
Popular Culture

British New Wave

Sandinista!, the new triple album by the Clash, is a political and musical breakthrough unprecedented in rock and roll history. That's quite a claim for any recording artist. It says even more when we remember that a few years ago the Clash were only one of the many angry bands of young men playing loud, fast and abrasive punk rock in the working class districts of Britain.

But the Clash always exhibited militant and articulate progressive tendencies within the punk genre, and their new album is more an example of their spectacular growth than a total surprise. What *is* surprising is that, not only is *Sandinista!* one of the clearest progressive anti-racist and anti-imperialist statements ever put on vinyl, it is also a veritable panorama of cross-cultural references and musical styles.

Having stretched punk to its limits, the Clash left behind the harsh, rough-and-ready minimalism of their "garage band" days to find their own special ground in rock music with the critically acclaimed *London Calling* (CBS, 1979).¹ With *Sandinista!* (CBS, 1980) the Clash have expanded their scope to show that they can master the studio sophistication necessary to successfully incorporate such diverse instruments as harpsichord, bagpipes, vibraphones and steel drums into their developing sound. The band has effectively broken through the boundaries of rock and roll altogether, now deepening their explorations of reggae, and even venturing into the realms of jazz, gospel, folk, and yes, disco. As one reviewer wrote, "The Clash persist in testing themselves musically, and they are now testing their audiences as well; those without the patience or imagination to appreciate the band's metamorphosing style may get left behind by *Sandinista!*."² Indeed, their imaginative experiments with various forms of music indicate new and exciting directions for popular music as a whole.

Nearly reaching the national Top Ten in the record charts in March, this album is a massive exposition of 37 songs and 2½ hours of listening pleasure which has widely received praise from most music critics.³ Unfortunately, the band is in serious financial trouble in spite of their musical success. The primary reason for this is that they have demanded that CBS keep the retail price of the album low (as they did previously with *London Calling*), thus cutting into their own royalties and source of income.

Broad Cultural References. The amazing breadth of this album is revealed on several levels: in the presence of several "hit"-type songs, as well as in conscious references to other media, especially the cinema, in their explorations of jazz music, and in the presence of guest artists who even perform lead vocals in several cases. In this the Clash are still functioning within the rock and roll milieu, but are tending to explore its furthest reaches in the process.

The brilliant cover of Eddy Grant's "Police on my Back" ("What have I done?"), and the strong moral reflection on the senseless brutality of street crime found in "Somebody

got murdered" ("I've been very hungry, but not enough to kill"), show that the Clash can still produce popular rock songs dynamic enough to challenge the rest of the music world to keep up. The album is extremely expansive in its use of other cultural media—incorporating cartoons of certain songs on the lyric sheet, as well as various cinematic references. "Magnificent Seven" starts as a dread elaboration on the ringing of an alarm clock at 7 AM, ready for another boring day of work, continues through a denunciation of advertising, consumerism and meaningless news programs, and concludes with a list of seven political figures and martyrs caught in unlikely situations. Meanwhile, "Charlie don't surf" jabs at the US military intervention in Vietnam with an ironic twist on scenes from "Apocalypse Now."

The incorporation of elements of Afro-American jazz on *Sandinista!* are among the many references to US culture, and are imaginative explorations of a quite different terrain for the Clash.⁴ Their cover of Mose Allison's "Look Here" shifts from a seemingly "throw-away" au capella lead vocal into a biting monologue criticizing apathy and self-indulgent posing with a driving jazz accompaniment. Other jazz-based cuts offer a clear example of the Clash's ability to work expertly within yet another musical form.

Further, by inviting guest musicians, including *young* children, to perform lead vocals, the band is exhibiting a calculated egalitarianism further reflected in some of their lyrics. Ellen Foley and Tymon Dogg (singing his own sensitively conceived "Lose this skin") add a helpful diversity to the album, and the children are not only "cute," but also perform well, and add a conscious element of the subversion of youth. There is something gleefully devious about having "the next generation" (Junior Murvin) singing in "Career Opportunities" about resisting conscription, and in "The Guns of Brixton" such an ominous statement of defiance.

