

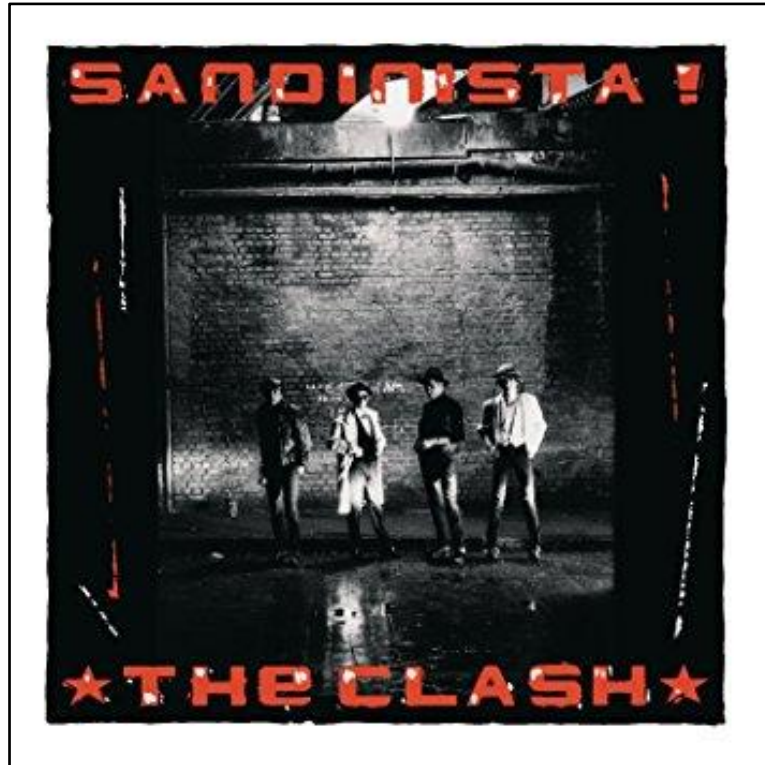


**'Is the music calling for a river of blood?': Political  
engagement and the possibility of social change in  
*Sandinista!* and *Contra***

**Jack Taylor**

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**Supervisor: Dr Steven Morrison**



Acknowledgements

Last summer I revisited *Sandinista!*, listening to the whole album in a single sitting. Over the 144 minute experience there was one verse that particularly stood out, and it has stuck with me since. At the time it struck me as depressingly relevant nearly four decades on from its writing, and perhaps it seems even more relevant another year on. I have not had room to include it in the body of the dissertation, but I would feel I was betraying myself if I did not include it somewhere as it is essentially the reason I have written this dissertation, so here it is:

*'We been told to keep the strangers out  
We don't like em starting to hang around  
We don't like em over town  
Across the world we're gonna blow em down'<sup>1</sup>*  
I hope I have managed to do it some justice.

I would like to thank Steven for trusting me to write a dissertation which I am fully aware is slightly ridiculous, as well as for his continual support throughout the process. It's been a lot of fun.

Thanks to my dad for playing The Clash in the house while I was growing up, and to my mum for letting him, even though it's not really appropriate tea-time music.

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<sup>1</sup> The Clash, 'Charlie Don't Surf', in *Sandinista!* (New York and London: Columbia Records, 1980). All lyric quotes throughout this dissertation are taken from the lyric booklets of the albums and are reproduced in the form displayed there.

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## Introduction

'[M]usic offers a counter-view, a space where rebellion is possible; and that is what explains music's immense role in political contestation and in subcultures.'<sup>2</sup>

'Music, in other words, is a non-conceptual, non-discursive language, which unselfconsciously "re-presents" the social world outside it.'<sup>3</sup>

Since technological reproduction allowed for its widespread dissemination, popular music has been both criticised and lauded for its (in)ability to spread political critique. Of particular concern in this domain is the work of the Frankfurt School. While Walter Benjamin argued that technological reproduction has the potential to lead to a newfound politicisation of art and, subsequently, communist revolution,<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse contended that while culture does create a space for critical thought and social change, it ultimately succumbs to the demands of bourgeois society.<sup>5</sup> Theodor Adorno - perhaps the most influential scholar in this field - viewed popular culture and music in particular as being impacted by the 'homogenizing tyranny' of what he termed the 'culture industry', arguing that it represented the 'mechanical reproduction of a regressive moment'.<sup>6</sup> While I will not take a vulgar Marxist view of culture in the sense that all elements of the superstructure are a reflection of the base, I do accept that popular culture generally forms part of a Gramscian cultural hegemony which reflects the values of the ruling classes. As Jon Savage notes, 'The central problems thus remain for those who want to question the basis of society: how do you avoid becoming part of what you're protesting against?'<sup>7</sup> This dissertation will explore two works of popular music which can be seen to question this societal base while reflecting on their (in)ability to do so.

In 1980, following the critical and relative commercial success of their landmark album *London Calling*, The Clash released *Sandinista!*, a 36-track, two-and-a-half-hour triple album. It was simultaneously a departure from, and an expansion of, their punk philosophy. In both length and musical form it was a far cry from their first album, a 14-track, 35-minute record. In their own words, *Sandinista!* lacked the punch to 'knock 'em dead / In two minutes 59',<sup>8</sup> requiring prolonged attention rather than immediately capturing it. It was met with mixed reviews and is often labelled their weakest album.<sup>9</sup> *New Musical Express*, which had previously championed the band, called it 'Complete chaos', arguing the band had 'lost their

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Middleton, 'Reading Popular Music', Unit 16 of Open University course U203 *Popular Culture* (Open University: Milton Keynes, 1981), p. 35; quoted in Reebee Garofalo, 'How Autonomous is Relative: Popular Music, the Social Formation and Cultural Struggle', *Popular Music*, 6:1 (1987), 77-92 (p. 91).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 133.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. by Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Herbert Marcuse, 'The Affirmative Character of Culture', in *Negotiations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Jay, *Adorno*, p. 12; Theodor Adorno quoted in *Adorno*, p. 93.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. xvi.

