

**take note****Chris Farrell**

review

Has Clash punk lost its spunk?

Touted just a few years ago as "the last band left standing" after the collapse of British punk, the rebel rockers of the Clash stand in disarray.

With its old drummer back in the saddle, a new album in the stores and a book of photographs just released, the band seems primed for a full-scale assault on the American rock market. Instead, a closer look reveals the Clash with its energies unfocused, its future uncertain.

"Combat Rock" is the group's fifth album, dabbling with the same military metaphors that have painted the Clash as rock 'n' roll revolutionaries, guerrillas with guitars. The record glistens with songs sharp as broken glass, but the band whose endless energy gave birth to the double album "London Calling" and the triple set "Sandinista" ran out of ideas about halfway through this solitary disc.

The group's American tour with original drummer Terry Chimes (dubbed "Tory Crimes" by disgruntled partners when he left the band in 1979) found the Clash reprising its greatest hits with inspiring fervor.

But Democrat critic Steve Dollar, who saw the band last month in New Orleans, said the group that drew praise for turning rock into fiery social comment was strangely silent on Britain's war in the Falklands.

Have Joe Strummer and company forgotten the difference between war and revolution?

"The Clash: Before and After," a book of photographs by Pennie Smith, shares the common problem of most volumes of rock photography. Smith's most famous shots — one taken onstage at Atlanta's Agora — graced the covers of the Clash's "London Calling" LP. But she fails in this book to go far beyond illustrating the band.

The interest in "Before and After" comes from the subject, not from the artist. If you love the Clash, you'll love this book. If you love photography, stick to Cartier-Bresson.

Ironically, Smith's failure might explain the Clash's own problem. In the same way that "Before and After" is

(Please see TAKE NOTE, page 2B)

2B Tallahassee Democrat / Friday, June 18, 1982

Take note

(Continued from page 1B)

just another book of rock photography, has the Clash become just another rock band?

In 1977, the Clash and the Sex Pistols were the avenging angels of the punk apocalypse, bent on puncturing the bloated corpse of rock 'n' roll, then washing themselves in the blood. Two years later, the Sex Pistols had played out that script to the end, disintegrating in chaos and death. The Clash, though, had turned punk nihilism into a career opportunity.

Recording for CBS-Epic Records, the Clash has made the most of that opportunity, delivering some of the best music of this decade.

Comparing "Combat Rock" with the group's first awesome album, it's clear much has changed: Some things are better, some worse, some just different.

The most striking development is the group's incorporation of the spirit of Jamaican reggae. The debut album featured a (pale) imitation of Junior Murvin's "Police and Thieves" which worked as the sincerest form of flattery.

By now, the Clash confidently makes its own style of reggae-inspired music. It's wonderful when it works on "Combat Rock" — in "Know Your Rights," the first single; "Red Angel Dragnet"; and "Straight to Hell" — keyboard riffs and charging guitars swirling around a dangerous void at the center of the music.

But the failures — which include most of Side Two — show just how dangerous that void is; the music goes sliding off to nowhere.

The failures sound like flawed experiments, as if the Clash's ambition has too far exceeded its grasp. And the often aimless music is matched by wandering lyrics; the best Clash music is built on sharply drawn, bracing images. Strummer often gets obtuse, wordy or just plain weird on "Combat Rock."



From left, Paul Simonon, Topper Headon, Mick Jones and Joe Strummer. Strummer, who once abandoned the Clash, is back, but drummer Topper Headon has left.

Another change is Joe Strummer's singing, which for years has seemed most eloquent when he mumbles, never more so than on 1979's "White Man in the Hammersmith Palais." Listening to it three years later, I still can't understand what he's saying, and I love every word.

On "Combat Rock," Strummer doesn't exactly sound like he's taken lessons from Henry Higgins. But with his infamous rotten teeth replaced by gleaming new choppers, I understand every word and don't like much of it.

Still, Strummer's elocution occasionally pays off — in the tearjerking "Straight to Hell" and "Innoculated City," the rollicking "Rock the Casbah."

Mourn one difference in the Clash: Where the debut album sounded imperative, a howl from the soul, "Combat Rock" sounds professionally passionate. How did it happen?

Smith's book gives a clue. There's shot after shot of the Clash on stage with stacks of amps, rows of guitars, even video equipment. Put them all together and they spell money, the kind that record companies pay to run your band.

CBS doesn't run the band yet, but it sure does pressure it. Ask Joe Strummer, who hopped a boat train to Paris a few months ago, bailing out of the group and striking fear in the hearts of fans everywhere. He's back in, but now drummer Topper Headon has split.

Record companies aren't the only professionals to apply pressure. On-again, off-again manager Bernie Rhodes brought in Glyn Johns, who worked with the — urp! — Eagles, to re-mix the sound on "Combat Rock."

Moreover, the lean and hungry sound of the early Clash comes from

being lean and hungry. These boys haven't put on much weight, but I'm betting they aren't that hungry anymore.

Coming up

Talk-show host Phil Donahue chats with "Parents of Punkers" on Monday's program (9 a.m., WCTV-Channel 6, cable 9). With the support group for parents whose kids have succumbed to the lures of hardcore music, slam-dancing and Mohawk haircuts, Donahue welcomes "Jeff," a reformed punk. Turn on the tube, slap Black Flag on the turntable to drown out commercials and get ready for a TV party.

Rick James, One Way featuring Al Hudson and Dazz Band, 8 p.m. June 27, Tallahassee-Leon County Civic Center (\$10.50, \$11.50).