The Clash

By Ira Robbins

WITH THE SUDDEN death of Joe Strummer on December 22, 2002, the story of the Clash finally came to an abrupt end. In fact, the Last Gang in Town, as they called themselves in a song, had packed it in some twenty years earlier, drained of the high ideals and united purpose that had fueled some of the most fervent, exhilarating and provocative rock & roll ever made. No matter. What the Clash – Joe Strummer (vocals, guitar), Mick Jones (guitar, vocals), Paul Simonon (bass, vocals) and alternating drummers Nicky "Topper" Headon and Terry Chimes – achieved was far greater than what it left on tape or burned in the memories of those who saw the band onstage. It was a reckless force of nature that – on a great night, and there surely were many – relinquished conscious thought for careening energy.

Once credibly billed as "the only English group that matters" (but also the last band to believe *rock* mattered), the Clash nailed the point of punk so hard that it stuck. Forever. Loads of young toughs have professed themselves ready for whaddya-got rebellion, but the Clash didn't just sell and succumb to chaos; the Clash lived it. Full time. For seven years the band made huge creative leaps, despite (more likely thanks to) the entropy, much of it self-induced, of its existence. At a time when the record industry was still dubious about, if not downright hostile to, punk, the Clash consistently showed willful disregard for the strangeness of its position:

✦ The band's third British single, "Complete Control," was a vituperative 1977 attack on CBS Records for releasing the Clash's second 45.

✦ A year later, the group shelved punk for the single "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais," a syncopated musical report on a reggae concert.

✦ Without so much as an introduction, someone in the band's dressing room decked the American record producer who was to make the group's second album, *Give 'Em Enough Rope.*

The Last Gang in Town, 1978: Drummer Nicky "Topper" Headon, vocalist/guitarist Joe Strummer, guitarist/vocalist Mick Jones, bassist/vocalist Paul Simonon (from left)


mps, punks,
s, good-time girls &
Clash

Left: Joe Strummer takes a break, 1982. Above: Original Clash drummer Terry Chimes, Jones, Strummer and Simonon (from left) at an early club date.

✦ They overruled photographer Pennie Smith and used her blurry shot of Simonon totaling a bass onstage as the cover of *London Calling*, an album whose graphic design borrowed from that icon of punk Elvis Presley.

✦ In 1982, a tour had to be postponed when Strummer dropped out of sight for more than two weeks in what may well have been a publicity stunt gone awry.

It makes sense that after all that (and more), the Clash would wind up – integrity intact – with records plated in American platinum, thanks to "Train in Vain (Stand by Me)," added to *London Calling* so late in the day that it wasn't mentioned anywhere on the original vinyl release, and "Rock the Casbah," *Combat Rock*'s danceable dissertation on matters in the Middle East, with music written by Topper and a video in which their manager, Bernard Rhodes, was cast against type as an Arab. For the band's encore, in 1991, Levi's used "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" in a U.K. television advertisement, and the song topped the British singles chart – an achievement that had eluded the group during its existence. "London Calling" then became a jingle for Jaguar. What more proof would anyone need that the Clash will last forever?

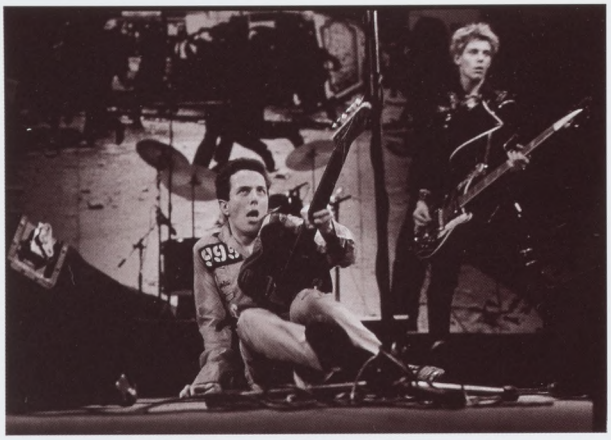
The Clash had a global view of punk's indie spirit

Most important, the Clash showed that a band smart enough to know and care about the world could gain enormous popularity and well-deserved respect, know its rights and still resist the demagogic temptation to act like a leader. Strummer, a uniquely potent songwriter and riveting frontman who could make a compelling case for anything he chose to, never stopped challenging fans to lead, not follow. That made the Clash punk in the greater sense. Not a uniform, a marketing tool or a blanket excuse for fast 4/4 mediocrity but a knot of concentrated fury – a riot of their own – forged from all of rock's best elements, that sneered at what it saw and swore, loudly, that there had to be something better.

