

INTERNATIONAL **Musician** AND RECORDING WORLD

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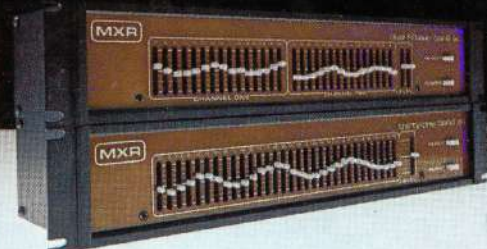
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CLASH:

David Lawrenson meets Topper and Mick, alias Headon and Jones

"We're musicians"

"I'm so surprised to be asked to do this sort of thing, because only lately have I realised that people think we properly play and stuff." So speaks Mick Jones, lead guitarist with the Clash.

He was genuinely surprised that a publication like International Musician and its readers would be interested in the way he plays his instrument. The fact is that he is a member of one of the most potent and exciting bands in the country.

To some people in the rock business, the term "musician" is reserved for players who have been around a long time, amassed a huge collection of instruments or who take endless long solos. Because all these criteria are largely absent from the New Wave, the implication is that it's a scene devoid of musicians.

Luckily this narrow outlook is not universal. If it was we would have had no Beatles, Stones or the Who. Rock music is primarily concerned with expressing feelings, emotions and excitement — qualities which the New Wave has in abundance.

Along with the Sex Pistols and the Damned, the Clash were one of the original punk bands formed in 1976. Now the sole surviving outfit from that trio, their music still contains much of the anger and aggression of those early days, although they possess a style and an awareness that sets them apart from many imitators.

With a minimum of TV and radio exposure, their singles have consistently made the lower reaches of the charts, while their first CBS album "The Clash", released in early 1977, went straight in at number 12 and has sold consistently ever since. It has taken them almost 18 months to come up with a follow-up, "Give 'Em Enough Rope", which saw them working with American producer Sandy Pearlman.

Mick Jones is 23. He started playing guitar at 16, having tried his hand at drums and bass. He blew a week's wages on a big blond F-hole Hofner acoustic which he used to mike up. "Then I got a Telecaster, a great old maple neck Tele, but I always wanted a Les Paul Junior.

"I thought they were the greatest guitars going because I'd heard both Steve Hunter and the other guitarist on the Lou Reed live album used them and I thought, 'This is what it's all about'. So I saved up for about six months and got one. It was really difficult to find, because there were none in the shops. Eventually I found one in the Vox shop in Shaftesbury Avenue. It was on a top shelf and really dusty. It was a cherry one and I paid about £190 for it. It has been broken about four times, so it has

more or less died but I've got a couple of others now.

"The guitar I'm using now is a 1952 Les Paul Standard, which got broken in Arnheim by the stage manager. It was on a guitar stand and he walked straight into it and the neck was off. I had a bit of respect for that guitar — it was older than I was! I got it fixed but it's not the same, it doesn't tune up and sustain goes. As a spare I use a Les Paul Junior; I've got a blue sparkly one and a red one. I think there are some guitars that do talk to you, you feel OK with them. If you feel good with them then they are great guitars."

