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Revolt into style=

Mike Mills with The Clash on the build-up to this week's London shows

Persevering punks

Clash register

by Mike Mills

THE darkness is suddenly filled with the sound of Tennessee Ernie Ford singing '16 Tons'; the refrain: "You load 16 tons, and what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt."

The Clash, whose present success in the record charts might seem to indicate a certain comfortable affluence, have called their latest two-month tour of Britain, which ends at Bristol's Colston Hall on February 25, the '16 Tons Tour' because, at the end of it, despite having sold out virtually every concert (there will have been more than 30) they'll be lucky if they've broken even on the operation.

When Tennessee Ernie is cut short in mid-croon and The Clash crash into 'Clash City Rockers', it becomes clear why, despite the financial shortcomings, it has all been worth it. On their present form they are off ahead of most of the field as the most dynamic and exciting rock band at work in the land. Their instrumental abilities, the strength of the singing, the excellent sound mix and the obvious vigour with which they are performing — smiles, even — all are light years ahead of earlier outings in which the intentions outstripped the result by what was too often a large margin.

It will be four years in May since the band first formed. Guitarist Mick Jones and bassist Paul Simonon took up with relatively experienced singer Joe Strummer, then front man for a band called the 101'ers. All three had an art school background, but it took little to persuade them that the group was more important.

With Terry Chimes (nicknamed Tory Crimes) as the first drummer, they started playing (bottom of the bill on the Anarchy tour in December 1976), signed to CBS and with a manager, Bernie Headon, and recorded their first LP (*The Clash* CBS 82000) with the sound man as producer. Chimes left when he'd seen enough of the violence which their appearances caused, and they recruited Nicky 'Topper' Headon, a friend who also impressed them with his powerful technique (he still does).

The first LP, poor though the sound is, contains several songs now accepted as classics of the original punk movement: 'Janie Jones', 'White Riot', 'London's Burning', 'Career Opportunities', and their ver-

sion of the Junior Murvin-Lee Perry song 'Police and Thieves'. This was acknowledged as a break-through in the "Can white boys sing reggae without making fools of themselves?" debate. Despite the approval of Perry, however, only their fondest friends could have described the band as competent live musicians at this time — Jones being the only one to give any indication of what was to come.

Although the record sold well, the singles it spawned and other 45 rpm releases met a wall of radio silence. The obvious unwillingness of the networks to play the records stemmed at least in part from the running battle which the band appeared to be having with the police and licensing authorities everywhere.

Trouble

Every time they toured, with such support bands as The Buzzcocks, Slits, Subway Sect, Richard Hell, Suicide and Special A.K.A., they left a trail of damaged seats at concert halls, hasty cancellations when local authorities banned them,

confrontations with the law over alleged drug offences, vandalism, petty theft and worse. In Sweden they had bomb threats and physical assault from the *Raggers*, the right-wing Hell's Angels-type gangs.

The most extraordinary incident was when two of them were arrested by armed police after some racing pigeons had been shot from a rooftop in Camden Town (check out 'Guns on the Roof' on the second LP). Undeterred, they went off on tour again: 'The Clash Out on Parole Tour', having recorded the new LP with US producer Sandy Pearlman.

Give 'Em Enough Rope (CBS 82431) certainly sounded better than the first, and again it had some essential tracks: 'Stay Free', 'Tommy Gun', 'Last Gang in Town' and 'Julie's Been Working for the Drug Squad'. It went into the charts at No. 2, and 'Tommy Gun' was their first real hit single. This was the moment at which they parted company, none too amicably, with manager Bernie Rhodes. With claim and counter-accusation flying everywhere, they set off to the US, where the new LP had been listed among 1978's top ten Pop LPs by *Time*, and took Bo Diddley along as support.

The tour was a success. On their return they released the *Cost of Living* EP on election day, and it made the charts easily, though more for the re-make of 'I Fought the Law', which got airplay, than for the other tracks, including a

previously abortive 'Capital Radio'. Their only live UK appearance was at a benefit for those involved in legal action after the Southall demonstration in which Blair Peach was killed.

