

Call to Action

Some call the **Clash's** *London Calling* the best album of the '80s. We call it one of the greatest albums of all time. Clash members Mick Jones and Paul Simonon look back on its making.

ON APRIL 25, 1980, A PUNK BAND FROM Britain appeared as the musical guest on ABC-TV's sketch comedy program *Fridays*. While at the time the Clash—Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon, Topper Headon—were still a cult phenomenon in America, their third album *London Calling* was picking up momentum on the strength of the unexpected hit single “Train In Vain.” By the next morning, however, anyone hanging around an office water cooler (that pre-Internet-era version of the chatroom) already knew the score. The Clash, having gobsmacked viewers with incendiary versions of “Train,” “London Calling,” “Guns Of Brixton” and “Clampdown,” were, verily, the only band that mattered.

London Calling, of course, is key. From the indelible sleeve art with pink/green lettering (a clear nod to the first Elvis album) overlaying an iconic photo of Simonon about to smash his bass; to the music inside, a marriage of American rock, blues and rockabilly to the

band's trademark politicized punk and reggae; to the bold move of issuing a double LP a mere three years after *Frampton Comes Alive!*: there's nothing remotely gratuitous or routine about *London Calling*. The original plan was even to call it *The Last Testament*, suggesting the Clash were intent upon closing the very book of rock itself.

If the book didn't slam shut on them first, that is. As Strummer told the *New Musical Express* shortly after *London Calling's* release, “This album would have been our last shot, never mind if we didn't have the spirit for it, which we did. I don't know why, but the problem seemed to relax us, the feeling that nothing really mattered any more, that it was make or break time.

“Desperation—I'd recommend it.”

WHAT WAS THE CLASH'S SITUATION WHEN they strode through the anonymous doors of London's 36 Causton Street in the spring of '79? Located in an old rubber factory-turned-

car repair shop was a grimy, no-frills rehearsal studio dubbed Vanilla, and its selection was a matter of necessity. Recently divested of both their overbearing manager, Bernie Rhodes, and their regular practice space, the Clash were also sparring financially with their record label, CBS. In the parlance of the times, they were skint, and at Vanilla, the price was right.

Plus, observes Jones now, "We needed that kind of seclusion. The Pistols had broken up so we didn't really fraternize with anybody, and we felt we were outside of everything in the business. Vanilla was literally a room in the back of a garage; if you weren't invited to come down you'd never have known there was a band in back."

The Clash rehearsed in earnest for a couple of months, eventually bringing in a Teac four-track to document their progress. Captured on tape were future *London Calling* gems, including an embryonic version of the title track and instrumental takes of "Clampdown" (then called "Working And Waiting") and "The Right Profile" (aka "Up-Toon"); also recorded but eventually discarded were the rocksteady-flavored "Where You Gonna Go (Soweto)" and the punkish "Heart And Mind" plus a



reggaefied cover of Bob Dylan's "The Man In Me."

The Vanilla Tapes is comprised of 21 of those songs, a bonus disc included on the new *London Calling: 25th Anniversary Edition* (Sony Legacy). Yet until recently the material was thought to be lost, the result of a Clash roadie accidentally leaving a boombox containing the only known cassette on a subway platform. This past March, however, Jones came

across an old box of tapes: Inside were his long-forgotten personal copies of the Vanilla rehearsals.

Asked what went through their heads when they heard these lo-fi, hissy rehearsal tapes for the first time in 25 years, both Jones and Simonon express amazement.

"Suddenly I remembered exactly how the room that we made those demos in looked, like the dirty brown carpet on the floor," marvels Simonon.

"Like a sense memory, it brought all those images up."

The tapes prompted some head-scratching too; both men barely remember "Heart And Mind" and "Where You Gonna Go (Soweto)." "We're trying to figure out who wrote them," Jones chuckles, "and we might have to do a 'copyright control' notation for them until we can find out."

Rounding out *London Calling 25* is a DVD containing videos and a 40-minute

documentary on the making of the album. (*The Fridays* appearance was slated for inclusion but, according to Jones, ABC demanded too much money for the footage.) When filmmaker Don Letts flew to New York to interview longtime Clash associate Kosmo Vinyl about *London Calling*, Vinyl suddenly recalled he had a reel of black-and-white film shot during recording sessions at

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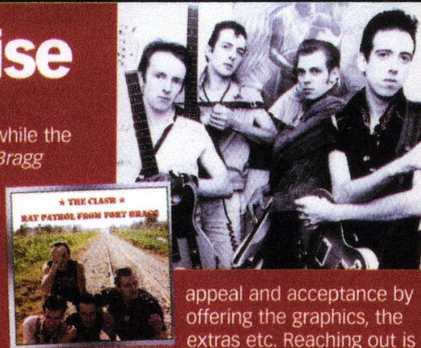
Bootlegger's Paradise

THE VANILLA MATERIAL IS CLEARLY aimed at Clash collectors who routinely snap up underground recordings of the band. As Simonon himself freely volunteered, he's not bothered by bootlegs, we decided to track down the foremost Clash bootlegger, a gentleman living in northern Italy who goes by the nom du rock "Arnold Finney." His nine releases (to date) on the Red Line and Snotty Snail labels boast outstanding audio and elaborate packaging (such as booklets that fold out into posters), additionally demonstrating a keen instinct for giving collectors what they want. For example, *On Broadway 4—The Outtakes* is a rarities collection serving as a fantasy "fourth disc" to the

official *On Broadway* box, while the 2-CD *Rat Patrol From Fort Bragg* comprises unreleased *Combat Rock* material. Finney gave us his opinion of the *Vanilla Tapes* and more. FINNEY: [Sony] have still edited out some alternate *Vanilla* takes and I think they could have put these out on a promo CD. Still, it's great they are putting it out. The music industry has denied collectors, but bootleggers are making them come out of their shell.