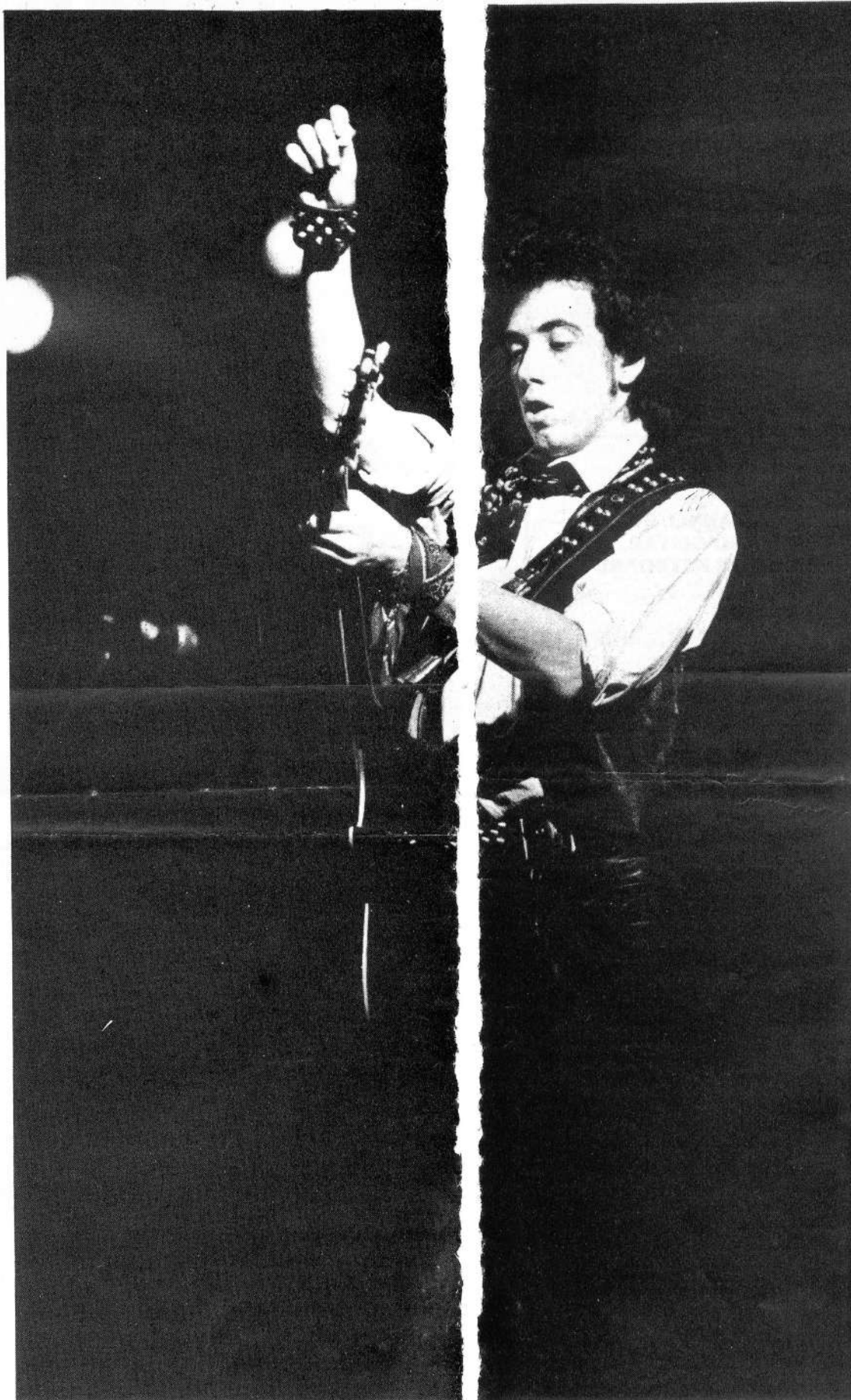
Mick has very definite ideas on guitars and the way they should be treated and played. He is a firm believer in the quality instruments made by top manufacturers such as Gibson, dismissing many of the newer makes as merely "copies". "I didn't buy them when I had no money, so I'm not going to buy them now," he proclaims.

For amplification he uses a Boogie set-up. "I was using Ampeg for ages because the Stones used them, but now I've got a Boogie and it's really great, the best. I use one of those big ones with a graphic on it. If we are playing a really big hall I use a slave of a Marshall and a couple of 4 x 12s, otherwise it's just the Boogie and 4 x 12s. They're good amps except the speakers blow, but that's only because I turn it up to 10. I've got no self-control whatsoever.

"The only effect I use is an MXR phaser, it's an American one, the biggest they have. You can get about five different phases on it. We have Space Echo and that kind of stuff through the PA, and I used a wah-wah on one of the album tracks."

To many, the music of the Clash would seem crude and regressive, with guitarists such as Mick Jones definitely not qualifying as "musicians". Yet those same people would undoubtedly extol the expertise of the Stones or the Who — bands who definitely were not considered top quality musicians in their early days. It is impossible not to draw comparisons between the early Sixties and today's New Wave scene.

"It's probably just the same," says



Mick, "but it is a pity that all those people forgot about it, and forgot it was said about them. The point about our music is the spirit of the thing. You have got to communicate the spirit of what you do. When you do that, you can't really spend a lot of time respecting traditional values of what music is all about.

"I think it's nothing to do with what guitar you use, it's how you do it. I think you can do it on a Woolworth's guitar, quite truthfully. The important thing is how. Guitars are there to be used, it's a tool, you shouldn't let it play you or be your boss. Some groups you see and you say, 'Oh, the guitarist needs a good sound, he's got a tinny sound and it doesn't quite fit the music.' But really, it's only a matter of once you've got the thing that fits the music, doing it with a bit of style.

