BY FRANCISCO GOLDMAN

The Clash

Making militant rock'n'roll for the urban dweller

BY 1977 THE Clash, along with the Sex Pistols, had become the pivotal band in the now-legendary British pure-punk explosion. You can get a sense of what it all looked like way back then in 1977, of what a really local scene it was, from a movie called *Rude Boy*. The movie was about a young, often morose, bored British punk whose intense and unremonstrative hero worship of the Clash is rewarded when they decide to give him a lift up and hire him as a roadie on a tour of clubs in industrial Britain. The Clash came across as daringly inept musicians who romped about tiny stages, usually playing before crowds no larger than the numbers you'd expect at any high school dance. With Mick Jones and Joe Strummer on guitar, Paul Simonon on bass, and Topper Headon on drums, they sang and played passionately, crudely, raucously to and about the singularly claustrophobic world they were from. The band's roots were in the biracial slums of Brixton.

Paul Simonon named the band the Clash because it was the word he saw most in the newspapers. Joe Strummer's pounding lyrics, when you could understand them, articulated a kind of uncompromising code of honor for urban youth:

In 1977 there's knives in West Eleven;
Ain't so lucky to be rich.
Sten guns in Knightsbridge,
Danger, stranger,
You better paint your face.
No Elvis, Beatles, or the Rolling Stones in 1977.
Sod the Jubilee!
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"You're my guitar hero!" shouted out lead guitarist Mick Jones in "Complete Control," celebrating the three-chord ethical primitivism of gang-style garage bands. The bands would be the heroes as long as they told the Truth, didn't sell out, didn't turn out to be flashy and egotistical like the expensive poodle-rock bands. Being in a band like the Clash came to mean living out a public morality play. The titles of Clash songs paraded their zeal and singular bent: "Clash City Rockers," "Last Gang in Town," "Garageland," "All the Young Punks (New Boots and Contracts)," "English Civil War," "Hate & War," "Police & Thieves," "White Riot," "Guns on the Roof," "Tommy Gun."... To their fans, being a part of it all was like getting to go off with Peter Pan to a never-never land where the stakes were as high as those faced by real guerrilla fighters.

In a scene that shows how life would be if it were a Clash song, the roadie sits in a bar with Joe and dreams aloud of wealth, a country mansion, and limousines.

And Joe, looking up from his pint, explains in a passionate whisper that "there's nothing, nothing at the end of that road. Believe me. I've given it a lot of thought, and there's nothing. You get your country house and in the end...in the end, your wife comes and blows you away with a shotgun." Joe Strummer has a rasping, confiding voice and the charismatic sleaze and integrity of a Graham Greene whiskey priest.

The Clash's first record album released in the United States took that fevered, boyish naiveté and defiant certitude and immortalized it in great rock 'n' roll that will always sound like the way you felt when you were sixteen and stealing your first car or whatever you did to unwind while understanding in your gut that the world did not offer a dazzling array of choices: you were for or against, wholeheartedly or not. A whole generation of young urban manic-depressives could hardly get out of bed in the morning unless they riveted their hangovers to that album's absolutely fierce, angry, joyous, intelligent beat. The pressure of growing up in the slums of the Welfare Island had become stunningly universal.

Career opportunities,
The ones that never knock;
Every job they offer you
Is to keep you out the dock.
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Everybody's doin' just what they're told to,
Nobody wants to go to jail.
White riot, I wanna riot...
A riot of me own!
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Up and down the Westway,
In and out of lights.
What a great traffic system—
It's so bright.
I can't think of a better way to spend the night
Than speeding around underneath the yellow lights.
But now I'm in the subway looking for a flat;
This one leads to this block; this one leads to that.
The wind howls through the empty

AS if seeking some rock equivalent to the imaginary moral stomping grounds of Graham Greene-land, the Clash populated their international stew with rebel dreamers.

PHOTOGRAPH • DAVID BAILEY

The Clash have finally set themselves free of punk's trivial orthodoxies.

blocks looking for a home,
But I run through the empty stone
because I'm all alone.
London's burning with boredom now.
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The album was one of the few classics of the late Seventies, and it created awesome expectations. To this day, four years later, when the interviewer in *Musician* observes how many people wish the Clash would turn back to their "White Riot" days, Mick Jones rails, "That's all they bloody go on about!"

