

BANGING ON THE



PAUL SIMONON checks out America.

WHITE HOUSE DOOR

The most significant New Wave event of 1979 is the Clash's attempt to conquer America. As ALLAN JONES discovered in Cleveland and Washington, they can't depend on anyone's efforts but their own.

CLEVELAND squats untidily, like a ragged child on a street corner begging for relief, beneath the bleak winter expanse of Lake Erie. A lunatic February wind whistles up its skirts; a blizzard of snow whips relentlessly down upon its frozen municipal heart.

The TWA Boeing out of New York bucks and shudders in the virulent turbulence as it circles above the city in a nervous orbit.

Cleveland! Cleveland! Home of the Rockefellers and Standard Oil. Home of the Hanna Mining Corporation and Republic Steel and the Consolidation Coal Company: economic dynasties which for two generations have controlled, with imperialistic authority, the industrial heartlands of America.

Cleveland! Hey, ho — home, too, of the Cuyahoga: a river so polluted by the waste of Ohio's industrial expansion that it once exploded into flames.

Burn on, big river, burn on!

LISA picks me up from the airport in her battered Pontiac cab — a rusted, scarred relic of some former affluence, it now seems a tired apology for Cleveland's present economic disasters. Cleveland used to be a great city,

Lisa says. Now it's on the edge of bankruptcy, already in the throes of an urban crisis more severe than that of virtually any other city in the United States.

The city owes more than 15 million dollars to six Ohio banks. The banking interests are demanding either the money or financial control of the city. Cleveland's young mayor, Dennis Kucinich, is fighting for the city's independence and for the welfare and future of the poor whites and blacks lingering helplessly in the slums and ghettos of Cleveland's inner boroughs. The affluent white middle class has long since retreated to the suburbs.

Lisa throws the cab into a slow motion curve across the highway. Its tyres spin wildly, clamouring frantically for purchase on the ice. I roll around in the back of the Pontiac like a midget in John Wayne's coffin.

We drive on through derelict downtown areas. Cars pass us in a somnambulant parade, creeping and sliding through the treacherous slush. Ice and snow are banked high on both sides of the highway. Lisa says Cleveland is enjoying a mild winter. I shiver and chains-

moke. The streets through which we are skating are illuminated by the dull, exhausted glow of neon signs, flickering from pool halls, bars, porno cinemas — "Erotic-nemas" — and assorted lowlife dives.

A drunk stumbles down the sidewalk like a newsprint yeti, wrapped in old newspapers. He collapses head first into a snow-drift and does not move. Groups of bored men gather in windswept doorways along the route. They stamp their feet, pass around bottles. Their breath is frozen on the night air like signatures of disaffection.

Lisa says on a night like this there ain't no one on the street who ain't up to something ho-o-o-d.

Unemployment and crime are partners here in an unholy marriage. Lisa says it ain't so bad in the winter. People are too cold to kill. The summers, though, that's when it gets real heavy. You pack artillery for your own protection, or you go home via the hospital.

"In the summer," Lisa says, "it's like someone declared war, you know, but forgot to tell the other side. There's so many unemployed, they get drunk, they get restless,

they kill people. There's a lot of dope murders, a lot of drunk killing. They say the unemployment ain't so bad no more. But I don't see my man in work. No sir. Times like this, though, in the winter — it don't get so bad. People don't get out so much, you know. Mosta the guys who get killed know each other, you see . . . they hang out together in the bars and they get intoxicated and argue and start fighting, and bang — someone's dead. I'm just surprised there's enough of them to go at it again after other folk when it gets to be summer again. . . . I'll drop you around the backa th'hotel. It's kinda safer."

THE Clash, according to the schedule so kindly provided for me by CBS, are by this time meant to have checked into Swingo's Celebrity Hotel. The Clash, however, are lost (somehow inevitably, I reflect) somewhere between Oklahoma City and Cleveland.

