

London
February 1976

Mick Jones sees the Sex Pistols perform for the first time and is blown away. In fact, he is inspired to form a new band based on that performance. With the help of manager Bernie Rhodes, Jones got Paul Simonon to join him on bass, Keith Levene to join him on guitar, and Jones' old bandmate, Terry Chimes, to play drums.

Although Jones sang, the band still wanted a lead singer, but it took a while for Rhodes to find them one. As it turns out, Rhodes found them the perfect one. John Graham Mellor, known more by his stage name, "Joe Strummer." Though he was already in a band called the 101ers at the time, Strummer was ALSO heavily inspired to start something new after watching the Sex Pistols, as it turns out. After Rhodes convinced Strummer that this new band would "rival the Pistols," Strummer left the 101ers to join Jones, Simonon, Levene, and Chimes.

After a few successful rehearsals in the summer of 1976, the band explored some different names. The Weak Heartdrops? Nope. The Psychotic Negatives? Nah. Finally, Simonon came up with "The Clash" after noticing the word "clash" often kept showing up in newspaper articles he read.

The Clash played their first show on July 4, 1976, opening up for the Sex Pistols at the Black Swan in Sheffield.¹ Soon after that, members of The Clash and Sex Pistols, as well as others in what was becoming known as the first "punk rock" scene in London, saw the Ramones, a rising American punk rock band. "Punk rock" was deeply influenced by the garage rock of the 1960s but took on an ethos of sticking a middle finger to all the overproduced, corporate mainstream rock of the era. The members of The Clash fully embraced the rebelliousness of punk rock. That said, they were also determined to create their own sound, separate from the Sex Pistols and the Ramones. Strummer and Jones wrote songs as a team, with Strummer often coming up with the words first. Unlike most songwriters, Strummer wrote about social and political issues, often with a left-leaning perspective.

The Clash played their second show on August 29, 1976 at The Screen on the Green in London, once again opening for the Sex Pistols and also playing with another eventually legendary band called Buzzcocks. Music historians say that single show greatly helped solidify the British punk scene into an entire movement. The day after this, Strummer and Simonon got caught up in a confrontation between young black men and the police at the Notting Hill Carnival.² This inspired Strummer to write a song called "White Riot," which eventually would become the band's first single.

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<https://www.exposedmagazine.co.uk/news/historic-sheffield-venue-nominated-as-asset-of-community-value/>

² http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/30/newsid_2511000/2511059.stm

In September, Levene was kicked out of the band. Levene would later form the influential “post-punk” band Public Image Ltd. with John Lydon of the Sex Pistols. The Clash played their first show without Levene on September 21, part of another legendary concert called 100 Club Punk Special with Siouxsie and the Banshees and...you guessed it...the Sex Pistols. Right before the Clash was to TOUR with the Sex Pistols in November, Chimes left the band, so they recruited Rob Harper to temporarily replace him.

By January, The Clash, as well as a bunch of other London-based punk rock bands I should say, were catching the attention of business folks looking to cash in on the new trend. Even though the Clash had yet to headline a gig, Columbia Records approached them, and the band ultimately signed a deal with them for £100,000. Even though some punk rockers said The Clash had quickly sold out, the band still had to pay their own way for just about everything, including tours and recording costs. Hey speaking of recording, Jones, Strummer, and Simonon recorded some of their songs at CBS Studio 3 beginning in February. Terry Chimes even came back to record with them and stuck around again with the band for the next few months. Mickey Foote, who had previously run sound at their concerts, produced the recordings.

Columbia released “White Riot” in the United Kingdom on March 18, 1977. It was a controversial song that talked trash about social class and racism, and most radio stations were scared to play it. Still, today the song is considered a punk rock classic.

