

The magnificence of Sandinista!

THE CLASH’S EPIC ALBUM will forever sound like it was made yesterday

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“I think people ought to know that we’re anti-fascist, we’re anti-violence, we’re antiracist and we’re pro-creative. We’re against ignorance.”

— Joe Strummer, 1976

Snap question: What is the greatest rock album of all time? A preposterous question, impossible to answer, because there are so many classics of all genres. But fools rush in, so here goes:

After 33 years of listening to it, Sandinista!, the sprawling 2½-hour epic by the Clash — the greatest so-called punk group — keeps getting better with age. It’s a matchless talisman of the possibilities of rock, created in a concentrated fever over three weeks in New York (Hendrix’s Electric Ladyland studio) and then spells in Jamaica and Britain, a transcontinental odyssey jam-packed with every possible musical influence Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Topper Headon and their guests could sponge. You’d be hardpressed to find a more stylistically “absorbent” album.

With this week’s release of their boxed set, Sound System, the four-some’s oeuvre remastered (plus many extras), the Clash’s fourth album reflects the group on creative fire, part of a progression so evident in the box. There’s never been a more musically in-your-face work than Sandinista!

But the album’s grandiose ambition — six sides of rock, rap, funk, reggae, peppy Motown pop, rockabilly, calypso, jazz, waltz, gospel, choral and gobs of dub — presented problems for rock’s arbiters of taste, who charged that Sandinista!, like its title, was “ridiculously self-indulgent.” It was too long, at 144 minutes. (Who do those self-important blokes think they are?) They were accused of betraying their unadorned punk roots. One biographer claimed it “wasn’t an easy album to get your head around back then, and still isn’t now.” (Oh, my.)

Above all there were inevitable comparisons with London Calling, widely accepted as the apex of punk.

To paraphrase some of their lines:

This is Radio Clash, on pirate satellite, underneath the mushroom cloud, go straight to hell boys, there ain’t no asylum here, on Broadway, everybody hold on tight!

Strummer built a “spliff bunker” from equipment cases in the studio so he could scribble verses in relative peace, “a place to retreat and consider, for musicians and groovers only.” (It also stopped everyone hanging out in the control room, so the engineers could get their work done.)

Strummer once reflected: “Many times I’ve debated with people what should be on (Sandinista!), what shouldn’t be on it, but now, looking back, I can’t separate it. It’s like the layers of an onion: there are some stupid tracks, there are some brilliant tracks. The more I think about it, the happier I am that it is what it is. The fact that it was all thrown down in one go and then released like that makes it doubly outrageous — triply outrageous. I can only say I’m proud of it, warts and all. It’s a magnificent thing and I wouldn’t change it even if I could. And that’s after some soul searching.” Indeed, the so-called “silly” songs — the dub and sound-effect

based items — added crucial aural context to the proceedings.

When the group talks about Sandinista!, there’s a sense of right-time-rightplace wonder. “I wasn’t born so much as fell out,” Strummer sang. That could well describe the *modus operandi* of Sandinista!

“It was just there: we were just picking it off a tree,” Mick Jones once said. “Sometimes it’s like that. You just get that perfect moment. Sandinista!: We went free then and it was great. Such a lot of diversity. No rules anymore. Because even the one before (London Calling) wasn’t so free. It was still in the traditional structure.”

After touring North America to support London Calling, the band was full of vim and vinegar, and decided to immediately pick up on the creative buzz in New York, at the time the centre of the rap revolution; Mick Jones’s trips to Brooklyn (Sugar Hill Records territory) spurred the rap-orientated songs The Magnificent Seven and Lighting



Joe Strummer, left, Mick Jones and Paul Simonon of the Clash at Top of the Rock in New York City, June 1981.

Strikes. The album’s profusion of styles is amazing — as multicultural as New York itself — yet magically comes across as a unified statement (or, if you will, cultural survey) epitomized by the mystic-philosophic If Music Could Talk.

However, some found this smorgasbord of sound “disorientating” and “deeply confusing.” New Musical Express reviewer Nick Kent, who rush wrote his judgment so it would appear on the day of release, claimed that Sandinista! “simply perplexes and ultimately depresses.” The group tried to convince NME to re-review the album, to no avail.

