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When we fought the law for The Clash: Recalling Belfast's 1977 punk riot

As an academic conference opening today debates what really happened during the band's infamous visit to Belfast in 1977, Henry McDonald recalls the riot that took place – and the myths that followed.



The Clash in front of a Saracen

Bassist Paul Simonon on stage



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Someone somewhere in Siberia, on the other side of the Urals mountain range, probably still has my Clash T-shirt secreted in their home. In an act of Irish-Soviet friendship I swapped it for a Red Army tunic with a Siberian in the dormitory of a third-level college in Weimar, East Germany, in the summer of 1981.

Looking back, the exchange was not just an instance of late Cold War East-West barter. It was also a means to ward off the sexual advances of an older USSR soldier in his mid-20s who was three sheets to the wind thanks to East German schnapps and Polish vodka; a noxious concoction that smelt and tasted like it should be fuelling the engine of a Mig fighter jet.

As the big Siberian waved my T-shirt triumphantly in front of his friends from Irkutsk, I realised the reach and influence of a punk rock band fronted by the son of a former British diplomat and whose bass player was a poor white kid who grew up among the south London black community of Brixton.

Four years earlier the group came to a European city which had its own mini-set of Berlin Walls – Belfast. One of the locations they visited on their brief, controversial and now myth-laden tour of the war-torn city was the Henry Taggart police and Army base in west Belfast.

It was a photograph taken outside the heavily fortified, rocket-protected station on the Springfield Road that later found its way on to that T-shirt, the one that ended up stretched over a Siberian's torso.

Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon, Mick Jones and Nicky 'Topper' Headon also posed for photographs at the top of Royal Avenue, which at the time was secured at both ends by the so-called "ring of steel", where civilian searchers flanked by armed troops and police checked the clothing and handbags of shoppers for firebombs.

One image of the four of them in biker jackets and zipped bondage trousers, an Army Saracen just to their right, is still a powerful visual reminder of actually how grimly suffocating Belfast was in the mid to late 1970s.

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It was out of this stifling atmosphere that a generation of the fed-up and the angry emerged just as punk rock was exploding across the Irish Sea, outraging a nation and prompting London dockers to threaten to put their boots through TV screens over the sight of these spiky-haired, foul-mouthed alien creatures who saw no future in England's dreaming.

This brief but creative flowering of protest, DIY musical innovation and emergence of some genuine talent is captured poignantly in the critically acclaimed Terri Hooley movie biopic Good Vibrations.

One of the most important scenes in the film is at the end, which recreates Hooley's punk and new wave music festival in the Ulster Hall in 1980. I can still remember the actual night he stormed up on to the stage to proclaim why the local punk and new wave scene had more substance to it than England or America. "New York has the bands, London has the clothes, but Belfast has the reason," Hooley proclaimed.

One band who failed to make it on to that stage during this period were The Clash. They were scheduled to play a concert at the Ulster Hall in October 1977, but never appeared.

And like old saloon bar republicans you used to meet on day trips with your parents to Dublin in the 1970s bragging that they had been "out in 1916", a myth grew up about the concert-that-never-was and the riot that broke out in Bedford Street as hundreds of young punks and other Clash fans turned their anger on the police.

I was there partly because I only lived around the corner, and also, even though I was just 13, had a guarantee that I could sneak into any concert. My family knew several of the bouncers who worked the door and who later let me in for free to see the likes of Siouxsie And The Banshees (backed up by The Cure) and The Stranglers.

Yet 'that' gig still exercises more power over the memories of the early Ulster punk generation. This was – and is – in part due to the myth that grew up that the '77 riot was the only one during the Troubles that saw Protestant and Catholic kids unite against common enemies.

In fact, The Clash myth is so enduring that the University of Ulster at the Art College is hosting an academic conference this weekend discussing the band's relationship with Northern Ireland and its youth.

To declare a dog in the fight, this writer is chairing one of the sessions at the symposium, although his mind will at times be far away, soaring back in space and time towards the east, wondering where is that T-shirt gathering dust, tucked away somewhere in a wardrobe or drawers in post-communist Irkutsk.

- A Riot Of Our Own – A Symposium On The Clash, Belfast, today and tomorrow, at the University of Ulster's Belfast Campus. For tickets go to www.ariotofourown.wordpress.com/

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