



We Are The Clash: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered

Mark Andersen , Ralph Heibutzki

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“*We Are The Clash* tells an important part of the story of both The Clash and punk rock. The repercussions of what went down politically both in the USA and UK back then are still very much felt today.”

—**Kosmo Vinyl**, former manager of **The Clash**

“The Clash are remembered as much for their blistering music as their gritty yet hopeful message to listeners worldwide. In this first serious look at The Clash’s music and meaning, post-commercial success, the authors mix thoughtful reflection with grassroots political analysis in an effort to inspire a new generation of music fans and activists to Cut the Crap.”

—**Craig O’Hara**, author of *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise!*

The Clash was an incendiary paradox of revolutionary conviction, musical ambition, and commercial drive. *We Are The Clash* is a gripping tale of how the band—fractured by its Top 10 success—fought to reinvent and purify itself as George Orwell’s 1984 loomed. This extraordinary effort crashed headlong into a wall of internal contradictions, personal tragedy, and rising rightwing power as personified by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

While the world teetered on the nuclear abyss, British miners waged a life-or-death strike, and tens of thousands died from US guns in Central America, Clash cofounders Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon set out to rebuild the band after ejecting guitarist Mick Jones and drummer Topper Headon. Bolstered by coconspirators Bernard Rhodes and Kosmo Vinyl, and three twentysomething recruits—drummer Peter Howard and guitarists Nick Sheppard and Vince White—The Clash launched a desperate last stand, shattering the band just as its controversial final album, *Cut the Crap*, was emerging.

Authors Andersen and Heibutzki weave together extensive archival research and in-depth original interviews with virtually all of the key players involved to tell a moving story of idealism undone by human frailty amid a climatic turning point for our world.

We Are The Clash: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered Details

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From Reader Review We Are The Clash: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered for online ebook

Ken French says

This book could have been so much better. As a re-evaluation of the Clash's final two years, it makes its point. The band achieved some great things in that period, especially their busking tour of northern UK cities. Also, the idea that this period in the band's history should be seen in the context of what was going on under Thatcher and Reagan in the UK and US is important.

That doesn't mean, however, that a good third of the book (at least) should be given over to the minutiae of the miners' strike or the Iran-Contra deals. Sometimes it felt like union leader Arthur Scargill was getting as much space in the book as Joe Strummer! Plus the book is filled with ham-fisted segues (after going on for pages about the collapse of the strike, the next paragraph begins "The emotional mettle of The Clash was under similarly extreme stress.").

And last, too much of the Clash's story is told from the point of view of later members Vince White, Nick Sheppard, and Pete Howard. Strummer drifts in and out of the story and Paul Simonon is barely there at all. Granted, the new guys took the brunt of the criticism of the later unit but it comes across very one-sided.

Douglas Lord says

This work focuses on the lesser-known last act of The Clash, their post—Combat Rock period that was not embraced by many fans or critics. It was a historically political period, and the flexing and forces of America's Ronald Reagan and Britain's Margaret Thatcher figure largely in the discussion of one of the most politically motivated bands to become commercially successful. Coverage is specialized, extending considerably beyond mere behind-the-scenes reportage and deeply explores the sociopolitical context in which the band operated; as such, the tone can be intense (read: punk) and professorial. In all, Andersen (coauthor, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*) and Heibutzki's (*Unfinished Business: The Life & Times of Danny Gatton*) examination of the band's proletarian stance in light of its commercial striving is immensely satisfying. VERDICT Fans and musos will thoroughly enjoy this book, which is most appropriate for libraries with large music collections. For a chronicle of the band's life on the road, try Randal Doane's *Stealing All Transmissions: A Secret History of the Clash* ; for an overview of all things Clash, Marcus Gray's *Last Gang in Town: The Story and Myth of The Clash* sets the standard.

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Nestor Rychtyckyj says

If the Clash is the only band that matters, this book covers the version of the Clash that didn't seem to matter. This new addition to the ever-growing Clash library covers the band after the firings of Topper Headon and Mick Jones. This new version of the band that included Pete Howard, Vince White and Nick Sheppard along with Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon released one album and quickly vanished from sight. All of the Clash

retrospectives barely pay any attention to the Clash Mark II and they are not included at all in the definitive Sound Box collection. For all intents and purposes the Clash ended when Mick Jones was unceremoniously fired from the band that he helped create.

