

CLASH

THE grandly named Coliseum in Harlesden, London, turned out somewhat grander than most people expected. It's no fleapit, more a small local theatre — complete with balcony and rows of tatty red velour seats — which has seen better days. The place is falling apart, but it's alive. West Indians regularly pack it for showings of uncensored Kung Fu movies, and gaudy Indian film posters illuminate the foyer. It is the ideal venue for the Clash — their first gig in two months.

The Slits are on first, and Ari Up, the 15-year-old vocalist, who looks like the illicit offspring of an Alf Garnett/Katherine Hepburn one-night stand, leads Kate (guitar), Tessa (bass), and Palmolive (drums) through their first-ever performance. Ari

pulls off songs like "Let's Do The Split," "Social Servant," "Drug Town," and "Shoplifting" with striking confidence. Strings break and numbers dwindle rather than end, but no one expects perfection, and the Slits, confounding chauvinist scepticism, win on guts alone.

Next, Subway Sect — teenagers from Mortlake — the blankest of all the New Wave bands. On stage Vic Godard (vocals), Robert Miller (guitar), Paul Myers (bass) and Paul Smith (drums) pose in choreographed tableaux of studied seriousness. Deadpan and ice-cold in black-and-white attire, they play what they themselves aptly describe as "complete noise." It's an acquired taste.

Their exit is suitably nihilistic. Vic flings himself offstage, landing flat on his face in the wings. The Buzzcocks move in over the top of him.

Their re-shuffled line-up — minus Howard Devoto and with a new bassist, Garth (who looks more like a butcher than a musician) — is an immense improvement. Devoto hated performing, and it showed. With Pete Shelly as the front man, the Buzzcocks, resplendent in hand-painted Mondrian shirts, have strong links with the audience. Hearing Shelly soar through "Breakdown," "Boredom," "Time's Up" and "Friends Of Mine" — titles from their EP, and some of the best songs yet written by a New Wave band — is exhilarating.

The Clash, after two false starts, settle into one of the best sets they've played to a London audience. The sound is fuggy, lyrics crackle, and for most of the time the band have no idea what the others are playing. But all attention is drawn to the band's assaulting visuals.

Since the Clash last played, their clothes have undergone a subtle metamorphosis. The lyrics of their songs are stencilled onto long strips of material, which is bound and looped across militaristic trousers and jackets. The Clash attack their songs, and "London's Burning," "1977" (with Joe counting out the years until the ominous 1984), "48 Hours" (a song about weekend thrills packed between the nine-to-five grind), and a new arrangement of "Cheat" turn the audience into a frenzied heap.

"White Riot," "Career Opportunities" and "Back In The Garage" (a new number where Terry drums out an astonishing machine-gun riff) wind up the magnificent set. The band will be better after more gigs. Even so, there is little doubt about the audience's enthusiasm. The evening has been a landmark event, establishing the Clash as one of the most dynamic bunches of rock maniacs to emerge in years. — CAROLINE COON.