

Melody Maker

December 29, 1979

20p weekly

USA \$1.25

CLASH CALLING

Strummer on
the rebound

by CHRIS BOHN (p.12-13)

Chinn &
Chapman:
producers
of the
decade?
(p.16)

Records
of the
year
(p.14)

Win £80-
worth of
records in
'The Spanish
Inquisition'
(p.10)

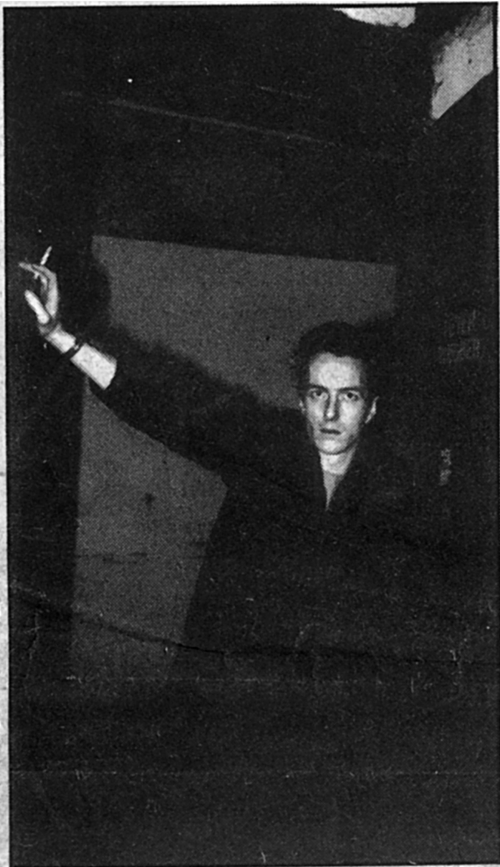
Electric
Almanac:
Lynott's
choice
(p.23)



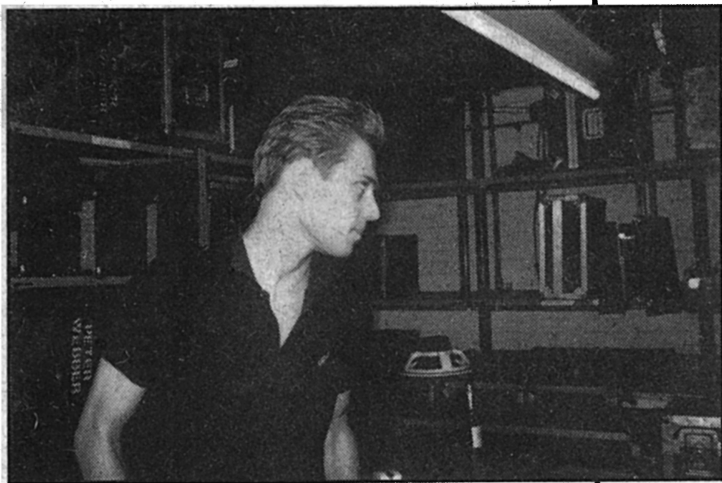
Clash: one step beyond



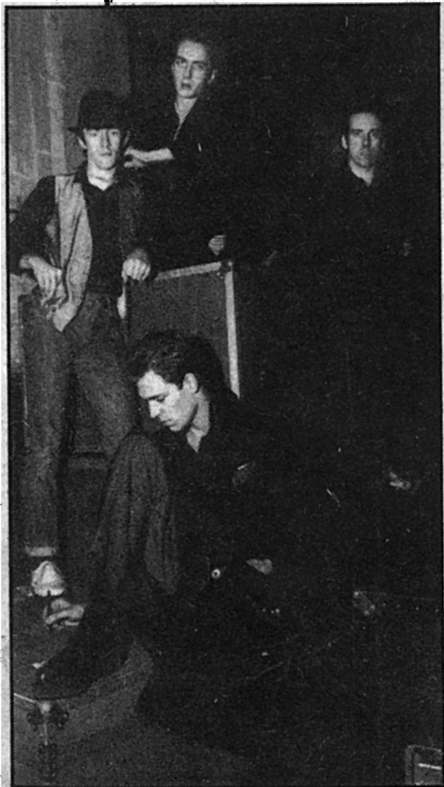
Mick Jones models leather fashions, circa 1945.



