

UNICORN

T I M E S

MUSIC FILM THEATER TV BOOKS ART DANCE

FEBRUARY 1980 FREE



*AN
EXCERPT FROM
TOBY THOMPSON'S
"THE 60's REPORT"
COWPOKE CHIC*

ON RECORD

BY PHRED A. HEUTTE

The philosophy of aesthetics is very peculiar. It holds on to this notion that art reflects and reflects on the times. But like Janus it really seems more a simultaneous looking forward and back, at least in "popular" art, and only in retrospect does its relation to the present appear. Its externals reflect rarely on the world around it; art becomes popular as a debased, nostalgic reflection of the past or a truncated, amorphous projection of the future—e.g. those current abominations, 1941 and *Star Trek—The Motion Picture*. This is not to say that there is no value in looking behind or ahead of ourselves, or that artistic presentations shouldn't be fun. But in the most visible, most widely shared art in our culture there is a tense search for what came before (we think) or what is to come (we hope)—and always a flight from our own reality.

This is especially true in popular music. There is little in the common ground between the primal rock'n'roll beat and the synthetic bop of the future. The few bands that cross that ground and thus reflect the present as it is are often dismissed as trite or artificial. And there are, to be sure, the imposters, the ones who add past and future together and get no more than an uneasy mix-and-match.

The present is dangerous, all the newsheadlines tell us, but it's even more dangerous to consider it unfettered, on our own. We are receptive, both by habit and determined training, to accept the artificial present we're given . . . it may be that the Futura Is NowNowNow, but it's amazing how little of what's now lasts very long and how it all falls very neatly into convenient annual balance-sheet cycles. Meanwhile our minds are out to lunch with the Animal House/Happy Days/Barry Manilow syndrome. Anything to keep our minds off of what is really going on.

New wave has been highly concerned with the present, and thus its definition as an attitude rather than a distinct musical style. Most successful new wave artists have been interested, usually overtly, in mediating a view of actual, everyday life. Thus the Talking Heads, Ramones, Pere Ubu, Sex Pistols, Television, Elvis Costello, Urban Verbs, Patti Smith, Graham Parker. And thus the pretenders: DEVO, Cheap Trick, The Cars, post-Pistols Lydon and nearly all of power pop.

One thing that has emerged with the punk and new wave vectors is this funny idea that people don't only want to be sedated by music. Three bands that subscribe to this dictum have released recent albums.

THE CLASH HAVE A heartening new double album on Epic (36328), *London Calling*. I heard rumors in London last summer that the band had hit a stylistic impasse and faced bankruptcy. This new recording shows that, in effect, the band's course has been like that of a river: from steep, narrow and noisy origins, through rocky eddies at the falls, and finally a broad and

powerful waterway coursing to its destiny.

There have been insistent attempts to make El Clash combo to be something like new Rolling Stones, but for my money they're really closer to The Who (aside from the guitar-smashing on the cover) . . . idiosyncratic, uneven, full of fire and ire. The parallels are striking: lower middle class origins, quasi-spiritual leaders for many of their peers, a highly respectful attitude toward the audience, a complementary nose-thumbing at the music machine. Like father, like son. Pete Townshend scoffed like a disenchanted father at The Clash's viability in December's Unicorn. In turn, the band replies, like disrespectful sons: "Every gimmick hungry yob digging gold from rock'n' roll/Grabs the mike to tell us he'll die before he's sold."

The Clash, in contrast, depict themselves in "The Four Horsemen" as resisting the not-so-subtle enticements of the fame machine. War, Pestilence, Famine and Death have precious little exposure in popmuzik (save for David "Life in Wartime" Byrne), and while the band does not always address such questions, their overtly populist approach has sparked some backbiting.

