

**I**MPTONCE might be described as having to apologise for something that wasn't your fault. When complete control becomes remote control. Last Thursday in Belfast the Clash were confronted with such a freeze-out.

The date not only marked the opening of their current UK tour, but also the first time a major British punk/new wave/now band had played in the strife-racked city. Joe Strummer remarked that they had wanted to play the venue ever since the group formed last year, and consequently were itching for the stage of the Ulster Hall where the event was supposed to take place. But once again the Faceless Ones who transform people into puppets stepped in at the eleventh hour and refused permission . . .

However, let's start at the beginning of the invidious fiasco. Perhaps the minor irritants that happened in the morning could now be interpreted as omens for the later catastrophe.

We all arrived at the airport to find that the tuner had been left in the cab and the carnet (the official document for transporting equipment from Northern Ireland to Eire) forgotten.

Sound man Micky Foote was despatched to gather up the missing links and so had to catch a later plane. Plus the plane itself was delayed because of the air traffic controllers' industrial dispute.

Then through security (the guard jokingly described his Evil Presence detector as a Dan Dare gun) and onto the plane, where conversation turned unneringly to talk of the recent Baader-Meinhof hijacking.

Not, you can understand, the most comforting of topics at 8.30 am on a plane to Belfast. Spirits picked up as Paul Simonon leaned over to announce that his word for the day was "Synopsis." Eh?

We were about to land and the stewardess made the customary announcement that anyone carrying foods or livestock should report to the Ministry

## Ian Birch tours Ireland with the Clash

of Agriculture. Mick Jones shouted out: "That includes me! I'm a chicken!"

Another cab ride followed and initiation into Belfast began. Scenes of endless devastation, urban wasteland, rows of terrace houses that had been reduced to (and by) shells, the windows boarded up with grey breeze-block slabs.

The driver was like a surreal tourist guide. Passing yet another gutted pub, his meticulous memory threw out a brief history of the events behind the attack. How many people were killed, when it happened, what the backlash had been. If you look up that street on the left, two men were killed last month in a fire-bomb raid, etc.

One building he singled out was

what remained of the Youth Employment Exchange, now enmeshed in a wire cage. Joe and Mick understandably gave it a lingering glance.

Late that day Mick mused: "Black is the predominant colour here. The first thing I saw in Belfast was hundreds of blackbirds."

He added, in a lighter tone: "Joe thought they were crows, but they weren't crows because crows have dark glasses and saxophones." The movie Fritz The Cat takes on a different meaning in Belfast.

We arrived at the hotel, the Europa, similarly fenced off by a wire boundary and security outpost, to find out that it has the dubious claim to fame of being the most bombed hotel in Europe.

Everything seemed to be going well until about 4 p.m. when yours truly was in the pub awaiting the band for a pre-soundcheck Guinness or two. Suddenly drummer Nicky Headon rushed in: "You've got to come back to the hotel. The gig has been cancelled." Whaaaaat????

**O**NE of the promoters was waiting with the story so

# Clash lose

far. The gig had been organised by the Northern Ireland Polytechnic and they had genuinely believed that all aspects had been accounted for.

All but one, as it transpired: the insurance.

To secure the Ulster Hall (which is run by the Belfast City Council and not officially connected with the Polytechnic) what is known as an insurance 'cover note' is needed to underwrite any unforeseen mishaps that might occur.

It is a stipulation made by the Hall. Three weeks previously, the Medical and Professional Insurance, who handle the Polytechnic's affairs in this respect, apparently assured the

Polytechnic's entertainment's committee that the cover note would not pose any problems. It would simply be an extension of their existing cover for the Students' Union.

However, come Thursday morning, the committee were informed that the offer of insurance had been withdrawn — allegedly because there were outstanding claims arising out of previous Clash concerts.

This the band later refuted as entirely untrue. Anyway, the committee feverishly tried to find an insurance broker, both in Ireland and on the mainland, who would be prepared to underwrite the concert.