Wallbeam plus support (Joe Strummer).



"Where's my automobile?" — Paul Simonon.



Garage band in garageland — Topper Headon, Joe Strummer (over), Paul Simonon (under) and Mick Jones.

They're not the same. Are you? CHRIS BOHN talks to Joe Strummer about new directions for the original agitprop rockers.

INSIDE the Clash's new rehearsal studio, under a railway bridge somewhere in South London, Joe Strummer is singing a slow country blues about rolling boxcars, twisting his head way down under to reach a low mike, perched next to an electric piano.

To his right, Mick Jones, dressed in black shirt, vest and trousers, looking like a maverick from a Western B-movie, messes around with a bottleneck; while to his left Simonon slouches on a barstool, as if posing for the silhouette logo on "Top Of The Pops". Behind them, Topper Headon drops an occasional beat to throw drumsticks for his dog.

This is the new Clash, relaxed and unfettered by the chains — or "bullshit", as Joe would have it — with which some would bind them to their past. They will later worry about the lack of work they're getting done, but undoubtedly the music will be as tough and as tight as it ever was by the time they reach the stage in January.

By then, their attack will be strengthened by an influx of new songs from their third album, "London Calling", which showcases an ardent, much younger-sounding band, for the first time allowing itself the expression of a full range of emotions, rather than just those sentiments we all wanted to hear. The sound is exhilarating, jumping from the loping, lightweight "Jimmy Jazz" to the swinging political punch of "Clampdown", to the "white trash" reggae of "Lover's Rock" and the upstart, rocking "I'm Not Down" or "Hateful".

The songs' source-material is rock 'n' roll, old movies, Raymond Chandler, anything — not just personal experiences or responses, which limited the scope of "The Clash" and "Give 'Em Enough Rope".

Those albums were necessarily narrow, pushing forward the punk message. But life goes on, things change, people grow, and in doing so the Clash have broken out gloriously from their own confines. They've learnt from their mistakes, which were many, and today they're far more cautious in what they say off the record, friendly and helpful, without volunteering the "good copy" they used to deliver, and which they've been forced to live down ever since.

THE trouble is the newspaper men have forgotten why humans like music," says Strummer. "It's like the fairy-tale, when people forget the basic thing because they're too involved with the bullshit. And that's the moral of this fairy-tale — they can't see the wood for the trees any more.

"We're just a group and we release records, and that's the face of the situation, I'd say, but people think they've got to swallow all the bullshit with it. That's why I thought Blind Date, which you used to have in your paper" (MM used to carry single reviews by a guest musician who wasn't allowed to see the label or the artist's name before passing comment) "was so good, because the reviewer had to judge it on the tune and the beat — what it should be judged on, you know, not what kind of trousers he's got on. Aw, I dunno."

Easy to say that now, but the Clash — with or without Bernie Rhodes, whom they've previously acknowledged as being important in establishing the political character of the band at the beginning — formed the blueprint for the whole movement of socio-political punk bands, and thrived on confrontation at all levels: with authority, with their record company (CBS), and with their public — the last category perhaps still to come.

The Clash coming clean will shock those harbouring illusions about them being front-line troops, though the band began the whole mobile-guerrilla-unit thing themselves. Even on the new album, on "Spanish Bombs", Strummer glamourises the "artists at war" image.

"I got that from reading — Orwell and people like that," he says. "It's been pretty well covered. But me, I've gone through my Starsky and Hutch stage. If there was another one, I don't think I'd rush out there and get in the front line. Who lives by the gun dies by the gun — never was a truer word said."

