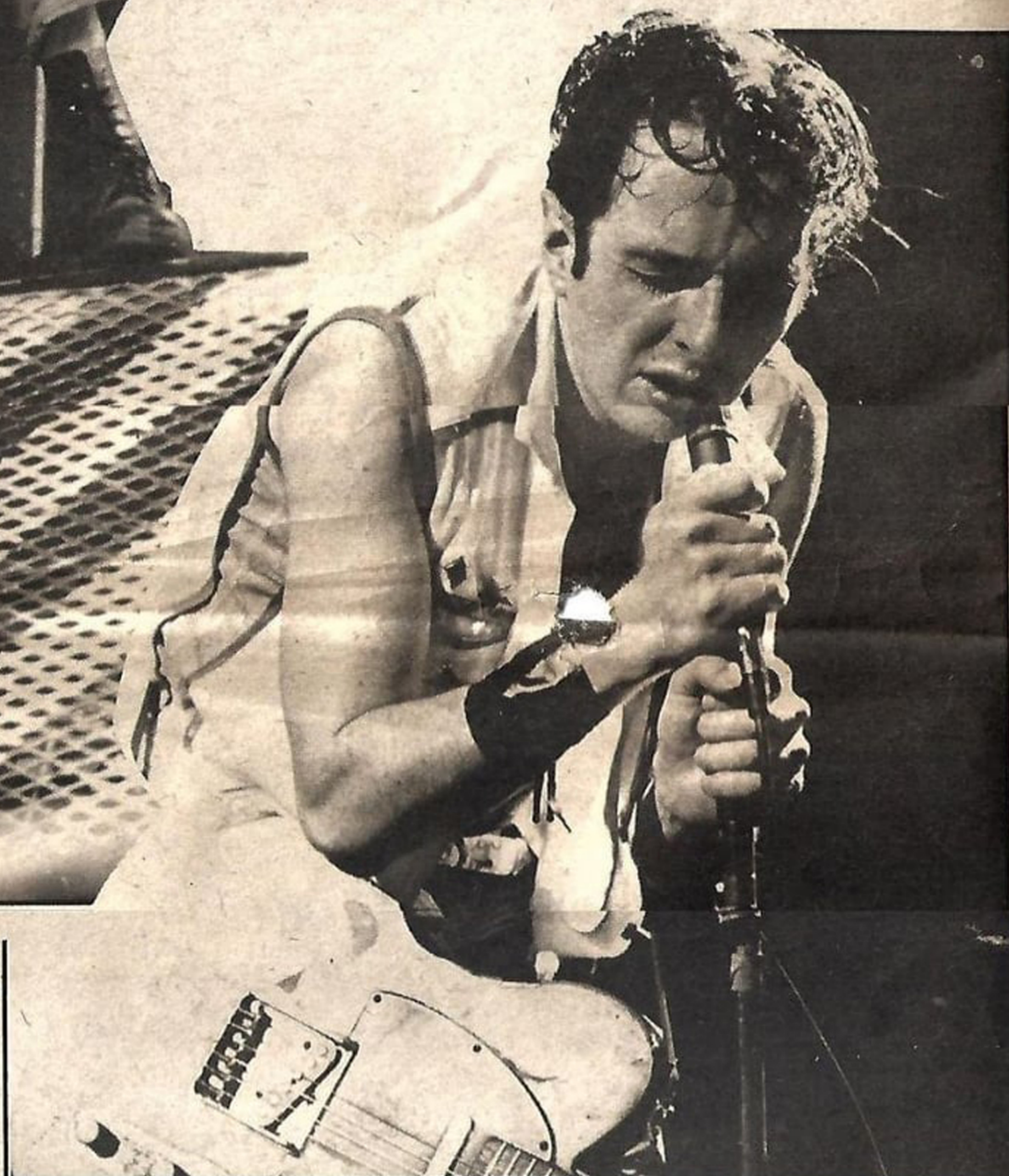
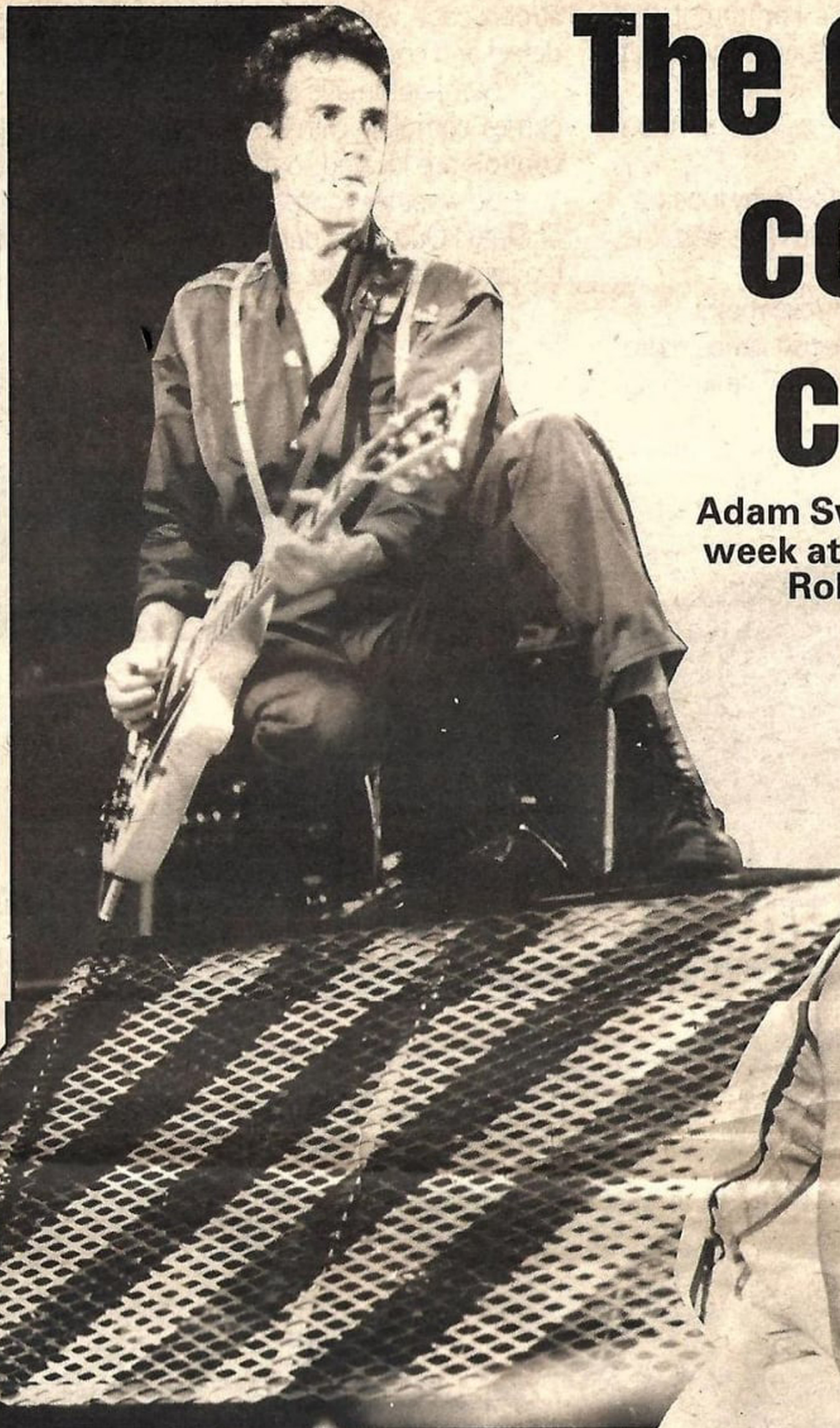