<sup>8</sup> The Clash, 'Hitsville U.K.', in *Sandinista!*

<sup>9</sup> Robert Christgau, 'Christgau's Consumer Guide', in *The Village Voice* (New York: 2nd March, 1981).

way'.<sup>10</sup> However, in its treatment of politics and its engagement with both national and international current affairs, it can be considered their most potent work. While Dick Hebdidge argues that punk posed an 'oblique challenge to hegemony',<sup>11</sup> by 1980 the movement was beginning to die out, prolonged as much by the commercial ambitions of record companies as the expansion and reformulation of the genre. As The Clash guitarist Mick Jones notes, 'Punk was getting narrower and narrower in terms of what it could achieve and where it could go'.<sup>12</sup> The solution to this was the formal innovation of *Sandinista!*

In 2010, alternative indie band Vampire Weekend followed their eponymous debut album with *Contra*. The album reached number one on the *Billboard 200*, becoming only the 12th independently distributed album to do so since the rankings began in 1991. *Contra* marked a departure from their debut's consistently upbeat, sonically cohesive sound, showcasing an experimental and eclectic style that drew on a range of musical and generic influences, including The Clash. It also differed from their first work in its treatment of subject: while *Vampire Weekend* told fantastical narratives and tales of university excess, *Contra* engaged more deeply with political ideas, particularly exploring the realities of late-capitalist America. The band had previously been 'derided as preppy imperialists trading in African culture' due to their use of African musical styles, writing 'songs about colonialism and privilege buoyed along by rhythms and melodies taken from the colonised and underprivileged'.<sup>13</sup> However, there is no departure from this in *Contra*, which samples rap and reggae artists while taking inspiration from various other genres. Its name - one half of a Nicaraguan political scene completed by the Sandinista party, with an etymological root in opposition - expresses a demand to be seen as politically engaged. This shared political engagement is a key factor in comparing these texts.

Both albums represent more experimental follow-ups to relatively successful predecessors, mitigating between the demands of the indie or the punk and mainstream popularity. They also share contextual elements: *Sandinista!* was released in December 1980 to the backdrop of the Sandinista National Liberation Front's socialist revolutionary success in Nicaragua. This was contrasted to the recent election of Margaret Thatcher, as well as economic recession, giving way to a new era of neoliberalism backgrounded by the resurgence of Cold War tensions. *Contra*'s January 2010 release came with recession still looming over the global economy and on the back of a landmark US presidential election. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were still large in the public conscience, and relations in Libya and the Middle East were becoming increasingly tense.

While *Sandinista!* is more overt with its political engagements, *Contra* is generally more ambiguous, frustrating its own politics at times. As such, I will argue that the albums' use of particularly black genres represents a form of cross-cultural solidarity rather than cultural appropriation. The forms of their difficulty - overlength and experimentation in *Sandinista!*, self-awareness and reflexivity in *Contra* - are imperative to their ability to critique. In an era where culture has been 'permeated by the process of commodification'<sup>14</sup> and the majority consume it 'without paying particular attention to its content',<sup>15</sup> creating a work of genuine political

<sup>10</sup> Nick Kent, 'Complete Chaos', in *New Musical Express* (London: Time Inc., 13th December, 1980), p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> Dick Hebdidge quoted in Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Constable, 1983), p. 158.

<sup>12</sup> Mick Jones quoted in Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Topper Headon, *The Clash*, ed. by Mal Peachy (London: Atlantic, 2010), p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Lester, 'Vampire Weekend: "They're Attacking a Version of us Which Doesn't Exist"', in *The Guardian* (7th Jan, 2010) [accessed 26th April 2018] <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/jan/07/vampire-weekend-contra>>.

<sup>14</sup> Jay, *Adorno*, p. 38.

<sup>15</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, (London: Garden City Press, 1967), p. 128; quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, p. 44.

subversion is increasingly difficult. This dissertation will contend that *Sandinista!* and *Contra* see the solution to this problem in generic experimentation and formal innovation, using genres associated with subcultural groups largely outside the dominant cultural hegemony as a key element in the formation of their own counter-hegemonies. Henceforth, I will explore the use of structure, genre and form in the albums, and how these link to their political engagement.

### **Part 1: 'This is fuckin' long, innit?':<sup>16</sup> The Album as a Form; Nicaragua, Structure, Paratext**

The names and covers of both albums can be seen as a microcosm of their political engagements. *Sandinista!* offers an upfront and overt message of revolution while *Contra*, though still political, is more reserved. The *Contra* album cover features a portrait polaroid photo from the early 1980s of a white, blonde, apparently middle-class female in a Ralph Lauren polo. Across her chest is the album title, inviting associations between the album's name and this individual. While the image may connote a straightforward sense of class and privilege, I would argue it is indicative of the frustration Vampire Weekend create throughout their work. Indeed, the cover image is distinctly more difficult to decode than *Sandinista!*'s, though its singular portrait form invites further inspection. In an age of limitless cultural consumption, cultural aesthetics are increasingly important. Not presenting an image of the band reflects the priority of the text's content, using the cover to inform its reception. The image's indeterminacy - the uncertain expression, encroaching darkness and untidiness of the shirt collar - represents the imperfections behind the middle-class image and the status attached to it. While this image is a snapshot of middle-class life, it is not an endorsement.

The blurring of class distinctions is furthered by the title's inherent link to *Sandinista!* and thus the punk movement, with its working-class image yet art-school background, as well as the CIA-backed Contra party, its human rights abuses and the Iran-Contra affair of Ronald Reagan's presidency. References to Reagan are themselves complicated in terms of class: the brand of neoliberalism shared by Reagan and Thatcher appealed not only to the middle-classes, but also the so-called aspirational working-classes. As the working-classes' engagement in neoliberalism results in a recurrence of the inequalities from which they suffer, so *Contra*'s criticism of neoliberalism is predicated by an engagement with it. With the failure of the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis to alter the economic system, such self-awareness is arguably more effective than outright political critique.

'Contra' also invites a certain wariness of projecting absolutisms of message: the word itself is ambiguous, referencing both the Nicaraguan counter-revolutionary party and the popular 1980s video game series.<sup>17</sup> The neo-imperialist associations of the Contra party also serve as something of an admission of guilt: by taking inspiration from world music styles and relating stories of class privilege, *Contra* then becomes a near-apology, and a realisation that the text is inherently ideologically compromised. There is something of the unknowable about 'Contra' due to its various connotations, and *Contra* thus invites inspection.