Their tour opened on January 31, in Vancouver. They then travelled to San Francisco for two gigs (one promoted by Bill Graham, who left

the city almost as soon as they arrived, and the other a benefit concert for a new venue, whose promoters, ironically, are attempting to break Graham's stranglehold on SF's rock promotions). There followed a concert at the Santa Monica Civic. Then, while the roadcrew drove directly across the Midwest to Cleveland, the band lit out for the Southwest, on a three-day trip through Arizona, Kansas and Texas, travelling in a coach hired from Waylon Jennings.

"We wanted to see America," Mick Jones later tells me. "It wasn't entirely successful. I kept falling asleep. It was a long drive."

When I arrive at Swingo's, they are winging in from Oklahoma. The bus had clapped out at some point during their trek. It's now in Nashville being repaired. I am, however, presently indifferent to any problems encountered by the Clash. At the hotel it's a definite Bethlehem vibe. They don't have a room for your exhausted correspondent. How typical, I think, of the efficiency of CBS Records! The fellow at the desk suggests I try the Holiday Inn on East 22nd Street.

"It's not too far," he advises. "You can go out the back way. That's quicker. But, if I were you, I'd go out the front. It's a longer walk, but there's more light — you'll be able to see anyone coming at you. . . ."

continued overleaf

Clash from p. 37

"Naaaah, man... never saw 'em... wish to fuck I had 'em. Man, I'd want to see the Sex Pistols..."

The Clash race back on the stage, whip through an uninspiring 'Julie's Been Working For The Drug Squad' (easily the weakest number in their repertoire), 'White Riot' (flying the banner of '77', again), 'Complete Control' and 'What's My Name', which is a weak climax (no nudge, as Simon Frith might say).

But the audience is ecstatic. I talk to a guy called Eric Schindling backstage. He and six friends have driven from Lawrence, Kansas, to see the Clash. It had been a 20-hour drive — it's 900 miles from good ol' Lawrence — and it's taken all their money to finance the trek.

"Hell... yeah... sure it was worth it, man. We saw the Pistols in Tulsa. And after the Pistols there was only one other group to see. The Clash. Nah... it wasn't too much of a drive. Like, people drove right across the States to see the King Tut exhibition. Us coming to see the Clash is just like them driving across America to see King Tut. And at least the Clash are still alive..."

The next morning, in the lobby of Swingo's, no-one looks too healthy (there had been a bit of a party after the gig at the Agora). The original schedule had the Clash leaving Cleveland at noon for Washington in Wayne Jennings' bus. Two hours later we're sitting around in the lobby of the hotel.

It turns out that the Clash, at the moment, are financially embarrassed; they can't pay the hotel bill. Caroline Coon has been on the telephone all morning to Epic in New York, demanding that they wire out enough money to Cleveland to cover the bill. The Epic person to whom she must speak to authorise the payment of the bill has been in a meeting, she is told. It looks at one point as if the group will have to do a runner.

"I told Epic," says Caroline, "that they could make up the state border. We'd be the bus with the Highway Patrol chasing it..." Topper Headon appears. He has been watching a local news programme on the television. There had been a feature on last night's benefit at the Agora. It had stated that Bo Diddley headlined the gig. There was even an interview with him. There had been no mention of the Clash.

"Which channel was it on?" I ask.

"Channel 8." "Which network is that?" "I dunno — probably CBS." Headon replies sarcastically. "It is CBS," a local fan confirms. "Whaaa?" cries Headon, incredulously. "Fuckin' typical. What a circus."

THE bus finally leaves the cold clutches of Cleveland at 3.00 p.m. and we settle down for a 10-hour drive across America to Washington. D.C. It is snowing as we hit the highway. "I'm gonna get a bunch worse, too," says Bo Diddley, pessimistic to the last.

Strummer, Simonon and Mick Jones have retired to the rear lounge of the coach; the rest of the party sit up front in the main compartment listening to tapes and watching television and videos.

The countryside spreads out on either side of us; a vast plain of ice and snow, frozen lakes and rivers, isolated farmhouses, truckstops... I begin to wonder whose movie I'm in, as the view through the windscreen begins to resemble the opening credits of *How The West Was Won*. Darkness falls as the giant Exxon signs light up and snow piles down harder, freezing on the windscreen. We have to stop regularly to chip off the ice.