But more importantly, the Clash have fused some of the most innovative popular music of today with some of the most intelligent and challenging political lyrics ever set to music. While in the past their hopeful militance and dedication to progressive ideas have had tendencies toward anarchy, and even a touch of nihilism, the lyrics of *Sandinista!* are a deepening of their more thoughtful progressive instincts. Sad reflections on the failure of historical revolutionary struggles in Spain ("Rebel Waltz") and Chile, as well as articulate calls to put an end to military conscription through resistance are combined with a sophisticated anti-imperialism. And there is even a song dedicated to the ideal of a classless society.

Anti-Militarism and Anti-Imperialism. By far the most moving sequence of songs is found on the fourth side of the album. "The Equaliser" is one of many songs that begin with a somewhat distant and muddled vocal (a reggae/dub effect) that becomes clearer as the message of "equalizing" work relations becomes more articulate. The song goes on to target capitalist relations of exploitation as the dominant source of human suffering today:

Geneva, Wall St., Who makes them so fat?
Well, Well, Me and you, better think about that ...
Till Humanize is equalize—put down the tools.

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Intimating the need for establishing a classless society, "The Equaliser" in effect calls for a general strike to achieve it, and presents a direct lead in to the challenge of "The Call Up" not to go to war.

"The Call Up" is a song that is clearly directed to the Clash's US audience as much as it is to Britain and is almost "pop" in its production. Building melodic verses over fading military chants ("One, two, three, four . . . I love the Marine Corps"), the song intertwines historical references to past wars, a wonderful aside on love, and a subtle statement of fear of nuclear holocaust. The final product is inspirational to say the least. And with "Washington Bullets" the anti-imperialism of the album reveals its full flower.

Mick Jones recently admitted in a radio interview that "Washington Bullets" is "preachy." But he expressed the hope that its message will spur people to do something about the situations that force him to preach. The sadness of the opening lines, and the references to a defeated Chile, give way to shouts and whoops of joy for the revolutionary success in Nicaragua:

As every cell in Chile will tell,
The cry of the tortured men,
Remember Allende, and the days before,
Before the Army came,
Please remember Victor Jara, in the Santiago stadium,
Es verdas—those Washington bullets again . . .

For the first time ever,
When they had a revolution in Nicaragua,
There was no interference from America,
Human rights from Amerika!

Well the people fought the leader,
and up he flew . . .
With no Washington bullets, what else could he do?

Sandanista!

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The melodic accompaniment of "Washington Bullets" (with guitars reminiscent of the Grateful Dead) is a fitting vehicle for such a jubilant and powerful statement of internationalist solidarity.

But though the internationalist spirit of this song clearly targets US imperialism as the main danger to the people of the "thirdworld," two inorganic references to Afghanistan and China⁵ exhibit a somewhat confused attempt to balance their critique of the US with the recognition that all is not well in the socialist camp either.

In spite of the unfortunate fact that the critique of Soviet militarism is effectively "tacked on," the song is otherwise a brilliant anti-imperialist anthem. In this the Clash reflect the concerns and confusion that dominates the popular ideology. A good number of people actually believe the US government's lies building for a new Cold War (and Soviet policy and actions quite often earn the criticism of progressives). Yet, though we must admit that the problems with the Soviet Union and China are very real, we must be very careful not to equate Soviet errors (no matter how tragic) with the brutality of world imperialism.⁶

If the criticisms of the Soviets and Chinese in "Washington Bullets" are somewhat misdirected and inorganic to its strong anti-imperialist theme, the

outrageous pop disco of "Ivan meets G.I. Joe" is a brilliant slash at the arms race and the Cold War. There are no winners in this dance contest—a "dance of the titans," only destruction.

Unfortunately, alongside this critical realism of powerful anti-militarism and the Clash's outstanding solidarity with third world peoples, we also find a clear exposition of the "two superpowers" line. This is due to a muddled understanding of imperialism, which leads them to lump all of their spontaneous concerns together uncritically, without a clearcut sense of priority that could come up with a more correct theoretical/political orientation. (Though popular culture generally should not be judged on its "theoretical/political line," the Clash have brought themselves onto this terrain with their choice of subject matter, and therefore, must be critiqued accordingly.)

