

'The Clash': Unredeemed punk rock

By Ken Tucker
Inquirer Popular Music Critic

As the explosion of English punk rock in the late '70s fades into rock 'n' roll history, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Clash is the only band to escape that period with its music and its politics intact. The English quartet came to the University City Center last night to give a demonstration of its perseverance.

In 1977, the Clash released a debut album that was powered by ferociously loud, simple melodies and a sense of modern history that was unassailable: Times were rough for English youth, and that's exactly what the Clash was — a band of out-of-work prole youths with something to yell about. The band became a raging success in its homeland and across Europe — clearly, they were telling people something they wanted to hear.

Over here in America, however, the Clash — and, for that matter, all of English-style punk rock — was treated as if it were just a particularly nasty whim of fashion. The Clash never made a dent in the U.S. record charts, but unlike many of its col-

Review

leagues, it persisted, and by now, the band has at least attracted the American college-age audience, a group that comprised the bulk of the crowd at last night's show.

The acoustics at the University City Center were awful, which isn't surprising, since the place used to be a skating rink. Lead singer Joe Strummer usually has enough trouble being heard through his snaggle-teeth, but the packed hall muffled his pleasantly hoarse, braying voice beyond recognition, and frequently blurred the guitars of Mick Jones and Paul Simonon as well. The songs that fared best, therefore, were those with the simplest melodies.

As such, nearly all the material on the band's new album "Combat Rock" (Epic) failed to pass the acoustics test, since "Combat Rock" features the Clash's most convoluted song writing to date, and a lot of its weakest. The album doesn't succeed on its own terms — there's little

that's combative on "Combat Rock"; instead, songs like "Sean Flynn," "Ghetto Defendant" and "Straight to Hell" are exclamations of defeat and exhaustion. The best tunes are the fastest, most foolish ones — "Rock the Casbah" and "Overpowered by Funk."

The Clash's stage show on this tour seems designed to triumph over poor acoustics by adding visual messages: Strummer has lopped off the hair on either side of his head and has been left with a punk-Mohawk cut, a style he has gone on record as saying he hopes will provoke a strong reaction. Here's mine, Joe: It looks silly.

For this tour, they have mounted a projection screen behind them, on which they show slides to illustrate the music. Last night, this led to some of their most fatuous politicking, as when, during "Radio Clash," they projected three color slides: a shot of London Bridge, a picture of the Royal Family waving, and a

newspaper whose headline read "The Clash." Is there a point here? And is there much point in their other slides — scenes of Polish Solidarity workers, Vietnam atrocities and mug shots of various world leaders — other than a demonstration of the band's knowledge of current events?

Still, the band redeemed itself during the song that followed "Radio Clash," as Mick Jones took over the vocals for a poignant, harrowing version of "Police on My Back." This was the Clash at its best: pointed, specific, concise.

Preceding the Clash was the reggae band Burning Spear, a group that has made excellent music on record, but it turned in a slack, self-indulgent performance this night. Burning Spear received as many boos as it did cheers, but that was primarily because neither the Clash nor the promoters had informed the audience that there was an opening act.

COLLECTIBLES

BEER CANS (500), 100 Different:
Wilco, Grain Belt, Hop n Gator,
\$125, 353-5491 PM

DOLL Collector wishes to buy Bis-
que & China Head Dolls, Wood
Schoenut Dolls, Circus Animals &
Alexander Dolls, toys. 825-6609

OCCUPIED JAPAN COLLEC-
TION 50 assorted pces all in mint
cond \$200. Call 609-983-1450

ROCKWELL Christmas Plates,
Certif. of authenticity 717-275-0303

TOY COLLECTOR buying old tin &
cast iron toys-banks-soldiers & cap
guns. pre 1940. 233-4094

FIND YOUR
HOME
in
Inquirer
Classified