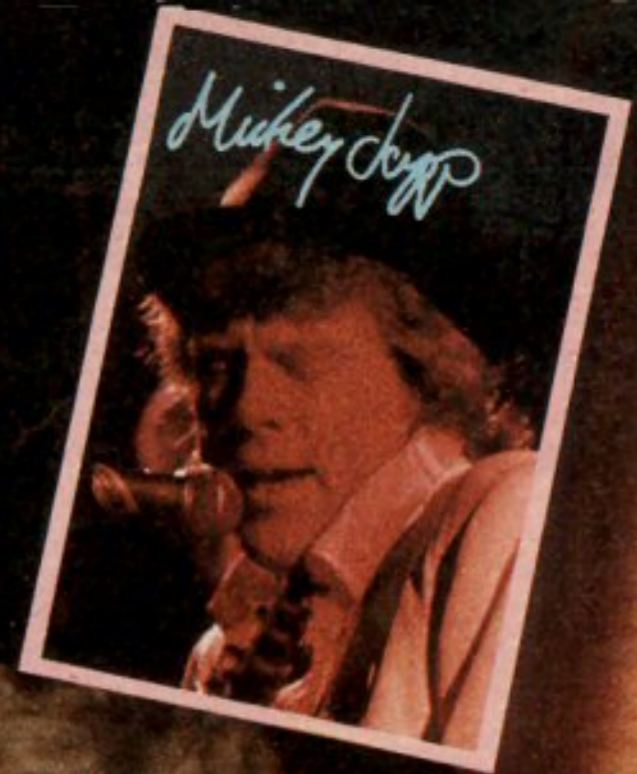




THE ROCK 'N' RAIL TOUR

19 NOVEMBER 1978

OBSERVER



STIFF TEST

Photographs by Peter Howe

Tonight at the Lyceum Ballroom, London, the 'Be Stiff' rock tour finally pulls up after a five-week whistle-stop train journey up and down the country. It's the first time a chartered train has whisked a package tour from gig to gig.

The goodwill of British Rail aside, Stiff Records, the small independent record company with a reputation for outré talents and witty - if non-too-subtle - promotion, takes the credit for this travelling circus. This live-act rock tour is culling even more publicity than last year's 'Bunch of Stiffs', which launched Nick Lowe, Elvis Costello and Ian Dury.

This year, the five featured artists - who each have their own backing bands, take half-hour sets apiece and swap roles as headliner - are bewilderingly diverse specimens. Of them, Mickey Jupp registers in the 'theoretically most deserving but least likely to succeed' department, holding down the hard 'n' heavy R & B end of things. It's a style that befits one who is something of a legendary figure among the booze-blues musicians from Southend. The nasal Wreckless Eric, overshadowed last time out by Costello and Dury, is hanging in there with a Clever Dick brand of pop which is variably fetching and irritating. It is the distinctly peculiar Jona Lewie who proves most endearing of the males, with very cute, catchy, pop boogie rendered somewhat startling by his thin, whining voice.

However, for once the news is that the two women participants are really the ones who count. The theatrical, playfully exotic, Lene Lovich is well set up to become a character personality, rather as Ian Dury has. Taken separately, her voice and musicianship are only adequate, but she puts everything together with a sure-footed sense of style.

And the promised darling of the tour, 16-year-old schoolgirl Rachel Sweet from Akron, Ohio, really is the goods. Her background (Reno club gigs at age of 10) and appearance (cuddly) might be against her, at least by those wary of child stars, but she has turned out to be reasonably low-keyed and tasteful. Cool and self-possessed on stage, she has the same freakish blessing that made Brenda Lee a star - a mature, bruised and knowing voice in a baby doll persona.

Stiff have masterminded this tour to promote albums by all five acts, gambling most of the company's finances in the cause. It will be interesting to see whether the enterprise reaps returns or if, as happened last year when Elvis Costello, Nick Lowe and other acts decamped from Stiff for deals with major record companies, Stiff will find itself aced out of their unequivocal winners and left - yet again - with the less commercial eccentrics.

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