The Clash and cocktail culture

Adam Sweeting reflects on the CLASH's week at the Lyceum. Mick Jones pic by Robert Ellis/Joe Strummer by Jon Blackmore



I USED to know this bloke from Iceland. When I first met him, he was a practising Communist.

A few months later, he was spending most of his time drinking vodka and smoking unfiltered Camels. This indicated a radical change from his earlier doctrinaire ways.

He said that he was through with Communism, and indeed with socialism in any form. The only step left after Communism, he explained to me in his meticulously clumsy English, was decadence.

He threw himself into debauchery with desperate enthusiasm. I haven't seen him for years.

THE CLASH may be the victims of a similar process, less egocentric but even more inexorable.

Their sin has been survival — a lot of people seem to feel that the Clash should not be here.

"The parody lingers on" was the NME's headline for a review of the Clash's first night at the Lyceum. This presumably means "self-parody" or "parody of rock'n'roll myth" or perhaps both.

Certainly, the Clash can be absurd in a number of ways. Could anyone doubt that lines like "For the very first time ever/When they had a revolution in Nicaragua/There was no interference from America" ("Washington Bullets") are childish in inept?

And yes, Mick Jones can look preposterous running through

his guitar poses, and yes Joe Strummer has talked a lot of half-baked drivel about terrorism and politics and social conditions, etc.

But the Clash are one of a handful of artists capable of putting on a two-hour show which is more than the sum of its parts. I saw three of the Lyceum gigs last week.

I had doubts about the first one, less doubts about the second, and by the end of the third I knew I'd witnessed an event.

This Clash is not the Clash of "Janie Jones" or "White Riot", but it has a lot in common with the Clash of "White Man In Hammersmith Palais", among other things. This Clash is not ordinary, although it's unwieldy at times.

