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LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

THE CLASH: STRUMMING THE MESSAGE

By ROBERT HILBURN

"I'm not interested in fighting for the ownership of the phrase 'rock 'n' roll' one little bit if rock 'n' roll is defined by the kind of music they play on American radio," said the Clash's Joe Strummer, whose British group is the foremost contender in years to the Rolling Stones' long-standing claim to the "World's Greatest Rock Band" title.

"Most of the stuff you hear on the radio in this country just slides in one ear and out the other ear without really affecting anybody," he continued, during a stop here on the band's current U.S. tour. "It's like wall-to-wall carpet or something. It's there, but so what? That's certainly not my idea of what rock should be."

As defined by the Clash's records, Strummer's concept of rock is music that combines an intense, white-heat delivery with a heavy socio-political slant and a provocative mix of punk, rockabilly, reggae and funk strains; all of which defies timid radio guidelines that favor such homogenized attractions as Asia, Journey and Styx.

Though the seductive "Should I Stay or Should I Go" and the playful "Rock the Casbah" tracks from the Clash's new "Combat Rock" album are picking up airplay on adventurous rock stations here, the group's music has suffered commercially from a virtual blackout on U.S. radio.

Noted Strummer, "That (blackout) is why we're a lot different from the British Invasion of the mid-'60s. At that time, things were happening in rock on all fronts—on the airways, in the record

stores and in the concert halls.

"Because of radio today, however, we're like backdoor merchants or something. If you just judged by what's happening on the radio or at the top of the charts, we don't even exist. But something is obviously happening if you go to our shows."

Something, indeed, is happening with the Clash.

While each new album leaves even Clash fans puzzled over the group's latest radical turn, listeners gradually adjust to the often stimulating changes. The Clash's "London Calling" and "Sandinista!" were named the best albums of 1980 and 1981, respectively, in the Village Voice's annual poll of the nation's leading pop and rock critics.

And, despite some initial grumbling over some of the band's latest experimentation, the new "Combat Rock" LP should again score high in that poll. The album, which is No. 27 in just its fourth week on the national sales charts, also shapes up as the Clash's biggest U.S. seller.

There's also an aura of greatness about the band's live shows, which included five sold-out performances at the Hollywood Palladium. The diversity of the group's new material, including the stirring social compassion of the plaintive "Straight to Hell," has not only added dimension to the group's early punk attack, but has also forged a stronger sociological bond with the audience.

Where Clash fans once seemed drawn in large part by the quartet's rebellious punk connection, they seemed more attracted at the Palladium by the group's apparent integrity and independence.

In fact, the Clash's anti-authoritarian tone in its frequently Third World-slanted themes seems a throwback to the early work of Bob Dylan and other '60s protest writers—an era in music that has been largely ridiculed as hopelessly naive and ineffective by much of the punk contingent. Pointing to the conservative governments in England and the

United States, critics of political rock scoff at the suggestion that the '60s liberalism had any lasting effect.

But Strummer doesn't flinch at being linked to that socially conscious tradition in rock.

"I didn't really know what Dylan was doing until it was all over and done with, but it still meant a hell of a lot to me," he said. "The fact that we have Thatcher and Reagan is an accurate reflection of right-wing attitudes in the two countries, but I still think that music mattered."

"At least I know it did something to my mind that was really valuable and, I suspect, it did the same to a lot of other people. Maybe it was just that fact that Dylan showed someone could speak up and talk in his music about an alternative to what seems to be a straight, boring road to destruction."

For someone who exhibits on stage the nervous anxiety of a man whose car has just stalled in front of an oncoming train, Strummer seemed strangely subdued during the afternoon interview.

It was as if he were trying to conserve his energy for the next round in the Clash's turbulent campaign that includes frequent run-ins with the group's record company and unorthodox (and sometimes self-indulgent) steps that leave its fans exasperated.

"I'm being very careful these days," Strummer volunteered. "The more shows you do, the more you need of yourself to give away on stage. That's why we don't party much any more. In America, people are always coming up and asking, 'Where's the party, man?' But there's simply not enough left of us after a show to go jabbering about all night. We're not trying to be rude. There's usually just nothing left."

The pressures of constant touring and recording with the Clash led to Strummer's recent, much publicized hiatus from the band, an unannounced holiday

Clash-mates, from left, Terry Chimes, Joe Strummer, Mick Jones and Paul Simonon are challenging radio, pop conventions and Stones' rock crown.

that forced the postponement of 20 British shows and left the rest of the Clash (guitarist Mick Jones, bassist Paul Simonon and then-drummer Topper Headon) wondering if there was even still a band.