"Maaaaa-aan, it's gonna be a baaaaad night," Bo Diddley intones gravely, rolling his eyes like white marbles beneath the brim of his stetson. "Ah wuz drivin' this way once," he recalls, and we all listen. "Uh road jes' wen' from under me. Wen' straight over th'hill, whhhhhooooosh..." His large hand glides over the air.

I ask whether he suffered much trouble on the road. This cracks him up even more. He literally howls with laughter.

"Yoah a comic sonuvabitch," he laughs. "Lissen Ah'm 50 years old. Ah've lived all mah life the United States travelled in every goddam state, an' Ah'm black. An' you ask me whether Ah've even been in trouble... sheeetee. Yeeeeeuech. Ah been in th' kinda trouble Ah don't even remember. Ah've had dudes come up to me and put a gun to mah

head. An' they'd say — 'Nigguh — we gonna blow th' shit outta your brain.' Ah'm allus be very polite an' say 'Yessuh, sho' you are.' An' then get th' hell on outta there."

I ask which areas he found most troublesome and dangerous. "Texas," he replies. Then, after a pause, "An' Alabama, an' Kansas, an' Virginia, an' Mississippi, an' Georgia, an' Tennessee, an' Missouri... America, you know. Yeeueuech..."

IT is close on 2 a.m. when the bus drives into Washington. We stop on the outskirts of the city for something to eat. Wearily, we pile out of the coach and into the truckstop. Topper Headon looks around at America.

"When it all comes down to it," he remarks, "it's really all just Finsbury Park, innit?"

I don't have an answer for him.

THE Clash book into the Americana Hotel at 2.30, after a brief skirmish at the Barbizon Terrace, where they had originally been booked. For some of us, the night is not over. John Green, Simonon, Strummer, Jones, Barry Myers and I make our way to a nearby Italian restaurant for a meal.

Simonon tells us about his trip last year to Moscow; he had been intrigued by the attempted obliteration of the memory of Stalin from the nation's consciousness.

"You won't find his name anywhere. In none of the history books, on any of the statues..." They pulled all his statues down. They even dug up his body..."

"You know," says Mick Jones, diverting the conversation towards the group's erstwhile manager, Bernard Rhodes, "I think it was always Bernie's ambition to have a city named after him..."

"Yea," says Strummer, "he was gonna re-name Camden Town. Call it 'Berniegrad'."

They are still in litigation with Rhodes, Strummer says, but no date has yet been fixed for an official hearing.

"We haven't spoken to him for a while. He doesn't answer the phone. I suppose he finds it a bit difficult since they took him off to the hospital and put him in a straitjacket..."

Mick Jones has a map of Washington. He decides he would like to go sightseeing. Now. It is 4.00 a.m. Jones wants to go to Arlington, the military cemetery, where there burns an eternal flame in memory of John Kennedy.

"Great," says Strummer, "let's go and piss on it and put it out."

It is decided, finally, that we'll visit the White House. It is deathly silent as we drive down Pennsylvania Avenue in search of Jimmy Carter's gaff. We eventually stumble upon the building and slide to a halt across the road from it. The White House looks small, unimposing, almost insignificant.

"That's it?" asks John Green, disappointed. "It's gonna be a 'Oh, it's a garden shed. Don't tell me they run the entire bleedin' world from that..."

"Just think," says Strummer, "if we had a mortar or a bazooka or some machine guns, we could blow it all away. Just lob a few grenades over the garden wall and wipe them all out. It's worth thinking about..."

"Can we go, please? I'm getting nervous," says Mick Jones. "I can feel them looking at us and loading the guns. I don't want to be here when the bullets start flying..."

STRUMMER and Headon are sitting in the back of a limo outside the Americana Hotel the next afternoon. They have been persuaded to drive out to the radio station at Maryland State University to be interviewed. Strummer is furious.

"I hate doing this. It's just so much arse-licking. I'm not prepared to do it. It's the worst thing in the world. I'm here to do a job. And that job is to play the gig, not spend all afternoon pouncing about Maryland in a limo talking to idiots."

I tell him that Geldof and Johnnie Fingers on their recent radio promotion tour of America visited three or four stations a day for a month. "They must have been out of their heads, then," he replies tersely.

