PATTI GIORDANO

Clash At The Crossroads

by Richard Grabel

Outside on Eighth Street, among the pizza parlors and shoe stores, it's early evening. Inside Electric Lady studios, the house that Jimi built, it could be any time at all. At the controls is engineer Bill Price, pushing buttons with one hand and swigging from a bottle of Remy Martin with the other. On bass is Mick Jones, filling in for the absent Paul Simonon, who's off movie-making in Vancouver. Topper Headon taps his drum kit, while out in the hall Joe Strummer plays acoustic guitar. A young Irishman named Tyman Dog is singing and fiddling some kind of punky jig or Virginia reel. This is a Clash recording session? This is a Clash song? Am I in the right place?

A take completed, everyone drifts into the control room. I ask the name of the song; "Keep your questions to yourself!" Strummer shoots back. Well, nobody likes a press leak . . . On the mixing board is a sheet of paper headed "Clash Hot 100 — Compiled at Electric Lady". Twenty or thirty song titles are grouped in descriptive categories: "Clashabilly," "Clashrocksteady," "Clashcityrockers," and (the longest list of all) "Strange". The control room empties out and the Clash go back to work. Visitors are no longer welcome.

A week later, I'm back at Electric Lady, where Mick Jones is adding a guitar part to a vocal-less track. A chat with Tyman Dog reveals that he's an old friend of Strummer's from their busking days on the streets of Amsterdam.

"I came over here just to play around," Tyman tells me. "I've been playing the small places on Bleecker Street, and Folk City. The folk scene in England is really dead . . . I ran into Joe and Mick, and went 'round to see them with this song. They just said, 'Great, let's record it.' We just knocked it down in a day — it's called 'Lose This Skin'."

Not exactly typical Clash fare to these ears . . .

"I don't think much of what they're doing here is. They should call this album, *Spot The Clash*."

The vocal takes begin. This time it's a Clashrocker with a story line about the death of an innocent bystander, and some vivid lines about blood caked on concrete. In the control room, Topper Headon is talking over his legal troubles with some of the road crew. This time it's a petty drug bust for which he'll face charges upon his return to England. Headon runs down his previous convictions: "Yeah, so far I've got criminal damage, illegal possession of firearms, and theft. Criminal damage and firearms — that was the pigeon-shooting thing. The theft was a key from a Holiday Inn in Newcastle. Bloody ridiculous, isn't it? They came on the tour bus and searched us all, and they found this key and charged me for it. I'd just forgotten it . . .

"Joe had stolen all these pillows. They looked in our rooms and found all the pillows gone, and they came after us. The bus looked like a fuckin' marshmallow!"

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You remember the Clash: the last gang in town, the bad boys of rock and roll, the honest men living outside the law. But with America's embrace of *London Calling* and their mugs on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, one wonders if the Clash can have it both ways. Today they stand accused of losing their edge and their anger. John Lydon says they "don't know what they stand for"; Paul Weller calls *London Calling* an Americanized cop-out.

Together with *Never Mind The Bollocks*, that first Clash album wrote the book on English punk rock, stating the case for all time. But where to from there? The first stop was Jamaica, for "Police and Thieves" and especially "White Man In Hammersmith Palais" – proof that the Clash could muster the dance rhythms of reggae without diminishing their rock and roll drive. "White Man" wasn't just the adaptation of a musical influence, but a comment on the process of adaptation, a broad canvas of conflict in music, style, and politics.

We'll leave *Give 'Em Enough Rope* out of this. It seems, in retrospect, a wrong-headed attempt at compromise with American radio and CBS Records. In an effort to improve the technical quality of their recordings while retaining the raw power of that first album, the Clash and producer Sandy Pearlman settled on a fat heavy metal sound, long guitar solos, slower tempos. The "Cost Of Living" EP was a far more successful series of stylistic explorations, from the cover of Bobby Fuller's "I Fought The Law" to the harmonica-laced folk rock of "Groovy Times". The Clash were stretching their musical muscles further with each new release.

London Calling showed just how deeply the Clash had been affected by their travels in America, and how deeply influenced by American music. Up to this point, all of the Clash's songs had looked out at the world from London and dealt with London-based experiences. "Safe European Home" was their first venture into foreign territory, but it found the Clash in temporary retreat. *London Calling* was their first work to acknowledge and reflect the fact that the Clash have become, for better or worse, an international band.

