

ALBUMS-

THE CLASH
Sandinista! (CBS)

OK, OK, they're a jolly prolific bunch always about to give their audience more than their money's worth, but — Christ, let's not mince words here — 'Sandinista', six sides of vinyl well-packed with 36 tracks, is a ridiculously self-indulgent communique from International Clash City headquarters. There's a preponderance of The Clash gesticulating madly in every idiomatic direction conceivable, but precious little 'statement' making of any substance. This record is strong testimony that The Clash have — temporarily at least — lost a grip on their bearings and find themselves parked in a cul-de-sac.

They seem disorientated and not a little uneasy about their feeling that their previous body of work is musically restricting, not to mention being well out of sync with certain somewhat spurious 'new music' peers, be they Public Image's anti-rock'n'roll leering cacophony or James Chance's bent for collating disco pulse-beats into vehicles for watered-down 'cool jazz' brouhahas.

That's 'Sandinista's' principal blight; on the 36 tracks, The Clash are constantly attempting to grapple with differing musical idioms: the 'disco' pulse beat — usually a surly repetitious bass figure punctuated by an ethnic piano chord — is featured twice on Side One alone ('The Magnificent Seven' and 'Ivan Vs. G.I. Joe'); 'jazz', decked out in its most superficial gladrags, is first introduced via the scat-voiced tomfoolery that mars a Clash-up of Mose Allison's stoic diddley-bobbing 'Look Here' early on Side Two and sticks around for much of the record's playing time.

Then there's the gospel work-out ('The Sound Of The Sinners'), the Bo Diddley bim-bam-boom effort, (the Profumo song — 'Leader'), the rockabilly work-out, calypsoes, South American marimba-scrappings ('Washington Bullets') with 'yobiba'-style shoops and hollers ... oh, and I almost forgot the instrumental 'Mensforth Hill' which is strictly 'Revolution No. 9' revisited, not to mention the hearts of oak 'brass-band' splashes that make Messrs. Jones and Strummer's dual vocalising on 'Something About England' so preposterous and precious that it sounds just like a Jethro Tull track. There's also lots of 'psychedelic' sound-effects which make large parts of Side Five, in particular, sound like The Grateful Dead's 'Anthem Of The Sun' (I kid you not), and an attempt at a Confederate Army waltz tune ('Rebel Waltz') that Joe Strummer should've dropped like a hot brick having taken a brusque sobering earful of The Band before he dived in. Oh, and there are seven 'dub' cuts (most on Side Six) plus an equivalent number of reggae-style toasters or else glib diatribes against Babylon's myriad inequalities and general shortcomings.

What there isn't, is much actual music of consequence — certainly not anything like the frenzied flailings of the first album, the sharp, terse stab of 'Give 'Em Enough Rope's' better work or the toughness and sense of The Clash's instinctual rocker fervour that one could denote maturing into a lethal musical cocktail on nearly half of 'London Calling's' four sides. With 'Sandinista', The Clash spurn this ferocity — the fullness of sound, the essential jolt of acceleration — which was their strongest musical suit. The idea appears to be — don't look back boys, sit down and soak up a load of influences and with the considerable aid of those outside players like Micky Gallagher and Tyron Dugg, plus Davey Payne, Norman Watt-Roy, Voldoid Ivan Julien and Lew Lewis, become



Pic: David Corio.

Joe Strummer demonstrates the best way to hear the new Clash album — through headphones worn around the neck.

Complete chaos

"This record is strong testimony that The Clash have lost their bearings and find themselves in a cul de sac."

professionals. Unfortunately, this move must have become so obsessive in its implementation, certain key factors were disregarded. Subject matter for songs seems so scarce, Strummer and Jones appear so desperate to provide their followers with a relevant overview, we end up with another set of neatly glib black and white snapshots of "the good fight" be it in Nicaragua or in a pub down Shepherd's Bush Junction (after all, when you've seen one ghetto you've seen 'em all, eh lads?), plus more ill-focussed finger-pointing at the Amerikan disease (file under Babylon). Secondly, the fact that the group even consider releasing six sides of music — albeit very modestly priced — indicates that some absurdly sychophantic reviews from

across the Atlantic have very probably blinkered them to their own strengths and shortcomings. No reviewer ever denotes problems when addressing this group — like the fact that vocally The Clash are incredibly limited. Strummer and Jones — and the latter sings a lot more on this new opus — both possess very limited vocal range, bad pitching and — in Jones' case — a severe inability to project. Meanwhile Strummer's singing on much of this new stuff is simply duff, because his fractured range is only truly effective when it's up front in the mix and allied to angry passions. When he's attempting to widen his powers of vocal interpretation, things sound perplexingly awry — until, that is, one notes that the sound that they've gone for is not only too grandly embellished by

