

THE CLASH: "Sandinista" (CBS FSLN 1).

CRITICS of the Clash will welcome "Sandinista" with fangs open, as it confirms just *why* they dislike the band so much.

The title alone reeks of the political "awareness" which many find so glibly unattractive. (Sandinista are the Nicaraguan guerillas who overthrew the right wing government recently.)

To drive the point home, the cover shot features the band in stark black and white against a bare brick wall, with Mick Jones posing in a GI helmet. Then there's the Clash's growing fixation for reggae, which fuels criticism of white men playing music totally alien to them.

Fans, however, will find in the "Sandinista" package a confirmation that the Clash do still *care*. In hard terms, they go one better than their last Christmas present of "London Calling", and put their mouths where their money is.

"Sandinista" offers three albums, 36 tracks, a lyric sheet ("Armageddon Times Number Three") and a 20-page booklet containing some of the best ever articles on the Clash. All for £5.99.

Proof positive, to the converted, that even if it's still cash registers rather than sten guns stuttering in Knightsbridge, Joe and the boys ain't nestling next to the bloated belly of capitalist pigs. That if the Clash wanna put out three albums for six quid, the Clash *do it!*

So, in economic terms and practical commitment, no complaints at all. When the price of *one* album leaves you little enough change from six quid, three for the price of one must be the bargain of the year.

I treated myself to "London Calling" for Christmas last year, and the anticipation preceding "Sandinista" was considerable. I mean, there's only one thing better than a Clash double album, and that's a Clash triple, right? Wrong!

For me, the strength of "London Calling" was its diversity, the absorption of the various influences – rock 'n' roll, rockabilly and reggae – into the Clash mainstream, vinyl proof that they had progressed, without forsaking their original power and passion by broadening their overall sound and horizons. Testified by the gloriously epic "The Card Cheat", which blew away any lingering doubts that the Clash were forever condemned to songs never far removed from the arterial Westway.

Since then, even the reggae "Bankrobber" and "Call Up" singles demonstrated that the Clash were still in control, harnessing the reggae rhythms while maintaining their energy as a rock band, while being the Clash.

Yet "Sandinista" is a floundering,



Rebel chic

mutant of an album(s). The odd highlights are lost in a welter of reggae/dub overkill.

The Clash espouse reggae with the zeal of new converts, like the blinkered socialists who returned from Stalin's Russia with: "I have seen the future – And it works!" on their lips, oblivious to any faults.

Sadly, "Sandinista" does not build upon the foundations which were laid during their last majestic outing.

What makes the package such a disappointment is that it represents an emasculation of the raw, urgent energy of the Clash, and suggests – in its bewildering aimlessness – that the band are floundering, uncertain of their direction.

The quantity of the material suddenly made available does not compensate for its manifold deficiencies.

Lyrically, it's as interesting as ever:

the anti-conscription testament of "The Call Up", the Profumo type affairs on "The Leader", chronicled through the scavenging eyes of the Sunday papers.

"Something About England" is a telling encapsulation of English life, effective in its stark imagery. Or the scathing "Washington Bullets", with its harsh criticism of American imperialism.

But it's that track, and the romantic "Rebel Waltz", which call into question (again) Strummer's chic rebel obsessions. The rebel fantasies (as on "Bankrobber" – thief as rebel, or "Rebel Waltz", with its lines about "A song of the battle, that was born on the flames, and the rebels were waltzing on air").

It's the black and white way which the band equate rebels with all the right causes. On the biting indictment of tower block life – "Up In Heaven (Not Only Here)" – The Clash tack on a Phil Ochs

song at the end.

Strangely enough, I was reading a biography of Ochs – "The Death Of A Rebel" – and had just reached the point where Ochs switched his allegiance from Elvis Presley to Fidel Castro, recognising them both as media manipulators. I wonder if Joe Strummer's read "The Death Of A Rebel"?

But then, it's bands like the Clash who just might be able to stop the British Movement sieg-heiling its way to the holocaust, or impede the SPG's slow progress down the corridors to Room 101.

I believe that the Clash do still care, and remain a radical, committed band. Their espousal of reggae is seen by some as a superficial, white dalliance with an indigenous black music form. But then, the argument against that is that by championing reggae, they are doing more to stop the insidious growth of racism by simply being *white* guys playing *black* music.

But here, their adoption of reggae, in all its essentially similar forms, is simply too much, the similarity palls over six sides. In the process, it also threatens to diminish the raw, raucous sound of the band who – at their best – were, the best!

Mikey Dread dubbles up, masterful Mickey Gallagher contributes keyboards (his kids rendering their own piping versions of "Guns Of Brixton" and "Career Opportunities" – St Winifred's School Choir watch out!).

Folkie Timon Dogg gets a fine song to himself, "Lose This Skin", with an impressive string arrangement. Guy Stevens has vacated the producer's chair and the sleeve credits Den Hegarty and Ellen Foley.

Even the peaks on "Sandinista" pall besides "London Calling", as on "Corner Soul", with Strummer's aggressive singing tempered by the cooing backing vocals, or the topical "Ivan Meets GI Joe", which fails to attain its epic potential.

There is one track I kept returning to, the sneeringly irreligious "The Sound Of The Sinners", a compulsively anti-gospel, gospel song.

The Clash are a band who have suffered a great deal of critical flak, virtually from their inception. I, for one, do not doubt their sincerity; the songs come from the heart, and not the one worn on any convenient sleeve.

Despite their conviction, slogans carry much more power if you can dance to them, but if skanking the night away carries you through, then this is/are the album(s) for you.

"Sandinista" strikes me as a sporadic, unwieldy work. A sprawling statement which comes as a disappointment after the consistent excellence of last year's offering. That aside, I can't wait for the next Clash album. – PATRICK HUMPHRIES.