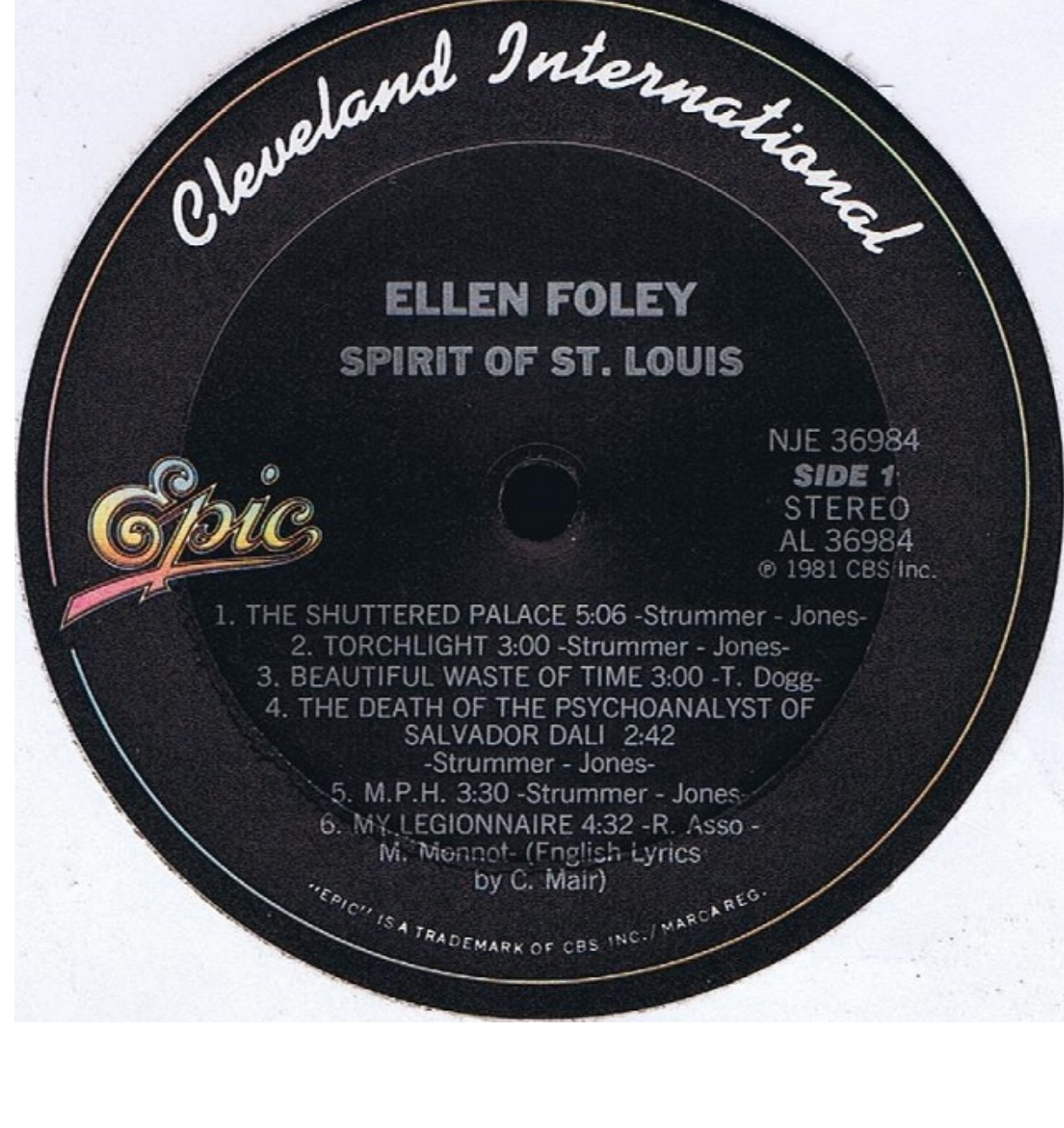


Damien Love



SANDINISTA'S SISTER: ELLEN FOLEY & THE LOST CLASH ALBUM



Ranging across dub, funk, hip-hop, Northern Soul, rockabilly, jazz, disco, folk, gospel, Cajun, rock'n'roll, hobo skank and several weird genre-gumbo genetic mash ups of no fixed label, *Sandinista!*, *The Clash's* triple album of 1980, baffled many on initial release, widely regarded as a bloated self-indulgence. Yet this magnificent mutant mongrel is perhaps the group's most ambitious piece of work.

Ever since it appeared, fans have played the editor's game of trying to whittle the three-disc *Sandinista!* down to the great single or double LP that is surely lurking within. Yet the splendid sprawling size of the thing is part of its character – it's what makes *Sandinista!* an experience that's less like listening to an album and more like spending a summer night wandering lost through the neighbourhoods of some strange new city.

What's less appreciated is that this triple album could actually have been a *quadruple*. During the sessions, The Clash (augmented by the same extra players they had assembled for *Sandinista!*, including Tymon Dogg and Blockheads Mickey Gallagher, Davey Payne and Norman Watt-Roy, as well as engineer Bill Price) made a whole other album entirely: *The Spirit Of St Louis*, the second LP by St Louis-born singer Ellen Foley.

