

What are we going to do now?

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A review of

The Clash: All the Albums, All the Songs by Martin Popoff. PM Press, 2022

Prolific Canadian music journalist Martin Popoff has written a remarkably exhaustive, song-by-song exhumation of the Clash, the astonishing rock and roll group (1976–1986) once popularly dubbed, “The only band that matters.”

The meticulous, chronological study examines five singles and six full-length albums, including one double-LP (*London Calling*) and one triple-disc (*Sandinista!*).

Even non-Clash fans may marvel at Popoff’s painstaking research, including the historical connections to such diverse influences as Woody Guthrie, Lee “Scratch” Perry, the Kinks, and the Sex Pistols.

The methodical, briskly-paced prose presents a convincing appraisal of probably the most influential protest music in the history of pop culture. The Clash’s raucous, expansive sonic assaults and unashamedly political verse are fully dissected, with digressions of trivia that oddly amplify a fascinating collision of revolutionary art, one in constant conflict and creativity. It’s as if Popoff is carefully documenting an anthropological time-capsule for future civilizations.

He also begins unpacking some unresolvable contradictions by the fourth Clash track (and first single), the dubiously named *White Riot*, sparked by their witnessing of the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival riot in West London, where police violently harassed Black youth. The paradox underscores this exhilarating band, this peculiar book, and the subtle intellect of their manically driven front-man, the late Joe Strummer, in their meteoric rise to unusual fame.

Black man gotta lot a problems

But they don’t mind throwing a brick

White people go to school

Where they teach you how to be thick

The author unearths plenty of solid gold for even the most die-hard Clash fanatics like me in this deep dive discography. I never knew, for instance, how one of their most haunting songs, “Up in Heaven (Not Only Here),” ends with a repeated refrain unashamedly lifted from an obscure Phil Ochs song, “United Fruit.” Strummer’s plaintive wailing understates his taking of the baton from the muckraking folk music of Ochs.

Of course, the Clash were not the only band that mattered. Many subsequent groups known for expressing similar social urgency have noted the Clash as a major influence. As Clash-inspired protest rocker Billy Bragg recently mused on stage in Detroit, music cannot change the world, but it sure can help inspire you to change it.

Still, all this confessional documentation inadvertently triggers some nagging questions:

Can art offer sustainable meaning when we are now all so saturated with screen stimuli? Can any of this agit-prop change anything? Does rock 'n' roll still matter?

Despite Popoff's meticulous insight into the Clash, he generally sidesteps the agitation potential of the music for social upheaval. This oversight should not discourage readers and audiophiles to reconsider how art, literature, and music periodically influences some major political transformations and whether it ever will again.

For example, time-travel back to the origins of the American Civil War. One will uncover Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial 1852 anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as the second best-selling book of the entire 1800s (behind only that other work of fiction, the Bible). While fueling activists in the north and infuriating slavers in the south, more militant abolitionists like John Brown would claim Stowe's work a poor substitute for failed action against ending slavery.

Even as Abraham Lincoln half-jokingly blames Stowe for inciting the conflict, Brown's shocking yet failed raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry (with the resulting execution of him and his captured insurgents) ultimately ignites the bloodiest war in this hemisphere along with more incendiary art and commentary.

Internationally known writers Victor Hugo, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman and most significantly, Frederick Douglass, all vehemently protested Brown's hanging.

Still, it's the dedicatory marching song, "John Brown's Body," morphing into the most common rallying cry for all union troops, both white and Black, singing in unison throughout the war and into the early civil rights movement. Here, an omnipresent anthem, prototype protest music, directly aided the war against slavery.

Another instance of art stirring actual revolutionary action surfaces a century later in poet André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, with Breton's timely speaking tour to Haiti in late 1945. According to Michael Lowy, emeritus research director at the National Center for Scientific Research, Breton unexpectedly helps instigate an overthrow of at least one repressive Haitian regime which seized most copies of the *La Ruche* "Revolutionary Papers" that had published Breton's anti-colonial speeches.

As anarchist French philosopher Jacques Ellul explained in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965), there are crucial distinctions between agitation propaganda, where the objective is to incite frustrated humans to decisive action and integration propaganda, where the goal is to better assimilate people as consumers into the needs of the market. If we march back to the Clash, their attempts at agitprop, largely subsidized by CBS, their major corporate recording label, epitomize many of these crucial complications.

