THE CLASH
Fair Deal, Brixton

Square Deal Clash

Face to face — MICK 'n' JOE *Pic: Tom Sheehan*

WHEN you're gasping for breath and the sweat is rolling down the insde of your shirt like melting fat, it's tempting to make a dart for the exit. Clash? Who needs 'em. You can't even get within gobbing distance of the bar.

Having paid their maney, the punters chose to stick with it, and were duly rewarded with a tenacious display of rough-cut wallop by the World's Most Paradoxical Rock Band. Should they stay or should they go? On this showing, they could yet run and run.

Joseph "Travis Bickle" Strummer, public service announcer (with guitar), opened the proceedings with his by now inevitable grumble about people gobbing at him. As far as we nearer the back could tell, this single yellow card was enough to persuade those old and stupid enough to cherish punk's disgusting habits to stop. Boundaries established in neon, Strummer led his group into a terse "London Calling" (beret — Simonon, denim waistcoat — Jones), and for the next hour and a half or so The Clash proved that so far Phyllosan is unnecessary.

Smug bastard that I am, I'd already seen the Topperless Clash in famed seaside resort and home of God, Asbury Park (NJ). Thus it came as no surprise to find that replacement stick-wielder Terry Chimes was more than capable of confounding those critics (me included) who assumed automatically that no Topper = no Clash.

Chimes, amazingly, can deploy a beat of epic solidity, and so maintains the time-honoured Clash tradition of the drummer being the only member of the group who can count. Strummer's guesses are better than those of the other two, I should add, though Jones had quite a good night and often played in tune. Simonon's bass playing can be charitably described as "functional".

But we digress. The Clash played lean, hard and pretty tough, and somewhere along the line covered all required turf and probably a bit more. Early peaks: a poignant "White Man In Hammersmith Palais", a sparse "Janie Jones" and a vengeful "Magnificent Seven" in which Chimes had to intervene and impose the crushing 4/4 beat anew when Jonesy got lost.

However, he redeemed himself by seizing the microphone and delivering a closely-fought "Police On My Back". Then they lost it all again with an incomprehensible stagger through what seemed to be "Rock The Casbah" — devoid of the chunky piano chords from the recorded version, it turned into a dollop of pig-iron.

But equilibrium was restored with the triple afterburner blast of "Career Opportunities", "Police And Thieves" and "Somebody Got Murdered", all rough and raw and genuinely exciting.

Plenty of encores too, of course, such as "Armagideon Time", "I Fought The Law" and an emotive "Straight To Hell". At the end, they chucked in a storming "Garageland" which burned brightly enough to convince you for a few fleeting seconds that all this really mattered. Finally, the glistening and often bare-chested supporters accepted the inevitable, flicked the wet tips of hair out of their eyes and headed for the exit.

Me and most others enjoyed ourselves in almost unbearable conditions. Despite the usual riot-scene slides and delivery of such inflammatory fodder as "Guns Of Brixton" — sung by Simonon in his I've-Just-Swallowed-A-Cricket-Ball mode — there was no danger of this (almost) all-white crowd being pierced to the quick.

Instead, we were entertained by a rock 'n' roll band which is incapable of slickness (thank God) and has learned to replace bullshit with more songs. They could have got away with a lot less. — ADAM SWEETING