

Clash/The Specials Aylesbury

FOR PEOPLE who like to put things in neat little pecking orders — and because of our conditioning there's a lot of them — the Clash are the Big Boys now, THE punk establishment.

Well, the Damned have split; the Stranglers aren't cool, are they?; and with Johnny in cold storage the Ex Pistols are nothing more than Uncle Malcie's marionettes, mainlining on the puerile publicity of negative outrage. Jolly shocking, what? Saddening more like.

So the mantle of 'leadership' falls unwelcome on the Clash, which naturally makes them an easy and obvious target for the facile bitching that often passes for 'informed comment' in certain sections of the music industry. Pete Silvertown highlighted it all a fortnight ago ... that not seeing them and the wait for the album had nurtured all that "they're finished/they were never that good" bullshit.

So this, the first of the tongue-in-cheek Clash on Parole tour, was a chance to prove that all wrong. And the message to the 1800 white men and women in Aylesbury Friar's only looking for fun (and everybody else out there) is: don't believe the media hyperbole, forget the 'fame', any group are as good as they play. Do they make you dance? Question? DO something?

SURPRISE number one last Thursday were support group The Specials (as they'd been known for four whole hours. They were formerly the Automatics which was very

confusing for the other Automatics, you know, the tanks rolled over Poland ones). The Specials are a five piece multi-racial punk-reggae group from Coventry, and the two cultures don't so much clash as entertainingly intermingle.

Whereas Clash play punk songs and reggae songs, The Specials' ditties combine elements of the two. Yean it sounds a phoney not to say disjointed formula but, surprise, surprise, it worked.

Song titles that stuck in mind included 'Its Up To You', 'Dawning Of A New Era', 'Wake Up' and 'Concrete Jungle' which give an idea of stance even though I couldn't make out the lyrics from where I was standing.

They finished on a nifty nostalgic version of 'Liquidator' and encored with 'Naked' which sounded uncannily like 'Big 8' before racing up to an accelerating pogoable pace and the final frantic finish. Ol' Skin'ead, that ought to appeal to your sense of heritage.

The Specials have been playing the West Midlands for a year. The vocalist sounded like Pete Shelley, the bassist's movements were a bit naff, but what the hell? They're competent, 'interesting' and enjoyable. Check 'em out.

THE KIDS had come for the Clash tho', and no one should have been disappointed. Tonight they were the best I've ever seen 'em and this was my fourth time ... twice before at the Finsbury Park stalag with its security goons and fixed seats, and once at Vicky Park where the sound system sabotaged the set. This time there were no goons, no chairs, an 1800 capacity crowd and dynamite sound.

They kicked off with 'Complete Control', Strummer

as ever shaking like a fanatic, and then it was a machine gun drum burst and into the first of the unrecorded songs, 'Tommy Gun'. Christ, no wonder they call Topper "the rhythm machine", his drumming gets better and better, solid, sharp building blocks for the others to construct the choones over.

There were 16 songs tonight, half of them unrecorded, none of them standard. In fact the only shadow over the set was the crowd's conservatism. A lot of the kids looked like last year's media images, right down to the swastikas, safety-pins and spitting, and it was obvious they really wanted the records churned out, and consequently didn't give the new songs the reception they deserved.

I didn't get all the titles but new ones on me were 'Cheapskates' and 'All the Young Punks' ("This song is for punk rock which is the only thing that's happened in this country in living memory". Loud cheers). 'The English Civil War' is instantly accessible, based on the American Civil War song 'When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again'. Only this time Johnny's come on the bus and the tube, and this civil war's already started, see Grunwicks, Lewisham, Brick Lane.

Sure Clash are political, but there's a false dichotomy between *their* politics and fun. Clash politics aren't about being Boyson, Tyndall or Tony Benn, they're about living. Living is about surviving and having fun. Not about any electronic god or walking the dog. Not about passivity and acceptance. That's why their politics are more convincing than Uncle Tom's. And that's why they hit me so hard 18 months ago when I was living on the sprawling wasteland the GLC call White City Estate just a gobaway from the throb,

throb, throb of the West Way.

Clash have always been best when they're trading on raw anger. Songs like 'London's Burning', 'Complete Control', and 'Capital Radio' are vitrollic power bursts seeping with gut conviction. 'Capital Radio' was probably their finest moment tonight.

'White Man' ("This one's no.32 in the charts — I'm so excited") is a really powerful anthem live, specially as Mick's solo was five times better than the studio version. That "Burton suits/rebellion into money/Hitler" bit is a mighty two fingers to all that Thamesbeat media powerpap.

What else? There was Paul at his best on 'Police and Thieves' (with last year's backdrops) which succeeded in turning the crowd into one heaving, seething slow pogoing mass. Mick took over vocals for 'Jail Guitar Doors'; and 'Garageland' still sounds convincing even though the equipment shows they've long abandoned working in carbon monoxide fumes. There were three other new songs which indicate there'll be no softening up on the new album either musically or lyrically. And finally the crowd pleasing encores: 'I'm So Bored', 'Janis Jones' and 'White Riot'.

All this and only the first night of the tour too! Enough to invalidate any lingering misgivings; as long as they still generate the sort of buzz of excitement you get when you skip off school for the first time at 13, they'll still be the Clash we know and love.

What more can a poor boy say? 'Cept perhaps to warn them not to play any more open air gigs. I hear there's a bunch of loose-bowled pigeons from 'High Anxiety' just dying to get their own back.

GARY BUSHELL

1st Gig of tour
Sounds 8th July