Clash concert provides both relevance and good music

Review By Larry Kelp
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A new record by the Triggers blared through the Warfield Theater p.a. system:

I don't want to be radioactive
I just want to know what's going on.

A packed crowd of 2,200 Clash fans milled, waiting for the most important rock band of the '80s, so far, to take the stage. The music would be fun, but there was something more that the Clash offered: relevance.

Standing in front of an industrial-scene backdrop of factories and nuclear power plant, the English quartet delivered just that in a 24-song, 90-minute rock show that seemed to explode with more force than all the fireworks in Chinatown a few blocks away: guns on the roof, bombs in the street, executives planning ad campaigns on the 51st floor, musicians getting lost in the supermarket, the Four Horsemen riding, nuclear power plants running amok.

London calling, now don't look to us
All that phoney Beatlemania has bitten the dust.

The audience was much younger this time than at the Clash's American debut in Berkeley a year ago, when the Londoners began by singing, "I'm so bored with the U.S.A."

The youths who came Saturday—and to another sold-out show Sunday—would have been intimated and alienated by watching male strippers in Fremont, seeing Jerry Brown on television, being surrounded by drunks in an Irish pub, buying fancy roller skates.

Mick Jones, left, and Joe Strummer of The Clash.

Clash fans are aware that world problems have reached crises proportions. They are also aware—maybe not consciously so—that they should be doing something corrective. But what?

The Clash doesn't offer any answers. They can reflect that sense of alienation from a world they didn't create, but are stuck with. And the songs bound along with a sense of urgency and an almost overwhelming positive force missing in nearly every other rock band.

What they say to their fans and how they say it probably makes more sense than anything on the 6 o'clock news.

The Clash was one of the first, and the very best, punk bands to spring up in the wake of the Sex Pistols three years ago. They mixed punk garage-band tactics with rock and reggae beats. While early recordings and shows were lacking in polish and technique, audiences quickly got the message and responded to it.

After two albums of furious rock, the Clash has moved on, and the recent two-disc "London Calling" is a far-reaching mix of nearly every element in rock's history, from rockabilly and early R&B to punchy Memphis Stax sound, New Orleans soul and Jamaican reggae.

More than any other band that sprang up in the late '70s, the Clash seems capable of developing beyond its original format and taking its audience with it. The group is not about to knock Barry Manilow out of the charts, but stands a good chance of being around long after Manilow has become nostalgia.

Much of the show was devoted to songs from the new album: the terrifying title track "London Calling," "Working for the Clampdown," "Spanish Bombs," all delivered by hoarse-voiced Joe Strummer.

Cynicism and desperation cuts through an abundance of Clash songs, but they also seem to offer hope that a change can come, not from political or economic leaders, but through the power of the individual.

Guitarist Mick Jones sang the two most melodic and most life-affirming songs: "Stay Free" and "Train in Vain."

Strummer, Jones, drummer Nicky Headon and bassist Paul Simonon bounded about the stage in black outfits. Organist Mickey Gallagher was added for the tour.

A year ago the Clash was a ball of barely-controlled wild energy. In the interim the band has matured and gained full control of the stage. The show Saturday was one of rock's noisiest and finest hours.

As in past tours around the states, the band has hired unknowns and forgotten giants of pop and rock to open their shows. So far the openers have included Bo Diddley, Sam and Dave, Screaming Jay Hawkins. At the San Francisco shows this weekend they dredged up Lee Dorsey, best known for his soul-pop hit "Ya-Ya" 19 years ago, before many in the audience were born. Dorsey still has a voice and strong stage presence, although he might have been better received in a different setting.

Lee Dorsey

Backed by a hot combo, Dorsey sang to an intent crowd gathered about the stage while at least half the audience, sole Clash fans who weren't about to watch an older black man sing his past hits, wandered about the lobby and hung out at the upstairs bar.

As with his early hits, Dorsey's most recent album, "Night People," was produced by Allen Toussaint. And, as luck would have it, the record company folded shortly after it came out in 1978. You can sometimes find it in Eastbay record store cut-out bins.

Unknown Jamaican reggae singer Mickey Dread opened the show, then stayed around to sing on two of the Clash's six encore numbers.

The Clash shows are not for everyone, especially not for those who just want uninvolving entertainment.

No small parts

United Press International

James Woods was played a lead role in "The Onion Field" by cop-turned-writer Joseph Wambaugh, and even though the role he has in Wambaugh's latest release is strictly a bit part, it's one he chose and talked his way into.

In "The Black Marble," Woods plays a street violinist who fiddles while Robert Foxworth and Paula Prentiss burn with passion. The off-beat love story premieres in New York March 7.