Given the relative inability of Britain to play much of a role in shaping world affairs these days, it seems that the Clash's frustrated, "a plague on both your houses" attitude is an expression of their desire for disarmament in general. The major problem with this is that they reduce the complex problems of nuclear proliferation to the simplistic "war between the two superpowers"; and since Britain, itself, and France and Brazil, South Africa and Israel, *ad nauseum*, are all in the nuclear "game," the target *could* be more broadly defined and more clearly distinguished. As a popular critique of nuclear holocaust, targeting the two most aggressively armed protagonists as *examples*, "Ivan meets G.I. Joe" is brilliant. As a capitulation to the "two superpowers" simplicities, it is potentially politically confusing.

Deteriorating Living Conditions. Another aspect of the critical realism of *Sandinista!* is found in the myriad songs that declaim the general deterioration of family life and human relations and existence under advanced capitalism. "Something about England" links this deterioration to racism in an historical perspective on war and British imperialism, while "One more time/One more dub" mourns the poverty and injustice in American ghettos with references to Watts and Montgomery, Alabama.

Perhaps the most important of these critical realist portrayals of misery and capitalist injustice is "Up in heaven (Not only here)," where the Clash build on the following lines from Phil Ochs's folk ballad "United Fruit":

Allianza dollars are spent,
to raise the towering buildings,
for the weary bones of the workers,
to go back in the morning.
To be strong in the morning.⁷

Constructing a sad picture of marital strife, the song also portrays children drifting aimlessly in search of a meaningful life, instead of fear and desolation living in unfit housing. The bitterness and anger are ironically counterposed to an uplifting melodic musical arrangement, in much the same way that reggae musicians protest inhuman conditions in Jamaica.

Revitalization Through Dancing. But though militant progressive politics dominate *Sandinista!*, the album contains a fair share of songs for laughing and dancing, and just plain fun (though none of the songs can be said to totally lack a political slant). From the call to revel in the rhythm and "sledgehammer sound" of "carnival time" in "Let's go

Crazy," to the stoned egomania of "The Sound of the Sinners" (a catchy gospel spoof of revivalist religion), the Clash have clearly developed a strong sense of music as a revitalizing element in popular culture. Even the cartoons of such songs as "Ivan meets G.I. Joe" heighten the light-hearted explorations of relaxation and rejuvenation.

"Hitsville U.K." stands out in this respect because it combines a happy craziness with a sharp critique of the multinational record companies in the United Kingdom. In addition, the lead for "Hitsville U.K." is sung by Ellen Foley, who has been involved with Mick Jones for some time. Unlike most male rock bands who work to reinforce their male bravado with harsher lyrics and sounds as they dig deeper in the mythology of rock and roll sexual stereotypes, and as their audience becomes more jaded; the Clash have been moving to "soften" their sound. Their use of female and child vocalists is one element among many to achieve a more expansive effect.

The Clash and Sexism. While the Clash are clearly moving toward a more progressive and *non-sexist* ground in their gentle treatment of love and women, combined with respect and professional assistance as musicians (see below), they have not embarked on an ambitious *anti-sexist* path to equal their powerful anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist sensibilities. In this their music should be contrasted to recent songs like "Womankind" by the Greg Kihn Band (*RocKIHNroll*, Berserkley, 1981), and the Gang of Four's "Hole in the Wallet," (*Solid Gold*, EMI, 1981), which are clear examples of how male rock bands can consciously and *explicitly* struggle to break down sexist stereotypes of women through the medium of rock itself. On this level, the Clash are clearly lagging behind in their political challenge to sexual relations, which would seem to coincide with the challenge they pose for British and American audiences on the more general political levels of racism and imperialism.

This lag is even more clear when we listen to Ellen Foley's solo album, *Spirit of St. Louis* (Epic/CBS, 1981), on which Mick Jones and Joe Strummer provide musical accompaniment, back-up vocals and a majority of the song credits. Though Foley's album is interesting and innovative on certain levels, it is not a step forward within rock and roll toward the liberation of women. It is rather a well crafted production that explores themes generally remaining within the typical constraints and sex stereotypes of the dominant ideology, quite unlike such avant garde bands as the Raincoats and the Au Pairs.

