

# The Clash

After being dismissed as just another frenzied punk group, this outfit has matured and diversified, and could become one of the most exciting bands of the '80s

By Lynn Van Matre  
Chicago Tribune

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 storm and 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 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 followup 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, 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 3-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 drill-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



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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 distinctive Jamaican rhythm has its best chance yet of reaching a wider audience.

But while the Clash incorporates the style marvelously, and *Wrong 'Em Boyo* ranks as one of the best songs on *London Calling*, the band's rock 'n' roll reaches out even more aggressively on a couple of levels. Those interested simply in rock's sound and fury can find plenty of it here — but should you want to get "literate," a glance at the lyrics printed on the record sleeves can prove both entertaining and thought-provoking. (The last song on the album, incidentally, is not printed on the

sleeve or even listed on the record jacket, entitled *Train in Vain*, it was apparently an afterthought addition.)

*Koka Kola*, for example, a hard-rocking, impressionistic collection of images from and about the advertising world, speaks of "the pause that refreshes in the corridors of power; When top men need a top up long before the happy hour; Your snakeskin suit and your alligator boot; You won't need a launderette — you can send them to the vet!"

As is usually the case, the Clash, scheduled for another U.S. tour this spring, offers no real answers to the situations they decry; their calls to action suggest few real solutions. But their passion is almost palpable, their energy is direct and devastating, and their *London Calling* ushers in the '80s with an adrenalin rush of raw excitement coupled with musical competence and diversity — the sort of sound a lot of people may just have been waiting for.

## M, Gary Numan replace emotion with electronics

By John Rockwell  
New York Times

Ever since Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis*, and no doubt long before that, the modern world has been fascinated with robots. Exotic yet familiar, "perfect" yet devoid of emotion, robots become even more compelling as we recognize in them a model for future human evolution. Much of the punk fashions lately have projected not an image of drool-like violence but its repressed opposite, a world in which emotion and sexuality are supplanted by a bizarre, mechanistic androgyny.

The musical metaphor for all this is stiff, jerky rhythms and a heavy dose of electronics. Often the singing is secondary, indifferent voices filtered through enough electronics to make questions of vocal timbre and quality irrelevant. Devo is the most obvious example of this trend, but there are many, many

more, from the spacey acid rock of Pink Floyd to the German synthesizer bands, Talking Heads and Brian Eno.

Inevitably, the world of pure pop has noted the commercial potential of this trend, and records have begun to appear that exploit it for the marketplace. Such is certainly the case with the band called M, and possibly with Gary Numan. Both of these acts use lots of electronics and, with the potential of overdrubbing, in both cases the bands and their human progenitors have become interchangeable. Robin Scott of M has chosen to let himself become known by the band name; Numan seems to have dropped the "Tubeway Army" sobriquet under which his disks first appeared.

M became known last year with a delightfully dizzy single called *Pop Muzik*. M's debut album is called *New York, London, Paris, Munich* — a line from the single, which it includes. The

rest of the songs are cast in the same mold, bouncily danceable in a way that fits either a conventional disco or a new-wave rock disco neatly enough.

The lyrics, however, give one just a bit of a pause. Scott seems determined to capitalize on a sort of "Après moi, le déluge," Joel Grey in *Cabaret* hedonism. "Satisfy your lust, before we go bust," he chirps in one song, and another advises his listeners to "spend it while you got it." Still, it's cute, and you really can dance to it.

Numan ostensibly aspires to weightier stuff, tapping the basic adolescent fantasies of the lonely, unpopular hero. His most common metaphor for that is the robot and the machine, and the music is a denser, more ominous kind of electronics, akin to M's but also to Pink Floyd's. Numan is mighty popular in his native Britain, and seems likely to make a dent in the American market, as well.