

Coding *From Here to Eternity: Live* by The Clash

The Material:

From Here to Eternity: Live is a live compilation album released by notorious punk headliners *The Clash* in 1999. Each of the 17 songs was recorded between 1978 and 1982 in New York City, London, or Boston. By 1978, the British rock group had already released two critically acclaimed studio albums and established themselves as one of the leaders of a new movement in rock'n'roll. By 1982 the band was at the peak of their powers, having just released an album featuring the rock standard "Should I Stay or Should I Go" and headlining alongside acts like David Bowie. After four years of discord growing between the founding members over drug abuse and other disagreements, The Clash disbanded in 1986, leaving behind a legacy of politically charged lyrics that shook the foundations of post-war Western society.

In many ways, FHTE is a "Greatest Hits" album. While it lacks chart toppers like the outwardly political "Rock the Casbah" and the wonderfully subversive "Bankrobber", FHTE contains live recordings that reflect the energy of The Clash and their fans when these tracks were still fresh and ready to be devoured. The fans indulge with screaming, wailing, and chanting at the front and tail ends of each song, which creates an atmosphere of cult-like electricity. To listen to this album is to be enchanted by both the band and the entire cultural movement it represented. This zeitgeist is one in which mainstream music is not just stale, but politically and spiritually oppressive, and in which music is better if played by amateurs screaming their throats raw about the injustices of the age. As it turns out, many of these injustices are still around.

Positionality:

I have been fascinated with this album since I first bought the CD back in 2003. At the time I was the world's biggest Beatles fan looking to grow my knowledge and love for the genre that the Liverpoolians had played such a pivotal role in shaping. I first listened to FHTE after leaving acts like The Who, Elton John, Led Zeppelin, and Queen on repeat in my portable CD player. It was the first live album I ever listened to, but it wasn't the sounds produced by the audience that gave me the feeling that this was a record pure grit, fervor, and fury. It was Joe Strummers hoarse, concrete hollering about dead-end jobs, thugs, defying the law, heartbreak, and burning cities. It was the blistering speed of Topper Headon's gorilla punches on the kick and the snare drums and the garbled shrieking of Mick Jones' guitar. I didn't understand a word of it on first listen. It was too poorly produced, disorganized, and ugly compared to *Abbey Road* or *Back in Black*. By the time the penultimate track ended, the only quote I pulled from the disorienting experience was, "this indecision me molesta." I only discovered that this is a misquote while I was coding- true to their political ideology, The Clash uses damn-near perfect Spanish in *Should I Stay or Should I Go*. The Clash's lyrics, which were written for the most part by Strummer, are politically enigmatic like Bob Dylan's,

but the music demands a careful and sincere listener to parse out the message the band is trying to get across. As a young teen, I was too impatient to give the more challenging songs a chance and focused on the hits that were overplayed by 1990.

Since then, I have almost incidentally put a Clash song on just about every playlist I have ever made. I have found that The Clash is the most enduring rock band of all time for this purpose. While the tracks on FHTE frequently slip into sonic mayhem, The Clash are bona fide experts at crafting pop hooks, danceable beats, and call-response anthems. Tracks like the Bubblegum Pop-infused “Police On My Back” and the quintessentially New Wave “Lost in the Supermarket” are, ironically, just as likely to be heard in the aisles of your grocery store or office lobby as they are in a shabby old punk bar. Combine The Clash’s pitch-perfect pop sensibilities with lyrics that are both radical and heartfelt, and you have the most authentically avant-garde pop group of all time.

This is why I wanted to code the album more than any other. I knew the choruses, the drops, and the hooks by heart after 15 years of dancing to these tracks surrounded by partiers of every stripe, but I had never studied the verses. I wanted to understand just how real this seeming authenticity is. Are Joe Strummer and Mick Jones as clever as they sound, or are they just singing with a vicious tongue to make a splash and sell records? Are they actually trying to address the injustices or are they just trying to scare mom and dad?