But at the same time that we are mindful of an evident lack of a feminist consciousness in the outlook of Ellen Foley and the Clash, we must struggle to understand their specific situation within a medium dominated by overtly sexist structures and material. In this context we can see a reflection of the broader popular culture that has yet to embrace feminism as a way of life for the vast majority of women. For though women in general have gained certain *potential* openings in their stereotyped existence; just as often the turmoil in existing sexual relations has led to a male backlash against feminism and women's equality. For most women in the larger popular audience who have generally not experienced the liberating effects of a coherent and non-sectarian feminist consciousness (and who are often defensively "anti-feminist" because of the narrow and even anti-male perspective of the feminists who gain the most media attention), the progressive liberating message of

Holly Near and Meg Christian is generally unknown.

For the broader popular audiences, music that relates directly to their experiences is a tool to help them relax and relate to each other, and prepare for another day of hard and generally boring work. (This is not to say that such an audience could not relate to some of the more "universal" songs of Holly Near, but rather to say that there is generally no functioning avenue for them to discover her work.)

When situating the work of any performer, we must realize the specificity of different sexual *roles* (yet strikingly similar *functions*) for popular singers. The manner in which popular audiences use music, generally means that performers sing *to* men or women or *for* the listener who finds they are unable to express their own feelings. A listener can sing along if s/he finds her/his own feelings expressed. Some listen to try to learn what the opposite sex are thinking and feeling (which can obviously be quite disconcerting to women who hear the crude lyrics some men sing pertaining to women and juvenile caricatures of female stereotypes). Listeners are generally attracted to those singers who express the character traits and feelings they are looking for in a partner.

Therefore, when we see that the Clash seldom sing about women and love, and that when they do it is not in the typical way such subjects are usually addressed in rock, we see that they have rejected the typical sexist structures of rock and roll (which generally reproduce unending variations on the "love" theme), and effectively produce a *non-sexist* music. But again, the absence of explicitly *anti-sexist* lyrics exposes the lag in their political consciousness, and of course a lag in the development of the British popular ideology of which the Clash are a mediated expression.

One way to attempt to describe the relationship of the Clash and their music to social sexual relations is to say that they have essentially broken free of many of the sexist structures of popular music. But they are still without a coherent alternative to the dominant structures, and are thus floating relatively freely, open to both progressive or more traditional ideas depending on the situation, and even maintaining ideas that perpetuate male domination and mindless prattle when it comes to sexual relations. We can only hope that the strong feminist and socialist movements in Britain will have a more immediate affect on the Clash's sexual politics in the future.

We should further raise the issue of what some have called "self-indulgent ramblings" that infiltrate the latter parts of this immense accomplishment. This is particularly evident in the more extended dub versions and on "Mensforth Hill," which is quite reminiscent of "Revolution No. 9" on the Beatles' "white album." But the far reaching political and cultural implications of the album are clearly present in even the "indulgent filler," which is generally quite innovative and obviously an integral part of the process of production. As John Piccarella wrote in his *Rolling Stone* review, the Clash seem to be "over-excited about passing on everything they've learned." ⁸ Piccarella goes on to write that the depth and breadth of *Sandinista!* reflects "a deliberate, diverse, post-masterpiece fragmentation, plus the fusion of whimsy and urgency that going-for-broke aesthetics create." (He is not alone in his laudatory remarks, since the Clash have been the favorites of the American rock press since *London Calling* was released.)

Conclusions. Clearly *Sandinista!* marks a milestone in the development of popular music. The inspiring fusion of consciously political lyrics with imaginative musical arrangements indicates the incredible potential for progressive ideas to challenge the hegemony of the dominant ideology *within* a realm that has for too long been complacent with the lack of vitality inherent in refusing to develop the active and rejuvenating struggle of contradictory values and ideas.