The Jamaican connection remained, but there were new and powerful strains of R&B lifted from the same Memphis and New Orleans sources that inspired so much Jamaican pop music. Some of the album's most Americanized tracks are also its most refreshing and exhuberant: "Wrong 'Em Boyo," "Train In Vain" – the Clash took to this stuff like pups let off the leash to romp.

Is that "going soft"? Not, I say, when you've got songs with the apocalyptic vision and defiant strength of "London Calling," "Clampdown," and "Guns of Brixton."

The point of tracing all this recorded history is simply to get an idea of where the Clash may be headed next. Judging from the tapes I heard, their next album will be even more explicit and diverse in its musical/cultural borrowings.

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At the time of my conversation with Joe Strummer, the Electric Lady sessions had produced twenty-eight tracks in various states of completion, none finished. Many had no vocals and only working titles. The tapes went back to London with Bill Price, and further studio work would commence in London later in the month.

The scene was Strummer's room at the Essex House hotel, near Central Park. We rolled a few spliffs and settled in for a good long talk. So, Joe, why did you choose to record in New York anyway?

"It's a treat for us, really. I thought at first it's just be about six days, just finish a few songs. We must have been there about three weeks! First we had to con CBS into it – they were very nervous about the cost.

"Things are a lot looser here than in London. In London, you can't go out with a clear head. You'll be riding in a car and you'll come up to an intersection, and there'll be coppers stopping anybody they think looks suspicious and searching them. Here, I never have to speak to a cop."

Checked out any local bands during your stay?

"Naw. We had our time so locked up . . . I wanted to check out James, uh, Blood . . . "

James Blood Ulmer?

"No. Yeah, him too. But James White and the Blacks, at the Squat. We never made it. But we've been listening, we've been influenced by New York music. Listen to this . . . "

Strummer flips on the portable cassette machine, which plays a light, lilting funk number with a talkover vocal that reminds me of the Jamaican deejay toasters. But Joe says the song was inspired by the rapping deejays of Harlem and the South Bronx – Sugar Hill Gang and Fatback Band-type stuff. It's called the "Magnificent Seven Rappo-Clappers".

All titles mentioned here are tentative. ("We don't know for sure until the labels are printed"), and questions about the time and form of the album's release go unanswered. Enough material probably exists to fill another double album, but whether one will appear depends on what the group can get away with. Strummer thinks about the negotiations ahead with a look of distaste, but brightens considerably at the mention of Bill Price, engineer and co-producer of the new recordings.

"Bill Price is worth his weight in brandy. He's the only engineer who would have the suss to roll the tapes when we're just mucking about, and get everything down.

"Like *London Calling*, there's us four crazies, and there's Guy Stevens, an even bigger crazy, let loose in a studio – and it comes out sounding great. Bill Price is the answer to that one. And the dub version of 'Armagideon Time,' that was us directing Bill, but it was him at the controls."

More tracks follow. One is entitled "The Call-Up," with Topper laying a funky shuffle on bass, and an off-beat rhythm guitar part.

"That's Ivan Julian on guitar. He just dropped by late that night. I'd bought a new '51 Fender that day, and I just handed it to him and told him to play."

Norman Watt-Roy of the Blockheads is guest bassist on "Lightning Strikes," a slice of punk-funk very much in the Contortions/James White vein. "Sound Of The Sinners" is described by Strummer as "punk gospel," and contains the memorable lines "After all this time, to believe in Jesus/After all those drugs, I thought I was Him." There's the Tynan Dog song, "Lose This Skin", one called "Junkie Slip" and another entitled "Charlie Don't Surf," inspired by *Apocalypse Now*. "If Music Could Talk" was another talk-over vocal, very strange and eerie, and I heard three rockers-style reggae tunes (all without vocals), one of which was called "Version City Junction". "When It's Over" is an old-fashioned R&B stomp straight out of the '50s, with Jessie, the Electric Lady doorman, on sax. "Freedom Track" is a "Clashabilly" number delving deep into Cramps country.

From a single listen, it was almost impossible to glean any idea of what these songs are *about*. But the music I heard was always intriguing, sometimes powerful, and mostly a departure from familiar Clash styles. Missing was the sense that the Clash are moving beyond homages to their various sources to create a synthesis uniquely their own, one which draws on these influences without sounding quite like any of them.