Approaches:

First Coding Method:

As my aim was to get at the soul of this group, to try to separate their stage bravado from their sincerely held beliefs, just by looking at their lyrics, I knew from the start that I would be using the “values” coding method. In *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, Saldaña describes this method as particularly useful “for those that explore cultural values and intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions in case studies.” An interesting aspect of values coding is that it uses three different codes- values, beliefs, and attitudes- that are applied to statements by the subject and then expanded upon by the researcher. In some cases all three of these codes might apply to the same statement.

For example, when Strummer howls, “On the last tour, my mates couldn’t get in/I’d open up the door, but they’d get run out again” in the second verse of the opening track Complete Control; he is expressing a value, a belief, and an attitude. The value is loyalty and devotion to one’s community, which is a common theme in FHTE. The attitude is frustration and defiance- more common themes- and the belief is that The Clash represents an underclass that is not welcome in society. Taken together it is easy to see how this coding method is an effective tool for accomplishing my goal.

However, there were problems with values coding that I did not expect. For one, it is not always easy to tell if someone is projecting a sincerely held belief or just an attitude, and this is especially the case with song lyrics. Punk songs are often packed with a sense of irony and ridicule, which they tend to use to project authenticity and a rejection of middle class aspirations. This makes it difficult to

outright know if a left-wing singer is trying to decry the injustice of the middle class dream, or if they are simply making fun of those who pursue it.

While The Clash appears to value honesty and authenticity above all else, they frequently sing from perspectives that they have not personally experienced. The most common example of this is when the singer takes on the perspective of a working-middle-class employee struggling to survive in a life not suited for human beings (there is always an anti-capitalistic tinge to these stories). “Working for a rise, better my station”, raps¹ Strummer on The Magnificent Seven, “take my baby to sophistication/she’s seen the ads, she thinks it’s nice/better work hard- I seen the price.” At this point the band were well-established hit-makers and it is unlikely that Strummer, who wrote the lyrics to the post-disco hip-hop beat on the spot, ever saw himself working in an office-as is implied later in the verse- or “bettering his station.” Yet since the character he has created is such a perfect projection of the worldview found in others verses on other tracks, we can assume that this story reveals a sincerely held belief. He is not mocking the men who feel like they can relate to this story, but questioning the system that makes this story so relatable.

There were several instances when “attitude projection” did actually threaten my “beliefs” coding (another coding method helped me through many of these, which I will talk about later). One such instance can be found in my coding of London Calling, which is perhaps the group’s most celebrated punk anthem.² In this song Strummer and Jones declare “The Ice Age is coming, the sun zooming in/Meltdown expected, the wheat is growing thin/Engines stop running, but I have no fear/’Cause London is drowning, and I live by the river.” Taken from any other punk band, it would be easy to look at this verse and read it as basic youthful nihilism and categorize it as a belief, if a limply held one. However, based on the rest of my values coding I decided that this fearlessness in the face of the apocalypse is a projection of an attitude, not a belief. While The Clash regularly extolls fearlessness, I believe that their lyrics reveal that they are afraid of the world ending, and that they would like to prevent it from happening by establishing a more just and honest society. My coding suggests that Strummer and Jones (both are credited for writing this song) knew that singing about Armageddon sounds hyperbolic and distant unless you convince your listeners that you do not care whether it happens. By

¹ Yes, raps. The Clash had been spending a lot of time in New York City during the late 70s and were impressed with early hip hop artists like the Sugarhill Gang and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. After listening to a few tracks they stumbled across at a record store in Brooklyn, the band decided to record the track “The Magnificent Seven”, which was the first “rap” single by a white artist.

² Punk indeed. London Calling, the 1979 which features themes of street violence, revolution, Armageddon, and a reference to the “Three Mile Island” nuclear incident, was linked to social disaffection and frustration in the UK for decades after its release. [In 2006, a 23-year-old phone salesman was arrested at a British airport](#) after he asked his cab driver to play the song-manifesto. The cabbie called the cops fearing that the 23-year-old was a terrorist. Racism probably played a role in the rest, as well as Britain’s police state, both of which The Clash abhorred and protested against at events like “Rock Against Racism” in 1978.

doing that, The Clash come off as tellers of cold facts. The message to society is not that they are fearless in the face of imminent societal collapse, but that the leaders of our society needs to shape up or this nightmare vision may come true.

