

ALBUMS

Celluloid heroes

The Clash
COMBAT ROCK
CBS FMLN2

WITH macabre irony, The Clash present their would-be assassins with the first round without a shot being fired. As the real blood washes up on the stony beaches of the Falklands, The Clash come crawling from the bunker in their best wasted-guerilla togs and deliver a record called "Combat Rock". You almost have to laugh.

But as usual, there's more to the new Clash LP than the packaging (which is especially unpleasant this time). "Combat Rock" is a fairly logical successor to "Sandinista!", 18 months on, but it's leaner and more concentrated - still eclectic, not very electric. Lots of layers.

Because of their sloppiness, The Clash frequently manage to persuade the listener that they can't write tunes any more and don't give a toss. This isn't true - the music here is varied and mostly works. Their attitude and subject matter remains ambiguous, though, often delivering attractive imagery but leaving you with doubts about its motivation.

They give you the worst first with the tedious "Know Your Rights", a non-single if ever I heard one. "Murder is a crime! Unless it was done by a policeman or aristocrat", grunts Strummer. How quaint.

The Clash wish they'd been born ten years earlier. They're steeped in a Sixties "radical" sensibility, preoccupied with Vietnam veterans, street poetry, guerilla struggles, death-as-film noir.

So, you have Allen Ginsberg delivering a few lines about urban angst as a preface to "Ghetto defendant", a song which could easily have been written in Chicago in 1968: "Ghetto

defendant it is heroin pity, not tear gas not baton charge, that stops you taking the city". Eldridge Cleaver Joins Clash Shock.

It's strange that the blood and broken heads and napalmed children can seem so romantic now. There's a darkness here, yes, but it's distanced, a zoom shot from a low-flying helicopter. Like editors of old documentary film, The Clash re-process imagery through the shifting lenses of their music - reggae, some funk, hints of salsa, jungle-line scene painting, a bit of rock.

But is voyeurism valid? You could argue that "Guns Of Brixton" was prophetic, but you didn't even have to go there to know that. It's all on TV, innit? Similarly, "Red Angel Dragnet" here finds Paul Simonon changing the scenario but singing the same song, this time about New York's Guardian Angel vigilante subway patrols.

"Just freedom to move, to live, for women to take a walk in the park at midnite". It's intercut with quotes from Paul Schrader's script for "Taxi Driver" - "Thank God for the rain to wash the trash off the sidewalk". The subject is serious, but the inspiration is someone else's. The song isn't really about the people's fight against street violence, it's about a Martin Scorsese movie.

With "Sean Flynn", same again. It's ostensibly inspired by the Vietnam journalist and son of Errol, but doubtless The Clash have nicked the idea from Michael Herr's "Dispatches" or "Apocalypse Now".

"You know he heard the drums of war, each man knows what he's looking for". Strummer sings it over slow drips of percussion, with a few splashes of guitar and a minimal bass and drum pulse. It's eerily effective, a lingering piece of atmosphere... don't look for anything more.

Seen this way, "Combat Rock" is merely showbiz, a demonstration of the boundaries rock 'n' roll (or whatever it is) can never cross. But it's a record, not a book, and the music is increasingly effective the more you listen to it. The Clash have always been able to throw in a few surprises to keep you guessing, though here the hard, dry mix means you have to work



The elusive Mr Strummer before his extraordinary disappearance.
Pic: Robert Ellis.

at it.

But anyway, the tough, ragged dance beat of "Overpowered By Funk" is swiftly effective. "Car Jamming" has a persuasive jerking motion fired up with hard rhythm guitar, and "Rock The Casbah" is a seductive Latin shuffle driven by chunky piano chords. "Straight To Hell" is plaintive, quietly desperate.

And to finish the LP, there's the off-the-wall "Death Is A Star". It's a dark little vignette of love and death, sung breathlessly by Mick and Joe with a little spoken

narrative from rap-man Futura 2000. Cocktail piano tinkles a tango over an acoustic guitar strum. It's strange and moody and I like it a lot.

Result: I like the record, hate the title. I have doubts about the more exploitative aspects of The Clash and the way they milk death and repression until they become meaningless, but I'll be listening to "Combat Rock" for a while yet.

Does this review tell you anything you didn't know already? - ADAM SWEETING.

Rose Royce
STRONGER THAN EVER
Epic EPC 85634

THE LP cover shows a rose breaking through the concrete streets of what appears to be New York. In the background there are people watching this proud, red blossom, which seems to dominate the street, with anticipation.

The message is clear - Rose Royce are "stronger than ever".

It's a highly presumptuous title - probably provoked by a need to put on a brave new face in lieu of all the line-up changes the band has undergone. But it's actually pretty fair.

Rose Royce have already made their mark on the world - "Car Wash" and "Wishing On A Star" are easy classics of their time. And now, just when I for one, had begun to write them off they've produced another gem.

"Still In Love" is the epic Martin Fry has yet to write. Starting in the mood of a "Love Don't Live Here Anymore" it then blossoms, with scything strings, into an almost classical dance number, breaking only for a neat jazz-funk keyboards flourish before it glides off into the grooves.

Elegant and instant, with every highlight tipped by Norman J. Whitfield's lavish production pen, it should haunt a lot of nightspots this summer and in the years to come.

But even though the track stands out from the eight present there are certainly some fine seconds to the throne.

Side two's opener "You Blew It" - is an excellent dancer which has the sort of space and power in its production capable of forging genuine cross-atlantic links with the likes of Junior and ABC. And "Fire In The Funk" is another sharp mover - leagues ahead of Shalamar and co.

"Stronger Than Ever" is by no means a perfect LP, though. It's not really until halfway through side one, with "Best Love", that the scene really hots up. And even side two contains a minor sore thumb in the shape of the gross lyrical sentimentality of the Manilow-meets-Eruption "Somehow We Made It Through The Rain". It's well executed but rather too gushing. - PAUL SIMPER.

Jahman Levi
TELL IT TO THE
CHILDREN
Tree Roots Records
TRLPS 266

TOO seldom does the intriguingly independent reggae circuit throw-up a recording, performing personality strong and sassy enough to add the spiritually