We drive through the campus of Maryland State, Strummer's mood darkening as we make our way through groups of dulleccated students. We are outside the radio station building. Strummer

gets out of the car and walks up the steps to the entrance. He scoops up a massive block of ice from the steps. He flings it viciously at the glass doors. It shatters with an enormous crash. The glass remains intact, but the impact draws inquisitive faces to the windows of the buildings around us.

"Place looks like a dog ranch," Strummer mutters as we step inside.

STRUMMER and Headon are being interviewed by a fresh-faced girl called Audrey. It is clear from her opening remarks that she knows little about the Clash. Strummer and Headon are in no mood to offer any pertinent information. They act dumb, answering her questions monosyllabically, with terse replies and occasional mumbles.

Audrey asks Strummer how the Clash got together.

"We all met in the street one day," he replies.

"I bumped into him, and he knew the other two," Topper adds, not very helpfully.

"Me and him were odd-job merchants," Strummer says. "The other two were at art school..."

"How does an art major get into music?" Audrey asks.

"Because art is so boring, innit?" Strummer says.

Audrey wants to know whether there was some concept behind "Give 'Em Enough Rope". Strummer thinks it over.

"Concept... mmmm... no."

There was no message the Clash wanted to get over to their audience?

"I just want to educate the world on how to speak Japanese," Strummer says.

"Yea," says Audrey, fascinated. "I didn't hear a whole lot of Japanese on the album..." She is sure, however, that there was something more to the record; some significant message.

"Maybe," says Strummer. "But we don't like to brag about it..." "How did you guys break into London?" Audrey asks.

"We kicked our way in," says Strummer.

"Literally?" asks Audrey, astonished.

"It was a pathetic waste of time. We should never have done it. Caroline told me that radio station reaches 40,000 people. More like 40. If that station has 40,000 listeners, I'm Bob Geldof..." It was like a hospital radio, where you go in and speak to all the cripples... I've done that in my time, too..."

We are sitting in the restaurant of the Americana Hotel, Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon, photographer Bob Gruen and I. Strummer is still complaining bitterly about the radio interview. We are joined by Caroline Coon, Joe turns his complaints against her. I don't mean to eavesdrop, but I can't ignore their conversation.

"We shouldn't have done it," Strummer repeats for Caroline's benefit. She looks a little exasperated, but tries to be patient. "No one told me what it would be like. I shouldn't have to go driving around half of Maryland with some pansy journalists. I shouldn't have to go to these radio stations and talk to these morons. No one told me it was gonna be like this."

"I know how you feel," says Caroline. "No. You don't. That's the point," Strummer argues. "You should sit down and think about it before you arrange these things. It would have been better for you to spend the afternoon in my room, reading a book or watching TV or something... We're here to do one job — play the gig. That's what we should be concentrating on. What we should be doing is going out and playing the best rock 'n' roll show these people have ever seen and piss off with it."

"That's what we are doing," says Caroline. "But at the same time I know that radio stations are the key to America. I'm sorry. I thought you wanted to get through to as many people as possible. I was wrong."

"Spore me the sarcasm, Caroline, will you," says Strummer bitterly, ending the conversation.

THE television lights cast a harsh glare on the drab walls of the dressing room, back stage at the Ontario theatre — a converted cinema in downtown Washington. The television crew, cameras and sound equipment strapped to their backs, follow Bo Diddley around the room.

Mick Jones and Paul Simonon look on in amusement as Diddley performs for the cameras. Strummer, whose mood has brightened considerably since the afternoon, watches in some awe.

"How do you feel," asks the television interviewer, "about all these people who've copied your licks over the years, Bo?"

"Hey, me-a-n," laughs Bo Diddley. "Everybody does it. Look at the Japanese. They cop everybody's licks. Can't do a thing about it, though."

"Why are you on tour with this group, the Clash, Bo?"

"Cuz they asked me. An' it's an honour, an' Ah'm happy t'be here. They're nice dudes. Everything's a goin' beautiful. The shows are sold out. The kids go wild when they see this band. It reminds me of the Fifties."