Other problems I encountered during my values coding were far more obvious and not worth giving too much attention. During this process I realized that each category should have different kinds of descriptions in order to work best with song lyrics. For example, attitudes and values were typically summed up by one or two adjectives, while beliefs required full sentences. I didn't have this problem when I coded interviews at the beginning of the quarter, so it took me a couple reads before I adjusted. Another challenge that existed in all of my coding methods but was particularly problematic during my values coding is that the new themes that pop out in every song often bleed into the next song in my head. Since these songs were written separately over a number of years and do not appear to be organized in any way, this seems code corruption. In order to address this I coded front to back the first two times and back to front the third time, hoping to break apart my tendency to treat these lyrics as a linear story.

Second and Third Coding Methods:

I knew early on that my values codes would be the heart of this project, but I also wanted to include at least two other methods to enhance my understanding of the cultural and political nature of FHTE's lyrics. I was immediately drawn to "in vivo" coding, which I tried out at the start of the quarter. According to Saldaña, it is coding "a word or short phrase from the actual language found in the qualitative data record" that reveals what is significant to the subject. Saldaña adds that in vivo is useful for coding beginners and "particularly useful in educational ethnographies with youth." While it would be difficult to describe the members of The Clash as "youths" between 1978 and 1982 as they were all in their mid-late 20s, their focus on creating a group mentality among Britain's younger generations through shared frustrations, energy, and slang made the band a lightning rod for the nation's "disaffected adolescents." Taking that into consideration, it makes perfect sense to apply in vivo codes to an act that was pivotal in a generation's shift into adulthood.

Unfortunately, my experience applying in vivo codes to *song lyrics* was less than satisfactory. The problem is that The Clash's dedication to authenticity, honesty, and the use of their political ideology to shape the listener's perception of their identity led to a lot of overlap with my values coding. Since punk lyrics are typically meant to get to the heart of the message without a whole lot of fluff and metaphor, it was tempting to just highlight every line, as each word feels intentional and significant to the subject. When I tried to narrow my in vivo coding down, I found myself underlining the same lines I highlighted as fitting in the "value" category. For example, in "(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais", Strummer fires off, "White youth, black youth, better find another solution/why not phone up Robin Hood/And ask him for some wealth distribution." I highlighted this section in my values coding as it demonstrated the band's value of anti-capitalism and their belief that racial division is fueled by income inequality. For in vivo I underlined "Robin Hood" and "wealth distribution" as these phrases exhibits the group's British-ness to some degree and their interest in economics and income inequality. While the

discrepancies between the two codes are somewhat interesting, it felt a little redundant at the time. For the most part, my in vivo codes did not reveal what was significant to the group as much as it revealed that this is a late-70s British band that spends their spare time watching late-70s British and American TV and listening to late-70s British and American radio. References to pop culture like the Cheesboiger! sketch from Saturday Night Live and a pop DJ on Capital Radio are more abundant than references to punk icons like Blue Beat Records, and they say little about what truly matters to band. What my in vivo codes do reveal in hindsight is that The Clash displayed their identity and the values that mattered most to them by highlighting the hypocrisy and cruelty of others, not by talking about their raggedy shirts and dyed hair, as punk bands like Rancid and Greenday did in the 1990s.

After a disappointing turn with my in vivo coding, I skimmed through Saldaña to find a third coding technique that would show me something that my values codes had not. In my first coding exercise I chose the “descriptive” method, but I felt that this method would not be all that insightful when applied to such a small dataset (17 songs spread across 17 pages). When I came across the “versus” coding chapter I knew I had found a winner. Saldaña describes versus coding as identifying “in binary terms the individuals, groups, social systems, organizations, phenomena, processes, concepts, etc. in direct conflict with each other.” I bet Joe Strummer himself couldn’t have come up with a better way to read the band’s lyrics. If values coding could tell me something about The Clash’s ideology and in vivo about their cultural identity, than versus coding would reveal the power dynamics and rationalizations the band hoped to subvert with their music.