No-one was forthcoming — even after they had offered a pre-

mium themselves of £500. So an alternative plan was suggested: switch the venue to Queen's University. But that also proved fruitless as they couldn't accept the responsibility, not having the requisite insurance.

Since the event looked doomed, the Polytechnic promoters asked the local radio and TV to announce that the gig had been cancelled.

By this time the fans had started to congregate outside the doors of Ulster Hall. The police turned up and told them the news.

In despair, frustration and anger they stormed round to the Europa hotel, pulling at the wire fence and demanding to see the Clash. An official from Queen's Student Body arrived and said they could play in a smaller hall in the university — the bar, in fact, as opposed to the originally-mooted main concert arena.

Nicky and Paul explained this to the fans, who duly rushed towards the seat of learning.

The site wasn't ideal by any means, but it was better than nothing. The Ulster Hall has a capacity of 1,600, while the bar holds only around 400 and, due to the liquor license, was barred to those under 18.

Just to compound the seriousness of the situation, news was also coming in that several of the hotels that the band had secured for the tour had cancelled the bookings.

Nicky was horrified: "Sometimes I think I might just slash my wrists and maybe then they'd see what they're doing to us."

The last time the Clash had tried to play in Britain was at the Birmingham Rag Market festival in July, virtually subtitled "The last big event before we all go to jail," and that had collapsed under a torrent of bans.

The next move was to dismantle all the gear that had been so far erected in the Ulster Hall and to move to Queens. The kids were amass-



# control...

ing outside the university entrance (800 advance tickets had been already sold and obviously many more punters were emerging on the night itself).

It was both an odd and potentially hysterical situation. The police and army were there in force, but looked confused, to say the least, by the spectacle. They weren't acclimatised to such a congregation.

Inside, the mayhem gathered momentum. The old obstacles were rearing their oppressive faces again.

A white riot was feared and insurance cover stayed as inaccessible as it had been all day. In addition, the roadies were unhappy with the stage. It didn't boast the most reliable structure.

**I**N THE dressing room, the band smouldered. But there was nothing they could do without incurring massive repercussions from almost every legal side.

Unfortunately, the only course of action was to leave. They were trapped in contracts that cared zilch about providing entertainment for rock 'n' roll-starved kids.

First Joe and Mick left, followed quickly by Nicky and Paul. I was in the second batch, and as we came out by a side entrance a bunch of about 40 kids were waiting.

They pleaded with Nicky and Paul to play, and in return the two band members attempted to explain the trail of absurd events. But the words were drowned out, and all the kids could see was that the group they had, in many cases, travelled long distances to enjoy were abandoning them. Nothing could have been further from the truth. The group and manager Bernie Rhodes had done virtually everything they could to alleviate the eleventh hour chaos.

The kids became furious. Nicky and Paul left in the car, and as it drove off the fans hurled abuse, beer cans and whatever

was available at the departing vehicle.

When such an iron clampdown occurs, it must have its counter-reaction. A few windows in the Ulster Hall were smashed, five punks (three male and two female) were arrested and a pack of about 100 formed a human chain across Bedford Street.

Just remember, they mean it, maaaaan. Back in the hotel the atmosphere was one of terminal depression intercut with pure anger.

Three fans who were on the verge of forming their own band had collared Joe, whose external belligerence belies an incredibly sympathetic and understanding nature.

The three blokes were bitterly hurt, and Joe spent several hours clarifying the debacle and offering advice about getting a group together.

Two were Protestant and one was Catholic, and in order to practise together they ran the daily risk of all that such religious intermingling implies. Now that makes the ludicrous struggles of the more pampered mainland would-be stars look a trifle silly, don't you think?

**T**HE late night news came on the TV. The first item was — surprise, surprise — the Clash, the pared-down information giving no clear

picture of what ACTUALLY HAPPENED. Mick sneered.