On *Give 'Em Enough Rope,* the second Clash album, they packed the three-chord structure with as much energy, weight, and tension as it could bear. It was terrific but sounded as if it were being played in the next room; it sounded a bit overcrowded. The impression was that of an agile rhinoceros rolling over and over in a fraying net: it was going to break. The Clash verged on setting themselves free of punk's increasingly trivial orthodoxies.

One of the most effective moments on that album was one of the quietest. In "Stay Free," Jones celebrated, with simplicity and depth, a teenage friendship:

"We met when we were at school/Never took no shit from no one, we were fools."

The song recounted how they were both thrown out of school. One practiced his guitar daily in his room; the other, down in the crowd, planned his next move and got busted and went to jail. The narrator sang of not being able to write to his friend; of how, when his friend got out, they'd go out on the town and burn it fucking down. And then:

And I'll never forget the feeling I got
when I heard that you were home.
And I'll never forget the smile on my
face 'cause I knew where you would
be.
And if you're in the crowd tonight
have a drink on me.
Go easy, step lightly, stay free.
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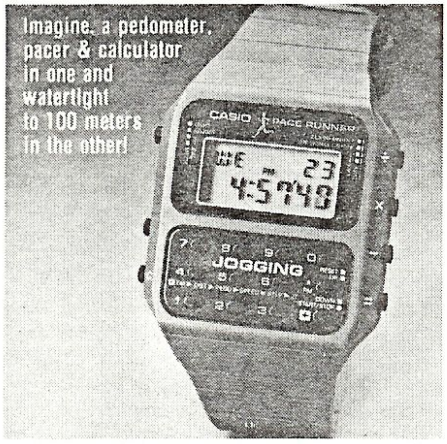

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London Calling was the next Clash release, a double album. Devising a musical hall of mirrors in which to study and amplify every aspect of their evolving profile, the Clash took the themes of those first two albums and haughtily, joyously set out to prove that the band was larger than three-chord punk and that to the band, punk was never just amphetamine music for angry young men who couldn't play very well. Like a shape changer, Joe Strummer's voice singing his familiar lyrics now turned up embodied in reggae, rockabilly, jumped-up mariachi—you name it, it was all there. The Clash had become rock 'n' roll eclectics. What bound it all together and made it the work of a rock band that is a cut above the rest was the commitment to their beloved notion of themselves, which hadn't waned one bit. The band's vitality was undeniable. Joe Strummer's lyrics had a gritty, cantankerous appeal. Sometimes he sounded like Damon Runyon, sometimes like a caveman W. H. Auden.

Their latest album, a three-record set released last spring, was entitled *Sandinista!* It was a beautiful, sprawling, often inaccessible album. With a militant beat throughout, even when dreamy and lyrical, there was something ceremonial about it. It was as if the gang of rebel boys who left home in 1977 had returned home to Brixton, having seen the world and having discovered that it was all a lot like Brixton, only more colorful and strange. *Sandinista!* was even more eclectic than *London Calling.* There were reggae and reggae-dub, a rap song, a disco number called "Ivan Meets G.I. Joe," and a Beach Boy–ish number, "Charlie Don't Surf (And We Think He Should)," that tried to get inside the perplexing image in *Apocalypse Now* of GI's surfing after having demolished a Vietnamese village. As if seeking some rock 'n' roll equivalent to the imaginary moral stomping grounds of the famed Graham Greene–land, the Clash populated their international stew with rebel dreamers and love-sick soldier-poets.

Said Mick Jones of this record in *Musician:* "We decided that on this one we wouldn't do anything that didn't mean anything as far as the lyrics were concerned. It was great because there was a book of them by the end of it. It was really something to look at and read."

Throughout *Sandinista!* the music and the lyrics moved from the universal to the particular and back. Sometimes they were just stunning, as in "The Call Up," an anti-draft song that was proceeding almost drearily (I don't wanna die et cetera) until you were hit with the yearning romanticism of the following lines:

There is a rose that I want to live for.
Although God knows I may not have met her,
There is a dance and I should be with her.