While they could be bloody-minded to a fault, the members of the Clash had a global view of punk's independent spirit. To be sure, they knew their rock and reggae (covering everyone from Bobby Fuller and Booker T. to Junior Murvin and Eddy Grant), but they also found inspiration in film, literature and insurgent movements around the world. To Chuck Berry's teen spirit, James Brown's soulful strut, the Stooges' menace, Bob Dylan's articulate devastation, Woody Guthrie's populist conscience, Bob Marley's Third World rage and Pete Townshend's art-school scorn, the Clash brought along Montgomery Clift, Bill Burroughs, Travis Bickle, *Apocalypse Now*, Daniel Ortega, Ho Chi Minh, Salvador Allende and others who sacrificed something – or everything – for a glorious cause, even one as simple and personal as a strong claim on cool. Live fast and die young was for romantic dreamers; the Clash took itself more seriously than that. "Death or glory," the group sang, "becomes just another story." The Clash knew how slippery rock's revolution could be, warning the groups coming up behind them, "Ha, you think it's funny – turning rebellion into money." Not surprisingly, stardom was the only career contradiction the band from "Garageland" could not overcome.

Strummer was born John Graham Mellor on August 21, 1952, in Ankara, Turkey, the son of a British diplomat. Before he was sent to an English boarding school, his family lived in Cairo, Mexico and Germany. Later on, he attended art college in London; busked in the underground (on ukulele, no less!), calling himself Woody;

From clubs to stadiums, the Clash rocked the Casbah from 1976 to 1983.



Half the young punks: A floored Strummer (left) and Simonon rock steady.

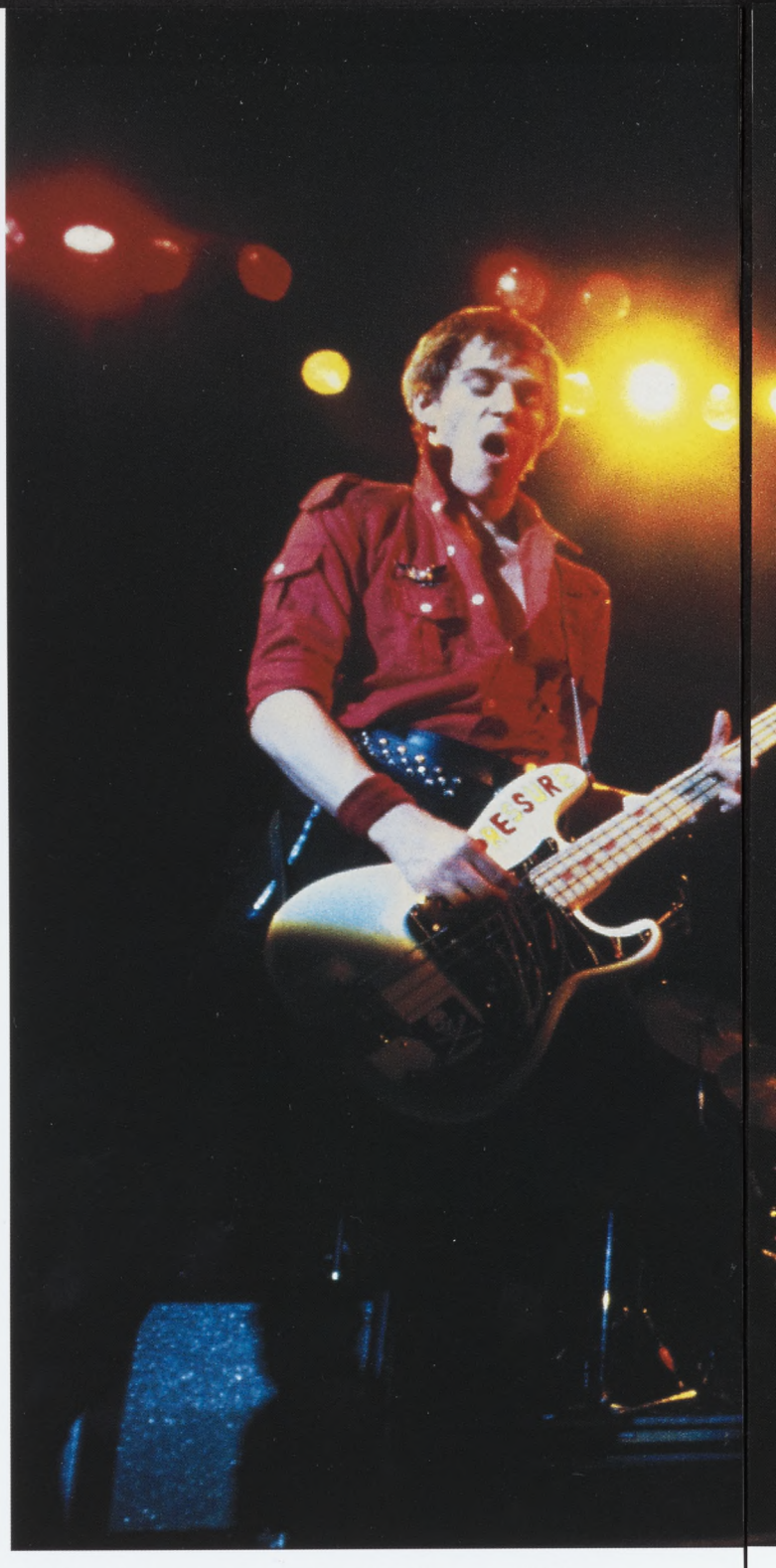
and – come 1974, when nothing was shaking the U.K. but labor strikes and the wane of glam rock – formed a gritty pub-rock band. The 101ers were going strong two years later, when, in short order, he met Jones and Simonon, who were getting a band together, and the Sex Pistols opened for Strummer's group. "I knew that the future was here," he later said. A day later, Joe joined Jones's gang.

