

Local News

This Week in History: 1979: The Clash rock the Commodore

John Mackie

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The Clash at the Commodore Ballroom, Jan. 31, 1979. Left to right: Mick Jones, Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon. Photo copyright Don Denton. ©DON DENTON / PNG

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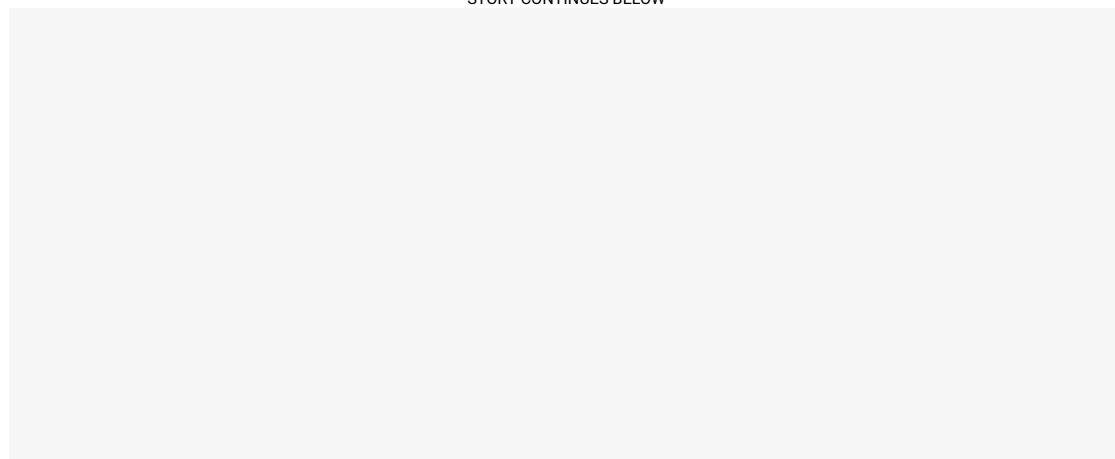
The first Devo show in Vancouver was at the Commodore on Jan. 12, and was a real event — some audience members showed up wearing their own yellow Devo “radiation suits.”

But the gig that overshadowed them all was the Clash on Jan. 31, 1979, which is 40 years ago this week.

It was the first North American show for the English punk quartet, and there was a buzz in the crowd quite unlike anything I’d ever experienced. It wasn’t a regular show, it was a historic event.

Up to that point, the Vancouver punk scene was quite small, a few dozen people who went to every show. All of a sudden, there were over a thousand people crowded into the Commodore, and you had a sense there was a changing of the guard.

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“It kinda was the show that really opened up the scene, I would agree with that,” said Joe Keithley of Vancouver punk legends DOA. “It was tremendous. They were at their peak in those days. It was a total event. Everybody who could be there and was vaguely connected with the scene made

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The Clash came back for a second Vancouver show at the PNE Gardens on Oct. 16, 1979, and Vancouver Sun photographer Ian Lindsay shot the band. This photo of Mick Jones (L) and Joe Strummer ran in the paper.

Punk was still very much an underground deal at the time. The Clash's first album is now considered one of the best LPs of all time, but initially it wasn't even released in the United States, probably because the American wing of their record company didn't know what the hell to do with fiery songs like I'm So Bored With The U.S.A. and White Riot.

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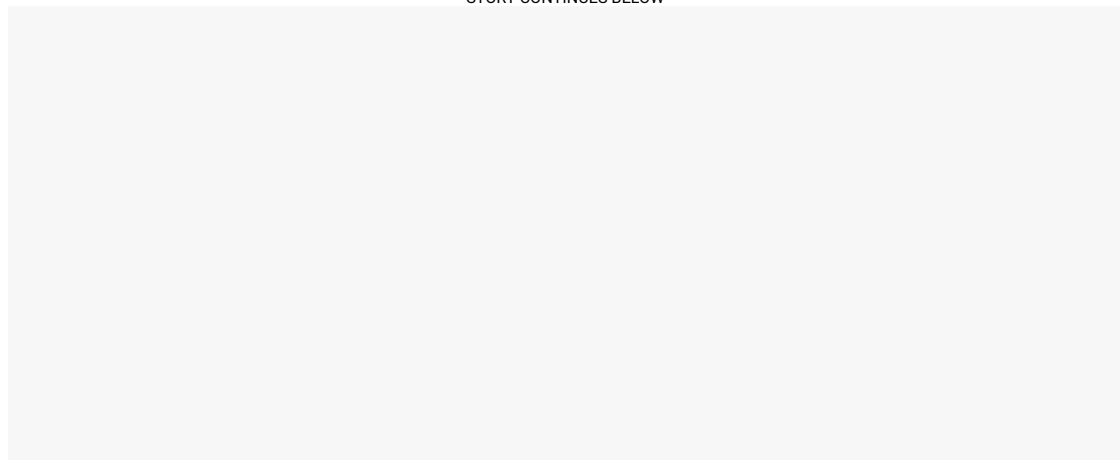
But it connected with musicians like Paul Hyde of the Payola\$.

