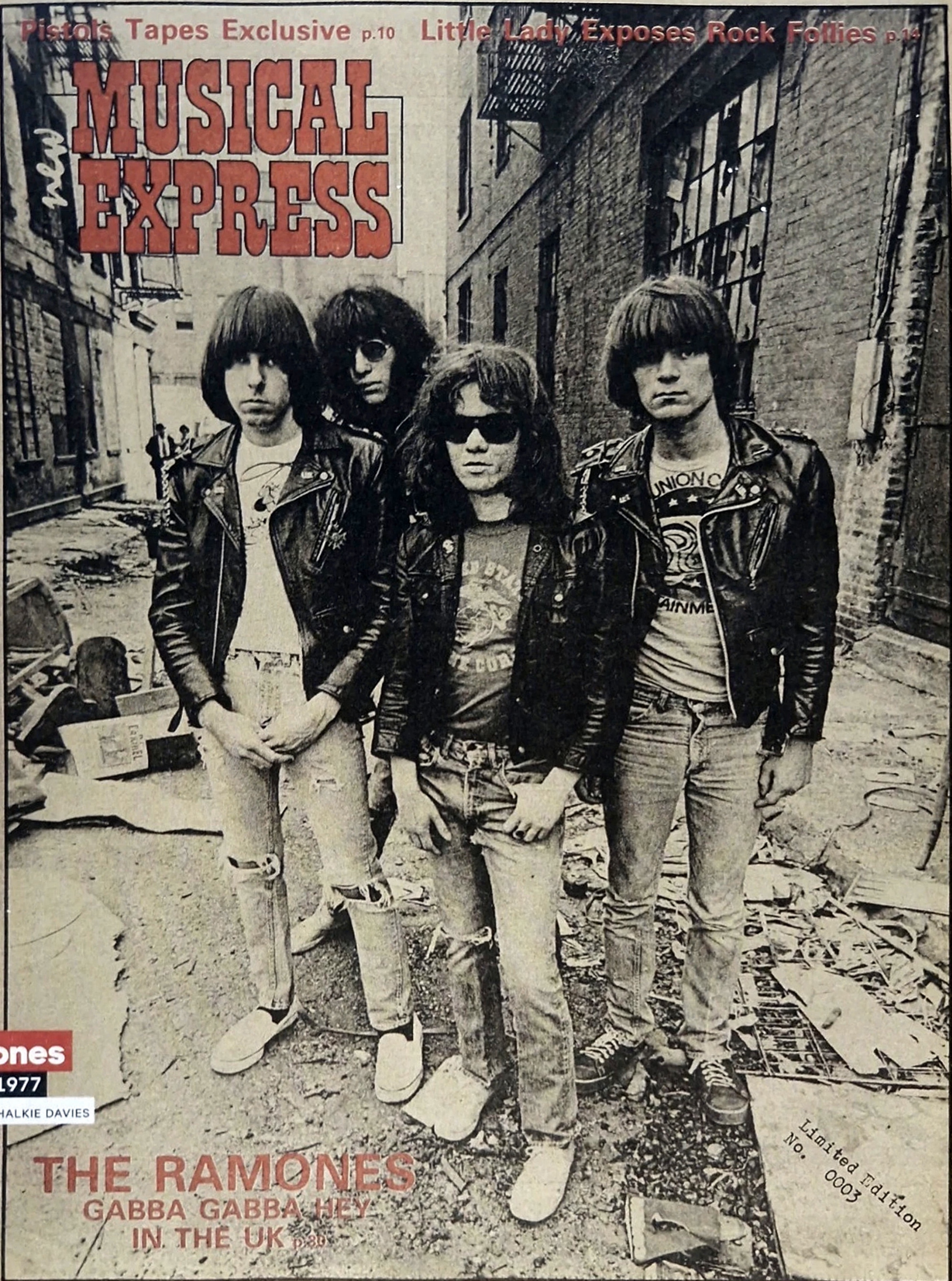


Pistols Tapes Exclusive p.10 Little Lady Exposes Rock Follies p.14

MUSICAL EXPRESS

new



THE RAMONES

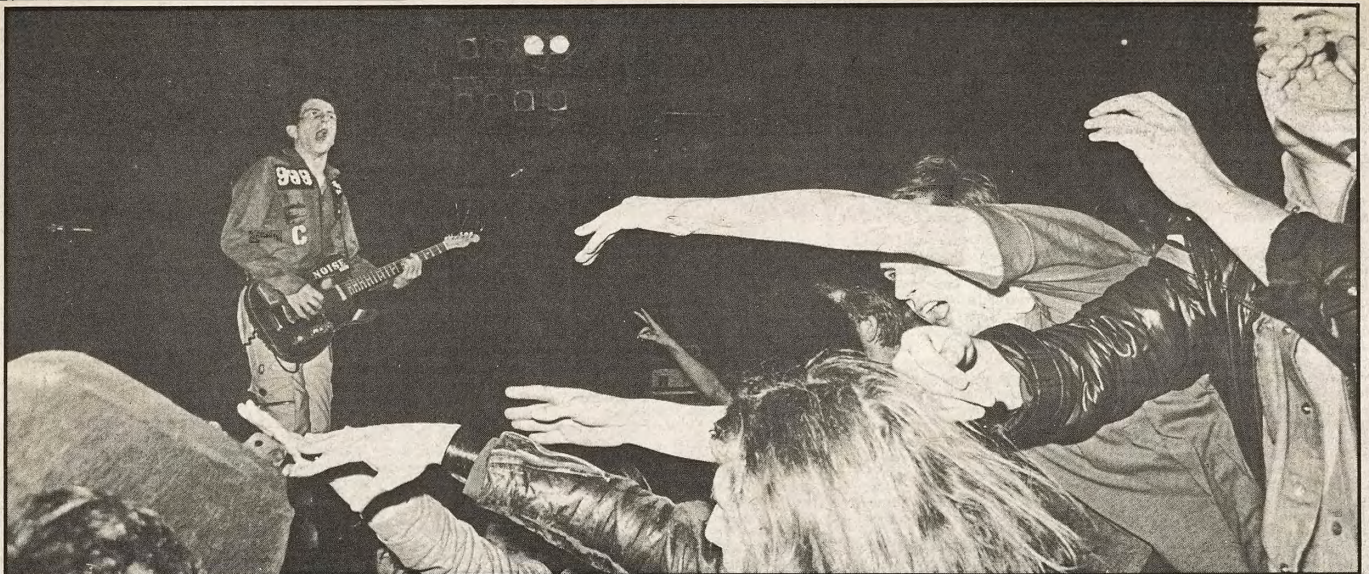
May 21, 1977

BY CHALKIE DAVIES

THE RAMONES
GABBA GABBA HEY
IN THE UK p.35

Limited Edition
No. 0003

Sub: NZ 20c, SA 35c, DM 10c, FR 45c, GR 10c, HK 10c, IL 10c, IN 10c, JP 10c, KR 10c, MA 10c, MX 10c, NZ 20c, PH 10c, SG 10c, TH 10c, TW 10c, UK 10c, US 95c, ZA 10c
Printed in the USA by Time Inc. Magazine, Inc. © 1977



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A curiously self-conscious and predictable kind of riot, but the demolition of 200 seats from the Rainbow stalls at the major gig of The Clash's national tour last week seemed to satisfy everyone concerned; group, audience, and the daily press, who went away gratefully clutching their latest Punk Rock Shock Horror headlines.

Of course, most of the audience sensibly preferred to stand and watch as the bristly hardcore down front pogoed and catapulted all over each other in mindless abandon and offered up the homage of a few rows of seats to the young gods on stage.

After all, why risk losing an eye? As long as the resultant debris was stacked neatly along the front of the stage, The Clash themselves remained unperturbed, while in the wings the Rainbow management likewise looked on apparently unalarmed. After all, it had been previously agreed that any damage would be paid for in full by The Clash management.

Anyway, rock venues get to expect this sort of thing. A few months ago it was The Hot Rods who'd occasioned the stall-trashing, and not long before that I recall seeing a particularly awesome picture of seat destruction after an Alex Harvey gig at the Glasgow Apollo.

Or was it the Bay City Rollers? And let's not forget that these incidents are as nothing compared to the fury of rioting Teddy Boys at rock-'n-roll shows in the Fifties, when water-hoses were frequently used to

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Or even compared to what a few hundred Man Utd fans can do on a bad Saturday.

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THAT something was going to happen that evening was entirely predictable.

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The New Wave had finally got what it had tried for six months previously when the Pistols' Anarchy Tour had ended in debacle — its own package tour, along with record company sponsorship, albums in the charts, and acceptance by established rock venues.

There was, in fact, a distinct air of History In The Making as evidenced by the plethora of music-biz folk and what seemed like every New Wave band that wasn't actually appearing on the five-strong bill. The rest of the audience seemed a mixture of the downright curious, a large number of people trying on the New Wave thing for size, and the faithful few hundred who'd been with The Clash and the rest since those now-distant days way back — yup — last summer.