"The most horrible thing was the way the kids were treated — the way they were pushed around. They didn't have a chance to understand what was happening, so they were disappointed in us.

"Obviously, it wasn't our fault, but you can't explain that to 800 people personally. The way they've been pushed around by the army and the police, they obviously thought 'what the f— going on here?' They reacted accordingly. Everyone acted the monkey they thought they would.

"Like, it's almost a night of freedom and they can see it slipping through their hands while policemen are coshing them. You don't look for sane reasons. You just see the object, and the object is the Clash and you aim for that.

"You want to be assured that it's going on and it didn't. In two weeks' time the insurance will probably be worked out and the Stranglers (set to play then) will come in and clean up, and the Stranglers will reassure them. Meanwhile, for us the kids were lining the street in front of armoured

cars. It was a scene of desolation and chaos.

"I thought it was great that they lay down in the road in front of those armoured cars because they wanted the concert so badly. The trouble is that it's our first time here and we don't know the situation and we can't go down the police station and check it out because we don't know if we can walk down the block. I'm like a complete alien.

"It was essential for the band to play here. It was so important we played and I realised the more important it became, the less and less chance we got of doing it.

"It was very self-conscious. It was a self-conscious way of getting your own way in a situation which is so out of our control.

"No way are we going to call the shots with guys with bren guns standing outside and beating on kids.

"In no way was it also giving up. We ain't an army, we're a rock 'n' roll band. It's like a band against the army and the Ulster constabulary, who were only there in case of trouble, and the only trouble

was produced by the fact that this company wouldn't insure us.

"The threat of half a million pounds meant nothing to me. They said, 'do you want to pay it yourself?' so I said, 'I'll pay it myself.' I meant it. "They couldn't get it off me, so throw me in jail. It's just a joke. I think they had a lot more trouble here because of the fact that the concert was cancelled than if they had let the concert go on. It was a complete red herring."

**T**HAT afternoon, other bizarre events had taken place.

Mick and Joe had gone to do an interview with the local radio station, Downtown Radio. As they stepped out of the car by the station, the security had mistaken them for members of the UDA.

The reason was evidently their clothes — black zippered outfits, Doctor Martin footwear, leather jackets, which highlights the fine line between the (excuse the possible pomposity) the symbol and reality.

Again, what is de rigueur down the Vortex takes on provocative implications in the authentic war zone.

In addition, during the afternoon, we had all piled into a minibus for a round-the-town photo session. The band were ill-at-ease at the prospect and its ramifications.

At suitably evocative landmarks, like an army barracks, or, patrol, or devastated rubble, the camera would whirr. How had Mick felt?

"Like Paddy McGinty's goat. I just felt like a dick. The best time was when all the kids were in the photos with us. That was the only time when it was human and real.

"I should imagine they'll lap it up in London, though. The soldiers crouching in their cubby holes thought we were dicks. The kids thought we were dicks. Like, we asked some, do you want to be in the photograph and they said 'bollocks' on the Ballymurphy Estate.

"But I think it was important because we got a lightning tour of what was actually happening, and so we were really in touch during those moments.

"I was more aware of what was going on around me than the



**continued overleaf**

# Conflict and Clash

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camera. If I had known people in Belfast, I would have hung out with them and become part of the background. Instead, I thought the group stuck out like a sore thumb."

Another raw nerve was the backdrop the Clash play against. It features a photographic blow-up of a violent Belfast street scene, replete with armoured cars and hunched civilians.

Mick: "I didn't think we should put it up here because they aren't going to particularly want to be reminded of it and they are going to say what the f— do they know about it."

"Obviously, we're sympathetic and have an empathy for the place, but I also feel we might be rubbing their faces in it."

"In Bournemouth it's great because everyone is f— asleep and it's really heavy because everyone is confronted by this stuff, but in Belfast they don't need to be reminded. You just have to walk down the street and be reminded of it every day."