In their self-written press packet, for example, Mick Jones recalls how they "recorded an extended-play record entitled 'The Cost of Living' ep which was released on election day. We all know what happened on that day [Thatcher and the Conservatives came to power] and it was no surprise when one critic exclaimed that the record sounded like left-wing paranoia and that 'The Clash should relax and enjoy the ride like the rest of us.' The Clash,

who claim no allegiance to either the left or the right, did not blindly dismiss that criticism but instead observed the so-called 'ride' itself more carefully than ever . . . they could not help but notice that despite the short-lived Tory tax cuts (specifically designed to help the already rich—not the poor) The Bee Gees did not return to these shores."

LONDON CALLING bristles with meaty commentary on many aspects of the current "ride," some of it equally applicable to the US (for which English bands seem to gain an immediate sensibility once they've toured here—the band now appears in England in cowboy-derived duds). For example, in the sly "Koka Kola," they interpolate the melody of the Coke jingle: "Koke adds life where there isn't any," and juxtapose the "Pause that refreshes in the corridors of power/When top men need a top up long before the happy hour" with the only perceived escape from the executive suite—jumping out the window. High analytical, these Clashboyos, not yer ordinary rudies 't all.

The concentrated anger that surfaced in their early work—"White Riot" and "What's My Name" and "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A."—has metamorphosed on this record. It can be simplistic—the macho Maoist RCP claptrap of "Guns of Brixton," or their favorable comment on the connection between the Spanish Civil War and recent Basque summer terrorism on Spain's leisure coast. But in "Clampdown" we are beginning to see the development of greater insight:

You grow up and you calm down
You're working for the clampdown
You start wearing the blue and brown
You're working for the clampdown
So you got someone to boss around
It makes you feel big now
You drift until you brutalize
You made your first kill now

Perhaps The Clash are hopeless power-from-a-gun romantics . . . some of the lyrics here and elsewhere would point that way. But we must temporize that they are always careful to set such thoughts in the context of self-defense, be it of body or psyche. At least they understand the outcome of violence begetting itself:

London calling, see we ain't got no swing
'Cept for the ring of that truncheon thing
The ice age is coming, the sun is zooming in
Engines stop running and the wheat is growing thin
A nuclear error—but I have no fear
London is drowning and I live by the river.

IT MUST BE NOTED that not all the songs here are political. There is a comment on sexual politics, if you will, in "Lovers Rock" that is not one of the better moments on the four sides. But the little present on side four,

THE CLASH LOOK SHARP

And the Police are Arresting



unmentioned anywhere on jacket, sleeve or label, is a fifth song called "Stand By Me (Or Not At All)"—shock horror—a love song with harmonies'n' all!

It is hard to get away from the lyrics in *London Calling*. They are agile, expressive, and surprisingly well-pronounced by Joe Strummer. He's not *totally* there yet, but now that The Clash realize they have a huge audience I think Strummer decided to leave his mouthful of marbles on the beach and go talk to the crowd. Not only that, but the liner has the actual printed words (most of them, anyway). The Clash have certainly found their voice, and they exercise it fully . . . maybe even falling into a few Dylanisms (def: n. a verse containing a good thought and surrounded by cliché filler). But how could it work without the magnificent music?

In addition to Micky Gallagher on organ (he of Ian Dury's *Blocks*), we have the Irish Horns and all sorts of fancy garage production to go along with the garbage pail of Clashy influences: from rockabilly revel (Vince Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac") to reggae romp ("Rudie Can't Fail"). The best traditional sound is "The Card Cheat," outSpectoring the master himself since his best early Sixties days, including the mandatory percussion and thin horns.

BUT AT THEIR real best, they are only The Clash themselves—Mick Jones' squawling, piercing, haunting guitar; the charging, inventive bass of Paul Simonon; the precise and powerful Topper Headon on drums. The sound is almost indescribably delicious



—a swirling, raspy, bristling, magnificent mess. It shows best on "The Right Profile" (an odd reminiscence of Monty Clift) and "London Calling."

This is an aggravating, enlightening, joyous double album. It compresses as much of our hectic, cross-purposed, fulfilling, perilous world as I've heard in any record for half a decade. It may be too early to assess The Clash. It certainly is a fool's diversion to compare them to The Who or the Rolling Stones or The Beatles.

