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WHEN THE CLASH FINALLY PLAYED THEIR FIRST U.S. SHOW

Bryan Wawzenek | Published: February 7, 2019

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The **Clash** were about two and a half years into their career before they played a gig on U.S. soil. The band's first American show wasn't at a grimy punk club: They were already too popular in the States. Besides, *Give 'Em Enough Rope* had already shown the Clash was moving beyond the rudimentary constraints of punk.

They played their first U.S. gig on Feb. 7, 1979 at the Berkeley Community Theatre in Berkeley, Calif. The 3,500-capacity venue on the campus of Berkeley High School had a rock pedigree, with past gigs by **Bob Dylan**, the **Who** and **Jimi Hendrix**.

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But Joe Strummer was still dismayed that his band's American debut would be in a college town. "We shouldn't have played here," Strummer told *Time* magazine backstage. "It's a university town. They're boring snobs."

It wasn't how Strummer pictured this would go. But then, not much in recent months had gone that way for the Clash. The band had been forced by CBS Records to use **Blue Oyster Cult** producer Sandy Pearlman on their sophomore LP, ***Give 'Em Enough Rope***, an album that – for its glossier, more radio-friendly sound –

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hadn't broken the Clash in the U.S. the way the record company had hoped. Meanwhile, the band was in debt to CBS, it had just fired manager Bernie Rhodes, and Strummer and guitarist Mick Jones were in the midst of a bout of writer's block.

Things started to get better after the Clash picked a new manager, Caroline Coon. Sure, she was bassist Paul Simonon's girlfriend, but she also listened to what the band members actually wanted to do.

Do a tour in America? With the Clash in debt, CBS didn't want to fund an overseas trek, but Coon was able to get the band's Stateside label, Epic, to pony up the cash. (This was somewhat remarkable, given that Epic had refused to release the Clash's raw debut album in 1977.) When Simonon and Strummer wanted rock 'n' roll pioneer Bo Diddley to open the band's U.S. tour, Coon found the singer-guitarist in Australia and agreed to pay him upfront.

The guys in the Clash met their tourmate in Vancouver, where the string of dates began on Jan. 31, before heading down to the States. Diddley was somewhat bewildered by his role in what the Clash termed the Pearl Harbor '79 Tour (and didn't particularly enjoy the volume at which the band played). Strummer was in shock the rock icon agreed to the job.

"In the flesh, he was more awe-inspiring than we could possibly imagine," Strummer recalled, according to ***Q***. "He dressed like he was ready to fight. He always had his huge sheriff's hat on and a giant belt buckle, and you were unmistakably in the presence of someone who gave no quarter."

But Diddley and the group soon warmed up to one another, which helped since they all traveled on the same tour bus, which had been leased from another American music icon: Dolly Parton. Even though Strummer and friends didn't enjoy sleeping on the bus too much, they took to the on-board TV and videocassette machine, which allowed them (or at least drummer Topper Headon) to watch ***Star Wars*** over and over.

They were on their way from Canada to Northern California when they heard some awful news: **Sid Vicious** – former **Sex Pistol** and a member of the same London punk scene that had birthed the Clash – had died in New York, on the other side of the country the group was so eager to explore.

"I wake up and as I'm searching for some breakfast, Ace Penna, our U.S. tour manager, tells me 'Hey, didja know Sid is dead?'" Strummer wrote in the **tour diary** he penned for *NME*. "I grab him by the throat. 'What do you mean?' I snarl. Then, as it sinks in, I don't want no breakfast. Our first morning in America."

Watch the Clash Perform 'I'm So Bored With the U.S.A.'

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It might have been the Clash's first morning on tour America, but it wasn't actually their first trip to the country. The previous year, the band spent a little time while recording portions of *Give 'Em Enough Rope* in San Francisco. But that had given the Clash but a taste of the U.S. and the members were excited to see more.

Humorless fans in the Berkeley audience might not have realized how happy they were to be in America. As a poke in the ribs, the Clash began their set with "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A." It would become a tradition throughout the winter tour.