THE emphasis has shifted. The Clash still shoulder responsibilities, like making sure the songs are right and the band are fit to play them and to give their all onstage. "It ain't like sitting on a stool, it's about 300 times more physical than that. I'm now 27 and it's something you gotta learn by the time that you're 25 that before then your body doesn't keep a record of what

you do to it. After that you get real sick, sort of burning the candle at both ends — especially doing the stuff that we do. All this junkie he's-so-out-of-it rock 'n' roll stuff doesn't appeal to me at all. That's the easy way out, you know?"

He adds: "I wrote 'Rudie Can't Fail' about some mates who were drinking brew for breakfast. They think nothing of it. Me, I'm past the stage where I can. I can drink brew for breakfast, but not every day, and that's what made me notice them. I thought it was a hell of a way to start a day."

Their commitment comes in the positive exuberance of the songs, concentration on getting the basics right and helping people in the most direct way they know — cutting the price of the album to the minimum. Eighteen tracks for £5, as the ad goes. Most of them worth having, too.

Ironically, bearing in mind the music's healthy vitality, the Clash were at their lowest when they began planning "London Calling". Reeling from expensive court hearings, extricating themselves from former manager Bernie Rhodes, then leaving his successor, Caroline Coon, the Clash were going through a radical reappraisal of their whole approach.

First, they took control of their management, only recently relinquishing it to Blackhill Enterprises when they had the album in the can, because "we didn't wanna spend all day on the 'phone".

But they were at rock-bottom, and desperately needed to find a way out. Says Strummer: "Economically, we were really tight at the time. This album woulda 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 anymore, that it was make or break time."

"Desperation. I'd recommend it." He continues: "We thought of this idea to create the £2 wall of sound, by recording it on two Teac recorders to keep the costs low, so we could release it cheap. Then the music would have to be fucking good to cover this fucking insanity. We just said to ourselves that we'd never put out a Clash album for six quid."

"But to do that, we knew we'd have to pay for the recording costs ourselves, otherwise CBS woulda told us to fuck off and sent us

another list of debts ~~when we~~ asked them to put it out cheap.

They got CBS to agree to the lowest price category, which would also cover a free 12-inch single; they played a festival in Finland — “it was good dough and would pay for the recording costs at Wessex studios,” says Strummer — and recorded between May and August.

“We gave CBS 20 tracks and told them to put eight on the 12-inch single. They freaked out, so we said, ‘Look, make it a fiver’, and against my expectations they agreed to put it out as a double-album.

“I’d say it was our first real victory over CBS.”

MORE important, the double-album format allowed them to keep lighter, nonsensical tracks, like the free-ranging “Jimmy Jazz” or the misunderstood “Lovers Rock”, alongside more conventional Clash songs like “Clampdown”, “Hateful” and “Death Or Glory”.

“Jimmy Jazz” is the Clash at their most relaxed, working out on a bluesy tune, with Strummer scatting along, taking more care with his voice than the words:

“What started me thinking, is that it’s not only the message, but the way it’s said. So a piece of nonsense can have a powerful meaning to me. Like, you know, ‘Well, they all call me Speedo / But my real name is Mr Earl.’ But in this post-Dylan age, if you unleashed that on the political critics, they’d go ‘tedious nonsense’, whereas in fact it’s the greatest thing that ever walked the earth along with all the other things.”

Mick Jones begins miming Gene Vincent doing “Be bop a lula” and Strummer continues:

“Like, I saw that TV programme when they were taking the piss on a panel show, by reading out the lyrics of ‘Be bop a lula, she’s my baby / Be bop a lula, I don’t mean maybe.’ They didn’t understand that it’s Gene Vincent and that’s it — the meaning of life is revealed immediately (laughs).

“But,” he says, “I put a lot of

thought into the whole process of writing lyrics. Some days, I just can’t see the point, and then I get worried because it’s the only thing I’ve been solely preoccupied with for I-don’t-know-how-many years.”

