Celebrating the politics of punk

Written by Mark Perryman in Music 1406

8th April is the 40th Anniversary of The Clash's debut album. Mark Perryman reminds us what the 1977 punk and politics mix was all about.

The birth of punk for most is dated on or round 1976, with the November release that year of the Sex Pistols' Anarchy in the UK. Music and movement were catapulted into the 'filth and fury' headlines via the band's expletive-strewn Bill Grundy TV interview.

More Situationist than Anarchist, Rotten and the rest were of course key to the detonation of a youthful mood of revolt alongside the not entirely dissimilar The Damned, Manchester's Buzzcocks and the more trad rock Stranglers. Giving the boy bands a run for their money, The Slits pushed perhaps hardest at punk's musical boundaries, their Typical Girls track quite unlike what the others were recording.

But it was The Clash who more than anyone symbolised the punk and politics mix, showcased on their debut album The Clash, released 40 years ago on 8th April 1977. From being bored with the USA and angrily demanding a riot of their own, via hate and war to non-existent career opportunities, fourteen tracks, played at furious speed to produce two-minute classics. The one exception was their inspired cover version of Junior Marvin and Lee 'Scratch' Perry's Police and Thieves, played slow, the lyrics almost spoken rather than sung, backed by a pitch-perfect reggae beat.

The album cover shows the youthful threesome of Strummer, Jones and Simonon in their artfully stencilled shirts and jackets that was to become their signature stagewear, completed by the obligatory skinny jeans, white socks, and black DMs. The print quality is purposely poor to add a degree of authenticity that this band more than most hardly needed. But it was the back cover that is the more telling. A scene from the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival Riots with the Met's boys in blue, these were the days before RoboCop style body armour, riot shields, helmets with visors, in hot pursuit of black youth retreating and regrouping under the Westway flyover.

\[MP police 2\]

It was that experience in '76 that inspired The Clash's anthemic White Riot and the lines 'WHITE RIOT! I WANNA RIOT. WHITE RIOT! A RIOT OF MY OWN.' At the time the National Front's streetfighting racist army was laying waste wherever they marched, their leaders John Tyndall and Martin Webster were household names, and the NF was getting enough votes to suggest an electoral
breakthrough might be a possibility. The potential for ‘White Riot’ to be misinterpreted then, and now too, is obvious. But the band’s intent couldn’t be clearer. Living and recording in and around the Westway, they embraced the changes this West London community had undergone since the 1950s. Caribbean music, food and fashions were as much a part of The Clash as rock and roll, Sunday roast and safety pins. They sought to share the spirit of Black defiance, not oppose it.

All the power is in the hands
Of people rich enough to buy it,
While we walk the streets
Too chicken to even try it.
And everybody does what they’re told to
And everybody eats supermarket soul food!

A year after the album’s release, The Clash headlined the first Rock against Racism carnival in London’s Victoria Park. The dayglo politics of this musical culture of resistance fitted perfectly with the agitprop look and lyrics of the band, as it did with Polly Styrene of X-Ray Spex’s punk feminism, Tom Robinson’s liberatory Sing If You’re Glad to Be Gay, and Birmingham’s Steel Pulse with tales of a Handsworth Revolution. This wasn’t just a line up that commercial promoters in ’78 would die for, it was a platform to challenge prejudice both without and within that we could dance to. In her book 1988 The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion, Caroline Coon predicted of The Clash that "their acute awareness, and ability to articulate the essence of the era which inspires their music, will make their contribution to the history of rock of lasting significance. Happy times are here again."

The Clash inspired, and continue to inspire, a wave of bands who play music we can dance to and march to in equal measure. Belfast’s Stiff Little Fingers, Southall’s Ruts, and the Au Pairs stand out from back then. Poets too, who often styled themselves as ranters, like Seething Wells, and of course Atila the Stockbroker. Then came the unforgettable and much-missed Redskins and the hardy perennial favourite, Billy Bragg. Today? A new wave (sic) of bands whose influences, musically and politically, can be traced back to ’77 era Clash would certainly include The Wakes, The Hurriers, Thee Faction, Joe Solo, Louise Distras, Captain Ska, Sian McGowan and more. Off the musical beaten track yet holding out for a better tomorrow with tunes to match!

Like all successful musicians The Clash did become celebrities, their appeal went mainstream, and the venues became bigger and bigger. But through force of circumstance the band bailed out before they reached U2’s overblown proportions, or outstayed their musical welcome to play into their dotage Rolling Stones style. 1977 is a year to remember but not to fossilise - that would be the antithesis of everything they represented. As the final track from the album put it:

I don’t want to hear about what the rich are doing, I don’t want to go to where, where the rich are going.

Garageland. That’s where they came from and never entirely left either. Its why more than anything else ’77 Clash in 2017 matter still.

MP Clash ad for Tweet

’77 Clash Night is presented by Philosophy Football in association with the RMT and supported by the FBU, Brigadista Ale and R2 Magazine. Saturday 8th April, the 40th anniversary of the release of The Clash Debut Album side one played live ‘as was’, side two ‘played now’ by artists of today remixing and rewriting the originals. At Rich Mix, Shoreditch, East London. Tickets just £9.99 from here.

’77 Clash T-shirt range available now from Philosophy Football. This is an extended version of an article first published in the Morning Star.
Woodstock revisited, held that summer.

Woodstock preserved the memory of the hippie movement and the late 1960s, a period of social and cultural upheaval. The festival, held in 1969, was a symbol of counterculture and anti-war sentiment. The music, art, and atmosphere of Woodstock have been remembered as a time of freedom and expression.

The Grateful Dead, a prominent band of the time, performed at Woodstock. Their music and the music of other groups like Jethro Tull and Crosby, Stills, and Nash captured the spirit of the era. The event also had an impact on the music industry, leading to increased interest in rock and roll and the development of the concept of a music festival.

Woodstock's legacy continues to influence popular culture, with its symbol of peace and love inspiring future generations. The festival's message of unity and freedom remains relevant today, as people continue to seek ways to connect and express themselves through art and music.