"We started the show with 'I'm So Bored with the U.S.A.' because we wanted to find out if they had a sense of humor in America," Strummer said, via *Q*. "And the answer was that they were double into that number. They

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loved it, because we were saying we were sick of the cheap rubbish on TV, all the substandard cultural imports that came out of America. The kids were as bored as we were with all that rubbish."

The rest of the set featured a mix of songs from the Clash's first album (which had yet to be officially released in the States, though tens of thousands of import copies had been purchased by American fans), second album and recent singles – including "Clash City Rockers," "White Man (In Hammersmith Palais)" and their ferocious cover of "I Fought the Law." All three songs would end up on the U.S. version of *The Clash*. "White Riot" served as a frenetic encore.

"The first show was a blast," photographer Bob Gruen recalled in ***Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer***. "The place was full of happy, dancing people. The Clash was more than your average good-time band. You not only had a good time but you also thought about issues that bothered people. Things were serious and there was a lot to be angry about, but there was also a lot to have fun about. The force of the music made it sound like a battlefield, a clash. The lights were always flashing, like explosions."

Newspaper and music magazine reviews of the show were largely positive. Some acknowledged that the U.S. audiences were more subdued than British punk fans, and the Clash appreciated that no one tried to spit on them as they performed. Even though Strummer would acknowledge that the university crowd loved the Clash's first U.S. show (they were "tapping their biology textbooks in time with the tunes" he snarked in his diary), he hadn't come to America to connect solely with the student population.

And so, in defiance of promoter Bill Graham, the Clash hastily organized a second show in the San Francisco area for the next evening. This one would take place at Geary Temple (which had once been Graham's old Fillmore West), cost half as much as the first show and benefit a youth organization and the homeless. The band's second concert in America was a charity benefit – a fact the Clash wore proudly.

"The show is really great, the hall is really great, the audience is really great," Strummer wrote, "but we gotta leave straight after the set to drive the 400 miles to Los Angeles."

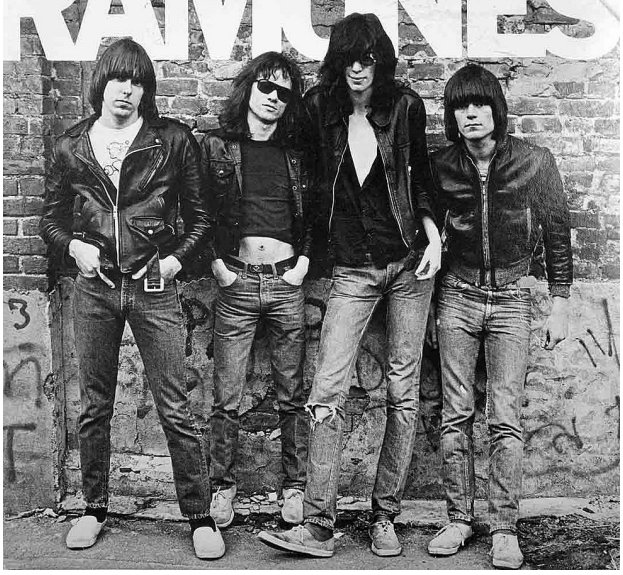
Having only toured Britain and Europe, the guys in the Clash were surprised at how spread out the cities in the U.S. could be. Four hundred miles was nothing. After leaving L.A. to drive across the Southwest, the band became shocked by the expanse of empty space. America was more normal, more boring, than Strummer had expected, but it was still the place that had given them so much of the music he loved.

"When you've been into American music as long as I have, to go there is a trip," Strummer said in the 2000 Clash documentary ***Westway to the World***. "To ride across the country, even better, on a bus is another trip. Fantastic. I got endless amounts of inspiration from it."

The Clash's primary songwriters – Strummer and Jones – were creatively rejuvenated not just by experiencing America for themselves but also by the reception they received from fans during the nine-date tour that took them from Vancouver to California, Cleveland to Washington D.C., New York and Toronto.