From this distance, Foley might seem a strange fit for the Clash to draft in as front woman for a record that found them effectively adopting the guise of invisible backing band. At that point, she was best known as the co-vocalist swapping ramalama lines with Meat Loaf on "Paradise By The Dashboard Light," one of the hit singles from 1977's world-devouring *Bat Out Of Hell*.

But as the 1980s dawned, Foley had a very direct link to The Clash camp: she was going out with guitarist-writer Mick Jones, who threw himself into the task of making an album for her with true labour-of-love zeal, pulling his band in along with him. Of the album's twelve tracks, six are new Strummer-Jones compositions specifically written for the project.

If *Sandinista!* saw The Clash venturing farther and farther out from their prescribed punk pigeonhole, *The Spirit Of St Louis* sees them roaming in other directions again, trying softer textures. The opener, "The Shattered Palace," blends Latin and folk influences with Brel-like pop balladery – all acoustic guitars, flutes and cantina chime, it mines a seam of soft, lush, warm drama that looks forward to the soundtrack Joe Strummer would compose in 1989 for the movie *Walker*.

Elsewhere, with Jones chanting strident back-up vocals, "Torchlight" is a classic Clash call-and-response, while, if you replace Foley's vocals with Strummer's, "MPH" becomes an orphaned *London Calling* track. Elsewhere again ("Theatre Of Cruelty") you catch a glimpse of The Clash living out their secret life as ABBA fans.

The Clash played coy about *The Spirit Of St Louis* – the sleeve notes credit them only as Mick, Joe, Paul and Topper – and, perhaps as a result, the album all but vanished on release in 1981. There are Clash fans out there who have never heard it, although they will have heard Foley singing with the group on *Sandinista!*'s track "Hitsville UK," and might know her as the inspiration for Jones later writing "Should I Stay Or Should I Go."

But *The Spirit Of St Louis* deserves to be rediscovered every now and then. One of the most fascinating aspects of the record is how it offers the chance to hear The Clash writing and playing free from the pressure of being The Clash. It's *Sandinista!'s* Sister. Here, I speak with Ellen Foley about her memories of how it came about.

How did you first hook up with Mick Jones?

ELLEN FOLEY: I was performing in London, and I met him a couple of days before that in the club where I was gonna perform and...that was kinda that. We were together for about two and a half years, and somewhere in the course of that, I was on the Epic label, and I needed a second album. And, y'know, I wanted to be there with Mick, and he and the guys just offered to do the album with me, and enlisted all their people to do it.

Did you talk much about the kind of record you wanted to make? It's quite a different record from your first album (Night Out, 1979).

EF: Yeah. It was the time I spent over there in Britain. I went from a very American album to a very European album. It was all influenced by the environment, the people I was with, and the relationship. Mick was sort of, you know, anti-American music – or anti-American music of a *certain kind*, anyway. I mean, y'know, to Mick, Jim Steinman was *The Devil*. And that's where I was coming from, and I think Mick was very interested in presenting the person that he was with in a very different light, because it – I – sort of reflected on him.

Were there any specific influences that you talked about?

EF: Well, we were both very, at that moment, into Edith Piaf. I was going through old LPs the other day, and I found about 12 Edith Piaf albums that I acquired back during that time. I think I thought I was going to be the Anglo-American Edith Piaf! The idea was that it was going to be a kind of...modern cabaret album.

It went out as an Ellen Foley solo album, but is it fair to say it was much more collaboration between you and Mick?

EF: Oh yes, very much so. And actually, collaboration with Mick and Joe – and Bill Price, he played a very big part in the making of that album. Bill's more than an engineer, he played a big part in the technical and musical end of things. But everybody sort of did everything extremely spontaneously. That's how The Clash made their records, at least in the beginning. Although they were very meticulous at the same time. There was that kind of paradox in the way they worked. Bill managed to somehow bring it together in the middle.

There are Clash fans who don't even know that these Strummer-Jones songs exist today, because...

EF: Because the record tanked! Let's just say it. Nobody heard it!

How did the songwriting work? Did you talk with Joe about the lyrical side of things?

EF: No, he just kind of went off and wrote them. I wasn't going to tell him what to write. In a way, it was sort of a difficult period for me, because I was just there as the singer. I would have liked to have had a little more...The funny thing is, I recall Mick and I would have "discussions," about keys. Because I would ask, "What key..." And Mick would just be like, "What, what? You can sing it, you don't need to sing in a key" – he almost didn't understand, because, y'know, they just *wrote*. They didn't even think about keys, they just wrote for Joe. But, as a singer, I have to sing in specific keys, obviously. So, I kind of think the whole vocal end of it was downplayed a little bit, actually, and that I could have shown a little bit more than I did vocally on that record. I think it was most interesting musically and lyrically, but in terms of the vocals... it wasn't really an Ellen Foley record. I mean, it really was more of a Clash record. Whether you like it or not, I think that my first album, and the Meat Loaf material, really showed off how I sing. You know? But that kind of thing was just *anathema* to the whole situation with The Clash. The only thing I remember really arguing about was this thing, about specific keys...and it was like a concept that they just didn't get! But I was very enthusiastic and accepting, because it was a really exciting project for me. And it was also them doing something different, that was tailored to something that they wanted to do for me. I mean, they wrote them, but those weren't "Clash" songs by any stretch. And I think they thought it was sort of cool to do this kinda out there, Edith Piaf/ Rock'n'Roll record, which was something that they wouldn't do for themselves.

