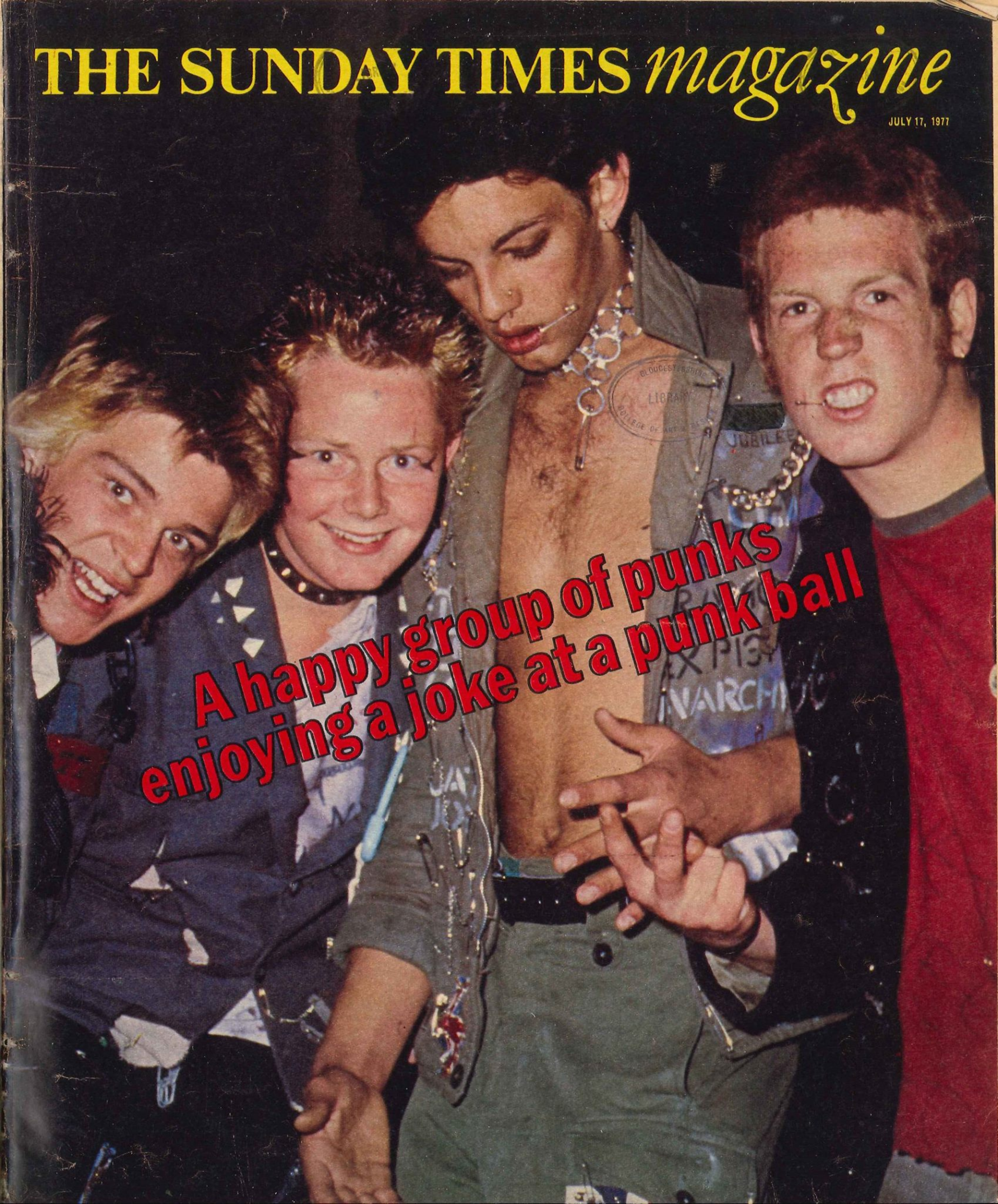


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**A happy group of punks
enjoying a joke at a punk ball**

GOOD CLEAN PUNK

For most people, 'punk rock' still means four-letter words, safety-pin jewellery, and a rude song about the Queen. After the Sex Pistols' infamous language on TV, concerts were cancelled, contracts torn up, and righteous outrage swept the land. Punk, it seemed, was sunk. But eight months is an eon in pop; the record companies, hungry for a genuine youth phenomenon, have swallowed their misgivings and re-opened their cheque books. Punk, deodorised and re-packaged as the 'New Wave', is here to stay – at least for half an hour. Report by Gordon Burn; photographs by David Montgomery



Above: assorted punk fans in Chelmsford on the 'White Riot 77' tour. Right: The Clash, most political of the 'New Wave' groups; left to right: Paul Simonon, Joe Strummer, Nicky Haddon, Mick Jones

The 'new wave' had made the charts – the Jam, the Damned, the Clash and the Stranglers all had albums in the Top 30 – but it was clear the reality of it still hadn't penetrated as far as Newcastle. It was a haphazard mob who crashed through the wall of undergraduate stewards at the Students' Union. Inside, they fell in a scrum before a platform dominated by a blow-up of last year's Notting Hill riots.

