



SEPTEMBER 25, 2019

The Clash at the Tribal Stomp

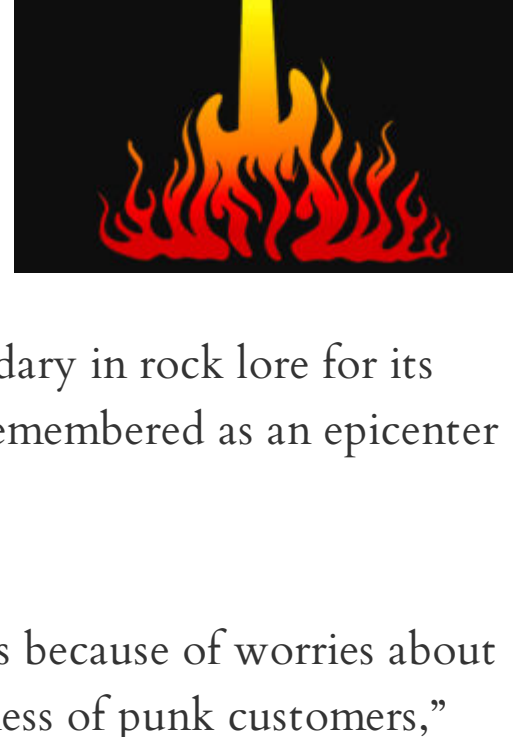
Monterey Rocks #17



Joe Strummer of The Clash | Photo: Charles Davis

By Joe Livernois

Joe Strummer and the cheeky Brits from The Clash were a few months from releasing “London Calling” when they showed up in Monterey, improbably, for a hippie gathering on Sept. 8, 1979, called Tribal Stomp II. The Clash may have been known to punk fans in the United States, and they had played their first U.S. show nine months earlier in Berkeley, but they were like gypsies in the palace to a place like Monterey. While legendary in rock lore for its iconic Pop Festival, Monterey will never be remembered as an epicenter for punk-rock rage.



“Club owners here wouldn’t book punk bands because of worries about damage — not to mention the general cheapness of punk customers,” remembered Charles Davis, a Monterey journalist who was at Tribal Stomp II.

Turnout for the festival was abysmal, even as it was promoted by Chet Helms, a legend in Bay Area culture. But the 500 people who did show up were treated to one of the more memorable single performances in Monterey Bay history.

Helms was a founder of Big Brother and the Holding Company, recruiting Janis Joplin to join the band back in the day. And he was the man behind the free concerts at Golden Gate Park during the Summer of Love in 1967. He had pretty much fled the concert promotion business by 1970, but tried to get back into it later in the decade with his Tribal Stomp concerts. Even with Clash on the bill (and Big Mama Thornton, the Chambers Brothers and Joe Ely, among others), he couldn’t attract a crowd in Monterey.

“What if they held a Woodstock and nobody came?” asked Michael Goldberg, writing for The New Musical Express in a snarky review titled “The death of a hippie’s dream.”

It’s tough to imagine Joe Strummer and The Clash as hippie-ish, but we get the drift. New Musical Express is a British weekly rock magazine, better known as NME, that followed the home-country boys for their second U.S. tour. The Clash launched its Take the Fifth Tour with its Monterey gig, Goldberg seemed to think that Tribal Stomp II was supposed to be the second coming of Woodstock. Wavy Gravy and Jello Biafra were in the crowd, after all. But the Monterey show was a bust. Ticket prices were too high, for one thing, and Monterey was too far from the big cities, according to Goldberg.

But The Clash, with vintage Strummer, made it all worthwhile. The band had been recording “London Calling” in Wessex up to two hours before jumping on a plane to the U.S. They wended their way into Cannery Row, where they rented a rehearsal space to prepare for their live tour, starting with Tribal Stomp. At one point, the bandmates wandered outside and noticed railroad tracks — probably where the Recreation Trail is now — grabbed a couple of sledgehammers and shed their shirts to pose as rail workers for a photographer, according to Marcus Gray in his book about the band, “Route 19 Revisited: The Clash and London Calling.”

The entire show was a mystery to Goldberg. Why was this angry British punk band even there at a hippie festival?

