

CLASH: ANGER ON THE LEFT

By Mikal Gilmore

LONDON

NEVER MIND that shit," says Joe Strummer, the thug-gish-looking lead singer of the Clash, addressing some exultant kids yelling "Happy New Year" at him from the teeming floor of the Lyceum. "You've got your future at stake. Face front! Take it!"

In sleepy London town, during a murky Christmas week, rock & roll is being presented as a war of class and aesthetics. At the crux of that battle is a volcanic series of four Clash concerts—including a benefit for Sid Vicious—coming swift on the heels of the group's second album, *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, which entered the British charts at Number Two. Together with the Sex Pistols, the Clash helped spearhead the punk movement in Britain, along the way

earning a designation as the most intellectual and political New Wave band. When the Pistols disbanded early last year, the rock press and punks alike looked to the Clash as the movement's central symbol and hope.

Yet, beyond the hyperbole and

Jones, Simonon, Strummer, Headon
(from left)

wrangle that helped create their radical myth, the Clash brandish a hearty reputation as a rock & roll band that, like the Rolling Stones or Bruce Springsteen, must be seen to be believed. Certainly no other band communicates kinetic, imperative anger as potently as the Clash. When Nicky "Topper" Headon's single-shot snare report opens "Safe European Home" (a song about Strummer and lead guitarist Mick Jones' ill-fated attempt to rub elbows with Rastafarians in the Jamaicans' backyard), all hell breaks loose, both on the Lyceum stage and floor.

Like the Sex Pistols, the Clash's live sound hinges on a massive, orchestral drum framework that

buffers the blustery guitar work of Jones, who with his tireless two-step knee kicks looks just like a Rockettes' version of Keith Richards. Shards of Mott the Hoople and the Who cut through the tumult, while Strummer's rhythm guitar and Paul Simonon's bass gnash at the beat underneath. And Strummer's vocals sound as dangerous as he looks. Screwing his face up into a broken-tooth yowl, he gleefully bludgeons words, then caresses them with a touching, R&B-inflected passion.

Maybe it's the gestalt of the event, or maybe it's just the sweaty leather-bound mass throbbing around me, but I think it's the most persuasive rock & roll show I've seen since I watched Graham Parker rip the roof off a San Francisco nightclub almost two and a half years ago.

I try to say as much to a reticent Joe Strummer after the show as we stand in a dingy backstage dressing room, which is brimming with a sweltering mix of fans, press and roadies. Strummer, wearing smoky sunglasses and a nut-brown porkpie [Cont. on 22]



Session stars band together

Toto's crafty kids

By Kristine McKenna

LOS ANGELES

NOT ONLY IS craft more important than content," says Toto drummer Jeff Porcaro, "craft is content. I can sit and listen to punk shit and have a kick, but I can't take it seriously. I'm a musician, and as such I can't appreciate guys who just make a bunch of noise. Hendrix was as outrageous as these assholes today, but he was also a great musician. We want to make things happen onstage with music rather than flashy lights and punk shit."

Although keyboardist David Paich writes the lyrics and singer Bobby Kimball fronts the band, Porcaro is clearly the spokesman for Toto, whose hit single "Hold the Line" epitomizes their debut LP's big, dramatic, tightly arranged style of music. Rounded out by Steve Lukather (guitar), David Hungate (bass) and Jeff

Porcaro's younger brother, Steve (keyboards), Toto has developed an uptempo blend of classical melodrama and blue-eyed soul built around infectious hooks and thunderous rhythms.

It sounds like a sure-fire airplay formula, yet the band is truly surprised at how well Toto has done. Their single reached Number Five on most charts, *Toto* has gone platinum and the group has been nominated for a Grammy as New Artist of the Year. "This thing keeps snowballing," says Paich. "The Grammy nomination came as a real surprise. We didn't think we were even eligible because the album came out so late in the year, not to mention that we still feel totally incognito as a band."