The complaints of too much genre-mixing seem ludicrous today, when crossfertilization has long been legitimized as an esthetic in itself. True, the Beatles pioneered this approach with Rubber Soul in 1965, but 15 years later Sandinista! was as much a watershed moment, upping the ante for eternity. Perhaps what also bent the critics’ collective nose out of shape was the extensive list of guest musicians, as if they had betrayed the sacred quartet compact, or sold out the punk esthetic of basic rock ‘n’ roll, no frills attached. (The criticism of colourful, raspy-voiced reggae singer Mikey Dread, who provided much of the dub and toasting, smacks of racism.)

Sandinista! did have defenders, voted best album of the year in the Village Voice’s Pazz & Jop critics poll. It garnered a five-star review from Rolling Stone and ranked No. 404 on its 500 Greatest Albums of All Time in 2003.

The mixing was a work of hallucinatory precision; you hear every lick, riff, motif, reverb. (The new remaster for the box-set, supervised by Jones, reveals even more: “Remastering’s a really amazing thing,” he has said. “That was the musical point of it all, because there’s so much there that you wouldn’t have heard before.”)

Sandinista! teems with real-life stories, songs combining compassion with a cool reporter’s eye, with not a shred of pop-star ego. Politics and pop culture collide to demolish expectations, the Clash leading us into heavy weather. Danger: Creative Turbulence Ahead!

The album kicks off with the gargantuan stutter-step funk vamp of The Magnificent Seven, which might be considered a rap-based update of Dylan’s Subterranean Homesick Blues (from 1965): “What do we have for entertainment? Cops kickin’ Gypsies on the pavement / Now the news — snap to attention! The lunar landing of the dentist convention / Italian mobster shoots a lobster, seafood restaurant gets out of hand / A car in the fridge or a fridge in the car? Like cowboys do — in TV land ... Magnificence!”

The Leader revels in Britain’s scandal-obsessed tabloid press (chorus: “The people need something good to read on a Sunday!”). Something About England explores the nexus between racism and the forever entrenched class system: “They say the immigrants steal the hubcaps of respected gentlemen.”

Lightning Strikes explodes with the cacophony of events that was New York in 1980. “Accidental hike in the transit strike, Roller skate or

ride a bike / Three to a car, Brooklyn Bridge, You won’t get far if you’re privileged.” The desolate Broadway reflects the feeling of being down-and-out amid the big city’s brightest lights, and then there’s the plight of Junco Partner: “Gonna pawn my watch and chain, I would’ve pawned my sweet Gabriel’s, but the smart girl wouldn’t sign her name ...”

Naturally, Sandinista! is also a political springboard. Ivan Meets G.I. Joe portrays the Cold War in a comic book context. The Call-Up makes matters clear: “It’s up to you not to heed the call-up, You must not ask the way you were brought up / Who knows the reason why you were grown up, Who knows the plans and why they were drawn up ...”

And who better expressed the socio-political divide of the Vietnam War — and by extension all cultural clashes — by lifting a Robert Duval line from Apocalypse Now in Charlie Don’t Surf (“and we think he should”): “Charlie’s gonna be a nappalm star.”

Rebel Waltz, embellished by twinkly celeste moon glows, is a devastating, deeply moving reverie of an innocent vision in the horrors of war: “I saw an army of rebels dancing on air ... A dance with a girl to the tune of a waltz that was written to be danced on the battlefield ...”

Somebody Got Murdered is a razor-sharp dissection of rumour and intrigue when a neighbourhood is confronted by a killing. Police On My Back, with its wailing siren-like guitars following a desperate flight, is an urgent cover of a song by the Equals.

There are songs about music itself. The Crooked Beat: “Seeking out a rhythm that can take the tension off, stepping in and out of that crooked, crooked beat.” Let’s Go Crazy celebrates Carnival time with an underpinning of foreboding. Musical utopia DIY-style is epitomized by Hitsville U.K.: “No slimy deals, with smarmy eels, in Hitsville U.K. ... The mutants, creeps and musclemen / Are shaking like a leaf / It blows a hole in the radio / When it hasn’t sounded good all week.”

Sandinista! will forever sound like it was made yesterday. Unconstrained by the commonplace precepts of punk, there was creative magic in the Clash’s name. In short, this album oozes flavah.

As Strummer once recalled: “Every day we just showed up and wrote phantasmagorical stuff. Everything was done in first takes, and worked out 20 minutes beforehand. What we did was go the core of what we are all about — creating — and we did it on the fly and had three weeks of unadulterated joy.”

Sandinista! is one for the ages, as is the rest of Sound System.

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