Mark Andersen & Ralph Heibutzki beg to differ and this new 374-page book is an audacious attempt to convince us that this second version of the Clash was just as relevant and important as the classic Clash lineup. Their case is even made more difficult as the members of the second Clash, especially Joe Strummer, had frequently disparaged this band and their sole album "Cut the Crap" is widely considered to be an epic failure. The book frames their argument for the Clash Mark II within the scope of the political landscape across the USA and UK in the 1980s. In other words, Reagan and Thatcher are mentioned almost as often as Strummer and Bernie Rhodes.

This three-part narrative that weaves its way through the book both improves and detracts the book depending on how relevant each political passage is to the story of the five men who were the Clash. It quickly becomes evident that manager Bernard Rhodes has assumed "Complete Control" after getting rid of Mick Jones and with his hold over Joe Strummer. The three new members are thrust into a situation that they do not understand and are treated like hired hands with little or no input. The crusade for socialism and equality by Strummer and Rhodes does not apply to Howard, White and Sheppard; they are paid poorly and treated as bad as the workers that Rhodes and Strummer are fighting for. The other obvious impact is on Joe Strummer who starts collapsing under the pressure of both leading the Clash and somehow creating new material without Mick Jones. This is all doomed to fail and the final nail is driven into the coffin when Rhodes takes over the production of the album and turns Strummer's idea of a "back to punk" album into a mishmash of different styles without any punk energy that would ironically be unfavorably compared to Mick Jones's Big Audio Dynamite.

Now that I've excised my opinions of the Clash Mark II and will repeat for the 1000th time that seeing the original Clash at the Motor City Roller Rink was the single most important musical event of my life - it's time to discuss the actual book. There are a lot of things to like about the book - the story of the new Clash is compelling and the story of the coal miners strike in the UK fits in well with the political activism of the band. The political narrative of Reagan's elections and politics in the USA in relation to the Clash seems tenuous in some cases and takes away from the flow of the narrative. However, the most annoying part of the book is the tendency of the authors to both exaggerate and go way overboard on the hyperbole to support their own beliefs. For example, the introduction sets the tone for the book by stating that the Clash Mark II created "profound moments, words, and music, including works worthy of standing next to the best that the Clash created". That is just plain wrong. This tendency continues throughout the book and starts wearing thin. Joe Strummer seems to take the brunt of the blame for the new Clash falling apart and for not standing up to Bernie Rhodes during the recording of Cut the Crap. The fact that the second coming of the Clash could play well live does not mean that they could create music on par with Jones or Headon. The Clash are still relevant today because of their music and that music was created by the original band.

This book is certainly worth reading and is a fine addition to my Clash library, but in spite of the efforts of Mark Andersen and Ralph Heibutzki, I am still very content to skip over Cut the Crap when I want to listen to the Clash.

P.S. I did buy Cut the Crap and the This is England single in 1985; I have listened to them both again after reading this book. They are not as bad as I remembered, but I will still stick with London Calling and the Clash (UK version).

Andy says

One of the few nice things about getting older is that eventually you'll be around to see someone write a surprising book that goes against some set of firmly-held beliefs you've had about any given cultural topic. "Post-Jones Clash = bad" is one of the first things I learned as a teenager getting into punk rock. I'm not sure the conventional wisdom is totally wrong here, but all the same, this is a great corrective to that stance. It's pretty convincing, despite going a little overboard on trying to connect a direct line between Thatcherism and Reaganism and the band's struggles to remain engaged politically.

What really makes the book is the chapter on the band's busking tour, where the band more or less spends two weeks walking across Britain playing in public spaces. I'd have been happy if that had been the whole book (though in much shorter form), connecting to the long history of walking and pilgrimages as an ever-present force in the social and political life of England.

Dave Purcell says

A solid dive into The Clash mk II (v 2.0). The story of the post-Jones/Headon version of The Clash is described well. The interweaving of the parallel history of Reagan/Thatcher (and later, Trump/Brexit) is hamfisted -- with numerous transitions like (paraphrasing) 'Just as The Clash were struggling with ____, England was struggling with Thatcher's policy on ___' -- and I ended up skipping all of those parts after the first couple.

Still a worthy read for Clash fans. Start with *Passion Is A Fashion*, if you haven't already read that.