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THE CLASH sure have changed a lot since I saw them last autumn at a Fulham Town Hall gig where the audience was counted in tens rather than hundreds. Any suggestion of amateurishness or a fumbling inability to cope with their instruments is completely gone, along with the paint-splashed dole-queue threads.

After the numerous shabby new wave shows I've seen round London town in the past year, I was totally

unprepared for the expertly honed professionalism on exhibit that night. Visually, at least, they were undeniably impressive.

It was a scene straight out of *Clockwork Orange*, a giant backdrop of last summer's Notting Hill riots being the only adornment beyond the stark dramatic lighting and the black speaker monoliths that towered on either side.

The group themselves look exactly like the sort of outfit that Alex and his droogs would be wont to catch by way of priming before a little spot of ultra-violence. Like the scenery they're predominantly in black, white, and red, and covered with a multiplicity of pockets, zips, toggles, buckles, and the other trappings from the current para-military fashions.

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That it's a threatening, desperate landscape is an impression reinforced by the sheer ferocity, noise, and primal aggression of The Clash's music. For the most part it's music without subtlety, or compromise.

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He takes the part of street psychotic further than anyone before him. Just as the lettering on his clothes and the backdrop spell out images of violence and alarm, so Strummer's vocabulary is plundered from the madhouse, the jail, and the detention camp.

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For pure adrenalin-rush excitement the Clash are probably the best band in the country right now.

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EXACTLY WHAT depressed me?

It certainly wasn't the seat-smashing episode, which, as I said, is hardly anything new or depression-worthy, though the sense that the audience was doing exactly what was expected of it was depressing — and it was also most ironic in view of Strummer's claim half-way through the set that the "we ain't on remote control no more". Oh no?

No, what depressed me was more importantly — the music (which we'll consider a little more closely in a paragraph or two) the cumulative effect of the concert's small ironies, contradictions, and inconsistencies, and their implication for the future of the New Wave as a whole.

The prevailing impression I took away was one of nihilism, of anti-life as opposed to life-affirmation, of a perverse and slightly sick communal spirit, of a movement that glorifies hopelessness and has nothing positive to offer beyond the mere fact of its existence.

This piece is not meant to be another routine put-down of the New Wave and its adherents, when the movement has so clearly been beneficial in terms of enabling and encouraging people to play and participate rather than merely consume the occasional offerings of its tax-exiled heroes. A change it had to come, we knew it all along . . .

With it, the New Wave has brought lyrics of youth, involvement, and protest, the very lifeblood of rock and a far more apt and meaningful response to life in the greying British '70s than is represented by the docile escapism and California soundtracks that have come to dominate the charts and rock thinking as a whole. Deliver me, dear lord, from life in suburbia with an Eagles album . . .

THE CATHARTIC wind of change that the New Wave has brought is almost enough for me to forgive it its unlistenable music, but personally I can't make much sense of music that lacks any subtlety of rhythm or melody, which is invariably badly played and whose lyrics are usually delivered in a monotone screech.

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■ Continues over

From previous page

can't find anything much positive to say about the Buzzcocks either beyond the great two-note guitar solo in "Boredom" and the fact that their bass-player looks like rock's answer to the Michelin man.

Even The Jam — who can certainly play with a great deal of verve and power on their night — came over tinny and formless on the appalling PA system. There may be good musicians in the New Wave, but it'd be a hell of a lot easier to hear them if there were some good sound engineers as well.

While conceding it's helped resurrect the single to its rightful status, I feel little better toward punk rock on record. But then these days, apparently like J. Rotten and The Clash, I don't listen to much else but reggae anyway. The only Clash number I actually enjoyed last week was their singularly potent exposition of Junior Murvin's "Police And Thieves".

Unlistenable or not, groups rarely become groups for the music's sake, as Ian Hunter said in last week's NME: it's money, girls, image, whatever. The music comes later. I trust it will last.

NO AMOUNT of musicianship, though, could conceal the almost wilful confusion and ignorance that's presented as the New Wave's public face.

I say "public" because as individuals most New Wave bands and punters seem pretty, uh, regular people. All the more depressing then, to hear lyrics and public statements of the sort that have earned the movement its moronic reputation.

For example, there's the oft-repeated denigration of all things 'hippy' — psychedelic music (together with its Heavy Metal and Hip Easy Listening offspring), long hair, cannabis, what is construed as phony hippy artiness (books and paintings bah), and the 'Peace and Love' ethic of ten years ago, which, claim the punks, was a demonstrable failure in its attempts to change the world.