Were you surprised at the stuff they came up with? I mean, lyrically, Strummer's writing from a woman's perspective...

EF: Exactly. But I wasn't really surprised. Joe Strummer was a really extraordinary person in how empathic he was. I wasn't surprised that he could write songs from the woman's point of view at all. And I didn't feel uncomfortable at all with the material. Joe was such a bohemian, y'know, and he was so open to anything, so I wasn't surprised, no.

You said you were almost there just as the singer, and it was almost a Clash record. But at the time, it almost seemed you were all at pains to downplay the Clash side of things.

EF: Yeah, it says Mick, Joe, Paul, Topper on the cover – but it does *not* say Jones, Strummer, Simonon, Headon... That was intentional, a kind of a cute thing.

'Produced By My Boyfriend...' y'know, we were being cute. The hilarious thing was, I was going along with the whole Clash "Screw The Man" ethos, y'know. My manager, he came all the way over from America – and we wouldn't even let him in the studio to hear this stuff! So, y'know, I think we did everything to make the record not sell! That's why nobody's last names were on it, although, of course, the songs are credited to Strummer/ Jones.

I've always wondered exactly when the album was recorded – was it at the end of the Sandinista sessions, or during, or...

EF: Right, actually, it was more sort of like in, around, and inbetween. So that's when I did "Hitsville UK" with them, it was all around that same time. It was sort of all mixed up together, y'know, catching studio time from The Clash sessions and, yeah, sort of mixed up together.

Did you notice any difference in their attitude between them doing their stuff and your album?

EF: I think they were a lot more relaxed because it wasn't a Clash record. I think maybe they were maybe having more fun with it. They brought in people. And maybe especially Topper and Paul, because the pressure of The Clash record was off, and they maybe felt almost like session men sort of, which was probably a new experience for them at the time, and everybody felt that way, I think it was a more relaxed atmosphere, definitely.

You mentioned the record didn't sell much. Was that a surprise to you?

EF: A bit. Because, you know, when you're inside something you really believe in it. But then you put it out, and the record company doesn't *like* it, and the record company doesn't *promote* it, and they don't *play* it on the *radio*... and it's a real shock, because this is who you are at the time. You put out what you want the world to see as who you are. And those guys, The Clash, were gone: you know, after that, The Clash were still The Clash – but this was my album, and I was left with it. And in a way, like I said, I kind of didn't feel like it *was* "my" album. I mean, I'm sure there were things that I was feeling kind of pissed off about. You know, I might have been left thinking: "Well, if I had made an album that was the extension from my first album, which *sold*..." You know, in retrospect, when you're involved in things, you don't see the things that you see later. All the stuff that my manager and people were telling me: 'Oh, Ellen, why didn't you make a record like the first one and blah, blah, blah...' And I was like, "Oh, no, no, no, fuck you..." I thought *I* was part of The Clash, y'know, and I could get away with this, because The Clash could put out whatever they felt like, and people would love it. You know, their later stuff was so vastly different from their earlier stuff, and there were probably some punk-purists who were like "Oh, what is this?" and didn't like it – but it certainly didn't stop them from selling records, because they became such a huge band. But I wasn't in that position, so, in a way, there was regret involved, especially after Mick and I weren't together any more, because you put in so much, and that record was really an extension of that relationship. So, at the time, when it didn't sell and people were saying to me, "Wow. This doesn't sound like you..." You know, when you've only made one album, and then you turn around and you're a whole different person, it can confuse people. If you make a bunch of albums and you're established, and then you start trying something different, that can work better. But, I really don't regret anything in my life, because I'm really happy where I am, and everything you do takes you to where you are. So I've never really sat around and said, oh I wish I hadn't done that... and I do hear from people... I just went through my LPs, and, if I could find it, and if I had a turntable that worked, I'd certainly like to listen to that record again – I'm a terrible archivist of my own stuff. I haven't even listened to it in I couldn't tell you how long. But I'm sure if I listened to it now, with all the years of separation and distance, I'm sure I might think: "Well, yeah, actually: that *was* pretty good. I didn't sound as bad as I thought!" Because I kept thinking back then, feh, I sound weak, I sound weak on this album. But I'm not taking away from the songs, because they were really interesting songs, and I'm sure if I'd done them say eight years into a successful recording career, it would probably have been a very cool thing. Not that it wasn't a cool thing.

Some people refer to it as, like, The Lost Clash Record. How do you feel about that?

EF: Yeah... Yeah, I'll take that. I wouldn't mind being thought of as a lost Clash project. I think that's pretty cool. If people take a listen to it and they can hear something of that, that's fine with me. And if they even *bought* it... Well, that'd be okay by me, too.

HOME

