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The Clash in America

Euphoric scenes of wild abandon, the belated explosion of punk consciousness etc etc

SO YOU think we lost the battle — then go home and weep about it. Sometimes you've got to wake up in the morning and think, 'Fuck it you're going to win the battle.' — Joe Strummer.

There were no riots, no outraged citizens, no glaring headlines when Pearl Harbour '79 came to an old elegant building in downtown Vancouver last week. The only report in the newspapers' music section was that the local symphony orchestra had gone on strike. The Clash's first American tour is being felt by the press as the stimulating aftershock of the Pistols US invasion a year ago or not at all.

The Pearl Harbour '79 tour posters depict the Statue of Liberty bundled up in rope. A more illuminating picture I think could have been taken outside the Berkeley Community Theatre in San Francisco a few days and a long bus ride later. An hour before the doors were due to open a line of people stretched quietly from the front steps in a perfect shape of a walking stick, where two young security guards shone torches on the few rebels who wanted to hang out rather than wait in the queue for their numbered seats. There was something numbing about that picture. US rock on quaaludes.

Maybe these were the Bo Diddley fans. The middle aged usher who showed me to my seat felt the need to tell me who he was. He stood up there with his square guitar and growled "This feels like 1965 all over again" and almost everyone cheered and gave him standing ovations.

The difference between a living legend and a living band I thought to myself when Diddley left the stage, and the hired DJ brought over for the tour playing Buzzcocks, and Sid's 'My Way', is between standing up and shouting because you feel you ought to — and standing up and shouting because you simply had to. There's simply nowhere else for all that passion to go. The best rock music someone once said is

like a good whore, it's both aggressive and relieving. I didn't get any of that from Bo Diddley's macho strutting. The Clash supplied an overdose.

The audience was divided into factions: the delirious converts who made the most of The Clash's rule that the bouncers weren't to force people into their seats,

Winterland's dead and San Francisco is still the Grateful Dead. The Clash have got a lot of reviving to do.

There were a lot more Ramones lookalikes, stormtroopers in sneakers with elaborate punk badges, a couple of miniature Sun front page headlines 'I want justice for my Sid' and a

BACKSTAGE there wasn't much talking.

In the five days the band spent in San Francisco they must have talked to just about everyone who wanted to listen. A press conference on Monday with a barrage of dumb questions led the band to turn it into their own personal comedy show;

Berkeley gig, the venue seatless and flooded with atmosphere. Of the eight dates on this mini-tour (the band intends to return in June and fill in the gaps) only one failed to sell out — the Berkeley one. A good sign considering the size of the venue (the only time the Pistols played to anything in the few thousand seat mark

dribbling in, falling over, dancing with strangers and having fun. There was a strong wired sexual sort of atmosphere here, an intangible kind of craziness. The thing that attracted you to rock and roll in the first place.

There was some trouble in the line, a few bottles broken, but that's all, mostly brought on by the slowness with which they were let in. This was 'New Youth's first gig and they hadn't quite got it together. They only opened one cash register until Clash's manager threatened to open the doors and let everyone in free and tills appeared like magic.

Clash were electrifying. Like a bloody great headline, commanding attention and belief. They opened with 'I'm So Bored with the USA' and the punters went as wild as I've ever seen them go. No time to take notes — there were more important things to do. For the first time in the US I could see the relevance of pogoing. When there's no seats and everyone's crushing your ribs to powder down the front and you want to dance, there's nowhere to go but up. It's also a pretty efficient way of meeting people when you fall on top of them. One girl danced from someone's head onto the stage and dived off head first into the solid mass of people. That must be just about the ultimate rock fan experience.

America was getting off on the Clash and New Youth was getting a good down payment for their organisation. Some hope yet. But the battle's not won. Johnny Walker the DJ was there. He's just been fired by a San Francisco radio station for playing punk records.

ON THE BUS after the show, Jones, Strummer and Simonon are conducting a private post mortem on the tour in the back. Verdict: Vancouver pretty good, Berkeley OK, the benefit in 'Frisco, the best so far. Topper and a friend and the rest of us are down the front watching 'Heaven Can Wait' on the video machine while fans mill around outside.

Just before the gig started, Topper was sitting on the bus watching 'Star Wars' when a guy came inside and struck up a conversation and took a lot of persuading to leave. He came back a few minutes later with a bottle of champagne, shook the drummer's hand and left. The champagne was consumed on the 400 mile trip to L.A. Everyone is half dead by the time the bus reaches Santa Monica.

While Ace is sorting out a beach front hotel, an old man wanders up and asks if he can look around the bus. He thinks we're a troop of wandering Bohemians until



CLASH PICS BY BOB GRUEN

flooded the front section and pogoed madly.

