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The Further Adventures of

RECORD HUNTER

THE CLASH

The First
12 Months

THE SOUL MEN
STAX

**CHRIS
ISAAK's**
Magnificent
Obsession



Labelled with Love



RISE OF THE

In the arid Summer of 1976 The Clash burst forth upon an unsuspecting world, with the establishment in their sights and enough raw energy to fuel a battleship. Danny Kelly charts their first year

Most of the groups that history eventually tags 'great' take time to develop, evolving gently to an artistic peak. But a precious few bypass the learning phase and are perfect from the start. They land in our unprepared lives with the suddenness and force of a grenade, their classic debut disc not a fluke but advance warning of an avalanche of gems heading your way...

The Who, for instance, arrived like that; so too did The Byrds, Sly And The Family Stone, REM and The Smiths. But even those epochal agglomerations didn't better the creative intensity, musical brilliance and sheer bloody planets-collide impact of The Clash in their extraordinary first year...

The legend goes like this: one night, during the scorched summer of 1976 - the hottest this century - Joe Strummer (front-man of pub plodders The 101ers), Mick Jones and Paul Simonon (art school chums and members of post-glam hotbed The London SS) saw a band that scrambled their wires, unravelled their certainties and pointed an exciting yet dangerous way forward. That band was the Sex Pistols.

Abandoning previous projects, the trio (augmented by guitarist Keith Levine and drummer Terry Chimes) set about harnessing the ragged inspiration of the Pistols. Every detail - music, image, stance, the lot - was pored over. This band was going to get it right, from the name onwards. It was Jones who came up with the handle, claiming it was the word most frequently used in tabloid headlines. The ensemble was to be called The Clash.

Maybe they were lucky, maybe they were clever; and probably they were both. In any event, The Clash never struggled. By September they were playing their first gig, as support to - guess who? - the Pistols. They retained this

prestigious slot for the infamous 'Anarchy In The UK' magical misery tour that followed.

From the very start The Clash had the music press, desperate for new 'punk' bands to champion, eating from their hands. Buoyed up by endless plaudits in the papers, they had little trouble securing (in February 1977) a deal with CBS, rumoured to have been worth what was then the astronomical sum of £100,000. As the day of reckoning approached, expectations were, unsurprisingly, reaching ludicrous and unattainable levels.

MARCH 18, 1977:

White Riot/'1977' (CBS single)

This was the proof of the pudding. As it turned out, every fawning syllable, every extravagant penny and every bead of anticipation was triumphantly justified by the release of this single. It was more than just a fantastic debut: it was a manifesto, a declaration of war, a gauntlet thrown down to all comers, and a saleable artefact that reached Number 38 in the charts.

The tangible taint of tower block menace and barely-suppressed violence, that characterises all of the group's early work, oozes from every pore. Even the cover (appropriated

by reggae buffs Strummer and Jones from an LP by Jamaican producer Joe Gibbs) smacks of police states, uniforms and brainwash. And 'White Riot' itself accentuates an already wire-taut call to mob



violence with the nerve-shredding addition of marching boots, smashing glass and, unforgettably, the police siren that slices through its intro.

Amazingly, the B-side is even more remarkable. '1977' was the first in a long line of Clash proclamations, and though its chilling warnings to the rich were explicit enough, it was the famous line "No Elvis, Beatles or The Rolling Stones, in 1977" that most clearly stated Punk's self-appointed mission to ransack rock's precious history.

It was a slogan that The Clash, as they became more and more obsessed with the music's iconography and past, would live to regret. They were never given a chance to make their peace with Elvis, however, since he died just six months after the single's release. Is there just a twinge of guilty conscience in the cover of the band's third LP, 1980's 'London's Calling', as an obvious tribute to the pre-Army Presley?

APRIL 7, 1977:

'The Clash' (CBS LP)

Even to begin to grasp the immense impact made by this searing debut LP, you need to recall a Britain almost unrecognisable from today's.

