



Written before screenings of 'Rude Boy', this is a Clash fan's account of touring from the trenches. Vaughn Toulouse (pictured left) quit the dole in Plymouth to follow the 1978 Clash tour. This is his story. Pennie Smith took the photos during '79 and '80.

FOR a while back there in the summer of '76, I was fast losing hope in the future of rock and roll. Where had all the gangfights gone? Where were the seat-slashers now?? From where I was—living in Plymouth, digging out the vinyl past of Motown, Trojan and Stax in the second-hand shops—it seemed like the only rock and roll future worth shouting about was Bruce Springsteen, and he hadn't done anything new in over a year. Discovering The Clash was in the order of a personal revelation.

When the 'Anarchy In The UK' tour rolled into Plymouth in December '76 the charts were full of Showaddywaddy, Johnny Mathis, Queen, Chicago, ELO and . . . need I go on? A month had elapsed since Fleet Street splashed the Bill Grundy business over their front pages, and the Sex Pistols single had climbed from No 42 to No 38.

Good or bad, all this publicity had little effect on the citizens of Devon and Cornwall. Only 50 or so punters turned out on each of the two nights that Woods Club opened its doors to the Pistols, The Clash and The Heartbreakers. Was this the opening salvo in a gutter-rock upheaval destined to

blow the UK pop scene apart at the seams?

I know what it meant to me. I hadn't had a buzz like this since the early '70s when I watched the likes of Alice Cooper, David Bowie, T. Rex and Mott The Hoople on the box and wished to hell I was old enough to compete with these mad cats. Now at last a new sense of urgency was rearing its ugly head and this time the walls were gonna sweat again for sure.

And they did. The first Clash album landed in the BRMB chart at No 12, their own 'White Riot' tour followed, the summer of '77 brought the Sound Of The Westway, and a hundred more punks picked up cheap guitars and figured out how The Ramones did it.

BY the time 'The Clash Sort It Out' tour came around in the winter of '78 yours truly was on the dole, bored and broke (yeah, some of us still were!). The dates were in the music papers and, since I had nothing else to do, I decided to hook up with the tour in Bristol and just hang on for the ride. Go wherever it took me.

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I reckoned against hitching—too chancy—and set off from Plymouth Station at 7.30 am on a cold and miserable November morning. My 'luggage' consisted of a Dunlop sports bag containing one pair spare jeans, one t-shirt, and jumper and one biography of Jimmy Cagney to pass the time on trains.

I'd cashed in my fortnightly dole giro the week before, as a result of which some £20 in notes nestled in my jacket pocket to last as long as I could stretch it. Not that I was about to blow that on my first train journey.

I did the trip to Bristol with the aid of one platform ticket, a lot of front, and an eagle eye keeping lookout for advancing ticket collectors. This is the cue to dive into the khazi. Doesn't always work so you have to make sure that you have enough cash on you to pay from the last boarding stop if British Rail feels your collar.