The story of this particular performance in Monterey should not pass without mention of the promotional poster produced for Tribal Stomp II. While the show was a commercial failure, Helms’ Family Dog production team — artist Gilbert V. Johnson, in particular — drew up what just might be the most eye-catching handbill ever designed for a Monterey County rock ‘n’ roll performance. In a nod to the deco style of Erté, the dominant art depicts a fetching nymphet straddling a couple of bright rainbows against a starry sky. With both hands, she holds a conch shell gently against her left cheek, like it’s a bar of soap in an old Ivory commercial. The scene is framed in a bright primary red, over which is printed the business intent of the poster — the who’s playing what day, where, at what time and at what cost (\$40 for the weekend). At the bottom right-hand corner, the mugs of two dogs are depicted, as if in portrait. They are presumably a couple and they are dressed elaborately in classic pre-WWII style: the slack-jawed bulldog sports a bowler hat and looks like a world-weary trainer of prize fighters; the great white shaggy girl, perhaps the bulldog’s wife, wears an elegant light violet sweater and a matching hat, accessorized with a big red heart necklace on a gold chain. It’s a thing of beauty, this poster.

Meanwhile, back to the show itself.

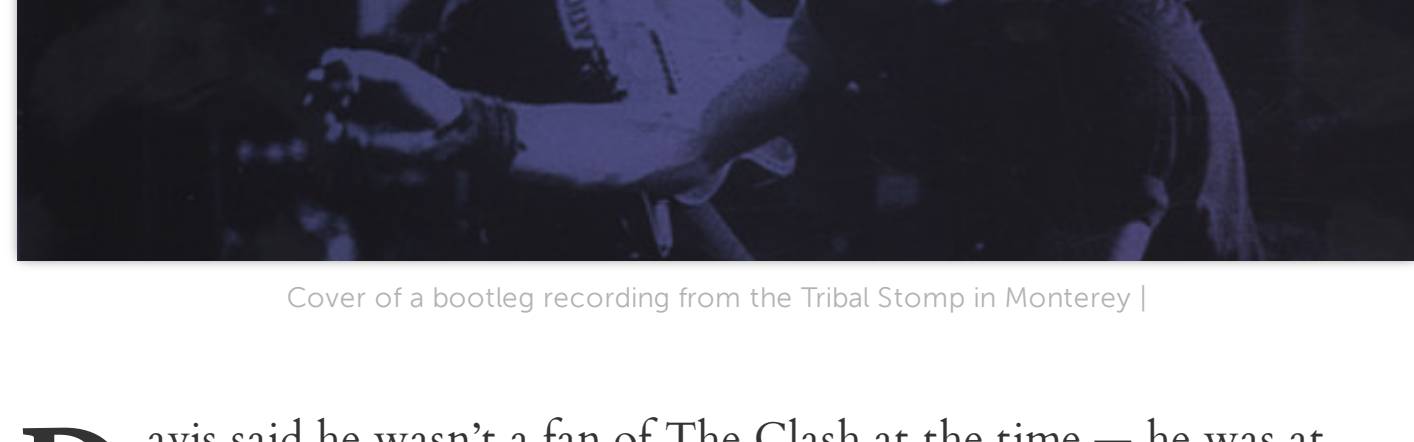
At the Monterey Fairgrounds, Strummer “looked like rock and roll incarnate,” Goldberg wrote, “with a flaming pink shirt (collar up) and hair greased up like Gene Vincent — spat out the lyrics to ‘I’m So Bored with the USA.’ Although only 500 fans crowded the stagefront, The Clash played as if the show would make them or break them.”

The Los Angeles Times’ music critic, Charles Hillinger, added that The Clash “played with enough energy and commitment to satisfy an audience of 25,000.”

At one point, early into “I’m So Bored with the USA,” Strummer reeled back and fell into Nicky Headon’s drum set, stopping the show until roadies could sort out the mess. Later in the show, a fight broke out in the audience, pitting a hippie in a cowboy hat against a punk with short hair. Davis, who was in the audience, said Strummer witnessed the fracas from the stage and called out, “Aww, c’mon mates!” He crawled down from the stage and broke up the fight.

Chester Simpson, the renowned rock ‘n’ roll photographer, was also at the show; he said he remembers the incident. In his recollection, Strummer “jumped off the stage to a small stage in front, where he stopped a security guard from mistreating a fan at the show.”

