

Caroline Coon goes on tour with Clash, Subway Sect, Buzzcocks and the Slits

ARRI UP, 15-year-old lead singer of the Slits, is sprawled in the familiar angularity of a G-Plan armchair. She looks about as comfortable as it's possible to be in the pseudo-anodyne atmosphere of a bedroom in Cardiff's Post House Hotel.

Temporarily, that is. She and the other three members of the band — Viv Albertine (guitar), Tessa (bass) and Palmolive (drums) — have been on the road for six days. But they've checked in and out of half as many more hotels.

The Slits deport themselves disconcertingly like lofty viragos, storming through life with the lusty abandon of stagehands at the Folies Bergères. Their earthy arrogance and striking mode of attire — an organised mess of dressed-up undress — has thrown a number of hotel proprietors the length and breadth of the UK into barely-controlled fits of apoplexy.

The day before, they were ousted from a hotel in Birmingham after a three minute warning. And at any moment the hotel room calm could be shattered by yet another "get packed — we're leaving immediately" order from Tour Headquarters.

By now the hotel evacuation procedure is merely routine. Damp T-shirts, dirty socks and tins of hair spray will be scooped back into overnight bags.

There will be an amble to the lift. A sedate ride down to the lobby — probably with a dour hotel porter escort.

Perishing glares will chill the marrow of those behind the reception desk, and then everyone will saunter, with studied indifference, out of the hotel and onto the tour coach.

The trusty vehicle, a kind of hermetically-sealed refuge from the hostile world, will be waiting with its engine running to shoot off to Destination X (with any luck a more accommodating hotel) as soon as all are aboard.

All is some number. Usually the coach party is 21. Often it's more — for this is no ordinary tour.

It's the Clash's first, headlining, country-wide "White Riot" bash. With a hit single and a hit album, the Clash could do very nicely with only one support band on the road with them.

A year ago, however, when they had just formed, one of their avowed intents was to help young bands who, like themselves, had to struggle for rehearsal space and places to play.

Their manager, Bernard Rhodes, always ready with a spiel of political rhetoric, is now actually putting his idealism into practice.

With loyal tour promoter Dave "Corky" Cork, he has become the benign, if harassed, ringmaster of a mobile school for aspiring rock stars. He booked the Buzzcocks, the Subway Sect and the Slits for most of the 40-date tour. The Clash are paying, if not all, then the bulk of these bands' expenses.

The Buzzcocks, who make their own way to the gigs, are accomplished and professional musicians.

Their great EP, "Spiral Scratch," released on their own label, has already sold over 7,000 copies. They have a following already.

But before the tour the Subway Sect had performed only five times, and their collective on-stage persona has stymied critics into describing them as "abstract."

The Slits performed three times before the tour and they expect people to dismiss their music as "dreadful." At the moment they could not care less. They know what they want and they are far more interested in doing it than talking about it — however severe the criticism.

That both these bands are unashamedly beginners, in every sense of the word, is one of the reasons why, on the "White Riot" tour anyway, the pioneering spirit of the new wave is alive and kicking.

On the tour, the Clash seem to relish their gaffer status. At least they get the pick of the seats on the coach.

With them is their guitar roadie, Rob, and general effects person Rat Rodent. The Slits are touring with their "acting manager," ex-Roxy deejay and Rasta, Don Letts, and his friend, Leo. Sturdy Baker is roadie for the Subway Sect.

Lighting man Micky Treadwell doubles as the bouncer. Micky Foote, the Clash's producer, is along as sound mixer. And just to keep things jumping, various journalists, from the Sunday Times to local fanzines, come and go as friendly ladies mount the coach at one town and take their leave at another.

It's quite a junkie! The coach driver, a hefty gentleman aptly named Norman, has his routine down pat, too. He has perfected an expression of one on a journey ever closer to hell.

Every morning, with a face like grim death, he swears to Corky that it's all finally too much for him.

