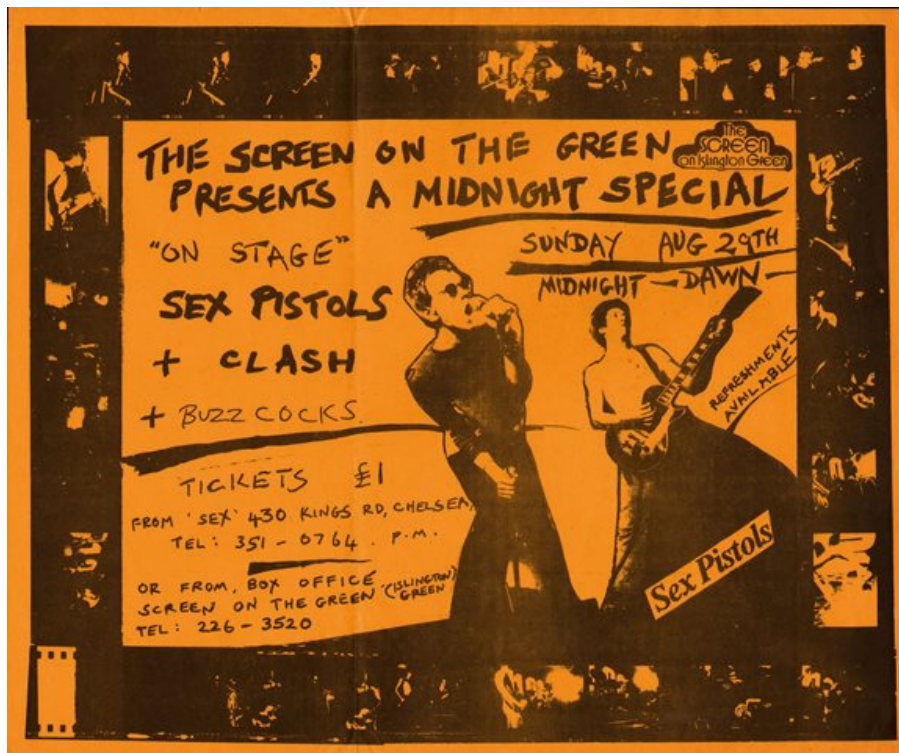


Music Reissues Weekly: Keith Levene and The Clash | reviews, news & interviews :: Reader View

<https://theartsdesk.com/node/90116/view>

Forty-seven years ago this week, a new band called The Clash were seen by a paying audience in London for the first time. On Sunday 29 August 1976 they played Islington's Screen on the Green cinema, billed between Manchester's Buzzcocks – their earliest London show – and rising luminaries Sex Pistols. Doors opened at midnight. The anniversary needs marking.

At this point, [The Clash](#) had three guitarists. They were a five-piece band rather than the four-piece which became familiar. The guitarist who left a few weeks after the Screen on the Green outing was Keith Levene. Along with fellow guitarist Mick Jones and bassist Paul Simonon, he was a co-founder. Former 101'ers frontman and rhythm guitarist Joe Strummer was next on board, assuming the same role in the new band. The drummer they settled on by the Screen on the Green booking was Terry Chimes.



When The Clash played the 100 Club a month later on 20 September – at what became known as the “Punk Festival” – Levene was out and they were the band which – despite some drummer wobbles – signed to CBS on 26 January [1977](#). What came next for The Clash is well known. Easily lost though is the story of what came first.

Remarkably, and despite his short stay in the band, there is an aural evidence of the formative, Levene-era Clash. The band played in front of audiences five times with him in the line-up – the last three

appearances were recorded. The surviving audio from before and after Levene's departure makes it possible to dig into his importance to the band and impact on their sound – and how The Clash changed after the departure of one of their co-creators.

Keith Levene, who died on 11 November 2022 at age 65, was a significant figure in British punk and what came in its wake. An accomplished, self-taught guitarist his pre-punk adventures included working as roadie for Yes in 1972 and 1973. After leaving The Clash, he spent some of late 1976 in a band named Flowers of Romance with, amongst other in-crowd punks, Sid Vicious and a pre-Slits Viv Albertine. They never played live. In late 1977, he was in a short-lived band named Drunk & Disorderly with Rat Scabies, who had just left The Damned – they played live twice supporting The Clash at London's Rainbow. Then, from May 1978, Levene became integral to John Lydon's post-Pistols band Public Image Ltd, who he left in 1983. Following this, his path was erratic. He was the only person to play with members of all three of The Clash, The Damned and Sex Pistols. Becoming a member of The Clash was the opening shot.

