THE CLASH

Where to begin? Pity the Clash instantly deified as true punk messiahs (the fusion of Pistols energy with a more "intelligent" approach). After finally shedding that role, they have unwittingly become prime targets for those who are obsessed with the contradictions inherent in new wave. Every move the Clash make is scrutinized for possible compromises or dissolution of idealism. Yet the band continues to maintain that it can coexist and prosper without losing any of their integrity.

However, this point is highly debatable. Embarking on mass tours through conventional promotional channels, grinding out the same songs they were playing two and a half years ago, doing promo films for local tv stations all smack of increasing acceptance of the music industry heirarchy and all that goes with it.

Yet, once one got past the barriers that the record and promotion companies tried to throw around them, the band made every effort possible to help their grass roots supporters. Interviews were granted to virtually every magazine, no matter how small, the group visited the Windmill Monday night, played soccer with the locals on Tuesday and despite exhaustion, turned up at the after party at Action Central on Wednesday. True to Jones' words in the interviews, the roadies made sure that no one was left on the street, whether they lacked a ticket or sufficient I.D. Still, the Clash are in an increasingly difficult position.

The first album is arguably the greatest record of the seventies. The songs are brilliant, the performances immaculate and the sound, despite the whimperings of CBS America, remains the finest example of the marriage of punk immediacy to studio technology. The album was followed by the classic "Complete Control" single, a record which established the band as the musical as well as political leaders of the British scene. "Control" was no less than an anthem and confirmed Strummer's genius as a lyric writer, raising individual events to universal significance. The flip, "City of the Dead", was in a word, "tough", and flaunted the groups ability to synthesize diverse musical elements into a truly original sound.

"Clash City Rockers", while certainly not a revelation, was a strong single none the less, both sides bursting with hooks and humour. Finally, "White Man in Hammersmith Palais", a transcendent song, that by itself guarantees the immortality of the Strummer/Jones team. The lyrics were a virtual history of the punk movement and the music displayed an increasing sophistication without any lessening of power.

Given the quality of these releases, it would have been impossible for the Clash to fulfill the expectations which awaited the second album. Yet by any standards, it is a dissapointment. Only "Guns on the Roof" comes together, Strummer growling out his four line vision of the apocalypse ("I wish to be in Africa, a beating on the final drum . . .") while Jones hovers in the background ready to explode like a terrorist bomb.

The rest of the album fumbles about, the songs never fully realized. Flashes of lyrical and musical brilliance still abound, but are dissipated in the general structure. The music is especially suspect, being ridden with stock riffs and self plagiarism. In addition, Pearlman's production is as bad as was to be feared ("Blue Oyster Clash"), robbing the band of any bite of harshness. Despite the inanity of "1-2 Crush On You" (the flip of Tommy Gun) the song reveals how good the Clash can be made to sound.

The album also revealed an increasing difference between Strummer and Jones. Strummer seems to answer the various accusations leveled at the Clash (selling out, glorification of violence, ill understood uses of political situations etc.) by retreating into the angry young man pose — the distant defiant revolutionary; the ends justify the means. Jones has chosen to downplay the Clash's visionary stance to concentrate instead on the "We're just the best rock and roll band in the world" angle. The following interview with Mick Jones was conducted in Bimini's swinging lounge on 4th Avenue the Monday before the concert.

Public Enemy: Why did you decide to start in Vancouver?

Mick Jones: I didn't. We just turned up here.

P.E.: Despite the Clash's god like status in Vancouver, there is still a split among the fans, one group claiming the Clash have sold out while the other says you're as idealistic as you ever were.

M.J.: We are still as idealistic. I don't know whether that's a particularly good virtue, but regardless of that, let anybody stand and do what we've done. Let them *find out about selling out. We don't think* we've sold out.

P.E.: Do you ever get depressed about the constant pressure?

M.J.: We get very depressed. I'll get myself into a terrible state of mind, but I just think like that it's a sympton of organized society.

P.E.: There's been a lot of criticism over the ticket prices.

M.J.: Costs a lot to get us over here.

