

Stations of The Clash

DON LETTS' original claim to fame was as the DJ at the Roxy Club who turned a whole generation of punks onto reggae. Today he plays that one down — he wasn't really a DJ, just played permutations of his ten

favourite records. Don, a modest fellow, would probably also play down the importance of *The Punk Rock Movie* which, five years on and with new titles and re-cut and re-edited with new

material, looks like a very comprehensive statement about the era — the Pistols, The Clash, Subway Sect, Siouxsie, Wayne County, The Heartbreakers, and your average extreme punk, all shot by Don on super 8.

Now the film-maker has moved on: he shoots on 16mm and transfers onto video, never having liked the look of stuff done straight onto video tape. Don's work got a fairly comprehensive exhibition at the recent International Video Festival in London: *The Punk Rock Movie* was shown with his promos of The Slits, PiL, The 4 Be 2s, The Psychedelic Furs and more. There's an interesting range of styles, from the *verite* ("earthy" is Don's preferred word), through the zany (the incredibly young sub-teenage reggae band Musical Youth doing 'Don't Blame The Youth' and getting up to Madness antics while scoring some political points), through to the downright ambitious — and that means Don's work with The Clash.

There are the promos for 'Bank Robber' and 'The Call Up' (both shown on *Tiwas* but, unfortunately, nowhere much else) and 'Rock The Casbah', shot in Texas and featuring an armadillo upstaging the band.

Seeing all this stuff made me want to give 'Combat Rock' another listen — quite an achievement as I can't abide it. Don, who doesn't necessarily like everything they do, considers the album their crowning achievement, the Clash way of balancing "hard politics and entertainment".

In due course there'll be a feature length film about the band, and so far a sizeable extract exists in the shape of *Radio Clash*: the project should prove to be Don's best piece. Although as a director he doesn't touch a camera these days, a sophisticated version of the DIY sensibility informs his work as much as when he first started. Don, who hasn't been to film school and "just don't believe in them", thinks that you can pick up a full directorial grammar just by watching films and TV: "You can even learn from *Crossroads*."

Don Letts, director... sounds grand. But he continually stresses the collaborative bias of film and the way in which the whole crew come up with ideas: Bernie Rhodes and The Clash have been pretty good at that too.

"It should never be a case of whose idea was that, but what's the best idea?"

Radio Clash runs on ideas and kaleidoscopic editing. It avoids not only cliches in its portrait of a band, but also works as a fresh depiction of New York. Don has got beneath its surface, having spent 18 months there with short trips back in Britain. Some of the best footage is about Bonds, the club whose fire regulations initially led to all sorts of trouble about whether The Clash would play there or not. But the band soon found themselves in the middle of a dirty business war between clubs and Mob factions. Don speaks of people having their eyes shot out...

Absence from Britain has only confirmed his belief that

PAUL TICKELL talks to Don Letts about *Radio Clash*, and the problem of making videos that are more than just images and effects

"the rich are getting more paranoid, and the poor are getting poorer and sooner or later they're going to take some of that rich shit." He isn't sure when and thinks Britain must first overcome that defeatist mood about its own problems, but he sees the riots as a healthy sign.

He lives in the Stockwell and Brixton area and wouldn't choose anywhere else. It's the equivalent of those places in New York and Jamaica which, though economically deprived, provide all that's best — funk and rapping and reggae and graffiti. If Don takes his inspiration from the urban proletarian sub-soil, he doesn't romanticise his position: he does after all "mostly move in trendy media circles where it's easy to forget what's really going down". A lot of bands forget and become "spoiled brats", moaning about record company hierarchies and their bosses, while most of the rest of the country never even see their boss, let alone get to speak personally to him.

Don the music man is less than taken by the current charts. He finds bands very low on content and, like their videos, high on "image and effect". He obviously misses the polarisation wrought by punk and the way it temporarily rocked the business. He is glad, though, that reggae is no longer as fashionable. He believes that a certain kind of white business interference distorted both its development and the achievement in Jamaica of producing great sophisticated music out of "nothing but weed, sun, and poverty".