"THIS game is called survival..." The Clash's problem is far from unique — how to survive and keep moving in the ever-narrowing corridors of pop — but it's been complicated by factors nobody can control.

Any group that's made a reputation early in its career and got past its first couple of albums finds it's confronted by a law of diminishing returns. The options seem to be to break through to megastar status (like the Police), keep on making records which some people like but which are

generally ignored (like Joe Jackson) or give up.

The Clash have done none of these things. "London Calling" made a large dent in the American charts, but instead of following it up with something outrageously commercial like a live double album, they delivered the sprawling, confusing "Sandinista!"

I think it's daft to accuse them of "selling out", whatever that means in an industry built on selling things to people.

Maybe the Clash are just too untalented to organise their own sales and marketing properly, but if they were really committed to "selling out" they could have made a far more lucrative job of it.

Somebody once wrote in NME that the Clash have made more fuck-ups than most groups because they try harder than most groups. I still think that's true. After the flak they received for "Sandinista!", with its bewildering range of material and styles, the Lyceum shows struck me as a determined effort to clear the decks and bring the whole operation up to date.

Thus, songs like "One More Time", "Charlie Don't Surf" and especially "Somebody Got Murdered" were delivered with fierce purpose and clarity. It's a shame it had to take these shows to demonstrate the worth of some of the "Sandinista!" material, but it was heartening to see that both effort and thought had been

put into them.

Typical Clash — blunder through a triple album, losing a whole lot of potentially classic stuff in the footnotes, then disappear from English stages in favour of 365 consecutive nights in New York. From Toxteth to Tunbridge Wells, this looks bad.

LEAVING aside the problems and criticism the Clash have brought on themselves, it's time to explain the presence of the anonymous Icelander at the top of the page.

No, I don't mean the Clash have abandoned a set of principles in favour of rampant decadence. I was thinking more of the press...

Rightly, the whole notion of "rock'n'roll" has been scrutinised, dismembered and often rejected in the last few years. Since punk, many of its jaded rituals have been vilified and abandoned by groups like Gang Of Four, Dexy's, U2 and Wah!

All of them have been able to make passionate and convincing music, using many familiar components while demanding effort from the listener, more self-criticism, greater awareness of the context and application of music as a medium.

(These aren't the only groups, of course — add Simple Minds, Bunnymen,

Comsats... make your own list.)

Lately, most of the gains from this re-selection process have been thrown away in a sort of new dark age.

It doesn't look like a dark age — it's fashionable and brightly lit, has a synthetically soulful soundtrack and is decorated by a lengthy menu of cocktails. It's kept alive by a series of fierce little jolts of adrenalin into its pale, palpitating heart — a new buzz every couple of weeks.

Don't get me wrong. I like cocktails. I like records by Haircut 100, Heaven 17, Human League but not Grace Jones, who leaves me cold, and not Soft Cell, who make me sick.

I'm just highly suspicious of an ethic which elevates a solitary seven inch record into this week's cult, dances to it for a while and then dances on its grave.

PEOPLE have always gone out dancing and drinking and always will. This is a good thing. But I can't

remember a time when the notion of dance-and-forget was endorsed by the music press as a way of life, which now is the case. Perhaps I'm too old! Perhaps I'm not old enough!

A friend said it reminded him of the Flappers of the Twenties, in retrospect a chilling remark. This new attitude seems to me like an abject admission of defeat, a refusal to face up to the warnings which were being broadcast by the same music press a year or two ago.

Just when we need it most... "Be Brave", say the Comsats Angels. "Out of the dark and into the light/Looking for a way round it/When it calls we won't hear/We will shout and we'll drown it out..." Instead of determination we have submission. Instead of heart, we prefer plastic soul.

So what was supposed to be an evaluation of Clash '81 has turned into a diatribe. I don't mean by all this that the Clash are "the greatest rock'n'roll band in the world" and are being unjustly passed over. I'm more interested in the attitudes

which dictate that a group like the Clash doesn't merit serious attention any more.

They aren't the only ones who are suffering. It's as though we've hit a patch where any group that's made a serious investment in its own future had better forget it. Groups like the Bunnymen or Comsats, for instance, now two LPs old, look like OAPs in this glittering, twittering new landscape.

Maybe everything's too serious and depressing for music to be serious any more (and why don't groups have senses of humour these days?) But I doubt whether the people on the Right To Work march can afford to nightclub the night away to the groovy sounds of Pigbag or ABC.

These are the people who genuinely need the sort of hope and challenge that used to be expected of music. All they're getting is lip service.

After the challenges of punk and the earthy dynamics of its aftermath, I think we're back to worse than square one.

I think we're working for the clampdown.