

For the Clash, Music Is Part of the Message



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Gary Gershoff / Retna Ltd

By DEBRA RAE COHEN

The Clash — who will be at the Bond International Casino in Times Square for eight performances starting Thursday — emerged along with the Sex Pistols in the British punk rock explosion of 1976. Both bands played music that was fast and furious, brash and bitter, in response to the seeming hopelessness of the British economy. But while the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten turned each song into an apocalypse — proclaiming "no future" for himself, for society, and for rock and roll — the Clash made each song a battle that might, conceivably, be won. Above the guitarist Mick Jones's insistent power chords, Joe Strummer used his raspy vocals like a rallying cry. One of the group's early singles, "Complete Con-

Debra Rae Cohen writes frequently about rock music.

trol," even found them taking a heroic stance in response to an argument with their record company.

That lack of "complete control" became, for the Clash, ever more irksome, especially with the top 20 success of last year's "London Calling." For their most recent release, "Sandinista!," they produced a three-record set, hoping that CBS Records would accept it as the equivalent of three albums, thus fulfilling the band's contract with the label. The gambit failed; the Clash still owe CBS two more albums.

But Strummer and Jones, who are astonishingly prolific songwriters, were unwilling to face the backlog of material that would have resulted from cutting down the project. So "Sandinista!" was issued intact, its bulk representing, to the hostile British critics, directionless self-indulgence, and, to many in the record industry, a perverse commercial gamble. Priced at a low \$14.98 at the band's insistence,

"Sandinista!" has sold respectably, but not nearly as well as "London Calling," the consistently powerful two-record set that established the Clash commercially in the United States.

Artistically, however, "Sandinista!" is a near-total success. The album's initially daunting two-hour sprawl turns out to be structured with both passion and purpose, skillfully paced to provide — like a live performance — breathing spaces, humor, and moments for reflection, as well as high-energy barages. While much of the music is a far cry from the Clash's original two-minute skirmishes, the record fulfills the promise of those early songs, extending their struggle by universalizing it.

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Slip" is a sort of staggering shuffle, while "Ivan Meets G.I. Joe," to a thumping mock-disco beat, places a nuclear confrontation in Studio 54. "The Magnificent Seven," New York "rap"-style funk and one of the set's most compelling cuts, turns the "don't stop" exhortations of popular dance tunes into the dispiriting harangue in a working-man's head.

Throughout, the music itself is made part of the Clash's message, rather than its passive accompaniment. The results are often stirring, as in the plaintive anti-censorship anthem "The Call Up."

Much of "Sandinista!"'s spacious feel comes from the band's liberal use of dub (the reggae producer's art that involves subtracting and tinkering with pre-recorded tracks); as is common on Jamaican records, the album contains dub versions of many songs also included in their fuller form. At its best — in the work of Augustus Pablo, for instance — this practice can serve as a means of commenting on the songs themselves, throwing their subjects into focus by selective use of vocal tracks.

Unfortunately, Mikey Dread, the Clash's dub producer, is relatively ham-fisted, and most of the dub versions lack both import and subtlety, serving only to tie the album together musically. The Clash are better at glossing their own songs; the pointed irony of having their keyboard player's young children sing the bitter 1977-vintage Clash hit "Career Opportunities" doesn't detract from the cut's deliberately small-scale charm. Like most of "Sandinista!," it is deadly serious without being grim.

covered Junior Murvin's reggae classic "Police and Thieves" back on their first album. Much of "Sandinista!" is reggae-influenced, but the Clash experiment as well with a whole array of (mostly black) musical idioms — soul, calypso, gospel, blues. Each is integrated into the band's hoarse, rough-edged rock rather than flatly imitated, and each is wedded to an appropriate social issue: the anti-drug "Junkie

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