Socially and politically, this was a tired, edgy country. A worn-out Labour government presided sullenly over unending industrial unrest and 20 percent inflation; the Notting Hill Carnival was an annual battleground for police and revellers; the dreaded Special Patrol Group still roamed the streets; the fascist Right was on the rise and the Winter Of Discontent was just over the horizon. This was a dispirited, dispiriting, island - a mess.

And musically, the rotten roost was ruled by disco marathons and the mindless noodlings of tax-exiled leftovers from the '60s. The Damned's first LP was cartoon punk, so the clenched-teeth velocity and scimitar edge of the new rock had yet to be heard.

'The Clash' fixed all that. Into this grey, frightened, safe, white-suited little world it arrived like a wolf in a henhouse. It was a renewable electric shock to the system; the sound of the old order splintering and falling - a bloody revelation.

For starters, it sounded like nothing that had gone before (or, indeed, that has happened since). The band had turned down all the record company's suggestions for producers, and had, instead, entrusted the task to their live sound man, Micky Foote. Foote had never made a record before, but somehow he managed to capture and project the ferocity and physicality of the group's live onslaughts. There is a sense of immediacy, of now-ness, of real-ness on 'The Clash' that is wholly unique.

In the songs themselves (14 in all, at mostly less than three minutes' length) the dangerous glint of something raw and untreated is heightened by Joe Strummer's lyrics and singing. The story at the time was that 'The Clash' was recorded in an unending amphetamine jag, though the band themselves now say they can't remember the exact circumstances. Whatever the truth, Strummer's vocals do sound unbearably wired: sometimes snarling, sometimes pleading, sometimes bent in a



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ICONOCLASHES



Right: Mick Jones and Paul Simonon flail their axes in true rock 'n' roll style
Above: 'The Clash' LP - "a renewable electric shock"

mocking howl from the bleak balconies of London's concrete coffins. It's the voice of the dispossessed, the disgusted, the dehumanised and the defiant.

The passing of time can be horribly cruel to pop music, effortlessly rendering it outmoded, laughable or, worst of all, just plain mundane. It's only some strange notion of classicism that stops us realising that most of the acknowledged 'rock masterworks' are hollow shells, unlikely to survive even the gentlest critical poke. 'The Clash', however, continues to withstand and even reward the closest of scrutiny. It's that rarest of artefacts, simultaneously an unimpeachably accurate slice of its own time, and an enduringly great record by any prevailing standards.

'The Clash' defied even the most optimistic forecast by entering the national chart at number 11. Even so, CBS's American operation did not consider the record (particularly its sound quality) sufficiently good to merit State-side release. The American public vehemently disagreed with their decision, though, and more than 100,000 copies were imported from Britain, making 'The Clash' the biggest selling import LP of all time.

And when the Americans finally got round to issuing the LP (in mid-1980!), it was markedly different from its British counterpart. Many of the original tracks had been replaced by ones culled from later sessions, and it is this configuration that today comprises the CD version of the record.

It's also worth noting that a 1986 critics poll in NME rated 'The Clash' the fourth-best LP of all time, behind only 'What's

Going On', 'Astral Weeks', and 'Highway 61 Revisited'.

APRIL 1977: 'Listen'/'Capital Radio'/'Interview' (CBS/NME single)

This was the first Clash collectable. The initial 10,000 copies of the band's first album contained a red sticker on the inner bag which, with the addition of a coupon from the NME, could be turned into this sleeved EP. The interview and 'Listen' can be safely discarded, but the jagged, boggly-eyed platter through 'Capital Radio' - later rather lamely re-recorded for the 'Cost Of Living' EP - is as stridently fine as anything on the LP. This was a bonus for the band's increasingly fanatical following and now, of course, is devilishly difficult to get hold of.

MAY 13, 1977: 'Remote Control'/'London's Burning (Live)' (CBS single)

When The Clash signed with CBS they believed their contract gave them watertight artistic control over their output. The release of 'Remote Control' disabused them of that naive illusion.

CBS wanted another single out pronto, so this admittedly excellent track (ironically, it was written about the manipulative machinations of the powerful) was prised from the LP, coupled with a crunchingly crude live charge through 'London's Burning' and housed in a disappointing copy of the LP's sleeve.