“They were everything that rock ‘n’ roll should be: raw, loud, anti-establishment, and fun,” he said.

The Sun and Province were in the middle of an eight-month strike at the time, so the newspapers have no photos of the show. But photographer [Don Denton](#) was there and captured the band in full flight, with singer/guitarist Joe Strummer stomping away centre stage, an American flag as a backdrop.

Opening with [Complete Control](#), the Clash burned through punk classics like [Garageland](#), [Career Opportunities](#) and [London’s Burning](#), and the crowd went absolutely nuts.

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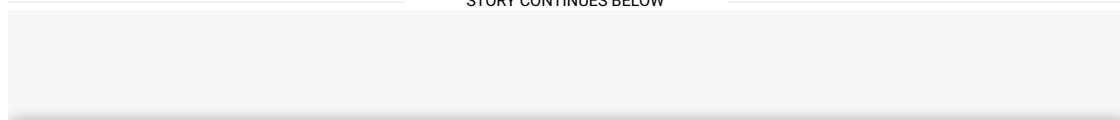


It was so intense up front the bouncers thought 17-year-old Lynn Werner was going to be crushed. So they lifted her onto the stage, where she snapped photos for the local punk fanzine Snot Rag.

“Afterwards, I was charged with doing an interview with the Clash, so I went backstage,” she recalls. “I was so shy. I was 17 and this was the Clash, come on! Basically, I didn’t know what to do, so one of them, maybe (bassist) Paul Simonon, had an idea. He grabbed the Give ‘Em Enough Rope poster (for their new album) and flipped it over and said ‘Let’s do this.’

“He grabbed a sharpie and took the reverse of the poster and made it into quadrants, and each member of the Clash drew their impressions of Vancouver. So I have all four Clash members’ original drawings, each in their own corner on the reverse of the poster. We used two of the images in Snot Rag.”

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Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon's artistic impressions of Vancouver, from Snot Rag fanzine.

Simonon's drawing shows a city of highrise towers and mountains, while Strummer depicted local punk band the Rabid, who the Clash had seen two days earlier at the Windmill, a dump club on Granville near Davie.

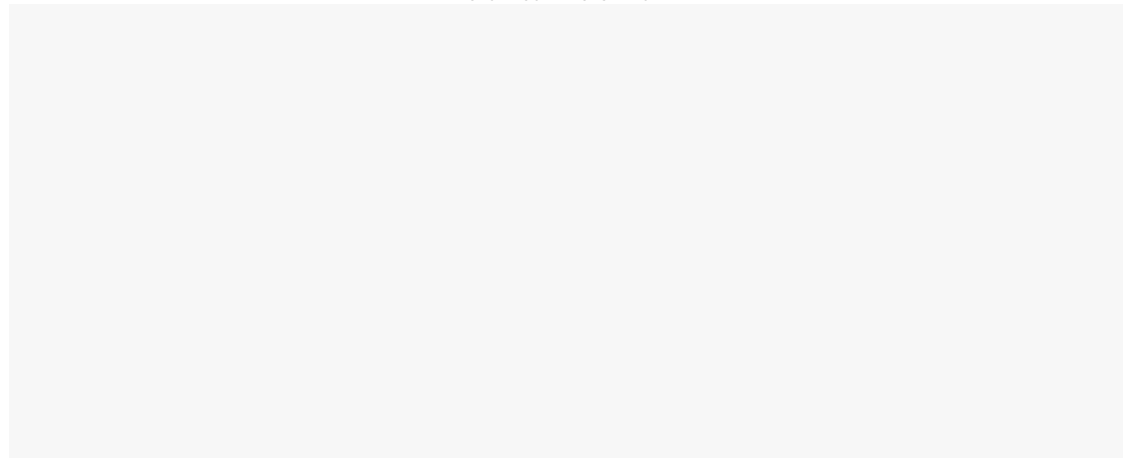
"I remember them walking in and my friend Don Betts said, 'They look like Mott the Hoople,'" laughs Grant McDonagh of the Windmill visit.

