

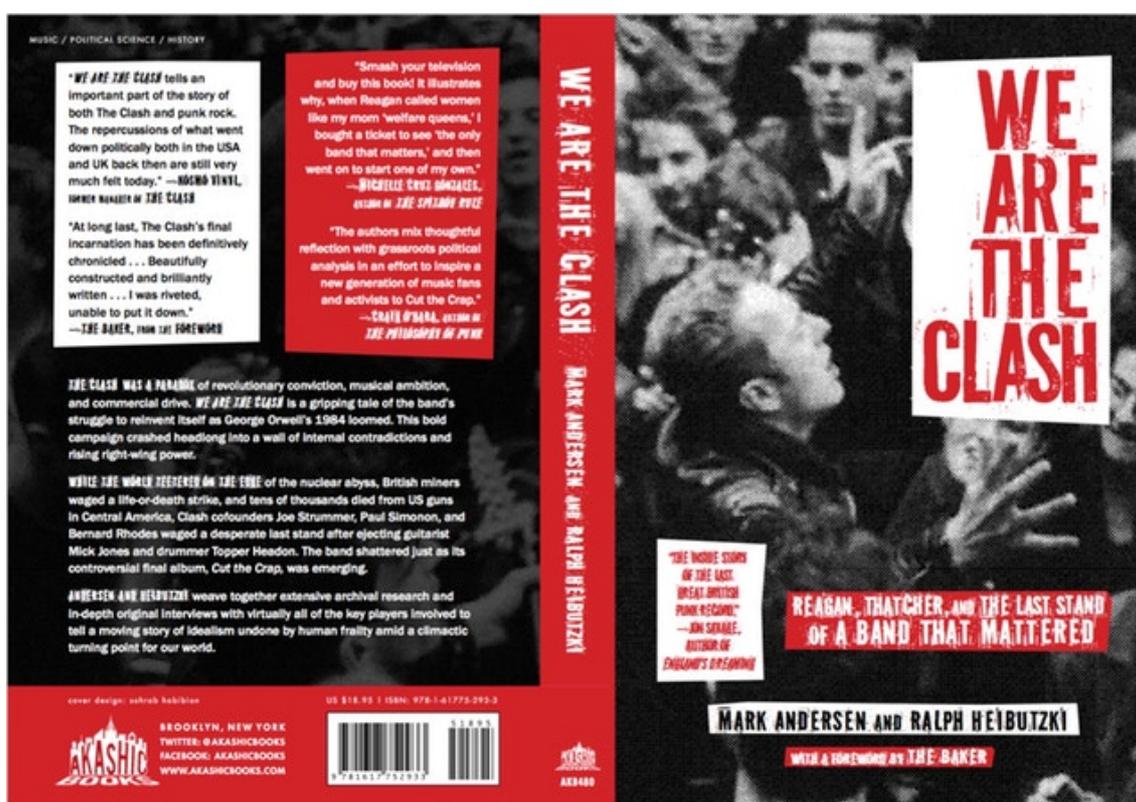
# Vol. 1 Brooklyn

BOOKS , FEATURED , INTERVIEWS , MUSIC

## INSIDE “WE ARE THE CLASH”

AUGUST 22, 2018

by TOBIAS CARROLL



As you might expect from its title, Mark Andersen and Ralph Heibutzki's new book [\*We Are the Clash\*](#) delves into the history of a certain beloved punk band—but it's the period that they focus on that might surprise some readers. Specifically, Andersen and Heibutzki explore the complex dynamics of the band's final lineup, the music that they made, and how this uneasily juxtaposed with the rise of reactionary politics. Between this and the upcoming release of [a new Joe Strummer box set](#), it's the perfect time to think about The Clash's legacy and their music's connection to contemporary politics. I talked with Andersen and Heibutzki about their book, great live recordings, and the history of final Clash album *Cut the Crap*.