An examination of the set lists from Levene's stay in The Clash makes it obvious this was different to what CBS signed in early 1977. Songs were played live which were never recorded: "Deadly Serious" (also known as "Going to the Disco"), "How Can I Understand the Flies?" "I Know What to Think About you," "I Never Did it," "Mark Me Absent" and "Sitting at My Party." These sat alongside others which were released: "1977," "48 Hours," "Deny," "I'm So Bored With you" (later reconfigured as "I'm So Bored With the USA"), "Janie Jones," "London's Burning," "Protex Blue" and "What's My Name." Of those lacking later studio versions, "Deadly Serious," "How Can I Understand the Flies," "I Know What to Think About you" and "Mark Me Absent" remained in the live set after Levene had gone. His departure did not markedly affect the material played on stage.



Scrolling back, as recounted in Marcus Gray's 1995 book *Last Gang in Town*, Levene first met Mick Jones through a mutual friend named Alan Drake, the potential singer for a new band Jones wanted to

form in Spring 1976 after his spell in the rehearsal-only London SS. Levene came on board, probably as result of encouragement by Malcolm McLaren associate Bernard Rhodes, who had managed The London SS. McLaren had Sex Pistols on his books so Rhodes wanted a competitor band. Also around was another London SS alumnus, neophyte bassist Paul Simonon. **(Pictured left, The Clash rehearsing in June 1976 with Paul Buck on drums. Keith Levene, right)**

In April or May 1976. Mick Jones, Keith Levene and Paul Simonon had the skeleton of a new band. Drake dropped out and a few rehearsals were held with a singer named Billy Watts. Drummer Terry Chimes – another fleeting London SS member – arrived after he was phoned by Rhodes. Watts and Chimes were gone by the time Levene and Rhodes approached the recently Sex Pistols-smitten 101'ers frontman Joe Strummer at a 25 May Pistols gig at the 100 Club to see if he'd join the band they were touting. Despite the imminent release of his band's debut single "Keys to Your Heart" and the following he had fronting a band familiar on the college and pub circuit, Strummer pitched in with the unknowns and began rehearsing with the new band in the first or second week of June 1976. The final 101'ers show was on 5 June.

During this June 1976 rehearsal period, the as-yet unnamed outfit's initial drummer was Paul Buck (later in 999 as Pablo Labritaine), who had been at school with Strummer. He left after two or three practices and Terry Chimes was once-again tapped. The line-up settled on Chimes, Levene, Jones, Simonon and Strummer. Finding a name was difficult – amongst those in the running were The Psychotic Negatives and The Heartdrops or Weak Heartdrops (from a Big Youth record). Simonon came up with The Clash. A debut show was booked for 4 July, supporting Sex Pistols sat Sheffield's Black Swan – on the same day The Ramones debuted in the UK at The Roundhouse. The Sheffield billing was "ex 101'ers." It was deliberate that, Pistols aside, London's punk elite would not have a chance to pronounce on the worthiness of the band.



Despite there being no sonic evidence for the Sheffield debut, a little is known about what was played. The band opened with an instrumental titled “Listen” and, according to Pat Gilbert's 2005 book *Passion is a Fashion*, also played “Protex Blue” and Mick Jones’ Sixties-style beatster “1-2 Crush on You.” The set additionally included 101’ers staples “Keys to Your Heart,” “Junco Partner” and “Too Much Monkey Business” along with a Who cover and The Troggs’ “I Can’t Control Myself” (also covered by the early Buzzcocks). A 101’ers hangover clouded proceedings. A retreat to rehearsing followed. **(Pictured right, The Clash rehearsing in late June or July 1976 with Terry Chimes on drums. Keith Levene, second right)**

Next up, over a month on, was a showcase at their Camden rehearsal room on 13 August 1976 – an invitation-only event for booking agents, music journalists and record label people. This time, the band had to be sure it had the goods. Despite this being written about by *Sounds’* Giovanni Dadomo and the presence of writers Caroline Coon and John Ingham, there is no record of what was performed. However if, as at Sheffield, R&B and 101’ers numbers were played, it would have been noted. Dadomo was thrilled by what he saw, writing “I think they're the first band to come along who'll really frighten the Sex Pistols shitless. Exciting isn't the word for it.”

In the early rehearsals Levene, like Strummer, played a Fender Telecaster. For the showcase and later, he had the more unusual, un-rock Mosrite guitar – perhaps influenced by The Ramones, whose guitarist Johnny also played a Mosrite: Levene had seen them at Dingwalls, near The Clash’s rehearsal studio, on 5 July 1976. The showcase ushered in a new-style Clash.

Focus arrives with the next three shows, the remaining trio Levene played with the band: The Screen on the Green (29 August); The 100 Club (31 August, supporting Sex Pistols for a third time); The Roundhouse (5 September, supporting Strummer’s former pub-rock peers The Kursaal Flyers). All were recorded.



