

## News

### Night The Clash were on a mission

By Barry Leighton

See both photos



**SOME of us had squeezed two or three abreast onto table tops; others were craning their necks while standing on chairs; several of the more enterprising had managed to position themselves, somewhat precariously, high up against the side of the walls. Towards the front there was a sticky huddle of bodies; a frantic, formless, ecstatic mass. Summer was still officially several weeks away but it was hot and humid inside The Affair that night – not to mention bursting at the seams.**

Had any passing member of the fire brigade happened to wander in then I'm pretty sure they would have consulted their manual on the rules and regulations governing the overcrowding of nightclubs.

But on that occasion just about every Swindon fireman was otherwise engaged. Across the road, less than a stone's throw away, they were tackling one of the town's most severe conflagrations of recent years.

Two momentous events occurred in Swindon on the evening of Wednesday, May 4, 1977; the elegant Methodist Central Mission Hall was burnt down and The Clash came to town.

The Clash gig – considered by many as the apogee of the Swindon punk era – took place almost 36 years ago today... the first Wednesday in May.

It is still spoken about in almost reverential tones by those who were there and has earned its place on Swindon's cultural landscape alongside the likes of Laurel & Hardy at the Empire Theatre.

The best thing about punk music was that you could read in the New Musical Express who were the hottest (no pun intended) new bands – and see them in Swindon a couple of weeks later.

Respected music critic Charles Shaar Murray famously slammed The Clash as “the kind of garage band who should be speedily returned to their garage, preferably with the engine running.”

What did he know? Their debut album released four weeks before the Swindon show was – and still is – one of the genre's greatest recordings.

So there we were, about half-a-dozen Advertiser journalists comfortably ensconced in our favourite watering hole, The Belle Vue in **Old Town** (now Long's Bar) cheerfully anticipating the forthcoming jollities.

Suddenly, one of our photographers burst into the back bar urgently seeking the duty reporter (thankfully, it wasn't me), while breathlessly spluttering something about the mission hall burning down.

I have to admit, perhaps with a tiny hint of shame, that my initial reaction – like everyone else's in the bar – was not sadness and shock for what appeared to be the impending loss of a worthy example of Edwardian architecture, complete with eye-catching dome. No, we all looked at each other in horror and gasped, as if as one: "That's where The Clash are playing."

Shaking the nation on their White Riot tour, The Clash had been booked to appear at The Affair in Theatre Square (now Foxies) but had become so big, so quickly it was decided they should perform at the much larger Central Mission Hall, a minute's walk away.

The idea was that local punk outfit the Aggravators would warm-up the crowd at the Affair – which had a drinks licence – before we all filed in an orderly fashion across Regent Circus to watch The Clash and support group, the Subway Sect, at the mission hall, which didn't have a drinks licence.

But when the mission hall was engulfed in flames, it was decided that all three bands should play the Affair, otherwise, well, there could well have been a white riot.

At what turned out to be an incendiary gig (oops), The Clash crashed their way through London's Burning which of course they sang as Swindon's Burning. Mightily pleased with the response, singer Joe Strummer then altered the lyrics of Police and Thieves to "Police and thieves in Swindon high street."

Every time I hear that song – including Junior Murvin's reggae original – that's what I'm singing in my head.

For the Aggravators – Swindon's first punk group – playing on the same bill as The Clash was a baptism of fire (sorry). It was only their second-ever gig. The line-up was: Steve Baker (vocals), Nick Brooker (drums), Glen Doughty (rhythm guitar), Ian Doeser (bass) and Dave Marx (guitar/vocals.) Ian, now 54, who remains a familiar and boisterous figure on Swindon's live music scene, graphically recalls the events of May 1977 He says: "The Clash gig turned out to be one of the strangest I've ever done. "On the night we arrived early and set up our gear before retiring to the pub. It wasn't long before we were hearing reports of fire engines outside the Central Mission Hall.

"Soon afterwards we were summoned back to The Affair and told the Central Mission Hall had caught fire and a lot of The Clash's gear had been lost in the flames.

"By this time, there were hundreds of people queuing outside the club, so cancelling wasn't an option."

In time honoured tradition, the show went on. Continues Ian: "By the time The Aggravators took to the stage, the place was packed.

"I remember being in awe at the size of the audience. I can't really remember our set; it was just a blur and seemed to be over before we'd even started. But people seemed to like it and remember it – so we couldn't have been too bad.

"One bit I do remember though was The Clash's road crew passing bits of equipment salvaged from the Central Mission Hall over the heads of the crowd and then rebuilding it behind us onstage as we were playing.

"I can remember the stage getting smaller and smaller as our set went on."

Ian and chums were thrilled when The Clash, in full throttle, dedicated their song Garageland – a suitably aggressive riposte to the aforementioned Shaar Murray criticism – to The Aggravators.

Aggravators singer Steve Baker, 55, now of The Sins, has a fleeting recollection of the occasion. He says: "I can remember The Clash being really friendly and Joe Strummer dedicating Garageland to us. I was quite impressed because they had a suitcase full of guitar strings and I had sold some of my records to buy strings for the gig. The rest of it was all a bit of a blur really."

In all, a sad night for ecclesiastical architecture. A victim of an apparent electrical fault, the Central Mission Hall in Clarence Street remained a charred shell for eight years before it was eventually demolished and replaced with a faceless office block.

But a blinding night for Clash fans – even ones like me, who never wore safety pins or an I Hate Pink Floyd t-shirt.

By way of an encouraging postscript, Ian adds: "Punk is still thriving in Swindon. We have two bands – The Charred Hearts and Two Sick Monkeys – touring Europe each year. Last year we had a Jubilee punk festival at the Rolleston pub, at which I played."



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