

What happened when The Clash brought Buzzcocks, The Slits and Subway Sect to Manchester

It was the sound of splintering glass; of half-bricks crashing onto the pavement; of angry shouts and ferocious taunts.

It was an average Sunday evening in Collyhurst, two miles north of Manchester city centre. A bizarre and disorderly queue had formed outside a crumbling former picture house, latterly to gain infamy as The Electric Circus – a wholly inadequate, curiously vibrant downbeat rock house that was being etched into the heart of Manchester’s growing punk legacy.

If you prefer your punk memories to have been staged in post-apocalyptic surrealism, where garishly clad thrill-seekers risked serious bodily injury in the face of the absurd hostility of the local punk haters – be they neo Teds or merely sundry idiots – then The Electric Circus will remain forever part of that vision. It really was like that.

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Sunday evenings, in particular, had become unmissable, with a series of gigs featuring [The Ramones](#), Talking Heads, The Jam, [The Stranglers](#), Buzzcocks [of course] and a parade of ragged local support acts who would, in due course, famously grasp the spotlight for their own musical adventures.

[The Clash](#)-fronted *White Riot Tour* would soon be seen as the gig on which The Electric Circus's short reign would hinge. By 8pm the venue had swelled to a seething, ungodly mess, where it was necessary for revellers to submit to the increasingly erratic sway of the crowd.

At the precise moment when the sullen Vic Godard and his ragamuffin oiks Subway Sect clambered onto the stage – it was an entertaining Electric Circus idiosyncrasy that, to get from dressing room to stage, bands had to run the gauntlet through the crowd, thus having to suffer something reminiscent of the old school playground 'sport' British Bulldog – a giant ex-Teddy Boy wandered into the throng, carrying one of the venue's gruesome toilet pans above his head. Subway Sect were game enough, though the loveable Goddard's wry, lyrical musings were lost somewhere amid the crackle, hiss and rumble of the Electric's house PA.

But it was left to The Slits to inject a musical frisson into the evening's edgy dynamic. This they achieved with an awesome, wholly effective blend of spectacularly musical ineptitude, empowering female belligerence and considerable wit. They dismantled the reggae rhythms they so adored, and produced a glorious racket that was striking even in those circumstances.

As The Slits' set disintegrated into inevitable cacophony, singer Ari Up, having almost forsaken her trousers – much to the delight of the laddish mob at the front of the stage – leapt into the crowd and screamed at the DJ to crank up the reggae. Her request brought forth a blast of Max Romeo's *War In A Babylon* – the title of which certainly seemed apt for the moment.

For Buzzcocks, revelling in the warmth of their home-town crowd for a second time that week, their set merely served to cement that unholy kinship. With Steve Diggle's guitar chops improving on a seeming daily basis, and frontman Pete Shelley wryly goading the crowd, the tension was duly cranked up to a boiling, pre-Clash frenzy.

And so to The Clash, shunting boisterously through the ragged throng – and accepting the appalling rain of spittle with extraordinary grace. Kick-started by Joe Strummer's opening rallying cry of "Maaaaaanchesssster's burnnnin'!" the band hurtled through 60 minutes that would remain forever imprinted indelibly in the memories of those who were there.

Janie Jones, Career Opportunities, I'm So Bored With The USA, Complete Control and a staggering *Pressure Drop* fused together on that evening as The Electric Circus appeared to rise from the stark realities of Collyhurst and move to a different world, where sweat, spit, beer, sex, amphetamine rushes, fevered musical intensity and absurd polemical naïveté were all that mattered. It was the punk gig of dreams.

As we filed out into the unfriendly night, we knew – we just knew – that it would never be quite the same again. And we were right.

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(Image credit: The Clash)