THE NIGHT PUNK ROCK FINALLY CAME TO TOWN...

Something remarkable happened — on and off the stage. Ivan Little was there.

IT'S THE sort of night that almost defies you to forsake the warmth of the living room and the dubious pleasures of "Match of the Day."

It's cold, misty and dismal. Thoroughly unpleasant really. Even "Starsky and Hutch" starts to look tempting.

But onward. And outside the Students Union they gather in their ripped tee-shirts; their bin-liners and their boiler suits.

A little bit of inclement weather isn't going to spoil their night. The night punk rock finally came to town.

There have been a couple of false starts before. Most notable was the visit of English punk group, the Clash, who came, saw and were conquered by red tape. Insurance firms wouldn't take the risk on them, fearing their reputation could lead to damage to the Ulster Hall.

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But now they're here. This time Queen's University have agreed to stage the concert. Not without internal struggles, mind you.

The university's executive told entertainments secretary Eamon McCann they didn't want anything to do with the Clash. So he held a student referendum which over-ruled the Executive decision by a 3-1 majority.

It's now just before 8 pm on this miserable evening. And the punks are growing restless. Which is hardly surprising because their tickets clearly state that the Clash show starts at 6 pm, the first of two tonight.

So why on earth are they still shivering outside, they wonder. Apparently McCann has sent messages down to the bouncers on the door to tell the kids there's going to be only one show now and to hang on.

But somewhere there's a communication breakdown. The bouncers aren't getting the message through to the fans.

Inside McCann's office, tucked away on the upper floors of the Union, the atmosphere is somewhat tense. The bearded entertainments secretary is in the midst of dispute with Mike Barnett, the Clash's tour manager. Over money, if you hadn't guessed. Barnett wants more than McCann is prepared to give.

Barnett claims that the first show was scrubbed because the hired PA equipment and the stage weren't ready and because no representatives of the promoters were there.

On top of that a member of the support band — an all-girl punk group from France — was detained at the airport while police questioned her about her luggage.

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McCann claims that the Clash arrived too late to make the first show even a possibility. But he is powerless. The contract that he drew up never did get signed with the rush to stage the gig at short notice.

Now the pair haggle over fees. All previous formulae go out the window now that there's only one show.

Normally McCann pays by cheque. But Barnett wants cash. They've arrived in Belfast with hardly any readies — they haven't yet received payment into their hand for a string of sellout shows in London earlier in the week, they say.

Barnett badgers sound man John Connolly of Andromeda Sound into taking a drop in his fees. "Everyone else is taking a cut," he pleads. Connolly, who seeks and gains an assurance that the Clash won't damage the equipment, concedes.

Barnett isn't happy about security for the concert. There's too much of it, he thinks. Earlier during the band's sound check, two fans sneaked in and were being hustled out of the hall by university security men when a member of the Clash complained about excessive "muscle."

Barnett wants the bouncers, who normally, wear dickey-bows, to be less conspicuous. McCann agrees that they should take off their neckwear and that there should be no line-up of bouncers between the fans and the group. Just a sturdy barrier.

"Okay, okay," says McCann, growing weary. "Have we got a deal?" Barnett says they have. "Well, shake on it," says McCann. They do. "Now we've got a gentleman's agreement," says McCann.

Barnett insists of having the cash before the show. He is still worried about the bills in hand. He says Clash stand to lose hundreds. Now he tries to pare the expenses.

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Could they fly back tonight and save on hotel bills? Phone calls to Aldergrove say time rules that one out. Could they not have found a cheaper hotel than the Europa, someone wonders. "The boys are tired. They need a good hotel", counters Barnett.

The only thing to do is get on with the show. The doors are opened and the punks flock in. They've all received a leaflet with their £2.50 tickets appealing for good behaviour. It's the first make or break concert for punk in the province.

They're all searched on entry. Studded belts and chains are forbidden. All offending articles are taken off them for collection at the end of the show.

The youngsters spill out tales of fights in the queues; bottle-throwing incidents; police and bouncer provocation. But any incidents were minor. No damage has been done to the Union itself.

In the Union bar, Clash members Nicky Headon and Mick Jones are swilling pints with their fans. It's hard to image the superstars of rock deigning to mix with the masses. But no matter.

The straighter students are amazed by it all. "They're all hippies at Queen's," says one punk rocker. Students peer out of the windows at the fans going into the McMordie Hall. Expressions ranging from bewilderment to horror are etched on their faces.

Inside the hall, support band Lou's are grinding out their frenetic music. Their English isn't good. But the lead singer obviously has a nasty line in English four letter words.

In the dressing room the Clash are ready for action. The Lou's are finished now. But still the Clash hold back. One wonders why. The answer is supplied in a nearby room.

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There McCann is counting out the money to Barnett. No sooner has he the cash in his hand than the band sprint along the corridor and onto the stage.

The roar of welcome is ear-shattering — that's a whisper compared to the music. Immediately the Clash explode into life. The momentum of their short, snappy songs never lets up. up.

Most of the 650 kids in the hall — McCann's estimate — respond with sheer enthusiasm. There are no chairs in the hall. So they bounce up and down in their pogo dance. They're having too good a time even to spit — a punk ritual — at the Clash with any feeling.

The energy of the band and fans is incredible. A 26-year-old friend caught up with the excitement of it all has a pogo. He is exhausted after three minutes. "I knew I was too old for this," he mutters.

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The music comes as a surprise. It's good primal rock and roll. Admittedly it's virtually impossible to make out the words — the sound has been turned up to distorting full volume — but then that's hardly a punk peculiarity.

Without the advantage of lyrical understanding it does tend to sound a mite repetitive. But the power, the fever of it all, is undeniable. And the fears of trouble are unfounded. The fans are too busy enjoying themselves.

Maybe one or two are a bit the worse for drink. But again that's nothing new.

Only at the end of the encore do things look nasty. One or two fans have scrambled up on stage to embrace their heroes. But it's only a trickle.

Back stage the Clash are washed out. One can only wonder if they could have done a second show. But they sink pints of water and invite their fans back to talk to them.

Two teenagers who publish a punk magazine, "Alternative Ulster," are interviewing Joe Strummer, the Clash's main vocalist. He tells them, from the band's playing point of view, it was a bad gig.

Outside the two teenagers introduce themselves under their pen-names of "Hugh Angry" and "Gerry Hat-Trick." They're embarrassed to admit they're really university students. But they defend punk to the hilt.

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"People have it all wrong," says Hugh. "The main theme of punk is humour. We've the biggest pair of liggers in the town. All the dressing up is a good laugh."

They're delighted at the way the concert has gone, proving that punk and aggro aren't constant companions.

Upstairs McCann is delighted at the complete absence of damage at the Union. Sound man Connolly says his equipment hasn't been harmed either.

McCann is doing his sums on a pocket calculator and reckons if he has a loss it will be only a small one. He sees the show as a success. It will be the forerunner of more new wave shows.

Barnett re-appears to find out how the Clash will get up to the airport in the morning. McCann says they can have the hired minibus provided they give him the money for it.

Barnett, faced with large hotel and air bills, says he might have to give him a cheque.

It's late. Eventually differences are solved. Differences that reflect a night of frustration and suspicion away from the stage. Which couldn't have been in sharper contrast to what happened on and in front of it.

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