

The Clash

Give 'Em Enough Rope

Steve Brennan



Photos by Penny Smith



Turn off your mind, lie back on the couch and relax. We're going to have an association test. What do you think of when I say the Clash? Running battles with the grey forces of government? Three chord supercharged thrashes vilifying unemployment and public housing vegetation? Seething hordes of punks dancing themselves into a frenzy?

Wrong. Times have changed. Punk is now locked as firmly into the past as hippies were in the Sixties. Safety pins and bondage trousers are as passé as headbands and peace signs. The bands that characterized an era have disappeared. The Sex Pistols destroyed themselves which left the Clash.

After an impressive first album and a fair second effort, their third double record recaptures the drive and energy of the first. The Clash have established themselves as the most talented band to emerge from the much vaunted new wave.

Their latest album, *London Calling*, displays considerable evolution since early days of the band. The songs are more reflective and melodic. Songwriters Joe Strummer and Mick Jones contribute heavily but to a large extent the dexterity and adaptability of drummer Topper Headon has enabled the Clash to develop their musicality.

Topper is, perhaps, the most accomplished musician of the four-man band. His early training with a variety of different music forms, from traditional jazz to soul, has provided a firm foundation for Strummer and Jones. Topper provides the matrix from which the rest of the band work.

Topper believes the Clash have survived because they have staying power, because they haven't been afraid of changing and because they weren't hesitant to branch out when they grew tired of playing frenetic chords.

"We've remained true to what we ori-

Their attitude irritates businessmen. "If anybody does something like sneak a video of us on television, we'd split up. And CBS knows we mean business. We owe them so much money they can't afford for that to happen."

The Clash are a refreshing contrast to the kind of bands that do anything to get their name on the dotted line. From the beginning it's been a complete turnaround from the usual state of affairs that exist between band and record company. The *companies* have been chasing the Clash.

Topper joined the Clash between their first and second albums. Previously he was playing with a soul band that regularly toured Germany and British airforce bases. Regularly earning \$100 a week, Headon took a cut in pay to work with The Clash. "I knew at once that it was the gig I'd been looking for. Everything came quite naturally."

By the time Topper joined the band, he was beginning to think he'd never pass an audition. Not many bands were signed before the British punk explosion. "They'd form a band for somebody from out-of-work-musicians who had been thrown out of other bands. They knew the ropes, so they wouldn't kick up a fuss because they knew they were dispensable. Everytime I went along for an audition, I was constantly beaten by drummers who had played for name bands and had 'experience.' It just went on and on like that."

Topper had been playing drums since he was 13. Drumming was a habit he picked up when he had a broken leg which halted a promising football career. His dad spotted a second-hand kit in the local paper and bought it. By 14 Headon was regularly playing with a traditional jazz band. "For some reason bands were always short of drummers."

"This jazz band," Topper recalls, "were all about 50 years old, and a couple of them were pretty good. It taught me a lot about time keeping, just keeping it moving and swinging. Just because I was straightforward — no frills or anything — they thought I was great. Gradually, I began to get better and they liked me less and less because I started to get flash. The first lesson I learned was that other musicians appreciate a solid drummer, not a flash drummer."

As far as tutoring, Topper never got past the introduction in the books. Paradiddles and triple paradiddles were as far as he got. Eventually, Headon bought

a Premier kit: "At that time it was the cheapest pro kit you could get. You could go into any music store and get one. Everyone stocked spares and fittings. That was one of the reasons I bought a Premier. I'm still sold on silver kits because they look great under the lights."

A few days before his first tour with the Clash he took possession of a silver Pearl kit, which he still uses. After a bit of chopping and changing of toms, he's wound up with a 24" x 17" bass drum, 14" x 10" top tom tom, 16" x 10" and 18" x 10" floor toms, and a Ludwig Black Beauty snare drum. All the cymbals are Zildjian — two pairs of 15" Heavy Rock hi-hats, a 16" crash, an 18" crash, a 21" Rock ride, a 19" Rock crash and a 20" Rock crash, plus a little Zildjian splash cymbal attached to the top of the bass drum which he claims is driving the rest of the band mad. All the stands are Premier Lokfast Trilok stands.

"I go for a real solid kit," claims Topper, "that's why I chose Pearl and Premier. There're really solid and serviceable, no frills on them. You get a good feeling when you sit behind them because they're so workmanlike. You think, 'Great, I ain't gonna knock these over'. I use rubber mats to secure the kit on the riser."

"Although I have the kit basically the same most of the time, I do like to change it around occasionally. If I started to use wooden blocks on the riser then I'd be stuck with one position, and that can be limiting."

When it became evident that the Clash were here to stay, Topper got the chance of a new kit, which he tried but didn't rate as much. However, he did take Pearl up on the offer of a buckshee recover and recon. He expects to have his present kit for at least another five or six years, providing it doesn't get dropped or broken.

Another complaint from Topper is lack of service and spares outside London: "We've got a flight case which is like a miniature drum shop, it carries everything down to cymbal felts and spare lugs for the bass drum. We always take it with us on the road and keep it stocked."

"I begin a tour with everything I might conceivably need, and gradually I get rid of things I don't need, so the kit gets smaller as the tour goes on. Once the hi-hat busted, the spring went right inside, and it was impossible to fix. It was a Saturday night when we discovered it, and

ginally believed in," declares Topper. "We still enjoy playing our own songs. We're not going through any set patterns. The basic idea has been to remain true to what we believe in and not allow ourselves to be dictated to by the industry and become CBS puppets."

They've done a deft job of staying ahead of the big business machine. "Who needs it? We wanted our double album to go out for \$10 when everybody else's albums go out for a lot more. We had to fight battles to get a cheap record out. Obviously, that's not in the record company's interests. They told us it was impossible. Maybe that's why we've stayed together; we keep setting ourselves impossible tasks. It gives us drive."

