



KNOW YOUR RITES!

Paul O'Reilly on the trail of the lonesome shrine.



Despite what you may have read, last month this will not be an interview. For a variety of reasons that option was ruled out and so you're going to get a considered week long view of The Clash, on stage and off. Although I couldn't get an interview I was involved in a different capacity, selling shirts at the band's London gigs and I got an opportunity to see behind the scenes and watch the way that The Clash 1984 is being run. For those of you waiting for words of wisdom, I have none. This is a personal impression of the state of the band as of today, I trust you find it interesting.

As you probably know, The Clash came back to London with a bang, three straight shows at The Academy in Brixton, but the first impression on the Thursday morning was much more low-key. Mornings on gig days are really misleading, roadies appearing to sleepwalk around the venue as though the show were weeks away and yet almost as if by magic things began to take shape and the stage starts to shed its excess luggage until suddenly you look once again and the scene is prepared. Still, I had work to do myself and after a couple of hours my stall was looking ready to do some business. Let's get this show on the road!

It's not until later on in the afternoon that the feeling of an impending show starts to grip the place. Rooms begin to fill, security men, bar staff, ticket collectors and all the countless other people who make the gig tick begin to arrive until finally the band themselves. On the first day there was a real tension as they took the stage to soundcheck, instantly everyone seemed to be in the hall and there was a pure concentration as the band smashed into "Safe European Home" for the first time. Joe appeared deep in thought as he put the new guitarists through their paces and pulled them up time after time if it wasn't right. A demanding boss but good to see

Live shot: Kirsten Stoller.



after eight years.

Paul Simonon adopts a much lower profile. During the afternoons I'd hear him already onstage playing to himself. He doesn't appear to have a lot to say at least in public, seeming happy to plug in his bass and practice intently. I remember his stumbling style of years gone by and its obvious the dedication that's gone into the fluency he exhibits today. There are hundreds of hours in his vibrancy and he's worked for every note. When you add to this what is probably the world's greatest haircut you cannot avoid the conclusion that Paul Simonon has got things pretty well sussed.

The new guys on the other hand are still in the process of finding their feet and a long and hard one I should imagine it will be. At the moment they seem in a sort of no-mans-land somewhere between being total unknowns and superstars. They're still at a stage where they can walk the bars of the venues unrecognised and reasonably comfortable but on stage they have it all to prove. It's a hard position but if they're made of the right stuff they'll come through. Joe is constantly pushing them on at every step but he's equally fast to eradicate any signs of complacency.

In Manchester, Pete Howard the new drummer was taking the piss out of the support acts dodgy drumkit and Strummer was down on him like a ton of bricks, "You'd still be playing a kit like that if you hadn't been picked for The Clash", he thundered. "Just fuckin' remember where you came from!" In print, it probably sounds harsh but it seemed to have the desired effect for Pete pulled out all his reserves of stamina to contribute to the best set I've seen the new band turn in. They're going to have a rough ride but facing a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity like that I have a feeling they'll move heaven and earth to make it work.

Soundcheck is always the start of countdown to the show for real and the tension and buzz in the air start to build by the minute. I'm running all the gigs into one here but don't worry, we're dealing with impressions not details. As The Clash finish their check and the support move in I head for the stall and finish all the final preparations, one last check around the . . . SHIT! here come the punters.

Merchandising is a funny job. Most of you will never have done it but basically on the stall you are the only member of the crew who has direct contact with the paying public. As you might guess in a crowd of five thousand you get a fair number of idiots and generally they come in the same forms every night. There's always Jack the Lad whose idea of a good night out is to nick everything that's not nailed down. He requires firm measures . . . I've found a baseball bat often does the trick.

The next worse is the complainer, who can't get to the band so spends the whole gig telling you how much he hates the band, your shirts and the world in general and how he's only there because one of his mates gave him a ticket. The ancient Zen Mantra Fuckoffyoupoxfacedlittlebastard, repeated ten times or so usually does the trick for this type.

Finally you have the Drunk who will queue for twenty minutes then proudly place his glasses on the counter and demand two pints of Fosters and a double Scotch please. This is a hopeless case.

However it's not all hard times for there is another class of customer who can make your day worthwhile. They are known in the trade as Americans. These people are invariably polite and patient and given the chance will spend vast amounts of nice new notes attempting to obtain one of every item you have for sale. Generally they make wonderful customers and can usually make up for all the other plebs you are forced to endure in the course of your duties.

When you work on a stall the two busiest times are as the punters come in and again as they leave, at both points you get submerged in sweaty bodies that each believe they have the loudest voice and a divine right to immediate service. At these points in the evening all rational thought goes out of the window and for a short time you exist just on instinct and reflexes. Coming in its bad but going out its a nightmare that has reshaped my concept of hell. May you never see it for yourself.

But to return to the shows and the state of The Clash. Of the three shows in Brixton, I can only report that they varied too much to make any assumptions. The Clash have taken a gamble on these shows as a good 40% of the material is new and with three new faces as well that's quite a stake to put

up. It bodes well for the future that they are already pulling it off in some style although of course some nights they do it better than others. Sticking my neck out I'd say that the best new shows I've seen could easily be measured alongside any show the old line up played. They've been playing most nights for nearly two hours and every crowd has left wanting even more.

After hearing comments from literally thousands of punters, fans and cynics alike I just defy anyone to justify calling The Clash a dead band. This isn't dead, it's the liveliest band I've seen in years. Let the critics scoff, if The Clash have reverted to guttersnipes — all the better.

Off-stage the band is more obviously new, there is a clear gap between the veterans and the fresh recruits and finding a balance is the considerable task that falls to Bernie Rhodes and Kosmo Vinyl, respectively the bands manager and aide cum troubleshooter. These are the two men behind the scenes who are responsible for not only the business but also have a say in the direction and presentation of The Clash as they appear to the public. In their own different ways both are crucial to The Clash. Bernie Rhodes is a very astute man, he has a devastating verbal manner and there aren't many people I'd bet on against him in an argument. He has occasional flashes of pure brilliance but against that you have to set an infuriatingly dogmatic side of his nature that can often reduce a situation to stalemate.

The Clash are in a stalemate at this moment and until rhetoric is replaced by some kind of action they'll remain stuck there, trapped in theories, the eternal whipping boys of the smartarse press. Call me naive if you like but I still believe the position The Clash hold to be a potentially powerful one that could be harnessed to enormous use. If ever there was a time for The Clash to live up to the aims they professed then surely this is it. The ball is well and truly in their court.

And so, as the last punter drifts homeward, music in his ears, I take down the stall piece by piece. Crowds of liggers prepare to drink the bars dry. In the dressing room The Clash take a well earned rest and in the offices the money gets counted. What's changed?

KNOW YOUR RITES!