P.E.: Also the fact that people under nineteen can't get in.

MJ: If the guy's got enough fucking happening for him he'll get in. Why are they so fucking afraid? If I was under nineteen, I'd still go. These rules are just made to be broken.

P.E.: That's nice to say, but it's difficult sometimes.

M.J.: Just break 'em. It's a drag, but they'll be there. What we do in England if there's an age limit, they go round to the back door and the roadies let them in.

P.E.: How many cities are you doing.

M.J.: 9 or 10. We're just having a look. Vancouver is representative of the Clash's look at Canada. We hope to do a more extensive tour if it seems worth it.

P.E.: In England, people take the band very seriously. Yet over here when people sing "White Riot", it's because of the hook like. It's like singing "You're the one that I want."

M.J.: Good tune, isn't it?

PE: Do you think that you will be taken as seriously over here as you have been in Britain? Do you care?

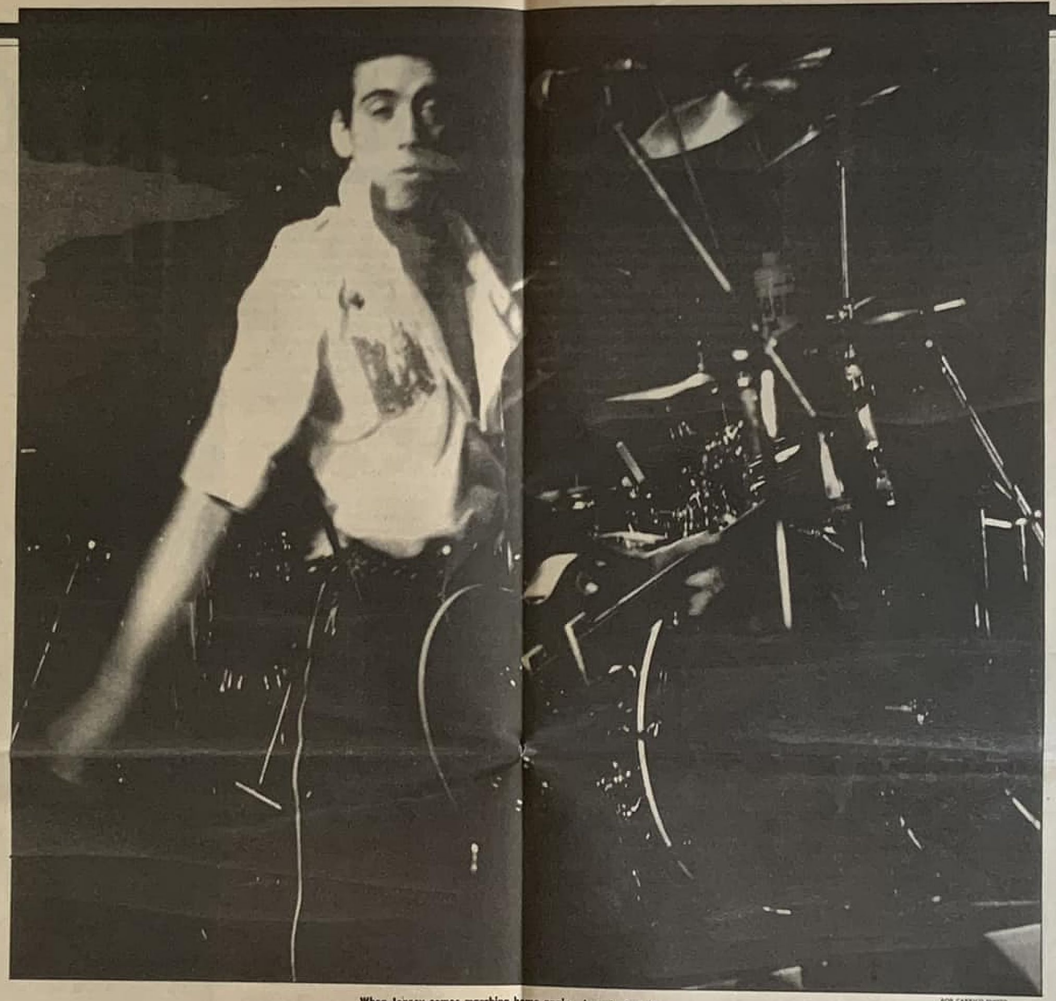
M.J.: I don't know enough about it to say. I imagine some people would take it seriously. People will take it different ways. Some will give a shit. They haven't really tried it here yet, they don't really know what it's like. It was like a really big deal, an excitement for the whole of youth.