Strummer’s at his most passionate these days talking about method rather than content, except in a rather extraordinary defence of “Lovers Rock”. It’s a song I’d considered lightweight before he volunteered, out of the blue, his reasons for writing it, opening up a whole new area previously left uncovered by the Clash.

He says that the song’s based on “The Tao Of Love And Sex”, which is about “The Chinese way of fucking. A lot of people in the Western Hemisphere have problems. No-one really wants to talk about this kind of thing, but it’s very common, especially with boys turning into men — you get some great bird and fuck it up, right?”

“This song mainly tries to tell you how to do it properly. It goes: ‘You Western man, you’re free with your seed / When you make lovers rock / But whoops there goes the strength you need — to make real cool lovers rock.’

“Another thing,” he adds, “it’s about how you can have a good time without her either having to take the pill or have a baby. The pill leads to dreadful depressions with some girls. Taking the pill every day, sometimes getting fat and they don’t know why, and that makes them feel worse.

“I mean, I was a dwarf when I was younger; grew to my normal size later on, but before then I had to fight my way through school.

“Anyway, that’s why I wrote the song, even though it’s a bit of a touchy subject. I don’t agree with the pill at all. Then you got the Pope saying Catholics can’t take it . . .”

Strange: the Clash, musically closer than ever to the rock ‘n’ roll mainstream, moving further away in their concerns. Strummer does deflate his explanation somewhat, though, saying: “The song is, kind

of, having a laugh, too.”

IN retrospect, “Give ‘Em Enough Rope” was more of a mistake of execution, Sandy Pearlman succeeding only in diminishing the Clash’s passion, without playing up their force. It just doesn’t compare with Guy Stevens’ more sympathetic, less obtrusive job on “London’s Calling”.

Strummer remarks on the difference: “Guy is that private thing called an X-factor. He comes in and grabs me by the throat and says, ‘I deal with emotions’, and that’s it. He doesn’t deal with knobs or whatever else producers deal with.

“He’s very off the wall, and he understands the spontaneity of the moment — priceless. If you can get that moment when you play a song just so in front of a tape machine, you got a million dollars. He understands that.

“Sandy’s just a knob-twiddler. Well, not even that — he oversees others twiddling knobs. But Guy Stevens no longer knows what a machine is, only that it’s a means to an end, while Pearlman half-knows that, but he’s not sure. He’s too obsessed with the machinery of it. He’s kinda forgotten that it’s only there to give us some soul.”

THE myth-making of “Guns On The Roof”, “All The Young Punks” and “Last Gang In Town” indicated that the band were taking themselves and their history a bit too seriously in those days. Strummer counters:

“Yeah, that was another stream of bat-piss, you know? But I think sometimes you need to do that. We like to gee ourselves up a bit, but it’s not strictly serious, like ‘Last Gang’ wasn’t anything to do with us at all. I never for one minute imagined that we were the last gang in town, but the fact it was one of our song-titles became a handy headline for newspaper editors.

“In fact, I was taking the piss out of violence by inventing a mythical gang. Every day I was hearing

about a new gang, first the teds, then the punks — then they were fighting — then the rockabilly teds and the zydeco kids, who were rumoured to wear straw cowboy hats and Doc Martens covered in cement.

“All this was at the height of the violence, an’ I came across it lots of times. I just wanted to take the piss, you know? So we invented this mythical gang, like ‘Boy, you better come running, because here’s the last gang in town.’”

Less interesting were the continually publicised clashes with CBS, the remote-control / complete-control games that still go on, but now they don’t talk about them so much.

“Hmm, I must agree it’s not the point at all, fighting record companies. It’s a waste of time, but with ‘Complete Control’ I thought strongly about it, and the phrase kept cropping up everywhere after we seized on it; so I think, looking back, it was worth latching on to.”

STRUMMER today is more pragmatic, less prone to lash out at easy targets. Mick Jones is the same. In casual conversation, he’s friendly and open. When he drifts in on the interview, he contents himself with a few quips or corrections. He’d rather continue the rehearsal that the meeting has interrupted.