"I can positively say we are not living for the future," says Mick Jones in closing the bio, "we're living day to day. No, in the present—we shall have to see what happens." All they ask is recognition for who they are. In a day of dominant Doobies doo-doo, that's a lot to ask. Is it too much to hope they'll get it?

THERE HAS BEEN a lot of speculation about The Police. Are they simply a projection of Miles Copeland's mad-scientist ego?

Copeland is a most pleasant and engaging person, but he is a go-getter with a nasty reputation (being editor of the London weekly

Time Out, writer, promoter of concerts, founder of the alert indie/A&M affiliate IRS; and as well being manager of The Police, whose drummer is his brother Stewart). The Police have the flash and the class to remain at the top of the charts for as long as they care—as they have done for some time now in Blighty with "Message In a Bottle" and "Walking on the Moon" from their newest lp, *Reggatta de Blanc* (A&M, SP-4792). But the credit is mostly the band's, for they really can play.

The band mines two parallel lodes—root beer reggae and straight three-chord rock. The reggae on the whole is the more successful blend—a concise, minimalist distillation of an already stripped-down form. On "The Bed's Too Big Without You," the standout, Sting starts out with a simple bass phrase supported by Copeland's B-B beats. Andy Summers steps in with tattered threads of swirling guitar as Sting takes up with an echoey vocal, twisting a little from the usual boy-loses-girl motif. It's sprightly, reflective, and the warmest song in a rather frosty album (mirrored stunningly, by the way, in the silvertone cover art).

On the rock side, a particular favorite is "On Any Other Day," a self-mocking first-person narrative of middle class anomie ("My wife has burned the scrambled eggs/The dog just bit my leg," etc.). The Police don't measure up to The Clash for reveling in the grandiose present, but they have a certain newwave sensibility that informs their efforts. They are, in effect, downright depressing. On the whole, then, *Reggatta* is not a bad album at all, though not really endearing either. But it's a damn sight better than the mush that passes for power pop. To put it simply, The Police have defined a new role for the power trio.

JOE JACKSON IS EVEN MORE straightforward. His first album spawned a no-see-um hit, "Is She Really Going Out With Him," that kinda burrowed into the charts and wouldn't go away. It swelled into an itch on the placid radio skin and soon produced a highly praised tour. More of the same can be heard on *I'm the*

Man (A&M, SP-4794), which boasts surely the ugliest cover (front and back) since the invention of the lp. Joe himself designed it. He should stick to music. You should stick to music, too.

So throw away the cover and keep the vinyl. Joe and the band have put together a serviceable collection of comments—witty ones at that—on his current world view. The title cut shows Joe in the pose of the spiv, Gregory Peccary himself. You remember Gregory—the little pig with the white collar from Zappa's *Studio Tan*, who worked for Swiftly Trendmongers. "Kung Fu, that was one of my good ones," he says. "Well what's a few broken bones/When we know it's all good clean fun."

In "The Band Wore Blue Shirts," Jackson recounts his days playing the "dreaded lounge circuit" that's always written up in his interviews. "Friday" views the working week and the goal of it all for most of us: "Friday rules OK/Out to the local mecca." "It's Different For Girls" is an elegant reversal of the usual four-F male attitude towards women.

Jackson isn't slick because he doesn't have to be. Production is one the—er—raw side with a heavy dosage of Graham Maby's bass throughout, contrasting so well with The Police's light touch. Jackson himself adds a unique touch with his melodica ("the instrument of the Eighties," he calls it in jest), particularly on "Geraldine and John," a Costello-ish tale of a love affair between two married people (who are not wed to each other, of course). And on the Graham Parker-ish "Kinda Kute," he supplies some interesting piano licks.

I'm the Man is not a record to overwhelm—it simply consolidates the ground staked out on the first album in a straightforward way and progresses from there. It's a highly personal approach, and Jackson is able to make his observations acute without being cute or acerbic.

I ONLY GOT ONE QUESTION. If all this wonderful music is coming from England, why—outside of the Talking Heads—is it being shut out in our own American mainstream? ●

