

CALENDAR

POP MUSIC

ACTIVE OR PASSIVE: TWO ROCK VOICES

BY ROBERT HILBURN

Let's throw away the old labels—new wave, punk, power pop, mainstream—they miss the point. There are only two main types of rock bands these days: the Active and the Passive. We'll see both in town this week.

The Clash, which debuts Friday night at Santa Monica Civic Auditorium, and Toto, which opens the same night at the Roxy, represent the extremities. The Clash is Active; it deals in ideas. Toto is Passive, it deals in sounds.

The separation isn't just attitude, it's also sales. On paper, the Clash annihilates Toto. Critics love the British foursome. They respond to the Clash's individuality and substance.

But during this period of extreme pop conservatism, the L.A.-based Toto walks away from the Clash in sales. Toto's sprightly "Hold the Line" single has been in the national Top 10 for weeks and has helped push the group's debut LP past the million mark.

Passive bands can do enticing work (Boston's "More Than a Feeling"), but the artistic heartbeat of rock rests with the



British import the Clash, above, and Toto, left, symbolize the Active and the Passive approach to rock music.



more challenging Active outfits: Bruce Springsteen, Elvis Costello, Tom Petty, Talking Heads, Patti Smith, the Cars, Devo—and the Clash.

While they welcome sales, the primary intent of Active rockers is to say something, and to say it with the individuality that is at the base of all worthwhile art.

The trouble with most Active bands from a commercial standpoint is that you have to pay attention to the music to fully appreciate what's going on. The surfaces can be noisy and intense. You may even have to strain to understand the words. And there isn't always just one interpretation. The aim is to make you feel and consider: *get involved*.

This involvement was once prized in rock. During the key '50s and '60s periods, Elvis, Dylan, the Beatles, the Stones, the Who, Hendrix, the Kinks, Joplin all teased imaginations. They stepped away from the

pop norm in a way that invited you to weigh your own attitudes.

But adventure has become a commercial liability in the 1970s. The emphasis is on groups that do all the work for you, thereby taking true involvement out of pop. The God of AM radio is Accessibility. Anything challenging is shunned by program directors.

Accessibility once was a valuable element in rock. It kept bands from becoming stuffy. But it has become an unfortunate end in itself. Accessibility without content is to reduce all challenge and mystery so that a listener can absorb the music as easily as the handsome photos in a glossy coffee-table book.

The technique of Passive outfits like Toto, Boston, Foreigner, Kansas and Styx is to reduce all challenge and mystery so that a listener can absorb the music as easily as the handsome photos in a glossy coffee-table book.

The textures are clean, the lyrics straightforward, the themes simple. Ev-

erything is spelled out on the first hearing. All the listener has to do is put the record on the turntable and his job is done.

This doesn't mean that all Active bands are noisy and Passive ones ultra-accessible. The Eagles is a highly accessible unit with generally clean musical features, but there are ideas in songs like "Hotel California" and "Life in the Fast Lane." The band, therefore, is Active.

At the same time, Ted Nugent is the essence of high energy noise, but the music is as void of ideas as the most innocuous Vegas lounge singer. Nugent may excite his audience, but it's only on the most mindless "get-down-and-boogie" level. So, it's essentially Passive music.

Whatever the specifics of its songs, the Clash's music has a constant theme: You don't have to conform. You can hear the band's independence in the fury of its instrumentation and in the urgency of Joe

Strummer's vocals.

The Clash was influenced by the Sex Pistols, the late, great, and greatly misunderstood British "punk" band. Its target is the same as the Pistols': apathy. Songs like "London's Burning" and "White Riot," from the first Clash album, attacked indifference.

In the new "Give 'Em Enough Rope" LP, the Clash deals with various issues—from sociocultural matters in England to autobiographical reflections. But the enemy remains hypocrisy and compromise.

While these attitudes fit neatly into the Presley-to-Stones tradition of rock rebellion, a band can't succeed on intent alone. The group has to back it up with music. The Clash does. What makes the Clash an exhilarating force on record are the dynamics of its sound.

The new album doesn't have the consistent power of the Sex Pistols' "Bollocks" album, but there are moments in which the explosion of sounds and ideas is captivating. The band is young and evolving. It is one of the most important and potentially influential rock bands in the world.

Toto, on the other hand, holds less immediate punch and promise. The group's musicians are first-rate. Though most are still in their mid-to-early 20s, the six musicians include some of Los Angeles' most prized session players. Their credits include backing such pop hotshots as Boz Scaggs, the Doobie Brothers, Steely Dan, Barbra Streisand and Alice Cooper.

But the step from support musicians to frontmen is a difficult one. The difference is you have to stop implementing someone else's musical vision and supply your own. All Toto's first LP demonstrates is that the band spent a lot of time listening to what's

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Leaning on influences is common in pop. The difference between the best Active bands and most Passive ones is that the influence is incorporated with style rather than left simply intact. The Clash's use of the melody from "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" in "English Civil War" makes a wry point. Most Passive bands simply use a familiar riff because it has proven successful.

While most of the Toto album is uninspired, the band has a potential ace in the hole. Paich is a promising writer who also shows character as a singer on the spicy "Manuela Run," the LP's most attractive track. If Paich develops in both areas, Toto could have a longer and more interesting career than either Boston or Foreigner.

But Toto needs to make considerable strides before one can feel comfortable with its Passive approach. As it is now, the pop-music climate in America would be much healthier if the Clash were selling a million copies and Toto was struggling—like the Clash—to make the Top 200.

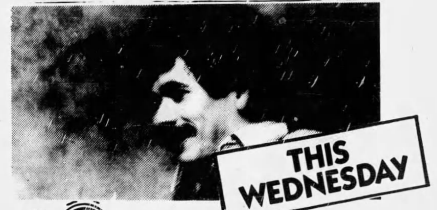
Whether or not America responds to the Clash, the band needs to be considered. With the AM/FM blackout on the band, that's not happening. Nothing's gained from listening to Toto. Something may be lost from not hearing the Clash. □

been selling in recent years.

The "Hold the Line" single and the equally commercial "I'll Supply the Love" fit squarely into the soaring, but also vapid pop-rock style of Boston and Foreigner. The songs rely mainly on catchy riffs. Some are fresh, some are borrowed.

If the band's "Georgy Porgy" reminds you of Boz Scaggs, excuse Toto because the group's David Paich co-wrote and arranged Scaggs' "Silk Degrees" LP. But what about the use of ELO's "Do Ya" riff in "I'll Supply the Love"?

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