About the holiday, Strummer explained, "After you've been in a band for a long time, you feel like you're on a one-way ticket to the edge. You talk about taking a break, but there are so many commitments that you never get time. So I finally just went off on my own to Paris. I grew a beard and walked around like Fidel Castro, and it was great because nobody recognized me."

"I felt in Paris I was like a real person again—not just a member of a band. I think it's real important to make that contact with reality. Look what happened to Elvis (Presley). That was the saddest thing. . . . The poor guy never wanted to end up being locked up in that hillbilly palace."

Despite Strummer's "serious" image, he can be playful. When the phone rang in his hotel room during the interview, for instance, he discovered the caller was trying to contact one of Strummer's pals who had gone out for a few minutes. Advising the caller to hold on, Strummer simply stuffed the receiver into a duffel bag and pushed the bag behind the sofa. When the pal showed up 15 minutes later, he said, deadpan, "There's a guy in your bag who wants to speak to you." (He was still waiting patiently on the line.)

Strummer's face also lit up with genuine fan enthusiasm whenever the conversation touched on some of his favorite records, including Presley's classic "Sun Please Turn to Page 79

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Sessions" LP, or on a favorite rocker, like John Fogerty. He's a big fan of early American rock.

Before joining the Clash, Strummer was in the 101ers, a British group that specialized in the celebrative '50s style of rock. One of his songs from those days, "Let-sagetabitarockin'," mixes that good-time spirit with the sheer vocal abandon that characterizes his work with the Clash.

The shift from the traditional rock themes of the 101ers to the social activism of the Clash was encouraged by Clash manager Bernard Rhodes, Strummer said, adding:

"He didn't tell us what to write. He just said, 'Write what affects you, what you care about.' He was always against just love songs and things like that, which we were writing a few of, but not many. That was during the first weeks of the Clash. So, we just naturally started writing tougher and tougher stuff. I was already kind of drifting that way with the 101ers. The last few things I wrote with the band were moving away from the rock 'n' roll good-times songs."

Did he worry that audiences would reject political lyrics?

"No, not at all," he responded quickly. "We didn't even think about audiences because we knew we could play well, and we just assumed people would want to listen to us. We were pretty arrogant, I guess. Arrogant—and a little bit of to-hell-with-it thrown in."

"The same goes for a lot of the changes we've made in the recent albums. The reason we tried other styles (than punk) in 'London Calling' was that we suddenly discovered we could play *tunes*. It was great fun to come across a song like 'Armageddon Time' and discover that we could do a reasonable cover version of it."

But, again, didn't the band worry that the shift from pure punk would alienate its fans?

"Everything you do causes you to lose and to gain fans, so you can't let that determine what you do. It's my feeling that if you don't change, you lose something yourself. To me, the reason the Sex Pistols died was that

they weren't writing any new songs. You can't just do the same thing over and over and survive.

"But it also stimulates us to do things that we aren't supposed to do musically—move into areas that are off-limits for a rock band. We'd like to reach as many people as possible, but we also can't resist the temptation of putting something we know is a little extreme on an album to see if the audience will be able to take it."

□

Given the volatility of the Clash's approach, it's hard to picture the group staying together indefinitely. Indeed, drummer Topper Headon bailed out just before the U.S. tour, causing the band to enlist Terry Chimes. But the odds must have been high in the '60s against the idea that the once volatile Who and Rolling Stones would still be around in the '80s.

Strummer, whose messy Mohawk haircut mocks the seriousness of his rock mission, paused before commenting on the band's future.

Like anyone who seeks to inspire with music, he admits he goes through occasional "black moments" when he wonders if he's reaching anyone at all. But his passion for the Clash is still apparently high enough for him to want to continue challenging himself and his audience.

He concluded, "I remember when I was working as a

laborer and they'd have this string to show you how far you had to dig. If you looked down at the string, it became almost impossible because it looked like you'd have to dig forever to reach the end.

"But I eventually realized that it's much lighter on the spirit if you just concentrated on each spadeful. So that's what I try to do now. On good days, you hope its going to last forever, but other times the string seems so long. I try to just do it one spadeful at a time." □

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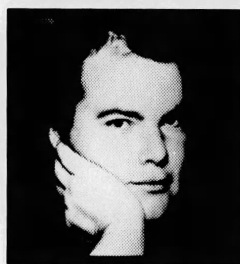


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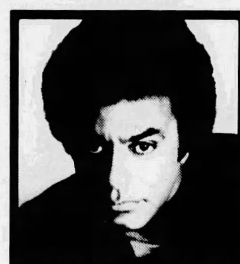
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