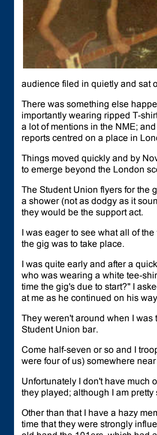
CLASSIC GIGS

Sex Pistols and The Clash
Lanchester Polytechnic, Coventry
29th November 1976

Memories by David Parker



I had moved to Coventry in the summer of 1976 to study Industrial Design at Lanchester Polytechnic, it was my first move away from home and to my 18 year old self the experience was new and rather daunting.

Music was a major feature in my life. For the previous year I'd been playing in a splendidly ramshackle band of friends back home in Basingstoke, and it was a real jolt to have to leave that music-making behind. One of the biggest frustrations was that it seemed impossible to get anywhere in a musical career without some kind of major backing, or being Pink Floyd or Yes or someone similar.

The largely rubbish nature of the contemporary music scene in 1974-75 meant that I'd taken refuge in the music of the 1960s, digging up records in local junk shops by bands like the Yardbirds, The Beatles and a whole raft of obscure and fiercely unfashionable psychedelic groups like The Smoke, Dantalion's Chariot (wish I'd kept that one!) and The Creation. I was reading the New Musical Express (or 'The NME' as it truncated itself) every week, and the same discontent with contemporary music meant that they were reporting a revival of interest in US 'punk' bands from the 1960s like The MC5, The Flamin' Groovies, The Stooges and The 13th Floor Elevators.

After the relatively backwater nature of Basingstoke, Coventry seemed like the big city life to me. For one of a musical mind there were gigs aplenty to see, and although I cannot remember who they were exactly, the first band I saw at Lanchester was someone like the Welsh group Man (Deke Leonard in West Coast mode) or Renaissance (the bass player wore an embroidered cape). The pre-show DJ played Pink Floyd's 'Echoes' in its entirety, and the audience filed in quietly and sat on the floor in neatly ordered rows.

There was something else happening musically though. There were US bands emerging like the Ramones and Television (then playing without a drummer, but more importantly wearing ripped T-shirts,) who were influenced by the old punk bands and creating a buzz of their own. Acts performing at a US club called CBGBs were getting a lot of mentions in the NME; and back home in the UK the magazine were beginning to report on a 'new wave' of bands influenced by these US punk groups. These reports centred on a place in London called the 100 Club, and a band beginning to make a name for itself as part of the 'new wave' scene - the Sex Pistols.

Things moved quickly and by November 1976 there was a definite change in the music world. 'New wave' or 'punk rock' as it was variously tagged at the time was starting to emerge beyond the London scene - and it was with some interest that I spotted a poster for a gig by the Sex Pistols and The Clash at Lanchester.

The Student Union flyers for the gig were rather natty. About 18" long x 6" high, they featured a blurry black and white photograph of a couple of girls wearing bath hats in a shower (not as dodgy as it sounds!) with the Sex Pistol's name in large Letraset characters. I presume The Clash were listed as well, as I seem to remember knowing they would be the support act.

I was eager to see what all of the fuss was about, and it was with a mix of curiosity and excitement that I and a handful of friends headed for the Student Union hall where the gig was to take place.

I was quite early and after a quick drink in the upstairs bar I headed down to buy my ticket (I think it was 75p). Halfway down the stairs I passed by a chap with spiky hair who was wearing a white tee-shirt. He seemed to be in a hurry to get upstairs and looked like he might be a roadie or suchlike for one of the bands. "Do you know what time the gig's due to start?" I asked him. "About half seven," he said. I couldn't think what else to say. "Great!" I said, "I'm really looking forward to it!" He smiled briefly back at me as he continued on his way.

They weren't around when I was there, but I was told later that the Sex Pistols spent a respectable amount of time before the gig drinking and creating a bit of a riot in the Student Union bar.

Come half-seven or so and I trooped into the half-empty venue. I can't remember a great sense of occasion, or a great deal of atmosphere, but joined my friends (there were four of us) somewhere near the middle of the hall waiting to see what would happen.

