

Review: 'Pop Disaster' tour: More flash than thrash

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Published 2:15 a.m. PDT Tuesday, April 30, 2002

The "Pop Disaster Tour," which features blink-182 and Green Day, is a meeting of pop-punk's wunderkinds. But next time around, the show's organizers might as well add Motley Crue to the bill. As it turned out, the "Pop Disaster" concert, which reached the AutoWest Amphitheatre on Sunday night, was packed with pyrotechnics, flashpots and a rotating drum cage, to boot.

Punk rock was originally a music stripped of pretense and pageantry, but judging by "Pop Disaster," has punk become the new arena rock?

Then again, blink-182 and Green Day long ago ditched their punk credibility for major-label status, multiplatinum sales and massive teen followings. And with "Pop Disaster" sponsored by the kiddie-oriented beverage YooHoo, you could bet that most die-hard punkers didn't dare bring their egg white-starched Mohawk hairdos anywhere near the place.

So there's no going back to 924 Gilman Street, the punker-than-thou Berkeley club that gave Green Day its start. But it should be remembered that Green Day wasn't always the toast of Gilman Street. Even in its formative years, the Bay Area trio was knocked by punk purists for its sophomoric subject matter and endless tunes about puppy-love crushes (e.g., "At the Library," "Why Do You Want Him").

Still, the band's unbridled energy and tenacity on the small-club circuit transformed Green Day into a formidable live act.

Throughout Green Day's 75-minute set, frontman Billie Joe Armstrong often played master of ceremonies, mugging endlessly, leading the audience through numerous singalongs and inspiring collective arm-swaying. These are all proven arena-rock techniques, but the set's momentum was sometimes sullied through such diversions.

One 10-minute sequence that featured three audience members selected to play on

stage as a makeshift band was cute, but perhaps the time could've been better used to feature some early Green Day favorites (how about "80," "Disappearing Boy" or "The One I Want"?).

Green Day simply didn't need all the audience pandering and pyrotechnic punches. The band was musically powerful enough on its own when romping through such signature songs as "When I Come Around," "2000 Light Years Away" and "She."

Sure, there were some goofy touches, including horn players dressed as chickens, bees and mariachis, and a cover of "Shout" a la the movie "Animal House." But the band nailed its dynamic push-and-pulls ("Longview," "Minority") and played with a ferocity that stirred mosh pits and waves of crowd surfers. Perhaps Green Day packed an extra pow because of Jason White, a touring guitarist who doubled up on some of the band's riffs and allowed guitarist-singer Armstrong to concentrate more on his vocal duties.

The show's headliner, blink-182, would have benefited greatly from a pinch-hitting musician. The smart-aleck trio from San Diego struggled to lock in rhythmically and veered oh-so-close to becoming a musical train wreck.

True, punk rock doesn't have to be technically perfect to work. Yet blink-182's set wasn't any kind of ragged nirvana, but rather the sound of a group that lacked musical chemistry in a live setting.

During its breakout hit "Dammit," each of the three members seemed to be in his own tempo universe. Rhythms were also hopelessly rushed during "Rock Show." A pop disaster, indeed.

It's not that blink-182 didn't have a solid musical foundation. Drummer Travis Barker showcased some mighty percussion chops and inventive fills, though his Tommy Lee-esque solo, complete with a rotating drum kit, veered on cheesy.

The group, however, delivered on its penchant for scatological humor and pull-my-finger jokes. If the band's objective was to miff some of the many parents in the audience, well, blink-182 succeeded mightily. But for musical merit, its 75-minute set was heavy on volume, pyrotechnics and herky-jerky speed, but short on conviction.

Maybe blink-182 could take a few pointers from Jimmy Eat World, the show's opening act. The group presented some of the concert's punchiest tunes and well-honed harmonies, and ripped through nine songs in just half an hour. There were no spark showers or M-80-like explosions, just well-played rock 'n' roll sent straight from the gut.

Talk about some true musical fireworks.