Born in London on June 26, 1955, Mick Jones was raised in a working-class high-rise by his grandmother after his parents' divorce. Citing the New York Dolls, MC5 and the Stooges (if not Mott the Hoople, whose producer, Guy Stevens, would take part in the saga as well), Jones formed the now-legendary London SS, which rehearsed for nearly a year but neither recorded nor performed in public. January 1976 marked the arrival of Paul Simonon (also born in London in 1955), a painter who had dropped out of a ritzy art college, accompanying a friend to a band audition. Mick liked the look of him and asked if he was a singer. He wasn't, so Mick taught him bass.

The original Clash was a five-piece of Jones, Simonon, Strummer, drummer Terry Chimes and guitarist Keith Levene, although all concerned have acknowledged that manager Rhodes, who had been a friend and associate of Malcolm McLaren's, was no less crucial to the enterprise. With the group's typical instability, that lineup was history by the time the band set about recording its historic debut (an album initially deemed too raw and rugged for American release that sold a hundred thousand copies as an import). Levene had been sacked, and Chimes – the band's apolitical odd man out – had given his notice. "I wanted one kind of life, and they wanted another," he later explained. Chimes stayed on long enough to make the album, only to find himself credited on the back cover as "Tory Crimes." (His hard-hitting replacement, Nicky "Topper" Headon, proved a boon to the Clash's music but a drag on its existence when he became a junkie. When he and the band parted company in 1982, Chimes returned.)

While Strummer dealt with Big Issues in his writing ("Hate and War," "London's Burning," "Spanish Bombs," "Washington Bullets"), Jones often played a more personal hand. (Tellingly, it was Joe who turned Mick's number about a dull girlfriend into "I'm So Bored With the U.S.A.") Some of the snarling guitarist's best lyrics – on "Stay Free," "Hitsville U.K.," "Should I Stay or Should I Go?" "I'm Not Down" and "Jail Guitar Doors" (a staunch defense of legally beleaguered guitarists Keith Richards, MC5's Wayne Kramer and Fleetwood Mac cofounder Peter Green) – are vulnerable and loving but never soft. For his part, Simonon (who wrote and sang "The Guns of Brixton" on *London Calling*) upped the group's visual abilities and helped steer the ship away from the parochialism of rock, freeing it to explore reggae, dub and hip-hop.

