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TRACKS MY FEAR

The Clash's Joe Strummer gets honest and goes through their new album, 'Sandinista', with BILLY SLOAN.

THIS THURSDAY morning in Glasgow is cold and unwelcome. Feeling like my mouth has had my backside for breakfast, I don't particularly want to talk to Joe Strummer so early in the working day. He probably doesn't want to speak to me either, looking tired and gaunt.

But it's been arranged. And we must.

The new Clash record 'Sandinista' has just hit the racks — a three album set selling at less than a fiver, with the band passing on a share of the booty to keep the price down.

For the Clash it's an overwhelmingly ambitious album considering the musical circles they've moved in, and the easily identifiable tag they've had foisted on them. A sprawling 36 songs embrace everything from characteristic Clash rockers, to rockabilly, folk and reggae. There's even a slice of Ray Davies style mid-sixties tea and scones scene setting, and a cynical gospel Hallelujah hootenanny guaranteed to have you racing down the aisle at a

pig claiming to have seen the Lord in a lightning bolt.

So far most of the criticism levelled at 'Sandinista' has not been aimed at the songs or sentiments. The Clash are carrying the can for attempting something different, when, let's face it they could have continued being the persecuted, angry young men of their genre. Double time with the volume cranked up.

They've genuinely tried to create through an alternative musical avenue — and for most part it's worked, and worked convincingly.

Strummer acknowledges that what's happened has been experimental and indulgent, but at less than five quid for the privilege who's patronising who?

It's not a case of what the hell are they playing at? But would you have been contented with six sides of variations on 'London Calling' or 'Tommy Gun'; lumpy, turgid re-treads from a creative slump. Then they'd have been accused of languishing in safe territory. They can't win.

Joe Strummer, huddled in thick black overcoat, sits by my side and warms to my questions, as I warm to his honesty.

On my suggestion that

'Sandinista' is their 'Sgt Pepper' he looks mortified, before realising that my comparison is based on the sense of endeavour from the respective organisations. He says:

"I always thought 'Sgt Pepper' killed the beat off. I thought it was wonderful at first, then as the years went on everybody went mad and progressive with rubbish like fools playing organs for 90 minutes. When I started in a R & B pub rock group in my first ever interview I said it really killed everything off — and it's taken 10 years to recover. But the sense of adventure ain't a bad thing — I hope that's the real comparison."

'Sandinista' began in April in New York's Electric Ladyland, was interrupted by a tour, then reconvened in August, before moving on to Wessex Studios. There was no producer as such — "nobody really turned up."

The volume and variety on the album was the result of going in to record with only two numbers already on paper; most of the material being penned on the spot in what was a new way of working for the band.

"We also did a lot of composing with Mickey Dread. To write with an

outsider is new for us. He's teaching us stuff."

If 'Sandinista' comes as a surprise to hardened Clash fans, Strummer's honest enough to admit that that's also true of the band themselves. There was a point according to him where the four stopped and looked at each other, knowing they "had something." Suddenly becoming aware of the choices — to carry on or to retreat back behind their demarcation lines.

"It's very hard to have that kind of foresight or planning. We just went in and did it song by song, we just fumbled around, we never had a definite plan."

"Obviously we're interested in the rhythms we haven't played before so that made it more varied rather than keeping to a 4/4 beat."

Working through the tracks, even reading the liner notes is an illuminating experience of change. 'Junco Partners' for instance is credited to "writer unknown."

"I learnt it off this bargain record I bought in a shop five years ago. It was written by a guy called James Wayne, but apparently it's a 50 year old New Orleans standard. We used to do it in the old days with the 101-ers, R & B style, and since then it's

been credited to James Booker, and some other people, so we're investigating a bit more before we pass out any royalty cheque."

As ever, the band's views on the need for racial harmony crops up. Having almost fallen off the chair at the old school tie Englishness of 'Something About England' the lyrics immediately find the target. It's the bait, for although the words stand up through their own merits, the musical dressing the Clash employ digs deep — deep enough to guarantee undivided attention regardless of the subject.

"People are gee-ing up all the young people by saying 'You gotta get rid of the black community and the Asian community because they're to blame'. It's not that at all. The class system is to blame as owners and workers — we just wanted to make that point. Mick was the one going — 'Find me a brass band'. And we were going — 'Don't be ridiculous'. There are no such things around here."

"Eventually Topper brought some mates up from Dover. One of 'em played sax, and he brought his dad who played cornet and he in turn brought this guy from a band who played euphonium and they worked on it bit by bit. It was kind of fun to



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see things like euphoniums that we don't normally come across."