Towards the back the typical US rock fans observed the action at a distance through binoculars (imagine the only place you'd ever seen your favourite band play is half a mile from the stage in a place like Earls Court — out here it's as inevitable in rock as death and taxes are in life) and an even more staid bunch sat in the balcony. I suspect they were the ones queuing quietly outside to guarantee a safe spot for their voyeurism.

There were a number of old style bondage and safety pin punks — remember nothing has happened on this scale since the Pistols gig in Winterland at the end of '77. Now the Pistols are dead, Sid's dead,

large crowd of US music press analysing the action like it was the interval of a Bernard Shaw play complaining that they couldn't make out the words when Joe Strummer called from the stage 'If you can't understand the words, don't worry, you're not alone'.

We were thanked for bothering to come tonight. Bothering? It was magnificent. Though I could see little more than the flag used as backdrop and Jones' and Simonon's electrocuted leaps above head level, all other rock and roll senses were gratified. Contact with hot pogoing bodies, smell of overheated energy (something you forget is sanitised for your protection in sports arena rock gigs) and the sound; a brain battering 'Tommy Gun', an exhilarating 'Stay Free', a scorching 'Guns On The Roof', 'I Fought The Law', 'Cell Block No. 9' and the hardest, fastest, most powerful encore in rock with 'White Riot'.

As for the audience reaction, some seemed to feel uncomfortable but more felt salvation. I can't remember having seen a performance so shot with adrenalin, outdone though it would be by the next night's show.

record store appearances, radio interviews and private viewing with anything from 'Time' magazine to 'Cashbox'.

In the dressing room someone asked Mick if he liked the Jam (to a suitably non-committal answer) and someone else warily suggested that Clash had some sort of pact going with Elvis Costello (whose tour bus was parked in Japan town near the next night's gig) who was going to have old rocker Carl Perkins on his tour (Perkins in fact backed out a while ago), only to be told politely that if anyone was doing the copying it was Elvis, who doesn't seem that popular with Clash. Mick and I swapped notes on what a strange place this is.

Tommorrow night's gig hasn't exactly left their record company brimming with philanthropic joy. It's a benefit concert for 'New Youth', a fledgling organisation aiming to keep ticket prices down, get larger percentages for the bands and a place for new wave acts to play.

Besides not being part of the official tour and bound to upset the promoters (the slyest get round any legal points by advertising 'White Riot' in the Fillmore with the best band ever direct from England'. No names mentioned), the tickets are half the price of the

over here was at Winterland).

The following afternoon I head for the Villa Roma bar to find Ace, the tour manager locked in a verbal battle with the red-faced vein-popping Motel manager. A misunderstanding over a phone bill that would have evoked polite discussion at the most with the average guest. "The man's an arsehole" Mick told me by way of explanation. The manager had parked his little Pinto station wagon (one of the smallest American cars) in front of the tour bus to stop it leaving, and was threatening to call the police.

Ace was trying valiantly to keep his temper — not easy when a middle aged man screams "You bums are freaks" to your face. The band left and the manager swaggered over to the bar, loosened his collar and had the barmaid get him a double, boasting how he "wasn't going to be taken for a ride by the like of those freaks" and how "I blocked the bus with my little Pinto wagon — it couldn't move". A hero for a day.

The benefit concert was at a moth-eaten synagogue in San Francisco next door to Jim Jones' People's Temple, tacky but majestic, and a great venue. The punters were generally shit-stoned,

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ONE OF these men is Bo Diddley

the driver tells him it's a rock band that's playing the Civic tonight. Underdressed the 70-year-old announces that he and his wife go disco dancing every fourth night. The bus breaks out in smiles. "All you've got to do is get in there and do your own thing, feel the beat," he tells us knackered looking bunch of youngsters. No-one offers him tickets for tonight's gig.

Los Angeles is less Bohemian than San Francisco. LA is big streets, big cars, big billboards and big money. In LA anything that doesn't make a big profit is considered neither art nor desirable. Little bands are pretty much

banging heads against the brick wall. The so-called 'new wave' scene is barely holding its own. That Clash sold out the 3,000 capacity Santa Monica Civic is a good sign, even if the numbers were padded out by press and posers and probably members of every quasi-punk band in town.

It was a good show, but not a great one. Though that's not to say that this wasn't one of the best evenings I've spent in this venue. As always here the sound was flat, but the spirit and strength of the music and the wildly vibrating floor from the frantic pogoing as good as compensated. The crowd

was pretty manic tonight.

Kamikaze plunks made exultant swallow dives into the audience from the stage and the editor of 'Slash' fanzine leapt up to join Stummer in an unofficial duet before being dragged off and according to him, roughed up by the bouncers who seemed for the most part very easy going for the States.

As Mick said: "We do as much as we can, we try to say to the guys, let them stand up, don't bash them, and if we're the headliners they've got to take some notice of us." So they've bought quite a big crew with them but they don't know all the security guards, Joe said,

and was pretty pissed off when the guy from Slash kept on whining about his battle scars.

