



Filthy Lucre Tour. The Sex Pistols.

Reviewed by Sam Smith

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The Birth of Lounge Punk

Last night at Red Rocks the Sex Pistols played their first American show in eighteen years. That last American show, in 1978 as I recall, was the band's swan song (or so we thought), coming at the tail end of a tour that was, if I might misapply a few words from Dave Marsh, a bad idea gone wrong. The way Johnny remembers it, the whole tour—the whole band, even—had become something horribly different from what he expected. The defining moment of the tour was perhaps its last: a wasted, defeated Johnny Rotten kneeling on stage, staring into the crowd and uttering those now-infamous words: “ever feel like you’ve been cheated?”

So when the band's original lineup (Johnny Rotten, guitarist Steve Jones, bassist Glen Matlock, and drummer Paul Cook) announced some months back that they were reuniting for a tour, many familiar with both the band and its near-Frankenstinian legend wrung their hands in despair. “Why are you doing this?” came the question. Johnny's answer was brief and to the point: “We want your money.”

It began to smell like the ultimate cliché—a dinosaurs-of-rock summer cash-in tour, only this time it wasn't the Doobies, The Eagles, or even Traffic. Nope, it was the band that for many of us represents the very antithesis of such foolishness. The Pistols, we thought, ought to KNOW better.

After all, what could possibly be accomplished artistically and creatively? The Sex Pistols set the standard for rock rage nearly two decades ago, and ever since their descendants have engaged in an ongoing battle of one-upsmanship. Who can swear more, outrage more, damn the establishment more? Even if the band came out and perfectly recreated the sort of spectacle that got them banned in the late 70s, so what? Been there, done that. There

are dozens, maybe hundreds, of bands out there who are at least as disgusting and vile as the Pistols ever were.

Apparently, the Sex Pistols—or maybe I should call them the New and Improved Sex Pistols—realized all of this, because they didn't even try.

You knew something was up when Steve Jones took the stage wearing some VERY shiny pants—my best guess at the fabric is silver lame. Johnny, though, would have put Spinal Tap to shame. He strode front-and-center decked in black pants with a neon yellow stripe up the sides and a matching neon shirt, bright red suspenders, and a red and silver smoking jacket (I'm guessing at the style) that made Steve's trousers look downright subdued.

Glitter City, folks. Welcome to the birth of Lounge Punk.

The music was pretty slick, too, at least by Sex Pistols standards. The band now lacks the edge which invariably accompanies sheer incompetence (not that Jones and Cook were ever bad players, exactly, but punk was never about musicianship). In fact, the boys looked and sounded downright professional as they ripped through a fairly predictable playlist (when “God Save the Queen” appeared early in the show, you just KNEW “Anarchy in the UK” would be the encore, and it was). As Jones explains, the members have played quite a bit since we last saw them together, and are quite simply better musicians than they used to be.

But the most startling change in the band wasn't about wardrobe or time in the practice hall. Rather, it was the transmutation of Johnny Rotten into Johnny Charming. The Nastiest of Them All, the eternal purveyor of “filthy lucre,” joked throughout the show about the weather (35+ mph wind gusts that forced the crew to strike the backdrop before the band took the stage) and Denver's famed lack of oxygen. At first I

couldn't tell what Johnny was doing when he wandered off stage left between songs, but when a roadie wheeled the oxygen tank out and set it up beside the drum riser toward the end of the set it all became clear, and the wise-cracking about "nice stuff, this oxygen—you should have more of it" got really funny. And I don't mean funny in a sad, cynical way, either—Johnny Charming had actually become the consummate showman, the anti-Rotten, as it were. A likeable scamp. Almost respectable. <p> And in this moment, we saw perhaps the ultimate metaphor for the Filthy Lucre Tour: the aging superstar on the road, cashing in on his bloated legend, bedecked like a second-rate Vegas lounge lizard, self-consciously sucking on the oxygen mask not just between songs, but between verses, and hamming it for ever snicker it was worth. <p> Of course, I mean this in a good way. As I said above, what COULD the Pistols have done that would contained even a shred of substance? Reversion to the original "authentic" punk stance would have just been sad, I think, even though they're as entitled to the pose as anybody. <p> The choice they seem to have opted for is a wholehearted, over-the-top embrace of cliché. This was the most cyn-

ical moment in the history of one of rock's most unrepentantly cynical minds. Instead of a pitchfork full of P.R., why not just announce that you and your fellow dinosaurs are going to hit the road in a quest for a paycheck, and once you're there, why not just entertain the heck out of whoever ponies up? <p> All of which left me with a whole new question as I drove back toward Denver. Is it possible to be so calculatingly and cleverly cynical that you transcend cynicism and wind up producing something brilliant? <p> When Elvis wrapped his fat, aging butt in spangles and hauled it out to the Tropicana, I don't really think he understood that he was becoming VEGAS ELVIS, a thing most unlike YOUNG ELVIS. Now, though, The Sex Pistols have become Vegas Elvis, and they seem acutely aware of the fact. Happy, even. And I won't EVEN bother elaborating on the fact that 16 minutes after the band took the stage, at 10:01 A.M. MDT, we marked the 15 year anniversary of the launch of MTV. "Video Killed the Radio Star," eh? <p> If there isn't a Las Vegas lounge date on this tour, it's a damned shame. My choice? How about Circus Circus? <p>

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