The dated nature of *Contra*'s aesthetic immediately connects it to issues both past and present. Like the vinyl medium on which it was released and the Ralph Lauren polo on its cover, polaroid photography is another renewed trend in popular culture.<sup>18</sup> These references to the 1980s further connect *Contra* to *Sandinista!*, while showing the repetitions of the culture industry. Adorno uses this term to argue that culture is imposed structurally, rather than being chosen by the masses.<sup>19</sup> In this paradigm, the recirculation of culture represents a return to the past, a re-presentation of the status quo which reinforces neoliberal hegemony. However,

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<sup>16</sup> The Clash, 'The Magnificent Seven' in *Sandinista!*

<sup>17</sup> Konami, *Contra* (Las Vegas: Konami, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Taylor Swift's inclusion of replica polaroids in her 1989 album package.

<sup>19</sup> Jay, *Adorno*.

I would argue that *Contra* uses these re-presentations to show the recurrences of capitalism, drawing parallels between its contemporaneous context and its 1980s context of reference. The polaroid applies a nostalgic veneer to the period, one of apparent middle-class comfort, youth and good looks. This is parodied by the title's shorthand reference to political controversy and foreign policy misadventure. The woman on the cover then becomes symbolic of the historical revisionism and reframing involved in discussing and fetishising the past. The recirculation of her attire and the polaroid form suggest a recirculation of the *Contra*, which already works to reinforce the status quo. This cyclicity can then be seen in terms of a Brechtian historicisation, referring to the contemporary political moment and the foreign policy misadventure of the Iraq War.

The single 'Holiday' draws attention to the role of oil in this war, ironically presenting the Iraq invasion as a time of joy ('Holiday, o, a holiday! / And the best one of the year', the clipped 'o' even connoting tradition), while the responsible narrator seeks to 'cover both my ears' to contrary opinions.<sup>20</sup> The bridge of the song criticises the naivety of a woman (possibly the symbolic woman of Americas past, present and future on the cover) who had 'never seen the word bombs blown up to 96-point Futura', the font used on Vampire Weekend's branding and album covers. Further historicisation is presented in 'Giving up the Gun', a song ostensibly about a period in Japanese history where guns were replaced with swords in a recurrence of the culture of bygone decades. Through this association with cultural recirculation, the song becomes applicable to the modern American context of gun control, lamenting the lack of progress in regards to cultural violence more generally - 'And though it's been a long time / You're right back where you started from.'<sup>21</sup> While Mark Fisher argues that the "alternative" or "independent" cultural zones' to which *Contra* belongs 'endlessly repeat older gestures of rebellion and contestation as if for the first time',<sup>22</sup> *Contra*'s repetitions do precisely the opposite: rather than presenting its criticisms as new, it shows them to be taken from and applicable to past situations, thus showing the longevity and repetition of hegemony. By creating such associations between past and present, foreign and local, the album also creates a space for listeners to politicise virtually any aspect of the album: if an upbeat song called 'Holiday' can be about the folly of the Iraq War, any and all of the album can be about contemporary and/or past politics. Conversely, though, such ambiguity risks misinterpretation. As much as *Contra* opens up the possibility of politicisation, its pop stylings and commercial popularity facilitate its consumption as a near apolitical cultural product. Even the politicisation inherent in its title means less to a younger or foreign audience. While the subtler stylings of its lyrics encourage interrogation, the casual listener is likely to miss their political messages. Perhaps an openly politically subversive album cannot be popular in a late-capitalist age of mass consumption: instead, such work can exist on the fringes of popular culture, or sacrifice its politics to reach a wider audience.

The revisiting of the past in *Contra*'s aesthetics and lyrics then becomes necessary for a complete vision of the present, foregrounding Harold Bloom's idea of clinamen:<sup>23</sup> as the *Contra*'s counter-revolutionary politics followed the Sandinistas, *Contra* repurposes 1980s cultural items and modern black genres to create a new form. Titling the album 'Contra' roots it in a reactionary and counter-revolutionary history, seeking a return to the status quo. This is particularly striking given that the members of Vampire Weekend were born in 1983-84 while the Iran-Contra affair took place from 1985-87: *Contra*'s use of 1980s politics and culture is thus representative of the neo-imperialist ambitions of the CIA, as the album acts as a form of external interference. This admission of interference is especially pertinent given criticism of *Vampire Weekend* as engaging in cultural appropriation, and draws attention to *Contra*'s own

<sup>20</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'Holiday', in *Contra* (New York and London: XL, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'Giving up the Gun', in *Contra*.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There no Alternative?* (Ropley: O Books, 2009), p. 9.

<sup>23</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975).



role as an ideological tool and a furthering of American cultural neo-imperialism. This ensures that the text cannot operate in the post- or anti-ideology sphere that Fisher, building on Slavoj Žižek, identifies as the most dangerous area of ideological operation,<sup>24</sup> and the area that it can be argued the majority of pop music now operates in, even as - or, perhaps, especially as - certain forms of politically convenient and popular piecemeal activism begin to become increasingly commodified and fetishised.<sup>25</sup>

The cover image itself was the subject of a lawsuit against the band when the woman in the photo claimed she had not given permission for its use.<sup>26</sup> The repurposing and recontextualisation of cultural material here becomes an ideological act in itself: chosen by band member and album producer Rostam Batmanglij, as a found object and the work of another individual the image reflects the generic sampling of the album. Roland Barthes has argued that the ideological vapidness of popular culture is due to the fact that it produces nothing new - 'The bastard form of mass culture is humiliated repetition...the superficial forms are varied...but always the same meaning'.<sup>27</sup> However, it is here the very fact that popular culture has repurposed old material that makes it subversive, calling into question ideas of artistic and cultural ownership. As with their other albums, the cover image does not feature any members of the band. Combined with the found nature of the artwork, these factors provide a degree of detachment between the band and the album as a form of consumable cultural object, preventing commercial marketing. *Contra's* paratext, then, subverts dominant political rhetoric while foregrounding its historicising critique and the role of culture in such a conception of capitalism's repetitious nature.