"We never said it was a utopia. Rock and roll is played on enemy ground. We never promised you when you were a baby that it was going to be roses all the way. But we stopped more than you can imagine. You can go on about getting the shit kicked out of you and you can go on about that guy being murdered by bouncers in London, you can go on as much as you like and I'll just sit here and listen and I'll be thinking of the times I've stopped the blood when I had the chance to."

There was a press conference at midnight after the show, rather a depressed concert as Mick described it. The band were in a lousy mood. No explanation. Mick told me it has just been a 'strange day'. They seemed pissed off with the way the record company was handling them, especially with the Statue of Liberty posters.

"If they're going to have ads and buy big space and show how flashy we are" said Joe "We're going to pack information into it such as the lyrics". As in the epic 'Don't know what to do with us, they're fucking us up'. So what should they do? "Leave us alone for a start".

And they're understandably worn out after the 10 hour bus ride from San Francisco. In seven hours time they'll be back on the bus again heading for Cleveland Ohio. Some people at the record company were privately expressing anxiety about letting the band drive halfway cross country. They

might decide not to arrive at the right place and the right time.

But they spent 20 minutes slouched over a table backstage (except when Topper got up to let in the members of the Gerns, an LA girl band who were pummelling on the windows outside). Opposite 10 rows of assorted scribes giving half hearted answers to questions; will they fill in the gap left by the Sex Pistols?

Joe: "I don't know. I haven't seen the gap yet." Will they ever release their first album here? (the record company thought the material and presentation too crude for US radio's present AM or FM programmes, and with no hope of a hit on their hands, didn't bother to put it out)

Joe: "We might release it sometime as a historical document, a greatest hits album".

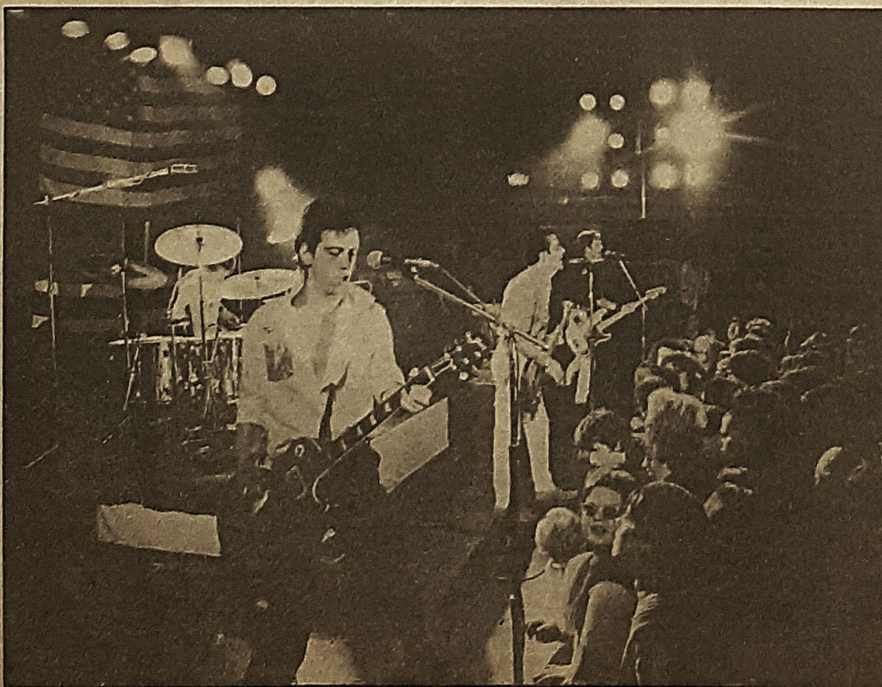
Do they have problems being famous? Paul: "We can walk down the street in London, people recognise us and come up to us. It's like having loads of friends. That's the way we live, we don't even think about it."

We learn they came here as soon as they could, touring the odd places at home was getting tedious, that they found what they consider a healthy new wave scene everywhere they've been so far, that they intend to come back and finish off the job here in the Summer of however much flogging it takes them to make it, and that their ambitions are to do away with Boston, Kansas, Foreigner and Kiss as quickly as possible and become 'the best rock and roll band in the world'.

If Pearl Harbour '79 continues its electrifying attack, they're going to succeed on both fronts. When it comes down to it, the battle is not tying the Statue of Liberty with rope, nor about the right to wear your safety pins, Fiorucci jeans and prawn silk shirts without protest from your Mum.

It's about defeating apathy in rock, changing its direction and taking over its future. And if that's too much to hope for, all who have seen this tour must agree that they're halting senility for a while.

**SYLVIE
SIMMONS**



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