

Paul Simonon auditions for the lead role in the movie version of John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flats*.
Pic: Pennie Smith.



ALBUMS

THE CLASH London Calling (CBS)

"... the wit of the city's urchins is as sharp as the finest conversation of the rural lord; the vulgar speech of the street arabs is so full of metaphor and condensed reference that an ancient poet would have given his soul to possess the tongue of a London apprentice; yet it is a speech almost impossible to translate, more mysterious than Sanskrit, and its fashions change from day to day..."
— Michael Moorcock, *Gloriana, Or The Unfulfill'd Queen*.

'LONDON CALLING' is the first of The Clash's albums that is truly equal in stature to their legend, yet for the most part it disposes of the more indigestible portions of that legend. Parts of it sound totally unlike anything they have ever recorded before, yet it is the most quintessentially Clashlike Clash record thus far. Much of the material on these four sides represents The Clash writing, singing and playing for their lives, yet simultaneously much of it shows them writing, singing and playing purely for fun.

Clashrock as of now (or as of 'London Calling') has a freshness, variety, vitality and range that they've never shown before (though aspects of it were signposted as long ago as 'Stay Free', 'White Man In Hammersmith Palais', 'Julie's Been Working For The Drugs Squad' and the 'Cost Of Living' EP) while simultaneously drawing from musical roots scarcely apparent back in the days of 'White Riot'.

'London Calling' is also — no small point, this — the first Clash record (with the possible exception of 'Cost Of Living') that actually sounds right; Guy Stevens has produced The Clash the way they should have been produced right from the start: the tinny Winfield-wall-of-sound of the first album now sounds quaint and one-dimensional by comparison and the AOR (Adult Oriented Rock, that is) easy-listening HM sound imposed on 'Give 'Em Enough Rope' by the appalling Sandy Pearlman is now exposed as an even more gargantuan error of taste and judgement than it seemed at the time.

The business: 'London Calling' is an 18-track (19 if you count the bonus track which appears at the end unmentioned on either sleeve or label) double album of new

Clash music retailing for a fiver, and if you buy it sharpish at a Virgin shop you can take it home for three quid. It's good, it's cheap and there's a lot of it: I call that a bargain, one of the best I ever had. With 'London Calling', The Clash have matched everybody else's bets and chucked their cards on the table: in Springsteen's words, they've shown a hand even the police couldn't beat, and they deserve to clean up.

They've even been honest enough to expose their three greatest faults on three specific tracks:

The excruciatingly condescending and self-conscious 'Lovers Rock' demonstrates that they're a hell of a lot better at discussing the relationship between man and society than they are at dealing with the relationship between woman and man. This is a chronic imbalance in the

Lyrical, those three tracks represent the worst of The Clash: male-bonding (with women either not mentioned or taken for granted), militarism along with the militancy and a martyrdom fixation. Everywhere else (now we've got those three out of the way), The Clash come up trumps.

The album opens with the single: a straight line drawn between the apocalypse of Bowie's 'Diamond Dogs' and the testament to personal courage and integrity of Springsteen's 'Darkness At The Edge Of Town'. A call for solidarity and trust in the face of impending disaster, 'London Calling' is a tuning-fork that strikes the keynote for the album, a tone apparent even in the most light-hearted moments of what is to follow.

Even before Mick Jones' pickup-selector morse-code

the smooth humming guitar sound Mick Jones featured most notably on 'I Fought The Law'. *Anything I want he gives it to me / Anything I want he gives it but not for free*, "Joe points out while sardonically and ruefully chronicling his mental and spiritual decline.

Mick Jones' 'Rudi Can't Fail', one of the highpoints of a fairly highpoint album, rounds off the first side. Rudi has clearly gotten his bottle back since Strummer first evoked him during the retreat-fade back to their 'Safe European Home' on the last album, and Strummer eggs Jones on to a marvellously spirited vocal over a whooping ska exercise that's the equal of anything on The Specials' album. *"How you get a rude and a reckless / Don't you be so crude and a feckless / You been drinking brew for breakfast / RUDI CAN'T FAIL!"* crows Jones, effortlessly evoking a pride

resemblance to Steve Tyler to sell in the States.

'The Right Profile' has Joe sounding drunk again (when he slurs like that he bears an unnerving vocal similarity to Ian Hunter — what did you do to him, Guy?). A rollicking, roistering tribute to Montgomery Clift, Stevens psyched Strummer into writing it by some unholy means of his own. Pointed, rocking Big Fun.

Mick Jones pops up again for 'Lost In The Supermarket', another high in subtlety. Jones adopts the personality of the bewildered conditioned citizen vaguely aware of the fact that there's something missing from his life with commendable compassion and lack of condescension. Simonon cops a classic disco bass lick and Jones' still small voice evinces a genuine pathos, especially when Strummer enters with a gruff counterpoint towards the end.

gimmick-hungry yob digging gold from rock and roll / Grabs the mike to tell us he'll die before he's sold / But I believe in this — and it's been tested by research / That he who fucks nuns will later join the church.