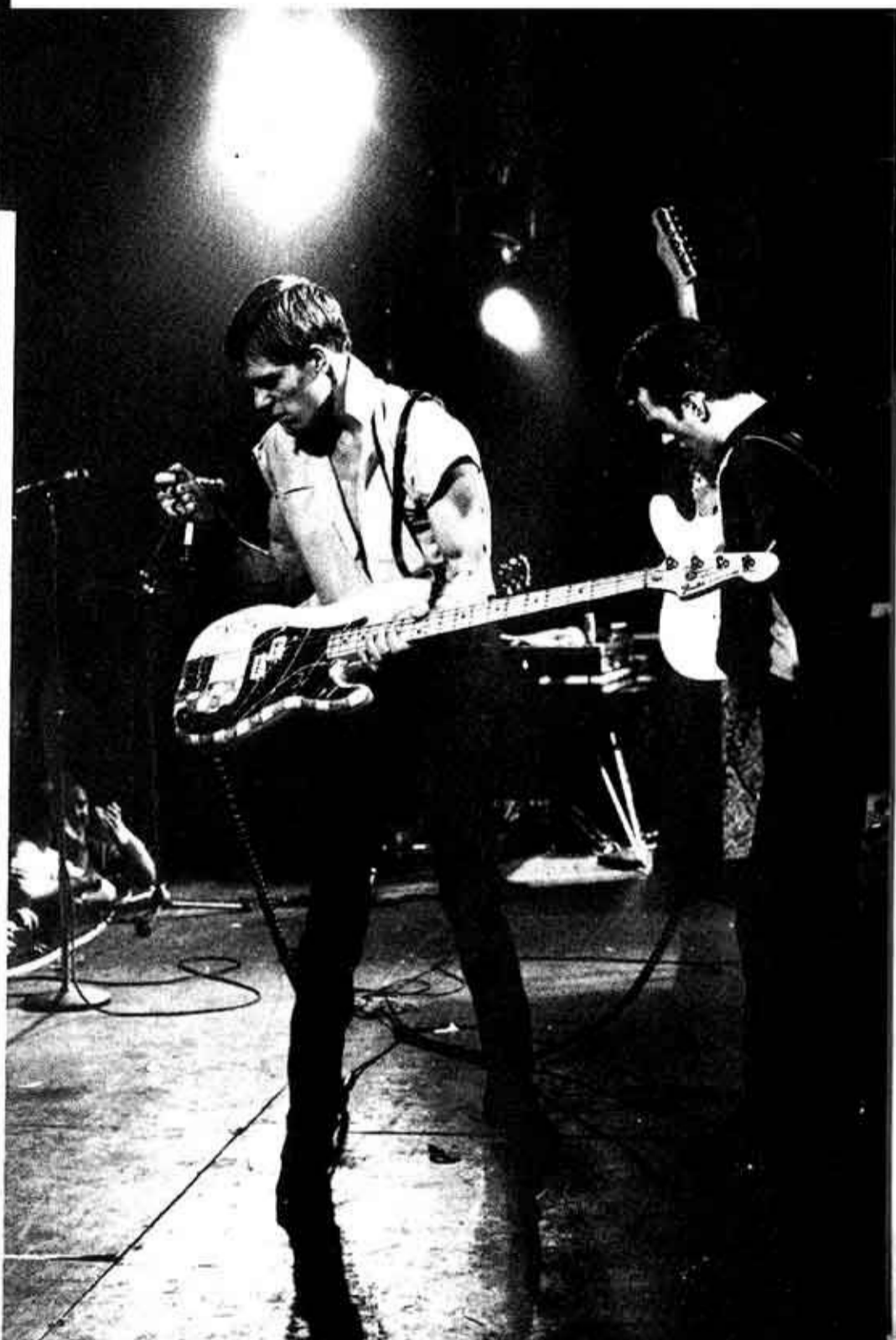
I got into Bristol with time to kill, and set about getting a ticket for that night's gig at the Locarno. My plans were to get in free but I had to be sure of entry. Walking into the first record shop I struck lucky and scored a ticket.

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Time now to case the venue. Get in for nothing and I can resell my ticket later, saving my cash for emergencies and necessities. I figured on getting a foothold on this plan by approaching the roadies who were unloading the group's gear at the back of the venue. For starters I wanted to know what time The Clash would arrive for a soundcheck. Most road crews react with run-of-the-mill stupid comments when asked favours like this, but Johnny Green is an OK geezer. He's the tour manager, and the group's right hand man.

There were a couple of hours yet to go so I checked out what the city had to offer (not a lot), keeping within spitting distance of the Locarno just in case I missed my opportunity. (After a few gigs I got slightly better acquainted with the road crew and discovered the advantages of the backstage pass.)

By 4.30 a motley crew of punks and skins were gathering outside the building. Inevitably, when you're on your jack and not an established face in the place, conversations are struck up easily. Three of them there were, ugly-looking brutes, two of them



Joe Strummer works late in the office: The Ice Age is coming . . .

punk-rockers (! ! !) and the other a skinhead who just strolled up and started giving me the "Where you from? How many times you seen 'em?" chat.

We stood together, shivering in the cold, sheltering from the drizzle on the ground-floor of a multi-storey car park. It was 5 pm and already dark. There were now a dozen of us waiting, hands in pockets, opposite the stage door. A couple of younger kids were clutching record sleeves, press cuttings and pin-ups for signing.

Me, I'm wondering what it's all about, starting to lose the feeling in my feet and guessing how long it will be before my monkey boots start shipping water, when The Clash's tour van pulled into the driveway.

Joe Strummer was first out, an ill-fitting Crombie wrapped around his frame, red-spotted scarf and motorcycle boots poking out of either end. The small, autograph-hunting 'Swop

my belt for your scarf Joe' gathering immediately came to life. Bits of paper and pens were thrust at the group. Obliging each fan in turn, the groups inched their way towards the door.

While all this was going on, yours truly was putting two and two together and looking for the main chance. I reckoned that if I mingled between The Clash and The Slits, one of the support groups, there was a good chance the doorman would take me for a member of the official party. I grabbed my bag, tried to look as much like part of the entourage as possible. It worked.

INSIDE the Locarno, tatty with the lights up, I hung around and waited for the soundcheck. Now a decent soundcheck is well worth seeing and sometimes, when The Clash get carried away doing their own personal favourites, things like "The Israelites" and "Revolution Rock" (then un-recorded),

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featuring Strummer's adlib vocals and Topper's reggae drumming, they can set the mood perfectly for the night ahead. It's at times like these I understand how kids get inspired to form their own groups.

By the end of the soundcheck I was well hungry. I'd noticed the groups and road crew going to a food bar and returning with baskets of pies and chips, with no apparent signs of readies changing hands. Why shouldn't it work for me? It did, but I sat and ate my free nosh as close to the road crew as possible, trying to look like part of the same operation.