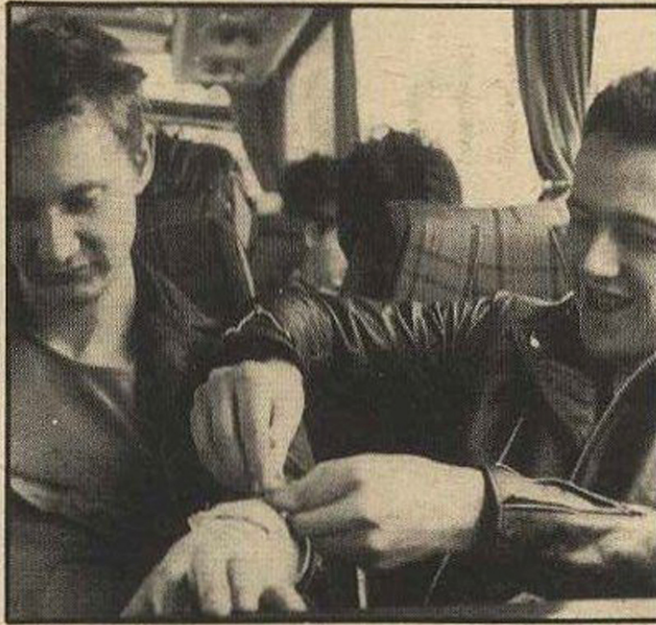
The Slits are the last straw. He can't, he protests, possibly drive the coach one more yard with them on board. They'll have to travel behind in a van. Every morning, a little extra cash exchanges hands before Norman feels calm enough to proceed.

Much to everyone's surprise, the Slits cause more consternation than the Clash, the Subway Sect and the Buzzcocks combined.

It's what the Slits represent, even at their least provocative (just minding their own business) which gets up people's noses. By Cardiff, the Slits are subdued. There are no more in-transit high spirits. If driver Norman sees Arri even move in her seat (and this is no exaggeration, such is the man's ire) he promises to quit.

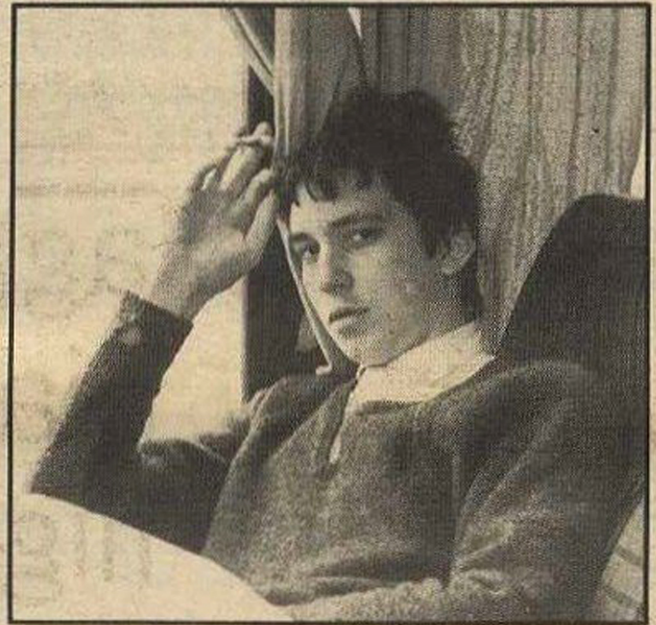
And since experience has shown that a mere glimpse of Arri could mean the expulsion of everyone to another hotel, her lobby appearances have been cut to the minimum. On the occasions when she has to be there, like on the way to a sound check, Don Letts has orders to keep her sitting down.

White



CLASH'S JOE STRUMMER (right) with roadie RAT RODENT.

Riot



ROB of the SUBWAY SECT

on the



SLITS: bane of hotel managers' lives

road

Standing up, she obviously presents a challenge to the very foundations of decency and order — not to mention natural biological law. Viv, Tessa, and Palmolive look moody and capable of stitching up troublemakers if the need arises.

But, in their tight trousers, shirts, ties and black leather jackets, they are often mistaken for men.