P.E.: But people have been trying here.

M.J.: Those who have tried, it's like what you give you get back. I'd encourage it just for the experience of it, to get people out of their . . . you know it's like when you put a record on it's the power of music, only the music ain't enough now. Like here the music is so dreadful, the groups are so fucking horrible. It's like people over here have forgotten what rock and roll is all about. So I wouldn't mind slapping a few people's faces — they'll feel better for it. Rather than conquer it all, we just want to have little raids, and see how it goes. We're just a piss in the ocean, trying to make a dent.

P.E.: I read an article from S.F. in which you claimed that if anybody was going to change the state of rock and roll in North America it was going to be the Clash.

M.J.: Really? Amazing how things get changed. Anyway, I don't think anybody else can do it. On the other hand, I'm not sure anybody can do it. I just think you should get some society type changes.



When Jonesy comes marching home again, hurrah, hurrah.

ROB CARRICO PHOTO

P.E.: Well, in England, it seems that things have changed in some ways but in North America., I have my doubts. Music is just a symptom of a much deeper sickness. In England, there's the National Front and all the polarization that goes along with it, but here no one really cares about anything, there's nothing to get angry about.

M.J.: That's like other places, Sweden for example, and the youth are just as discontent, you know. But if enough youth show their discontent then a change will come about. We're only five blokes, no, how many? four in our group plus our company and we just go around and do what we can. We did a considerable amount in Northern Ireland and it really shows, they've got a good scene there now. There's something that shows. I don't know. I don't care. They're active, I'm still miserable, but then I'm a miserable person. I'm different when I play.

PE: The last thing I read was that you inherent in this sort of music. Many of the early groups, the Pistols, the Damned, have already fragmented. How long do you think you'll be able to work in the Clash context?

M.J.: I don't know. We break up all the time. This might be the last time we see Vancouver or it might be the first of many. It's hard to say. We're very good friends, and we work well together so it adds a certain magic which we wouldn't have if we were on our own. Course, if we were on our own, because of the type of people we are, I should imagine we would forge ahead regardless. Nobody's kidding themselves. This is our prime for this sort of thing and it will continue to be so until we stop doing it.

P.E.: How are your ears holding up?

M.J.: Not very good, and neither are my fingers.

P.E.: You and Strummer write all of the songs for the band. Does the whole band unite behind the lyrics?

M.J.: It's only one sentiment you know. Every line is a different sentiment. We don't hold all the same sentiments — I don't agree with shooting pigeons. Everyone's their own and one has to be sensible about this. I can say sensibly it's not worth worrying about, the idea is the more the better. You can do your best work, however, with someone else or by yourself. Just make it your best. It's not worth rowing about, in the end. If a group sticks together a group does something. It becomes a whole and you reach a camraderie — it's like going to war, really.

P.E.: It's a drag that your singles are so hard to get hold of here.

MJ: Yeah, I suppose one day the record company will be putting out one of those records with them all on, and we'll be screaming "don't do it" and they'll be doing it, dangling the carrot in front of us — and I'll be saying "you fucking cunts" but at least you'll be able to get the singles then.

P.E.: People have constantly criticized the punk bands for signing to major labels; the Pistols to Warner Brothers (in America) and the Clash to CBS, a really big corporation.

M.J.: I still don't suppose you would have heard of us otherwise.

P.E.: The last think I read was that you were fighting to prevent a promo film from being on "Top of the Pops". Did it get shown?

DEFUSED!!