With both, some subjects are taboo. The Clash film for instance, which they’re adamant won’t be released. No further comment. On the band’s past political involvement, Strummer tends to sidestep questions by talking about the medium rather than the message.

He says: “I personally like a pokey lyric, because unless there’s something really good about it, it bores me to hear about jealousy and straight heterosexual complaining songs. Unless, say, Chrissie Hynde — I wouldn’t care what she’s singing. Her voice is the sweetening to the pill. But unless it’s someone like that, I prefer a pokey lyric — by which I mean a lyric covered in barbed wire.”

“Look, we’re just trying to do

the best we know how. Our ability has widened slightly. Ya gotta learn, ain’t ya? You wake up the next day and know there’s more to be done, and carry on hoping that you won’t make the same mistakes. You gotta keep your eyes open.”

“**A**NOTHER thing I’m fed up with,” Strummer adds, getting more animated, “if you don’t mind me saying so, and that’s calling the kettle black — (singing low, deadpan): ‘It’s a shitty situation/A lot of mess today / It’s a shitty situation.’ What I’m trying to say is one step beyond. I hope we’ve gone through that stage.

“Listening to all this cold, grey brave-new-world music — with a K — you know, I wouldn’t play it to a cage of hamsters. It wouldn’t do them any good. It doesn’t do me any good. What we’re trying to do is make some music. It’s just, you know, the sound of finger-clicking. You know what I mean? This is out of place in the modern world.

“It’s bullshit, the new kind of bullshit, and it’s just as well to spot it when you can, otherwise you follow it like sheep.

“Like, there we were in ‘71 following Emerson, Lake & Palmer to the brink of disaster, but luckily everybody snapped out of it. I don’t like this neu pop musik, because it just ain’t got swing, or soul.

“Dogma?” he continues. “We kind of need that stuff, but we ain’t gonna set it to lifeless, cold, grey music, because we realise there’s no point in trying to get a message across unless it’s somehow sweet — so that your unconscious will reach out to it.

“Anyway, we always tried to play just as good as we could. What we play now is what we can do. It wouldn’t be fair to do ranting music, because we’ve mastered a time-change. We can play in another rhythm. So there’s just no point. We do a bit of ranting, just to keep it up, but we don’t do it all the time. We do something now which we couldn’t do before.”

Clash: one step beyond



Mick Jones models leather fashions, circa 1945.



Wallbeam plus support (Joe Strummer).



"Where's my automobile?" — Paul Simonov.



Garage band in garageland — Topper Headon, Joe Strummer (over), Paul Simonov (under) and Mick Jones.

They're not the same. Are you? CHRIS BOHN talks to Joe Strummer about new directions for the original agitprop rockers.

INSIDE the Clash's new rehearsal studio, under a railway bridge somewhere in South London, Joe Strummer is singing a slow country blues about rolling boxcars, twisting his head way down under to reach a low mike, perched next to an electric piano.

To his right, Mick Jones, dressed in black shirt, vest and trousers, looking like a maverick from a Western B-movie, messes around with a bottleneck; while to his left Simonov slouches on a barstool, as if posing for the silhouette logo on "Top Of The Pops". Behind them, Topper Headon drops an occasional beat to throw drumsticks for his dog.

This is the new Clash, relaxed and unfettered by the chains — or "bullshit", as Joe would have it — with which some would bind them to their past. They will later worry about the lack of work they're getting done, but undoubtedly the music will be as tough and as tight as it ever was by the time they reach the stage in January.

By then, their attack will be strengthened by an influx of new songs from their third album, "London Calling", which showcases an ardent, much younger-sounding band, for the first time allowing itself the expression of a full range of emotions, rather than just those sentiments we all wanted to hear. The sound is exhilarating, jumping from the loping, lightweight "Jimmy Jazz" to the swinging political punch of "Clampdown", to the "white trash" reggae of "Lover's Rock" and the upstart, rocking "I'm Not Down" or "Hateful".