Double

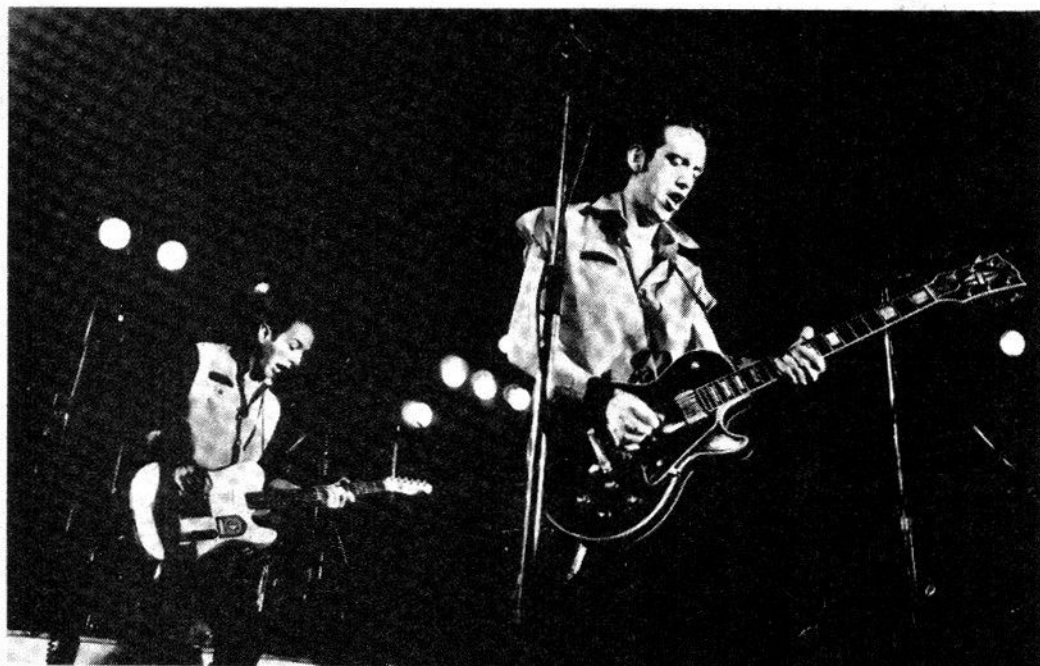
For their third LP they engaged Guy Stevens, producer of Mott the Hoople and much else, but not exactly an obvious choice. They were fortunate in Stevens, who gave them the recorded sound they had previously lacked, and was able somehow to bring out their most accessible, tuneful and powerful material to date. No small credit must go to keyboard player Mickey Gallagher (most well known as one of Ian Dury's Blockheads), and the 'Irish Horns', who add brass to many songs. Trouble loomed over the length of the LP (it emerged as a double, with 18 tracks), but eventually and admirably it was issued at the price of a single LP.

After they had almost finished *London Calling* (CBS CLASH 3), they went back to the US with Gallagher, and toured with such support acts as Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Sam and Dave, Bo Diddley, Joe Ely (who has come over for the London dates this week) and The Cramps. The LP and its title-track single were immediately successful, getting played on the radio and awakening an entirely new audience to the power and true abilities of the band.

There were, as a result, accusations of 'selling out' by

Paul Simonon (left) and Topper Headon (right): bass player and drummer





Joe Strummer (left) singer and guitarist, and Mick Jones (right) guitarist; they write most of the songs

those who preferred the band to remain the private preserve of a faithful few, but the group members are unrepentant. They know they've produced something which, by virtue of its greater professionalism and sheer entertainment value, will reach a wider audience and, they hope, make them think. For the imagination, fire and integrity of the early days have not gone. If you think they've lost the cutting edge of the first songs you'd be advised to go back and listen to them again, and see that they are not at all the paeans of negativism which many of us took them for at the time.

