

Music comes back to Beale Street



By Robert Palmer
New York Times

MEMPHIS — There isn't much left of Beale Street. The half-dozen downtown blocks of this Memphis thoroughfare used to be lined with theaters where America's finest black entertainers performed, and with stores that carried the kind of colorful flashy clothes that black bluesmen such as B.B. King and young white singers such as Elvis Presley wore on stage. The side streets that shot off Beale in both directions were lined with saloons where itinerant blues pianists tried to stump one another with spectacular feats of polyrhythmic dexterity.

All that is gone now. The buildings that remain are gutted and boarded up. Whole blocks have been bulldozed, leaving empty stretches of grass and gravel where the wind off the nearby Mississippi River whips through.

But in May, the Beale Street Music Festival brought music back to Beale Street — for a weekend. The festival began in 1977 when two Memphis jazz musicians, saxophonist Fred Ford and bassist Jamil Nasser, began talking about how much they would like to see some of their old friends again.

"We were listening to some of those old 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' concert albums," Ford recalled as

the 1982 Beale Street Music Festival was winding down May 23, "and we talked about bringing all the jazz giants from Memphis back here to play together again, to do some concerts and onstage jam sessions like 'Jazz at the Philharmonic.' A lawyer here in town, Irvin Salky, put his money on the line, and that's how we put the first of these festivals together."

Now the festival has a steering committee, sponsorship from the Memphis-in-May organization, which coordinates a variety of springtime celebrations in the city, and corporate sponsorship from Budweiser beer.

When Ford was a young man, in the early 1950s, Memphis was America's blues hotspot. Ford and friends such as saxophonist George Coleman and pianist Phineas Newborn were jazz players attuned to the modern music that Charlie Parker and other beboppers were playing in New York. But there weren't many opportunities to play jazz in Memphis, and most of the city's jazz musicians put in time working with local blues bands, and recorded with some of them.

Later, in the 1950s and early '60s, a number of Memphis' most gifted and ambitious jazz musicians — Coleman, Nasser, trumpeter Booker Little, pianist Harold Mabern, saxophonists Frank Strozier and Charles Lloyd — mi-

grated to New York, where they played with the best musicians in the business. But they didn't forget Memphis.

Coleman, Strozier and Mabern played for ecstatic festival audiences last month at the Club Paradise, where blues singers such as Bobby (Blue) Bland have performed regularly since the 1950s.

"George Coleman is the greatest living tenor saxophonist," Ford said several times over the festival weekend, in his most decisive tone of voice, and it was difficult to imagine anyone playing with more fire, feeling and technical expertise than Coleman displayed in Memphis. Mabern, playing a grand piano with such energy and force that it rocked back and forth on the stage, and Strozier, unleashing torrential solos while looking unflappably bemused, were playing at the same impressive level.

A white high school student, a rock fan, standing in a predominantly black crowd out on the grassy expanse that used to be part of Beale Street, looked utterly transfixed. "A lot of people don't listen to this music, do they?" she asked. "I guess that's because a lot of people are stupid. This music has everything."

On the second of the festival's two outdoor stages, a group of Please see **BEALE STREET**, 23

Clash slowing up growth

By Cameron Cohick
Rock Pop Writer

Combat Rock is the first Clash album that doesn't really break new ground for the group.

Their 1977 debut was humanist punk rock 'n' roll of awesome passion and commitment. In light of the Sex Pistols' vicious nihilism, it was certainly a new view of what this raw form could express. The followup was cleaned up, sort of Americanized, by the unfortunate production of Blue Oyster Cult puppeteer Sandy Pearlman. It was a step in the wrong direction, probably, but still a step.

London Calling (1980) expanded their stylistic vocabulary enormously; while they were still saying the same sorts of things, they'd found many more ways of saying them. Last year's *Sandinista!* continued that expansion, with a multitude of styles — nearly all of them amazingly within the Clash's grasp — sprawled over six sides.

Combat Rock, though, pulls this headlong run of growth-up short. It could fit onto the end of either of their last two albums, making *London Calling* a triple or *Sandinista!* a quadruple, without doing any damage to the stylistic or atmospheric coherence of either album. Both of those LPs cast long, hovering shad-

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ows over this new work.

Like *Sandinista!*, *Combat Rock* dabbles in many genres — funk, reggae-dub-like meandering, pop-punk rock, political ranting backed by dark, ominous rock — with mild Third World musical influences creeping in occasionally.

Even some songs that don't fit into an easy category have older relatives in the Clash catalog. The thuggish monotone rap of *Red Angel Dragnet* is a close cousin of last year's *The Crooked Beat*, and the elegant, effete decadence conveyed by *Death Is a Star* sounds like the sort of thing Mick Jones cooked up for girlfriend Ellen Foley's *Spirit of St. Louis* album.