Its anti-intellectualism aside, I object to such blatant misrepresentation of history. If 1968 was 'peace and love', then it was also the anti-Vietnam war demonstration in Grosvenor Square, the police riot at the

Chicago Democratic Convention, and the Paris student revolution that escalated into the complete immobilisation of France.

How's "Anarchy In The UK" compare to that?

In fact, a vigorous anti-authoritarianism and social alienation were as much or more a part of the 'hippy' ethic in practice as of the New Wave, who also seem under the delusion that before 'Dole Queue Rock' (since when haven't struggling rock bands been on the dole?) no-one was writing protest songs.

Someone should play them the likes of Frank Zappa's "Trouble Coming Every Day" (or, come to think of it, "Flower Punk") from 1966. Or remind them of the folk protest movement of the early sixties and Bob Dylan singing "Talking Third World War Blues".

IN STRICTLY nationalist terms, though, the punks may have a point.

Overt social or political protest has never been a strong point of British rock, which has invariably commented on social issues and attitudes in a more indirect way. The accent has always been on changing the individual rather than society; "You better free your mind instead" sang the Beatles on "Revolution", and likewise The Stones, Floyd, Kinks, and the whole mainstream of British rock has been political by implication rather than declaration.

On the few occasions that British rock stars have made overt political statements, they've usually been reactionary; recently we've had Rod wowing the Liberal, Eric coming out for Powell, Harley seeing reds-under-the-bed.

The major exception, of course, is John Lennon in his Red Mole/Sometimes In New York City" period, and it's significant that Lennon had to move to the U.S. before he could comfortably adopt such a stance.

Rock and politics have always mixed better in the States, if only because politics and showbusiness have never been seen as that far apart — they almost got a 'B' movie star for president recently. Then again, American youth has had more reason to be politically involved; no-one here got Vietnam call-up papers.

CLASH TRASH BACKLASH

Times have changed. With permanent crisis in the UK (including and especially Ulster) 69-77, and the resultant national identity crisis, it was inevitable that rock would become more politicised — rock being a barometer of the social climate and all that.

The Clash seem to be rock's response to the National Front. In complete and declared opposition to the NF and their sinister anti-democratic, racist politics, they nonetheless inhabit the same bighted urban landscape, preach violence against violence. *Hate and War* say the shirts, *Riot, 999* . . .

It's a dangerously ambiguous response, just as the response to Strummer's mention of the Front last week was ambiguous — a jeer, certainly, some cheers maybe. And no matter how many anti-NF remarks are made, still basically a movement toward the politics of violence.

So far the New Wave have been largely incapable of saying exactly what they're fighting for rather who they're fighting against. We know they're not fighting to defend love and peace, what then?

We know at least that The Jam love the Queen ("You're a commie ain't ya?") they said when I suggested Her Majesty didn't give a royal hoot about them or about rock music, and that Townshend's Union Jacket back in '66 was cocking a snook at the establishment). But what do the rest of the New Wave defend? The right to smash up the stalls?

IT'S IN the context of questions like these that I find the New Wave's fascination with reggae so curiously out of sync with where the movement is apparently at.

"Just fucking listen to some reggae, that's all," concluded Mark P in a *Sniffing Glue* interview with the Roxy Club's black DJ Don Letts, while at the concert last week they played the best sounds I'd ever heard at the Rainbow, great hunks of dub, Skatalites, Revolutionaries.

Sure, much reggae is 'Rebel Music', instantly alienates Eagles fans, and deals with militant images and lyrics, but there any resemblance to the New

Wave music ends. Even the angriest reggae is built on a foundation of positive beliefs which, again ironically for the punks, preach peace, love, spirituality and equality. Serious t'ing iyah. No jestering.

Nowhere is the fundamental opposition of reggae and New Wave music more plain than in the dancing that each inspires. Reggae is sensual, laid-back, polyrhythmic; its dancing fluid, total, often very close, and sexually suggestive. Reggae dancing usually goes on for several hours at a time.

Compare this to the despicable pogo dance, or rather, anti-dance. The body is clenched, catapulted aggressively at other leaping lemmings, and can be sustained only for short bursts. That it's hardly the most seductive display of the human form goes without saying, as does the fact that it's wilfully moronic.

At least the Teds had jiving at their riots.

"STREET FIGHTERS in custom-made guerrilla togs," sneered one recent *Gasbag* correspondent. "Anarchy courtesy of EMI?" spat another.

