

The night the Clash went to jail, and other tales

The new Academy is the best thing to happen to Glasgow's music scene for years. But can it ever match the seedy glory of the old Apollo? It will be a tall order, writes **Tom Morton**

Health and safety: two concepts that militate against the essence of rock'n'roll, which is surely a distillation of danger, glamour, sleaze, brain-melting noise and visceral excitement. Yet you can bet your ticket for next week's opening Deacon Blue gig that the new Carling Academy, Glasgow's latest music venue, will be safe, and relatively comfortable, as long as you don't mind standing.

It's the law, after all, health and safety. And these days rock'n'roll keeps to the letter of it.

The New Bedford cinema in the Gorbals, now the Carling Academy, was eyed for decades, along with the former Eglinton Toll Odeon just along the road, as a possible replacement for Glasgow's late, lamented Apollo. With a capacity of 2,500, easily accessible and with free on-street parking, the Academy also has a touch of the raffish glitz you find in old cinemas. Round the corner is



Just big enough: the Academy, right, is a mid-size venue, like the Apollo before it

more. The main other motley figures sauntered on. There was the hum, thump and crackle of instruments being plugged into amplifiers and then . . .

And then, my life changed, solely due to the ensuing noise. Keith Richards, for it was he, hit the opening chords to Brown Sugar and a kind of paralysis beset me. This was what music was all about: brutal, physical, washes of sound, the snarl and whimper of Jagger, the screaming whine of Mick Taylor's playing.

Nothing has ever lived up to that first experience of live rock music: the Rolling Stones at their peak, in the Apollo, me at the age of 17. It was transcendent.

Three years later I went back to the Apollo to see the Stones and this time found myself in the upper circle, teetering on its vertiginous slope. Never good with heights, I was unprepared for the effect of my fellow fans' stamping in time with the music. The whole balcony began to bounce. You could see the rail at the front moving by at least a foot. It was terrifying.

Sprung to withstand just such

pressures (though in 1927, surely nobody could have foreseen the thumping feet of Stones or, worse, Status Quo fans), there was, supposedly, no danger. Years later I stood below the upper circle as Wham! played to thousands of screaming teens and watched plaster fall from the ceiling. It felt scary, though, which just added to the venue's appeal.

As a student, and later as a journalist specialising in long articles about heavy earth-moving equipment (some things never change), I frequented the Apollo as tastes and culture altered. Dare I admit being at Yes's Tales from Topographic Oceans concert? Ten Years After? Gordon Giltrap? A half-empty (the Apollo was never half full) Cat Stevens gig or the time Ralph McTell, with barely 200 people shivering in front of the stage, showered insults at everyone and refused to play Streets of London? Er . . . no. But I'm happy to tell you about the Police, just before their first album came out, when they played every track on Outlandos D'Amour twice,

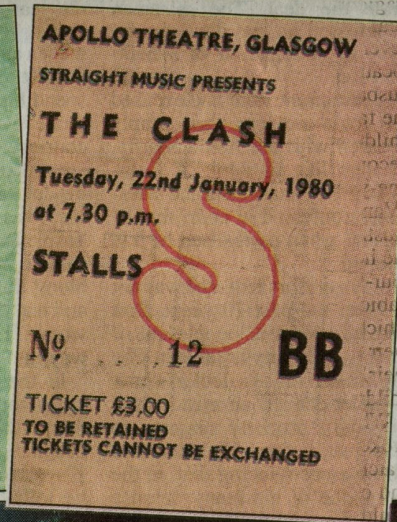
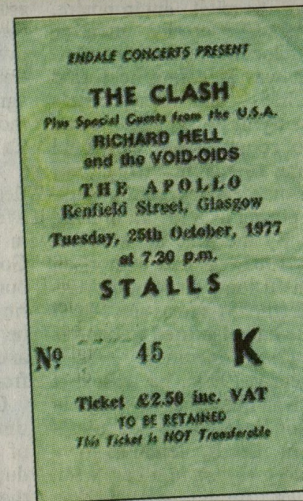
and Miles Copeland, their manager, collected ticket money in cash. Before then, Dr Feelgood came and, watching Wilko Johnson's pre-punk guitar slashing, I recovered some of the thrill of hearing those "Keef" chords back in 1973. And Costello's This Year's Model appearance was a revelation.

One of the most famous incidents in the Apollo's history was the Clash gig, in July 1978, where war broke out between the audience and the bouncers. The band were unable to prevent the carnage, the place was trashed and Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon ended up in the cells. The place closed for renovation and there was very little live music in Glasgow for a year.

In 1984 I began working for the now-defunct rock weekly Melody Maker, and suddenly access to the Apollo, just as it began its inevitable slide towards closure the following year, was, with a little schmoozing, available for free. The first concert I reviewed for the paper was nearly the last, though. Iron Maiden's management provided me with a VIP box, about 3ft from the main PA stack. Never have I been in such physical pain from music. Having stuffed my ears with tissue paper, I had to have it medically removed.

In the months that followed, a parade of the ephemeral (Wham! Paul Young, King, that desiccated, middle-aged guy who's on MTV as a presenter, name of Paul) and even Frankie Goes To Hollywood passed on and off the Apollo's towering stage. Mostly it was easy to get in, though I still remember the coke-crazed eyes of one of the Frankie promotional team and the sight of my photographer, John Logan, being thrown into the street. Did I intervene? What do you think?

Among the most precious of rock'n'roll creatures I encountered that year was Gary Numan's dad. Numan was managed by his father, and both were suspicious of the music press. I hatched a plot with my opposite number at NME to obtain guest-list passes, the notion being that we would be each other's plus one if the other succeeded. In turn, we spoke to the road manager: "Gary's dad doesn't like Melody Maker," he said, scowling. And then: "Gary's dad doesn't like



Clash of the giants: Glasgow was a must-play venue in the punk era

NME." We ended up buying tickets. But that's rock'n'roll. It's just not rock'n'roll journalism.

Towards the end, the old hyperbarn was falling to bits, finally being declared unsafe and closed forever. The action shifted to Barrowland, which was smaller, had the atmosphere but was all standing, and eventually the SECC's sterile factory ambience. King Tut's offered a smaller club alternative, but Glasgow has been crying out for a medium-to-large rock venue ever since.

Will the Carling Academy fill the Apollo's shoes? Maybe. Its stalls area will probably be all standing and the sloping auditorium may be left in place. There are concerns, from veterans of the Brixton Academy, about the giddy effect of the

incline after a few hours on high heels. But nothing, surely, could be as vertigo-inducing as that Apollo upper circle as it leapt and juddered beneath pounding feet? Especially with the knowledge that above you a deserted ballroom lay inhabited only by the ghosts of Bible John and numerous forgotten punk rockers?

Still, the Academy will doubtless establish its own legends in years to come. The question is, would I let my daughter go there on her own for the upcoming Sugababes gig? Only if I'm waiting outside in the Volvo to pick her up afterwards . . .

Deacon Blue open the Carling Academy on Wednesday (0870 7712000) Tom Morton presents his own show on BBC Radio Scotland.

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