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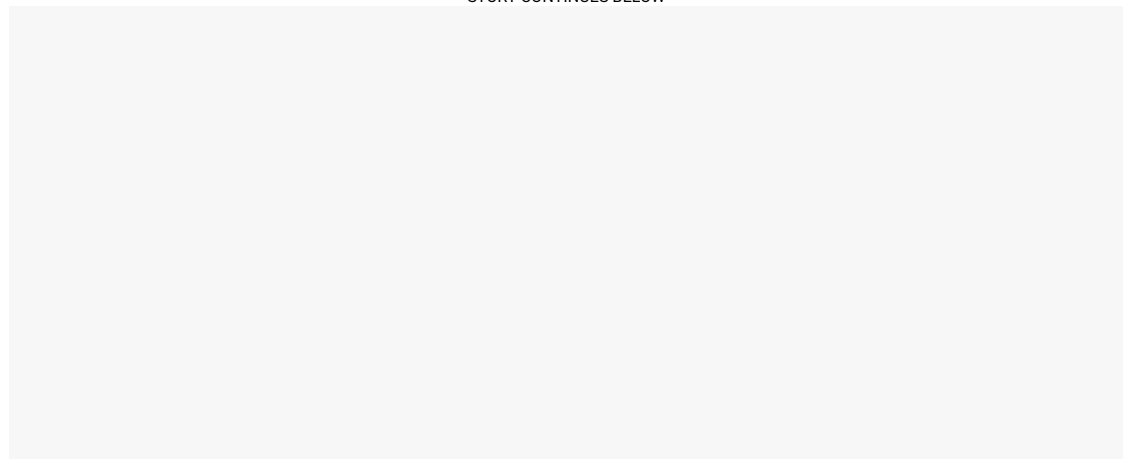


There were two opening acts at the Commodore show: Bo Diddley, and local punks the Dishrags, an all-female trio.

“I remember being at the side of the stage, because I was friends with the Dishrags,” said Keithley. “The Dishrags used to cover London’s Burning, one of the really great (Clash songs). They started playing it, a little unorthodox, because the Dishrags were slightly unorthodox.

“I looked over at the Clash guys and they were lookin’ at each other like ‘What the hell is going on? What are these girls doing? That doesn’t sound like that!’ And then they kinda got the plot, that they had a different take on it. I could see Joe Strummer laughing, thinking this is really cool.”

STORY CONTINUES BELOW



McDonagh also laughs at the memory.

“I seem to recall when the Clash played their set, (Strummer) made some comment like ‘We’re going to do a Dishrags song now!’” he said. “And then they did London’s Burning.”

McDonagh spent a lot of time with the band in Vancouver.

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The Clash in concert at the PNE Gardens, Oct. 16, 1979. L-R: Mick Jones, Joe Strummer, Paul Simonon. Ian Lindsay/Vancouver Sun IAN LINDSAY/PNG

On a personal note, I was also at the Windmill, although I didn't smoke a joint with Joe Strummer. You should have seen people's jaws drop when the Clash walked in. They looked very tough with their leather jackets and collars turned up, but were really down to earth.

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The Commodore gig was wild. The crowd was so hyped, all the spaces around the stage were jammed, and when the lights went down I found myself at the back.

Then I spotted local punks Keithley, Wimpy Roy and Dimwit forming a human battering ram to

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was rocking so hard that night I thought it was going to collapse, but miraculously it held.

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Bassist Paul Simonon. IAN LINDSAY/PNG

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Mick Jones and the Clash in concert at the PNE Gardens, Oct. 16, 1979. IAN LINDSAY/PNG

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Mick Jones (L), Joe Strummer and Paul Simonon of the Clash. IAN LINDSAY/PNG



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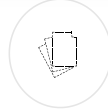
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