

Clash

Mix militance, music, mayhem

By Doug Pullen
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Leave it to The Clash to come to El Paso on such a sweltering day. Not even a preconcert downpour could cool off the 2,000 people who showed up for the British band's febrile El Paso debut Wednesday night in the Civic Center Theater.

It was a hot one, all right, certainly not the best the band's ever been live, but a concert the likes of which this town probably never has seen, nor ever will again. By the time it was over, two hours and 22 songs after it began, a couple dozen members of the audience had climbed atop the stage and danced to The Clash's musical maelstrom.

Let's face it, The Clash is one of a kind. Its live act may lack the polish of its contemporaries, some songs don't even work that well live. But its presentation — projected images of war, false leadership, oppression and exploitation serving to illustrate the unintelligible lyrics — is not cluttered by gratuitous staging.

Certainly no showcase for technical virtuosity, a Clash show thrives on unbridled, almost anarchistic mayhem. The music is so rhythmically intense, so sincerely performed that one can't help but get caught up in the tempest over which singer Joe Strummer presides. He sets the pace, he gives the show its character and tone. Before it even began, Strummer had the house lights turned up to bluntly tell the crowd in front of the stage to either remove some of the chairs — upon which everyone had to stand — or face the prospect of twisted metal sticking someone in the side.

His confidence and stridency make things much easier for the other band members to flesh out their parts. Lanky lead guitarist Mick Jones, using a camouflaged guitar, did not have the kind of night of which he is capable. He kept his solos short and sweet, seldom daring anything particularly new or surprising, and much of his work was strictly playing the melody, or picking leads



Herald-Post photos by Ruben Ramirez

Surprise guest Joe Ely (left) and Joe Strummer amid dozens of fans who leaped on stage.

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around the rhythm. But he was in touch with the crowd's volatility and slammed his convictions home with some biting riffs. Bassist Paul Simonon is an accentuator, physically, dancing the beat to perfection while laying down some very thick, fluid chords in the process.

The real surprise, though, was new drummer Pete Howard, a 23-year-old unknown who was among 700 who interviewed for the job. Despite only a week of rehearsal, Howard fit comfortably into the band's forceful sound, his constant flourishes adding needed foundation to the meanderings of the guitarists.

While songs like *Train in Vain* or *Magnificent Seven* gave people something to which to dance (the hit *Rock the Casbah* was not included, Strummer said, somewhat amazed at the realization, because "I forgot to include it"), others like *Know Your Rights*, *Radio Clash* and *Straight to Hell* were vehicles for Strummer's emphatic, improv vocals. The march, *London Calling*,

proved the fitting anthem with which to open the show, setting a defiant tone to which one can sing too.

Probably the most dramatic inclusion was *Straight to Hell*, its themes of imperialistic and cultural plundering reinforced by Strummer's instinctual, occasionally screaming vocals.

Know Your Rights was the right vehicle for the projected images the band used constantly through its show, many of them linked by images of misguided authority, political repression, exploitation and war. In this, one of the best songs performed that night, Strummer shouted emphatically, emphasizing the right not to be killed as pictures of Reagan and Thatcher loomed behind him.

The anything-goes attitude with which The Clash performs (the song list changes every night) was obviated by the appearance of Austin rocker Joe Ely, who joined the band for its second encore — Ely's unrestrained *Fingernails* and an aggressive, but plodding reworking of the old Bobby Fuller hit *I Fought the Law*, which deteriorated as the show drew to a close and the stage filled

with dancers from the crowd.

Still, the show had its low points. The mid-section songs dragged as the band groped to redefine the energy it captured so well early on. Bassist Paul Simonon's *Guns of Brixton*, for example, crumbled from within, suffering from the band's incohesion and Simonon's inconsistent, forced vocals. The audience up front was a constant distraction, as countless males and females climbed atop the stage, only to dive back amongst the throbbing mass below like a bunch of lemmings.

"Injustice — that tends to be the biggest emotional power that I write about," Strummer said of his compositional inspirations. "When you see something that's wrong and it stinks, you want to say something about it."

Certainly there was no injustice from The Clash Wednesday night, just a no-holds-barred, bare bones musical attack so physical and potentially ferocious that it in itself is a force to be reckoned with. Judging from last night's spectacle, El Pasoans won't soon forget The Clash's brand of musical mayhem.



Joe Strummer

'Cowboy songs' drew Clash to EP

Music hath powers to heal the soul, but in the case of The Clash, it was the lure of songs like *El Paso* and *Streets of Laredo* that drew the band to the Southwest.

The Clash's concert here Wednesday night was part of a short string of warmup dates prior to its headline appearance Saturday at the US Festival in California. The group specifically requested to play shows in the Southwest, including, among others, Amarillo, Laredo and El Paso.

"In the first place, we are in love with the romantic cowboy songs," Strummer explained over a beer during a backstage party after the show. "And besides, when we come to Texas, we always play Dallas and Austin and Houston."

He is skeptical about the festival's euphorically stated purpose, that of drawing people together under a common bond, but said the band's reported \$700,000 take (half of what David Bowie will get for his show Monday) probably will be used to help unknown acts. "We're gonna take the money and spread it over England ... We want to get something going with those bands that can't get through."

Strummer said the band was caught off guard by the success of its platinum album *Combat Rock* and the single *Rock the Casbah*. "We've struggled for so long," he said, "we thought we were prepared for it. When it final-

ly turned up, we were really pretty unprepared.

"I don't know whether to feel glad or fed up," he said as he signed autograph after autograph for adoring fans.

Strummer, the group's chief lyricist, likes the added exposure his messages are getting. "We've been saying, 'Listen to us,'" Strummer said, "so we will use the opportunity to tell people something whenever we can."

The Clash returns to England after its US Festival show to rehearse and record a new album, due out in the fall. What will it sound like? "I haven't got a clue," Strummer said, adding he still didn't exactly what he had written at this point.

The band has had pressure from its American label, Epic Records, to get a new record out. Strummer said the label is "shoving a Clash compilation album at us" a year has passed since *Combat Rock's* release.

New drummer Pete Howard is happy to be playing with The Clash. "I've admired them for a long time for their integrity and their guts," he said after the show. "It's a bit like The Who and The Stones in that they've kept it together."

Howard is not a permanent member at this point, having followed original drummer Terry Chimes and long-time drummer Topper Headon. "I'd like it to be permanent," he said after the show, "but right now it's a trial for both me and the group."

— Doug Pullen