*Sandinista!* is even more open in its admittance of ideology. The Sandinistas represented an overt challenge to the status quo in a form of genuine revolution. In contrast, while the Contras may have brought change to Nicaragua, this in fact reinforced the neoliberal realities of global capitalism. These political equivalences are particularly prescient when considered in relation to the contemporary political moment: The Clash's call for outright revolution on the back of Margaret Thatcher's election contrasts with *Contra's* apparent resignation to the impossibility of such a revolution. Despite the election of Barack Obama and his messages of hope and change, there was, as with the Contras, a reversion to a neoliberal status quo. However, while Adorno argues that cultural products have come to have a 'Purposelessness for the purposes declared by the market',<sup>28</sup> I would argue that both albums do have a distinct purpose of their own: in its simplest form, this is merely to *be* ideological, to accept hegemony as a concept and to attempt to challenge it. Despite their engagement with the popular, both albums remain political.

Accordingly, *Sandinista!* clearly sets out its political engagement in its cover. With a mid-shot photo of the four members in black and white - a feature of the band's first and third albums - the cover can appear distinctly retro. Drummer Topper Headon sports a long coat and waistcoat, lead singer Joe Strummer is wearing a Western-esque hat, while bassist Paul Simonon is in a flat cap and biker-style jacket. However, details such as the transistor radio to Simonon's right and the 'West Ham' graffiti behind Headon firmly locate the image in both time and place. Jones's army helmet brings further contemporaneity to the piece: reminiscent of

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<sup>24</sup> Fisher, *Realism*, p. 70.

<sup>25</sup> See, for perhaps the most extraordinary recent example of this, Gucci's 'Re(Belle)' line, inspired by the French civil unrest of May 1968.

<sup>26</sup> This was eventually resolved through an out of court settlement, though the outcome of Vampire Weekend's countersuit against the photographer (who allegedly told the band he owned the rights to the image) remains unclear. See <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/aug/16/vampire-weekend-contra-cover-star>> for more details.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. by Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 41-42.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor Adorno quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, p. 122.

conflicts both past and present, it shows the longevity of war imagery and its seeming ubiquity. The image simultaneously exists in a black-and-white past and a modern urban London, and, therefore, also in the future of today: just as *Contra* shows the recurrence in fashion and status of polaroid photography, *Sandinista!* shows the longevity of class distinction, American cultural influence and the marketability of war.

The flashes of red on the cover immediately connect it with left-wing politics, and the exclamation mark of the title connotes urgency. However, the black-on-red of the vinyl designs<sup>29</sup> also conjures ideas of fascist imagery in a connection and criticism of the authoritarian nature of ideological extremes. Black and red are a colour combination associated with both fascism and anarchism, to both of which punk was at various times linked. The uneven white border and confinements of urban space form multiple frames around the band, and there is a sense of claustrophobia about this old-fashioned, English landscape. This is a work engaged with its current moment in time and space, but with clear ambitions to progress and move out of the (punk rock) frame it requires to exist.

The album's lyric sheet furthers this theme: a double-sided fold out in the mock-style of a newspaper called 'The Armagideon Times no. 3', it simultaneously calls back to the band's 'London Calling' B-side (and reggae cover) 'Armagideon Time'<sup>30</sup> while also situating it in the current moment and presenting a conscious political engagement, complete with cartoons from Steve Bell and a map of Central America.<sup>31</sup> The pullout's black and white form replicates that of many contemporaneous fanzines, while one side's black background and uneven white border replicates that of the cover. The fanzine form seems a somewhat ironic comment on the origins of punk: whilst members of the band forfeited royalties to ensure a reduced price for *Sandinista!*,<sup>32</sup> resisting full engagement with consumerism and the standardised form of popular culture, the pullout is still mass-printed and disseminated via a corporate label. Its form is almost meta-critical, referencing a movement that is already past.

At 36 songs and 144 minutes, the album's experiments are occasionally unsuccessful, particularly its final side of remixes and reworkings. Despite the existence of B-sides for the album's singles, and the release of 'Bankrobber' several months before *Sandinista!* as part of a new compilation, several songs on the album are largely works of relative incoherence. Experimental tracks such as 'Silicone on Sapphire' and 'Mensforth Hill' (a backwards version of 'Something About England'), and the ridiculous 'Career Opportunities' sung by Mike Gallagher's children, represent what the band want the consumer to listen to, rather than their peak musical achievements. By this time all the band members, and indeed their management and production team, were accomplished enough to recognise these tracks as actively incoherent. As Barthes notes, 'the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories'.<sup>33</sup> *Sandinista!* certainly both discomforts and bores, and deliberately so.

Adorno argues that 'the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass',<sup>34</sup> and *Sandinista!*'s experimentation provides such discomfort, belying the straightforwardness of some of its political commentary. This intentional discomfort represents an extension and adaptation of the punk spirit at a time when the movement was dying out. Such belligerence speaks to the autonomous, anti-authority nature of punk, and rails against the restrictions

<sup>29</sup> See Appendix 1 for images of the vinyl designs.

<sup>30</sup> The Clash, 'Armagideon Time', in *London Calling [single]* (New York and London: Columbia Records, 1979).

<sup>31</sup> See Appendix 2 for images of the album pullout.

<sup>32</sup> Joe Strummer, Mick Jones, Paul Simonon and Topper Headon, *The Clash*, p. 181.

<sup>33</sup> Barthes, *Pleasure*, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> Theodor Adorno quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, p. 11.

associated with big labels. The purposely overlong nature of the album, complete symmetrically with six sides of six songs each, represents an attempt to act against immediate fetishisation: on the back of the critically acclaimed *London Calling*, *Sandinista!* makes impossible the unflinching positive approval that John Holmstrom contends had become features of bands such as Sex Pistols and Led Zeppelin several years earlier.<sup>35</sup> The nature of the album itself, then, rallies against an ideology of acceptance, demanding criticism.

For both *Contra* and *Sandinista!*, paratextual features encourage the audience to actively engage with the texts, as both albums clearly do with the worlds they inhabit. As Benjamin notes, 'A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it... In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art',<sup>36</sup> and both albums attempt to foster a degree of concentration in order to garner conscious and critical engagement. This attitude applies to the multi-generic form of the music on the albums, their lyrical content, and the interplay between these two factors.