Later the band would write, record and release ***London Calling***, a magnum opus that featured more than a little American influence with its R&B and rockabilly sounds. They also returned to North America for a second, more extensive tour. And more inspiration.

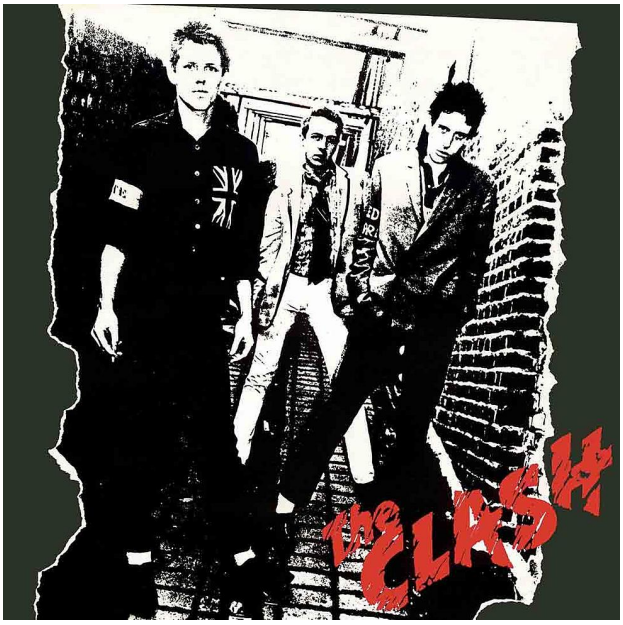
40 Best Punk Albums



Sire

Ramones, 'Ramones' (1976)

You can argue that punk rock started in the late '60s and early '70s with bands like MC5 and the Stooges. You can even go back earlier to the Velvet Underground and the garage-rock scene of the mid-'60s. But punk rock as we know it today started right here with the Ramones' first album, which set the basic template: two minutes, three chords and a sense that the future is bleak as hell.



CBS

The Clash, 'The Clash' (1977)

The Clash made better albums (see 1979's 'London Calling') and more ambitious ones (1980's 'Sandinista!') but they never made a more pure punk record than their self-titled debut. The U.S. got a different version two years later. It's great, but stick to the U.K. original.

Stiff Records

Ian Dury, 'New Boots and Panties!!' (1977)

Like many artists from punk's earliest days, Ian Dury wasn't solely tied to the genre. His debut album also includes disco, New Wave and, most of all, pub rock. But Dury's attitude was pure punk, and 'New Boots and Panties!!' was one of the first on the burgeoning scene.

Sire

Richard Hell & the Voidoids, 'Blank Generation' (1977)

Richard Hell was a member of Television and the Heartbreakers (Johnny Thunders' band, not Tom Petty's) before forming the Voidoids. They made only two albums; their first is the keeper, all punk indifference sung by one of the genre's snottiest voices.

Sire

Ramones, 'Rocket to Russia' (1977)

The Ramones' first few albums pretty much all sound the same. 'Rocket to Russia,' their third, stands out a bit because they had some time to absorb the fallout from their debut (it basically influenced every single U.K. punk who heard it). The band rarely pushed itself outside of its comfort zone (even their later work with Phil Spector wasn't totally unexpected); they just do what they do best here, and with attitude to spare.

Virgin

Sex Pistols, 'Never Mind the Bollocks - Here's the Sex Pistols' (1977)

The Ramones got there first, but if it wasn't for the Sex Pistols' debut (and only) album, punk may never have grown and thrived over the decades. 'Never Mind the Bollocks ... ' is angry, hateful and brimming with middle-finger-flashing spite. Everything that followed has been influenced by it one way or another. Decades after its debut, it still sounds relevant.

Red Star

Suicide, 'Suicide' (1977)

Suicide were more than pioneering punks -- they're also instrumental in electronic, industrial and synth-rock (even

Bruce Springsteen covered them). The duo paired minimalist electronic music (including early drum machines) to Alan Vega's echo-heavy voice, which usually recited strung-together words that didn't often fall together cohesively. Their recording career was scattered; their 1977 self-titled debut remains their most essential work.