(particularly) Micky Gallagher's keyboard work but also riddled side after side with a wafer-thin, soft-focus mixing down of instruments that divides everything off instead of building up textures. This mix problem is such a crippling flaw that song after song fails because its clout is dismembered. 'The Sound Of Sinners', The Clash gospel pastiche, is ruined by a make-shift choir bogged down in a sludgy mix that makes the whole effort sound like an amateur dramatic society in Wapping performing the Sammy Davis Jr. scene from 'Sweet Charity'. More obviously spoilt by this clumsy placing of instruments is Eddy Grant's 'Police On My Back' which comes close to being an ideal vehicle for The Clash's instinctual attack only to have the main ingredients mixed so

arbitrarily that the song's key sentiment of 'urgency' is completely overlooked. The effect is tepid — The Clash seems too scared to actually muster up a convincing performance. The latter claim would seem to be proven by 'Washington Bullets', which inspired the 'Sandinista' title. Here the listener is told of a struggling Nicaraguan splinter-group that liberated the country from a wretchedly fascist regime. Strummer seems preoccupied with solemnly naming hero after hero — his vocal is tame, to say the least. But then again he has to contend with a musical backdrop that flip-flops so mildly along with its blurry "white-boys get ethnic" South American clichés, (you play the vibes, I'll muck about on the marimba!) it sounds like a backdrop for some Pontin's

Holiday advert. When the shouts of "Yariba" start ushering it out in true 'Don't Stop The Carnival' fashion, one frankly doesn't give a damn about the plight of these people. More to the point, one wonders if Strummer really does either.

On 'Sandinista' The Clash seem to be feeling more demoralised than anything else a condition that's totally over-run the British Isles. None of the songs here, however, attempt to address that crucial malaise. Instead, Strummer dreams of good ole' Confederate Army boys, eulogizes the mavericks and supposed men of honour, the freedom fighters who take up arms in order to vanquish a highly palpable sense of evil. This adherence to courageous, plebian hero vs. the typically Babylon villain is just blinkered romanticism, a kind of escapism for those of us Britishers still sucker enough to believe in easy options cooked up there in fantasy-land.

It should be noted emphatically, though, that on the few cuts where something is delivered, The Clash remind one again that even when weighed under by empty gestures, there is a shambolic but still very real sense of something special hiding amid the debris. On 'Junco Partner' Strummer demonstrates his ever-increasing talents at tackling the roots reggae tradition vocally, whilst 'Broadway' may well be his most professionally adept vocal performance to date. Micky Gallagher plays beautifully understated jazz flourishes, Mick Jones' guitar sounds unnervingly like Jerry Garcia's at odd times but Strummer is out to get his story across, building up and up, until even in the foggy mix the wretched distance that seems to exist everywhere else on this multi-album is bridged. He also delivers a strong scat-down on 'Junkie Slip' whilst 'Kingston Advice' and even the single 'Call Up' stand up due to the mix-down working in his favour for a change.

Mick Jones, whose 'Lost in the Supermarket' and 'Train in Vain' were vital 'London Calling' songs, really flakes up on the ghostly 'Something About England' whilst suffice to say that his duet with Ellen Foley on 'Hitsville U.K.' doesn't enhance a dull chant and is naively square-headed in its view of Britain's independent labels scene. Only on the haunting 'Street Parade' and the opening chords of 'Somebody Got Murdered' does he truly impress: otherwise his guitar work veers between the exciting and the very leaden.

One senses that Jones is a dominant voice in The Clash seeing these 'new directions' as a viable escape route from the band being 'White Riot' clones. Yet the fact is that 'Sandinista' is so fixated on diversity as an end in itself that it's actually hard to attribute this work to the same group that provided us with 'The Clash', 'Rope' and 'London Calling'.

'Sandinista' would be a formidable record to deal with simply due to the amount of stuff one has to listen to. Yet even after one gets acquainted, the record simply perplexes and ultimately depresses. Certainly a producer would be advisable as the band have no real perspective on their work in the studio.

One is also tempted to wonder just who the UK Clash audience is these days. Whoever they are, they'll buy the album, play it until its formidable insubstantiality has been used up and file under 'C'. No hanging matter, The Clash will survive. Why they bother to is the really painful question that 'Sandinista' forces me to ask.

Nick Kent