## **Part 2: 'My revolution thoughts... I want to trace them to the source':<sup>37</sup> Genre, Culture, Form**

Simon Frith argues that, as punk progressed, 'the countercultural argument lost its force and became a selling technique'.<sup>38</sup> As Savage notes, while punk had a 'furious disgust with consumption', it was also well aware of its place within it.<sup>39</sup> While Adorno argues that 'Art is permitted the right to survive only if it renounces the right to be different',<sup>40</sup> the innovation of the albums under consideration here shows this to be too clinical an assessment. However, I would argue that the most popular cultural works generally do 'challenge the status quo the least',<sup>41</sup> hence the importance of these texts, which utilise the accessible nature of music to advance their politics.

In both their wider work and the specific albums under examination here, The Clash and Vampire Weekend utilise a variety of musical influences and genres. If, as Benjamin argues, 'The conventional is uncritically enjoyed',<sup>42</sup> it is thus essential for any politically engaged work to be unconventional. The Clash's use of reggae is a defining feature of their expansion of the punk genre, and can be traced from 'Police & Thieves' on their first album to its reprise 'Shepherds Delight', which closes *Sandinista!* Perhaps the only typically punk song on *Sandinista!* is 'Police on my Back', a cover of the reggae-inspired version by the Equals.<sup>43</sup> Vampire Weekend's use of afropop represents a similar synthesis of genre. If 'instead of curing authoritarian personalities' the commodification of music 'helped spawn them', as Adorno argued,<sup>44</sup> the variety of influences apparent in *Sandinista!* and *Contra* prevent the associations of individual genius and creation which have come to characterise capitalist cultural production.

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<sup>35</sup> John Holmstrom quoted in Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*, pp. 460-61.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, 'Work of Art', p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'I Think Ur a Contra', in *Contra*.

<sup>38</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, p. 52.

<sup>39</sup> Savage, *England's Dreaming*, pp. xv-xvi.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 130; quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> Garofalo, 'Popular Music', p. 80.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, 'Work of Art', p. 14.

<sup>43</sup> The Equals, 'Police on my Back', in *Explosions* (New York: Alston Records, 1967).

<sup>44</sup> Jay, *Adorno*, p. 122.

However, the absence of any black members in either band raises questions of cultural appropriation particularly pertinent to the world of popular music, which has often built upon the work of black artists while obscuring this origin. The multi-generic nature of both works is thus a way of combating the exclusionary and divisive rhetoric which is at the heart of many of the issues discussed across the texts, and the appreciative use of these genres is contrasted with the treatment of class division in the albums.

As the ability to produce politically radical content diminishes over time, subversiveness instead begins to come through formal innovations. The combination and expansion of genres on both albums then becomes a political act in itself - as subversive politics flourishes in subcultures outside the mainstream, it follows that popular culture which seeks to be political must borrow from said subcultures. The use of the cultural capital attached to both bands via their relative privilege then becomes a way to amplify the voices of those without access to such capital, showing that, in a Marxist sense, those of different cultures have more in common than the workers and the bourgeoisie of a single culture. This treatment of genre then becomes a way of challenging identity politics without undergoing the cultural erasure of essentialism, instead attempting to formulate a cross-cultural unity. If, as Frith notes in a summation of Adorno, the 'standardization of musical form is the source of its ideological effect - a soporific social consciousness',<sup>45</sup> then these albums combine non-standard forms to prevent such an effect. The combination of reggae and punk used by The Clash, in particular, represents a fusion of two genres which are political at their core. Such a fusion is not viable for Vampire Weekend, but their combining of pop with African genres such as kwassa kwassa is political in its own right. While audiences no longer expect popular music to be politically subversive in the way that punk and reggae were,<sup>46</sup> the bricolage form of *Contra* helps to negate this assumption of apoliticism. While punk aimed to agitate with its unpolished form, such results are now more effectively garnered through well-produced intertextuality.

The combination of non-standard forms and subversive lyrical content is present throughout both albums. For example, *Sandinista!*'s lead single 'The Call Up' is an indictment of conscription in the US: 'Who knows the plans and why they were drawn up / It's up to you not to heed the call-up / I don't wanna die'.<sup>47</sup> The song criticises the hierarchical nature inherent in conscriptionist policy, with a direct address that aims to speak in a simultaneously general and specific manner - 'Who gives you work and why should you do it?' applies to conscription as well as to menial jobs in society at a time of high youth unemployment. At over five minutes and driven as much by xylophones and triangles as electric guitars, its simplistic rhythm, repeated at length with no bridge and reinforced by a reggae-style guitar riff which adds an element of reverberation, is indicative of the simplistic nature of the song's instructions and embodies its critique of repetitious exploitation.

'The Call Up' is followed on *Sandinista!* by 'Washington Bullets'. Perhaps The Clash's most overt political statement, it features the album's name as its chorus. Criticising both US neo-imperialism and Soviet communism, its musical centre is a marimba rhythm derived from the American folk song 'Turkey in the Straw', which itself is influenced by Irish folk songs. This eclecticism is present in the song's lyrics, which move between Chile, Cuba, Nicaragua, the US, the Soviet Union, Afghanistan and Tibet.<sup>48</sup> 'The Call Up' sets war within a context of timelessness, a simple and repetitive task of ensuring obedience and its continuation, present even in the echoing sound of the guitar. 'Washington Bullets' then gives this a placelessness, while the Caribbean and African influences indicate both the indiscriminate nature of war in terms of identity, and the resistance that can be achieved through cultural solidarity.

<sup>45</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> While I would argue this is still the case, grime has arguably brought this into contention, in Britain at least, in recent years - another example of political subversion flourishing in subcultures outside of the mainstream.

<sup>47</sup> The Clash, 'The Call Up', in *Sandinista!*

<sup>48</sup> The Clash, 'Washington Bullets', in *Sandinista!*

The theme of perpetual war is also evident in the transition between sides one and two. Side one ends with 'Something About England', with vocals split between Jones and Strummer in a dialogue, Strummer taking on the part of an old man 'whom time could not erode'.<sup>49</sup> Strummer recounts the 'sorrow afterwards' the First World War, before those of 'the next war' began, although his sharpest critique is of the class system and the regret that 'England never closed this gap'. His part is followed by the chanting of 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary', before Jones situates the rant in modern society with a distinctly recognisable description of deserted streets, gangs and bedsits, to go with the ironic xenophobia and jingoism of his opening monologue ('They say immigrants steal the hubcaps / Of the respected gentleman'). Not only does the structure of the dialogue show how dissent is framed and encased in society, but the song's ending, with two seconds of silence followed by the stray strum of a guitar, cuts off a new beginning before 'Rebel Waltz' restarts the narrative of war.

