

Rock Warfare: Dispatches From the Front

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Dateline: West Hartford, Sunday, 29 August, 21:30 hours. It's like a jungle here on this little piece of territory called the Agora. Sweltering. Maddening. This bunker is crammed with more than 3,000 guerrillas full of pluck and spirit — recruits in punk uniforms eager for an encounter. God, how I love it

... Leaders of the commando rock group — The Clash — take the stage with a vengeance. Chairman Joe Strummer wears his hair in a tapered, scraggly Mohawk. Paul Simonon has on camouflage fatigues. Guitarist Mick Jones and drummer Terry Chimes look dressed to snipe. The troops are inspired by their toughness, their aggression. The Clash wants YOU. They reenlist on the spot...

... A writer from an enemy camp wrote several years ago that punk music died the day the Clash signed with CBS records. Dirty fascist swine. The Clash's music is still raw, rebellious and as politically committed as when they first led musical terrorist attacks six years ago.

... The Clash is still the real thing. The group's propaganda campaign to win the hearts and minds of America continues. "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" is on the pop charts. It is non-political, bouncy, danceable. People buy the album, take it home, put it on their stereos and, boom! "Combat Rock" explodes. Political shrapnel rips through their brains. The same thing happens on stage.

But for a while it looked like the stage shows might be a thing of the past. The Clash almost did a kamikaze trip earlier in the summer. Vocalist-guitarist Strummer disappeared during their European tour. Rumors ran rampant that he was kidnapped and tortured into listening to Glenn Frey's new album. It was discovered later that Strummer was actually on secret



Tony Bacewicz / The Hartford Courant

Loyal insurgents encourage The Clash: Mick Jones, Joe Strummer, Terry Chimes and Paul Simonon.

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R & R in Paris. He returned to the group, only to lose drummer Topper Headon due to political differences. Chimes, the original drummer when Clash was a little known group in England, rejoined the band, and the North America tour proceeded in early summer.

The Agora stop was the only small-arena engagement on the itinerary. The group's 20-song, 90-minute show opened with "London Calling" and continued through two encores of rough and tough playing. When the going gets tough, the Clash gets going. It moves with an anarchic optimism rather than an early punk nihilism. "Better to keep

yourself and the cause alive" is one of their many slogans.

Throughout the show the Clash used slide projections to illustrate their music. "Rock the Casbah" was punctuated with flashing images of Ayatollah Khomeini and Menachem Begin. During "Somebody Got Murdered," sleazy tabloid headlines like "Sex Murder in Queens" acted as a visual counterpoint to the haunting music. Other images such as ships being bombed, atomic mushroom clouds and military cemeteries, or a prop such as the flashing light of a police car, contributed to the unrelenting feel that this was a band with a political mission. The Clash doesn't want anyone in its army to be too seduced by the rock and roll rhythms or the polyethnic riffs of its apocalypso beat.

Sonny Curtis's "I Fought the Law

(and the Law Won)," Eddy Grant's "Police on My Back" and V. Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac" acted as contemporary anthems. The band's own sociopolitical songs, such as "Career Opportunities," "Spanish Bombs," "Stand By Me," "Charlie Don't Surf," "Straight to Hell," or "The Call Up," were as exciting live as they were on record, complete with elaborate textures, rhythms and sounds.

There was a sense of looseness to the concert but there was never an extended lack of control, as often reported in previous shows. (A minor flare-up of slam dancing took place toward the end of the show but quickly subsided.)

The Clash also showed its independence when it blasted local radio station WHCN for not playing its music. The attack was angry and retaliatory. But then, rock is hell.



Strummer and Jones