The cynicism is understandable. Rebels on £40,000 contracts? With some honourable exceptions, rock and roll has seen its heroes burn out or sell out. Or rather be brought out whether they like it or not. Only the fittest have been able to overcome the

Below: JOE STRUMMER does the Epileptic — it's the latest thing, dears!



debilitating patronisation of the music business and continue to simply create good music or contribute something to the public that gave them their privilege — not just materially but in the sense of maintaining their artistic integrity and simultaneously evolving their relationship to the world at large.

It's exactly because so many successive revolutionary fanfares have been stifled so easily that we should look back to the mistakes and cop-outs of the past rather than merely sneer at them. Won't get fooled again? Don't you believe it.

The New Wave now find themselves approaching the same position as the older established bands they've criticised. It's pointless to blame them for the quandary they now face — if they want their records out and their concerts played, they don't have much choice but to sign up (and lots of lolly is, as many members of the music biz, constantly remind one, What It's All About). That said, I don't see what's to stop the new generation of rock rebels going the same way as their successors.

The establishment, in the form of the music biz, is already finding ways of turning this latest threat to its life into a lucrative source of income. And if the boutiques can turn Che Guevara into a commodity, then they shouldn't have too much trouble with 1984/Clockwork Orange imagery and vague noises about 'Anarchy'. How long before 'Hate and War' shirts are on sale in the NME mail order ads where flower-embroidered loon pants nestled a few years back?

ALRIGHT, we've seen action. The New Wave has helped wash away the accumulated dross left by the ebb of the 60's tide, but in the long run it might just be washing up some more evil pollutant.

Certainly it's impossible not to have serious doubts about any musical form that limits emotional response to jumping up and down on the spot and blowing globules of phlegm at its heroes. Surely rock culture, youth culture, is richer than that?

"Blank Generation" may be apt as a description, but as a eulogy and rallying call it's pathetic.

Don't just pogo there, read something.

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- SUNDAY, MAY 29 LONDON, Hammersmith Odeon
- TUESDAY, MAY 31 BRISTOL, Colston Hall

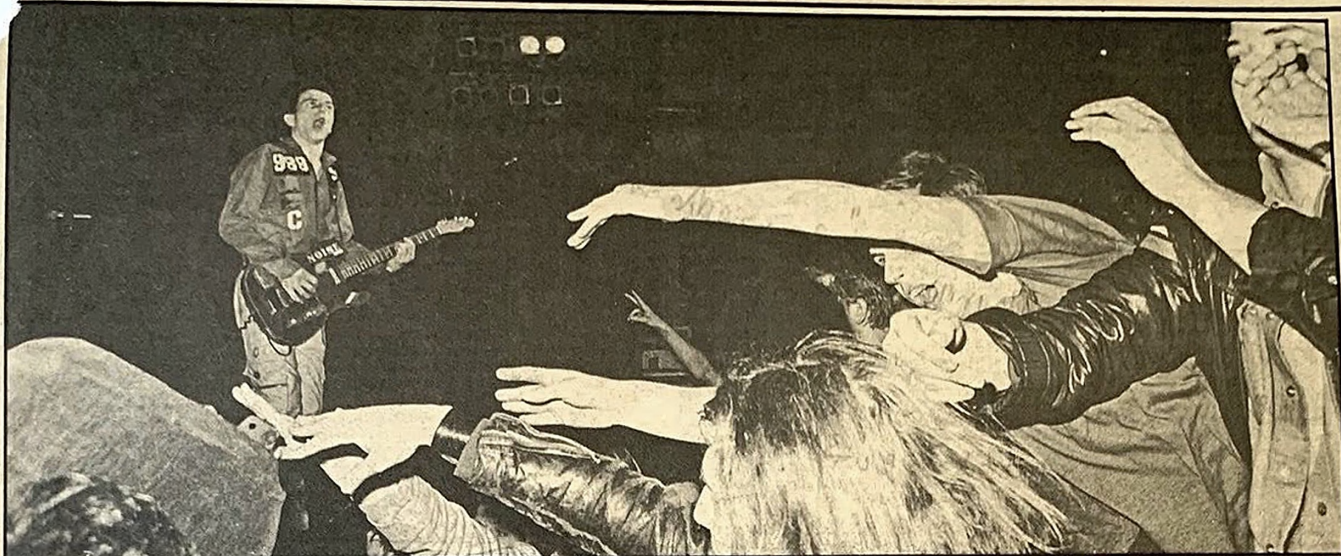
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