Their accessories were modish enough – paper clips, safety pins, of course, ripped shirts, plastic sandals – but they were thrown together in a way

that confirmed they had yet to be exposed to the real thing. Their idea of what was 'punk' was based on features in the music papers and banner-headline reports in the *Sun*. The rest of the audience was made up of the mildly curious, the openly sceptical, and some who obviously thought they had taken their lives into their hands and had come only out of a sense of daring.

'Punk rock' – 'this grotesque, insulting, anti-life festival of moral and spiritual anarchy' one commentator called it; 'puke rock' to the *News of the World* – had been labouring under an



almost total ban for six months, a direct result of the Sex Pistols' conscientious campaign of outrage.

The reasons for the punk explosion – bored and out-of-work teenagers kicking against 'super-groups' too old to identify with, concerts too expensive to attend, songs that were no reflection of their lives – had been widely put about. Still though, very few at the Students' Union in Newcastle had any real idea what to expect of a package optimistically, rather than provocatively, called 'White Riot – 77'. They soon found out.

The Slits are an all-girl group fronted by a 15-year-old who, when she isn't holding a dirty mac wide to reveal black latex tights and bikini knickers, is tatting her hair up into tumbleweed with a pink plastic comb. The other girls, sweating inside their own sausage-skin bondage-chic, remain impassive in the face of Ariana's tantrums, which are almost as spirited on-stage as they are off, and her nicely obscene line in audience abuse.

The Subway Sect, on the other hand, in their dole-queue rags, determinedly anti-fashion, look like nice boys. When the mood takes them, however, they can be unpredictable. It's not unheard of for the singer to be two songs ahead of the rest of the group, though nobody can claim with any confidence to know when this is happening. And far from being bucked at the sight of an audience dancing, they have been known to stop abruptly and walk off.

"Course it's not just the music, it's the total attitude. It's the clothes and the way we do things," Mick Jones, the Clash's lead guitarist, said later. "I feel a bit like a reason for a ritual." The abbreviated titles, committed at the last minute to a scrap of paper and taped into the curve of Jones's guitar – 'London-Pressure-Bored-1977-Hate and War-Cheat-Remote-Police-Career-Capital-Deny-Janie Jones-Riot' – effectively capture the spirit of the Clash's music. But it wasn't their articulation of the fears and frustrations of the so-called 'blank generation' that worked on the audience at Newcastle like a shorted circuit: it was the music. It is no accident that, of the words, only the title lines emerge like football chants from an onslaught that has been criticised for 30 being 'screaming, venomous and

unrelenting', the very qualities that are, however, its strengths.

In the same way that the Skinheads and football thugs were a reaction against the love-and-peace movement of the Sixties, so the primitiveness of the 'new wave' can be seen as a reaction against the artiness in rock music that the hippies came to represent. ('Hippy' and 'ageing hippy' are the punk vocabulary's standard alternatives to 'oldfart' and 'boringoldfart'.)

To call the music crude, though – and a lot of it certainly is – is, in a way, to miss the point. 'Dole-queue rock' has taken off the way it has because, for the first time in a generation, the performers are the same in every essential as the people who pay to come and listen. It was the "rawness" and "directness" of the Sex Pistols that prompted the 19-year-olds who have since become the Subway Sect to turn their backs on A-Levels in Barnet a year ago; and Paul Simonon of the Clash only recently removed the dots that guided his fingers along the neck of his bass guitar. "It only takes an hour to write a song," is Joe Strummer's line. "You can play everything inside three weeks. Everybody knows it's dead easy."

Strummer is the singer with the Clash and co-author with Mick Jones of all their songs, and it is his habit to talk to an audience. "Aren't you lucky?" he'd scoffed the night before in Middlesbrough, having read of ICI's plans to create more employment in the area. Next day, he would taunt the audience of St Albans with: "Rock Folies is on TV. You don't 'ave to come here an' look at us, you know."

Talking would have served no purpose in Newcastle, though, because it was bedlam from the word go. The 'pogoing' – a dance style that consists of going up to head invisible footballs – progressed naturally into punch-ups, and the wounded had to be hauled up laughing out of the crush. "I don't give a toss, they can kick hell out of each other," Mick Jones said when it was all over. "Most of them kids, they have a good time. They don't feel good unless they go home via the 'ospital... If I wasn't like this, I'd just want to be oblivious an' all. Down the terraces Saturday, Clash gig Friday night... Go an' bang yer 'ead against the wall."

It was all good news for the promoter, Dave Cork, an indomitable young entrepreneur from Wolverhampton who had also stepped in as tour manager. "Look at that, eh? All them pound notes walking in," he'd said to Joe Strummer, but Strummer had refused to see the joke. ("Tour managers," Jones said, "they stink. They ain't talking my language. Same as record company people. If any of 'em show up round here I ain't got nothing to say, 'cause they ain't talking the same language as me. I'm not interested in them at all.") Cork was organising the tour for nothing on the basis that the Clash, very soon, were going to be very big. Not that money, he wanted to make quite clear, was his only concern. "I'm just pleased there's something new," he said. "I'm 25 now, been in the business since I was 18, and I'd seen it all before. It was dead. But now, all of a sudden, the excitement is there, the way I remember it in the days of Hendrix and the Cream."

