

Clash album looks back to rock roots while preaching revolution

THE CLASH — "London Calling" — (Epic)

The cover of The Clash's new album owes much to Elvis Presley's first album. The pink and green lettering, the shape of the lettering and the arrangement of the title over a black and white photo is identical to the cover of Presley's first album for RCA released in 1956, almost as if The Clash hopes this album will be as important to rock as that one.

It is one of many bows this English rock band makes to the past here. (The cover photo also pays homage to Pete Townshend of The Who, by presenting a scene of impending guitar destruction.)

The sounds recall nearly all of rock's greats from The Rolling Stones to The Beatles, from Buddy Holly to Chuck Berry. The Clash also incorporates that other political music, reggae, into the act with good results.

The two-record set is ambitious, alternately flawed and successful. The big surprise is the amount of polish these musicians have developed since their last record.

The melodies, merely intimated on the last album, are now full-blown, with powerful arrangements that, while smooth, never undercut the band's raw power.

Unlike their spiritual progenitors, The MC5, who first blended a distinctly revolutionary stance with rock music in the late '60s, The Clash avoid experimental music preferring simple high-energy arrangements in traditional rock styles.

There are dangers for a group that claims to reflect the disenfranchised. One is that as a group becomes a star band it loses touch with the realities that engender its original commitment. This is true even when you consider rock 'n' roll as teen-age rebellion.

Record reviews

Most groups lost that rebelliousness as their pocket-books grew fatter.

The big question is, "Can the Clash keep from being corrupted?"

If the Clash truly seeks an overturn of the system that oppresses, it may be undoing its own cause by offering a vicarious substitute for action in the cathartic strains of its music.

The problem is that music is not a good medium for delivering literal information, it is the feeling that counts. And the feeling, sad to say, is usually gone a short while after the show.

Despite this, the title cut, "London Calling," is a great tune. The lyrics are vague but rousing: "London calling to the faraway towns/Now that war is declared — and battle come down." Maybe it's a reaction to the growing fascist movement in Britain as a result of that country's economic decline, or just one of rock's many doomsday scenarios.

It details the decline of humankind as well or, at least, the perception of its decline in a time characterized by scarcity: "The Ice Age is coming. The sun is zooming in. Engines stop running and the wheat is growing thin."

The song is chilling in much the same way that Dylan's "Desolation Row" is. Neither song makes literal sense, but they express a sense of doom and acceptance of it. The Clash song is much more didactic, much more humdrum in its lyricism, devoid of a real joy in language, because the beat is all important.

The best of the 19 songs is "Lost In The Supermarket." A strong melody is accompanied by lyrics that must speak for themselves: "I am lost in the supermarket/I can no longer shop happily,/I came in here for that special offer/Guaranteed Personality."

The song goes on to paint a picture of a lost soul, dehumanized by a crazy urban environment and a total product of the consumer society: "I'm all tuned in, I see all the programmes/I save coupons from packets of tea,/I've got my giant hit discoteque album."

"Spanish Bombs" seems to make a parallel between the Spanish Civil War and modern revolutionary movements. "Working For The Clampdown" is an indictment of Nazism. "Koka Kola" makes points against advertising.

There seems to be a strong anti-drug stance throughout, as if to say that drugs are a tool of government to keep the lower classes low. Take these lyrics from "Four Horsemen": "They gave us everything for bending the mind."

Also noteworthy is the group's "Train In Vain," the last song on the record. It's a tough nonpolitical rocker with a strong touch of rhythm & blues. (For some reason, the tune is not named either on the record label or jacket, but it's there on the vinyl and that's what counts.)

There are times when the lyrics fail — particularly on the reggae tune "Revolution Rock" — and the vocalizing is very raw throughout.

But on the whole, this is a dedicated tough record with good (if not great) songs in profusion. Even without its politics it is an important rock record (or maybe, more precisely, despite its politics).

—SAL CAPUTO

PAT METHENY GROUP — "American Garage" — (ECM)

Metheny is the most melodic composer-guitar player in jazz-rock fusion. "American Garage" is another album of floating melodies featuring Metheny's sinuous guitar leads.

There is a sense of *deja vu* upon hearing a new Metheny outing. The melodies here are different from those of his last album "New Chautauqua," but the feeling and spirit are the same. The new tunes are good but not immediately differentiated from those of the previous album.

Of the cuts here, "The Epic" has sections that are most jazz like, with some straightahead playing that shows both Metheny and his co-writer, pianist Lyle Mays, to have excellent traditional chops.

Most of the songs follow a simple formula. The heads (or opening segments) are more rock-flavored — such is the case on "(Cross The) Heartland," "Airstream," "The Search" and "American Garage." These segments then lead into fusion music that has a lightness and clarity uncharacteristic of the

field.

Mark Egan's bass is an important melodic element offering interesting earthbound counterpoint to both Mays' and Metheny's soaring solo lines. Drummer Dan Gottlieb keeps affairs moving quite well.

This is subtle rewarding music, but Metheny's work could use more variety despite its excellence.

—SAL CAPUTO

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