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"The Street Parade" began as an attractively sleazy-sounding song about heartbreak and surviving it:

I'll take my broken heart
And take it home in parts
But I will never fade...
Though I will disappear...
Into the street parade.

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And then there was this almost ghostly revival of tempo and "I was in this place/By the First Church of the City/I saw tears on the face/The face of a visionary." One thing about such quirky, haunting lines coming in the middle of a rather conventional song is that they're fun to sing.

Sandinista! didn't sell as well as was expected. It's not hard to understand how that happened, although it is hard to understand anyone's really hating such a chancy, melodic, interesting record. The Clash sounded as wild, intimate, and improvisational together as the way you picture a happy marriage if you haven't been married. An almost burningly introverted, psychedelic interpretation of reggae in the dub version of "Junco Partner" was sandwiched between a militaristic, lyricless lullaby and real little kids happily singing "Career Opportunities" like a rock 'n' roll version of the Vienna Boys Choir. The side, and the album, ended with a nice, weird little song that had a tropical, sexy languor punctuated by something that sounded like a forlorn, elegiac parrot squawking from the top of a palm tree while below, four *sandinistas* very much resembling a young garage band went rolling through the jungle in their jeep, guns across their laps. The song ended with the sound of a rocket ship taking off.

At Bond's Casino in Times Square, New York City, the Clash introduced a new song. It was called "Radio Clash," and the lyrics had something to do with the Clash yelling to everybody in Moscow, London, New York, yelling to them about...? The main thing is that it sounded a lot like something off the first album. It was a rhythmic blisterer, and skinny Mick Jones abandoned his guitar for most of the number to pound away at a little percussion contraption with so much energy that you expected him to fly apart. Most of the time he stared out over the crowd with slightly dazed eyes, marched in place like an elegantly disheveled toy soldier, or suddenly, looking around like a frightened ghost rabbit, went zipping across the stage. Topper Headon, bare-chested and in a black beret, steamed along melodically on his drums and impressed the hell out of everyone. Paul Simonon, looking more and more like a blue-skinned biker in a Fellini movie that hasn't been made yet, had a way of making

a bass guitar look like a chain saw. Joe Strummer, earnest as Jimmy Olsen, shouted out his lyrics and pounded his knee with his fist or crouched at the end of the stage like a gargoyle, eyes heavily lidded, whispering: "We gotta march a long way/We gotta fight a long time..."

No band was more representative of rock's lastingly adolescent image of glory and heroics. What happened back in 1977 in England saved rock 'n' roll, and the bands that returned the music to that vital and radical moment had to be young and angry, had to be teenage garage bands. Now into their mid-twenties, the Clash, onstage, came on like *Guernica*. They stepped out there, chaotic and whole, confident that they were a statement, a statement they realized many of their listeners would ignore. At Bond's the fans stomped and danced and idolized, and when (during "Washington Bullets") an El Salvadoran was invited by the Clash to come out and make a short speech about U.S. imperialism in his terrorized country, a large part of the crowd booed, threw things, and gave the finger. The Saturday matinee show for teenagers. They knew the words to all the songs, and they stormed the stage. A couple of hundred kids swarmed around the Clash, and the Clash stood pressed back to back and played three more songs. It was by far the best, the liveliest show of the two-week engagement, the sort of show they might have envisioned when they first took up guitar.

FRANCISCO GOLDMAN's *last piece in Esquire was a short story, "The Public Family."*