JOE Strummer is sitting on the bus after the Washington gig; people clamber over him, settling down for the overnight journey to Boston, another 10-hour drive.

"I don't feel unhappy, you know," he tells Mick Jones. "But I don't feel particularly happy, either. I just feel sort of good, you know? I'm just glad that it's over..."

"I thought it was a good gig," says Mick Jones. "I thought it was all right in the end... smashed the neck right off my fucking guitar, though... 'Stunni, I used to hate bands that smashed their instruments..."

Jones had smashed the neck of his guitar during the final onslaught of "London's Burning"/"White Riot", as the Clash's set roared to a furious climax. There had, earlier, been hints of disaster. The vocal mix throughout much of the first half of the set was a soggy blur; and often the group's

musical thrust had lost its impetus, with only Headon's drumming urging them forward.

"Hate And War" had collapsed into chaos, probably the lowest point of the show. "City Of The Dead" — "this one's for Sid," Strummer declared — revived the tempo, and "Safe European Home" continued the improvement. They lost touch again with the rising momentum after a ragged "Police And Thieves", but a powerful "Capital Radio" (soon to be released on an EP alongside "I Fought The Law" and "Groovy Times", incidentally) had set up the audience for the climax and the encores. Strummer was even smiling as he left the stage with a rose in his teeth...

"I thought we played fuckin' great," says Topper. "Why be basul?"

The weather forecast on the radio predicts snow and ice and sleet and all kinds of horrors on the highway to Boston.

Bo Diddley rolls his eyes and tucks into his bag for his bottle of Rock & Rye (a lethal concoction that tastes like marmalade and paraffin). "It's gone be a mutuh of a ride. It's gonna be another baaaaaad night," he declares, as optimistic as Cassandra with the Greeks coming over the walls of Troy... "We'd best be goin' before we're frozen..."

The engine of the bus starts ticking over.

This is where I leave them. I stumble off the bus, into the snow. The bus draws away slowly on the icy road, and is lost in the night.

I walk back to the hotel. With Jimmy Carter in Mexico City, there seemed nowhere else to go.

Entertainment Guide

THE CRICKETERS

The Oval, S.E.11

Thurs., Feb. 22

ALAN HOLMES & FLYER

Fri., Feb. 23

LACEY'S ALL STARS

Sat., Feb. 24

FULL TREATMENT

Sun., Feb. 25th

(Lunchtime)

FULL TREATMENT

with Star Guests

(Even.)

BASIL'S BALLSUP BAND

Mon., Feb. 26

DENIS HYNES

BIG BAND

Tues., Feb. 27

THE STAPLETON

ALL STARS

Wed., Feb. 28

THIS YEAR'S BAND

THE

JOHN BULL

(Opp. Gunnersbury Tube)

Chiswick High Road

London, W.4

Thurs., Feb. 22

TELEMACQUE

Fri., Feb. 23

THE INVADERS

Sat., Feb. 24

RED TRACK

Sun., Feb. 25

LAMMAGYRE

Wed., Feb. 28

WINDRUSH

TRIAD

Bishop's Stortford 56333

FRI 23

FEB 24

SAT 24

FEB 25

SUN 25

FEB 26

SUN 25

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ROY HILL

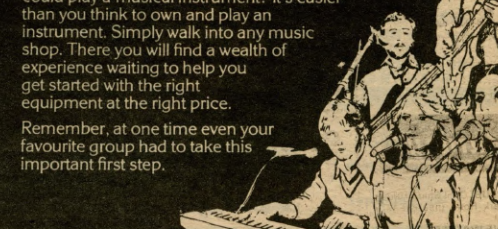
at The Venue

February 22nd.

The first step

Aren't you envious when you see your favourite group on TV? Don't you ever wish that you too could play a musical instrument? It's easier than you think to own and play an instrument. Simply walk into any music shop. There you will find a wealth of experience waiting to help you get started with the right equipment at the right price.

Remember, at one time even your favourite group had to take this important first step.



The Riot Squad

**ALLAN JONES finds Joe Strummer
wide awake in the
American Nightmare (p.35)**

