

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Billy Bragg

with Dave Graney Show
Norwood Concert Hall

The prospect of The Dave Graney Show on the same card as Billy Bragg made this event doubly appealing. But I am sorry to report Mr Graney's opening set is a disappointment. Perhaps he is diligently not wanting to steal the show. If so, I for one would not have been sorry if he'd taken that risk. Instead he's looking uncertain and understaffed, even his raffish homburg, flared safari suit and spotted cravat have become tentative ironies.

With partner Clare Moore ever inventive on drums and Adele Pickvance steady on bass, Graney now handles all the chores on guitar and the result is the kind of thin lounge sound that he has always carefully steered around. The newer material - numbers like *Anchors Aweigh* and *Don't Mess With the Blood* have a croony but somewhat anaemic charm and *Son of Maggie May* makes us wonder whether the joke is really on Rod at all.

Dave makes quite a few Lleyton Hewitt victory gestures but he is very far from pumped. His excellent *Three Dead Passengers in a Second Hand Ford* is edged out with an almost samba rhythm and a newer work, *Leaving the Mount* covers the same ground less crisply. *I Held a Cool Breeze* is closer to the gravy days, I try to imagine the Coral Snakes at his back in an arc of electric sound - it is a good song, like so many he has written. In these cut-down times we are all on skeleton staff, I know, but at the moment Dave Graney is travelling too light to even find his mojo, let alone his inner wolverine.

Billy Bragg also faces these tasks of continuity and renewal. What do you do when you have outlived your targets, when it is Blair not Thatcher, when the Wall is down, when you are an industrial citizen in a post-industrial world? The boy from Barking has learned to keep his powder dry. His is the socialism of the heart. After all, he was always the milkman of human kindness and the ups and downs for boys and girls were ever his text.

On stage and nearing the end of his solo tour, Billy Bragg is looking like a geezer in his forties. There is a little grey in the quiff and with his flattened nose and his cupid bow lips he looks less like the young Trevor Howard and more like the older George C Scott. But he is chipper and still holds an audience like the consummate busker he once was, his customised Burns electric slung from his hip and his London patois laced wiv wit. Petrol rationing is over and I've got rid of your premier, is there anything else I can do while I'm ere? Well you can sing us a song, Bill. Which he does - *A Lover Sings*, from the old hymn book, and *Way Over Yonder in the Minor Key*, music by B. Bragg, words by Woody Guthrie.

The Mermaid Avenue project, set up by Guthrie's daughter Nora, put Bragg to work setting tunes to a trunkful of lyrics and poems that Guthrie, the radical American folk music legend of the thirties and forties, who was struck down by Huntingdon's Chorea in the mid-1950s, left unfinished during his long and disabling illness. *Way Over Yonder in a Minor Key* is a charming song, its tune as catchy and partly purloined as any Guthrie might have written, and proof that the project was not as fanciful and contrived as it first seemed.

Between cups of tea, served by a roadie he calls Baldrick, Bragg sings the love song *The Price I Pay* and introduces a new song, *St Monday*, a ballad of the working week much enjoyed by a Sunday night crowd. The edgy *Little Time Bomb* from the *Workers Playtime* album is followed by the sombre and timely *Rumours of War*. Then, for the singalong component, some familiar Bragg anthems - *There is Power in the Union* and a jangling, spirited, strummy, *Milkman of Human Kindness*.

A likeable raconteur, Bragg entertains with stories of his tour, obsessional detail about wildebeest from his refuge from CNN, the Discovery Channel, and, because, this is, after all, an evening with Billy Bragg, some heartfelt comment on asylum seekers and international compassion. The set concludes with a Bragg classic, the ballad of Winstanley and the Diggers, *World Turned Upside Down*.

For encores he adds in *Ingrid Bergman*, a quirky glimpse of another side of Woody Guthrie, the droll self-portrait, *Waiting For the Great Leap Forward* and the rather wet, *Dolphins*. He sings a song about the Melbourne weather, the St Kilda football club and homesickness for watching West

Ham in the London rain, and finishes with the Billy Bragg oldie and goodie, *A New England*.

Billy Bragg is in good form, even in interesting times. He wears his talent and doctrine lightly and can read a crowd with all the radar of a regional comedian. He remains an original - although in many ways Billy Bragg, with his Essex vowels is in a long line of music hall heroes, a mix of George Formby and John Lennon, and a forerunner of such successfully sensitive new lads as Nick Hornby. He's not as red in the wedge as he once was, but he has not lost touch with us-down- pit. Even though he doesn't ask us quite so often, we still know which side he is on.