In parallel, there is a written record from the time. The nascent Clash was an object of fascination. **(Pictured left, The Clash rehearsing in late June or July 1976 with Terry Chimes on drums. Keith Levene, third right at microphone)**

On seeing them at The Screen on the Green, *NME*'s Charles Shaar Murray wrote "a group called Clash take the stage. They are the kind of garage band who should be speedily returned to their garage, preferably with the motor running, which would undoubtedly be more of a loss to their friends and families than to either rock or roll. Their extreme-left guitarist, allegedly known as Joe Strummer, has good moves, but he and the band are a little shaky on ground that involves starting, stopping and changing chord at approximately the same time." While it's odd the R&B-favouring Shaar Murray wasn't aware of Strummer from The 101'ers, this review inspired the future Clash song "Garageland."

The already converted Giovanni Dadomo was there too. In *Sounds* he wrote, The Clash "were amazingly good" despite "their equipment [doing] the band a grave disservice tonight, losing Joe Strummer's hard to mix vocals until they became an unintelligible mumble and generally poleaxing the band's nuclear potential."

Also for *Sounds*, Chas de Whalley saw them at The Roundhouse and said "At least you can guarantee that any band formed by the 101'ers guitarist Joe Strummer will bristle with fire and energy. Unfortunately at the Roundhouse The Clash had little more on offer."

Mixed views then. The audio of the Screen on the Green, 100 Club and Roundhouse shows brings a different perspective, especially on how Levene plugged into this new band.



At The Screen on the Green on 29 August The Clash take the stage and spend the first minute tuning up in front of a silent audience. Hardly nuclear. After the fiddling, the set opener is “Deny.” People in the audience start whooping. The live sound is fine. Jones has the rhythm guitar over which Levene superimposes jagged, spidery arpeggios. Next up is the Kinks/Who-style garage rocker “I Know What to Think About you.” Again, Levene is about irregular aural colour. His contributions render the songs off balance despite their relentless forward motion. When the well-known “Janie Jones” arrives, the difference between pre- and post-Levene band is set in stone: not as fast as later, with a metallic ring to the whole sound – not as in heavy metal, but a sharpness. It’s the same with the chugging “What’s My Name.” **(Pictured right, The Clash during the 13 August 1976 showcase at their rehearsal room. Keith Levene, right)**

Two days later, supporting Sex Pistols at the 100 Club, there's the same restraint with the pacing and an equivalent textured approach to the overall delivery. No matter how crude the songs, Levene’s guitar brings a prickliness. “1-2 Crush on You” is more mod-flash *Nuggets*-style garage rocker than punk in the 1976 or 1977 sense. “What’s my Name” is most interesting as it has a clanging quality which was later lost.

On 5 September, at The Roundhouse, the measured tempo is still a defining feature. As is Strummer’s verbal baiting of the crowd, which doesn’t work: there are catcalls for The 101’ers. In terms of Levene’s presence, his soloing as part of the overall onward thrust brings a spikiness which was lost in the barrage which was later perfected. By accommodating Levene’s guitar, this version of The Clash was a more measured unit than what was on the horizon.



Regular shows and press coverage meant the band was progressing but after late August's Notting Hill Carnival, which Strummer and Simonon attended, the former turned up at a rehearsal with a new song titled "White Riot." Levene's refusal to play a song with so provocative title is one reason he gave for leaving the band there and then. He also said he was increasingly sick of manager Bernard Rhodes' constant programming-style verbiage and Strummer haranguing him about the band's mission. He was also tiring of, as he saw it, rock 'n' roll. Any or all of these resulted in him walking out, leaving his guitar feeding back while leaning on an amplifier.

Within a week or so, on 20 September, The Clash played at 100 Club punk fest without Levene and as a four-piece for the first time – on before Sex Pistols again. "White Riot" debuted as the set opener. The show was recorded and finds the band faster than earlier and more emblematically punch-it-out punk than before. The Sixties garage-rock edge and chiming textures Levene gave the band have already gone. Shows from Birmingham, Fulham Town Hall and The Royal College of Art in October and November 1976 are the same –

the band has become The Clash: The Clash which would be caught on their debut album is within reach.

According to The Clash, Levene's sole legacy was a co-writing credit the first album's "What's my Name." But, as the recorded evidence from live dates shows, when he was on stage with the band in August and September 1976, his effect was to temper the coarseness while bringing an unpredictable edge. It is this sound, his sound, which left an imprint by resonating through the early Subway Sect as heard on their first single "Nobody's Scared." A slightly different, more abstract, legacy.

As to what the Keith Levene Clash would have sounded like had they signed to a label and recorded? Nothing they were doing then would have attracted a mainstream imprint. Levene's Clash would have had little chance in finding a wide audience. Nevertheless, Joe Strummer joined as he knew where music was going; after ditching The 101'ers, The Clash was his lunge for the brass ring. And manager Bernard Rhodes was only interested in a major label for his charges. Such a scenario meant there was no place for an individualistic guitarist. If Levene had stayed, he would have become collateral damage. There was no chance of an alternative history for UK punk.

- ***Next week: March Of The Flower Children – three CDs of "The American Sounds Of 1967"***
- [***More reissue reviews on theartsdesk***](#)
- [***Kieron Tyler's website***](#)

[**@MrKieronTyler**](#)