'Rebel Waltz' is highly ironic, even in its title, which juxtaposes the upper-class ballroom waltz with a punk rebelliousness in almost oxymoronic manner, mocking bourgeois culture in a treatment less respectful than that of black culture. The melody being played by both electric guitar and xylophone is a continuation of this juxtaposition. The lyrics fall into a rhythm of anapestic tetrameter or dimeter depending on the line, often reinforced by the echoing of Headon's singular drumbeat: 'Through the heart of the camp / Swept the news from the front'.<sup>50</sup> This meter, often used in comic poetry,<sup>51</sup> provides further irony against the gloomy backdrop of the muted bugle, while the occasional slipping of the lyrics into iambic feet gives a lyrical weight to the jarring of the song. As well as the class criticisms invited by its use of waltz, the song is filled with references to nature, as well as a degree of mysticism, as war is weaved into this backdrop of nature and humanity. Coupled with the childish and innocent xylophone, war is critiqued for its apparently inherent and natural existence, and then implicitly connected to the upper classes.

The Clash also borrow from (American) film influences in 'The Magnificent Seven' and 'Charlie Don't Surf'. The former borrows from the film of the same name (itself an adaptation of *Seven Samurai*), the latter from *Apocalypse Now* (itself an adaptation of *Heart of Darkness*). In 'The Magnificent Seven', the album's third single and opening track, the pursuit of thieving bandits from the film becomes a critique of capitalists thieving surplus value and maintaining exploitative working conditions. The song's opening lines set up its central critique - 'Ring! Ring! It's seven A.M! / Move y'self to go again / Cold water in the face / Brings you back to this awful place'.<sup>52</sup> Strummer's lyrics are delivered in an almost rap style with flat tone, short lines and tight rhymes, lamenting the apparent hopelessness of progress in a world where 'Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi...was murdered by the other team', and Plato is forgotten in place of such media figures as Rin Tin Tin, a canine star of various American films. 'Charlie Don't Surf' provides a similar mocking of American culture, as 'Africa is choking on their Coca Colas'.<sup>53</sup> Coca Cola here becomes a symbol of the cultural imperialism of America, encapsulated in the Vietnam War that is the subject of both *Apocalypse Now* and much of *Sandinista!* The borrowing of American culture thus leads to criticism in a way that the borrowing of black cultures does not: in fact, the use of black genres adds to the critique of (American) cultural hegemony, with the two placed in opposition.

*Contra* also criticises the establishment and bourgeois culture, particularly in 'California English', named after a dialect associated with young, middle-class Californians. The song tells of a 'little college girl' in the Contra Costa area of San Francisco so concerned with her

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<sup>49</sup> The Clash, 'Something About England', in *Sandinista!*

<sup>50</sup> The Clash, 'Rebel Waltz', in *Sandinista!*

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, many of the poems of Dr. Seuss, or various limericks. 'Rebel Waltz' occasionally replicates the dropping of the first unstressed syllable commonly found in limericks.

<sup>52</sup> The Clash, 'The Magnificent Seven', in *Sandinista!*

<sup>53</sup> The Clash, 'Charlie Don't Surf', in *Sandinista!*

image that she can be seen 'Waiting with the wind against your face / And gel in your hair'.<sup>54</sup> While she gives the impression of being against the world ('contra mundum, contradict what I say') and proffers an image of grittiness 'like *The French Connection*', she'll 'die in LA' with class privilege. In 'California English: Part 2', an apparent continuation of the song's narrative, the narrator wonders whether the girl's parents are 'actually Buddhists', while commenting that 'The girl wasn't damaged, her jeans were just ripped'.<sup>55</sup> This condemnation of the casualisation of Eastern philosophy and religion, in a song which utilises a distorted afropop sound, can be seen as an attempt to mitigate against claims of Vampire Weekend's own appropriation of external cultures. The interrogation of image, which extends to a resurgence of 80s fashion trends like 'Tight neon tights, t-shirts with big letters',<sup>56</sup> comments on the appropriation of working-class culture: paying high sums for ripped jeans from big brands and expounding a vintage fashion culture which allows for the recirculation of fashion at exorbitant prices in a form of commodity fetishism is a contemporary and recognisable form of classism. These descriptions also link to the woman on the album's cover, and the middle-class style of Vampire Weekend themselves: this is inward acknowledgement as well as outward criticism, a self-consciousness that belies the ignorance of much cultural appropriation.

Invoking the image of the album cover and repeating the word play with 'contra' draws our attention further to the Contras themselves, and what the label of Contra might mean. While there is an element of phonological punning at play, the label of Contra as applied in 'I Think Ur a Contra' is complex: the narrator states both that 'You're not a Contra', and 'I think ur a Contra'.<sup>57</sup> The narrator goes on to state that 'You wanted rock and roll, complete control / Well, I don't know', conjuring images of class and authority, as well as The Clash's early single 'Complete Control',<sup>58</sup> which complained about the authoritarianism of their record company. Furthermore, the narrator notes 'Never pick sides / Never choose between two', before beginning the next verse 'You said / "Never pick sides / Never choose between two"'. The label of Contra, then, is itself contradictory: complimentary and derogatory, outward and inward. *Contra* as an album then takes on such qualities, inviting interrogation.

However, this ambiguity is not apolitical. In 'California English', the chorus complains of condos 'that they'll never finish' in the wake of the financial crash, as well as the influence of the Middle East on American policy as messages travel through a 'Saudi satellite dish' before becoming 'California English'. However, the song's critiques are not immediately obvious due to the extremely high levels of production on the song: the speed-rap style combined with the auto-tuned vocals and the synth-pop backing make the lyrics virtually indistinguishable without the aid of a lyrics sheet. This in turn requires attention and consideration, while combining features from seemingly disparate musical contexts aids the song's international critique.