Some small innovations do come through. Multiple vocal tracks, in this case the mix of a sung vocal and a spoken one, are used on four cuts here. Some work, and some don't. Allen Ginsberg's ponderous incantations on *Ghetto Defendat* are a perfect touch, conveying the proper sense of history and madness to Joe Strummer's shouted catalog of oppressions. On the other hand, the chirpy toilet-cleaner com-

mercial dubbed over the end of *Inoculated City* is just plain stupid; it ruins the song by robbing it of any seriousness it might otherwise have had. (It's their fault, too. After 15 years, *Sgt. Pepper* can't be held responsible for this kind of crap any longer.)

And Jones' *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* is a traditional love song, set to more or less traditional British rock music. It sounds a lot like the Stones' *Start Me Up*, built on the same kind of snaky guitar riff. For the Clash, a "relationship" song like this isn't wholly unprecedented — *London Calling* had *Train in Vain*, which this new one resembles a little, and *Sandinista!* had *Street Parade* — but it is rare.

What's mainly different this time out is that they've kept it to a single record, thus reducing its potential "monumental work" status. Yet even at this modest length, the album bogs down a bit on side two, something that didn't happen at all on *London Calling* and not until Side Six of *Sandinista!* The problem isn't so much with the material as with the programming. The delicate and vague *Sean Flynn* and the spooky, swirling *Ghetto Defendat* are sluggish, true, but seductively sluggish. They just shouldn't be put back to back at the core of side two. A listener's attention goes into this



The latest Clash album has much less innovation.

murk, and sometimes it doesn't come out again.

The reservations have been stated. Now for the good points. Although no new approaches have been added to the Clash repertoire, the multiplicity of the existing ones continues to benefit the group. They no longer have to use reggae so compulsively to establish rhythmic rapport with their (hoped-for) Third World constituency. As they found

last time out, such empathy can be established in plenty of other ways, too.

And it's a joy to hear a band obviously motivated by more than just the desire — seemingly universal in '80s rock — "to just entertain the people, just keep on playing what they want to hear." The Clash want change, and they want to

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make rock 'n' roll that's powerful art, something that will make a difference and perhaps even endure as more than a product of the tastes of the time.

But that sort of aim often produces tedious, pedantic music. Just take a listen to the Gang of Four some time. What lets the Clash rise above that level is their sense of humor and ability to master a variety of rock styles, which apparently stems from a love of the music that the didactic rockers just don't have.

It's not like Joan Jett's much publicized love. Her breakthrough singalong hit implies a love that translates to, "I love rock 'n' roll, and what it stands for, and it's harshness and aggression, and above all, the social milieu — the marketplace — in which it operates." In other words, I love the status quo. You can disagree with that interpretation, but an anthem like *I Love Rock 'n' Roll* is more about conformity than anything else. (The odd thing is in that walking-dead AOR vein. But look what she gets a hit with.)

Whereas the Clash love (or like, or whatever) rock 'n' roll for its proven subversive powers. It can make a crack in the blank wall of authority, spur underground movements, heighten awareness of the existence of varying viewpoints, foster impudence and resistance. All of which, their entire career suggests, the Clash themselves would love to do. On *Combat Rock*, the song that makes the point most clearly is *Rock the Casbah*, where "the shareef don't like it," but the populace tunes in and wails to the forbidden sounds anyway.

In this sense, the Clash are to the '80s what the Rolling Stones were to the '60s — a rock 'n' roll band of considerable firepower and versatility who stand for rebellion of an intelligent, if not sophisticated, sort. They're handling that status well. *Combat Rock* finds the Clash covering little new territory. But they're holding their ground.

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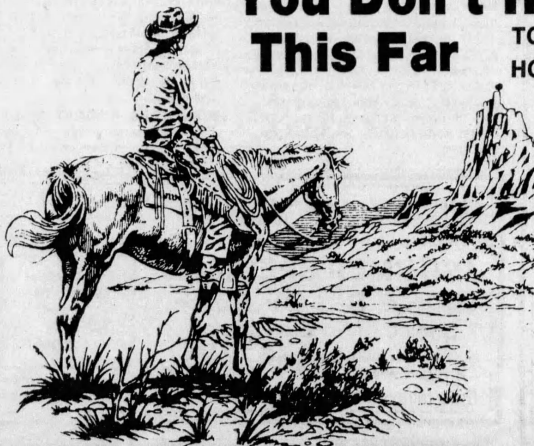
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