LIVE!

THREE CONVICTIONS ON THE ROAD FROM HELL

THE CLASH

Fair Deal

A GESTURE of fate, surely, that the weekend after five greying businessmen had played a ghostly entertainment to their thoughtless disciples should showcase the group long established as favourite pretenders to the throne their elders must one day vacate.

At the career point which The Clash now find themselves, The Rolling Stones had already floundered through 'Their Satanic Majesties' and were mired in indecision. Popular music moves even faster now — after all, The Clash have already recorded their 'Exile On Main Street' in 'Sandinista!' — and although The Stones have now effectively stopped time to suit their stasis (the Gods we make of men!), The Clash have moved this year as if time really is running out, for them and us.

That feeling of urgency, a sense that every step skipped could count against you, ran through their long-awaited show at Brixton's Fair Deal like kerosene from a ruptured gas pump (to be suitably American for a moment). Every one of perhaps 20 songs was dealt out with a surly, scorched-earth bravado, spilling accents of suspicion and untempered wrath: purpose in every turn.

Naturally, this kind of slam-bang assault can easily wear out into thunderous monotony after a while, and I waited for that particular clampdown to inevitably arrive. The reason why it never actually did, explains how this group have affected such a brilliant revitalisation.

What The Clash have done is familiar enough to most groups facing up to a mid-life menopause: re-examine their beginnings and climb a different path back. In a steaming 'Career Opportunities' that made the frustration of all the previous versions seem timorous, it was obvious how seriously The Clash had returned to their first strengths, trimming the deadwood of funky philandering on the bleaker spots of 'Sandinista!'. But rather than simply discovering that first blast all over again (which is impossible anyway), The Clash have reinvented their roots.

Everything has been reduced to an insignia. The Clash's rock'n'roll is primordial not in the way of rockabilly (because they never ever swing like rockabilly does and on the supercharged ignition of 'Brand New Cadillac' traditional rock'n'roll is moonshot, not revved-up), but in the blunt anger of the simplest figure or rhythm hammered on a line of deadeye consistency. The Clash have learnt to channel sound as never before.

What the bungling theatre of sores that now calls itself British punk cannot grasp is this definition. Most of them could again learn from a group they now presumably laugh at: the sound of punk shouldn't be the spluttery sprawl of mud-clogged feedback over Chad Valley drums, it should be this steeled rush, this fluorescent razor's edge!

'Know Your Rights', one of the year's great singles, is central to this. The Clash strip the form of a song down until all you hear is that unyielding guitar line — no more than a rhythm, like an agitated heartbeat — and the raging showmanship of Joe Strummer's roar: a marriage of fanatical directness and a rhetorician's fury.