Further difficulty is presented in the album's penultimate track, 'Diplomat's Son'. Its main melody features a sample from British-Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A., before the bridge samples 'Pressure Drop', originally by Jamaican reggae band Toots and the Maytals and covered by The Clash. The song's title can be seen as a reference to Strummer, himself the son of a foreign service diplomat. Its chorus - 'He was a diplomat's son / It was '81'<sup>59</sup> - creates further dialogue, referencing the year that *Sandinista!* charted in the US, as well as the beginning of the country's involvement in Nicaragua after Reagan's presidential victory. The

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<sup>54</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'California English', in *Contra*.

<sup>55</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'California English: Part 2' in *Contra* (iTunes bonus track).

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'I Think Ur a Contra', in *Contra*.

<sup>58</sup> The Clash, 'Complete Control', in *Complete Control* (London: Columbia Records, 1977). The song was also included on the US release of the band's first album.

<sup>59</sup> Vampire Weekend, 'Diplomat's Son', in *Contra*.

song's wider lyrics, which speak of a same-sex holiday fling, come to represent transgression more generally, particularly in the face of the government represented by the diplomat. Its final line - 'There's a car all black with diplomatic plates' - seemingly signals the arrival of a covert and sinister government: it appears 'In the dark' without action, juxtaposed against the natural images of the 'ice cold water', 'wind' and 'river' described in the final verse. This, then, is an unnatural government acting as a corrupting force in the earlier innocent romance and the transgression of dominant hegemony that, as a same-sex relationship, it represents.

The song's sampled bridge jars on each of the two occasions it appears in the song, once with lyrics and once without, and is the only appearance of Batmanglij as lead vocalist on the album. Tonally different from the song's body, its sound represents a different viewpoint both musically and lyrically, with Batmanglij's vocals, a jaunty reggae-inspired piano and, in the second bridge, a string section. These different aspects represent a synthesis of culture and worldview: while they may be fundamentally different, even appearing to be in contrast, the recurrence of the strings in the final verse and the increasing softness of the transitions between body and bridge show that they can exist together, especially when placed in opposition to government. The intake of breath after the music finishes, as well as Batmanglij's aborted vocals at the end of the first bridge, then work similarly to the guitar at the end of 'Something About England', representing the possibility of a new beginning while simultaneously showing the fragility of such moments. Whether it be in the war of the oxymoronic 'Rebel Waltz' or the struggles of middle-class identity and politics detailed in 'I Think Ur a Contra', form and generic adaptation are essential to political engagement.

### **Conclusion**

While *Sandinista!* and *Contra* may differ greatly on the surface, my analysis has shown they share a method of approach to political engagement. The experimentation of both albums and the formal innovations within, particularly the combination of genres, utilises the platform given to popular music to critique the system from which the works have benefitted. *Contra* is more ambivalent about this role, with the text being much more listenable (and thus popular, in terms of sales) as a result. *Sandinista!*'s overlength and extensive experimentation seem to rally against this inclusion in a system of popular culture, but ultimately its appeal to a global market and combination with a world tour ensure it remains a cultural product. The relatively greater popularity of *Contra* in terms of sales also speaks to the ability of overtly political works to be truly 'popular': in an increasingly mediated world, perhaps the only way to popularise counter-hegemonic critique is to encase it in an otherwise popular form, though this risks misinterpretation.

However, this does not lessen the criticisms apparent in the content of the albums. Rather than positioning themselves as avant garde and espousing a counter-hegemony to those already outside that produced by the culture industry, the texts remain popular. Their engagement with consumerism allows them to critique the processes at the heart of cultural production from this very place, reaching the audience most exposed to cultural hegemony. However, the greater popularity of *Contra* is, I would argue, partly due to its more ambiguous engagement with politics. Ultimately, the texts show the tension that remains between popularity and subversive politics.

Both texts exhibit a counter-hegemony, critiquing the repetitious nature of war, Western neo-imperialism and middle-class culture, but they do more than simply advance these criticisms. Through *Sandinista!*'s challenging length and anti-aesthetic experimentation, it invites criticism and prevents deification. This demand for critique, coupled with the explicit political nature of the album and its revolutionary intent, spreads to the political as well as the formal content of the album. Similarly, *Contra*'s criticism of the middle-class image to which Vampire Weekend themselves adhere, and their use of the 'Contra' label as an admission of ideological interference, results in scepticism towards the content of the album. As such, both texts not only deploy a counter-hegemonic viewpoint, but encourage the critical thinking that forms the basis of individual counter-hegemonies.

This counter-hegemony is instilled in the albums' titles, which ensure that engagement with ideology and politics is at the literal forefront of the texts. By using popular culture to

engage in international affairs and (counter-)revolutionary struggle, the texts seek to make such ongoings mainstream. *Sandinista!*'s insistence on making the listener take note is best encapsulated in the imperatives of 'Washington Bullets' ('Please remember Víctor Jara, / In the Santiago stadium'),<sup>60</sup> where engagement with the text is incomplete without a degree of knowledge about the political subject. As a product of popular culture, and a band with a growing fanbase, The Clash exploit processes of commodification and consumerism for political advantage: if *Sandinista!* must be popular, then at least its consumption necessitates an acknowledgement of revolutionary struggle and a recognition of the role the West plays in (re-)creating the atrocities described throughout the album. To consume *Sandinista!* without knowledge of the Sandinistas (and thus a latent interest in the rise of the Contras) is hardly to consume it at all. If 'the need satisfied by consumption is the need to consume',<sup>61</sup> then *Sandinista!* ensures satisfaction is dependent on the formulation of a counter-hegemony. *Contra*'s name, too, demands a degree of political knowledge, and the recurrence of discussions of class, image and labels invites listeners to make connections between these themes, the title of the album and its various connotations, and the album itself. Again, satisfactory consumption is dependent on political engagement.

Throughout both albums, the use of multiple and apparently disparate genres is, I would argue, essential to the furthering of their ideologies. The use of reggae and dub styles by The Clash particularly, even going so far with 'One More Time' and 'One More Dub' to present a dub version of a song immediately after its original, expands the punk genre and what it represents. As the punk movement destroyed itself, the continuation of its autonomous, anti-authority spirit became manifest in its appropriation and resultant manipulation, both of itself and other genres. The form of *Sandinista!* shows this spirit in both its successful and unsuccessful experimentation: the album's ethos is one of openness, synthesis and, most importantly, cross-cultural communication through art as a form of solidarity against broader structural issues. Headon's only lead vocal and the role of other musicians, particularly Mikey Dread who version mixed the album and contributes vocals to several tracks, show the openness of the creative process. In such a politically engaged album, taking in a broader range of voices and influences is necessary to reflect the world described.