That's understandable, since Toto has built a reputation not onstage but in the studio, where they've been some of the industry's busiest session players in the last several years. And most session bands, such as the on-again-off-again Stuff and the Section (the latter has supported [Cont. on 20]

CLASH

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Across the room, Mick Jones and Paul Simonon have taken refuge in a corner, sharing a spliff. "You a Yank?" Jones asks me in a surprisingly delicate, lilting voice. "From 'ollywood? Evil place, innit? All laid back." According to the myth encasing this band, Jones, who writes nearly all of the Clash's music, is the band's real focal nerve, even though the austere Strummer writes the bulk of the lyrics. In the best Keith Richards tradition, the fans see Mick as a sensitive and vulnerable street waif, prone to dissipation as much as to idealism. Indeed, he looks as bemusedly wasted as anyone I've ever met. He's also among the gentler, more considerate people I've ever spent time with.

But the next evening, sitting in the same spot, Mick declines to be interviewed. "Lately, interviews make me feel 'orrible. It seems all I do is spend my time answering everyone's charges—charges that shouldn't have to be answered."

The Clash have been hit recently with a wide volley of charges, ranging from an English rock-press backlash aimed at what the critics see as reckless politics, to very real criminal charges against Headon and Simonon (for shooting valuable racing pigeons) and Jones (for alleged cocaine possession). But probably the most damaging salvo has come from their former manager, Bernard Rhodes, who, after he was fired, accused the band of betraying its punk ideals and slapped them with a potentially crippling lawsuit. Jones, in a recent interview, railed back. "We're still the only ones true to the original aims of punk," he said. "Those other bands should be destroyed."

THE CLASH FORMED as a result of Joe Strummer's frustrations and Mick Jones' rock ideals. Both had been abandoned at early ages by their parents, and while Strummer (the son of a British diplomat) took to singing Woody Guthrie and Chuck Berry songs in London's subways for spare change during his late teens, Jones retreated into reading and playing Mott the Hoople, Dylan, Kinks and Who records. In 1975, he left the art school he was attending and formed London SS, a band that, in its attempt to meld a raving blend of the New York Dolls, the Stooges and Mott, became a leg-

endary forerunner of the English punk scene.

Then, in early 1976, shortly after the Sex Pistols assailed London, Mick Jones ran into Strummer, who had been singing in a pub-circuit R&B band called the 101ers. "I don't like your band," Jones said, "but I like the way you sing." Strummer, anxious to join the punk brigade, cut his hair, quit the 101ers and joined Jones, Simonon (also a member of London SS), guitarist Keith Levine (now a member of Public Image Ltd) and drummer Terry Chimes to form the Clash in June of 1976. Eight months later, under the tutelage of Bernard Rhodes, the Clash signed with CBS Records for a reported \$200,000.

Their first album, *The Clash* (unreleased in America; Epic, the group's label stateside, deems it "too crude"), was archetypal, resplendent punk. While the Sex Pistols proffered a nihilistic image, the Clash took a militant stance that, in an eloquent, gutteral way, vindicated punk's negativism. Harrowed rhythms and coarse vocals propelled a foray of songs aimed at the bleak political realities and social ennui of English life, making social realism—and unbridled disgust—key elements in punk aesthetics.

But even before the first album was released, the punk scene had dealt the Clash some unforeseen blows. The punks, egged on by a hysterical English press, began turning on each other, and drummer Chimes, weary of ducking bottles, spit and the band's politics, quit. Months passed before the group settled on Nicky Headon (also a member of Mick Jones' London SS) as a replacement and returned to performing. By that time, their reputation had swelled to near-messianic proportions.

When it was time for a new album, CBS asked Blue Oyster

Cult producer Sandy Pearlman to check out the Clash's shows. "By a miracle of God," says Pearlman, "they looked like they believed in what they were doing. They were playing for the thrill of affecting their audience's consciousness, both musically and politically. Rock & roll shouldn't be cute and adorable; it should be violent and anarchic. Based on that, I think they're the greatest rock & roll group around." Mick Jones balked at first at the idea of Pearlman as their producer, but Strummer's interest prevailed. It took six months to complete *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, and it was a stormy period for all concerned. ("We knew we had to watch Pearlman," says Nicky Headon. "He gets too good a sound.")

But nowhere near as stormy as the album. *Give 'Em Enough Rope*

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is rock & roll's *State of Siege*—with a dash of *Duck Soup* for comic relief. Instead of reworking the tried themes of bored youth and repressive society, Strummer and Jones tapped some of the deadliest currents around, from creeping fascism at home to Palestinian terrorism. The album surges with visions of civil strife, gunplay, backbiting and lyrics that might've been spirited from the streets of Italy and Iran: "A system built by the sweat of the many/Creates assassins to kill off

Joe Strummer is the Clash's lyric writer.



the few/Take any place and call it a courthouse/This is a place where no judge can stand." And the music—a whirl of typhonic guitars and drums—frames those conflicts grandly.