Arri is all girl, even though she flagrantly disregards anything remotely feminine. She is blatantly sexy, although such is her impact, that many straight men told me they thought she was "ugly" — a fact that please Arri immensely.

An alternative to her outfit of Jubilee Knickers worn OVER shiny wet-look trousers is a crutch-high mini skirt which also reveals an expanse of underwear printed with rosebuds.

She teases her hair continuously, and when the omnipresent comb is not in her hand, it's tucked ever-ready in her tangled mane.

She has fine teenage skin and, standing with her long bare legs cocottishly akimbo, she exudes the raunchy innocence of a futuristic mutation of Medusa and Lolita. Women mutter that she should comb her hair. If only they knew.

Commercial travellers, the usual hotel guests, halt bug-eyed in their tracks. But if she looks at men at all

(other than her close circle of musician friends) it's from behind an expression of unequivocal contempt. Which is probably half the trouble.

Arri Up and the Slits are highly defined examples of an ideal type which is becoming more attractive to women all the time. What they represent is a revolutionary and basic shift of female ego from one which is biologically defined to one which is made strong by an assertive mainstream role in society.

Thus they are far more "threatening" than the male musicians they are touring with. At their most outrageous, the antics of male rock stars are merely traditional expressions of male aggression and delinquency.

The Slits, however, without giving up their capacity to be warm, emotional people, are fighting for power, independence and recognition for their ideas and what they do. They are driving a coach and various guitars straight through a cornerstone of society — the concept of the family and female domesticity.

Not, I hasten to add, that the Slits themselves will have anything to do with the Feminist Question. Despite the band's name, they will only countenance a journalistic approach to them as people.

Palmolive: "We're too busy thinking about what we want

to do to bother about that. If you keep tall about chauvinism, it slows you down."

Viv, a cool bombst continues: "Girls should hang around with people give them aggro about v they want to do. If they they're idiots. To me it obvious."

"But you do tend to fo that you're in a mind when you're mixing people, like our friends, don't think in a negative about us or what we do."

"Girls do come up to more and more and say I think we're great — though we are not technic very good yet. Then start asking us what think about men and have to say that we sin don't want to know al that —. We just don't tl about it. Then we ask t to talk to us as people steer the conversation or music."

"We're not playing i rock and roll band i calculated way. It just co naturally. I just don't un stand why a great n more women don't do it I find it quite confusing, there aren't many more j in rock bands."

Arri Up has her own i "They just never try," says. "They just leave it to others. Well, the i

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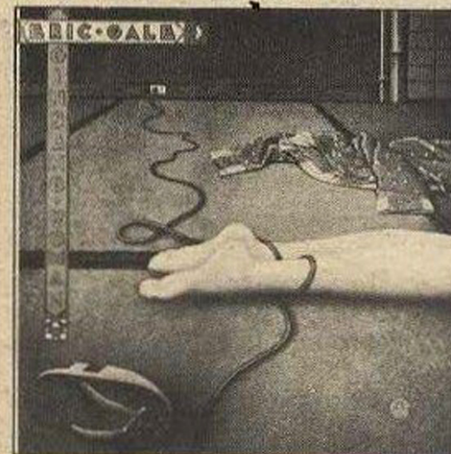
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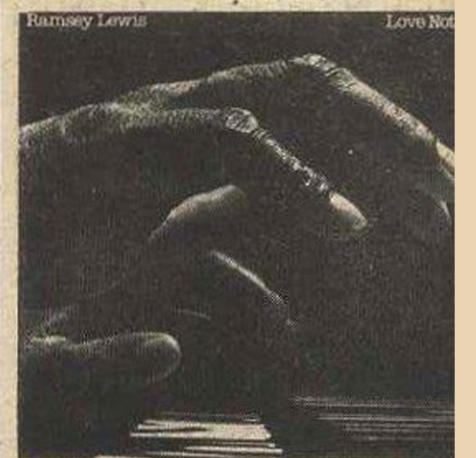
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