



Joe Ely

"Ere, Joe, look oo's on Tele tonight."

Fings ain't what they used to be

THE CLASH / JOE ELY / MIKEY DREAD Electric Ballroom / Lyceum, London

CLASH gigs these days aren't the backs - against - the-wall experience they used to be. The political tensions and confrontations they once represented are now just so much fuel for a purer rock 'n' roll fire which makes them, with the Pretenders, the best British Saturday-night band of the moment. Passionate escapism — no more and no less.

Having correctly gambled that the generation for which they'd been elected spokesmen were as sick of the war as they were, they deftly dropped campaigning in favour of a broader, less restrictive platform, which they desperately needed to break out of the creative cul-de-sac in which they found themselves. The switch from politico-rockers to entertainers was easier to make than they expected. Given that they'd improved musically, they suddenly became capable of drawing on the rock 'n'

roll traditions which punk professed to despise, and which they used to good effect on their last album, "London Calling".

That album's eclecticism was reflected in the weekend's billing: a Texan cowboy (Joe Ely), a Jamaican toaster (Mikey Dread) and alternating openers of forgettable London bands, the only one of note being the Nips at the Lyceum on Sunday, whom I arrived too late to see. Clash audiences are a lot more tolerant these days, and that they didn't try to bottle the supports off like they once did Suicide demonstrates how much faith they had in the Clash's choice.

Joe Ely theoretically had the toughest job, being both relatively unknown and a country singer, no less. But, apart from the initial barrage of gob, he rightly had no problems. The sight of someone throwing his head back singing rapturously with a great smile across his face was totally irresistible.

He had a great hard-rocking band, driving joyously forward through hard-travelling, hard-drinking stories which never

lapsed into self-pity. The dumber songs went down a treat, like "Roadhog" or the rambling tale of "Suckin' On A Big Bottle Of Gin", which had no end of false endings and a good twist.

When Mikey Dread's sets were divided either side of Ely's on Friday he sounded okay to me, toasting over a loud, demented backing track, but lumped together on Saturday to save time he went on too long and thus stretched an impatient crowd to breaking point, eventually leaving with a righteous speech about the audience's narrow minds. His problem was further compounded by it being difficult to hear what he was saying.

Both joined the Clash for the two well-rehearsed encores they played all three nights — on Friday the second one not even being called for by a hall already half-empty, most of the audience defeated by the heat which prompted Joe to call for a break continually through the set. It wasn't a very good night.

But they'd worked it out and were going to play it

anyway, which was somehow indicative of the the Clash's present stance, of being professional and leaving nothing to chance.

The Clash don't surprise us anymore and they're no longer at the forefront of what's happening — a position they're probably relieved to have lost. They've been superceded on the one side by more extreme punk bands and on the other by the more adventurous music of their peers, like Wire. This leaves them hovering somewhere around the centre, forging a new mainstream down which rockabilly fans, old punks and trad rockers can safely swim together. In some ways reminiscent of the Band, they've revitalised their music with a skilful assimilation of old traditions, meaning they can now play Vince Taylor's "Brand New Cadillac" or the great Doug Sahm-type reggae of "Wrong 'em Boyo" alongside something once as potent as "White Man In Hammer-smith Palais" without glaring cultural gaps showing.

Their killer punch is, as always, passion. Especially Strummer's. Passion glos-

ses over errors, like allowing Jones his embarrassing stoned Michael Crawford speeches between songs, which finally led to him being escorted off on Saturday night before he could start another. But his skinny skanking did look good and he played some great guitar, too — stingingly sweet on "Spanish Bombs" and more aggressive for "Clampdown" ("This is the angry one," he said) which is their last surviving political rocker, the effectiveness of their older ones killed by an affectionate familiarity.

"Armageddon Time" also cut through, with Mikey Dread joining on the choruses, as did their forthcoming single "Daddy Was A Bankrobber", which had a swinging menace in the subdued reggae rhythm.

I watched the Clash on three nights but they only inspired me to participate in one, and the Clash reduced solely to Saturday night people, to a good night out, is something I still find difficult to take. After all, I don't want to spend all week with Friday on my mind. — CHRIS BOHN.