"How many times have we been searched? Must be about 20 times. I really felt this concert was going to be a hot rock 'n' roll show and the audience was going to be one of the best we'd ever encountered."

"But, of course, the bureaucrats and arseholes put their foot in it. But listen — you can be a Catholic or a Protestant kid — you can come along and all be bouncing together."

"Now the authorities gotta see something wrong in that. It's a cruel irony. The live backdrop being associated with our group and then the authorities stamping on our concert."

AT LEAST the following night in Dublin the promised rock 'n' roll took place. On the

train down Joe handed me a Combat Picture Library cartoon strip booklet, called Jack Wouldn't Dare.

"That's for you and Melody Maker," he quipped. It told the engrossing saga of one reporter Jack Roberts (who looked not unlike Elvis Costello and had PRESS emblazoned on his helmet).

The time was the Second World War, and Jack the Hack was sent out with an army platoon on a search and destroy mission to a Japanese arms dump. Jack was SCARED but, as in all good stories, ended up by being the hero, destroying the hideaway singlehanded.

However, when he returned to his editor with the explosive

copy, it was summarily rejected because it was — you might say — too real. As a result he quit the journalistic department and joined the platoon.

The last line read: "It's easier blowing up Japanese magazines (geedit???) than getting one of my articles on the war accepted, Sir." Do you think Joe was making a point to me?

THERE were two shows in Dublin at yet another bastion of learning, Trinity College, in an astonishingly ornate hall. Joe shouted out: "Ain't this posh?" and he was right.

Portraits of past academic luminaries decorated the walls — bewigged gents in languidly pensive poses, a sculpture of two almost intertwined figures and a gigantic organ in the gallery, which looked as if it came out of Hollywood in its most fantastic phase.

Set all this alongside the kids and the finally, erected backdrop and the ironies were extreme.

Many of the fans who were disappointed in Belfast had come down, and Joe dedicated "Hate And War" to them. Despite there not being time for a proper soundcheck, the band, first time around, were astonishing, soaring through "London's Burning," "Capi-

tal," "City Of The Dead" (which, as Mick said, is the opposite of what was happening in Belfast), "Janie Jones" and "Garageland."

After half-a-dozen or so numbers, Joe announced: "Listen — shut up. I can't play with these guys here," motioning towards the security guards.

Instantly they upped and went, and suddenly the kids poured onto the stage, creating a scene of delirious confusion. No, they didn't prevent the band from playing but exulted in the fact that this was their night, their victory. Strangely, the audience numbered few fashionably attired punks. Most were longhairs or the curious brigade who transform

themselves from sports jacketed bystanders (one couple were actually smooching to "Cheat") to frenetic dervishes.

If the first set was good, the second was superlative. On "Remote Control" Mick's voice (he's now taking charge of more vocal parts than ever) rang out in spine-chilling splintered shards.

Nicky looked deceptively loose-limbed as he thrashed out a titanic drum underlay, while Paul, with India-rubber intensity, attacked the bass with a venom that would have split the atom. Joe was also superb as he circled the stage in those juddering, quickfire movements.

Equally intense was the version of Junior Marvin's "Police And Thieves" whose significance grew uncannily after the previous day's events.

Words like insistent, powerful, unavoidable, magnetic just spun through my head. I love the Clash because they are one of the most honest and exciting rock 'n' roll bands we have.

So, on leaving the hotel on Saturday morning to catch my various planes trains back to London, a small incident irked considerably.

Getting into the lift were two chambermaids who worriedly confided in me: "Watch out. There are punk rockers on this floor. Mind you don't get beaten up."

I replied that they didn't want to beat anyone up. "They do," the girls rushed back at me. "Are you one?" Do I look like one? "You can't tell by looks. They're a terrible lot. They put safety pins through their cheeks and even babies' cheeks."

Who is at fault for such an attitude? Girls, never was a band more on your side than your manager, who was toying with the idea of throwing them out of the hotel because of their so-called "bad language." See this band. They are very, very special.

