

Entertainment

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Clash: Still scruffy, but now rock heroes

By Geoffrey Himes
Special to the Sun

New York—Four musicians sauntered onto New York's Pier 84 Tuesday. Tall, gangly, ragtag and scarred, they looked like the scruffy street fighters they might have become had they not been hailed as "the only rock band that matters."

The scruffiest of the lot, guitarist Joe Strummer, sported a chipped tooth and a bushy mohawk haircut. "We're the Clash," he shouted to the sell-out crowd, "and we're from England."

With that, he pumped out the chords for a fast, hard-hitting version of "White Riot." Their first single in 1977, the song had epitomized the rebellious intent and passionate amateurism of that year's punk explosion. The splattering guitars and sputtering vocals ("I wanna riot! White riot! A riot of my own!") proved prophetic last summer when black and white British youth rioted against unemployment and police harassment.

Last Tuesday, though, the Clash were no longer punk amateurs venting their spleen; they were seasoned heroes of the rock wars. Unlike their punk contemporaries—most notably the self-destructive Sex Pistols—the Clash had learned to preserve their basic passion and instinct through conscious craft and grueling work. Thus they had survived to sing "White Riot" again five years later, with a new discipline that focused their big beat even more powerfully.

The growth of the Clash was even more apparent later in the show when Mick Jones sang last year's "Somebody Got Murdered." Bassist Paul Simonon and drummer Terry Chimes boomed a slow, giant heartbeat. Mr. Jones displayed the Clash's new gift for understatement, as his ghostly vocal gave death the respect it deserves: "I been hungry, but not enough to kill. Somebody got murdered; somebody's dead forever." Mr. Jones and Mr. Strummer—the band's co-leaders and chief songwriting

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The Clash, from left: Mick Jones, Paul Simonon, Joe Strummer, Topper Headon (since replaced by Terry Chimes).

Seasoned heroes of the rock wars

CLASH, from N1

team—extended the song's implications with a droning, frightening guitar duet.

All night the Clash ranged convincingly across different moods and styles. "London Calling," their anti-apocalypse anthem, assumed a majestic elegance as the band showed a new, sure togetherness. "Brand New Cadillac," their rockabilly romp, was nailed home by Mr. Jones's jangly, swinging lead guitar and Mr. Strummer's frenetic rhythm guitar.

The band turned in two first-rate reggae covers: Eddy Grant's "Police on My Back" and Toots & the Maytals' "Pressure Drop." Rap star Kurtis Blow joined the Clash on the band's own rap hit, "The Magnificent Seven." The newest songs, which sounded so rough on the new album, sounded vibrant and vital on stage. All in all, it was a brilliant concert by a band that seemed to be falling apart just a few months ago.

The Clash are not the most talented artists in rock 'n' roll; they can't sing, play or write nearly as well as Elvis Costello, Prince, Fleetwood Mac or many others. They are, however, the bravest artists in rock today. They are attempting to turn the glib assertions that rock 'n' rollers are revolutionaries into actual fact. Their political lyrics are far more militant than any major rock band before them.

The Clash have fought with their record company to keep the prices low and the politics explicit. They have fought with concert promoters to keep tickets low and dancing possible. The band has angered its original fans by moving beyond British punk orthodoxy to embrace American musics like rap, funk and rockabilly. The group has tested its white, teen-aged fans by showcasing hardcore

reggae and rap artists as opening acts. Moreover, the Clash have kept a raw, unfinished element in their playing that keeps their music unpredictable and grating.

Fighting on so many fronts has made the Clash heroes to those who still believe rock 'n' roll should be more than mere entertainment. In the annual *Village Voice* poll, more than 100 of America's leading critics voted the Clash's "London Calling" and "Sandinista!" the best albums of 1980 and 1981 respectively.

The new Clash album, "Combat Rock" (Epic), has already cracked the *Billboard* top 20 without the benefit of much radio play. Their summer tour of America—which passed over Baltimore and Washington when they couldn't find the right theater—played to enthusiastic sell-outs.

Still, the fighting has taken its toll on the Clash. "Combat Rock" sounds battle-weary. Their rap and funk numbers sound more like imitations than transformations. The most political songs—"Know Your Rights," "Ghetto Defendant" and "Atom Tan"—take the easy way out into propaganda polemics. The best uptempo songs—"Rock the Casbah" and "Should I Stay or Should I Go?"—sounded tired. The album's most successful songs—"Straight to Hell" and "Inoculated City"—are slow, brooding songs about war casualties.

Refusing to compromise their principles, the Clash have sacrificed financial rewards and the attendant comforts. The exhausting regimen and trying loneliness of the small-time rock tour are captured as never before in Pennie Smith's recent photo book, "The Clash: Before & After" (Little, Brown).

Ms. Smith, who took the archetypal cover photos for "London Calling" and "Sandinista!," has created a revealing photo biography that ranks

with Daniel Kramer's "Bob Dylan" and Alfred Wertheimer's "Elvis '56: In the Beginning." Their faces haunted by commitment and frustration, the four members of the Clash are surrounded by the sterile airports, grubby dressing rooms and ghostly auto junkyards of America.

Early this year, all the strain and frustration seemed to be catching up with the band. Topper Headon was arrested for heroin possession. Just before a spring British tour, Joe Strummer went AWOL. Without notice, he jumped on a train and wound up in Paris to relive his old beatnik life—singing on streetcorners and eating off his tips. Mr. Jones and Mr. Simonon feared the band was splitting up.

Mr. Strummer returned a month later—after the British tour had been mostly wiped out. Just after he returned, Mr. Headon quit the band in frustration that the constant politicizing meant constant financial worries. The Clash's original drummer, Terry Chimes (satirically nicknamed Tory Crimes on the first album), was conscripted to take his place.

In the wake of these trials, Tuesday's concert was an inspiring triumph. Pier 84 is an asphalt parking lot jutting out into the Hudson River. Docked next door were a showboat—replete with paddle wheel and gingerbread ornamentation—and a U.S. Navy aircraft carrier—bristling with radar and fighter jets. Against this backdrop, the Clash played hard to prove that entertainers could be a match for military might.

As slides of soldiers flashed over their heads, the band played a big funk beat that had the crowd dancing atop rickety folding chairs. They turned spotlights on the crowd, which sang along: "It's up to you not to heed the call-up. I don't wanna die. It's up to you not to heed the call-up. I don't wanna kill."