Throughout *We Are the Clash*, there's an implicit juxtaposition between the right-wing politics of Margaret Thatcher and contemporary moments like Brexit and the Trump presidency. What – if any – lessons do you think contemporary readers can learn about the role of protest music in combatting reactionary politics?

Ralph Heibutzki: There's a reason why Phil Ochs called his first album, *All The News That's Fit To Sing*, or why Chumbwamba dedicated an entire release to English rebel ballads going back to 1381 – it's because the issues that people wrestled with then (economic inequity, lack of healthcare, repressive societies, rising rents, social conformity, etc.) are the ones that they're struggling with today.

One of the key points that Mark and I make in *We Are The Clash* is that, to a great extent, we're still laboring in the shadow of the world that Reagan and Thatcher wrought – in particular, their aggressive monetarism, and allegiance to the free market as the ultimate arbiter of what's socially acceptable, a point that Democratic neoliberals capitalized on during the 1990s (a tendency that jump-started the scornful term, "Republicrats").

As an art form, popular music is uniquely positioned to raise its voice against such noxious social ills, and rally people in ways that once seemed the whole domain of the printed word. A three-minute song can boil down a social issue – or a cause – to the bare bones basics, while forcing listeners to think about it in a new light (depending, obviously, on how adept the lyricist happens to be), and then, act on the information they've heard. (Emotion plays a big part, too, since music is a great vehicle for expressing feelings.)

Classic examples include songs like "John Sinclair" (John Lennon), or "Free Nelson Mandela" (The Special AKA), which are widely credited – in both of those instances – with rallying public support for the MC5's ex-manager, and South African revolutionary leader, respectively, who had been imprisoned in large part for who they were, and what they represented.

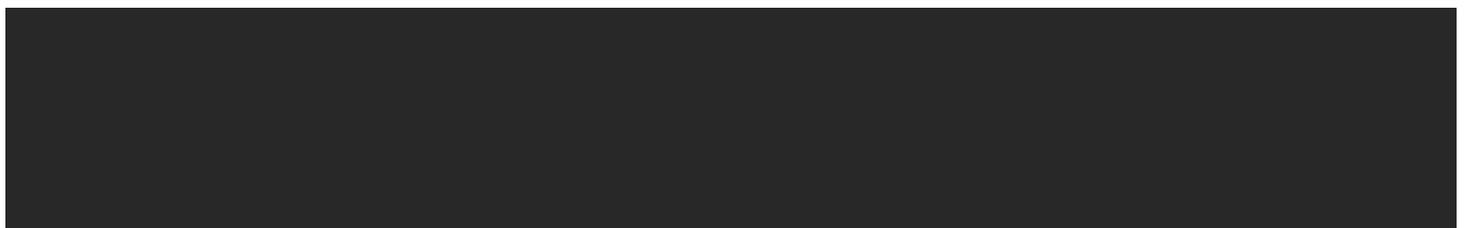
In some cases, the connection gets even more explicit and highly charged, such as in Chile, where Victor Jara – often referred to as his country's Bob Dylan – used his popularity and musical abilities to campaign for Salvador Allende's newly elected government, and then, rise to its defense, as the sharks in the military junta – and their shadowy corporate backers – increasingly threatened its viability (aided and abetted by the US government's vow to "make the economy scream").

The Clash Mark II, as the post-Jones lineup is commonly known, certainly positioned itself along similar lines – not only in the "back to basics" bent of the busking tour, for example, or the return to a stripped-down punk sound in those initial US/UK/Euro tours – but also in terms of the causes they backed, such as the miner's strike benefits, or the summer 1984 Italian mini-tour, in which they played at festivals organized by that country's Communist Party.

As a guitarist/songwriter, I feel strongly that such responses are needed, more than ever, in today's climate. If all we did was "talk shop" and live largely in a bubble, detached from the every day experiences that people are struggling against – such as the furor aroused by the detaining/deportation of children – then not much of significance has happened, right?