Jones and Strummer, the main writers, are concerned not with passing out slogans for the disenchanted to parrot, but with encouraging the processes of critical thought: complacency and blind conformity are the targets. Certainly they dislike the political set-up and have misgivings about much of the establishment in this country, but only an idiot could describe such attitudes as dangerously subversive.

Showtime

Meanwhile, back at the hall, The Clash are presenting an irresistible blend of old and new songs, typically including 'Tommy Gun', 'London Calling', 'Brand New Cadillac', 'Janie Jones', 'Clampdown', 'Jimmy Jazz', 'Guns of Brixton', 'Stay Free', 'I Fought the Law', 'Wrong 'Em Boyo' and 'Armageddon Time', all put over with clarity (full marks

to sound man Geoff Hooper) and bolstered by the keyboard fullness of Mickey Gallagher.

In the excitement of the show itself, it might be easy to miss, as I did at first, how much improved is the bass-playing of Paul Simonon, but at the Southampton Top Rank, during the sound check, when Jones and Strummer hadn't yet arrived, he, Gallagher and Headon played themselves in in a way which was more than enough to convince me.

On many of the shows they have had guests joining in: at Brighton, the second date, Pete Townshend had been in the dressing room and then mingling with the crowd, and was traced in time to play three songs at the end; at Friars, Aylesbury, the opening night, they had Ian Dury and the Blockheads as support; in London, Townshend was expected again. No encore has been complete without the support bands joining in, whether Mikey Dread, the reggae toaster, Joe Ely, US country-rocker, or slightly over-awed members of the local support group.

And after the show? there's a pause while most fans leave the venue — many have travelled some way and have to get home as soon as possible — and then the band makes itself available to any who have waited to see them, for autographs, handshakes or talk. There's no sign of any willingness to forgo what must be, after a long show and a day's travelling, fairly gruelling

meet-the-crowd sessions. Their readiness to talk, coupled with an open-handed generosity which is as misunderstood as it is instinctive, has not helped their relations with the police, since they attract and will stoutly defend a loose following of youngsters who might be described as disaffected if not actually delinquent.

On the journey back from Southampton, in the comfortable clutter of a customised van, Jones and Strummer sit almost silent as the inevitable reggae pours from the speakers. Talk is desultory and inconsequential, and the stop at a Motorway Services enlivened only by the search for change and a suitable cigarette machine, and some banter with Iggy Pop's road crew, travelling in the opposite direction.

Plans

No more singles will be taken from the last LP, and the band has been recording with Mikey Dread — a song called 'Bank Robber', and will be doing some more while in the US — to make up the follow-up to 'London Calling'. If you have tickets for the shows this Friday and Saturday, February 22 and 23, at the Liberty Cinemas in Balham and Mile End, think yourselves lucky — there aren't many hard rock bands on the road at the moment who could touch them.

After the final concert of the tour, at Bristol on February 25,

they'll go to Paris for one show and then immediately to the US for ten, including two benefits for hospitalised folk-singer Jackie Wilson. By the time they return, it will probably be time for Gallagher to rejoin Ian Dury's touring band, while The Clash will be completing recordings made on tour.

With their appetite for work, however, it shouldn't be too long before they're off on another UK jaunt, despite the difficulties in making these outings pay. With legal proceedings pending over another bust (of Strummer and Headon and two road crew at Southsea the weekend before last), it may well be 'The Clash Out on Parole Part II', but they'll be there.

This week sees the London trade showing of a film, *Rude Boy*, about The Clash and their involvement with a young fan who joins their road crew, by Jack Hazan, maker of *A Bigger Splash*. The group want nothing to do with the film as it is. Strummer is quoted as saying that he doesn't mind if it is shown, as long as no one has to pay to see it. *Rude Boy* opens on March 20, at the Prince Charles Cinema.



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