Caesar Warrington says

I always thought the Clash lineup featuring Pete Howard, Nick Sheppard and Vince White (aka Neo-Clash or Clash Mk UK) were undeservedly dismissed by the critics and fans. One of the best things about this book, *We Are The Clash*, is that the authors feel much the same way, celebrating those final years 1983-1986. Authors Mark Andersen and Ralph Heibutzki make the case that this lineup was a creative force that was unfortunately squandered by the likes of Bernie Rhodes and the insecurities within Joe Strummer. Using the political crises of 80s Britain and America for their backdrop, the authors highlight the 1985 busking tour and the ups and downs that went into recording the group's notorious final album, *Cut The Crap*.

In addition to the research that went into this book, it was a special treat to read the interviews done with Howard, Sheppard and White. Despite Rhodes' mistreatment, their recollections of that time are surprisingly positive. These seem to be really good guys who were willing to take the Clash forward through the rest of the 80s and into the next decade. Too bad their diligence and loyalty was squandered.

Ryan Bezerra says

There is one very good book, one decent book and one not very good book inside of this pretty good book. The story of The Clash could have been really good and that story comes out in places. In particular, the

story of how the band members fought with band managers and of how The Clash went out on a busking tour -- literally playing for money on the street -- in 1985 are pretty fascinating. The authors, however, then mix in the story of the British coal miners' strike in 1984 and 1985 as a prime example of the sort of social developments that The Clash were "fighting." The story of that strike seems to be fascinating, but it doesn't work well to try to shoehorn what was happening with The Clash into that story. The not very good book inside of this one is an attempted critique of the conservative politics exemplified by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher. Whatever your politics, that part of this book is a PoliSci 1 level analysis of those issues that becomes almost humorous at times. It's barely a C- undergrad-paper discussion of the situation. If you want to read about The Clash, I'd recommend that you read this book and just skim the political parts.

Gerry LaFemina says

A well written account of the Clash 2.0 that puts the band in context of US/UK sociopolitical history. Andersen does a good job of mirroring the microcosm of the band being overseen by charismatic overbearing manager and countries being overseen by charismatic, overbearing president and prime minister respectively. It did make me watch some footage of live performances of the Clash at the time and rethink my beliefs about them. It did not make me think Cut The Crap was a good record.

Jennifer Ozawa says

Was very interesting, intertwining part of The Clash's career with political events in Europe and the US. I am currently reading another book about UK politics in the 80s and liked seeing another facet of the topic. I was about to give this book a solid four stars, but it got very preachy and heavy-handed at the end and I had to knock off half a star.

Alan Taylor says

We Are The Clash: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered
by Mark Andersen, Ralph Heibutzki

An admirable attempt to put the last few years of The Clash into a political and social context, 'We Are The Clash Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered' is the story of the band's final days set against the turmoil of Thatcher's Britain - the miners' strike, the Falklands War - and Reagan's America - the Cold War threat of 'limited nuclear war in Europe', Iran-Contra - times that should have been made for a band as politically outspoken as The Clash.

The authors have written a well-researched and very readable history of a period in The Clash's history which has largely been ignored by the vast majority of music journalism. The band had splintered: drummer, Topper Headon had already gone, struggling with heroin addiction and, in a move which would have been unthinkable a couple of years earlier, in 1982 Joe Strummer had sacked founder member and lead-guitarist, Mick Jones. In most retrospectives, including the band's own, The Clash ended here but, as the authors rightly point out and evidenced by bootleg recordings of the time, musically, The Clash were in pretty good shape.

Andersen and Heibutzki also offer a succinct history of, and commentary on, the contemporaneous events of the early 1980s. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher's war on the mining industry tore communities apart and caused bitterness and resentment that still resonate today. In the USA, Ronald Reagan was conducting a more covert war against 'the threat of communism' and breaking all manner of laws in doing so. The arms race with USSR came as close as it ever did to 'Mutually Assured Destruction' when, on September 26, 1983, only the gutsy stubbornness of Stanislav Petrov, a Soviet 'early warning system' monitor, in not reporting what turned out to be a malfunction as an actual attack, prevented the start of WWII.

The failure of the book is that, despite valiant attempts to connect the band to the times around them, there was actually little connection. Little connection, not because of any failure on the authors' part but rather because The Clash, and Joe Strummer in particular, were in such a state of disarray that, other than a few low-key gigs in support of the striking miners in the UK, they failed to make any meaningful impact.

'The gap between Strummer's aims and his ability to live them yawned even wider.'