Cork says he lost a lot of friends through his association with the Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' tour. And there had been some fears that 'White Riot' might face the same sort of bans when the audience at one of the first shows, at the Rainbow in London, resurrected the old ritual of seat slashing. But once on the road, the tour had progressed without major incident. A basic wage of £25-a-week for each of the four members of the Clash, and a bare subsistence allowance for the other groups, plus a blanket ban on room service and the disconnection of all bedroom telephones – precautions insisted on by Cork – had more or less seen to that.

The porter, though, who patrolled them at the hotel after the concert was convinced that the youths littering the lounge were the Sex Pistols, the only group he would claim to have heard of since the Rolling Stones and the Beatles. But, significantly, it wasn't a member of any group who most conformed to the punk stereotype but a wasted boy with Vaselined-up hair, the Clash's chief roadie. 'Rodent' (a nickname derived as much from his real name, Rodney, as from any resemblance he might have had to a ferret) had been moved to rip his arms open one night with the ragged edge of a Coke can to demonstrate his boredom with a



"Most of them kids, they have a good time," says Mick Jones of the Clash

roomful of students. To relieve the tedium of the road, he occasionally added to these bloody scars with the serrated edge of a table knife. His background, as far as he'd admit to one, seemed to be public school and prison.

(A punk-in-the-making, to be seen backstage at Clash concerts in the London area picking up points of style, is a spindly boy called Conran, son of the Habitat millionaire and Shirley 'Super-woman'. An extempore equipment humper with a single ear-ring and the beginnings of a proletarian drawl, Sebastian was 'blooded' by being thrown into a swimming pool fully dressed one morning at five. But Strummer likes him: "He's got a very high-class voice, but he means well.")

For themselves, the Clash's clothes, onstage and off, betray a familiarity with the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, the American Pop painters, that they don't feel inclined to discuss. Although their recent histories all include squatting and the dole, three of them went to art school, as did their manager and even their sound engineer; but, in keeping with their anti-intellectual stand, they proclaim a profound disinterest in 'art'. Joe Strummer hates the recent translation of 'punk rock' into the more respectable-sounding 'new wave',

almost as much as he hates the persistent gossip in the music press about him being a public school boy. ("It wasn't a public school," he has explained succinctly. "It was a school where thick rich people sent their thick rich kids.")

"I hate those two words," Strummer said, "'new wave'. I much prefer to call it punk rock. It sounds tougher. Don't know why they use the other words. 'Spouse they think it sounds artistic."

Not given much to socialising, Strummer had whiled away the afternoon in his hotel room, stencilling letters that would finally read 'High Tension' across a lime-green shirt to which he had added some black patches and an arm band. It was in a feckless attempt to emulate the Clash, the most innovative and probably the most 'committed' of all the groups to be thrown up by the 'new wave', that Chelsea had just put out 'Right To Work' and the Cortinas were making their bid for the charts with the very catchy 'Fascist Dictator'. But Strummer, who claims to read only the *Sun*, says he knows nothing at all about politics.

"I don't know anything about it," he said. "I don't know anything about Marx. I mean, to me, it's just a big snore, because who wants to know about all that back-stabbing? People say our songs are political

now because we deal in things that affect daily life, but I ain't got no major plan to save the world. 'Just think about who's doing what to you and what you're going to do about it,' is all we're saying. 'Think for yourself.'"

As an illustration of their "personal politics", the Clash were carrying all the other groups on the tour, thanks to their two-year contract with CBS, reputedly worth £100,000. And Strummer, for one, was feeding people out of his own £25-a-week allowance. Inevitably, though, they were being heckled at their concerts for selling-out to 'the system'. "Geezer down 'ere says we sold out," Strummer would announce at St Albans. "Well, if we hadn't signed with CBS none of you lot would've heard of us. So stuff that down your gizzard."

"The world's full of people who think you've got to adopt the hippy ideal, make everything Alternative, and ignore all the existing structures. Which is a ridiculous idea..." He was rummaging in one of the plastic carrier bags that made up his luggage. "Look, it's all business, I know that. They only do it for business. Take you down there, sign you up, buy you a drink... If they didn't think they were going to make money out of it, they wouldn't give you the time of day."

Groups are forming and realigning and being snapped up by the major labels faster in 1977 than anyone can remember since the beat-boom of the early Sixties. The Damned have already appeared on children's television; the Jam and the Stranglers have graced Top of the Pops, and Paul Weller, 19, singer with the Jam, has said he intends to vote Conservative at the next election. Next stop Weybridge, summers on Mustique, partying with Mick and Bianca? What was going to make them any different?

"I don't know." Mick Jones was lounging on a single bed and his eyes never left the ceiling. "I don't know the answers. You see, the whole thing we're involved in is full of contradictions. And now compromise is rearing its ugly head. So we contradict and we compromise. So I'm just, like, trying to keep my wits about me, and hopefully... you can learn from other people's mistakes. I can't quit yet, just because it's getting big," he said. "Can I?"