



Clash performers (from left) Mick Jones, Joe Strummer and Paul Simon gave explosive and political concerts this week.

Clash fans get social message

By Larry Kelp
Tribune Music Critic

England's leading punk band the Clash returned to the Bay Area Tuesday and last night with one of the most socially aware shows in rock.

Their concerts were as explosive and political as the previous two days' blockade of the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory.

Without a hit record, and nary a compromise to current trends in pop music, the band drew full houses both nights at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium — about 15,000 Clash fans.

The stage was converted into a combat zone, the military fatigues-clad Clash using guitars instead of machine guns as they roared through a powerhouse 90-minute concert packed with musical and visual overkill.

The group's previous wild abandon has now been brought under control and made to effectively serve a well-organized, thematic show.

The stage area was draped in camouflage tenting, augmented by a brash, irritating array of spotlight effects to simulate the battle-front experience. Behind the quartet, a non-stop barrage of

photo slides were projected, bringing the battle fronts of the world into the concert hall:

There were scenes of war in the Middle East, Vietnam, Central America, Iran and Lebanon, and photos of famine victims, striking workers in Poland, riots, and police brutality in the streets of London.

As he sang the band's opening call to arms, "London Calling," Mohican-haired vocalist Joe Strummer could just as easily have been at Livermore protesting weapons development. "A nuclear error but I have no fear/London is drowning and I live by the river!"

The message was working-class revolutionary rock. For the teens unfamiliar with the lyrics of the Clash songs (the sound system rendered most of Strummer's words unintelligible) the slide show conveyed plenty of meaning.

The Clash have yet to write a song about love or sex. Even guitarist Mick Jones' "Should I Stay or Should I Go" and "Train in Vain" are political views of personal relationships.

Songs Tuesday ranged from the new "Ghetto

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Defendant" and the hilarious "Rock the Casbah" (in which a rock band triumphs over oil sheiks and Mideastern leaders, winning the public with its beat and even converting the jet fighter pilots sent out to

bomb the band), to the older "Spanish Bombs," "English Civil War" and "Clampdown."

Where the Clash once attracted the hard-core new wave crowd, this time the band's popularity has spread to include middle-class suburban teens who made

up the major portion of the audience Tuesday.

It is questionable how many at Tuesday's show shared an affinity for the social changes the Clash advocates. But nearly all of the audience had a positive physical reaction to the music. The entire main

floor was a sea of bobbing bodies, clusters of dancers, far more than at a standard rock concert.

It's hard to believe that only three years ago the Clash made its ragged-but-right local debut. Since then the band has gone through constant inner turmoil and tumultuous changes, threatening to break up on many occasions.

Since the release last month of its excellent fifth album, "Combat Rock," the group has dropped long-time drummer Topper Headon (consensus on group direction couldn't be reached, with Headon

favoring a pop approach and the rest committed to political staging).

For this tour Headon has been replaced by the original Clash drummer Terry Chimes (on the band's 1977 debut album he called himself Tory Crimes). Chimes and bassist Simonon pounded out an unrelenting rhythm track for guitarists Strummer and Jones to sing over. The music was not always melodic, but the combination of rockabilly, reggae, dub, rap, punk and funk-rock beat was irresistible.

Because of Chimes

the band played more from its first album than in past shows, including "Janie Jones," "Garageland" and the still-timely "Career Opportunities" ("are the ones that never knock," with slides of newspaper job want-ads flashed above the band).

About half the new album's songs were performed.

As the Clash matures, polishes up its act and attracts a wider audience, the music just gets better. If only more members of the rock culture were committed to something besides making a buck.