Elektra

Television, 'Marquee Moon' (1977)

Television never got as much attention as some of the other bands from the New York City scene that spawned them, but they made its best album. They didn't have much in common with their contemporaries either; 'Marquee Moon' piles on guitar solos like Neil Young and Crazy Horse jams, and the album's title track clocks in at 10 minutes. This is punk rock that didn't need to tear down the past to build the future.

Sire

Talking Heads, 'Talking Heads: 77' (1977)

Talking Heads were a whole bunch of things -- New Wave, artsy, funky -- but during their first few years they were definitely a punk band. They approached the music, and the lyrics, a different way than most of their peers, but they shared a fundamental aesthetic with most of the New York City bands they came of age with.

Harvest

Wire, 'Pink Flag' (1977)

On the surface, Wire's debut album can seem like a reaction to prog-rock excess with its scaled-back minimalism and songs that barely reached two minutes. But much of 'Pink Flag' is also rooted in the same art-rock that's tied to prog, Krautrock and other outre genres. Still, the record had a massive impact on punk, hardcore and alternative bands over the next four decades.

United Artists

Buzzcocks, 'Another Music in a Different Kitchen' (1978)

Buzzcocks were one of punk's greatest singles bands, but they also made one of the genre's best albums with their debut, 'Another Music in a Different Kitchen.' It's snotty, to-the-point and part of punk's frayed fabric in 1978. Plus, they weren't afraid of throwing in some pop hooks once in a while.

Warner Bros.

Devo, 'Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!' (1978)

What the hell was floating in the air in Northeast Ohio in the mid-'70s? Pere Ubu's twitchy art-rock from Cleveland had nothing on Akron's Devo, whose debut album is all jerky robotic moves and super-caffeinated takes on what rock music of the future might sound like. Their deconstructed cover of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" remains a pivotal moment in the divide between rock and punk fans.

Plan 9 Records

Pere Ubu, 'The Modern Dance' (1978)

Pere Ubu never stood a chance of breaking into the mainstream. Their complex and often difficult style of art-punk sounded like nothing else their peers were doing. Credit hometown Cleveland's industrial wasteland for that. Their debut album still sounds ahead of its time. Required listening for anyone who cares about punk's development in the late '70s.

Sire

Talking Heads, 'More Songs About Buildings and Food' (1978)

Like the title says, Talking Heads' second album sounded a lot like their first. They were growing as a band, though, pushing them away from punk's more primal instincts. No matter -- 'More Songs About Buildings and Food' showed that punk, like most music genres, came in various shades and tones.

Harvest

Wire, 'Chairs Missing' (1978)

Wire's second album expands a bit on the minimalism of their landmark debut. They're still thorny, and a third of the songs don't even get to the two-minute mark, but 'Chairs Missing' marks an early post-punk entry too, mixing art-rock and even some punk twists on prog into its grooves.

EMI

X-Ray Spex, 'Germfree Adolescents' (1978)

X-Ray Spex toed the line between punk and New Wave. Their saxophone player helped the latter, while singer Poly Styrene (who died of cancer in 2011) fed their punk urges. She was the genre's greatest female singer, and her gasoline-fueled vocals make 'Germfree Adolescents' one of punk's best records. It's their only album other than a 1995 reunion LP, but singles from the era support their legacy.

CBS

The Clash, 'London Calling' (1979)

The Clash's third album transcended punk while enveloping its core essence. There's rockabilly, ska, pop, R&B, reggae and a whole lot more on the two-LP 'London Calling.' The best album ever made by a punk band, and one of the greatest LPs ever.

Rough Trade

Stiff Little Fingers, 'Inflammable Material' (1979)

Stiff Little Fingers don't get as much attention as their early punk contemporaries, but their debut holds up with the best of them. Unlike many of their overseas contemporaries, Stiff Little Fingers were from Ireland, which gave their political (and personal) songs a somewhat different perspective. Plus, they sounded like they actually wanted to be played on the radio.

