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'The only band that matters'

By Cort Fernald
Of the Emerald

There's no disputing it — they are "the only band that matters."

And there's little room to dispute the claim that The Clash are the world's best rock'n'roll band. Ask any of the 3,000 who saw The Clash perform in MacArthur Court last night and they will tell you that no band can better The Clash at rock'n'roll.

As the Crazy 8's warmed up the crowd, The Clash came riding up to Mac Court in classic-style — classic Clash-style. They rode to the backstage entrance in the back of a red pick-up truck.

T-shirts were *de rigueur* down on the dance floor of the sweltering Mac Court. The crowd was so packed against the front of the stage the people working security were pulling people out and carrying them to the side. There were only a few fist fights to speak of (perhaps also *de rigueur* at a Clash concert) but overall the new wavers mixed well with the punks and hippies.

After a lengthy delay, Mac Court fell to pitch darkness. A single shaft of light crossed from the scaffolding above the stage, isolating the figure of Cosmo Vinyl at the sound board. Vinyl called to the hipsters and new wavers, flat-tops and bebops, and then introduced "The Clash."

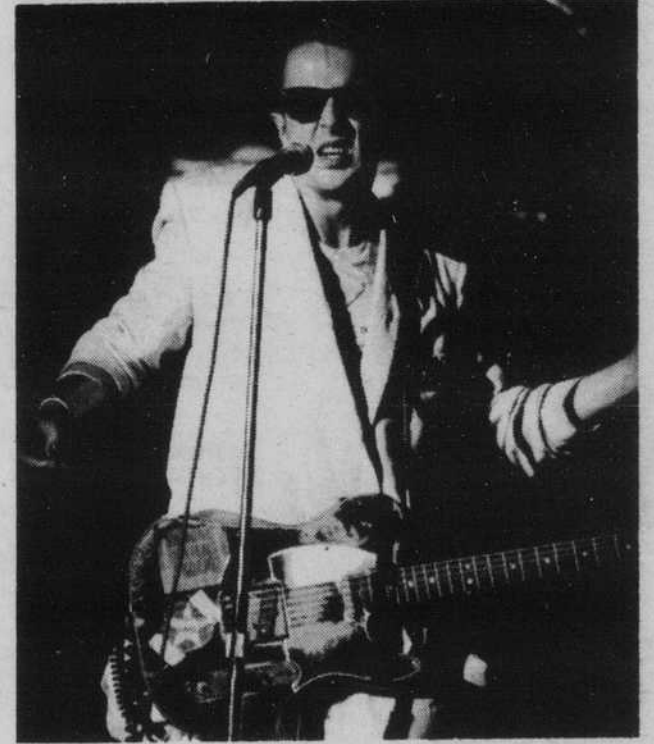
The opening chords of "London Calling" sheared through Mac Court like some oversized chainsaw in the hands of a grinning, slobbering demented Texan. And there was no let up through "Safe European Home," "Remote Control" and the next two hours of solid Clash-style rock'n'roll.

Joe Strummer, dressed in white, struck an odd figure next to the other members of The Clash who were, for the most part, in black leather. Strummer's singing voice was stronger than his speaking voice, which cracked as he talked.

After three numbers, pausing only to count out the next tempo, Strummer said the band had been riding the Oregon Trail and felt like "Frank or Jesse James." Then he added, "And I'm Kit Carson and this (he pointed to the band) is my mule train."

The Clash have lost little of their guitar power with the departure of Mick Jones. Nick Sheppard and Vince White, the new guitar players, add an amazing range and vitality to The Clash's repertoire. They fit right in soundwise and can play those well known Clash licks with confidence.

This tour was called "The Clash: Out of Control" but Strummer was in total control on stage. He commanded every eye and every ear through each number. Strummer threw his guitar offstage for "Rock the Casbah" and drew shouts and applause when he did a cartwheel across the stage.



Joe Strummer

Photo by Mark Pynes

They went through the numbers at a fantastic clip. Sheppard did a credible job singing "Police on My Back." They leaped into "Radio Clash." But had the crowd singing along on "Clampdown."

Across the stage, above the Clash's amplifiers, were a row of color televisions that would show clips from movies and music videos. When Paul Simon sang "Guns of Brixton" the televisions showed scenes from the Brixton riots.

In the middle of the song a man, flushed with a look of twisted joy, climbed on top of the barrier and tried to step onto the stage. The security force lining the stage front quickly blocked his way and threw him back into the sea of arms and bobbing heads.

After going through a blistering "Janie Jones" The Clash kicked into the Bobby Fuller Four number (written by Sonny Curtis) "I Fought the Law."

And when the stage fell black and Strummer shouted "Hey, be'cool" as they went offstage, the sweaty fans were stomping on the Mac Court floor louder than any basketball crowd. The 3,000 people stomping and clapping couldn't be denied. The Clash came back and did what amounted to another set — playing "Straight to Hell," "Brand New Cadillac" and "I'm So Bored with the U.S.A." to name only three.

The Clash, as a band, have the undeniable look and sound of survivors. Somehow, in some way, they are precise for the times in which we live. And anyway you look at them, they matter.

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