From its earliest days, in the late Seventies, the Clash not only rejected the moribund mess that rock had become but attacked its contemporaries' growing complacency with equal vehemence. The band members also took on one another, their manager, critics, their label and many of those who crossed their path. The



Early on, the Clash's willingness to scrap was legendary

Clash's willingness to scrap was legendary. The songwriters took aim at a dismissive critic ("Garageland"), a boring radio station ("Capital Radio One"), conscription ("The Call Up"), nuclear war ("London Calling"), white-collar drugs ("Koka Kola") and much more. And it wasn't just enemies who got the business. In Don Letts's excellent *Westway to the World* documentary, Simonon enthuses about the band's encounter with American journalist Lester Bangs – and then proudly recalls trying to set the American journalist's jeans on fire for fun.

The year 1977 was pivotal for rock, a time when sides had to be chosen, philosophies fixed, futures decided. Rock's self-consciousness was part of the problem (the pompous arena rock that needed overthrowing) and part of the solution (it could be about more than entertainment); the Clash had it both ways. Band members preached nonconformity while

Headon, Simonon, Jones and Strummer (from left) under a marquee moon

Joe Strummer, flanked by Paul Simonon (left) and Mick Jones, circa 1979

wearing matching spatter-paint clothes. They didn't believe in stardom, but they became stars. While looking for the world, they also saw themselves. "All the Young Punks (New Boots and Contracts)," the song that ends 1978's *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, offers enigmatic words of encouragement with a poignant dose of disillusion: "Face front you got the future / Shining like a piece of gold / But I swear as we get closer / It looks more like a lump of coal."

"The important thing is to encourage people to do things for themselves, think for themselves . . . ," Mick Jones told *Sniffin' Glue* in late 1976. Around the same time, Strummer shared a slightly jaundiced view with *Melody Maker:* "In three years . . . the guys who buy our singles are still going to be shoveling shit down some old chute. Rock doesn't change anything. But, having said that, I still want to try and change things."

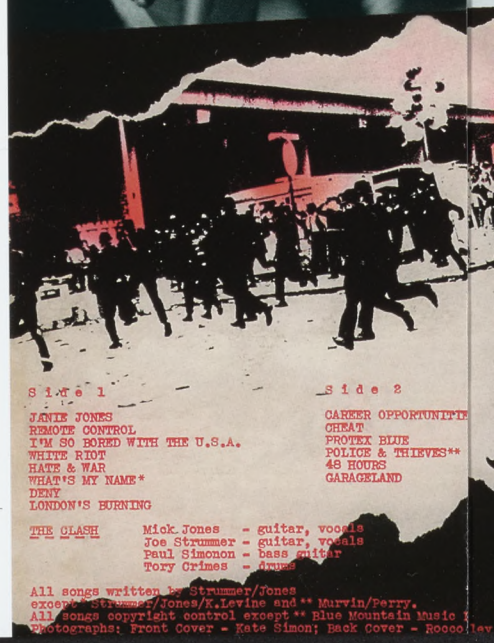
The Clash did. □

London Calling: The Rise of U.K. Punk

In mid-1970s London, a handful of feisty females, first-generation Jamaican musicians and snotty young men created the U.K.'s punky-reggae revolution.

By Vivien Goldman

YOU KNOW THE WAY that time seemed to stretch forever when you were a kid at school? Like how summer vacation seemed to last as long as a year does when you're thirty. Well, just before the dawn of the punk era, there really was a darkest, dreariest hour. England was reeling from strike after strike, electrical power cuts, the three-day week and IRA bombs. Nonetheless, T-E-D-I-U-M ruled in the editorial meetings of the feisty little underdog rock weekly *SOUNDS*, where I was an ace cub reporter in the mid-1970s. The Big Names we were supposed to salivate about, and scrap over with our rivals, *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*, were the same old roll call that had been around for years, since the prehistoric 1960s. It seemed then that teen culture had been reduced to these few rock icons, locked away in luxury limo land, all on an inexorable collision course with middle age and increasing irrelevance: the Rolling Stones, Genesis, Pete



Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's punk hangout-cum-boutique Sex; Sex Pistol Johnny Rotten at an early gig; punkette modeling then-fashionable S&M gear; graffitti-covered Clash fans; the back cover of the Clash's debut album depicting street action; Bromley's most famous punk fan Siouxsie Sioux, leader of the Banshees; Pistols manager McLaren (clockwise from top left)


TIMMIS & RICHARDS
CHEMISTS AND OPTICIANS
CHEMIST
OPTICIAN
SEX
CHAMPION JACK DUPREE
EDDIE
Guitar
BURNS
FERRY DATES
XCLASH
RICHARD
Stereo

The epitome of punk high style: leather 'n' chains choker, leather 'n' spikes wrist cuff, catlike eyeliner and two-toned buzz cut; Clash guitarist Mick Jones gets friendly with the fans; Pretender Chrissie Hynde frolicking with Sex Pistols guitarist Steve Jones while drummer Paul Cook looks on (clockwise from top left)

Townshend, Led Zep, the Floyd, Stevie Winwood. All the venerable musos had become an Old Boys Club – a seemingly impermeable wall, over or around which anyone under twenty would have a hard time crawling.