THE DAY AFTER THE Clash's last Lyceum show, I meet Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon at the Tate Gallery, an art museum. Simonon leads us on a knowledgeable tour of the gallery's treasures until we settle in a dim corner of the downstairs cafe for an interview.

We start by talking about the band's apparent position as de facto leaders of punk. Strummer stares into his muddy tea, uninterested in the idea of conversation, and lets Simonon take the questions. Probably the roughest-looking member of the group, with his skeletal face and disheveled hair, Simonon is disarmingly guileless and amiable. "Just because I'm on stage," he says in rubbery English, "doesn't mean that I'm entitled to a different lifestyle than anyone else. I used to think so. I'd stay up all night, get pissed, party all the time. But you get cut off from the workaday people that way. I like to get up early, paint me flat, practice me bass. I see these geezers going off to work and I feel more like one of them."

But, I note, most of those same people wouldn't accept him. They're incensed and frightened by bands like the Clash.

Strummer stops stirring his tea and glowers around. "Good," he grunts. "I'm pleased."

This seems a fair time to raise the question of the band's recent bout with the British rock press. After *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, some of the band's staunchest defenders shifted gears, saying that the Clash's militancy is little more than a fashionable stance, and that their attitude toward terrorist violence is dangerously ambiguous. "One is never entirely sure just which side [the Clash] is supposed to be taking," wrote Nick Kent in *New Musical Express*. "The Clash use incidents...as fodder for songs without caring."

Strummer squints at me for a moment, his thoughtful mouth hemming his craggy teeth. "We're against fascism and racism," he says. "I figure that goes without saying. I'd like to think that we're subtle; that's what greatness is, innit? I can't stand all these people preaching, like Tom Robinson. He's just too direct."

But that ambiguity can be construed as encouraging violence.

"Our music's violent," says Strummer. "We're not. If anything, songs like 'Guns on the Roof' and 'Last Gang in Town' are supposed to take the piss out of violence. It's just that sometimes you have to put yourself in the place of the guy with the machine

gun. I couldn't go to his extreme, but at the same time it's no good ignoring what he's doing. We sing about the world that affects us. We're not just another wank rock group like Boston or Aerosmith. What fucking shit."

Yet, I ask, is having a record contract with one of the world's biggest companies compatible with radicalism?

"We've got loads of contradictions for you," says Strummer, shaking off his doldrums with a smirk. "We're trying to do something new; we're trying to be the greatest group in the world, and that also means the biggest. At the same time, we're trying to be radical—I mean, we never want to be really respectable—and maybe the two can't coexist, but we'll try. You know what helps us? We're totally suspicious of anyone who comes in contact with us. *Totally*. We aim to keep punk alive."

The conversation turns to the Clash's impending tour of America. "England's becoming claustrophobic for us," says Strummer. "Everything we do is scrutinized. I think touring America could be a new lease on life."

But the American rock scene—and especially radio—seems far removed from the world in flames that the Clash sing about. (While the Clash may top the English charts, they have yet to dent *Billboard's* Top 200. "We admit we aren't likely to get a hit single this time around," says Bruce Harris of Epic's A&R department. "But *Give 'Em Enough Rope* has sold 40,000 copies and that's better than sixty percent of most new acts.") I ask if a failure to win Yankee hearts would set them back.

"Nah," says Strummer. "We've always got here. We haven't been to Europe much, and we haven't been to Japan or Australia, and we want to go behind the iron curtain." He pauses and shrugs his face in a taunt grin. "There are a lot of other places where we could lose our lives."

Those may seem like boastful words, but I doubt that's how Strummer means them. Few bands have fought more battles on more fronts than the Clash, and maybe none with better instincts. Of course, it's doubtful that the American and British underclass—or the teenage middle class for that matter—are any more willing than the music industry to be shaken up as much as the Clash would like.

As producer Sandy Pearlman says: "No one's really very scared of punk, especially the record companies. They've sublimated all the revolutionary tendencies this art is based on. The Clash see the merit in reaching a wider audience, but they also like the idea of grand suicidal gestures. We need more bands like *this* as models for tomorrow's parasites."