“White Riot” also appeared on The Clash’s self-titled studio album, released in the UK by Columbia on April 8, 1977. Critics absolutely adored it, and today it’s considered one of the greatest debut albums and one of the greatest PUNK ROCK albums of all time. Mark Perry said of it in the punk zine *Sniffin’ Glue*: “The Clash album is like a mirror. It reflects all the shit. It shows us the truth. To me, it is the most important album ever released.” Despite not getting any radio airplay, The Clash’s self-titled debut got all the way up to number 12 on the UK album charts. It wasn’t released in the United States until two years later. Before then, it became the biggest-selling import of all time in the United States.³

Other stand-out songs on the self-titled debut were the second single, “Remote Control,” “Janie Jones,” “London’s Burning,” and “Police & Thieves,” a reggae cover that sounds way different from the rest of the album.

And you might be wondering why the self-titled debut only features Jones, Strummer, and Simonon. Well, that’s because by the time the album came out, Chimes had left the band. Fortunately for them, Jones had met a talented drummer named Topper Headon, who was more than happy to join. Headon also was quite good at the piano.

Once again a four-piece, The Clash became headliners for the first time as they went on the White Riot Tour beginning in May. At a show at the Rainbow Theatre in London, fans destroyed seats and chaos ensued. After a show in Newcastle, police arrested both Strummer and Headon for stealing pillowcases from their hotel room. I’m not joking. Soon after this, police

³ <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-clash-mn0000075747/biography>

arrested Strummer and Headon again, this time for spray-painting the band's name on a wall inside a hotel.

Soon the band was getting frustrated with how their record label, Columbia, was promoting their stuff. And what's a great way to express that frustration? Through a song, of course. In July, the band recorded their first song with Headon, "Complete Control." Despite the fact that the song talked trash about Columbia, Columbia released it as a single on September 23, 1977. Well they were good sports, then, weren't they. Orrrr probably didn't realize what the song was about. Anyway, "Complete Control" got lots of radio airplay.

In October, the Clash went on tour again. The first show was supposed to happen in Belfast, but it got canceled at the last minute. In response, punks blocked a road outside the venue, leading to a confrontation between them and the police.⁴ Regardless, no one was seriously harmed and the tour continued afterward.

By early 1978, more mainstream media outlets were startin' to kinda notice The Clash, and it was quite weird to the band. Columbia released another single by them, "Clash City Rockers," and it got all the way up to number 35 on the UK Singles Chart.

In March 1978, the band began recording some new songs with producer Sandy Pearlman. One day during rehearsals, Simonon and Headon went up to the roof to shoot at pigeons with an air rifle- but these weren't normal pigeons. In fact, they were quite expensive racing pigeons. Due to this, police ultimately arrested Simonon and Headon. They even got charged with attempted manslaughter, but that was dropped and they just had to pay fines.⁵ This whole ordeal inspired the song "Guns on the Roof."

But The Clash wasn't done...uh...clashing with the law yet. On July 4, 1978, they played a gig at The Apollo in Glasgow. The band didn't like how the bouncers were beating people up at the show who were apparently just having fun in one of the earliest known mosh pits. After Strummer smashed a bottle, police immediately arrested him. After Simonon tried to pull Strummer free, they arrested him too.⁶ By this time, The Clash had long established the street cred to back up their rebellious punk image.

Meanwhile, the band had wrapped up what would become their second studio album, *Give 'em Enough Rope*, released by Columbia on November 10, 1978. It featured two singles: "Tommy Gun" and "English Civil War." Both were big radio hits in the UK. With "Tommy Gun," the band released their first music video. "English Civil War" warned against the rise of political reactionaries. *Give 'em Enough Rope* also featured the aforementioned "Guns on the Roof." Despite being more overtly political, the album got all the way up to number two on the UK Albums chart and number 128 on the American Billboard 200 chart. *Give 'em Enough Rope* was definitely much more polished than their first album, which the band didn't care for, but it also

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-62149191>

⁵ <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/the-clash/guns-on-the-roof>

⁶ <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/entertainment/celebrity/arrests-after-the-clashes-glasgow-gig-1098451>

demonstrated that The Clash was much more than just a punk band. They had developed a truly unique sound that, in fact, would be mimicked for generations afterward.

The Clash mostly toured the UK to support *Give 'em Enough Rope*, then took a break before deciding to tour North America for the first time beginning in February 1979.