Sire

Talking Heads, 'Fear of Music' (1979)

By the '80s. Talking Heads were no longer a punk band, but a world-music-leaning R&B band that also happened to be art-rock's greatest practitioners at the time. 'Fear of Music' was their last true punk record, a bridge between their past and future.

Sire

The Undertones, 'The Undertones' (1979)

These Irishmen made their name in 1978 with their excellent first single, "Teenage Kicks." Their self-titled debut album from the following year is more of the same pop-splattered punk guided by Feargal Sharkey's twitchy, distinct vocals.

CBS

The Clash, 'Sandinista!' (1980)

Following the double-record genre sweeping of 'London Calling,' the Clash aimed even bigger for the follow-up. The triple-LP 'Sandinista!' is messy, sprawling and totally fascinating. A great band working at the peak of its career.

I.R.S. Records

The Cramps, 'Songs the Lord Taught Us' (1980)

The Cramps pretty much invented psychobilly, so you have them to thank for all those guys walking around with greased-back '50s hair and ironic bowling shirts. Still, the band's debut album is a kick, garage rock turbo-charged for the punk generation.

Alternative Tentacles

Dead Kennedys, 'Fresh Fruit for Rotting Vegetables' (1980)

Dead Kennedys' debut album has its roots in the Sex Pistols, but the San Francisco band also had its own hometown's legacy to feed its ire. Jello Biafra spits out songs like "Kill the Poor" and "Holiday in Cambodia" like he can't wait to be rid of them. A milestone of American punk.

Slash Records

X, 'Los Angeles' (1980)

While New York City was spitting out one kind of punk rock, the other side of the country was working with something different. The Los Angeles scene was, for the most part, bluesier and rootsier ... at least until hardcore took over. X were the leading band of this early style, and their debut spins punk nihilism into a history lesson of desolation and waste.

SST

Black Flag, 'Damaged' (1981)

Black Flag had already burned through a few singers before Henry Rollins joined in 1981, propelling them to a whole new level. They immediately became one of the best and most popular punk bands in the Los Angeles scene. Their first album, 'Damaged,' is a landmark record that pretty much ignited the hardcore subgenre. Rollins' throat-shredding vocals, coupled with Greg Ginn's equally abrasive guitar, have influenced generations of punks.

Ruby Records

The Gun Club, 'Fire of Love' (1981)

Like fellow Los Angeles punks X, the Gun Club fused their punk with blues, psychedelia and other forms of American music. Their first album is their best, filled with lots of stop-start moments and stuttering guitars. At times, 'Fire of Love' recalls the more adventurous side of '60s garage rock, but there's plenty of punk attitude here too.

Slash

X, 'Wild Gift' (1981)

X's second LP is basically a finer-tuned version of their first, but that doesn't take away any of its impact. If anything, the songwriting and performances are sharper (unlike many punk bands, X boasted some skilled musicians). A key album, and band, from the Los Angeles punk scene.

Slash

Violent Femmes, 'Violent Femmes' (1983)

Violent Femmes stripped down their Midwestern punk until it almost sounded like a new, grittier form of folk music. Their debut album is filled with hooks, something singer and songwriter Gordon Gano never shied away from. They got darker and then more playful; this is the one that comes with no expectations up front.

SST

Husker Du, 'Zen Arcade' (1984)

Husker Du started as a relatively typical-sounding punk band, but by the time of their second album in 1984, they had evolved into one of the era's most genre-busting groups. 'Zen Arcade' is their double-record masterpiece, a concept album that makes room for both blistering one-minute noise bursts and 14-minute psych-rock freak-outs. One of punk's most ambitious records.