Unfortunately I don't have much of a recollection of The Clash. I knew nothing of their material (they had yet to release any recordings), so have no idea what numbers they played; although I am pretty sure they played 'White Riot' because I thought I recognized the song when I heard it on the radio some time after.

Other than that I have a hazy memory of the four of them manically bobbing about on stage playing short, frantic (and loud) pieces of buzz-saw energy, and a feeling at the time that they were strongly influenced by the Ramones. I vaguely recognised the lead singer Joe Strummer because I used to have the single 'Keys to Your Heart' by his old band the 101ers, which had a picture of him playing guitar (and wearing a teddy boy outfit!) on the front of the sleeve.

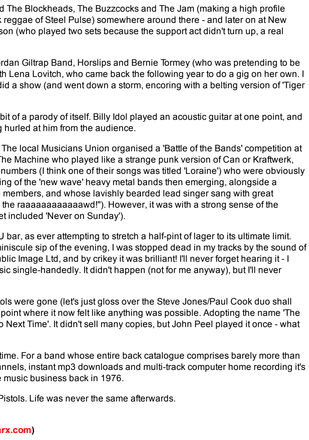
The Clash finished their set, and I have no memory whatsoever of what, if any, audience reaction they got. There was then a pause whilst the stage was rearranged, during which The Clash's lead guitarist wandered out and stood not far from me near the back of the hall. I recognized his spiked black hair from on stage, and remember that he was wearing a dark (blue or black) boiler suit with something (possibly the band's name) splurged on the back in white paint.

The Sex Pistols eventually emerged, and I was somewhat surprised to see my spiky-haired informant from earlier on the stairs now standing centre stage with the microphone. He'd changed into a dark top (I think it was a tee-shirt) with dark trousers for the show. Glen Matlock was standing stage left, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and jeans, whilst Steve Jones stood stage right dressed in black shirt and trousers.

There was a bit of fiddling about with guitars, but I cannot recall any kind of introduction, they simply launched into what I'm sure was 'Anarchy in the UK' (I recognized the 'wall of noise' opening when I bought the single not long after). Their sound was MASSIVE! I've had my ears fried by a lot of loud bands over the years, but when the Sex Pistols fired up I almost fell over. It was like standing in a hurricane of sound. And they were good too.

By this point in the evening I had moved to the stage right side of the hall (I think I stood on a table to get a better view) and I can remember the physical power of the volume and thinking they sounded absolutely amazing. There was something about the huge noise and the three man line-up across the stage that gave the Sex Pistols a strong stage presence that The Clash had rather lacked.

The only numbers I can definitely recall them playing were the covers (The Monkees' '(I'm Not Your) Steppin' Stone' and The Who's 'Substitute'). As with The Clash, the Sex Pistols had not released any recordings at this point in time, so there was nothing to compare the set to. Steve Jones scraped his pick along the strings of his guitar (ssscrauuunch!) after pretty much every song, and after their no-holds-barred, block-chord arrangement of 'Substitute' he quietly played through the 'proper' opening chord sequence, as if to say "I could play it this way if I wanted to."



I am almost certain they both opened and closed their set with the same number (as I said before, probably 'Anarchy in the UK'). Even odder than the fact that they played the same number twice was the fact that I am pretty certain the second version was much slower; although that could simply be the faulty result of my aging memory.

Of the audience my recollection is that there were only about a couple of dozen people watching (perhaps 30 or 40 at the very most), including one rugby club chap who had obviously fuelled up at the bar beforehand and who, from his general demeanour and occasional chanting, seemed not to be enjoying the music. There were two slightly self-conscious girls standing at the edge of the audience to stage left who stood out a mile because they were the only punks in attendance. My impression was that most people there were like me - they had come along to see what this new-fangled 'new wave' music was about rather than being fans of either band - the punk craze didn't really arrive (in Coventry anyway) until the following year.

I don't recall the Sex Pistols getting any strong reaction from the crowd (aside from our rugby club friend), and have no recollection of any of the band talking to the audience at any point. Looking back I got an impression that they simply blasted their way through a dozen or so numbers in a tightly-knit and professional manner - much in contrast to the lurid tales of fights and gobbing on the audience that had started to emerge from the London scene.

