

The Clash Newcastle Polytechnic 28 October 1977 and 2 December 1978

Entering the maelstrom

Support acts: Richard Hell and the Voidoids (1977) and The Slits (1978)

A maelstrom is a whirlpool; a body of swirling water produced by the meeting of opposing currents. Tumultuous antagonistic forces had surfaced; as I recollect here, their tide was particularly strong when The Clash returned to Newcastle later in 1977, and again in 1978. There was violence and fighting at both gigs. Both gigs took place at the Students' Union of Newcastle Polytechnic. Both were weekend gigs – party nights for the students. Admission was once again 'students only', which was a source of anger and violence, and in direct contravention of the tour policy which 'guaranteed access to non-college students' (Gray 2003: 256). Richard Hell had a firework thrown in his face at the 1977 gig, which took place a few days before bonfire night. These were crazy nights of excitement, violence, clashes between rival gangs and excellent rock music. 'The gigs were mayhem', recalls Johnny Green, adding, 'never seen anything like it in my life' (Gray 2003: 258). A member of The Slits urged the crowd to 'wreck the place' (*Newcastle Journal* 2011).

Through punk rock, violence surfaced in many guises, at once an angry, 'youthful reaction to the prospect of no future' (Worley 2014: 6), an aggressive response to the oppression of mainstream cultures and a performative display of 'the punk policy of provocation' (O'Hara 1995: 17). Being present at a punk performance, as a member of the audience, is to understand, feel and encourage the violence. Concerts allow us to release our frustrations; 'good rock is aggressive', according to Scott Calef, who recalls how he once saw 'Steve Marriott clobber a security guard in the head with the mic stand because the hapless bloke was trying to stop a fan ... smoking dope' and how the 'applause was deafening' (2009: 151). Calef also refers to The Who and Jimi Hendrix at Monterey as examples of how the energy and power of violence add to the intensity of the performance. Caroline Coon (1976) wrote of an early Clash gig:

Three weeks ago at London's ICA, Jane and Shane [MacGowan, later of The Pogues], regulars on the new-wave punk rock scene, were sprawled at the edge of the stage. Blood covered Shane's face. Jane, very drunk, had kissed, bitten and, with broken glass, cut him in a calm, but no less macabre, love rite. ... The Clash were not pleased: 'All of you who think violence is tough – why don't you go home and collect stamps? That's much tougher,' roared Joe Strummer. Then he slammed into the band's anthem White Riot.

A Clash gig did not in itself encourage violence. However, violence was, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of the shock and chaos which ensued. Davies argues that The Clash 'professed a sympathy with violence' (1996: 11), citing the lyrics of 'White Riot' as evidence.

I have very vivid memories of the 1978 gig. By 1978, The Clash were established, popular and the darlings of the music press, and as a result the gig sold out almost immediately. There was much anticipation for the concert. The students had come to see what punk rock was all about, and fans to experience their new rock heroes. The local people, those who managed to gain entry, were there to spit at the band and (for some) to fight with the students. The group of people outside were trying to force their way in, getting angrier and angrier, and ended up waiting outside to attack students as they left. The Fifth Wall remained intact, even after the attempts of the bands to break down that particular barrier: 'I was at the 1977 gig. What an experience for a young punk.

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Sixteen years old ... didn't have a ticket. Couldn't get in as the crowds outside the front door were massive. Hung round the back and, behold, Richard Hell let me in' (Anderson 2016). The Fourth Wall between audience and band was scaled at both concerts. At the 1977 gig, a fan tried to pull Mick Jones offstage, damaging his Les Paul Junior (Gray 2003: 258).

I saw, and felt, something different in The Clash at the 1978 concert. They were now an experienced, established and confident rock band, rather than just another new punk act. The place was packed, with everyone standing on chairs and tables. They started with 'Safe European Home', which set the tone and pace for the evening: 'The air was electric. The Clash were hyped up and 100mph but they were a much better band than expected' (Poolan 2014). I also remember being particularly impressed by Mick Jones' guitar work, and his quieter 'Cockney-charm vocals' (Sutcliffe 1978) on 'Stay Free', which remains

quieter 'Cockney-charm vocals' (Sutcliffe 1978) on 'Stay Free', which remains one of my favourite songs to this day. This was the best time that I saw The Clash, and the night I realized that they had become a serious rock band – the 'market leaders' (Sutcliffe 1978). I remember saying to my girlfriend (now wife) that on that night they stood up to comparison with The Who and Led Zeppelin as one of our best live rock acts.

Although I enjoyed the gigs, I was scared on both occasions. I had very long hair, and looked out of place at a punk gig. The fact that the gigs took place in a students' union building added a level of safety. I could blend in with the students, although I was also the subject of taunts from local punks. It was leaving the venue which was the most frightening aspect of the evening. We had to run the gauntlet of a large group of punks and skinheads who, having been denied access to the gig, were determined to vent their anger and frustrations on students, many worse for wear from alcohol, leaving the hall. Some people were seriously hurt. A heavy police presence minimized the violence and the danger and we survived both gigs unscathed. Poolan (2014) also recollects the eruptive atmosphere on those evenings:

I was at both [gigs]. There was a big fight – I avoided it thankfully – at the first and a lot of windows were smashed as people weren't students or couldn't get in. There was a lot of 'gobbing' at the first and Strummer eventually got angry and took his revenge at the front in similar fashion. (Poolan 2014)

This clash of cultures was a subject which would also become directly expressed through the band's material. 'Safe European Home' tells the story of a writing trip which almost went very wrong. Joe Strummer and Mick Jones were sent to Jamaica for two weeks in December 1977 to write songs for their second album. The song tells of the clash of cultures they experienced: 'We must've looked like a strange pair to the locals. ... I'm surprised we weren't filleted and served on a plate of chips.' Jones notes: 'We went down to the docks and I think we only survived because they mistook us for sailors.'³ The gigs themselves were again a focus for culture clash. The band were again playing to a largely student audience, who became the focus for violence and hatred of local gangs. *The Journal* in Newcastle (2011) reported the 1978 gig as an example of the 'harum-scarum days of punk rock' where 'hundreds of drunken youngsters' had 'fierce scuffles' and 'specially trained security guards with dogs and walkie-talkies' tried to keep order inside and outside the venue.

Based on this analysis and the account of Cobley (1999), punk in the provinces had a number of specific characteristics, and was quite different to the London scene. Punk gigs were often dangerous and marred by violence, as local camps saw them as opportunities for fights between themselves and with the security staff who were either preventing entry or preventing them from getting close to their heroes. The links to local 'politics' are very clear. Cobley writes of this in the account of Wigan, and it could be seen in the Northeast through the very explicit anti-police, anti-establishment and left-wing politics of punk bands such as the Angelic Upstarts, who formed as a direct result of The Clash's 1977 appearance in Newcastle, and also as a protest to the rise of the National Front in the region. Other characteristics include the DIY and bricolage nature of punk dress, and a time lag of a year or so between what was happening in London and similar events taking place in the provinces. The importance of local venues as rallying points, providing the opportunity

The importance of local venues as rallying points, providing the opportunity to experience punk rock, is also an important factor, as well as particular gigs as 'events' which served to develop punk culture.

³ This quotation is taken from the *Songfacts* website entry for "Safe European Home": <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=30869>.