The instrumental reggae tracks, in particular, made for compelling dance music. I asked Strummer what he thought of the bands who'd jumped on the white reggae bandwagon.

"Of course I'd like to take my tool out and piss all over them. Those – you know, *The Cops* and all . . . you know who I mean. It's very hard to do that stuff right."

"The key to ["Police and Thieves"] was we weren't trying to play reggae at all. We were playing strictly punk style, we just altered the guitar part maybe, as a nod toward the source of the song. Then we tried something completely different in 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais'. We tried to actually play in that rhythm. 'Police and Thieves' is a rock and roll rhythm – you can sing 'At The Hop' to that rhythm. But 'White Man', we took one of our own songs and made it a reggae rhythm. And we've kind of been keeping along that line here and there, so we can swing it pretty good now."

I mention the abundance of American influences to be found on *London Calling*.

"It's not surprising, is it? I just see it as a general loosening up . . . A lot of people are groovin' around now to '60s sounds, right, and in their heads they're saying, 'This is real cool, we're dancing to soul music, we've got on shiny suits, what more could we want?' And they don't realize that it's *American* – doesn't even cross their minds. What they identify with is that this was a big thing in England in the '60s, soul was. There's lots of image attached to it, history, legend, all that crap. So they identify with that. I don't realize it's American myself. I kind of think, 'It's from Detroit,' and it doesn't seem that could be in America, somehow.

"I'll tell you where we take stuff from. We take stuff from Detroit, and we kiss it (*smack*), and then we take that stuff from New Orleans. I've been taking it as a regular medicine ever since I could breathe. Then we take the New York stuff, all this punk-funk. Then we take our Texas music – that's covering quite a bit of ground there. Then there's the Missippi blues and Chicago blues. Then, what's coming up, we've got to take some stuff from the Bayou, and Philadelphia soul. It's good to know what's going on, to get around."

But, I ask, with all these American influences, aren't you betraying your original vision? How do you respond to charges that Clash music is no longer English music?

"Who needs to be a purist? Not me, thanks, no. I just say break off, piss on the rules and let's just swing it. If it's music, it it makes you feel good, then it's done its job. Who gives a shit whether a donkey fucked a rabbit and produced a kangaroo, right? I don't give a shit whether we did that or what. At least it's a fucking kangaroo and it jumps and hops, and you can dance to it. So what if you just keep your mule and you get it to fuck another mule and you produce another mule?"

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The evolution of the Clash on record has been mirrored in their live performances. It's hard to imagine a gig that could top their New York debut in February '79, one of the most powerful and moving rock and roll shows I've ever seen. Their return to the Palladium in September of that year was a whole different drama. The group seemed simultaneously tired and wired, rushing the songs forward with manic speed and sloppy playing, as if compelled to prove they were the fastest and meanest guns in town.

The third Palladium appearance, the following March, was yet another turn around. From the opening chords of "Clash City Rockers", it was clear that the group had achieved a new level of confidence and control. They no longer raced against each other; their sound cohered and connected. At the same time, the Clash were now more of a regular rock and roll band (albeit a great one) than they'd ever been before. The pacing of their set saved for last the torrent of energy they'd once unleashed from the start; some observers accused Strummer of playing to the galleries and rarely making eye contact with the teeming crowd at his feet. For his part, Mick Jones came on more and more like a self-conscious guitar hero.

Yet Jones pulls off those moves so convincingly, and conveys such joy at his developing abilities that I, for one, can't begrudge him his fun. And the sweetest moment of the show came when Strummer spat out that line in "Complete Control": *"They're dirty, they're filthy, they ain't gonna last."* I imagined the corporate execs who market this music saying just those words less than two years ago. Yet here were the Clash on their third U.S. tour, proving the nay-sayers wrong with a Top 30 album. The thought gave me a rush of pride and pleasure. Still, nothing in America comes free, and the price the Clash will pay for their success remains to be determined. My first misgivings came the night, at New Jersey's Capitol Theater, when an intolerant sold-out house booed Jamaican toaster Mikey Dread off the stage. The reaction seemed indicative of the predominant mass-audience mentality: conservative, close-minded, and responsive mostly to what it has been conditioned to enjoy. These aren't the kids who eagerly awaited every Clash single and made their first LP one of the all-time largest selling imports, but yesterday's Meatloaf and J. Geils fans yelling for "I Fought the Law".

