A Brief Story of The Clash, Radio & the Fifth Estate

Book review

Bill Blank

2015

a review of

Stealing All Transmissions: The Secret History of The Clash by Randal Doane, Foreword by Barry "The Baker" Auguste, 2014, PM Press, 192 pp. $15.95 pmpress.org

In December 1979, after stumbling through my first trimester at Michigan State University, I took the allotted three weeks off in suburban Detroit. While the media began priming the struggling city as host of the upcoming Republican National Convention (and a probable Ronald Reagan presidency), a vague desperation overtook me, to search for alternatives, first on the radio and then in the press.

This meant turning the knobs between college and rock FM radio while scanning the pages of Detroit's *Creem* magazine and the *Fifth Estate*, the *Village Voice*, or Michael Moore's *Michigan Voice*, anxiously yearning for the sound of something beyond formula rock playlists. Something relevant, rebellious, and astonishing. Within my late teenage isolation, a restless anticipation swelled for punk rock from England, particularly from one group known as The Clash.

The initial song, "London Calling," from their double album by the same name (released January 1980 in the US), would always jump from the speaker, with the snarling lead singer, Joe Strummer, introducing a still refreshing stance; "London Calling/Now don't look at us/Phony Beatlemania has bitten the dust."

In *Stealing All Transmissions*, author (and assistant dean at Oberlin College) Randal Doane tries to capture this unique, roughly three-year historical moment (1979–82) when The Clash, aided by an excited alternative press and select key radio support, led a second British invasion of high-energy rock and roll, one often infused with explicit left-wing politics.

As proclaimed by the late bandleader Strummer, "We're anti-fascist, anti-violence, we're anti-racist and pro-creative. We're against ignorance."

More succinctly, the band frequently hyped as "The Only Band That Matters," was also the apex of political rock or protest music. Although not explicitly anarchist, naming one of their albums after the left nationalist Nicaraguan Sandinistas and making catchy power chord statements about the Spanish Civil War (not Revolution, as anarchists define it) in "Spanish Bombs," or how capitalism creates the obedience required for submission to daily life in "Clampdown," are samples of how unusually subversive The Clash were at the time–and how timeless they remain.

A partial list of just some of the more well-known anarchist bands heavily influenced by The Clash could include Anti-Flag, Chumbawamba, Citizen Fish, Crass (where singer Steve Ignorant took up Strummer's challenge to form a better band), the Dead Kennedys, DOA, MDC, The Minutemen (with homage in "History Lesson Part II"), Poison Girls and, most recently, Pussy Riot. Yet even the most popular socially conscious leftist descendants, such as Billy Bragg, Rage Against the Machine, or Public Enemy, never equaled the impact of The Clash. It's notable that the first Clash album, containing accelerated proto-punk screamers like "I'm So Bored with the USA" and "White Riot," remains the all-time best selling import in the US, eclipsing any Beatles LP.

Doane's book oddly devotes much of its focus to the late 1970s New York alternative airwaves, chiefly the liberal WNEW-FM, and the even more free-form WPIC-FM, where rebellious DJs (and some more veteran rockers like Lou Reed) enjoyed a tenuous relationship with the underground sounds contrasting the more expensively produced, corporate rock dominating mainstream press, radio, and profits.

Aging East Coasters might treasure the author's detailed reminiscing, such as how Strummer openly made fun of corporate rock by the Eagles, Steely Dan, and Ted Nugent as early as 1979 (revealing some of the band's more subtle humor), but such memory detours overstate Doane's thesis on the converging forces of rock promotion.

Nationally, commercial radio (and even some major college outlets) would soon become more corporatized, with content and airtime regulated down to the minute (and eventually down to the seconds). Bands like The Clash benefited greatly from these last gasps of marketable freedom (even mockingly embraced in "Complete Control"). As they conquered Manhattan and America in subsequent tours, The Clash seemed like one of the few bands undaunted by fans or rivals crying "sell-out," as they retained the intense live performance as the lifeblood of their existence.

Doane spends four pages explaining the iconic photo of the London Calling LP cover, but neglects the main story of how a truly amazing agitprop band deserved such a large and enthusiastic following.

A more thorough and insightful explanation of The Clash can better be found on film, with the underrated 2007 documentary Joe Strummer: *The Future is Unwritten*, directed by Julien Temple. That visual and audio summary of a generation's lost spokesman in the vein of Bob Dylan, John Lennon, and Woody Guthrie comes through in electric Clash footage, and rare Strummer interviews. The ever-active Strummer died way too young at 50 of an undetected heart ailment in 2002.

The Clash, despite its inherent contradictions as a major label (Columbia) rock 'n' roll band, remains a bridge to more radical politics for many, not just for their music and lyrics, but also for their sense of timing and urgency.

Despite the typical rock star idolatry and post-Lennon assassination fears, The Clash kept trying to reduce the distance between performer and audience, including frequently inviting audiences to join them onstage at some point during their legendary shows, much to the dismay of security personnel. Strummer and the band routinely made sure interested fans could meet up with them after the show in their dressing room or outside their tour bus to continue the dialogue (this openness once cost them some stolen equipment at a show in East Lansing, Mich.).

On a magical summer night in Detroit's Grand Circus Theater, I eagerly caught The Clash at the peak of their commercial success, when their only Top Ten hit, "Rock the Casbah," could be heard all over pop and rock radio not many months before the band began to implode.

In their sweaty dressing room after easily one of the best concerts I ever attended, Strummer shared his fondness for Motown, the Stooges and the MC5 (a few years later, the MC5's lead singer, Rob Tyner, told me he thought The Clash impressively took what they were trying to do even further than the MC5 ever had).

I asked for Strummer's autograph, blurting out how The Clash that night inspired me to drop out of college and pursue my own dream. Before I could specifically declare my aspirations, Strummer simply asked, "What's the name of your band?"

Soon, I would determinedly embark on a worthwhile ten- year hiatus from college, where I kept trying to link the energetic protest rock of my band to literature tables dominated by *Fifth Estate* back issues we set at the rear of smoky bars and dark venues where we played (with a Clash cover or two often breaking up our song list of originals).

In this new age of atomized, digitized music, where the internet dispenses and diffuses millions of songs disconnected from any real political movement, the resilience of live music still proliferates in the music of hundreds of anarchist bands unknown except to the related communities.

As at the dawn of recorded music, the stage and the street is now where most acts once again make their impact– and where pockets of meaningful resistance continue to echo the power of The Clash.

That signed address book with Joe Strummer wishing, "Good luck to The Blanks," remains in the top drawer of my writing desk.

Bill Blank (William R. Boyer) left the drums, keyboards, and the songs in 1999 to teach at a public high school on the northwest border of Detroit. He teaches there still.

Bill Blank
A Brief Story of The Clash, Radio & the Fifth Estate
Book review
2015

https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/393-spring-2015/a-brief-story-of-the-clash-radio-the-fifth-esta
Fifth Estate #393, Spring 2015

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net