Why did you start your label?

It ensured quality control on bootlegs, and it also widened



appeal and acceptance by offering the graphics, the extras etc. Reaching out is another reason. There are loads of fans out there who would love to listen to [the material] but know nothing of it. All the material just came via someone saying they had something unusual, given to them by a friend who knew the band way back then, etc.

Tell us about your *On Broadway 4*

and *Rat Patrol* titles.

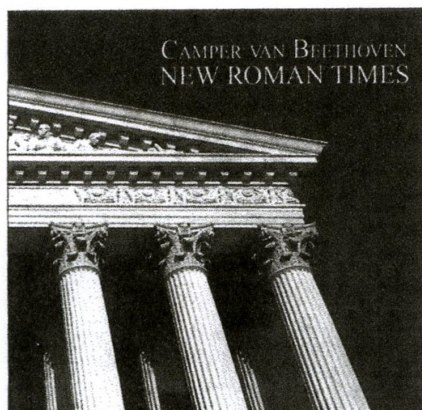
Aha! Revenge on Sony and the "kiss-Mick's-ass Clash fans"—they left out [material from] *Cut the Crap* on the box which was a commercial decision rather than a Joe Strummer one. [With *Rat Patrol*] the idea was to nail those demos for good as soon as a great sounding tape appeared.

Any "holy grail" Clash items still out there that remain elusive?

Some of filmmaker Julian Temple's 1976/77 footage or [producer] Mickey Foote's "hidden tapes" would be nice. But those close to the band try to keep their personal collections as some sort of medal of their closeness and trustworthiness. Bullshit. Music was recorded to be shared and listened to, not put in boxes in the loft. ■

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INDELIBLES

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Wessex Studios. Included on the DVD, it shows the Clash working through songs while producer Guy Stevens, paunchy, frizzy-haired and with a wild beard, buzzes around like a lunatic, shouting in their ears, upending chairs and at one point even swinging a ladder around in the air.

Jones says that prior to the discovery of the footage, "I don't know if people believed us. But that was part of Guy's being a kind of catalyst to us. He'd actually be talking to you while you were playing—talking about great musicians of the past, trying to instill a little of that into what you were doing. [laughs]"

Stevens was legendary from his work with such '70s luminaries as Mott The Hoople, Spooky Tooth and Free, but his unorthodox style, erratic behavior and fondness for the bottle had caused him to fall out of record industry favor. To the maverick-minded Clash, however, he was a kindred spirit.

"I knew he was an outcast, but it was simpatico between all of us, really," Simonon confirms. "Joe made this great comment: 'Well, it's usually the group that's supposed to do the damage—but for the producer to be doing it?' That's a really telling point, because it did allow us to get on with the music. For Guy, the live injection, that's probably why the album has that freshness. It's the group playing live there and it translates onto tape."

Stevens also made the band crucially aware how any time they walked into a studio it might turn out to be *the* take, something Jones claims helped them reach that critical point where they were "playing at the top of our game." Indeed, just the title track alone is worth its weight in sonic bullion, from the Headon-Simonon military thump and Jones' air raid guitars to Strummer's apocalyptic lyric visions and feral howling. And while journalists are fond of citing the album's stylistic breadth, the real source of *LC's* longevity can be found in its *vibe*, part viscera-stirring focused ferocity, part lightning-in-a-bottle spontaneity.

As Kosmo Vinyl observes on the DVD, "This is the album where the Clash defined themselves."

"How do you do that?" Jones wonders aloud. "To capture the thing that is what people maybe recognize but can't quite attain? You know, when you start, you're a boy, and then you go around a bit and your worldview broadens and you come to maturity. Well, that was the corner we turned here, and it was our most 'together' time. We went every day to the studio, not trying to think too much, but trying to just do it naturally. We worked dedicatedly *every single day*."

JOE STRUMMER, WHO DIED IN DECEMBER OF 2002, WAS NOTORIOUSLY non-nostalgic. Asked the inevitable question of "What would Joe think of the expanded *London Calling*?" however, and Simonon is unequivocal: "He'd be ecstatic that [the lost tapes] should be found again and that they're there for everyone to hear this work in progress. Joe was very proud of his legacy—and quite rightly, too."

What, then, of Strummer's 1979 *NME* quote? Did the Clash really snatch greatness from the jaws of desperation?

"Well," considers Jones, "I might not like to say 'desperation' entirely. Joe gave more of a flowery phrase there. But there was a lot of that in there, yeah, and we were feeling apart from everything, too."

Adds Simonon, "We tightened up and just focused ourselves. Joining hands, really: 'Well, the rest of the world is doing *that* but we're gonna do *this*.'"

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