The band, at that time locked into punk's idiosyncratic no-singles-on-the-album dictum, were incensed. They refused to promote the 45 and vowed to get their revenge on CBS with their next single. A

12inch demo of 'Remote Control' was pressed up but, with the band and the company at frosty loggerheads, it never saw the light of day. Another three years were to elapse before the first Clash 12inch ('London Calling'/'Armageddon Time') was released.

JUNE/JULY 1977: The 'White Riot' Tour

Early summer saw The Clash embark on their first nationwide trek. Like the Pistols' 'Anarchy...' jaunt of the previous autumn, the 'White Riot' tour became a landmark in the building of the new order, a punk legend and an unshiftable memory for those who witnessed it.

The bill was extraordinary. Preceding the headliners in pretty rapid rotation were a trio of bands who all went on to achieve either commercial success or cult status: The Subway Sect, The Slits and the emergent Buzzcocks. By now, though, The Clash (long since reduced to their definitive four-piece and bolstered by the arrival of the great Topper Headon on



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drums) were beyond competition. In just twelve short months they'd become the best live band that most of their audience had ever seen.

Every night they played like men possessed, building a crackling electric bridge between themselves and the crowd. Strummer had become a ragingly magnetic performer, every feature contorted and twitching as he whipped himself to new levels of intensity. Crowds responded by abandoning themselves to this emotional furore, turning stage-fronts into seething pits of burning lungs, steaming sweat and tangled, writhing, limbs.

A lack of space in which to perform just this sort of masochistic gymnastics, however, caused the last night of the tour (at London's Rainbow Theatre) to degenerate into violence. The venue's management had refused to remove the front rows of seats, and as soon as their heroes took the stage, the punters did the job for them.

In the twisted confusion of bodies, broken fixtures and irate security men, mayhem reigned and the show was terminated. The subsequent involvement of the police was just the first of many that was to dog The Clash's progress.

It had been a sad if eminently

predictable end to a legendary tour. The Clash would remain an awesome live band for several years to come; but never again were they to scale quite the same raw, pulsing heights of communion that they'd routinely achieved over these last few weeks.

SEPTEMBER 23, 1977: 'Complete Control'/'This Is The City Of The Dead' (CBS single)

The Clash celebrated their *annus mirabilis* by unleashing their long-awaited third single on the anniversary of their first gig.

'Complete Control' was, as promised, the band's riposte to CBS over the 'Remote Control' fiasco. But whatever the motivation for its creation, the undeniable fact was that it was a truly great rock single.

It was surprising, too: the first Clash record that didn't leave the blocks like a runaway train, and that allowed itself space and time to grow to its epic climax. There's an interest in the textures of the sound - and not just its brute strength - that presages their later work.

Some of this may be down to the A-side's producer, legendary reggae master Lee Perry, whose 'Police And Thieves' the band had recorded to such great effect on their album. Oddly, though, very little of the Jamaican's normally dominant personality and unmissable trademarks was apparent. Instead, he settled for a cineramic, and superbly effected rock production, not unlike the wide-screen growl that Sandy Pearlman would impose on the group's second album.

'Complete Control' pleased everybody. It was yet another feather in The Clash's already groaning cap; it satisfied the band's sense of wounded honour; and it provided the record company with their biggest Clash hit so far.

In addition, 'Complete Control' was the first Clash single to be issued outside Britain. There were minor variations on the familiar busted-speakers sleeve, with some territories abandoning it altogether in favour of a group shot.

For the twelve months that spanned the Septembers of 1976 and 1977, The Clash were the most exciting, compelling and down-right magnificent rock'n'roll guerrilla squad on the planet. Sometimes they promised more than they could ever possibly deliver, and sometimes they painted themselves into the most bizarre of corners. Arrogant, confused, infuriating and naïve, they nonetheless managed to inspire an almost religious devotion in those who followed them.

For one stupendous year at least, they defied the odds stacked against any rock group who dare to want to be best. They were, quite simply, a riot all on their own. ■



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