asked about it.

The Clash, however, were later to make this position clear, when 'powers-that-be' (you only need to guess who) quite recently attempted to move Steve Jones into Mick Jones' Clash position.

"Yeah, that's all true," mutters Jones now, adding slyly: "Course I wasn't going to have any of that! And, more to the point, neither were the rest of the group. But yeah, there were all sorts of little undercover swaps being arranged."

Jones, though, had an advantage in securing a kind of advance knowledge relating to these dodgy activities, partly because he's no fool and partly because of all Clash members he was the first to encounter Rhodes & McLaren — when the latter was making tentative plans for the importing into England of one Richard Hell.

"Yeah, like just before The Clash there was this thing where Richard Hell was writing to Malcolm saying, 'Honest, I'm not a junkie, I really wanna come over to London.' So I was in line for that. Meanwhile, Malcolm or Bernie would be planning some new group or other and I'd be sent over to some rehearsal (laughs) . . . Like, there was a pool of us musicians that they'd have 'on tap', expecting us to form bands ultimately.

"At one point, me and Chrissie Hynd would be half-heartedly rehearsing away and Bernie would rush in and say, 'I've got a new idea. We'll call the band 'Big Girl's Underwear' or something like that."

Jones's involvement with The Clash project was more his own doing, however. After all, it was he who taught Simonon the rudiments of bass-playing — "for all of three days (laughs)

. . . Which means Paul got pissed off after those three days and would go away and then return some days later to try again."

More pointedly, Jones — and Simonon — went after the services of Joe Strummer, then of The 101ers, a self-confessed pub rock band.

More pointedly, Jones — and Simonon — y'know, amongst the McLaren bunch, of thinking 'yeah, well' they're pub-rock — they're below us'. Whereas with Joe I could see he was a great performer saddled with a duff band."

THE WHOLE Bernie Rhodes subject is, according to at least one source, currently a 'sub-judice' matter, which may account for the official 'no hard feelings' front. In his place are a posse of lawyers and former Release prime-mover and freelance journalist Caroline Coon who, as Paul Simonon's girlfriend appeared a fairly obvious choice as personal manager.

For her part, after just a handful of dates, it's hard to tell whether this move has been for the best, although brief chats with the roadcrew denote that Ms. Coon is quickly learning the practical day-to-day facts necessary for a manager's vocation.

In her favour, though, is the feeling of great togetherness noticeable on this current tour. Coming off at a time when the "Rope" album has literally bulleted in at a staggering "No 2" in the official album charts, this latter show of faith has had a noticeably confidence-building effect on a band who'd had to watch virtually single after single nose-dive into the bottom reaches of the Top 30 before disappearing from sight.

"We honestly thought it was virtually finished for us in terms of commercial force", Jones now admits, pinpointing the four previous singles' lack of success as chief demonstration to this feeling.

That added to the constant barrage of letters that seemed to hit paydirt in the columns of the various music papers, almost every week berating the latest petty Clash let-down until a little under a month ago, and one begins to get only the outline of the problems that have been pelted down from what appeared like some monstrous frowning deity on the band themselves, as though their name itself warranted such treatment.

Jones points to the sequence of events that simply naming a tour, say, seems to have sparked off. The last one, for example, boasting that "On Parole" sign, appeared to virtually supernaturally guarantee at least one bust.

So this time it's down to simply "sorting it out". And this The Clash may actually achieve at least a semblance of this time around. The halls still get packed out, and visually the band may look a little the worse for wear — particularly Strummer, whose teeth seem in terrible shape after being chipped and battered by a fan manhandling of the singer's mickstand.

Yet The Clash's philosophy, not to mention the broad design of a deep interlinking set of friendships that hold this band together against often brutal odds is succinctly hinted at by Mick Jones when he talks about the latest slag-off and its perpetrators, namely our own Messrs. Parsons and Burchill and their book *The Boy Looked At Johnny*, which attempts a brittle dissection of the band — based, The Clash maintain, mostly on half-truths and warped malice.

"It's like, ultimately, who cares? So, two more people think rock'n'roll's dead? So what? Should we all drop our guitars down and fall apart? It's like too many people are letting the negative aspects get to them, get them into some terminal form of depression.

"Fuck it, I get depressed just as much, but what can you do? 'Cos if you start shouting about the death of something, you're just copping out really. To me, it's like rock'n'roll is dead? Oh alright then. See you at the next gig."