I came away from the gig highly impressed and with my ears ringing. The Sex Pistols were great! I loved their energy, the daft wall-of-noise cover versions (which were somewhat untrendy at the time), and there were obviously good songs in there too. I can recall being particularly impressed by the quality of the drummer Paul Cook, although Steve Jones's guitar playing struck me as a bit 'workmanlike' in a 'I know these chords and I'm going to stick to them' kind of way.

The NME later reported in rather po-faced terms about the Student Union waiting until the bands had finished playing before deciding not to pay them. This struck me as a shrewd attempt at cost-saving at the time - although the story emerged that the SU had refused to pay the bands because they did not like the lyrics! This seemed a bit odd to me because I cannot recall anything about either band's lyrics striking me as particularly outrageous at the time.

I bought the 'Anarchy in the UK' single which I remember as being around a week or so after the Lanchester gig. The chap at the record store made a witty joke about how the record would spit at me when I took it out of its plain black sleeve. I can remember listening to it very loudly through headphones on a friend's hi-fi, and the feeling of excitement I felt at the fact there was a genuine new music movement forming.

Not long after the Sex Pistols/Clash show (a few weeks I think), I spotted an A4 gig poster taped to a window at Lanchester. It was advertising a gig at Warwick University by a band "from London" called The Jam. In a witty play on the band name the poster featured a hand-drawn picture of a jar of jam.

It was a bit of a trek to Warwick in my pre-driving days, but having been so impressed by the Sex Pistols I thought maybe The Jam might be worth a try as well.

I think this ticket may have cost me 50p, and in time-honoured fashion I hit the bar for a small pre-show beer. As I sat cautiously sipping my drink, attempting to make a half-pint last an hour, I noticed what I guessed must be the band sitting in an alcove at the side of the bar; I can only assume they did not have a dressing room to wait in. I can remember thinking they looked a bit out of place because they were all dressed in grey suits in the style of The Beatles - were they a covers band? An older chap, who looked like he may have been their manager, was standing wearing a brown leather jacket and talking to them in a serious-looking way. One of the band was sat with his head in his hands looking at the floor and seemingly a bit nervous. I was particularly struck by the fact that he was wearing white socks.

The actual gig was another audience-light affair. As with The Sex Pistols at Lanchester, my recollection is of a couple of dozen people watching at most; there was a lot of space around and the audience failed to even half-fill what was a small hall. I was pleased to notice that the two Coventry punks were in attendance though.

There was a banner hung at the back of the cramped stage with 'The Jam' spray-painted onto it. The band strolled out, and the chap wearing the white socks turned out to be the lead guitarist. He clocked the two girls, and said something about it being "good to see the Coventry punks here," then blasted into a choppily chorded number that I did not know the title of.

They made my hair stand on end. They didn't have the huge sound of The Sex Pistols, but they had a high-powered, punchy, driving quality that was as exciting in its different way. Again the only numbers I can definitely recall were the covers; Bruce Foxton making a bit of a mess of singing The Who's 'The Good's Gone', and they played their speeded up version of 'The Batman Theme' near the end of their set (I have a feeling they may have played 'Slow Down' a la The Beatles as well).

It was another great gig. A friend of mine still has a letter I wrote to him afterwards where I raved about the band, and noted that "the guitar player can play solos," which was something of a novelty for a punk band at the time!

In retrospect I think I saw the Sex Pistols close to their high water mark. The year after the Lanchester show saw them buried under a welter of bad publicity and cancelled gigs; and they never seemed the same after the departure of Glen Matlock (the rumour at the time was that he had written all of their decent songs). I saw the advert for their low-profile gig at Mr Georges in Coventry in 1977 - there was a hand-written sign stood on the pavement outside the front door. I can't remember why I didn't go, although I have a feeling it may have sold out by the time I spotted the sign.

I bought their LP on the day it was released, and like many who wrote into the NME letters page shortly after I was a bit cheesed off to find that five of the eleven tracks had already been issued as singles (including the 'it won't be on the LP' 'God Save the Queen'). To add insult to injury I was annoyed to find that the Virgin record store in Coventry didn't have any of the bonus 7" singles of 'Submission' that the NME had said would be included with initial copies of the album. Ho, hum.