Music has a role to play in soundtracking and stopping the reactionaries in their tracks, and the Clash will always stand as a signpost in that direction.

Mark Andersen: Music is a somewhat limited tool in terms of political activism, but it can have an extraordinarily powerful impact on individual listeners, who then can impact politics at large. For me, music—and especially that of The Clash—was the essential catalyst for my activism, and remains a key source of inspiration and motivation. The broader lesson is that music is a very powerful tool and any artist needs to accept the social responsibility that goes along with wielding such power. At its best, music can not only educate and motivate us, it can help us connect to a deep source of commitment and belief, the idea that a better world is possible and that we each have an important role to play in that transformation.





This video is private



### How did the two of you come up with the idea to collaborate on this book?

Andersen: I had been working on the initial deep research for the book, and learned about Ralph and his past work on The Clash, as well as his aim to do a book that seemed somewhat parallel to mine. Having collaborated successfully with Mark Jenkins on my first book, *Dance Of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*, I thought this approach might work again, so I decided to seek him out and pop the question, if you will. He was a bit skeptical at first, but, in the end, we both really feel that this approach did work for *We Are The Clash*, that together we made a better book than either of us could have on our own.

Heibutzki: Essentially, in this case, it started with Mark, who approached me in mid- or late 2012, I believe, who'd had the idea for the book in his head, and wanted my help with contact info for some of the key players. By this point, I'd been working on my own vision of a Clash book, since 1989 – and that autumn, I made the first of several pilgrimages (so to speak) to London, to start tracking down some of these folks myself, including the three “replacement” members (guitarists Nick Sheppard, and Vince White, plus drummer Peter Howard).

However, in spite of all the work I'd put in, I couldn't get my own project off the ground – it took almost two years to get an agent to take it on, who ended up dropping me when the long-hoped-for deal didn't materialize. (This is one of the first cautionary tales you learn: be wary about a relationship that's all you're coining it in for somebody else, because unless there's a lot of pennies falling from Heaven, you'll find yourself in that “cruel and shallow money trench,” as Hunter S. Thompson allegedly called the music business.)

I was skeptical when Mark approached, because I'd already had a few similar experiences – Can you help with this, or that? – only to find myself stranded at the altar without so much as a thank you or a credit, once I'd provided what the requester wanted.

That's when Mark came back, and asked – to my surprise – how I might feel about working together. After a few phone calls, we realized that we were much better off combining our respective visions, than we might manage, if left to our own separate devices. *We Are The Clash* is the result.

### What was the collaborative process for the book like?

Heibutzki: As far as the writing went, Mark would put down his bits first, then I'd follow and add mine where it seemed to make sense, or shed light on a certain area, based on the various interviews we'd done, and tidbits we'd unearthed.

While this was going on, I was also spending a lot of time hunting online for additional source material that could either be used for the book, as well as its accompanying website (which we hope to continually refresh, as our time allows). In some instances, these were photos, in others, obscure or rarely-seen/quoted live reviews and interviews that showed this edition of the band in a better light than, say, the mainstream rock media did (which is not much different than the “regular” mainstream media, is it?).

Once we'd gotten a particular chapter down, Mark would send it off to me – and also, Mark Jenkins, his co-author on the Washington, D.C. punk history, *Dance Of Days* – for further comment, feedback, and review, which would then go back for more revision, depending on the particular point raised.

In this phase, I often acted like the continuity person on a movie – “Have we addressed this point, or have we covered that? Are we following up this thread raised in Chapter Four?”, and so on – which, at times, got more and more intense, especially as we moved got to the end of our work last summer.

Much like *The Only Band That Matters*, we all challenged one another, while keeping one result uppermost in mind: ensuring the best, most complete book possible, which we feel has happened.