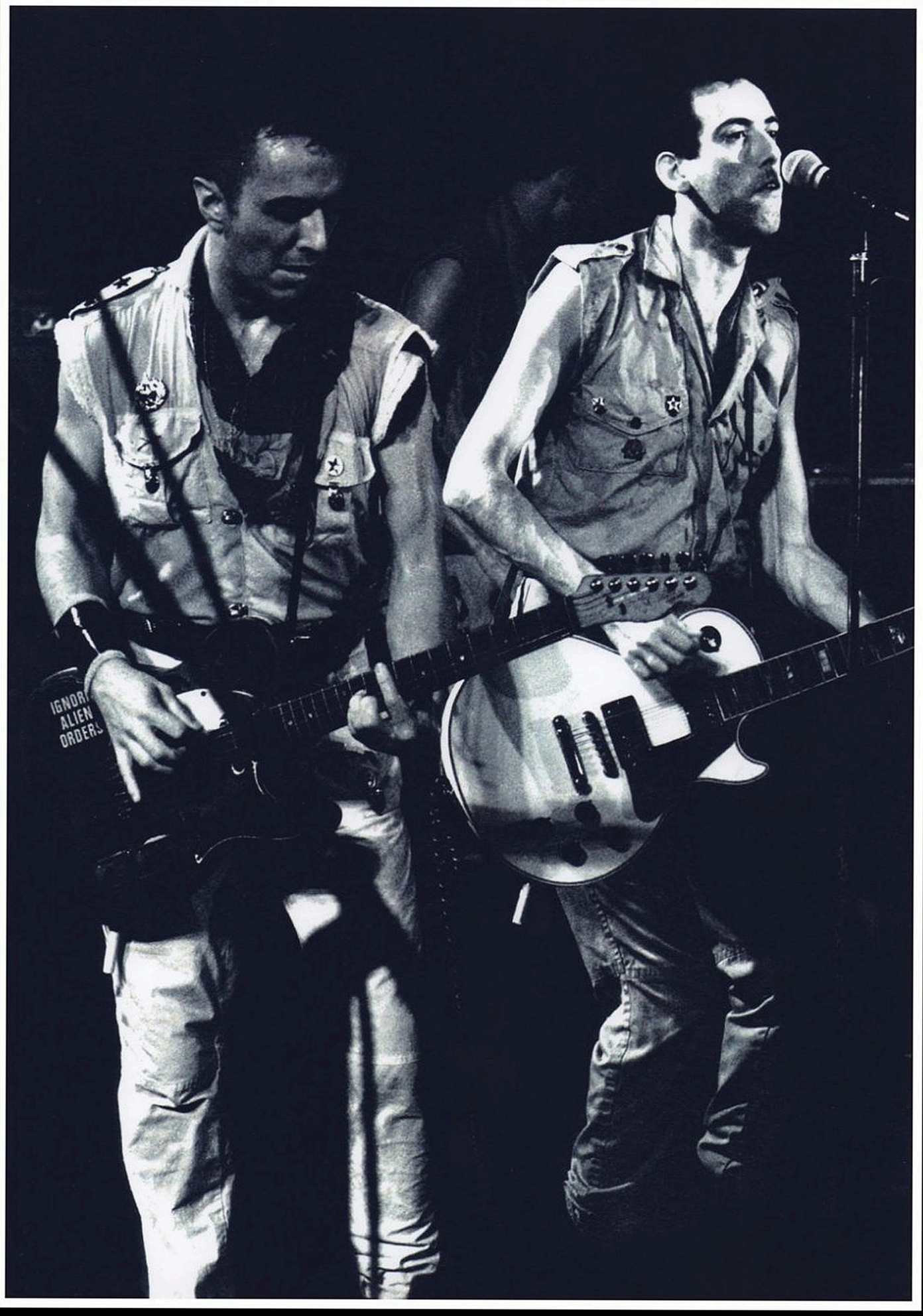
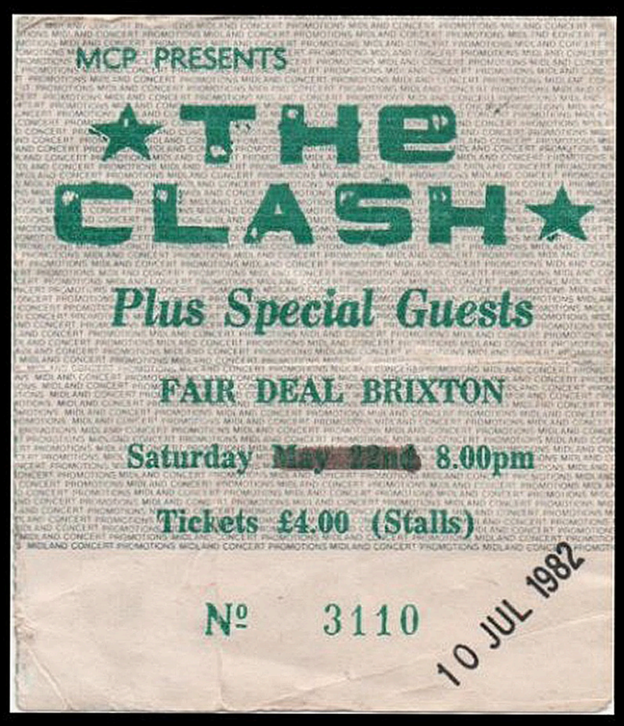
Except Strummer has no truck with rhetoric. The Clash line up with the same bald intensity as the rock they're playing. They are themselves reduced to line drawings: Jones' skill-featured stare, eyeballs forever about to flip backwards in their sockets, Strummer's mohican, Simonon's cliff-browed insolence. They perform before a backdrop of slides of the most simplistic political symbolism — Thatcher, Vietnam, Carol Ann Kelly's gravestone — and you're checked on the sneer in the realisation that they've forged a link between this everyman posturing and the music they're playing which does, at last, strike a fundamental humanitarian note.

Minus the distracting concessions to pop or a spurious bastardisation of 'disco', The Clash have rediscovered something that rock is supposed to have forgotten: its grip on exhilaration — its reactivation of concern. They have refused to institutionalise themselves. Of course 'rock' can't change anything — but if music can burst a slumber — if music could talk . . .

They still have their weaknesses, of course. A song like 'White Man In The Hammersmith Palais' has outlived its useful life, overstuffed with words and bereft of proper dynamics; Simonon's lugubrious thick-ear vocals tarnish an otherwise rivetting 'Guns Of Brixton'; and Jones' voice (despite his curiously affecting whisper on the signature to 'Stay Free') will never be up to much.

It is all overcome by Strummer's breathtaking conviction. If he faltered for a moment, the card house which any rock music is built of would fall in at once. Perhaps his greatest test comes on 'Magnificent Seven': to turn the rambling prototype of the studio version into something comparable to the surrounding inferno of 'Janie Jones' and 'Police On My Back'. It turns out a consummate acquital.

The most persistent memory is of Strummer, two fingers pressed against his face, eyes half-closed in concentration, taking the hardest course through 'Armagideon Time'. I say we need this anger, no matter how romantic it may be. I say this antidote to romantic *despair* is necessary.

The Greatest Rock'n'Roll Band In The World. I guess that doesn't sit so badly, after all . . .

Richard Cook