

## Clash at heart of today's rock

When a band is as good as the Clash, it's worth the trip to see and hear them touch the masses

By Cameron Cohick  
Rock/Pop Writer

ATLANTA — Into the life of every rock fan or critic comes the occasional need for pilgrimage. Not to a holy place — the Beatle-birthing Cavern Club is a parking lot now, the Woodstock site just a field — but to see a performer.

In the annals of rock 'n' roll, a handful of artists have proven to be more than entertainment, something deeper, more real than pleasant diversion. They've been able to deliberately blur the distinction between art and life, to be more than just an "act." And they've been this to more than just the lone-wolf fanatic; these artists have touched masses, or, at the very least, a vocal minority. Into this category go the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Jim Morrison and the Doors, the Sex Pistols, the Who, Elvis (don't ask which one), Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen. Maybe Patti Smith, for a while.

When these performers come around, the fan doesn't think twice, or he shouldn't. He just goes, to wherever he can get in. It takes time, and money, but true fans do it, if they can. Among the great regrets of my life are missing the Stones in '72, Patti Smith in '75, the Sex Pistols in '77 — all primarily because of simple geographical distance. Among the mistakes I *didn't* make are a 1,300-mile jaunt to catch the Stones in '78, and a trek to Lakeland to see Springsteen in a non-Sportatorium setting in '81. Sometimes, it's just worth it for an artist of that exalted stature.

The Clash belongs in that category, too. And perhaps following the example of their spiritual precursors, the Rolling Stones, who haven't played South Florida in 13 years, the Clash chose to bypass paradise lost again this time.

So it was that on the night of June 2, I found myself outside the Fox Theater in Atlanta, in the midst of a heated, violent dispute over the politics of the Clash.

On the one side of the disagreement, faces hard and smug, were tattooed agitators bearing placards that read "Commie Go Home" and "If You're So Bored With The U.S.A., Britain Is Where You Ought To Stay." On the other side, faces scrunched up in hatred and resentment, were the most deeply involved of the Clash's punk constituency, who weren't going to sit still for this maligning of their heroes' right to be red and bored if they wished. Insults were exchanged, and shoves.



On the outside of the fray was the bulk of the Clash's audience, most of the 3,000 who had just seen the group's performance, enjoyed it enthusiastically, and were now watching with equal interest this mini-riot, this most persuasive evidence that what they had witnessed was more than just another rock 'n' roll show. The comforts of middle-class homes — clearly where most of the audience had come from, rather than, say, anarcho-syndicalist communes — could wait. This was drama, something extra. Everybody on the periphery seemed to be delighted.

Things got ugly soon enough. Cop cars rolled in, cops poured out, nightsticks swished through the air, arms were twisted behind backs. Obscenities were screamed, squeals of pain and outrage were heard. (Not before I had shifted my own, personal position from "in the middle" to "on the fringe," for journalistic observational purposes, of course.) It was a fairly standard concert scene, except that the right to consume drugs or liquor wasn't at issue, and it wasn't a simple cops vs. kids face-off. It was politics, ideas, attitudes. Rock 'n' roll as a real-life force, all right!

The whole thing clogged traffic on Peachtree Street for about half an hour. Nobody wanted to leave. It seemed as if some landmark injustice might occur, and everybody wanted to be around to see it. A few even wanted to be in on it, ap-



Paul Simon

parently. But the cops finally herded everybody away, aided enormously by a non-uniformed man wielding a rifle with what seemed to be a tenuous restraint. His fuse looked pretty short, for commies, reactionaries and mere spectators alike.

The Clash is a band that brings out passion.

In the middle of the fight, figuratively, were the Clash themselves. The high-running emotions they'd stirred up were an indication that these change-minded Britons are making themselves heard, and at least partly understood. Real communists? Unlikely, but they are restricting press interviews on this tour to official communist journals (and fashion magazines). And they're no fans of capitalism. Bored with the U.S.A.? Maybe, maybe not, but they do have a song bearing that title on their first album.

Politics is the key to what motivates the Clash. The most casual familiarity with even the titles of their songs makes this clear. They aren't subtle about it. They may even be too obvious about it. The most revolutionary group of all time, in terms of the actual shake-it-up they effected, was the Beatles, and they did it singing almost nothing but love songs. The Clash, on the other hand, calls its albums things like *Sandinista!* and *Combat Rock*. Their non-political songs could fit on a single LP side with space to spare.

Politics motivated the post-concert fighters, too. The majority of the Clash audience, though, doesn't seem to care much about the policy specifics. They're attracted partly to the group's general image, presumably, but mostly by the power

of the music. On record, the group has lately shown surprisingly developed musicianship, and an admirable growth in songwriting ability. In attitude, they're still very much punks, but their music isn't. For the past three years, it has been as sophisticated (which is not to say as "complicated") as anything in rock.

In concert, as they showed last Wednesday, what they have to offer is their vaulted intensity (arguably unmatched in rock history), a breathtakingly savage instrumental attack and a riveting rock 'n' roll charisma — the last conveyed while singing about injustice and oppression, things most rock performers wouldn't think to approach and couldn't believably pull off if they tried. This effort didn't go unappreciated; the roared approval was almost nonstop.