Andersen: We pooled all our resources, including Ralph's extensive clipping files and substantial set of interviews done stretching from the 1990s, with me doing perhaps a hundred hours of new interviews and adding my own smaller set of clippings to the pile. After absorbing all of that—including Ralph's trailblazing articles on The Clash Mark II from the 1990s—I wrote the first draft of the each chapter of the book, which then went to Ralph for his input, then back to me, to be sent to Johnny Temple of Akashic, who was our editor. My dear friend and co-author of *Dance of Days*, Mark Jenkins, did a thorough edit, with aim to condense the text and streamline the narrative. Then Ralph and I did one last run through, being sure to inspect and adjust the final edits done by Akashic in preparation for publication. It was a sometimes unwieldy process and it took some time, but I think the results prove that this was the best way to proceed, as our aim was to make a book truly worthy of The Clash, an account that would stand the test of time, really touch, educate and even inspire our readers.

### **Was there anything that you learned about this version of The Clash that ended up surprising you?**

Andersen: To me, the utter commitment of the three newest members really shone through. Despite the extraordinary challenges they faced, they never gave up, kept their own spirits up and creative fires burning, even when it was all falling apart, and they were being essentially betrayed by both Strummer and Rhodes in some very real sense. They deserve a lot more respect than they have been given, and surely should not be written out of history.

Heibutzki: Two things, actually: first, while the mainstream rock press preoccupied itself with the is-it-or-isn't-the-Clash-debate, my online sourcing made clear that not everybody bought into that narrative.

In particular, the college press did a stellar job of covering the spring '84 US tour, and often seemed to have a much better handle on what Strummer and company were trying to do, than their more jaded (read: older) counterparts at the likes of *CREEM* and *Rolling Stone*. Though it's taken time for these nuggets to surface – like light from a distant star – even the most casual scan convinced me that the seeds for a reappraisal of this period in Clash history were being sown even then.

The other surprise is that, no matter how difficult things got, Vince, Nick and Pete hung in till the bitter end, hoping that the situation might somehow work out, because they believed so much in its potential, as did many of those who worked with them, or for them. As The Baker notes in his forward, “Jewels From The Wreckage,” the new band could have succeeded, “had they been just left alone, to do what musicians do naturally: to gel together, to create an alchemy of their own.” High praise, indeed, coming from someone who'd been there since the beginning, in '76, isn't it (and left in '83, after he felt the atmosphere taking a negative turn)?

(Conversely, the fact that manager/supremo Bernard Rhodes has never disowned *Cut The Crap* should not surprise anyone that's really clued in to this story – what's often forgotten is that he's never seen himself solely as a bean counter, but a radical who wanted to shake things up through the fist-clenching power of rock 'n' roll – anything less feels like a waste of time to him, as many of the players told us.)



While you've done an impressive job of making the case for the musical merits of the final lineup of The Clash, you're also honest about the flaws of *Cut the Crap*. Are there any recordings or live clips that you feel better illustrate the strengths of this version of the band?

Andersen: There are lots of great Clash II bootlegs pretty easily findable on the internet. For starters—and to observe the development of the band—I'd suggest the 1983 Lucky Eight demos (bootlegged as "Out Of Control"), Glasgow 2/10/84 (bootlegged as "Patriots of the Wasteland"), Stockholm 2/17/84 (bootlegged as "Five Alive"), Edinburgh 3/3/84, Fort Lauderdale 3/31/84, Seattle 5/30/84, Genoa 9/11/84, the first night of the Miners Strike benefits (12/6/84), Ripon-St. John's College show 5/9/85, Gateshead Station Pub 5/11/85, Coasters 5/14/85, the last three all from the amazing busking tour. There really is a wealth of amazing live shows—with variable sound quality, as these are bootlegs from 30+ years ago—out there, thanks to the immense, fervent and generous Clash fan network. These tapes are the foundation of our book, and special thanks has to go to those who recorded and shared them.

Heibutzki: As someone who's collected bootleg LPs and live tapes/CDs since 1984-ish, I can only answer an emphatic: yes, yes, and yes. If you've played music for any length of time, or simply enjoyed it for its own sake, it doesn't take long to realize that, while official releases are nice, they often scratch only the barest sonic surface of what a band can actually do.