By Phil Smith

M.J.: No, it didn't. We don't want to be on those programs. That was one . . . but we made such a fuss. They all hate us. No one talks to me at the record company in London, I'm really glad as well. For a while I thought I was on their side a bit. You know I'd go in and get free albums to sell and I felt I was co-operating with the enemy. Then I thought, you stupid bastard, the enemy is not the record company, it's like that's who they'd like us to think the enemy was, and the real enemy would be laughing its head off. So I stopped worrying about that stuff. It was just a new situation. Has Bob Dylan played in Vancouver?

P.E.: Yeah.

M.J.: Did you like him?

P.E.: No, he sucked. He was really good when I saw him five years ago, but this year.

Another Voice: Who was that?

M.J.: Bob Dylan, you know the sixties protest singer.

P.E.: Are you guys seventies protest singers? Are you the Bob Dylan of the seventies?

M.J.: (laughter) Are we? Are we? We haven't been called that lately.

P.E.: Wait 'til the eighties if you are.

M.J.: The eighties? What are you fucking talking about the eighties? There'll be nothing happening in the eighties. Listen, there's a technological revolution that's going on at this very moment which is more important than the industrial revolution. There's going to be a great boom, it'll be lovely, then there'll be the problem of what to do with all the unemployed and it'll be horrible. In five years, I'll bet you'll be joining the queue marching down the street with a picket in your hand.

Jones overheard a comment by Eric von Shlippen who was talking with Paul Simonon.

E.V.S.: I mean all you guys do is play guitar, right.

M.J.: What? That's all we do. You're right. Oh I'm sorry. I own up, that's all we do. I'm awfully sorry.

P.E.: Did you change your set at all for the North American tour?

MJ: Yeah. We were going to do "We're an American Band". It's a Grand Funk tune, but we didn't have time to work it out.

PE: Didn't you do Blitzkrieg Bop at a few London concerts?

M.J.: Yeah, we did, we did. Then we were in Holland once and somebody told us that the Ramones were fascists and we went off the song after that. I mean the Ramones are a good group, I like 'em, but we just went off playing it. People's opinions change. We did it as a joke, then people really dug it, you know how these things are.

At this point the two conversations merged.

EVS: In North America, bands get built up as gods, like the Stones. I know the Clash doesn't want that, but are they able to stop it?

MJ: I don't know. I think its up, to the people who do that sort of thing. I went through a very impressionable age where I thought some people were gods and others were just dreary folk. Its not my attitude that matters. Its other peoples. Theoretically everything should be okay, but in practice, everybody starts treating you differently. It's a bit horrible.

EVS: Things have changed in Britain. At first, every band was signed up immediately, but now the companies are more hesitant as the bands didn't sell right away.

MJ: They didn't sell period.

EVS: Is your album selling well in England?

MJ: It did well.

EVS: Are you really happy about that?

MJ: I'm glad. I'm fucking glad. I hate all these people like you meet someone from a band, like say, Siouxie and the Banshees and you say "how you doing" and their record's a hit and they're fucking miserable about it. Its fucking stupid. It's better for people to have the record as far as I'm concerned, it does a lot more good. I'd rather our records did sell. So it's through a big company. I don't think that's selling out. It's just fucking getting it across. Yeah, you be a cynic, think what you want, but there's no sense in being miserable about what you do.

PE: Are you still involved in politics in Britain? The rallys etc. We get a very distorted picture over here, i.e. the great punk freedom fighters against the evil National Front. It's a very black and white view. I'm sure it must be more mixed up.

MJ: It is quite confused. It's like if they've got no one to fight against they'll fight between themselves. When punk first started the punks used to fight between themselves. And then the Teds came along to fight the punks and then they both joined to fight the National Front, then skinheads fight the punks, then the mods, who were following the Jam, stabbed the skinheads. It's just a big joke for the authorities, it's a big laugh, like the youth are tearing each other apart. They're not directing their energies at anything 'cause no one is saying very much except for the few people and groups. Let's have a truce amongst the rebels.