"There's lots of guitarists I really like. I think Mick Ronson's great, Keith Richard don't do much and I think he's pretty good, Jeff Beck does a lot and does nothing at the same time. There's loads of them I really like and I've got nothing against these people. I've only got something against those who... well, the only spirit they communicate is just taking the audience's money and giving them nothing for it — the groups with their heads in the sand."

Mick admits that he is still learning and that the group are still practising and learning their craft. The biggest problem seems to be one of dynamics, in particular learning to turn down on stage so the vocals can be

heard. Mick writes most of the band's material along with fellow guitarist Joe Strummer. Their prolific output was one of the reasons for the delay of the album.

"We recorded it twice as demos before we actually cut down, then we recorded about 20 songs and ended up with only 10 on the album. Everything was concise and to the point, there is nothing on it that doesn't say something. Most groups are rushed into second albums almost before they've finished the first, they don't really have time to think about what they're writing, it becomes less creative and just another sales machine.

"We said we aren't going to rush, and told the record company that they would have to wait until we thought it was right. They could have had an album six months ago but it would have been dross in comparison to the first one. I think we have got a second album which is better than the first, and we're going to do a third which will be better than the second. That doesn't mean to say it will take a long time because now we're learning about producing and stuff we'll probably knock it off a bit quicker, but I'm very wary of quick decisions."

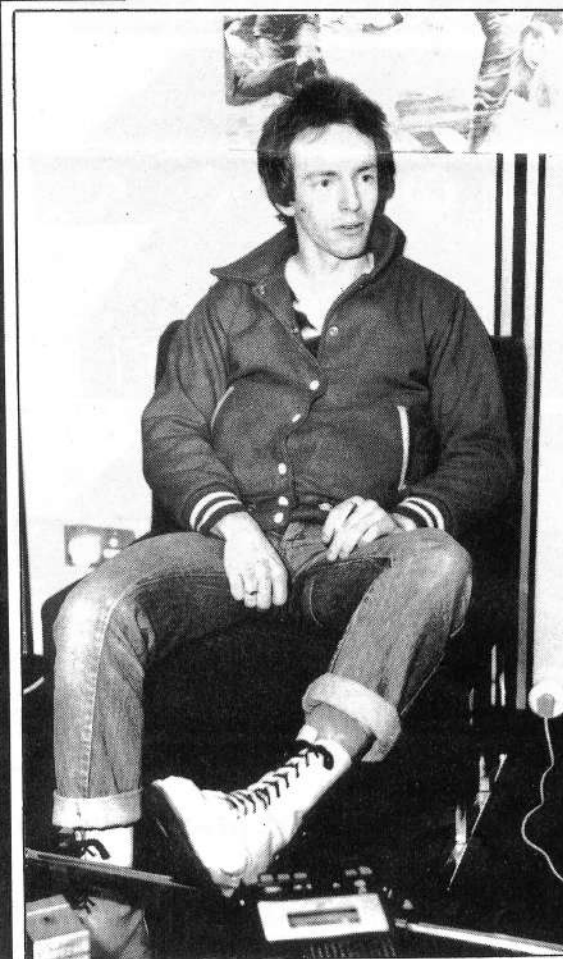
The one change in line-up between the albums has been their drummer, Nicky "Topper" Headon. On the first album they used Terry Chimes, but soon after installed Topper in the drum chair and his contribution to the band both on stage and in the studio has been considerable. He is a powerful drummer, whose brief career has seen him gaining experience in a wide variety of styles — the type of credentials which would satisfy even the staunchest music critic. Topper began his musical career in Dover, playing drums to alleviate the boredom of six months in hospital nursing a broken leg (an injury which ended his thoughts of becoming a footballer).

His father spotted an Ajax kit in the local paper and bought it. "The bloke who suggested it was a trumpet player in a local trad jazz band. For some reason they were always short of drummers in Dover. They needed a drummer so as soon as I could hold a tempo, I was gigging. He gave me all these Louis Armstrong and Gene Krupa records so that's what I learned first.

"I was gigging regularly, getting about £5 a gig, by the time I was 14. It was really good. The band were all about 50 and a couple of them used to be pros, they were pretty good. It taught me a lot about time keeping, just keeping it moving, keeping it swinging. When I started, just because I was straightforward — no fills or anything — they used to think it was great. Gradually I got better and they liked me less and less because I started being flash. The first lesson I learned was that other musicians appreciate a solid drummer not a flash drummer, so it influenced me a lot.