SST

Minutemen, 'Double Nickels on the Dime' (1984)

Punk's most sprawling album crams 45 songs into two LPs. And that's just the start of it. This California trio combined everything from jazz and folk to country and hardcore on their third album. Shortly after they released 'Double Nickels" follow-up in 1985, singer and guitarist D. Boon was killed in a van accident, ending the band.

SST

Husker Du, 'New Day Rising' (1985)

Husker Du's scaled-back follow-up to the double-LP zenith 'Zen Arcade' is all one-, two- and three-minute songs about apologies, summer and UFOs. Guitarist Bob Mould and drummer Grant Hart never abandon punk's core, but they expand on that foundation with acoustic guitars, pop hooks and a songwriting polish that was miles away from most of their peers.

Homestead Records

Big Black, 'Atomizer' (1986)

Big Black's debut album set a template for bands moving into the '90s: a little bit of noise, some industrial touches and a whole lotta mid-'80s punk attitude. Frontman Steve Albini went on to work with Pixies, Nirvana and other alt-rock bands that kicked back at the system. It all begins here.

Touch and Go

Big Black, 'Songs About F---ing' (1987)

Big Black made only two albums. This was their second, their last and their best. Steve Albini built his career on abrasive music and an even more abrasive personality. Both are prominently on display here. Contrary to the album's title, the 13 tracks are about more than sex. There's death, self-loathing and getting high too.

Island

The Pogues, 'If I Should Fall From Grace With God' (1988)

The Pogues always walked the line among folk, Celtic and punk. With their third album, they let their punk inclinations mostly take over. It's harder, faster and at times more chaotic than anything else they ever did, even when Steve Lillywhite's production tries to soften the edge. 'Rum, Sodomy & the Lash' is the better album, but 'If I Should Fall from Grace With God' is more punk.

Dischord

Fugazi, 'Repeater' (1990)

Ian MacKaye formed Fugazi after Minor Threat fell apart. They were bigger and more ambitious than his '80s band, and on their debut album -- released at the very start of the '90s -- he sounded like he was ready to bring punk to arenas. He was a few years ahead of the curve here, but 'Repeater' stands as an influential record on '90s post-punk and beyond.

Reprise

Green Day, 'Dookie' (1994)

Green Day pretty much kept punk alive in the '90s and '00s by updating the music's basic sound -- loud, fast guitars and snotty, spitting vocals -- for more modern, and pop-conditioned, ears. Their breakthrough album 'Dookie' was a huge hit -- something none of the bands Green Day worshiped could possibly even dream of -- making them one of the brighter moments of the gloom-stuffed alt-rock movement of the era.

Kill Rock Stars

Sleater-Kinney, 'Dig Me Out' (1997)

Corin Tucker is punk's best female singer since X-Ray Spex's Poly Styrene. And she has the band to back it all up. Sleater-Kinney really don't have a bad album; their third, 'Dig Me Out,' is the best place to start, though. The title track is all fierce guitar and even fiercer vocals -- maybe punk's finest moment in the '90s. Punk has had a troubled history with feminism over the years. Sleater-Kinney kick it into shape like their lives depend on it here.

Fearless Records

At the Drive-In, 'Relationship of Command' (2000)

At the Drive-In broke up around the time of the release of their third, and best, album. A couple members went on to form the more prog-leaning Mars Volta, but 'Relationship of Command' is all angular guitar swipes, howled verses and choruses, and battering post-punk rhythms. The band regrouped in 2017, but this remains their essential record.

Interscope

... And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead, 'Source Tags & Codes' (2002)

The Austin art-rockers' third album is their masterpiece, a complex blend of noise and math rock that nods to earlier bands like Big Black. ... And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead got more ambitious later, but the caustic, chaotic 'Source Tags & Codes' is their purest and best realized record.

Reprise

Green Day, 'American Idiot' (2004)

Green Day returned in a big way by taking a cue from rock 'n' roll's past. 'American Idiot' has power chords, heavily politicized lyrics and a concept that fit in so well with the '00s' disillusioned youth. It's punk rock filtered through the music's storied past and shot out through a classic-rock cannon.

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