Similar bare-faced nerve got me a place to stow my belongings for the duration of the gig. Having changed in the khazi into clean t-shirt and spare jeans, I strolled up to the cloakroom attendant, told her I was with the group, and walked away with a free cloakroom ticket. *What, me tight?* Yeah alright, but there were a lot more gigs and towns to come and £20 wasn't going to last long if I splashed it around on 'luxuries'.

I never had any real trouble with bouncers either on that tour. Not that it doesn't happen of course. Many a geezer with an arm in a sling will testify that it does, but I was lucky. The only real liberty I took that night was to nip out after the main doors opened and flog my ticket (the locals I'd been talking to earlier kept the stage door open for me). No point in wasting my money when I'd got in through the back.

It didn't take long to work out some kind of system. Usually, by the time The Slits piled on stage, I was halfway to pissdom. If I bought enough drinks myself that gave me the courage to ponce drinks off fellow punters or to half inch the fuller glasses left unattended on the tables.

The Slits were great. They take the rise out of audiences something rotten, and Ari Up is a terrific little mover. Gradually, as they came to recognize certain faces night after night, The Slits would offer us cream crackers, hunks of cheese and oranges, food probably lifted from the hotels.

After a few gigs I also got to know when the groups went on stage and the time, approximately, when the audience began to knot itself into a near unpenetrable mass. If I chose my time, I could struggle into a good position just before the groups came on, saving the



hassle of being stuck in one position all night or of missing out on the real action down at the front.

My position was always stage right—in front of Mick Jones. By my fifth gig on the 'Sort It Out' tour, Mick was used to seeing my mush in the same place and sometimes I got a swig of his bevv. (Some occasions it was brandy—hate the stuff but beggars can't be choosers.)

When the gig was over I collected my belongings, returned to the khazi to wash up and wipe the lumps of gob from the back of my head, changed back into my 'street gear' and made my way backstage.

Most nights, unless I had a train to catch to the next gig, I'd waste as much time as possible hanging about backstage with the group,

drinking the booze and eating the fruit laid on in the dressing room.

SOONER or later of course, The Clash were going to get used to seeing me around. Backstage at Cardiff Top Rank was the first time Joe Strummer made it known that my presence was being felt when he asked me out of the blue for a personal history. Gradually he and the rest of the group began to refer to me by my correct handle rather than as 'John' or whatever.

Tony PIL-Head, Irish Tom, Sheffield Ian, London Roy and me... we were the regular followers in the Clash brigade. Various others from different parts of the country came and went. Occasionally, even Ray Gange would show up!

As individuals The Clash are as different as four geezers you'd expect to meet anywhere. Mick Jones is probably the most instantly likeable. In the company of fans he seems really friendly, putting himself out to talk to people. Topper runs him a close second, salt of the earth type I suppose.

Joe struck me as being blunt and straightforward. If he doesn't like someone he ignores them. Paul Simonon, on the other hand, tells them where to get off. He's the quiet one, cool as cucumber, no airs and graces.

Things got easier the more we got to know the group. If they knew that otherwise we'd be sleeping rough, sometimes they'd allow us back to the hotel. Talk about Secret Service. They'd

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Mick's turn to wear the trilby.

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sneak us up to their rooms, dodging the manager, and fix us up with cushions on the floor. Hearts of gold, eh?

One night up north when Mick got me into his room, Topper and his girlfriend followed us in and told us that I'd been seen by one of the hotel staff. Joe, meanwhile, was in the process of sneaking in another couple of worn-out followers. It was suggested that I kip down in Joe's room with the others, in case the manager turned stroppy and checked up on Mick, which was exactly what happened a few minutes after the switch.

On other occasions it was a case of strolling into the night looking for an empty train awaiting its morning call. In Bristol I slept first class, a rolled up jacket doubling as my pillow.

Next morning I'd head off to the next town, unless returning to my home base—which I did once a week—for a bath, change of clothing, and to collect more dole. It was an experience I wouldn't have missed for the world.

THE Clash at this time were equalled in performance by no one. At times The Jam, Pistols and The Ramones have all come close, but they have never bettered live Clash on form. Why? It's hard to explain; it's just a personal happening. Coming away from a good Clash gig, to walk or talk, ears still ringing the following morning, even when you haven't a clue where you're wringing with sweat, hardly able going to kip for the night... that is my idea of The Perfect Evening.

It was sad to see it end. The Clash made tracks for the States, pastures new and unconquered. I did one more tour. Stiff Little Fingers, Essential Logic and Rober Rental hit the M1 in February and I was off again. I'm past all that now. I could never see myself as one of those doddering over-21s, watching contentedly from the back of some hall while the youth movement changes hands, the 14 year olds become 15 year olds and so on. I reckoned it was time to get my own group together. I mean, who knows who's next?

Vaughn's group is Guns For Hire, a Korova recording act. They're good.