"I didn't really bother with drum tutors. I used to read the introductions and things like how to set up your kit and tune the drums. Paradiddles and triple paradiddles was as far as I got, but never really got into reading.

"The Ajax kit was really good, I used it ►►



for about three years until I eventually realised that it wasn't so hot. Still, when I sold it to a shop I got £40 for it. Then I worked on the ferries and saved up to get a Premier kit. Premier have become more expensive, but at that time it was the cheapest pro kit you could get and everyone had them out of London. You could go into any local music shop and get one and everyone stocked spares and fittings. That was one of the reasons I bought one.

"The one I bought was a silver finish kit - I'm really sold on silver finish kits. It was a good kit and a mate of mine is using it now with the Ian Gillan Band. It must be about six years old and it's still going strong."

Topper's next kit came when he joined the Clash. He had missed out on their first album and was just about to undertake an extensive tour, during which he would be "on probation". He insisted on a new kit for the tour, and only a few days before they hit the road, he chose a Pearl set which he still has.

The original kit consisted of a 24" bass drum, 13" x 9", 14" x 10", 16" and 18" toms. He got rid of the two small toms and brought in an extra floor tom, so he now has just three toms, the 14", 16" and 18". The cymbals are all Zildjians, 15" hi-hats, 21" rock rides, two 16" crashes and two 20" crashes. Topper uses crash cymbals as crash rides because ordinary crash rides are too thin and frequently crack.

"When I joined the Clash I noticed that the Premier didn't seem to have that volume or that kind of depth that I needed. You've got to close-mike them to get a really good sound. A lot of heavy drummers use them, like Kenny Jones and of course Keith Moon, but I couldn't get a heavy enough sound out of them.

"When I first got the Pearl I didn't like it. There were a lot of bits and pieces that I had to get together like metal rims on the bass drum. I didn't have time to mess about with them before the tour and on the tour, which was quite long, I couldn't get a good sound out of them. When I came back I changed to wood rims and that made all the difference.

"It's the little things like that that you only appreciate after a tour, so there's no

way I'll get another kit without having a good long time to try it. The only other drums I'd use would be Ludwig and Gretsch. Even then, with the Gretsch you have to change all the fittings because they're weak, but Ludwig are good. I use all Pearl fittings on my kit, with a Premier snare drum stand, Pearl hi-hat and all Trilok stands.

"The thing I like about the Pearl kit is that they're really loud drums and at the same time you can get that depth, there's no tinniness. I use the Pearl in the studio and it's great - the only time I'd get rid of it would be when it just doesn't stand up to touring any more. So far it has held up really well, it's a really strong kit."

The problems encountered by drummers are seemingly the same the world over, no matter what level you're playing at. Topper has his own drum roadie so many of these immediate problems are alleviated but he is still aware of them and remains convinced that it is an inevitable part of a drummer's life.

"I think you will always get the same problems from drummers. In order to retain a characteristic drum sound, what a drum sound is about, you've got to have individual tension rods, wooden shells, Fibreglass shells. You always have to have stuff that is likely to break to get that sound.

"I use five cymbals and although I've got them pretty well set up, they are always slightly out from where I had them the night before and it takes a couple of numbers to get it right. Also the cymbals tend to slip down due to the threads going or whatever and I was thinking of getting actual welded stands in the position I want them in. It would be like the five stands on a truss and a bar coming round the kit, so you could just plop the cymbals on and they would always be exact.

"Most of the developments in drums don't seem to have gone into actually making things stronger. I think the only company who are really trying to improve its drums are Premier. Every six months they seem to be coming out with stronger fittings and new ideas while everyone else seems to be spending their money on electronics and new skins. The number of

different types of skins you can get now is a joke, they're all the same in principle.

"I've tried Asba drums and they are lovely and loud but you just get that ring - it's like playing in a marble room. I don't like the look or the sound of see-through drums. When I'm behind a kit, I like to feel I'm behind something solid. Synthesized drums make a nice sound for 10 minutes but then become boring, people just get the same sound out of them, which is not what they are designed for.