JAZZ COUNTRY ROCK CLASSICAL

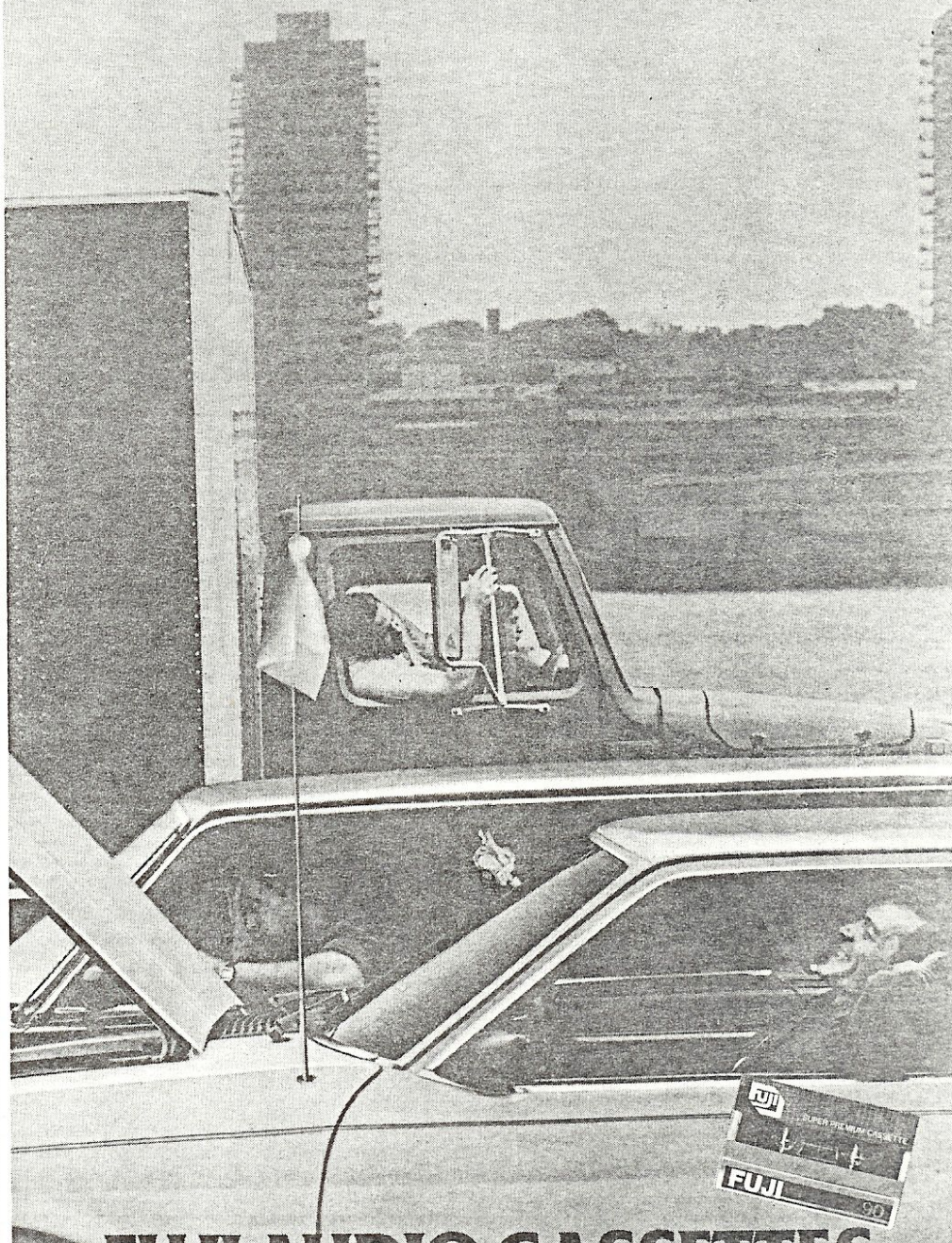
PROGRAM NOTES

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY TO the Beach Boys. It is twenty years since they had their first hit, "Surfin'." Carl Wilson, fourteen at the time, said it took "maybe twelve" minutes to record, with nineteen-year-old Brian Wilson on drums, nineteen-year-old Al Jardine on stand-up bass, and Carl on guitar.

IF YOU'RE LOOKING for old or not so old music memorabilia—publicity glossies, artist bios, posters, displays, ad infinitum—don't go to the record companies because they've probably thrown them all out. Try the Michael Ochs Archives in Venice, California.

ROD STEWART HAS had his feathers ruffled. After Rod spent $300,000 of his own money to record his concert at Wembley Arena, England, a recording that reached ten million when played on the radio, Warner Bros. declined to make the double album Rod had hoped for. Warner offers no explanation but says that Rod's new release—"a fabulous studio album"—includes Dylan's "Just Like a Woman." —W.T.

SOUND SO GOOD IT KEEPS THE BAD AWAY.



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