

On records

Maybe the smartest band, but not best — yet

By Dave Marsh

**THE CLASH: "London Calling"** (Epic) 4 Stars.

If the Clash was just another punk band, it might be possible to review "London Calling" with some measure of objectivity. As it stands, rhetoric has escalated the discussion beyond all reason — the claim this record, from its album graphics to the "hidden song" on Side Four, makes for itself is that the Clash is the latest pantheon rock band, that it's fully earned its place in the rock tradition alongside Elvis, the Beatles, the Stones, Dylan and the Who. The critical corollary is supposed to be that the Clash is the world's greatest rock band.

Not yet. The Clash simply hasn't developed a musical persona which is the equal of its supposed competition — the guitars clang with the proper force, but the rhythm playing has grown progressively less forceful with each suc-

cessive LP (this is their third) and vocalist Joe Strummer's affectless yowl is merely unconvincing only when it isn't positively alienating. At its best, the Clash might very well be the smartest rock band in the world (particularly in a political sense), and such songs as "London Calling," "Spanish Bombs," "Lost in the Supermarket," "Wrong 'Em Boyo" and "Koka Kola" could substantiate that claim. But the expansionist production of Guy Stevens works only up to a point — a point that's reached, for me, with the group's horrid wall-of-sound botch, "The Card Cheat." A good band, absolutely; a great one, maybe; the best — no way.

**THE UNDERTONES: "The Undertones"** (Sire) 4 Stars.

Feargal Sharkey, the Undertones' lead vocalist, has just what Joe Strummer of the Clash is missing — conviction and innocence. True, he rants no

less, and some of the concerns of this Irish band's LP may seem highly tangential to Americans, but the generalized expressions of frustrated rage ("Teenage Kicks," "Male Model," "Girls Don't Like It") speak a universal rock and roll tongue. For those who don't suffer in the translation, a winner.

**PENETRATION: "Coming Up for Air"** (Virgin International) 3 Stars.

Thunderous punk, not as distinguished as either of the above, but with at least one gem, "Shout Above the Noise" — as much an anthem as any-

thing this side of Tom Petty's "Refugee."

**THE NOW: "The Now"** (Midsong International) 2 Stars.

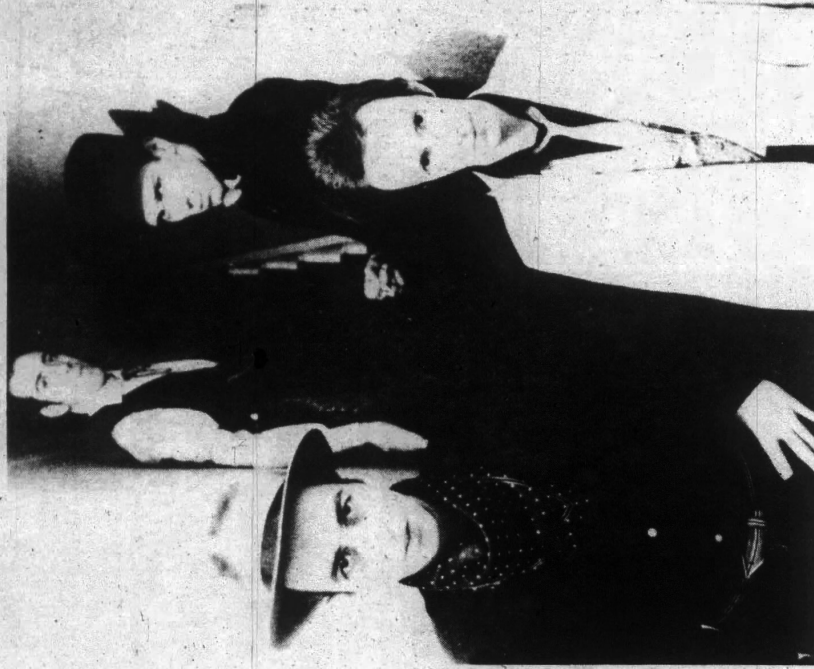
Power pop from a band that looks suspiciously as though it was playing heavy metal until "My Sharona" clicked. Come to think of it, The Now also sounds that way. Bands like this compare to ones like the Clash and the Undertones as Frankie Avalon compared to Elvis and Buddy Holly.

**FINGERPRINTZ: "The Very Dab"** (Virgin) 3 Stars.

Solid if arty new wave set, featuring a nicely spacey funk guitar style and solid rhythm percussion. This can be a monotonous album, and when it rocks out, it can be positively lame, but within its narrow, minimalist groove, Fingerprntz has its pleasures to offer.

(Records are rated from one star to five in ascending order of quality.)

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The Clash

Front row, from left, Joe Strummer, Nicky "Topper" Headon; backrow, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon