

POP MUSIC

Clash proves punk still lives

By JOHN ROCKWELL
Of The New York Times

AYLESBURY, England — The punk obituary notices may have been premature. Ever since Johnny Rotten quit the Sex Pistols at the beginning of the year and reverted to his given name of Lydon, and ever since it became clear that no real punk band was about to make a commercial breakthrough in the United States, commentators have sounded the death knell for the whole movement.

But if you believe punk is passe, you should have been in Aylesbury a few days ago, when the Clash began an English tour. Aylesbury is a moderate-sized, semi-rural, semi-industrial town some 50 miles northwest of London. The space in which bands play is called Friars and is in a shiny-modern civic center in a room that looks like a cross between a theater stripped of its orchestra seats and a school gymnasium.

EXCEPT FOR the fact that most people stood downstairs (there were some seats in the small balcony), the concert might have seemed like any other, at least at first. The opening act, the Automatics, were attended to with a polite indifference that seems the lot of most opening acts, anywhere.

Closer inspection revealed some anomalies, however, especially in matters of dress. Safety-pins driven through the cheeks and earlobes were in blessedly short supply. But the other accoutrements of the punk world were common enough — cropped, spiky, dyed hair, torn clothes, dog collars around the neck and such like. Some of these folk were London punk loyalists who had journeyed out to Aylesbury to see their favorite band. But most of them were locals, suggesting the spreading of punk throughout the land.

INNOCENCE INCARNATE, this observer stationed himself in about the

fifth row of closely packed bodies, right in front of the center of the stage. The instant the Clash began to play, the whole clot of bodies began to pogo as one — a convulsive mass hopping. Since several hundred people can't hop together, however, there was soon a series of violent eddies cutting through the crowd. Whole masses of people would lurch against one another; individuals would jump off-center and crash down half on top of their neighbors; others would fall to the ground and claw their way upright again.

If this sounds dangerous and brutal, it wasn't, really. Even the fights — and there were some — were more friendly rough-housing than grudge matches, with smiles and laughter abounding. The only really unpleasant aspect was the spitting. Punks crowds have taken as a matter of ritual to spraying one another and the performers with beer or actually lobbing wads of spit about the hall. Some bands reportedly resent this a lot, but although Joe Strummer and the others in the Clash went to the effort of dodging the grossest items hurled their way, they seemed sanguine about accepting sweat and spit as part of the intensely physical relief that a punk concert turns out to be.

AFTER A BIT of being knocked this way and that, this writer decided to extricate himself from the upfront violence. This was easy enough to do, simply by working oneself back to the periphery of the pogoing, where the rest of the audience was standing more calmly, listening to the music. It was all rather like going on one of those rides at an amusement park in which one drives a rubber-bumpered electric car, the express purpose of which is to ram as many other cars as rudely as one can.

THE CLASH ITSELF is probably the leading punk band in Britain at the moment, although less well known in the United States than the Sex Pistols were. Actually, the Clash is known at least by name to readers of the American rock press, since a number of well-known writers have proclaimed them about the greatest rock band of the day. But the group's first album, called "The Clash," is available only as an import on CBS International. Somewhat crudely produced, its release in the United States has long been delayed (although why crude production should be considered inappropriate for a crude band seems paradoxical). Now, there is talk that the first album will be out

soon in the United States (on Columbia's Epic label), with a few promotional concert appearances by the band at that time. And the Clash is close to completing its second album, produced with greater finesse by an American producer, Sandy Pearlman, and that should be released in America, as well.

THE CLASH IS interesting on several counts. One is the way in which it testifies to the clubbish nature of British punk. The band is not only friendly with the Pistols and other British punk bands, but has played together informally with them (the Pistols' guitarist, Steve Jones, has reportedly rehearsed recently with the Clash, for instance, and the Clash's original second guitarist — when the group had five members — is now part of Lydon's new band).

More pointedly still, the Clash's manager, Bernard Rhodes, is a former associate of Malcolm McLaren, who founded the Pistols. Both McLaren and Rhodes steered their charges in a strongly political direction. With McLaren and the Pistols, it was a wild sort of anarchism. Rhodes and the Clash are slightly more specific in addressing themselves to the frustrations of their peer-group — working-

class British youth — and slightly more overt about suggesting that a violent, political response is in order.

ACTUALLY, WHAT THE real nature of the Clash's politics is remains slightly mysterious. Rhodes can spin a fluent if somewhat disjointed rap about the band as a sort of Hegelian-Marxian agent of the class energies of its audience, and about how the band can "focalize" those energies in its songs. But the band itself, only half-joking, calls Rhodes "our enemy in the worst sense. Earlier on, he helped us as lot," admitted Strummer, who is rhythm guitarist (always feverishly double-time in his right-and strumming, hence the name), lead singer and co-songwriter, along with Mick Jones, the lead guitarist and other lead singer. "But now I wouldn't say there is any connection at all." Which is clearly exaggerated, since Rhodes was still very much in evidence arranging the concert at Aylesbury and at a dress rehearsal punk party in London the night before. But it points up the inherent instability of all these genuinely punk bands.

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