On May 11, 1979, Columbia released *The Cost of Living* EP, which signaled a transition of The Clash's straight-up punk rock sound to something much more varied and eclectic. It featured the single "Groovy Times" and a cover of "I Fought the Law," a song originally written by Sonny Curtis of the band The Crickets.

In August, The Clash began working with producer Guy Stevens to work on new stuff that would be the band's most ambitious and diverse yet. Sure, there were still punk rock and reggae-influenced songs, but the band also explored rockabilly, New Orleans rhythm and blues, jazz, anthem rock, and ska, likely due to the band taking a liking to the Specials. This time the lyrics explored issues like drug use, unemployment, and systemic racism.

Meanwhile, the band toured the United States a second time, with Mickey Gallagher joining them on keys.

In November, the band returned to London to wrap up recording what most people say is their masterpiece, *London Calling*. Columbia released it on December 14, 1979. It was almost an instant classic, and today is considered one of the greatest albums of all time. Heck, even the cover of the album is iconic. It ultimately sold more than five million copies worldwide. In addition to featuring the single "Clampdown," it featured two of their biggest songs ever: "Train in Vain (Stand by Me)," which wasn't even included in the track listing originally, and the title track. While not huge radio hits back then, today they both continue to be overplayed on a wide range of types of radio stations. In addition to being a commercial success, *London Calling* was also a critical success. I mean, that's an understatement, man. It's amazing how many perfect reviews it got. Soon music journalists began referring to The Clash as "The Only Band That Matters."

By the time the band went on tour to promote *London Calling*, a film called *Rude Boy* came out about a fan who left his job at a sex shop to become a roadie for The Clash. Well, apparently the band hated that film.

On May 20, 1980, police arrested Strummer yet again, this time for actually a good reason. At a show in Hamburg, Germany, he hit a member of the audience with his guitar. Now, that said, the person he hit was being violent himself, but regardless, after this experience Strummer vowed never to fight violence with violence ever again.

On August 8, 1980, Columbia released the single "Bankrobber," which was a pretty big radio hit. Meanwhile, throughout most of the year The Clash had been recording what would become their fourth studio album, *Sandinista!*, released by Columbia on December 12, 1980. Epic Records released it in the United States. It was a triple album, featuring 36 songs, all wildly different from one another. Strummer later said the band wanted to release a triple album

because Columbia hated that they released a double album with *London Calling*. Side note....I absolutely love how the Clash spent their careers trolling their record label.

Anyway, *Sandinista!* demonstrated the band was continuing to constantly sound like a completely different band from song to song. More than almost all other albums, *Sandinista!* showcases the most genres of music. Not just punk rock, reggae, rockabilly, rhythm and blues, and ska, but additionally funk, jazz, disco, folk, dub, calypso, gospel, and even rap. Yep, there is something for everyone on this album. It was maybe the first time a rock band tried rap, by the way. That said, despite *Sandinista!* being so much more than a punk rock album, it was still influential in the punk rock movement. While critics praised it, it ultimately was one of their lowest selling albums. It did feature three singles: "The Call Up," "Hitsville UK," and "The Magnificent Seven," but those are three songs not regularly played on the radio today.

The Clash spent much of the next year touring, then taking a break. By this point, they were bigger in the United States than their home country, and played more shows there. In September, the band began recording some new stuff. Then, their first and only world tour, playing shows in Australia, Japan, Hong Kong, and even Thailand. Shortly after THAT tour wrapped up, the band recorded some more new stuff. In the studio, Topper Headon had been messing around with a piano part that ultimately turned into the iconic song "Rock the Casbah."

Columbia released what ultimately ended up being their BEST-selling album of all time, *Combat Rock*, on May 14, 1982. The album peaked at number 7 on the Billboard 200 and number 2 on the UK charts. It featured two of their biggest hits ever- "Should I Stay or Should I Go" and the aforementioned "Rock the Casbah." Although both were hits at the time of *Combat Rock*'s release, the songs were much more popular A DECADE after they were released, crazily enough. The music video for "Rock the Casbah" was played heavily on MTV.