So it was like dynamite when the call to the punk barricades came, via blurry Xeroxed flyers, for midnight gigs in bizarre and exotic locales – a disused warehouse, a transvestite club, an X-rated flea-pit cinema. In such arcane venues, the weirder the better; the new punk groups like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Damned, the Buzzcocks and the Slits would play all night, and it might cost a shilling (around a quarter) to get in.

The Sex Pistols formed around an unassuming storefront in a then-untrendy bend of the Kings Road run by fashion radical Vivienne Westwood and her man, the Pistols' manager, Malcolm McLaren. They changed the shop's name at whim, with every flicker and glow of the zeitgeist: from the rockabilly and greaser 1950s vibe of Let It Rock, to the S&M–style Sex to the bondage gear–meets–punk attitude Seditionaries. The Pistols' brief career was equally volatile: They must have been banned from playing more than they actually performed. Seeing them onstage during their 1996 reunion tour was a shock. Finally, some two decades after the event, they were as good as producer Chris Thomas made them sound on *Never Mind the Bollocks.*

Fronted by a fourteen-year-old dreadlocked banshee named Ari-Up, fellow punks the Slits delivered deep dub-influenced tunes like "Shoplifting," "Newtown" and "Typical Girls." Their deliberately dissonant look – ballet tutus with "bovver" boots, white-girl dreadlocks tied in ribbons, torn fishnets over colored tights – formed the template for punk-girl style and enabled the existence of Madonna, riot grrrls, Courtney Love, Pink, Macy Gray and Avril Lavigne. It still wasn't easy, but the first seeds of the controversial "women in rock" industry were being sown by the Slits, the Raincoats, and Poly Styrene, with the band X-Ray Spex, et al. Postgroupie, prerock chicks, these spontaneous, strong-headed trailblazers composed the first female musical generation to score even some measure of self-

The Slits show they're women enough to wear mud (and loincloths) on the cover of their 1978 debut, 'Cut'; Aswad, live and direct at the Notting Hill carnival; fashion radical Vivienne Westwood poses next to her leather bondage party clothes inside the Kings Road boutique Sex (clockwise from top)

determination, and their existence is arguably the most radical of punk's contributions.

Wisely tapping reggae maestro Dennis "Matumbi" Bovell to produce their first album, *Cut*, the Slits caused a sensation as they stood proud on the front sleeve, half naked and slathered in mud. But this was no Christina Aguilera–style *Stripped* seduction. The Slits were primal, stomping Earth goddesses who put the fear into my editor at my new paper, *Melody Maker*. That veteran journalist was so appalled at seeing their real girls' bodies flout the *Playboy* aesthetic that, sitting at his desk in front of me, he almost gagged.

Such jolts were desperately needed in complacent old England, still wallowing in the afterglow of having run the many pink bits around the globe. There was a terrifying sameness about a Britain where everything closed at 5:30 p.m. and all day Sundays. The country was sliding deeper into unemployment; after seemingly interminable years in power, the Labour government appeared to have succeeded only in deepening the social inequities it had planned to prevent. The spectacle of the Queen's Silver Jubilee seemed to symbolize everything that was stultifying about the British establishment in 1977. It was definitely time for a new order.

In 1977, it was definitely time for a new order

We were all making it up as we went along; there was no rule book or how-to manual. That celebrity wrangling could be a profession was unimaginable. There was no separation between a band and its fans back then, no velvet rope – unless it was used to tie up your bondage pants. The Clash epitomized that hierarchical breakdown when they invited fans backstage or let them travel on the tour bus. Barring the odd ear being bitten off, security wasn't a big issue; the world of punk was very small and the scene intimate. It didn't take long for the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos of punk – slash it, burn it, stick it with a safety pin and

The Sex Pistols' infamous bad boy Johnny Rotten plays Boy Scout and points out the way to a gaggle of punk lasses; London's first punk club, the Roxy, posting its mind-boggling lineup for January 1977; the cover of X-Ray Spex's single "Identity," featuring lead singer Poly Styrene (clockwise from top)

then flog a fanzine about it – raged up and down the motorways and touched every corner of the Disunited Kingdom. Before Nike corporatized Just Do It, DIY was the punk heartbeat.