Simpson said he followed The Clash around the country, providing photos to Melody Maker and NME.



Cover of a bootleg recording from the Tribal Stomp in Monterey |

Davis said he wasn’t a fan of The Clash at the time — he was at Tribal Stomp II as the rock columnist for the Monterey County Herald and he was more interested in seeing guitarist Robert Fripp. “The big deal for me at Tribal Stomp was finally meeting up with Chet Helms,” Davis said, referring to Helms as “the sunny yin to Bill Graham’s dark yang.” He remembered being backstage with Helms, when Al Kooper suddenly showed up and the discussion turned to why in hell nobody showed up for the show.

Meanwhile, The Clash and Strummer went all-out. And the 500 people who were there can say they were among the first to hear “London Calling.” Years later, rock journalist Marc Myers would rank “London Calling” as among the greatest songs ever written.

“When it comes to the British punk movement, it’s really the national anthem,” Myers told an interviewer three years ago. “It’s the big song for a variety of reasons. Its political context, its anger, its tapestry, this Britannia feeling. But it also sounds like they’re herding cattle; there’s also a lot of energy to it. It’s incredibly in touch and ahead of its time for British punk.”

Davis said he wasn’t especially impressed with “London Calling” at the time, but he does recall that “I’m So Bored with the USA” and “White Riot” were both memorable. And if Davis’s recollection is correct, Strummer and the boys trashed the mobile home Helms rented for The Clash that night — and the promoter got stiffed on the cleaning deposit.

The entire show was a mystery to Goldberg. Why was this chaotic British punk band even there at a hippie festival? “The military rhythms, staggered guitar lines and guttersnipe vocals defined the wrath and frustration of the late ‘70s in a way that showed just how inappropriate the hippie affectations of the Tribal Stomp really were,” Goldberg wrote.

Strummer had told Goldberg that he was a fan of Joe Ely, who was also booked at Tribal Stomp. “We really wanted to play with Joe,” he said. Strummer called Ely out during the band’s encore, and they played Ely’s “Fingernails” and “White Riot.”

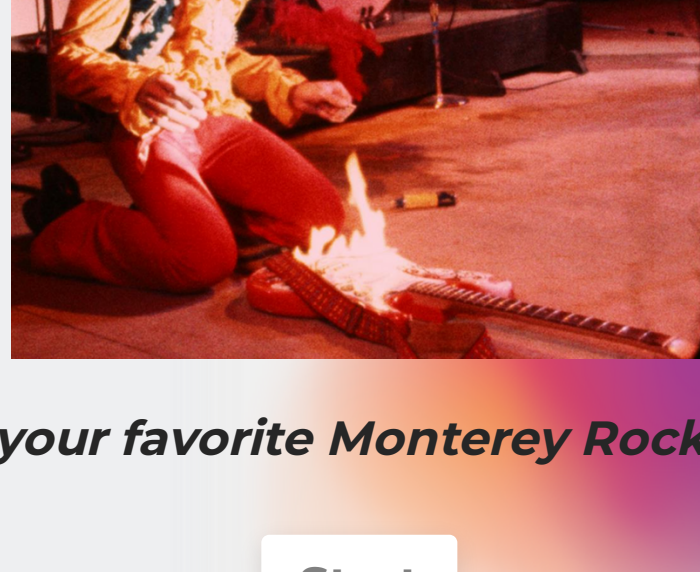
The Clash/Ely thing was a bright moment in what was otherwise a dismal event. The Persuasions were supposed to be there, but they cancelled. Maria Muldaur didn’t perform, though she was on the bill, and no reason was given. Peter Tosh headlined the set that night, but the plug was pulled after five songs “due to a local curfew.”

The crowd had dwindled to 400 the following day, which featured Canned Heat, Country Joe and Dan Hicks.

“Like all the hippie pipe dreams, this one came to nothing,” Goldberg concluded. “What if they threw a Woodstock and nobody came? They did and they didn’t and it was a drag.”

Except for The Clash. They were magnificent.

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About Joe Livernois

Joe Livernois has been a reporter, editor and columnist in Monterey County for 35 years.

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