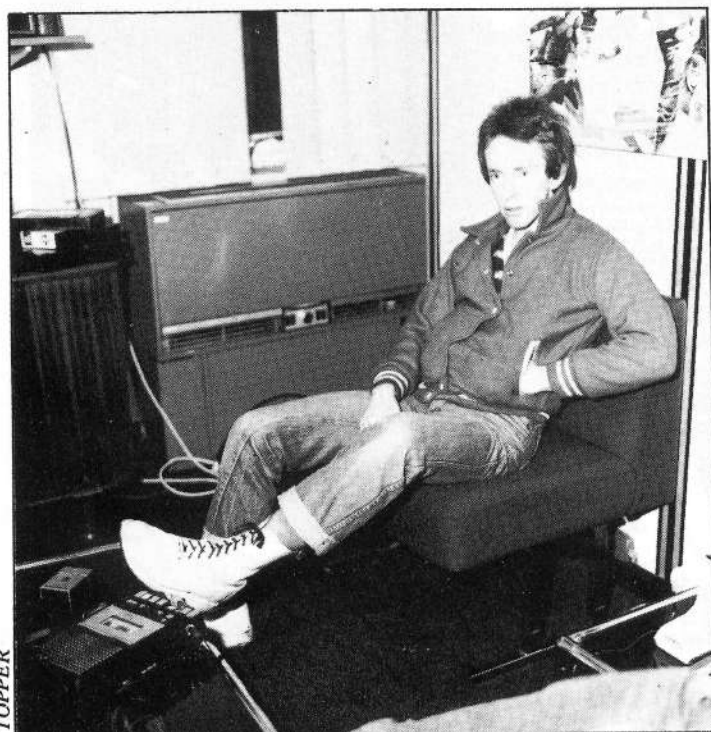
"The main drag I find is that everything de-tunes during the gig so I've got to tune between numbers. The snare drum takes a real hammering and I have to crank up the tension rods between every number. The only problem with a snare is you can tune it a bit too tight and it starts popping. You won't actually hear it acoustically, but as long as it's coming through your monitor you can tell it's popping and de-tune it."

Before joining the Clash, Topper had his share of ups and downs but still managed to cram in quite a bit of drumming experience. By the time he was 17 he was playing in a band doing Miles Davis, Blood Sweat and Tears type material before joining his first fully fledged rock band. He realised that he would have to move to London if he really wanted to make it.

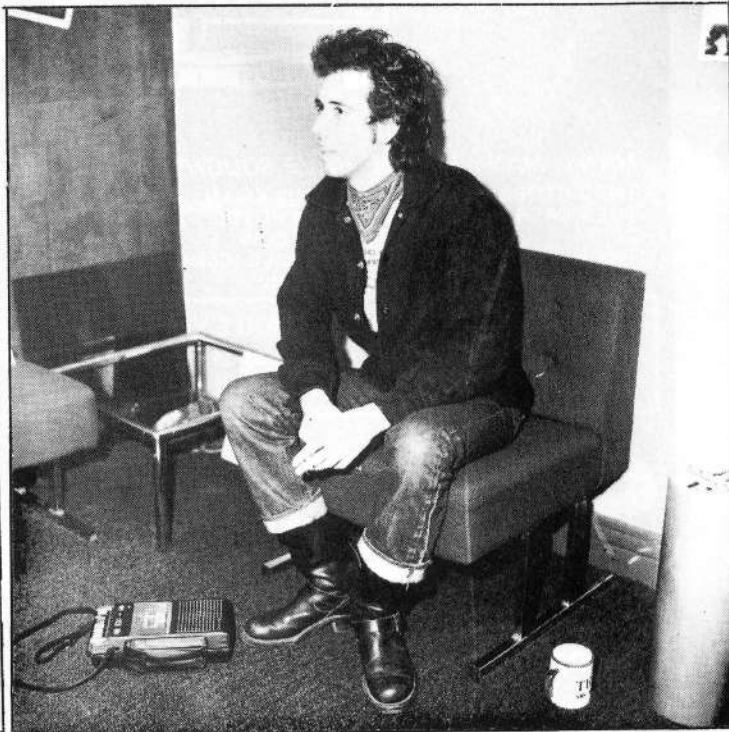
He did the usual round of answering ads and auditioning but found it soul-destroying. If people didn't know anyone you had played with, you were invariably immediately crossed off the list. Eventually he got a gig with a soul band from the States, which was more useful experience, before he encountered Mick Jones and joined the band.

Topper describes his style as "fast and heavy". He adds: "As long as you keep it like that and don't lag, you can fill in anything you want." His influences include Simon Kirke and Terry Williams who plays with Dave Edmunds.

Together Mick Jones and Topper Headon represent a new wave of musicians who owe little or nothing to the "progressive" era of the late Sixties and Seventies. Instead, they hark back to a simpler and more exciting era - which is closer, perhaps, to the true spirit of rock and roll.



TOPPER



MICK