

The Damned and The Alarm @ the Concorde 2, Saturday June 13th 2009

I got to the gig about half-way through the Alarm's set half-way through 'Without a Fight'. The Alarm still retain a following and Mike Peters makes a good-enough front-man. They play songs with rousing choruses that never seem to rouse me. Sometimes they sound like the Levellers, sometimes like U2, sometimes, and this is hard to say, sometimes like Springsteen. If all these elements combined into something special maybe it would make a difference but they didn't get over just being a good support band. But for the fans, of which there were some, I am sure it must have felt like a rallying performance including some of their best-known songs: 'Absolute Reality', 'My Town', 'Spirit of 76' and, of course, '68 Guns'. At one point Mike Peters shouts out 'This is punk rock!' and I think no it isn't and what is the connection between the Alarm and the Damned? He tells us. He saw the Damned at the seminal Eric's in Liverpool in 1977. These were the kind of gigs that spawned hundreds of bands. And from this experience was spawned the Toilets, an embryonic version of the Alarm. So nothing too hard to bear but leaving me waiting for the Damned to make the evening worthwhile.

'Love Song' kicks it off and from the start they're playing well, seasoned musicians and performers, transcending any kind of 'punk' tag bar the punk spirit of banning bullshit or as Captain Sensible puts it, 'blah'. Dave Vanian is in amazing voice. He was always a great stage presence but over the years his voice has gone from good enough to good to great. I'd say that, arguably, he has one of the great voices of our time. For whatever reason, Ian McCulloch of Echo and the Bunnymen, always liked to compare himself to Sinatra, as being of that technical calibre. In the field of rock/contemporary music I'm not sure if Sinatra is quite the singer with whom to make comparisons. Nonetheless from McCulloch it always seemed a conceited claim. A similar claim from Vanian while totally unnecessary and just as unlikely (a likeable difference between the punk and post-punk generations) would merit more serious attention.

Then we're into 'New Rose', famously the first punk single, released before 1976 was out. It's a great song and can't fail to go down well. 'History of the World' is followed by 'Ignite' which Sensible dedicates to 'the Noble organisation'. Sensible gets to show off his considerable guitar skills. Belonging to a punk band where virtuosity of that kind had old rock 'aristo' connotations has meant that aspect of Sensible's contribution has been underplayed but he's, probably for the best, a bit of an unsung 'guitar hero'. Sensible draws some but not too much attention to this by doing a bit of a Hendrix, playing his guitar behind his head. With Monty Oxymoron's own virtuosity on the keyboards the whole mix has now warmed up to a high in the band and in the audience. In the moment it seems as if the Damned are defining what rock n roll is about whether you think of that as a contemporary or historic concept.

'Wait for the Blackout' is introduced by Sensible as 'the song that possibly started goth' taking as its subject staying indoors in darkened rooms avoiding the light. 'Dozen Girls', the great bass riff of 'Neat Neat Neat'. The Damned

are transmuting their back catalogue and the stuff that's coming out of their newest incarnation into something that's as relevant as ever.

'Eloise' is a cover but the Damned have made it their own and is a showcase for Vanian's vocals. Then a song about Syd Barrett called 'Dark Asteroid' from their latest album 'So Who's Paranoid?'. The Damned were lucky or clever enough to not dismiss what had come before, so, in a way that the hippie-haters never even noticed, the sound always drew on the best of psychedelia. You can hear the Electric Prunes coming through. A couple of sets of tom-toms are brought onto stage. Dave Vanian takes over on keyboards while Monty and Captain pound at the tom-toms adding a shamanic vibe to the whole shebang. The Damned, the old punks, have become the masters of their sound. They can do anything they like with it. The set comes to a suitably climactic end. The Damned have triumphed and everyone on and off the stage knows it.

For the encore the Damned bring out the Alarm and Henry Cluney from Stiff Little Fingers for the last bash of the tour. Sensible says 'I may be 55 years old but I still got it'. Someone shouts out and he has to add 'I never had it in the first place, thanks very much'. 'Jet Boy Jet Girl' for fun and 'Stretcher Case' for the final punch. We're all knocked out.

Jay Bee