Not everybody was satisfied. Isaac Baruch, for one, was disappointed. *Disappointed*, after seeing the sort of show that comes once every two years, if that. His reasons are perhaps understandable. He's young. The Clash were probably his Beatles and Stones and Dylan all rolled into one. Until last fall, Baruch was the guitarist for the Reactions, South Florida's unabashed Clash-disciples punk rock band. Until Wednesday night, he'd never seen his apparent idols. And

Please see CLASH, 28

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## Clash

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here he'd traveled 600 miles to see these modern gods and found they were, ultimately, just a band. A band that provoked riots and played explosive hard rock for an unrelenting hour and 45 minutes — but just four guys, after all.

"Yeah, I know it's just four guys," he said. "But it's four hearts up there, too, and I expect to see those four hearts bleeding for me. And I didn't see that."

They bled enough. It may not have been the gushing of a slashed artery, but their veins were open. By the way they threw themselves into the performance, they took it to a level above mere performance. They made it clear that they meant all the noble sentiments in their songs, meant them deep down. Instead of four strutting peacocks onstage, impressing through spectacle and volume, the Clash presented four drably clad people who care about things and can back up that concern by playing well enough and overpoweringly enough (volume was no factor, at an unexceptional level) to bring 95 percent of today's multi-platinum bands to their knees.

Joe Strummer, with his head shaved on the sides, a dazed, crazed look on his face, eyes hidden behind horn-rimmed sunglasses, his body held taut as his guitar strings as he paced stiffly around the stage, looked like a true figure of avenging justice. A scythe would have looked more appropriate in his hands than a guitar.

Mick Jones, coaxing the usual hot white noise out of his guitar and plaintive yelps from his vocal chords, ran a close second in wild-eyed intensity. Original drummer Terry Chimes — back with the group for the first time in five years following the recent departure of Topper Headon for "political reasons" — looked perpetually sour, though his simple, rock-hard playing worked well enough. Only bassist Paul Simonon gave some relief from the bristling tension with his occasional gap-

toothed grins, and rubber-legged Elvis moves.

Even with a relatively new drummer — word had it that Chimes had had only a week of rehearsal — the group's precision was impressive, the whole sound monumental. Chimes and Simonon pumped out an enormous, booming bottom; Strummer and Jones provided an equally huge, crashing top from their guitars. Perhaps because of the sudden drum-slot change, or perhaps because they're touring unassisted by sidemen, the show was very much a hard-rock, uptempo affair, with little of the variety shown on the last three Clash albums. They did do six songs from *Combat Rock*, their latest, and most of them came off as well as on record. The most frequently tapped album was *London Calling*, from which they drew seven selections; the most neglected was their second, *Give 'Em Enough Rope*, from which they played nothing.

*Sandinista!* contributed only three of the set's 23, but one was the high point of the show, a heart-rending *Somebody Got Murdered* that built slowly to what seemed to be a fevered peak midway through the song, held for a few beats, and then took off again, continuing to build past any expectations the original might have raised. It was the sort of thing the Clash do better than anyone else ever has — the howl of righteous rage delivered with pure-heart conviction. Most songwriters, even the best of them, would think a song against killing too obvious, and look for something more subtle. (Springsteen might be the exception.) The Clash is willing — in fact, eager — to get down on that basic level.

When they do, the hearts bleed, all right, theirs and the audiences'. "Commie go home," indeed. We're lucky they came over. All fans of rock at its crackling, conviction-driven best are urged to drop everything and go see them, at once. Call in sick, skip school, escape from the asylum, hitchhike, buy scalped tickets, whatever's necessary. Go on, go...

## Marshall

Continued from preceding page

music is closer to the original Tucker earthiness than anything else on *Tuckerized*, and the sentiments are, probably, more appropriate today than when first written: "We've taken all you've given/But it's gettin' hard to make a livin'/Mr. President, have pity on the working man." It even makes sense that finally a real Southern group has recorded the song, since the West Coast Newman wrote it from the imagined point of view of a Southerner.

"When we were listening to the songs, and that one came by," Eubanks says, "everybody said, 'Hey, I know somebody that feels that way ... ME!' It just seemed very appropriate."

It's still a little too early to tell how *Tuckerized* and *Mr. President*, the first single, will do in the mar-

ketplace. Eubanks says the group is willing to go either way with this new direction.

"If this one's a flop, I doubt if we'd do it again. If it's a giant success, we'd have to be crazy not to do it again."

"We've been around long enough that we can put out a record of any particular style and it'll be OK. It's not like we're trying to prove our style with one record like a baby band has to do. We can take chances. Hell, after 10 years, why not? People don't want to hear you do the same stuff all along. At least, I hope they don't want us to. I'd hate to have to keep playing it."

Opening act for the Marshall Tucker Band is the Artimus Pyle Band, led by the former Lynyrd Skynyrd drummer. Showtime is 8 p.m. Tickets are \$10.75.



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