Classic example: The exuberant makeup (for boys, too) and topiary hairstyles of some fans from suburban Bromley got them noticed at scene centers like Oxford Street's 100 Club; next thing, they were a band – Siouxsie and the Banshees. The scene's fierce energy also lured young Americans like Chrissie Hynde. She was happy to slum it in London, sleep rough in squats and wear safety-pinned black garbage-bin liners for a photo shoot with her mates in the Moors Murderers – a short-lived band formed around the Sex shop – until she got her band the Pretenders together.

The crucible of the mid-Seventies London streets was restless. Not that it was as brutal as modern-day America, home of drive-bys and school-yard massacres. There were no guns, but there was a lot of hard street action, between punks and skins mostly, and between the fighting fascists of the racist National Front and their sworn enemies like Southall's collective of Misty and the Ruts and Jimmy Pursey's Sham 69. Brawls spawned political action, and the resulting organization, Rock Against Racism, harnessed popular music both broadly and on a grass-roots level. In Britain the alliance of politics and music has continued as governments now almost automatically try to co-opt whoever's charting at the time.

We were all making it up as we went along

The police storming the streets at the August 1976 Notting Hill Carnival (the annual West Indian celebration) was a flash point that galvanized the punk nation as black and white united to fight for a fairer, freer way. The revolution had a soundtrack: the Pistols' "God Save the Queen," the Clash's "White Riot" (inspired by the Carnival riots) and Aswad's "Three Babylon," the last of which was about the antiquated, Kafkaesque "Suss" law, which the police used as an excuse to pick

DJ, videographer and Clash confidant Don Letts; a view from backstage at an early punk show in London; punk's most notorious couple, the late Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen; the author (Vivien Goldman) on the sleeve of her single "Launderette," coproduced by one John Lydon (clockwise from top left)

up thousands of black youths on "suspicion of loitering with intent." 'Nuff respect was shown by Bob Marley when, during a break from mixing what *Time*'s recent Millennium issue would call the "best album of the century," *Exodus*, he chose Aswad to back him on "Punky Reggae Party," recorded in Basing Street Studios (right there on the Carnival route) and produced by dub master Lee "Scratch" Perry.

For a couple of glorious years, London, with its libertarian sense of enfranchisement, was the center of the cultural universe. Anyone could do it, and it seemed like almost everyone did – and had fun doing so. At night, punks and dreads would rock together at shebeens, illegal after-hours drinking clubs where the Jamaican DJs showed the Brits how to party – a lesson that would blossom again in warehouse and rave culture. Reggae became our tribal religion. Our high priests were great talents like Bob Marley, Jacob Miller and Dennis Brown, all now gone, who were still committing high ideals to vinyl over rugged steppers riddims (rhythms). Pogo dancing and gobbing (spitting on the band) were refined to arts at the first punk club, Soho's Roxy, where dreadlocked DJ and future Clash videographer Don Letts spun the apocalyptic dub plates of golden-age reggae like Culture's anthem "Two Sevens Clash" and Dennis Brown's "Revolution." From the Clash to the Pistols, the Ruts to Generation X, with its singer, Billy Idol: All the white punks heeded Jamaica's call, even if by simply dabbling in dub. I accompanied Johnny Rotten, after he quit the Sex Pistols, on his first trip to Jamaica; I hung out in the studio while he recorded a long-lost track at Lee Perry's Black Ark Studios in Kingston. I well remember how all the dreads slapped him on the back, praising him, " 'God Save the Queen,' yes, mon!" The Rotten One basked in their approval.

Odd how, though that world is technically gone, it still seems so resonant. Punk attitude and spirit proved to be as permanent as a tattoo on music and youth culture. Ask Nirvana and the Strokes. And right now, as the music business is mutating into something new and unpredictable, punk's DIY style still looks as pretty and practical as a safety pin. □

["Livicated" to the memory of Joe Strummer.]