



"Everything we've done so far has come to nothing," said a very depressed-sounding Joe Strummer recently. "As far as business is concerned, I've given up trying to be idealistic."

Sour words indeed, from a man of very high ideals. The Clash have had a tough year. *London Calling* finally broke them in America, but back in Europe, a wall of cynical contempt was being erected by people still entrenched in 1976.

Strummer and other people with vision have long since discarded punk ethics, but the Clash recently ran head-on into the legacy of what they and others started four years ago. In Germany, hard-core punks abused them onstage, accusing them of selling out. Strummer refused to back off in the face of a hail of cans and bottles, and finally assaulted a member of the audience with his guitar.

"It was only afterwards that I realised I'd almost gone completely over the top," he said. "I nearly murdered someone, and it made me realise that there must be another way of facing violence... you just can't face violence with violence. It just doesn't work."

Violent Days

In the early days, violence was an integral part of the Clash sound, preached hot and hard in songs like 'White Riot' and 'London's Burning.' Their debut album was open revolt set to music. The Sex Pistols preached chaos for its own sake. The Clash wanted to organise something, in the hope of change for the better.

The politics of revolution continued on *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, especially on tracks like 'Tommy Gun' and 'English Civil War', though by now, the Clash were more aware of the senselessness of violence. But they were still naive, and Sandy Pearlman's heavy metal-type production only served to obscure the band's virtuosity. Over-production is something the Clash have never needed.

London Calling made much more sense. It was the product of four young men who had grown up very fast. Musicians much longer in the tooth have still to reach the kind of maturity evinced on this album. Strummer's world-weary vocals on the title track, and the lucid putdown of pathetic heroics on 'Death Or Glory' were the words of people who had avoided the insular, sheltered life of the average rock musician. The best aspect of Clash music has always been its sincerity; it sounds as if it was made by breathing, thinking, sweating human beings.

No Split

As said earlier, 1980 has been a hard year. The strain of constant touring has brought all members of the band to breaking point, leading to many stories of arguments that have led to fist fights, and rumours that a split was imminent. Strummer denies them emphatically, saying all personal differences have been sorted out. The band has severed ties with Bernard Rhodes, and in the process has learned a lot about how not to get screwed.

"We all had high ideals but they've been well and truly trampled in the mud," says Strummer. "I've still got the same basic values, it's just that I've now learned to temper them with a bit more realism."

As if to firmly knock any bust-up speculation on the head, the Clash have just released their most ambitious work to date; a three-album set going under the title of *Sandinista!*

The title refers to a group of Nicaraguan freedom fighters who successfully overthrew the Somoza regime. They've had numerous problems since the takeover, and the Clash want to draw attention to their struggle. Their

ideals, it seems, are still worn on their sleeves.

The direct reference is made on a track called 'Washington Bullets', a Latin shuffle, complete with marimba backing, which refers not only to Nicaragua, but also to the right-wing coup in Chile and the Cuban revolution, and specifically the role of the CIA in those conflicts.

A Monument

Sandinista! is a sprawling, monumental work, covering 36 tracks with an overwhelming variety of musical styles. It's been barely 12 months since *London Calling*, but the progress made in that short time is astonishing. The experimental nature of the Clash's work is more evident than ever before.

They refute any claims that they're going soft with the opening track, 'The Magnificent Seven'. Set to a racing beat that's almost disco, with sizzling hi-hats from Topper, it's a catalogue of working class life, from the morning hangover, to clocking in, to bar brawls, to budgies being accidentally sucked up in vacuum cleaners. The common man's dilemmas. They echo Jimmy Pursey's "Whatta we got?" call, and the response is left unsaid.

In contrast, 'Hitsville U.K.' is pure Motown, strongly reminiscent of the Supremes' 'You Can't Hurry Love.' With sweet female voices behind them, The Clash sing of a musical Utopia, where there are no A&R men and the charts are never hyped.

'Ivan Meets G.I. Joe' chronicles cold war tension in hectic, urgent fashion, to the background of computer war games. 'The Leader' is rubbery rockabilly, done much more authentically than such ersatz as perpetrated by the likes of Major Matchbox.

Racists And Rebels

'Something About England' sneers at those who long for the return of the British Empire, who blame immigrants for most of the crime, and who roam the streets in packs, reinforcing their views with violence. 'Rebel Waltz' is a surprisingly gentle song, but the lyrics are desperate, as the rebels dance and sing, awaiting their deaths at the hands of an advancing army, knowing their cause is lost. This is followed with some old-fashioned boogie, a cool, sleek version of Mose Allison's 'Look Here'. Very un-typical Clash and not at all bad. Nice piano, too.

'Somebody Got Murdered' is another anti-violence song, filled with bewilderment at public apathy. Strummer sings:

*I've been very tempted to grab it from the till,
I've been very hungry, but not enough to kill.*

Throughout the album, the vocals are understated, less harsh and strident, more melodic. The fervour is conveyed through the lyrics. The Clash no longer have to shout to be heard.

'Lightning Strikes' and 'Up In Heaven' are songs about New York, where much of *Sandinista!* was recorded. Aspects of the frantic heartbeat of one of the world's most charismatic cities contrast with the tedious, cubbyholed lifestyle of the high-rise apartment. The New York atmosphere is continued in the slower, more reflective 'Corner Soul', questioning the need to carry a gun to stay alive. It's perhaps the loveliest song the Clash have written. A tender, affecting melody and certainly the first time Clash music could be called beautiful.

Crazy People

'Let's Go Crazy' is Latin rock, interspersed with the ravings of one of the many street-

corner loonies who inhabit New York. Such people are merely a symptom of an environment gone mad. The city has clearly had a profound effect on the Clash.

Switching moods again, they dish up a slice of old-time gospel with 'The Sound Of Sinners'. It's almost sincere, until you hear the preacher at the end calling for big bucks in the collection plate, at which point the tongue goes firmly into the cheek.

'Police On My Back' is more traditional Clash, an all-stops-out, raucous rocker, written by Eddie Grant. Actually, this would have made a better single than the sombre 'The Call Up'. For reasons only they know they've done remakes of 'Guns Of Brixton' and 'Career Opportunities', both sung by children. Maybe it's their way of showing how far they've come since.

Two discs down, still one to go, and the good tracks just keep coming. 'Lose This Skin' is written by someone named T. Dogg, possibly connected with the '60's American duo, Family Dogg. It's a sort of rock 'n roll hoedown, with sawing violins everywhere and vocals by Ellen Foley. Quite a stunner. 'Charlie Don't Surf', of course, borrows its title from the immortal line uttered by Robert Duval in *Apocalypse Now*.

Dread Control

There are eight reggae tracks, three of them written in collaboration with Mike Campbell/ aka Mikey Dread/ aka Dread At The Controls. He was also largely responsible for 'Bank Robber', and his influence gives Clash reggae a quality far beyond the token efforts of most other white groups. Especially good are 'Junco Partner', where Jones gets a very creditable Rasta inflection in his vocals, the Burning Spear-like 'One More Time', which is followed by a floor-shaking dub, the slow and sweet 'If Music Could Talk', and 'Living In Fame', featuring Dread on toasting.

So much music, so much variety. Strummer can't have been serious in putting down the Clash's achievements like that. In a year of excellent albums, *Sandinista!* damn near beats the lot. And once again, it's selling at cut price, an example more should follow.

"Every group should only be allowed to become so successful," says Strummer. "Once they've reached a certain level, they've got to cash their chips in."

The Clash's chips are far from down. What a group.

Duncan Campbell