And so Marine Band Sergeant David Yates was immortalised on The Clash's sleeve notes.

Or there's the waltz beat of 'Rebel Waltz'.

"Yeah, to start fooling with that must be the unhippest thing in town — but we just wanted something you could listen to with a waltz beat in it for laughs.

"There were a few moments when we looked at each other and perhaps thought 'Are we going a bit too far? Is this too much?' But you realise you gotta keep on going, keep changing — there's no harm in that although we've been put down for it."

'Somebody Got Murdered' — a future hit single make no mistake — is the result of an incident Strummer encountered while living in the World's End flats, and which brought home the realisation of horror and savagery on his doorstep.

"I looked out the window and saw a white police ribbon and it was the car park attendant underneath the flats who'd been stabbed. It wasn't like watching it on telly — it's no wonder we sometimes get too blasé about it.

"Living in London isn't frightening because of the size but for the aggro in the air. When I go out in the back on my mind I realise there's a good chance somebody's gonna start something somewhere along the line — I never used to feel like that a few years ago.

Sometimes I'd rather not bother, it kinda closes the town off a bit." Then, bearing in mind 'White Riot', 'Safe European Home' et al, 'Sound Of The Sinners' has simply got to be heard to be believed. A rousing tabernacle chorus complete with authentic "God's chillun" backing harmonies; subtract Strummer's distinctive breathless vocals and you've got the radio mystery musical quiz to end them all.

"I really hated Christianity — still do. The organised church system was stuffed down my throat when I was at school. Although I'm kinda taking the mickey out of born again sinners I'm also in a way saying that they got a point, y'know?"

"I don't think it's too bad to have a moral outlook or believe in right and wrong, good and evil. I'm having a good laugh — especially in the chorus — I had so many drugs/I thought I was Jesus."

The contribution of "names" such

as Blockheads Davey Payne, Norman Watt Roy and Mickey Gallacher, girlfriend Ellen Foley, and Lew Lewis is offset by some kids and an old folkie.

The kids — Luke 'n' Ben 'n' Maria — offspring of Gallacher, pop up on 'Guns Of Brixton', and a superbly effective 'Career Opportunities'. Parochialism, gospel, waltz beats, kids — just who's the joke aimed at if there is one? And where are the performing dogs?

"'Guns Of Brixton' was something Mickey and Maria who's five, recorded one night when they were wasting time down the Blockheads' sessions in Fulham. When I went round their house he played it to me and I asked if we could have it to stick it on somewhere.

"We asked Luke 'n' Ben if they'd like to have a go at 'Career'. We didn't have to teach 'em it or anything — they went home and actually recorded it on a cassette, demo-ed it themselves. We felt that the song still meant a lot and it means even more to them. It makes it more poignant when you hear kids so young singing that song, because they're the ones who're gonna be here when we've all had it."

Or there's 'Lose This Skin' which strikes a chord somewhere between The Bothy Band, Fairport Convention or The Chieftains. If you've survived the album under pressure so far, 'Lose This Skin' will finish you off.

"It's sung by a guy called Timon Dogg who first taught me how to play a chord.

"I used to busking with him, collecting the money and eventually I got hold of a ukelele and he taught me how to play 'Johnny Be Goode' on it so that I could busk at Green Park while he went on to Oxford Circus. We did a Trans-European busking tour — we had a lot of fun — and he turned up one day in New York with Mick and they were yelling about this song.

"Timon was signed up by Apple in the swinging sixties at the same time as James Taylor — they thought he was a male Mary Hopkin. He had a record which Tony Blackburn played once and it was re-released, but it was only a single.

"At home he's got half an acetate left — tracks recorded on one side and all shiny on the other. They never really recorded the other side and his career never really took off. He could really write good numbers

— he's got about 300 now. All the violins on the track is his natural style — he doesn't hold it by the neck; but jams it into his hip bone and plays harmonium, with his foot.

"We're definitely backing him up on the number — it took us ages to follow him, if the material is aired live The Clash will be augmented by only a keyboards player.

"We'll just play them in rock 'n' roll style, twice as fast. I like the idea of playing something delicate and wonderful in the studio then taking it onstage and murdering it. I like that."

If they continued on their courageous kick they'd go on with an orchestra and brass section. Still, I suppose they've got to compromise somewhere along the line.

That would be taking things too far. Or as Strummer says:

"If you played the album to a Martian who'd come out of a spaceship and never heard of The Clash he'd say — 'You know, this is good music'."

"But sometimes I worry that your hardened Clash fans will be far too angry to actually bother to listen." Tough shil for them.