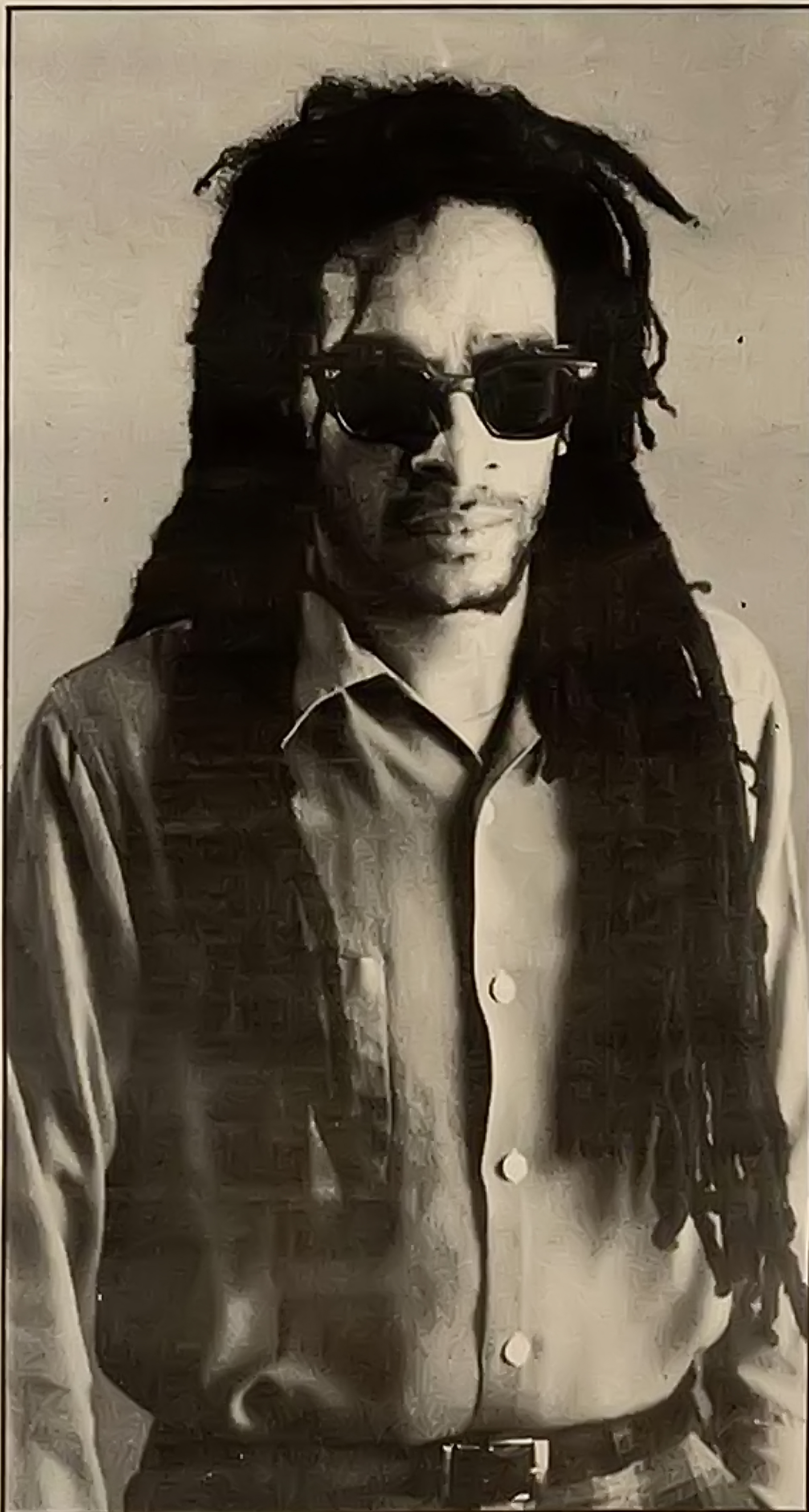
Not that Don would promote black separatism, he just thinks that a lot of talk about black and white people getting on and working together is liberal bullshit, when it should be based on "understanding differences, not pretending to be all the same". Needless to say he finds locks on whites a bit false — "Milky Bar rasta".

Meanwhile, as there is some strategic re-thinking of *Radio Clash*, Don is working on a play idea with young actor-director Trevor Laird. He also wants to complete a film-script (tentative title *The Working Class*) about a middle-class man being made redundant and deciding, along with the dreads and punks, to "bust out".

It'll be a political satire which will use popular forms like *Dirty Harry* and *Kung Fu* films. In that, it echoes a script finished a couple of years ago about rival black and white mini-cab firms who finally get friendly.

Backers are starting to come forward at last for this particular project, called *An Eye For An Eye*.

"You have to use the media's own mind-fuck," he declares. "The minute you mention politics you've lost an audience."



Don Letts — Bourneville rasta. Pic: Bob Gruen

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RECORDED BED-ROCKIN' ...
 "TH' WOMENS MAGAZINES VISIT...
 WHAT SORT OF SYNTHESIZER DID HER MAJESTY PLAY?"
 IT WAS A PRETTY PASTEL COLOURING—TRIMMED WITH

TH' SERIOUS PAPERS VISIT...
 SNIFF—WHEN Y' WERE IN THE, ER, BOLDOR, ER, SNIFF—DID Y' DO ANY DRUGS, ER GLUE... ANYTHIN'?"
 NOTHIN'—THERE WAS SOME

TH' PUBLIC IS NOT FOOLED...
 IT'S A SCAM—IT AIN'T TH' QUEEN IF Y' LISTEN TO IT ON CANS Y' CAN HEAR IT WAS RECORDED IN TESCO'S...