I can remember loads of great gigs in Coventry and Birmingham from then on, with Ian Dury and The Blockheads, The Buzzcocks and The Jam (making a high profile 'after several hit records' return) at the Coventry Theatre; The Stranglers (supported by the punk reggae of Steel Pulse) somewhere around there - and later on at New Bingly Hall there were the B-52's, The Human League (the original line-up) and even Joe Jackson (who played two sets because the support act didn't turn up, a real gent!).

Punk had not taken over completely though - Lanchester still hosted gigs by the likes of The Gordan Giltrap Band, Horslips and Bernie Tormey (who was pretending to be a punk Jimi Hendrix at the time). Then there was the Stiff Records tour at Warwick University with Lena Lovitch, who came back the following year to do a gig on her own. I can also remember a great gig by the decidedly not-punk Caravan at Warwick, and even Mud did a show (and went down a storm, encoring with a belting version of 'Tiger Feet').

Generation X played Lanchester 22nd February 1979, although by then punk was becoming a bit of a parody of itself. Billy Idol played an acoustic guitar at one point, and managed to look cool and sharp; at the same time dodging beer cans (some of them full!) being hurled at him from the audience.

It was around this time that the 2-Tone Ska sound came to dominate the Coventry music scene. The local Musicians Union organised a 'Battle of the Bands' competition at Lanchester, and it was a curious mixture of old and new styles. There was a local band called The Machine who played like a strange punk version of Can or Kraftwerk, and another group, whose name I've sadly forgotten, who played short and furious but melodic numbers (I think one of their songs was titled 'Loraine') who were obviously much influenced by The Buzzcocks. Scattered amongst the punky musical types were a sprinkling of the 'new wave' heavy metal bands then emerging, alongside a determinedly old-school heavy metal group who filled the stage with what seemed like a dozen members, and whose lavishly bearded lead singer sang with great intensity, and much in the way of facial contortions, about life on the road (or rather "Iiiiiiiiiiiife on the raaaaaaaaaaaaawd!"). However, it was with a strong sense of the inevitable that the prize that night went to a Ska band called The Swinging Cats (whose short set included 'Never on Sunday').

My last Sex Pistols-related memory from Lanchester was around late 1978. I was back in the SU bar, as ever attempting to stretch a half-pint of lager to its ultimate limit. They had the local radio station playing over the PA, and as I lifted my glass to take my 243rd miniscule sip of the evening, I was stopped dead in my tracks by the sound of a bass and guitar riff that was like nothing else I'd ever heard before. It was the first single by Public Image Ltd, and by crikey it was brilliant! I'll never forget hearing it - I thought the newly renamed John Lydon and his band really were going to reinvent popular music single-handedly. It didn't happen (not for me anyway), but I'll never forget that moment.

After I left Lanchester my friends and I reformed our band in a newly inspired vein. The Sex Pistols were gone (let's just gloss over the Steve Jones/Paul Cook duo shall we) but the punk rock movement they had spearheaded had stirred up the music business to a point where it now felt like anything was possible. Adopting the name 'The Walking Floors' we got ourselves together and recorded and released our own single called 'No Next Time'. It didn't sell many copies, but John Peel played it once - what a great day that was, one of my best ever!"

The Sex Pistols arrived, imploded and evaporated in what seems a ridiculously short period of time. For a band whose entire back catalogue comprises barely more than a dozen numbers their influence was huge. Sat here in a 21st Century of wall-to-wall music channels, instant mp3 downloads and multi-track computer home recording it's almost impossible to convey the sense of excitement and change that they engendered into the music business back in 1976.

It still astonishes me sometimes to think that I was there that night at Lanchester. I saw the Sex Pistols. Life was never the same afterwards.

Written by David Parker
Photographs by Ben Browton (originally published on the excellent online zine www.trakmarx.com)

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David is the author of Random Precision: Recording the Music of Syd Barrett, 1965-1974

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