Even on tour, the Clash are determined to keep prices down which certainly affects the band's take home pay. But money isn't what they want most.

"What we want is for the kids to be able to see us," Topper says.

The Clash



we had a show on Sunday. Luckily, we were able to borrow a hi-hat stand from the support band."

Topper is a man dedicated to acoustic drums. He regards synthesized drums as irrelevant: "They were alright for two weeks, then the novelty wore off. Personally, I'm exploring different areas, like percussion. I even use finger cymbals on one track of *London Calling*. But that's the way to go — into acoustic percussion. There's so much scope there that I don't know why synthesized drums were invented in the first place."

Miking up for a gig is a lot similar to miking up for the studio. Topper uses two overhead cymbal mikes, and two mikes for the double hi-hat set up he uses. The toms are all miked from the top, and the snare drum is miked from beneath. He keeps both heads on and never has anything inside the shells. Topper uses very little damping live. What damping there is, is usually on the bass drum, and always external. All damping is with gaffer tape. Topper prefers AKG mikes, but on tour they vary depending on which PA hire company is being used.

"I can go into the studio and get a good drum sound in an hour," continues Topper. Listen to the latest LP *London Calling* and you'll hear what he means. "The first time I went into the studio I was pretty green but I learned from it. For *London Calling* I went straight in and knew exactly what to do. Everybody goes into the studio much more relaxed now. I use AKG mikes and everything is miked from the top except for the snare. Again I use double heads to get the boom sound, and I use room mikes to pick up the spillage, to make it sound more live without going over the top. The set up is exactly the same as I have live, really, except I don't use a bit of damping."

The biggest problem with putting out the new album were recording costs. The Clash figure that the longer they spent in the studio, the more it would cost, the more money CBS would have to put up, and consequently they'd have a greater hold over the band. The Clash even put up some of the money themselves. Eventually, they had the tape and told CBS: "You can have it if you meet our conditions." Topper admits that there are some mistakes on the album, and more than a few drum errors. That's the price to pay for the energy captured on the vinyl.

London Calling was recorded in a month, with Guy Stevens producing. That's how it's going to be in the future, Topper maintains. The second album, *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, was not as successful as either the first or the third records, and Topper blames producer Sandy Pearlman for this.

"He made it quite dull," Topper says. "He was a dull person to work with. We wanted a producer, CBS gave us a list of producers and his name was on the top. We listened to stuff he'd done with heavy metal bands, and we thought it was rubbish, but it was the production we were interested in. We wanted to get a good sound, and one complaint against the first album was that it sounded too thin. So we wanted some production that would stand up to time. So we got Pearlman. But he took so long to do it, with his perfectionism, that the prevalent feeling in the studio by the time he'd finished was boredom. When I think about recording that album I cringe."

Problems don't end in the recording studio for the Clash. For a good few years now they've had constant trouble with local districts who insist on banning punk bands from "The Establishment" which began with the infamous Sex Pistols. The daily newspapers portrayed the Clash as wreckers of society.

"We're still getting that sort of prejudice," explains Topper. "We had 16 gigs booked at various places, and then about 12 pulled out. You have to completely re-route the tour."

One hall cancelled a concert because there were too many mirrors in the place to safely allow Clash fans in: "But our fans don't smash things anymore. They do if they're told what to do, like sit down in this seat and be a good boy. That's why out of all the gigs on our British tour only two have seats in them."

Harassment from local villages takes other forms. The obligatory visit from the fire inspector often results in strict demands being laid down: "He says take that backdrop down, so we take the backdrop down, and he says erect more crash barriers, so we put up more crash barriers, he says this stage has to be rebuilt

here, and you need more security. We just laugh at him and do anything he wants. Nothing can stop us playing. But they make life difficult."

As time progresses, however, the Clash are becoming more acceptable, though not more respectable, Topper hopes. He makes the point that the Clash have to pay for all the damage that's caused, so why should they promote vandalism?

Surprisingly, Topper found that the audiences in America weren't so much different to the British fans. The punk thing is really only just beginning to happen across the pond: "They're still into safety pins," declares Topper. "It's the same as the White Riot tour here, when there were about 300 or 400 fans dancing down the front with the rest there out of curiosity. But we sold out 25 of our 28 gigs there, and that was in 3,000 and 4,000 seater auditoriums. The States is so big. LA was just a load of old hippies lazing around getting stoned in the sun. I liked Chicago best, with all the blues clubs. But we should do well over there because the USA has all the same problems as Britain except they're magnified. They have all the slums and the poverty, and more of a racial problem, too."

Highlighting social problems is one of the bands strong points. They should have plenty to write about in America. The Clash are political, and very definitely against racist groups.

Topper's favourite drummers come from America, such as Harvey Mason and Steve Gadd. His favorite British drummer is Terry Williams, who plays for Rockpile. Musically, his tastes are strictly black; James Brown, Otis Redding and lots of reggae, particularly The Mighty Diamonds.

America looks ripe for the Clash. They've toured there twice and soon they should start to take off now that punk has spread. The Americans have been fairly slow catching on to what the '76 British new wave was all about — perhaps they've been too wealthy for too long. With a new recession biting home, The Clash will take on new relevance to downtrodden, unemployed kids in America.

Topper's favorite drummers come establishment of musicians in Britain that once would have been unthinkable. Two years ago The Clash were vilified as not being "real" musicians. Their drive, talent and staying power has proved the cynics wrong. In general, The Clash have proved themselves to be dedicated professionals with firm ideals at heart. In particular, Topper Headon spearheads the drumming new wave with a forceful and accomplished style that can't be dismissed.