This is especially true of the Clash II era, since *Cut The Crap* itself didn't emerge until two years after Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon announced the "course correction" after Mick's sacking. By that point, much of the material had changed over the course of those 120-odd live shows this edition of the band played, which makes it imperative for any committed fan to hunt down the more representative nights.

Studio-wise, there's little beyond the 11/83 demo recorded at the band's Lucky Eight studio – coming a month before Vince White joined, and an absolutely essential document of how the initial songs ("Are You Ready For War") were shaping

up, as well as better-realized versions of the unreleased material (“In The Pouring Rain”’s funkier-sounding workup, for instance), plus some fast ‘n’ furious unheard nuggets (like “National Powder”).

My own personal picks would include Stockholm (2/17/84), because the resulting *Five Alive* bootleg marked the first time I’ve ever heard the Clash II lineup that way. Other Euro ‘84 shows that knock me out include Glasgow (Barrowlands), 2/10/84; Colston Hall, Bristol (2/13/84: yes, low volume, but crank it up on Audacity, and it sounds just fine); Drammen, Norway, 2/16/84; Milan, Italy, 2/27-28/84, and Royal Court Theatre, Liverpool, UK (3/5/84). All offer fine, representative snapshots of what the new band did live.

For the US ‘84 tour, if you’re a newbie, I’d skip over the January/February ‘84 California tour – which offers such interesting oddities as Paul Simonon singing “Police On My Back,” for example – but also showcases a band that, in all honesty, was still finding its feet. Circle back once you’ve digested the better-sounding (and played) tapes first.

My own favorites include some of the ones mentioned in our book, including Fort Lauderdale, FL (3/31/84); Hofstra University (4/14/84); Veterans Memorial Stadium, Columbus, OH, 5/9/84 (show and soundcheck); Willamette University, Salem, OR, 5/29/84; and the Paramount Theater, Seattle, WA (5/30/84), from which the slowed-down, haunting version of “Pouring Rain” was taken, and ended up on the bootleg R&B *Shakedown* EPs.

Once you’ve done that work, dig through the one-offs – the Italian mini-tour of September ‘84 offers unique versions that you won’t hear elsewhere (as exemplified by the six-minute “London Calling,” for instance, where the band struts its stuff first, before Joe finally gets around to singing the entire song). Ditto for the Miners’ Benefit shows (12/6-7/84), which open with a blazing, howling version of “One More Time,” and the last two shows that have surfaced (Roskilde Festival, 6/29/85, and Rockscene Festival, 7/13/85), where the funk and dub elements are back in full force, yet the band sounds fully in command of the material (even if it’s largely a greatest hits package).

Similarly, the busking shows are often rough ‘n’ ready-sounding, with those acoustic guitars often swamped by the roar of the crowd – but, honestly, if you haven’t heard them, you’ll have no idea of what that whole interlude was about (getting the band back into the real world, while getting them closer to the fans). Out of the tapes that have surfaced, the *Back To Basics* and *Friday Night Saturday Morning* CD/LP boots offer the best performance and sound quality.

I should also add that some of my deep, deep, deep cut-type favorites suffer from poor or downright ropey sound quality – but, again, document a night, warts and all, where the taper might be fiddling with his/her equipment, as the band keeps blazing away.

Examples of this phenomenon include Ulster (3/12/84) and Dublin, SFX Hall (3/13-14/84) – where everything/s played at a double-time clip, that you can just about make out above the fuzziness of the tape – plus the Expo, Portland, ME (4/12/84), and St. Paul Civic Center, St. Paul, MN (5/15/84), one of the grungiest tapes I’ve heard in my life...but where else will you hear “Junco Partner,” belted out with the will-it-or-won’t-it-fall-apart quality so often attributed to the Rolling Stones, or Peter Howard’s clattering percussive drive on “Straight To Hell”, or some of Joe’s finest onstage rants (“Yeah, just pull that bit of rubber back and forth every 30 seconds for the next 30 years – how’s that supposed to make you feel?”).

