

# Last Night A Record Changed My Life

## Wanna riot of my own

Locked in a world of hippies and disco there was one way out for Billy Bragg: The Clash's raw punk

**W**HEN I HEARD THE CLASH, IT changed everything for me. It was a pivotal thing in my life – this punk ethic that anyone could do it. Before that, even though I was playing a bit in my mum's back room, I had no idea *anyone* could play a concert at somewhere like Earls Court. Me and my friend Wiggy had been to see the Stones there in '76 but we had no concept of how that actually happened. That was for these 'stars', not for the likes of us. That only changed when I saw The Clash.

They were playing the Rainbow with The Jam [April 1977]. I'd just seen The Jam at the Nashville, which is why I went along. The Jam fitted in with the stuff I was into – the Stones, The Small Faces – because they were Modish and sounded live. You didn't have to be a punk to like them, they were more Mod – which may seem trivial now but was very important at the time. But that night the stage was too big for The Jam: no matter how much they jumped around they couldn't fill it.

When The Clash came on, it was unbelievable.

They were all the things we liked about The Rolling Stones but with energy. And the key thing was they were 19, just like us. (*Are you sure?* - Ed)

They had this incredible *Zeitgeisty* rhetoric that made me feel being 19 and coming from London was the most significant thing you could ever do.

When I bought the album, there was so much on there that reflected the way we felt and the frustrations that we had. You know, London's Burning and I'm So Bored With The USA at the height of America being all over the place. 1977 was also the year of John Travolta and disco, so to hear that record was amazing. And the line "we are a garage band, we come from garageland", that was us. It made us feel that we were involved in something that was actually happening rather than just observing it. We weren't reading about it having happened, like we had to

**"To hear this record in the year of John Travolta was just amazing."**

with Mod and the bloody hippies. Before that it was so frustrating – all this promise in underground music and we got nothing except Emerson, Lake And Palmer and a load of bloody sixth formers. With punk it was like our generation saying, "Right, if you're not going to do anything about it, get out the way and give us a go." Year Zero, that's what it was, and the first Clash album was the declaration of that.

Musically, they were much more than furious, straight-ahead punks. You



### The Clash

#### THE CLASH

**Recorded:** CBS Studios, London, February 1977

**Released:** April 1977 (UK)

**Chart Peak:** 12 (UK), 100 (US)

**Personnel:** Joe Strummer (guitar, vocals), Mick Jones (guitar, vocals), Paul Simonon (bass), Terry 'Tory Crimes' Chimes (drums).

**Tracks:** Janie Jones / Remote Control / I'm So Bored With The USA / White Riot / Hate And War / What's My Name / Deny / London's Burning / Career Opportunities / Cheat / Protex Blue / Police And Thieves / 48 Hours / Garageland

It started badly. The receptionist at CBS Studios mistook the paint splattered four-piece for workmen, and once in the building they left producer Mickey Foote and engineer Simon Humphrey more than a little bewildered by their "unorthodox" methods of recording. "They wouldn't shake my hand because I was a hippy," Humphrey notes. Hours were often wasted because none of the group fancied being first in and thus uncool. But the record that emerged stands alongside *Never Mind The Bollocks* as British punk's apogee, wrapping fury, adrenaline and ideology into three-minute classics. "It ain't punk, it ain't New Wave," barked Mick Jones. "Call it what you want, all the terms stink. Call it rock'n'roll."

know, [Junior] Murvin and reggae and Marley, stuff that had only begun to break through in a popular sense in the previous 12 months. I mean, one of the stand-out tracks on the album is Police And Thieves, and there's no hint of that kind of stuff on the albums by The Damned or the Pistols. They did it without playing cod reggae but by taking it and souping it up, making it spiky. Just two chords as well.

It changed everything I knew about how and why to make music. It's all from the grooves of that album. They are the values I still have. The reason I got pissed off with the Manic Street Preachers [the now infamous Glastonbury Toilet incident] is because I felt in some ways we had come from that same mould, the way we both felt about The Clash, which is why I was so disappointed in them.

After The Clash everybody I knew was in a band. It was the push that took me beyond the rehearsal rooms to saying, I can do this, and standing up in a pub and performing. It took a while because they made me rethink how to write, to stop just rewriting Stones songs. Even then it took me a year or two with Riff Raff before I stopped sounding like The Clash.

You know, I find it difficult to recognise the person I was before that album, before the ideas that came to me as a result of it. The person before that was called Steven Bragg, someone I went to school with. Later on I became disappointed in The Clash, because they gave me the impression with that album they could change the world by singing songs about it and I believed them. Now I don't think music can change the world, but The Clash proved to me that it can change your perspective on the world. It definitely changed mine. It changed the way I looked at myself, the music industry and the world.

Interview by Jon Bennett

**Billy Bragg:**  
"Before this it was all bloody Emerson Lake And Palmer."