The songs' source-material is rock 'n' roll, old movies, Raymond Chandler, anything — not just personal experiences or responses, which limited the scope of "The Clash" and "Give 'Em Enough Rope".

Those albums were necessarily narrow, pushing forward the punk message. But life goes on, things change, people grow, and in doing so the Clash have broken out gloriously from their own confines. They've learnt from their mistakes, which were many, and today they're far more cautious in what they say off the record, friendly and helpful, without volunteering the "good copy" they used to deliver, and which they've been forced to live down ever since.

"THE trouble is the newspaper men have forgotten why humans like music," says Strummer. "It's like the fairy-tale, when people forget the basic thing because they're too involved with the bullshit. And that's the moral of this fairy-tale — they can't see the wood for the trees any more."

"We're just a group and we release records, and that's the face of the situation, I'd say, but people think they've got to swallow all the bullshit with it. That's why I thought Blind Date, which you used to have in your paper" (MM used to carry single reviews by a guest musician who wasn't allowed to see the label or the artist's name before passing comment) "was so good, because the reviewer had to judge it on the tune and the beat — what it should be judged on, you know, not what kind of trousers he's got on. Aw, I dunno."

Easy to say that now, but the Clash — with or without Bernie Rhodes, whom they've previously acknowledged as being important in establishing the political character of the band at the beginning — formed the blueprint for the whole movement of socio-political punk bands, and thrived on confrontation at all levels: with authority, with their record company (CBS), and with their public — the last category perhaps still to come.

The Clash coming clean will shock those harbouring illusions about them being front-line troops, though the band began the whole mobile-guerrilla-unit thing themselves. Even on the new album, on "Spanish Bombs", Strummer glamourises the "artists at war" image.

"I got that from reading — Orwell and people like that," he says. "It's been pretty well covered. But me, I've gone through my Starsky and Hutch stage. If there was another one, I don't think I'd rush out there and get in the front line. Who lives by the gun dies by the gun — never was a truer word said."

THE emphasis has shifted. The Clash still shoulder responsibilities, like making sure the songs are right and the band are fit to play them and to give their all onstage.

"It ain't like sitting on a stool, it's about 300 times more physical than that. I'm now 27 and it's something you gotta learn by the time that you're 25, that before then your body doesn't keep a record of what

you do to it. After that you get real sick, sort of burning the candle at both ends — especially doing the stuff that we do. All this junkie he's so-out-of-it rock 'n' roll stuff doesn't appeal to me at all. That's the easy way out, you know?"

He adds: "I wrote 'Rudie Can't Fail' about some mates who were drinking brew for breakfast. They think nothing of it. Me, I'm past the stage where I can. I can drink brew for breakfast, but not every day, and that's what made me notice them. I thought it was a hell of a way to start a day."

Their commitment comes in the positive exuberance of the songs' concentration on getting the basics right and helping people in the most direct way they know — cutting the price of the album to the minimum. Eighteen tracks for £5, as the age goes. Most of them worth having, too.

Ironically, bearing in mind the music's healthy vitality, the Clash were at their lowest when they began planning "London Calling". Reeling from expensive court hearings, extricating themselves from former manager Bernie Rhodes, then leaving his successor, Caroline Coon, the Clash were going through a radical reappraisal of their whole approach.

First, they took control of their management, only recently relinquishing it to Blackhill Enterprises when they had the album in the can, because "we didn't wanna spend all day on the 'phone".

But they were at rock-bottom, and desperately needed to find a way out. Says Strummer: "Economically, we were really tight at the time. This album woulda 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 anymore, that it was make or break time."

"Desperation. I'd recommend it." He continues: "We thought of this idea to create the £2 wall of sound by recording it on two Teac recorders to keep the costs low, so we could release it cheap. Then the music would have to be fucking good to cover this fucking insanity. We just said to ourselves that we'd never put out a Clash album for six quid."

"But to do that, we knew we'd have to pay for the recording costs ourselves, otherwise CBS woulda told us to fuck off and sent us