

Sound
**Clash makes
impact on
rock scene**

By Lynn Van Matre
Rock music critic

WITH THE DEMISE of the Sex Pistols, the overpublicized punk rock band whose short-lived career ended with a whimper in early 1978, the odds-on favorite in the British punk rock scene's *sturm und drang* sweepstakes was clearly a quartet called the Clash.

Like the Pistols, the Clash relied on primitive, pounding frenzy, rather than any sort of musical finesse, to put its performances across. Like the Pistols, its songs ignored the usual pop topics (principally love and/or something like it), concentrating instead on life gone sour in

Britain and other strident political and social complaints. "I'm so bored with the U.S.A.," ran the opening line of a song by that title the band performed in an appearance at the Aragon Ballroom last fall as part of its first American tour.

The feeling, it turned out, was more or less mutual. By and large, the U.S.A. didn't find the Clash all that captivating either; despite extravagant attention from a few quarters of the pop press and a few overblown assertions by some of the more hysterical critics about the band being the "best in the world," the band fulfilled relatively few expectations. As with too many punk and new wave acts, theirs was basically a one-note performance, whether on record or live onstage, in which the musical passion was undeniable but simply not enough to make up for the dreary narrowness of approach. Neither of the Clash's two muddily produced albums, released both in the U.S. and Britain, were the successes at the cash register that the attention accorded the band might have suggested.

Confusingly enough, the band's initial release in Britain, "The Clash," was released as its second album here, while "Give 'Em Enough Rope," its U.S. "debut" album, was the follow-up to "The Clash" in Britain. At any rate,

"Rope" wound up selling around 80,000 copies, according to Clash-connected sources; "The Clash" did little better, in the low 90,000s.

Obviously, the Clash had not connected on any mass level — nor, on the basis of their performance up to that point, did they really deserve to. Like a lot of other people at the Aragon last September, I danced to the Clash's music, but once the relentlessly raucous rhythms stopped, the temptation was to write them off as just another rock band in a snit — not to mention a rut. Entertaining enough, even exhilarating, in limited doses, but nowhere near diversified enough musically to qualify as real contenders over the long haul.

But "London Calling" (Epic), the Clash's recent double-album, has made it plain that the three-year-old band is not only capable of more diverse creativity, they also have the potential for becoming one of the most exciting bands of the '80s. The raw excitement and passion that were the Clash's most compelling points remain strong, while the occasional wit and insight reflected in lead vocalist Joe Strummer and Mick Jones' lyrics have intensified. But the range of moods and music is wholly unexpected. Where there once was mostly anger and a driller-killer, chain-saw-massacre musical approach to everything, now there is a

potpourri of reggae, ska, rock, blues, and soul, with the Clash's usual guitars and drums occasionally augmented by a brass section; one number, the reggae-rocker "Wrong 'Em Boyo," even incorporates a bit of the American traditional "Stagger Lee."

Clearly, the Clash has matured both in terms of musical outlook and execution without sacrificing any of its intensity of feeling, and the results add up to an effort that no doubt will wind up on a lot of "10 best" album lists come year's end.

Reggae (along with its predecessors, such as ska), which has always met with far more success with British rock audiences than U.S. ones, plays a large part in the Clash repertoire, as it does in a number of other newer British bands. While a lot of the "purer" reggae, particularly the militant back-to-Africa music made by reggae singers who are members of the Jamaican Rastafarian movement, was understandably alien to most U.S. audiences in terms of its sentiments, the beat itself can be irresistible. Merged with rock and new wave in the hands of such bands as the Clash and the Specials, who are currently riding a wave of success in Britain with a sound heavily influenced by the reggae forerunner ska, the distinc-