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MUSIC

'We're dealing with the power of music here'



THE CLASH

The Clash: Proclaimed 'The Cutting Edge of British Punk'

By Michael Goldberg

Carmel

THEY call themselves, simply, The Clash. The Village Voice called them, "the greatest rock and roll band in the world." And while Rolling Stone tagged the Clash as "the most intellectual and political New Wave band," the Boston Phoenix proclaimed them "the cutting edge of British punk."

Tonight, they sit in the cramped bedroom of a small, rented cottage around a bend in the road from the Carmel Mission eating white toast covered with a thick layer of baked beans. The low rhythmic murmur of taped reggae music drifts through the cool night air from an adjoining cottage.

Earlier in the day, the Clash played the first date of their second U.S. tour when they headlined at Chet Helm's ill-fated "Tribal Stomp II." Though only 500 people stood

in front of the stage in the 12,000 capacity outdoor arena, the Clash put on the rock and roll concert of their lives. Electric guitars blazed white heat, drums exploded with the rapid intensity of machine gun fire and the group's angry lyrics shattered the mellow calm of the Monterey County Fairgrounds.

The Clash, with Mick Jones, lead guitar, vocals; Joe Strummer, rhythm guitar, vocals; Paul Simonon, bass and Nicky Headon, drums will headline at the Kezar Pavilion on Saturday.

Now, as evening slips away guitarist Mick Jones, 24, reflects on the response the group received during their first tour of the U.S., earlier this year. "They see us as a novelty act," says Jones. Scarcely thin and attired in a second hand blood red dinner

jacket and black and blue striped suit pants, he looks like a young Keith Richards playing the part of a seedy waiter in Orson Welles' "Touch of Evil."

"People think you're a punk rocker, they expect you to have a safety pin through your nose," continues Jones. "And it has nothing to do with the music. In America they think we're a novelty act." He pauses a moment, then says bitterly. "But we're not a bloody novelty act!"

Indeed. There is nothing trite, gimmicky or geekish about the Clash. They are dead serious about their rock and roll and their anti-oppression stance. "We're totally suspicious of anyone who comes in contact with us. *Totally*," Strummer told Rolling Stone

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'We're Not a Bloody Novelty Act'

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earlier this year.

It's not that the Clash calculatedly try to make some grandiose political statement. As Mick Jones says, "We write about the things we experience and the things we think about." But in the Clash's case, those things happen to be hate and war and prejudice and imperialism and fascism.

"It's only 'cause we get bored with watching football," says Strummer, 27, a stocky young man who wears his hair short and greased back like a Fifties rockabilly singer.

"If we liked to drink beer and watch TV and do nothing," he continues, "we'd just write 'I love you baby, you've been on my mind' like the usual stuff. But we get fed up so we mash up the lyrics."

Unlike their nihilistic partners-in-punk, the defunct Sex Pistols, an optimism and an idealistic faith that things will somehow improve are at the root of the Clash's philosophical stance.

In England, not only are the Clash critically acclaimed, but their albums and singles shoot right up to the top of the charts. The group has attained star status in its homeland and finds its picture on the covers of the three weekly English rock music newspapers — New Musical Express, Melody Maker and Sounds — with some regularity.

Formed three years ago when Mick Jones ran into Strummer, a singer in another band at the time and said, "I don't like your band, but I like the way you sing," the Clash quickly rose to the top of the English punk/new wave heap, right behind the offensive and outrageous Sex Pistols. When the Pistols broke up in January of 1978, the Clash were heirs to the punk rock throne.

The Clash's debut album, which has only been available in the U.S. as an import until two months ago, sold a 150,000 copies in the U.S. despite no advertising and marginal airplay. When the group finally made it to the U.S. earlier this year, following the release of their second album, "Give 'Em Enough Rope" (Epic), they found a large cult eager to hear their raw, brash rock and roll. Over 4000 fans caught the group's two Bay Area concerts and turnaway crowds greeted them in L.A. and New York.

Village Voice music editor Robert Christgau stated flatly, "No one has ever made rock and roll as intense as the Clash is making right now — not Little Richard or Jerry Lee Lewis, not the early Beatles or the middle Stones or the inspired James Brown or the preoperatic Who, or Hendrix or Led Zeppelin, not the MC5 or the Stooges, not the Dolls or the Pistols or the Ramones..." Wrote rock critic Greil Marcus in New West, "This is hard rock to rank with 'Hound Dog' and 'Gimmie Shelter' — music that, for the few minutes it lasts, seems to trivialize both."

How do the Clash respond to such applause?

"I read it and I think, 'Who are these guys?'" says Jones. "I feel quite disassociated from it. It sounds like they're writing about another group."

'We write about things that we experience'

Does the world's most political rock and roll band think their rock politics can change anything?

Joe Strummer looks over to Mick Jones. "Oh, my God! Where did he get that question. A Chinese laundry?" They both laugh. Then Strummer puts his chin on his hand, as if in deep thought. Finally he looks up. "Umm. No."

"So there!" smiles Jones.

"And if your next question is 'Then why don't you do something else?' It's because I'm not interested in changing the world. I'm only interested in rock and roll. Playing it. Singing it."

Mick Jones is franker. "Maybe it won't change anything, but I still believe in it," he says. "I still have a lot of faith in the

music as a really good force. Something worth doing. Perhaps we're too ambitious a band. I would say rock and roll can contribute toward some minor change. Individuals change. But it ain't going to tell the politicians what to do. It ain't gonna save people from wars."

Jones takes another slug of beer and lights up a Winston. "We're dealing with the power of music here. And it really can soothe furrowed brows and all that stuff. And it works and it can make you feel better when you have the blues. But when you ask, can the music change someone. Can an attitude change anything? I don't know..."

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