

music/

ROBINS/The Clash's disquieting message

By Wayne Robins

"London Calling" could be the name of a BBC short wave radio program, with news, talk and music beamed at former colonies. In essence, that's what this newly-released third album by The Clash is, aimed at lifting morale in all occupied rock and roll territories.

Looked at from another direction, "London Calling," an accomplished, passionate and vital two-record set, could also be heard as a distress call. The Clash got together in 1976, a year which was to rock and roll in London what the upheavals of 1968 were to youth culture sensibilities in America and Paris. It was a time of defiance at the barricades, of taking a surging spirit to the streets in the hopes of overturning the established order. In America, that surge drove Lyndon Johnson from the presidency; in France, rebellious students came closer than anyone expected to toppling the government.

In December, 1976, The Clash was the opening act on the Sex Pistols "Anarchy (in the U.K.)" tour. By the end of the next year, the Sex Pistols were in disarray and The Clash had taken their position as leaders of the punk rock revolt.

The first two Clash albums, "The Clash" and "Give 'Em Enough Rope" (released in reverse order by a timid Epic Records in the U.S.), were indeed vitally, conscientiously political. Inspired by what they perceived as outbursts of repression and racism, coupled with the frustrations of undeniable inflation, The Clash were dealing with serious business. The titles themselves tell the story. From the first album: "Remote Control" and "Complete Control;" "White Riot" and "White Man in Hammersmith Palais." For outside materials, The Clash chose Texan Bobby Fuller's hit (composed by Sonny Curtis) "I Fought the Law" ("and the law won"), and Junior Murvin's frightening reggae song, "Police and Thieves," a song with violent imagery tempered by a nobody's-right-if-everybody's wrong theme.

From "Give 'Em Enough Rope": "Guns On the Roof" and "Tommy Gun," "Drug Stabbing Time" and "Julie's In the Drug Squad;" "That's No Way to Spend Your Youth" and "English Civil War."

The albums made The Clash heroes in the United Kingdom, but the United States held back approval. Both albums were too raw and dense for American radio to program comfortably; disco and "adult oriented rock" (AOR in the trades) ruled.

It is also probable that most American rock fans didn't know how to relate to The Clash. Unlike every other important and unimportant hard rock band, The Clash denounces decadence, is contemptuous of self-destructive behavior, and finds the cocky, sexist egotism that goes along with rock stardom to be pathetic. On the pointed



The Clash: Distress call on 'London Calling.'

and harrowing title track of the new album, The Clash makes its position on a few subjects clear. Drugs, The Clash understands, are more of an immediate threat to their young compatriots than the right-wing National Front, inflation and the Russian army. "London calling upon the zombies of death/quit holding out—and take another breath."

This opening song also has The Clash disavowing both movement leadership and the rock business' star-making machinery. "London calling, now don't look to us/all that phoney Beatlemania has bitten the dust." While "London Calling" shows the integrity of The Clash to be intact, it is far more expansive than its predecessors. It is leavened with humor and features a variety of musical styles. The Clash—singer Joe Strummer, guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Topper Headon—has learned to play a bit more slowly, with considerably more color (saxophones and keyboards have been added for richness). At the same time, there's no loss in intensity. This should be the al-

bum that allows the ears of the world to catch up with the most uncompromising hard rock band since The Who.

The cover of "London Calling," designed clearly as a homage to Elvis Presley's debut album, virtually marks this as a new beginning for The Clash. But while Elvis, on that 1956 cover, is seen riffing on his guitar, Mick Jones is seen smashing his. It is a cover that says: this is what we are, sons of Elvis, nephews of Pete Townshend, brothers of Johnny Rotten.

Musically, while Strummer, Jones, Simonon and Headon effortlessly are expanding their range, they are also reasserting the virtues of rock's formative era. There are three instructive cover versions. There is an obscure 1959 rockabilly tune called "Brand New Cadillac," with a lyric twist in which a woman is, figuratively, telling the man to stay off her blue suede shoes. There's also a little-known reggae song called "Revolution Rock," which might have meant something entirely different on other Clash albums. But The Clash has given up some of the puritanical edge it chafed against in making "politically correct" music. Instead of propaganda, "Revolution Rock" is a good time throwaway that nevertheless explains the real subversive power of rock and roll. The message is: "Everybody smash up your seats and rock to this brand new beat! This here music mash up the nation/This here music cause a sensation!"

The third borrowed song, "Wrong 'Em Boyo," may be the most stunning performance on this seamless album. It begins with Strummer singing a few bars of the rhythm and blues standard "Stagger Lee," a seminal piece of black urban mythology. The playing is so crude that it's apparent to all that there's nowhere to go but to disintegrate. The band stops and a voice cries: "Let's start it all over again." Enter the assertive riffing of New Orleans horns, lifted from Frankie Ford's "Sea Cruise," over a reggae rhythm section. "Wrong 'Em Boyo," credited to C. Alphanon, turns out to be the Jamaican interpretation of "Stagger Lee." The Clash has managed to isolate the precise junction at which New Orleans r&b (exported via radio in the 1950s) led to the formation of reggae by Jamaicans who tried to imitate that sound, only to come up with something

—Continued on next page

RECORD CAPSULES

John Fahey: "The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death" (Takoma). A reissue of Fahey's late 1960s album, a classic of innovative unaccompanied acoustic slide guitar, bottleneck and banjo. The emphasis is on country blues stylings with peculiar titles, such as "I Am the Resurrection" and "My Station Will Be Changed After Awhile." Most of the songs are by Fahey, although he borrows from a spiritual mentor, Bukka White, for "Poor Boy." There are also eccentric choices, such as "Bicycle Built For Two," that keep the listener constantly off-guard. A wonderful record. —Wayne Robins

Jules and the Polar Bears: "Fanetiks" (Columbia). A disappointing second album from a band that made an impressive debut last year. Rather than continuing to develop an original style, the songs and vocals of Jules Shear sound more like Kinks-Klones than ever. Even though there are some clever songs—"Fate" stands out—the arrangements are uninspired, the textures

bland, and the rhythms redundant. —Robins
The Cleveland Quartet: "Beethoven: The Six Early Quartets, Op. 18" (RCA Red Seal). In the brochure that accompanies this three-disc boxed set, there are instructive discussions of various technical and interpretive aspects of playing Beethoven. Essentially, the Cleveland has chosen to take a middle-ground position on such matters as articulation, dynamics, style and tempo—although the quartet has included all repeats as written. The result is a "modern" view tempered with respect for authenticity—and it works very well. The playing is generally excellent, the instrumental voicings and balances sometimes splendid. Violinists Donald Weilerstein and Peter Salaff, violist Martha Strongin Katz and cellist Paul Katz formed the Cleveland Quartet in 1979. Their long association is shown clearly in their remarkable rapport. They work together almost as a single instrument and produce vibrant tone, impeccable timing and, most importantly, an obvious devotion to both music and musicianship. A first-class album that you should hear. —Bob Micklin