*Contra* reflects similar values, particularly prescient with its release on an independent label. While the lack of any black members or producers may cast further accusations of appropriation over their work, I would argue that their sampling and open acknowledgement of outside influences<sup>62</sup> represent appreciation rather than appropriation. The introspective nature of the class critiques within the album, and the ideas of neo-imperialism that the title sets at its heart, show a self-awareness that acts as a defense against any unintentional offense. As Adorno notes, 'Music which has achieved self-consciousness of its social function', which both of these albums can be seen as doing, 'will enter into a dialectical relation to praxis'.<sup>63</sup> By being popular while utilising predominantly black genres, the albums ask why the origins they have adapted are not themselves popular. These albums, then, represent the debt that both bands owe to the art of the oppressed, and act as an attempt to highlight the injustices that have historically subordinated these forms.

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<sup>60</sup> The Clash, 'Washington Bullets', in *Sandinista!*

<sup>61</sup> Frith, *Sound Effects*, p. 45.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, references to Paul Simon in 'Diplomat's Son'.

<sup>63</sup> Theodor Adorno quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, p. 137.



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Appendices

All images are courtesy of 45worlds.com and are available at <<http://www.45worlds.com/vinyl/album/fsln1>>.

Appendix 1

Examples of the original *Sandinista!* vinyl designs. These are reproduced in the CD reissue.



Appendix 2

Images of the *Sandinista!* album pullout. The pullout is also reproduced in the CD reissue.

















VERSION CITY

THERE IS A TRAIN AT VERSION CITY  
 WAITING FOR THE RHYTHM MAN  
 IF YOU CAN JUMP THEN JUMP RIGHT NOW  
 SHE CAN PULL YOU THROUGH TO BETTER DAYS  
 IS THAT THE TRAIN THAT THE SIBS OFF  
 THE ONE I HEARD IN MY YOUNGER DAYS  
 ALL GREAT MUSIC FROM LORNE ROUCHER  
 I'M JUMPING UP 'CAUSE I'D BE THAT TRAIN  
 THERE'S A LONELY SOUL OUT ON THE CROSSROADS  
 WITHIN THREE IN THE HOURING FAIR  
 HE'S LOOKING FOR THAT GREAT BLISS  
 HE'S TRIPPLE TREE IN THE CHIMES HIS NAME

GO I RODE THAT TRAIN FROM VERSION CITY  
 YOU KNOW I HAD AN OBEY BALE JAYS  
 NEVER HEARD SUCH RHYTHM SOUND  
 IT WAS IN MY SOUL WHO WAS IN THE REAR  
 WE WENT STRAIGHT THROUGH SYSTEM ONE  
 IF AS OVER THE ACAPPELLA PASSES  
 THEN GIBSON BINY AND TENDERABLE  
 ALL DETAILS TO THE MELABODCA RANCH  
 WE SAW THAT SOUL OUT ON THE CROSSROADS  
 WITHIN THREE IN THE HOURING FAIR  
 WE CALLED HIM ANIMAL SANGRE BERTIN  
 SHE HE WANTS TO RIDE THE VERSION TRAIN

WE RODE THAT TRAIN FROM VERSION CITY  
 FOR BE AND ONE HALF YEARS  
 I NEVER SAW SUCH RHYTHM SOUND  
 WHILE RIDING WITH THE SOUNDLESS  
 COULD NOT FALL IN SILENCE  
 BECAUSE I RODE THE RHYTHM TRAIN  
 COULD NOT WORK AT MY VERSION  
 BEFORE I RODE THE VERSION TRAIN  
 THERE IS A TRAIN AT VERSION CITY  
 WAITING FOR THE RHYTHM MAN  
 IF YOU CAN JUMP THEN JUMP RIGHT NOW  
 SHE CAN PULL YOU THROUGH  
 TO BETTER DAYS

ALL SONGS WRITTEN BY JACK TAYLOR  
 EXCEPT WHERE STATED OTHERWISE



GUEST MUSICIANS

MICKET GALLAGHER

TIMON DOGG

- NORMAN WATT-ROD
- J.P. NICKOLSON
- ELLEN POLETT
- DAVE MAYNE
- RAY GASCANNE
- SAUL SOR DAVID YATES
- DEAN HOBBART
- CHARLIE 'N' GUY 'N' MACH GALLAGHER
- GARY 'N' GUY SARGENT
- JOEY WINSKOT
- YAN JILLEN
- NOEL TERRY BULL
- ANTHONY NELSON SPICIE
- LEW LEWIS
- SCOTT BAKER WARMAN
- TORRY MORGAN
- ROBERT ADOLPHUS STARR
- CADWELLOD

TRIAL: MICKY (JAYS)  
 (GIBSON BINY)  
 (MELABODCA RANCH)  
 (GIBSON BINY)  
 (GALLAGHER)  
 (GASCANNE)



SPECIAL THANKS TO

- KOSMAC
- BRUCE
- STEWART
- JEAN
- ALAN MILTON
- IAN BOST
- THE BLOODHEADS
- DAVE LOTT
- CHICK CARL
- STANLEY
- THE THE GORAS

- GRAPHIC DESIGN: CLASH/SIBS
- PHOTOS: PHILIP SMITH
- CARTOONS: SORVE BELL



THE CLASH

PAUL SIMONON  
 BASE, VOC.

TOPPER HEADON  
 DRUMS, VOC.

JOE STRUMMER  
 VOC. GUITAR.

MICK JONES  
 GUITAR, VOC.

PLUS ~~MICKY GALLAGHER~~ ~~ELLEN POLETT~~

RECORDED AND MIXED BY BILL PRICE

PRODUCTION: THE CLASH

VERSION MIX: MIKEY DREAD

ENGINEERS: JERRY GREEN, J.P. NICKOLSON,  
 + STUDIOS: WESS EX, ELECTRIC LABYLAND

LANCELOT  
 EARNEST MAXIE WILLIAMS  
 CHANNEL 2  
 LANCELOT  
 MCKENZIE  
 PLUTO + POWER STATION