EVS: What about the myth that new wave bands can't play their instruments? The second album clearly shows that you can.

MJ: Well we did the record just to show that we could be as good as, as far as your concerned, Aerosmith. So we can say "Get rid of 'em". That's all you've got here is that kind of stuff, I mean, you've got your scene, but that other shit is the predominant thing. I'm just as good and I've got a hell of a lot more to say and I'm not so self indulgent. These guys are just boring shit. Boston, Ted Nugent . . .

EVS: But that's Vancouver.

MJ: Well I can play as good as them. It's just like music my grandmother listens to, its so old fashioned.

EVS: But that's what you're up against.

MJ: I seen it last time I was here. People are very dour. It's as bad as Russia.

PE: What do you think of journalists?

MJ: I hope they know why they're doing

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it. I hope one day one of them tells me why he's doing it.

EVS: To meet bands.

MJ: Well, you don't need a tape recorder to do that. I can't really understand it.

EVS: 'Cause we're the go between.

MJ: No, not like you guys. Proper journalists like...

PE: Tony Parsons?

MJ: No, he's like you guys. I mean, like the hacks, the ones who go from fad to fad, their life is the life of a reporter with a little press card in their hat. I suppose they're opportunists but that's not a good enough reason for me. It's not even a creative field.

EVS: Who designed your album cover?

MJ: It's from a postcard, a guy in San Francisco called Hugh Brown. He actually introduced the postcard to us.

EVS: Is the Cowboy an American symbol?

MJ: At one time the cover had a hammer and sickle on the vulture as well. That got taken off.

EVS: What about the people who won't understand "English Civil War" or "Safe European Home".

MJ: They should understand it better than the English. It's an American folk song.

EVS: That's true, but I don't know what you're talking about. I've listened to that song eighty times, but it doesn't come across to me.

SANDIE CARRICO PHOTO

"See, we smoke cigarettes just like you."

MJ: I know. It's gonna be a problem for those who don't. Hopefully they'll get off and understand the feeling of it, and then they'll take the time to look deeper into it. I think what you understand from it yourself is the key.

PE: I think there is something there without decoding the specific references.

MJ: On the other hand there are some very real and specific references. It's like its happening already.

EVS: How many people are going to know that "Guns on the Roof" is about the pigeon shooting incident?

MJ: It isn't. It isn't at all. It's got nothing to do with the pigeons. You've been misled on that. The pigeons is a big joke thing. Regardless, it's not about pigeons. It's about what the record says it's about. You think we're talking about terrorist pigeons?

EVS: I don't know. We get the NME...

MJ: It's like a joke. They don't like 'em in Japan. Like Japanese people are really serious.

PE: Over here the serious things are the jokes. The Sex Pistols were a joke when they toured.

MJ: I can imagine. That's why it took us a long time to come. We had to reappraise the situation. The English invasion...

EVS: What was it like on the Anarchy tour?

MJ: Not many gigs. It was wierd. We just sat in hotel rooms all the time, throwing Damned members into the baths. We just sat around.