“Where was The Clash? They were AWOL, missing in action, nowhere to be seen” - Billy Bragg

The book is littered with awkward transitions between what was happening with The Clash and what was happening in the world because the truth is that The Clash failed to turn up.

'Three days before Reagan chose to wager his regime on this desperate ploy (selling arms to Iran), The Clash played the Rockscene in Guehenno, in a remote region of France.'

The authors neatly sum up the significance of The Clash at the time in this one sentence. Not only was the venue remote, the band remote from shady and probably illegal political machinations but on that particular date - July 13, 1985 - "seemingly every major rock act on earth played the Live Aid concert for African famine relief.." All of these events were calling for The Clash and The Clash didn't show up.

The authors make a good case that the major cause of the end of The Clash was not the sacking of Mick Jones but the return of manager Bernie Rhodes. Rhodes, who had been instrumental in pulling the band together with Jones, prior to Strummer's recruitment, before being ousted, saw an opportunity to take the reins and steer The Clash in the direction in which he wanted to go. The band toured as directed by Rhodes and, more significantly, the album which put the final nail in the band's coffin, 'Cut The Crap', was Rhodes' vision, a melding of punk and '80s electronic pop.

The authors offer a hearty defence of the album, on which few of The Clash save Strummer make any real contribution - guitar parts are heavily processed and lost in the mix, the drums are largely programmed and played in a drum machine - but their arguments are weak. Early demos of many of the tracks on 'Cut The Crap' suggest a much better album was in there but the final result is weak. As the book points out, Joe Strummer was lost at this point, occasionally literally, and The Clash did not really exist. A busking tour was a final stand and, had the album been successful, could have led to a resurgence but Joe Strummer essentially walked away and, thankfully, Bernie Rhodes plans to keep the band going without him came to nothing.

The book should be a must-read for Clash fans. It is well-written and is largely successful in placing The Clash in context with the times. That the band failed to engage with the world around them is not the fault of the authors but perhaps serves to mark not just the end of The Clash but the beginning of the end of any real political influence of rock and pop groups as a whole.

We Are The Clash: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered

by Mark Andersen, Ralph Heibutzki is published by Akashic Books on July 3, 2018.

Lauren says

This was so unexpected. As much as it felt like wandering into an argument that I really didn't have an opinion about (how good is the last Clash record?) since I stopped caring about the band @ Sandinista, I loved the juxtaposition of what was happening with the band and British and American politics. I learned a lot and it relit my white hot hatred of Reagan - not that that pilot light ever really goes out.

I also really enjoy a good piece of grassroots history and this is surely it.

Well done!

Thanks to the Early Readers program at Library Thing for the book in exchange for a fair and unbiased review.

John Mh says

I saw The Clash in this iteration in 1984, my second-ever concert--and in the company of co-author Heibutzki, as it happens. We drove across half the State of Michigan with friends, singing "London Calling" all the way--and it didn't much matter to me that Mick Jones wasn't in the group that took the state in East Lansing that night. It was The Clash, as far as I was concerned. I was 14, and it was 7th Heaven for me.

When the album "Cut the Crap" was released, however, I found myself among the Unwashed Confused of the world, scratching my head and thinking, "Huh? This sucks." I stayed in that camp for the next couple of decades, not as willing as some to write that album out of history entirely but still not entirely sure that I wanted to give it another listen anytime soon.

I had done that a few times, regardless, however, in these last few years, prior to the release of "We Are The Clash" and had already begun re-thinking elements of "Cut the Crap." There is indeed Good Stuff in that record that I didn't have the patience to wade in and retrieve at 14 or 15. There are good songs worth re-consideration, yes, indeed. What didn't need re-thinking was how much The Clash meant to me, how important they were to my entire self-conception: music, clothes, and--yep--politics.

I believe I have read every Clash book on the market, but none of them focus in on this phase of The Clash's existence, the only iteration that I ever saw play live. This is the Clash book missing from my shelf, the one that explains WHO this iteration of The Clash was, why they were, how they came together--and what the hell happened to them. Valuable stuff for the aficionado!

Authors Heibutzki and Anderson tell the biographical tell well, filling in the details missing from my mental biography of this band that has been so important to me. I learned a ton that I hadn't known before and now feel as though I have got the complete picture at long last. It is a sadder story than I imagined, full of lost potential and dashed hopes, and m'main man Joe Strummer I now understand to be a much more heavily burdened person than I had imagined.