Suiting the action to the word, Strummer leads us straight to a Manhattan skyscraper — not CBS', of course — "Elevator going up!" to show us the hip execs being hip and executive. *"Your snakeskin suit and your alligator boot / You won't need a laundrette, you can send them to the vet!"* he sings on 'Koka Kola'. (What about all them leather jackets then? — Ed.)

The side winds up with Guy Stevens making a Phil Spector record with The Clash that Spector himself is going to have to go some to beat with The Ramones. 'The Card Cheat' shows The Clash giving serious consideration to the possibility of loss and defeat and eerily echoing the melodic motif of 'Rudi Can't Fail', a point not easily missed. Jones plays piano (Strummer is credited with 'pianer' elsewhere, another vital distinction).

As well as the previously discussed 'Lovers Rock' and 'Four Horsemen', the final side stars Mick Jones:

Once giving defeat the finger on 'I'm Not Down', in which he acknowledges failure and error in the past and maybe even in the future, but declares his intention to win the war despite losing a few battles. *"I've been beat up, I've been thrown out, but I'm not down, I'M NOT DOWN / I've been shown up, but I've grown up, I'm not down, I'M NOT DOWN."*

Twice: the 'secret' track 'Train In Vain' was originally intended for an NME/Clash flexidisc giveaway project, but there were extensive technical and logistical problems, so it shows up here instead and it sounds better than it ever could on a flexi, so who's complaining? 'Train In Vain' is a bit of '79 UK soul that any of the mod bands would have been proud to call their own.

Strummer's sign-off comes on another Rudi riot: 'Revolution Rock' is one of the numbers on this album that The Clash didn't write ('Brand New Cadillac' and 'Wrong 'Em Boyo' being the others), but The Clash turn everything they play into a Clash song: what could be a more perfect Clash song than 'I Fought The Law', for example?

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Clash worldview, and the day that they resolve this contradiction is the day that Strummer and Jones (my money's on the latter) will write one hell of a good song. 'Four Horsemen' is the kind of stylish-radical-boys-together self-mythologising which they decry on 'Death Or Glory' and which should have been dumped back in the days of 'Last Gang In Town' or left to Generation X who, after all, have precious little else to sing about.

The third and final bone of contention is 'Guns Of Brixton', Paul Simonon's debut as composer and vocalist. Musically impeccable, it's one of The Clash's most tense and stirring reggae pieces (The Clash have always picked up on the taunt and militancy of reggae, whereas The Police's reductions of reggae have always concentrated on its spaciness, which is — after all — far more saleable as it's less challenging), but we don't need another paean to martyrdom; we've already had enough martyrs.

bleep has died away, The Clash drrrrriiiiive straight into Vince Taylor's 'Brand New Cadillac'; rockabilly-tinged R&B of the hard kind that recalls The Yardbirds' epic 'Train Kept A'Rollin'' with even a tiny nod to Cream's 'Crossroad' at the beginning of the guitar solo. The Clash's sympathies are — for once — clearly with the departing girlfriend: check Strummer's scornful roar of *"Balls to you, big daddy! She ain't NEVER coming back!"*

Next up, The Clash take over Tom Waits' favourite bar for 'Jimmy Jazz', a lazy, alcoholic shuffle with dirty, goosegrease saxophone. There's brass aplenty on 'London Calling', attributed to 'The Irish Horns'; if it ain't John Earle and the Rumour brass, I apologise. A slurring Strummer exclaims *"What a relief!"* over the sax solo and misdirects the police who come looking for Jimmy Jazz himself.

An Inter-City paced Bo Diddley beat leads into 'Hateful', a sharp look at drug consumption patterns with

and militancy that has nothing to do with aggro and bullying. A message to you, Rudi!

'Spanish Bombs', which opens the second side, is perhaps the most brilliantly uncharacteristic piece on the album. Jones' buzzing lead and Beatley chords are juxtaposed over a lush carpet of acoustic guitars and a hustling Headon backbeat. A marvellously ambiguous look at the Spanish Civil War with a chorus in the lovers' tongue (ha!), switching back and forth from the Spanish war to contemporary Spain and Ireland, it's counterpointed with the sinister line *"I'm flying in on a DC-10 tonight"*. Strummer sings the song beautifully, with Jones' higher smoother voice alternating octaves, harmonies and parts of the lead with marvellous sureness. This is as good a place as any to point out that this album is virtually Strummer's debut as a singer; he was still barking like a seal on the first album, and on the second Pearlman buried his voice on the grounds that he bore an insufficiently strong

'Working For The Clampdown' is old-style Clash: *strictly militant* with a ridiculously martial Mick Jones guitar bugle-blast, and the previously discussed 'Guns Of Brixton' rounds off the side.

THE second half gets a rousing curtain-raiser with 'Wrong 'Em Boyo', the Stag-O-Lee saga blaring out in true roadhouse style before Strummer halts the proceedings at the end of the first verse to translate the legend into tense, jumping ska. Another message to Rudi: to live outside the law in Clash terms means being twice as honest as those who live within it, and it also means taking the consequences. They ram the point home on another of the album's crucial tracks, 'Death Or Glory'; outlaw posturing is meaningless unless it's backed up with a real integrity. *"Death or glory is just another story."* They comment hilariously and ruefully on their own odyssey: *"And every*