For example, did the December 1979 reggae call-to-action wrath in "Guns of Brixton," from the momentous *London Calling* LP help provoke or merely predict the April 1981 Brixton riots in South London between angry, lower class, mostly Black youth and rampaging police?

Or, examine their only top ten hit, the danceable and easily recognizable single, "Rock the Casbah." As Popoff explains, the band intended the satire as hard-hitting humor against an Iranian ban on western music. Sadly, the ubiquitous track became both a piped-in U.S. combat soundtrack and soldier graffiti scrawled on bombs during the 1991 invasion of Iraq. The vigilantly anti-war Strummer openly wept upon first hearing how disturbingly his lyrics had been exploited.

It's a critical detail foreshadowing the limits of revolutionary rock in even the pre-internet era.

My own daily audio nutrition with the Clash didn't just satiate, it galvanized. It powered my exit from the confines of Marxist-leaning academia to the more activist, anti-authoritarian Detroit underground, and inspiringly, the Fifth Estate milieu and my own protest music with my band, The Blanks.

During the 1980s, Detroit Cass Corridor punk rock events, packed with animated, mostly white suburbanite exiles, noted such informal conversions as hardly isolated fashion. A local alternative band might rock a Clash cut mixed with topical originals at a fundraiser for the local Evergreen Alliance fighting the world's largest trash incinerator, with a related on-site lit table publicizing a demonstration the next weekend, and so on.

Simply put, the dedicated protest rock seemed to be feeding a movement, not just a moment.

In 1982, meeting the Clash for the first time backstage (Strummer famously welcomed fan access after any show), I shared my intentions of dropping out of college, getting more involved in anti-nuke activism, but before I could finish my rambling confession, Strummer simply asked, "What's the name of your band?"

Now the question might only be, "What's your website? Your Twitter handle?"

You grow up

And you calm down

Working for the Clampdown

On December 22, 2002, after enjoying three years in an ever-developing and gratifying band project, the Mescaleros, Strummer died suddenly at 50 from an undiagnosed heart defect. In just a couple of months, the Clash were scheduled to reunite in a long anticipated live reunion with their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Strummer's sudden passing predated the Internet's radical transformation of how music would be consumed and absorbed into a screen-dominated culture, i.e., integration propaganda. We can infer Strummer would likely be unimpressed with the overwhelming dominance of the Cloud, where the vast sea of available music is so often reduced to web visits and video Likes.

Would Strummer just have shrugged when one Clash track, "Straight to Hell," gets sampled by Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A. into her biggest global hit, "Paper Planes?" Her hypnotically rhythmic Clash-based satire of American anti-immigrant fears has reached over 246 million YouTube views.

To quote the Clash, from: "White Man in Hammersmith Palis:"

The new groups are not concerned

With what there is to be learned

They got Burton suits

Ha, they think it's funny

Turning rebellion into money.

Even less impressive, the dominance of corporate-controlled streaming audio, with its force-feeding algorithms of supposedly similar songs from millions of choices down to a precious few hundred.

On Spotify, with its over 456 million users, only about four percent of the 95 percent available songs are ever streamed, with 20 percent of the catalog never streamed even once.

With apologies to decades of passionate dedication to topical singer/songwriters like David Rovics, here are some unsettling conclusions:

1. Recent social movements like Black Lives Matter relied little on music spreading the word.
2. Everyone's expressing, but very few are inspiring.
3. Music no longer matters so much.

The Clash: All the Albums, All the Songs forces Popoff to paint himself into a miserable chronological corner with the final universally panned release, *Cut the Crap*.

Disowned by Strummer and anyone connected with the half-baked project, except for their blubbering manager, Bernie Rhodes, Popoff rightly dismisses the throwaway last song ("Life is Wild") as a "collapse in a dogpile of noise."

The ambitious book then ends abruptly, as if the Clash fought the law and the law won (a long-time favorite Clash cover), and the clampdown threw away the key.

William R. Boyer still loiters around an urban high school classroom in the Detroit area, his union HQ, and his weekly Substack column at williamrboyer.substack.com/publish

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