

## SOUND

# CLASH SWITCHES COURSE

By Jim Sullivan

**T**he last side of the Clash's new triple album, "Sandinista!," is reminiscent of the Who's "Sell Out," with radio parody interspersed between songs. Kicking it off is a snippet of canned nostalgia. As an organ passage swirls in the background, the announcer warmly intones, "I've had an awful lot of requests recently asking 'What happened to all those old songs?'"

With "Sandinista!," the Clash, too, are going to find many fans asking a similar question: What happened to the old style? The Clash's cornerstone — clenching, furious, climactic hard rock — takes a back seat. Riding shotgun are reggae, dub and structural experimentation with rock, blues and gospel — a surprise at every turn, a scattershot spray of variety. The kids even get two numbers. A very young-sounding Maria Gallagher warbles part of "The Guns of Brixton" (from "London Calling") as her daddy, Mickey, accompanies on piano. She ends with "That's enough now, I'm tired of singing." Then, presumably, it's bedtime. Two other Gallagher children do a light remake of "Career Opportunities" (from

Jim Sullivan is a correspondent for The Globe.



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"The Clash") as the band contributes a chiming, pop backing track.

On "London Calling," the Clash carefully stretched the barriers, expanding their hard rock/punk base and enhancing their credibility; on "Sandinista!," the Clash see no barriers, and everything from bagpipe passages to Dan Hicks influences to Mikey Dread's dub vocals pop up to jar the senses. "Sandinista!," a venturesome, sprawling, 37-track album with a lots-of-late-nights-in-the-studio feel, has both challenging, exhilarating new music (most of Sides 1 and 4) and directionless meandering (most of Sides 5 and 6).

The most disappointing realization is the obvious one: The frontal firepower

has decidedly diminished, and no song has the awesome, multifaceted force of "Complete Control," "Guns on the Roof" or "Clampdown." At the onset, the Clash's passion was married to a relentless hard rock attack. There could be no mistaking its appeal or intent: Seize the moment, question values, change rock 'n' roll.

On "Sandinista!," the Clash mostly eschew the classic rock 'n' roll employment of tension and release. Lead singer Joe Strummer is more apt to go off on a near stream of consciousness rap ("The Magnificent Seven," "Lightning Strikes") as the band churns and chugs along. Lead guitarist Mick Jones is more likely to fit into the rhythmic syncopation and

skank along, rather than jump out with a turn-your-head break.

But, to borrow a phrase from the Buzzcocks, the Clash are creating a different kind of tension — one that is more subtle and, given time, profoundly effective. The rhythmically entrancing "The Call Up" says No! to the draft and yet does it with a soulful softness. Strummer's plea, "I don't wanna die/I don't wanna kill," is touching and romantic. "Washington Bullets" has a light, tropical feel to it, but drills holes in American imperialism.

"Sandinista!" is the Clash's most political record. Since 1977, when they railed against England's inequities, the Clash have become increasingly concerned with worldwide oppression and "Sandinista!" (so named for the Nicaraguan rebels) has a stirring moral consciousness. The Clash are out shooting at targets most bands ignore. One recurring theme is crime, and the Clash attack the perception of white-collar boardroom crime as unimportant. In "Police On My Back" the guitar notes ring anthem-like as the Clash run from the law down the railroad track. Bravo! In the following song, "Midnight Log," Strummer points his finger at the well-masked corporate criminals (including a between-the-lines dig at major record company types).

Like David Bowie with "Low," the Clash musically have switched course, rambled around in new turf and remained vital. Yes, there may well be a full disc's worth of filler. No, there's not enough "old Clash." But, at a low \$14.98 list, the experiments that fail can be put aside without much grumbling, and many of the newer approaches work.

"It's music y'know," Strummer told New Musical Express. "The music's gotta change. I wish people would understand that more and allow for it." "Sandinista!" is, at the bottom line, well worth the allowance. □