

The Members @ the Engine Rooms, Saturday May 30th 2009

I was quite excited about this gig. The Members are seen nowadays as a minor punk band but in 1979 if you were 15 or 16 years old as I was they definitely had their time on our record-players. The album to have was 'At The Chelsea Nightclub' – not only because it had some great tunes and lyrics on it but also because it was funny. Lines like 'and half a pint of lager only costs 50 p/ at the Chelsea nightclub' also caught a moment when our teenage hearts hoped that punk might destroy pretension. That's why their satirical comedy worked – it captured a zeitgeist that wasn't on TV – it just existed in bands and young people who had got bored with hippie music and wanted something fun and rebellious.

People remember them – 'Sound of the Suburbs', 'I'm a Police Car' are the songs you probably know about if you haven't got into them further – but it seems people no longer want to see them.

I got to the Engine Rooms on a hot Saturday night and the place was barely half-full. I'd say about a third of us were there for the band, a third were there because the Engine Rooms is where they go, and a third were the rump of a stag and hen party that had basically ended up there by mistake. Not a good turnout or audience mix. The recipe didn't have much potential.

I got the last of the support band – Joe Grumbles, Joe Mumbles? – they sounded good, loud and heavy. The lyrics didn't really do much for me though – 'you're boring', 'fire, burn' and the final song of the set consisting mostly of 'you don't know' over and over again – good singer, good band, they just need some words to set them apart.

To the Members. I only really remember the 'At the Chelsea Nightclub' album cover so I'm not sure who was who. On guitar and vocals I think was J C Carroll. He had short, dark hair and ill-fitting glasses that kept slipping down his nose. On bass and vocals was Chris Payne. He looked more like an old hippie than an old punk. A bald pate and longish silver hair. A beach shirt seemed to sum up where the twinkle in his eye was coming from. I have no idea who was on the other guitar. He wore sunglasses like musicians do. And likewise I don't know who was on drums. For this tour they are using different musicians depending on who's available so only any remaining fanatics could be sure of the changing line-up.

They start with 'Muzak Machine', move into 'Soho a Go-Go', and before long an updated re-write of their 'Offshore Banking Business' now called 'International Financial Crisis' and their latest single/download. That song has really been vindicated by recent events and is probably what has brought the Members back to life almost thirty years on. But looking round the half-filled room it's still not enough to get this gig going.

They invite David Allen, not the one from Gong, someone else, the producer of the aforementioned 'International Financial Crisis', onto the stage to play keyboards/synthesiser.

The Members were one of the first bands to mix punk and reggae. So a reggae version of Kraftwerk's 'She's a Model' seems natural and inspired. Then what I think is another new one 'New English Blues Part 2'. It sounds like 'The Wall' to me. They attempt to get us to sing the chorus but there's too few people for that kind of thing.

The strong chords, drums and lyrics of 'Police Car' warm the whole set up and in terms of the music the rest of the set gets better from here. J C Carroll jokes about how difficult it is being an old punk, having to be constantly rebellious even when you're bringing up your own children before launching another new one (?) 'Midlife Crisis' with a lyric something like 'I'm having a midlife crisis/ and I like it' echoing, to me, the Stones' 'It's Only Rock n Roll'.

Then 'Working Girl', 'Solitary Confinement' (about living in a bed-sit), finishing off with, of course, 'Sound of the Suburbs'.

It's during 'Sound of the Suburbs' that something interesting happens and somehow takes on for me symbolic meanings of the whole weird evening. A song or so before I'd felt some beer splash onto me. Looking back to the bar I spotted who it was – he'd chucked beer, not at me, but just generally at the audience. He was a meathead with the wedding party, some muscle but no brains. Maybe some brush-off had infuriated him. I saw his friend gripping his neck, physically trying to calm him. Then, very fast, over in a minute or so – suddenly meathead has entered the audience who have all decided to dance to the Members' big hit and is on someone and that someone is on him and then a metal dude is on top of meathead and security drag the guy out. J C Carroll has leapt off the stage and is shouting something at him. The band had almost stopped playing but it was so fast that there wasn't even time for a band to decide to do that so they carry on slowly and even more angrily and tired sing the chorus 'this is the sound of the suburbs'. How deeply cynical, in a good way, that song is. The punk revolution brought a lot of good things to music and society but it also brought the vacuous, violent side of suburbia: 'Useless words yes I wanna be free/ Now they want anarchy' – and not a peaceful anarchy but just violent destruction of people and phone boxes with the perpetrators not conscious enough to really distinguish the difference between animate and inanimate objects.

There was something about that ending to the gig that took me on a time-trip back to 1977. The Adverts at the Oxford CFE. A song and a half in and a fight broke out that couldn't be contained. So the band stopped, the hall was cleared and that was that. In the previous age of hippie you didn't really need security to contain violence you just needed them to stop people trying to get in for free.

So, 'Sound of the Suburbs' – a song very much of its time and place – an historical comment that doesn't really say much about now. Other punk bands like Citizen Fish and the Subhumans can play the Engine Rooms and pack it out because they kept on going and still are impassioned with what they want to get across. The Damned, who developed new sounds, sang ballads like

'Eloise', did psychedelic albums, got out, as much as they could, of the trap that punk could become for its originators.

The Members were a good band but to be off the live scene for so long and then come back will take more than the goodwill of a few of us who can be bothered to get off our arses to try and live it up with them one more time.

Despite the above it was quite a good night for anyone with a taste for late 70s punk/new wave. But I hope to be bringing back better news from the Damned in a couple of weeks.

Jay Bee