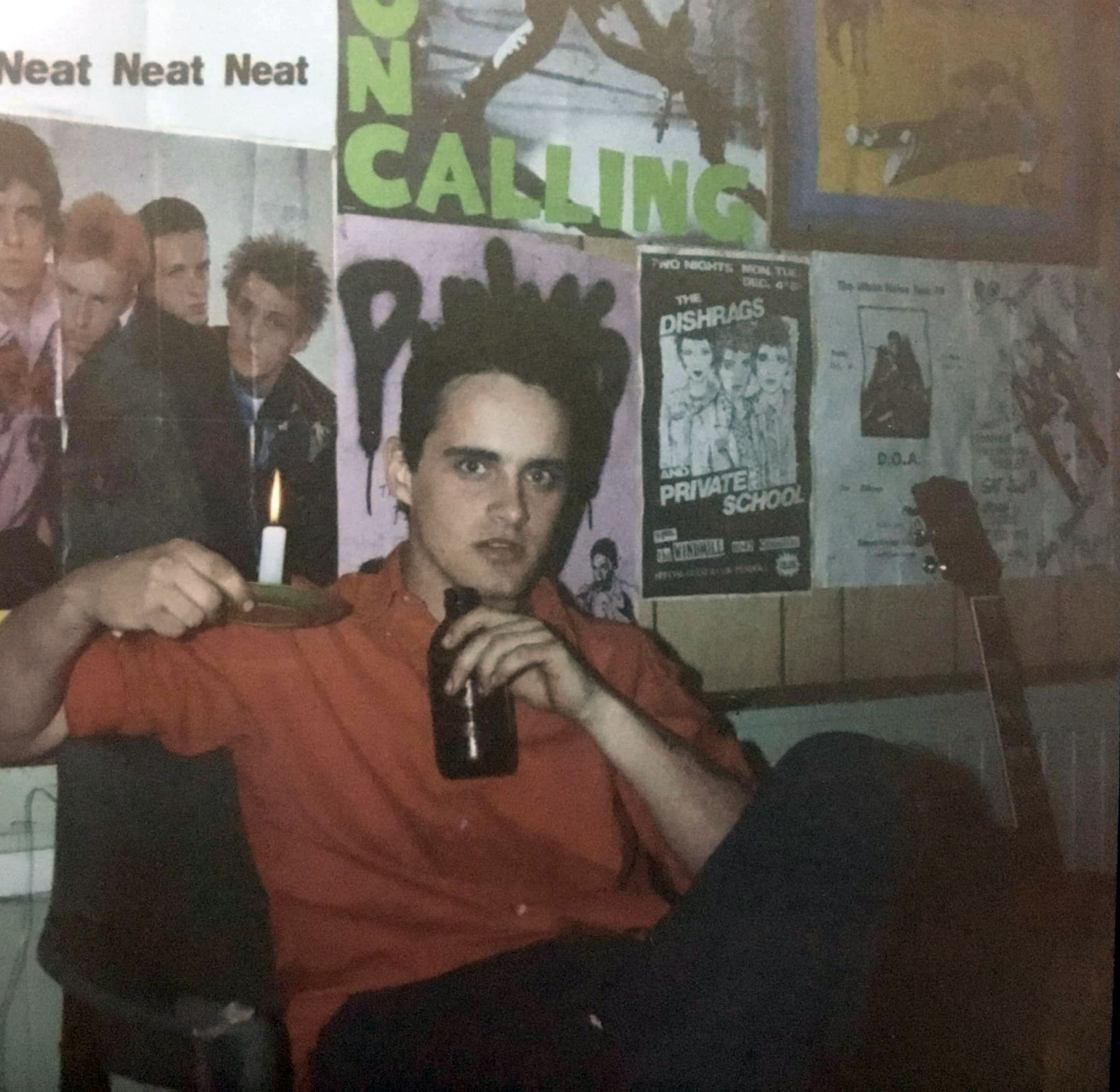
EVS: Was there more comradship back then?

MJ: Not really. There was some — like you had a group of friends and then there was another group over at that table you spoke to socially and were acquainted with, but were not really friends. We got things done — we overcame our personal differences — became motivated to do something en masse — actually worked for a while.

The concert was disappointing. Topper and Paul were superb throughout but neither Strummer nor Jones were in top form. Though his phrasing and stage presence is still awe inspiring, Strummer's voice was in terrible shape, sometimes barely louder than a mutter. Jones was the real irritant, prancing around stage and draping the songs with his phase shifter While his playing is still technically and melodically excellent, his guitar work has lost much of its tension.

The new material sounded much better than on the album (especially "Tommy Gun"), but the old songs sounded lifeless and dated, except for a doomsday version of "What's My Name?" complete with revamped lyrics, Strummer prowling the stage as he "peeks in your windows when you're sleeping tight."