But while the Clash are clearly in the vanguard on the cultural/political front in England and America today, it is still to be seen whether the left can capitalize on openings in the popular ideology that *Sandinista!* represents. For though the album will surely have lasting effects in popular music and culture in general, more immediate are its political effects of targetting US imperialism's war drive abroad, and the draft and deteriorating living conditions at home. Progressives should not remain indifferent to this unique and unprecedented example of revolutionary cultural practice.

"Troublemakers"

If we examine the harmonic and melodic structure of any popular song hit, it will most likely turn out to employ inventions of serious composers centuries ago... watered down beyond recognition, they repeat traditional patterns... of the past. In the long run, however, the parasitic use of inherited work is not sufficient to nourish the industry. However large a stock, you cannot sell out forever without replenishment; hence the need "to make it new," the media's dependence on [writers and performers] capable of innovation, in other words, on potential *troublemakers*.⁹

—Hans Enzensberger

This year's model of the annual low-cost consumer-grab-bag sampler from Warner Brothers Records is a valuable offering of hard to find punk and new wave rock and roll. Though it is a typically uneven collection, *Troublemakers* is one of the better buys for the money.

Urban *angst* is a common theme of these British and US bands who all have released recent new wave albums on Warner Brothers. From the Sex Pistols' "Anarchy in the USA," to Public Image Ltd., some of the tracks are previously unleased material, notably Jonathan Richmond and his Modern Lovers' "I'm Straight" and DEVO's "Social Fools." The most important contributions are by Marianne Faithful, from her *Broken English* album, and by the Gang of Four, whose socialist critiques of consumerism ("Damaged Goods") and of popular love songs ("Anthrax") are from their album *Entertainment!*

Though there are mediocre, slick and derivative performances by equally mediocre bands alongside the new wave "buried treasures," the price is so low that Marianne Faithful's rendering of John Lennon's biting, yet thoughtful, "Working Class Hero" and DEVO's clearest comment yet on the existing social order, are worth it by themselves.

Troublemakers is only available by mail order by sending \$3.00 to: *Troublemakers*, Box 6868, Burbank, CA 91510.

—Neil Eriksen

I am indebted to the Boston editorial board and Paul Costello for their insights and comments in the writing of this review.

¹*Theoretical Review*, No. 18, pp. 24, 26-27.

²Chris Morris, "The Clash: *Sandinista!*," *Ampersand*, April, 1981, p. 11.

³Interestingly enough, *Newsweek* disdained more than passing denunciation. Though Jim Miller, in his February 23, 1981 review, "Riding the New Wave" (p. 77), generally couched his criticisms in musical terms, it is quite clear that *Newsweek's* main concern is the Clash's overt and articulate anti-imperialist politics.

⁴Though the jazz medium contains many important political statements, it is interesting to note how *Sandinista!* presents a musical diversity and explicit political message similar to Archie Shepp's 1972 explorations entitled *Attica Blues* (Impulse!/ABC), which contains the introspective "Blues for Brother George Jackson," as well as the compelling vocals of "Attica Blues," readings by William Kunstler, and a child vocalist.

⁵"n if you can find an Afghan rebel/that the Moscow bullets missed/Ask him what he thinks of voting communist... Ask the Dalai Lama in the hills of Tibet./How many monks did the Chinese get?" When we attempt to analyze these "popular" expressions, we must ask why the Clash are concerned more with the Dalai Lama in Tibet, rather than with the much more significant problem posed for all socialists and communists by Pol Pot in Kampuchea, which does not go unnoticed by the American punk anarchist band, the Dead Kennedys?

⁶See especially Paul Costello, "World Imperialism and Marxist Theory," *TR* No. 9, March-April, 1979; "Afghanistan: Anti-Imperialism and World Revolution," *TR*, No. 17, July-Aug. 1980; "Debate on Afghanistan," *TR*, No. 18, Sept.-Oct., 1980; and "Class Struggles in Poland," *TR*, No. 19, Nov.-Dec., 1980.


⁷Phil Ochs Sings for Broadside, Folkways, 1976.

⁸John Picarella, "The Clash Drop the Big One: Red-hot rock and roll, a joyful noise and politics that live," *Rolling Stone*, March 5, 1981, p. 58.

⁹Hans Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, 1974, Seabury Press, pp. 13 and 14, emphasis added.

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