But just as the band was peaking in terms of their commercial success, that was also when everything just crumbled for them. Just days before the release of *Combat Rock*, the band fired Topper Headon due to his addiction to heroin affecting his drumming abilities. They scrambled to find a replacement for Headon, and it wasn't easy. Lucky for them, good ol' Terry Chimes agreed to come back on drums a third time. The band toured heavily for the rest of 1982 to promote *Combat Rock*. However, in 1983 things slowed down dramatically after Chimes once again left the band after him and the others weren't getting along.⁷ Not only that, Jones and Strummer were apparently now constantly fighting.

Pete Howard did take Chimes' place on drums, and he was there for quite possibly The Clash's biggest show ever on May 28, 1983, at the U.S. Festival in San Bernardino, California, in front of as many as 200,000 people. The band co-headlined the event, and threatened to not play it initially since they hated the fact that the promoters were charging so much for tickets to it. That might explain the giant "The Clash Not for Sale" banner behind them, eh? Little did they know that that would be their last show with Mick Jones. A few months later, Strummer and Simonon agreed to kick Jones out of the band.

⁷ <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/the-clash-mn0000075747/biography>

To fill the huge void after Jones left, the band recruited not one, but two guitarists to take his place- Nick Sheppard and Vince White. The Clash played at least 88 shows in 1984, but the magic was certainly gone by this point, and fans noticed. In early 1985, the band attempted to record a new album, but it didn't go so well. Manager Bernie Rhodes and Strummer fought most of the time, especially after Rhodes wanted more sampling and electronic elements. Ultimately, Rhodes completely took over recording and most of Howard's drumming was replaced by an electronic drum machine. Strummer even considered legal action to prevent the new album's release.

The Clash played their last few shows in the summer and early fall of 1985.

On November 4, 1985, Columbia released their sixth and final studio album, *Cut the Crap*. But crap it was, at least according to most critics. One critic called it "one of the most disastrous [albums] ever released by a major artist."⁸ Even today, nearly everyone agrees that *Cut the Crap* is their worst album...and uh...yeah, so did the band. That said, it did have one minor radio hit: "This Is England."

Some time early in 1986, Strummer and Simonon decided to call it quits. The Clash were no more. Strummer went on to be involved with other music projects, including a solo career and soundtrack work. He even hosted a BBC radio show called *London Calling*. He died suddenly from a heart attack on December 22, 2002. Before his death, Mick Jones and Strummer had long made up and had even performed together. Jones went on to form the successful band Big Audio Dynamite. Both Jones and Simonon also later collaborated with the band Gorillaz.

On March 13, 2003, The Clash were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. The next year, Rolling Stone magazine ranked the band number 28 on its list of "100 Greatest Artists of All Time."

Today, the band is way more popular than it ever was when they were still together. Sure, the Sex Pistols and Ramones came first, but The Clash were arguably even more influential than both in terms of bringing the entire punk movement into the mainstream, even if that took a couple decades. But while the Sex Pistols sought to destroy rock, The Clash sought to resurrect it, and indeed, they took it in an entirely different direction. This is why most folks don't even know about The Clash's punk rock roots- they ended up being so much more than a punk rock band actually, exploring seemingly every music genre in existence.

They planted the seeds of what eventually became known as "alternative rock," this weird genre that exploded into the mainstream in the 1990s.

The Clash were one of the first significant political bands. They were known for lyrics about social and racial injustice. For years after they broke up, concert promoters consistently tried to throw lots of money at them for a reunion show, but they always resisted.

⁸ Knowles, Chris. "The Final Days of the Clash". *Louder Sound*, 18 April 2005.

After all, they didn't seem to do it for the money. They did it for the passion. They did it for the fans. And that's why their spirit still lives on.

So what's your favorite song or album by The Clash? My favorite song is "I'm So Bored with the U.S.A." and my favorite album is London Calling. Also, which band should I cover next for this series? Let me know down below if that's your thing. Thanks for watching!

Sources/further reading:

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The Clash: Return of the Last Gang in Town by Marcus Gray

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Punk Rock: An Oral History by John Robb

Purchase here: <https://amzn.to/484gFcO>

Joe Strummer And The Legend Of The Clash by Kris Needs

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