Taking into account opening night jitters, I still felt I was seeing a band past its prime. The Clash call into question the very conception of the permanent rock and roll band. It is not humanly possible to maintain the level of anger and energy which they first displayed. The Pistols broke up, the Clash will succeed. Which is the most destructive?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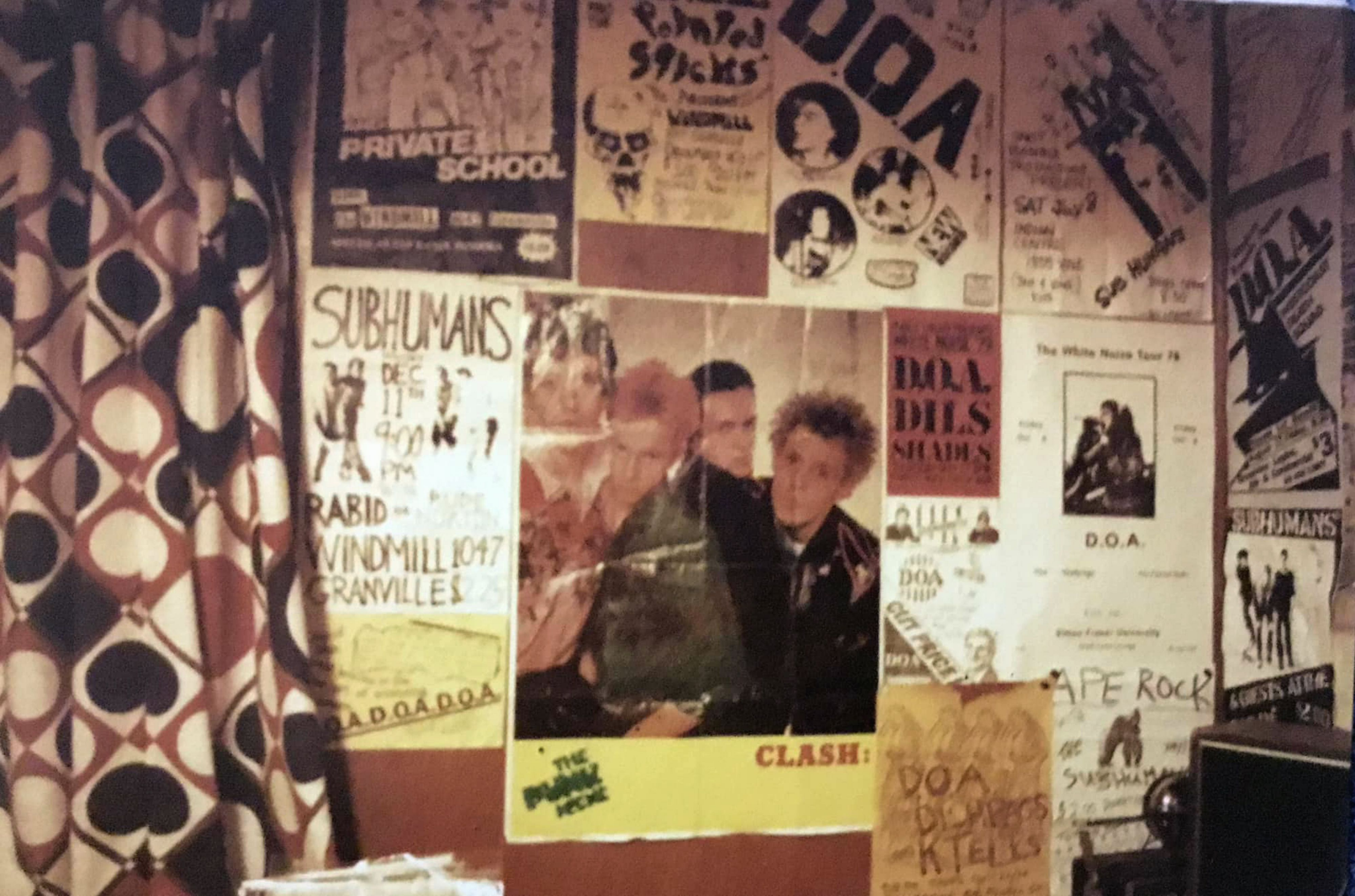
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