Had Strummer noticed any change in the makeup of the Clash audience this time around?

"Uh, no. Did you?"

Well, a Top 30 LP and your first extensive airplay must have effected some kind of change.

Strummer acts like the idea is brand-new to him: "Oh, right. I forget about that. I guess you're right. We don't notice that stuff when we're touring.

So the audience must be changing.

"See, that's exactly what I've got against cults. Cults are well and good, but they stitch themselves up in the end. They are breeding grounds for a lot of ideas and talents, but . . . that's not what we're interested in, being a chic minority. I don't think it's worth doing a damn thing unless people are going to hear what you're doing."

But will your music move the audience, or will the audience move your music?

"We don't play to them, for a start. We don't think about the mainstream. If they want to come along to the show, that tells me something. And that's all I dare to presume about them. We go out and play what we want to play."

The path of the Clash is strewn with traps. Strummer, at least in this talk, refuses to acknowledge them.

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But back to the work in progress. Would Paul Simonon's absence have any detrimental effect on the proceedings?

"No, I don't think so, 'cause mostly it was me or Mick or Topper playing the bass, and we'd always make up lines in Paul's style. Or other people would come in and do things to fit specific songs."

The songs – how and when were they written?

"Made them up on the spur of the moment, most of them. First thing in the day we'd get up, find our way downtown, and sit down and pick up a tune. Generally we'd mash it down, stick a vocal on it, mess it up a bit. Kind of made 'em up like that."

Must have been tough, getting downtown in the transit strike . . .

"Yup. We walked sometimes. Nice walk. Really felt wired up when we got to the studio, you know, after walking fifty blocks."

Anything to say about this new film, *Rude Boy* (directed by Jack Hazan and David Mingay, about the life of a Clash roadie, and including much live footage)?

"Sure. I'd like to see it, first off."

You participated in it, then disassociated yourselves from it?

"We tried to stop it. We just gave up 'cause we couldn't. They went to Berlin, made it the British entry in the film festival. We'd already made a big brouhaha about it in the press, and just thought, 'Fuckin hell'. We just wanted nothing to do with it, it was a lot of crap. But we did work hard on it, at one time."

What, specifically, did you object to in the finished product?

"It wasn't our film. So though we appear in it quite a lot, we didn't want to say it's a Clash film – as opposed to something we might make, if we can keep it together, in a couple of years or so."

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What about your position within the record industry? Okay, so you've won your small victories: a double album at a low list price, the right *not* to have *London Calling* plastered with a post-release sticker shouting "CONTAINS THE HIT 'TRAIN IN VAIN!' " But what about the gap between what the Clash, as one band, can realistically accomplish and what the Clash would ideally like to accomplish? Does your success within the industry's established boundaries pose any contradictions in your mind?

"Every change will be made. Don't worry. The bottom's gonna fall out of the bucket. *Mucho pronto.*"

You were once deeply in debt to CBS. Is that still a problem?

"You bet it is. What, did you think we were gonna just laugh it off?"

No, but it's impressive that even in debt you've managed to wring the concessions you've won from the company.

"Well, um, that's true. Pretty good, huh? You know we'd rather die than do it any other way than our way."

But is it possible that the company, with so much invested in your success, has to give in because it can't affort to let the Clash break up?

"An interesting thought. Safe. Can't be sacked. Owe them too much dough. Here, listen to this . . . "

The blinking TV, turned down low, catches Strummer's attention. It seems to comment on our conversation. From some old movie: "Would a hundred dollars help you?" "A thousand dollars." "Well, what does five hundred do for you?" "It warms me a little, but I still feel drafty." "Let's settle for seven-fifty, shall we?"

Strummer: "That about sums it up."

It's getting late, and we've both shared so much spliff that it's getting hard to remember just what we're talking about. But on my way out, I press Strummer one more time on the question of the Clash's new-found status as American hitmakers. Come on, Joe, you can't really mean that having an album in the upper reaches of the U.S. charts has no significance to you.

"One hit's not much. We haven't even had that much. What counts is twenty hits in a row.

"It is something different. It's pretty unusual for us. I just haven't tried to deal with it yet.

"We'll just see what happens."