Video-wise, there’s not a lot, because Bernard Rhodes apparently didn’t allow anybody to do much filming, though it’s worth hunting down the Canadian and Italian TV interview clips (from late winter/early spring ‘84) that have surfaced, if only to see how the boys interact with each other.

There’s also a bootleg video of the Roskilde show, which gives new context to Kosmo’s infamous mid-gig tirade against folks allegedly filming it without permission. Seeing him do that is a totally different experience than hearing it on a tape, particularly for the band’s delivery of the material (even if it’s largely just a greatest hits package).

Suffice to say, there’s a wealth of stuff awaiting the eager deep diver.

**Did the process of researching and writing this book make you rethink Joe Strummer’s post-Clash work? (Or, for that matter, Mick Jones’s post-Clash work?)**

Andersen: I don’t think that it changed my attitude towards the later work of either Strummer or Jones. I was not a big fan of Big Audio Dynamite, thought they surely had some good songs—especially “Bottom Line” which, in a way, is really the last Strummer/Jones Clash song—and achieved a lot of success. I do respect that Jones didn’t really try to re-do The Clash, but attempted always to push forward, at least in a musical sense... but most of it doesn’t move me. Strummer’s early post-Clash work is generally pretty disappointing—especially *Earthquake Weather*—but his later work with the Mescaleros shines with a familiar fire, even if it mostly doesn’t sound much like The Clash. He really did turn a corner musically in the late 90s and really went out on a high note, thank goodness.

Heibutzki: For myself, not so much – I suspect Mark will differ on this. I personally didn’t see the point of a direct comparison, if only because their approaches were so different, and the times were different, as well, although Mick fared somewhat better, since a) being the more accomplished musician, he stood a better chance of delivering what people wanted to hear (a decision, perhaps, borne out by the emphasis on sampling and dance beat hooks that propelled those early hits, like “E=MC<sup>2</sup>”), and b) proved himself the more astute arranger/producer.

In contrast, Joe struggled, because he chose to launch his solo career when interest in the Clash seemed at its lowest point – though, ironically, not before making his first solo album, *Earthquake Weather*, in the same sort of detached manner as *Cut The Crap* (with the whole band played the songs collectively, only to have Joe issue his instructions for the final mix, and disappear, until the engineer and the band completed it).

As Nick Sheppard has observed, Joe needed a good collaborator to bring out his better qualities, since he often got lost in the studio – which he found with his last band, The Mescaleros, though I like his one-offs during this era, too (notably, the *Walker* and *Permanent Record* soundtracks – get the outtakes boot CD of the latter, for instance, to hear what didn’t make it on the album – the results will surprise you).

*Earthquake Weather* has a pretty good EP struggling to get out (I dig “Gangsterville,” “King Of The Bayou,” “Island Hopping,” “Leopardskin Limousines,” “Shouting Street”), but would have benefited from including some of the stronger B-sides (notably, “Cholo Vest” and his version of “Viva La Cinsa Brigada”). My feeling is that, at this time, Joe felt like he’d given the people what they wanted, but some of the ingredients were either watered down, or missing. (Compare the garbled lyrics on lesser songs like “Sikorsky Parts,” for example, to what Joe did in his Clash-era prime – and you can see why folks felt let down by it).

Similarly, in Mick’s case, once you get beyond those initial BAD hits, you’ll find similar one-offs – I’ve also loved “London Town,” which is very Kinks-like, for instance – that will put a smile on your face, and make you realize how much that Clash DNA informed his later work, even if the guitar often got washed out in the mix (though less so, live, as I can attest, where he played a lot more guitar, as if he didn’t trust the limitations he imposed on himself in the studio).

As the say in the UK: it’s six of one, half a dozen of the other. You pays your money and takes your choice. That’s why mixtapes were so crucial back then.

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