Essential information, in other words, for the Clash Superfan.

However, "We Are The Clash" isn't satisfied with that. Was The Clash dubbed "The Only Band That Matters" only as a marketing ploy? Or was there something else there? Was their reputation as "a political band" warranted? If so, was there a coherent political theory fueling the band?

Piecing together something coherent from magazine interview quotations doesn't leave even a Superfan with anything firm to hang a hat on. But "We Are The Clash" looks hard at this question. As it should, particularly given Strummer's very strident public avowals of various sorts post-Mick Jones and the ardent assertions as to The Clash's mission in the world. The "Cut the Crap"-era Clash was rife with earnest declarations and public stances of various sorts ... I remember them first-hand.

What this book does differently than a standard rock bio is to stare hard at all of that and then juxtapose it with the political events of the day: the ugly doings of Reagan (a little), Thatcher (a lot), and the daily lot of the British working person under those hard regimes. What did and didn't The Clash do in that context? What was that context? This book is a stroll through the political landscape of the 80s in great part.

To what end is the reader here reminded of these non-Clash-related events? It isn't clear until the last 1.5 pages of "We Are The Clash," when the authors bring the political history forward into the Trump and Brexit era, long post-Clash, to discuss what and who the "WE" in "We Are The Clash" are ... As Joe Strummer is noted as avowing often during this period, the Clash is possibly best understood not just some guys in a band; it's the rest of us with our antennae unfolded. It's the call to action that a band that mattered can still blare out when even "Cut the Crap" is thrown onto the turntable, let alone their better-remembered albums.

This is a story of what was, and that needed telling alone. It is also a story of what could have been, had certain parties and certain conditions not persisted for this Clash "Mark II" line-up. But, most importantly, it is still a story of what could be. That's up to the rest of us. That's what differentiates this book from every other Clash book, the ultimate weaving together of the band's story and its music with the politics of the world at large to ask the reader: "OK, now what, Clash Superfan? What will YOU do?"

If we DO something, yes, WE are The Clash. And what better time than now?

I think Joe Strummer would approve.

Jay Gabler says

This would have been a great longread, but at book length it's a little much. Still, props to the authors for focusing on a very under-appreciated period in The Clash's history. I reviewed *We Are the Clash* for The Current.

Nick Spacek says

tied into punk rock, New Wave influences, and coal mining towns is *We Are the Clash: Reagan, Thatcher, and the Last Stand of a Band That Mattered*, by Mark Andersen and Ralph Heibutski, from Akashic Books. The story of the "New Clash," the band which existed following the ouster of original Clash drummer

Topper Headon and original guitarist Mick Jones from the Clash.

As the authors state early on, when a massive, career-spanning collection of all the Clash albums was released as a box set called *Sound System* in 2013, it excluded the band's final album, *Cut the Crap*. This book is an attempt to showcase the fact that the Clash was a legitimate, valuable act after Headon and Jones were replaced by drummer Pete Howard and guitarists Nick Sheppard and Vince White.

Thanks to what must've been exhaustive research into contemporary bootleg recordings of live shows and articles chronicling the audience response to the performances, Andersen and Heibutski provide exhaustive and intensely-detailed evidence that this was a band which was firing on all cylinders -- especially in a live setting -- almost until the very end.

Tied into it all is the political climate both in the UK and the United States, courtesy of the rise of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, respectively. Much is made of coal strikes, labor battles, and how the political climate of the time was mirrored by the inner turmoil of the band itself, which may or may not have been able to accurately and effectively respond to what was going on in the world around them.

We Are the Clash is a dense read. There's a lot of political information to take in, as well as reading about a four-year period of a major band, very rarely ever spoken of, except derisively. The fact that this was a major label, festival headlining act, and that they went on a two-week busking tour of the UK, and this is the first I've ever read about it beyond a one-line Wikipedia mention is a testament to how deep these authors go, because they give it thirty magical pages.

Seriously: if nothing else, track down *We Are the Clash* and read Chapter Eight, "Movers and Shakers Come On." It will reaffirm any fandom you might've once lost for the Clash, and for those who've ever doubted them or considered them "corporate punk," it'll give you fresh eyes on the band. It's fucking magical.

Edward Sullivan says

An interesting look at the The Clash's final days in a political and social context, set against the unrest in Thatcher's Britain - the miners' strike, the Falklands War, and Reagan-ear America, the Cold War nuclear threat, and Iran-Contra.