My versus codes held up to these expectations. Where my values codes isolated specific beliefs, such as “members of society are distracted from the issues that matter” and “we represent an unwanted underclass”, my versus codes linked the band’s frustration and sense of injustice to specific entities. For example, in Straight to Hell, the final track on the album, Strummer sputters, “Speaking King’s English in quotation/as railhead towns feel the steel mills rust/Water froze in the generation/Clear as winter ice, this is your paradise.” At the start of this lengthy ballad about the destruction British imperialism and American capitalism have left in their wake around the globe, the band directly accuses Britain’s educated elite of ignoring the destruction of the nation’s middle and working classes. This dichotomy between the underclasses and the national elite helps explain why so many other of the songs on this album demonstrate a visceral hatred of “the law”, mainstream media, the military and the police, and corporate imperialists. The band isn’t just wailing against “the establishment” because it possesses all of the economic and social power they feel has been denied to them, they are excoriating specific entities for causing pointless wars, destroying the environment, and leading its subjects into a more unjust society.

Conclusion:

When I began this project I hoped that by the end of it I would be able to determine whether The Clash really were the radical political activists their

reputation suggests they are. My chief concern was that I would find a series of isolated statements that are well written and witty, but ultimately do not suggest a fleshed-out ideology. I hoped that by picking a compilation album (I had considered choosing *Sandinista!* as my case study), I would be able to control for whatever motivations or ideas the band had for a specific album. I was nervous that maybe the band moved past politics by the early 80s as their fame increased. Another worry I had was that a rock band from the late 70s might have lyrics that are homophobic, misogynistic, and/or patronizing to people of color and immigrants. Thankfully, neither of these concerns was justified.³

Just about every song on this album features some kind of political statement. *Straight to Hell* was released in 1982 and also touches on the alienation felt by immigrants in the UK and US soldiers abandoning pregnant Vietnamese women at the end of the Vietnam War. It is a grim depiction of reality, but an earnest one. In “Career Opportunities”, the band denounces the Royal Air Force as an imperialist institution that they would neither support nor work for- a bold statement coming from a generation that grew up hearing of the heroism of the R.A.F. during WW2. In “(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais” they declare British democracy so feeble and corrupt that “if Adolf Hitler flew in today, they’d send a limousine anyway.” Of course, the elites aren’t the only ones to blame. In my coding process I found that the most repeated theme on FHTE is that the populace lets itself be distracted from the issues that matter by mainstream media. “London calling”, hollers the band in a reference to the BBC’s radio call to colonies during WW2, “and I don’t wanna shout/but while we were talking, I saw you nodding out.” The sheer breadth and depth of the band’s ideology- which is pro-peace,⁴ pro-democracy, pro-welfare state, and pro-free speech as much as it is anti-racist, anti-capitalist, and anti-elitist- suggests that The Clash were not just trying to send a shiver up the spines of moms and dads everywhere, but also up the spines of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Capitalism is the new imperialism and it is ripping the world to pieces, The Clash argue, and if we don’t act the things we agree are good for the population as a whole will be destroyed by a new generation of elitists and fascists. In the context of Brexit and Trump, I think it is safe to say that the worst nightmares of The Clash have come true.

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³ The Clash kept up their political lyrics until the very end. Their final album, *Cut the Crap* (1986), includes the hit single “This is England”, a borderline soccer chant that touches on themes of racism, police brutality, corruption, and even comments on the Falklands War (The Clash weren’t for it). While *Cut the Crap* is seen as the band’s worst album, *This is England* still has an influence on British culture today, as evidenced by a 2015 British TV show of the same name that touches on some of the same themes as the song.

⁴ Strummer was especially anti-war. When he found out that “Rock the Casbah”, which was inspired by Iran’s ban on Western music after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, had been written on an American bomb during the 1991 Gulf War, he reportedly wept.

