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The review: Working as a class hero

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Billy Bragg, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, Tuesday

Somebody has a sense of humour at Celtic Connections: Billy Bragg — the man who has become the presentable face of English nationalism — live on Burns Night? You can't accuse Bragg of failing to see the joke, marching on stage behind a piper and suggesting that if anybody wanted to come to his own festival, Cockney Connections, he'd be only too pleased to show a little of his heritage.

Quite how close he got to a rendition of Knees Up Mother Brown we'll never know. He was obviously tempted but, without a piano, stopped after a couple of lines. Where are Chas and Dave when you need them?

Of course, humour and politics have become inseparable in Bragg's act. Come the revolution, it will surely be part of the Barking-born singer's job to keep up spirits by telling jokes on the barricades. The sense of humour extends to himself. He is amiably aware of the ironies surrounding his own rise to fame: "I've been doing this all these years and capitalism still hasn't collapsed," he reflected on Tuesday night, "although I've got a five-bedroom house and a 4x4." The line got the biggest laugh of the evening.

The miracle of his playing to the gallery is that it doesn't undermine the music. Bragg is not what anybody, least of all himself, would call a great singer. At times, the voice teeters on the verge of self-parody, and he sounds like the busker he once was fighting to make himself heard in the corridors of South Kensington tube. But he has a way of driving a song forward that's so direct it's almost defiant: so what if the odd note's wrong, he seems to be saying, you'll listen up and you'll listen good — and the audience did.

A nod to Burns the egalitarian was evident in the opening number: Leon Rosselson's 1981 *The World Turned Upside Down*, a ballad in praise of the Diggers. In case anybody forgot where we were this was followed by *A Pict Song*, an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's poem about Pictish defiance of the Roman Legions: "For we are the little folk — we! / Too little to love or to hate / Leave us alone and you'll see / That we can bring down the state."

That was followed by *From Red to Blue*, Bragg's wry account of friendship soured by politics, and the anthemic *Saint Monday* ("I'm a hard worker, I ain't working Monday"), belted out with such gusto you'd have to have been the chairman of the CBI to disagree. Moving down a gear, he then rang every last drop of emotion from Woody Guthrie's eerie *The Unwelcome Guest*.

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Some performers might find it hard to make such a broad mixture of styles and influences gel. Not Bragg, who chucks it all into the pot and still finds room for rants about Tory immigration policies and speculations about why the Vikings only provided names for four days of the week.

The great thing about watching Billy Bragg is that you couldn't be watching anybody but Billy Bragg. Who else is equally at home pulling heartstrings or delivering a wry jewel of a line like "I look like Robert De Niro, I drive a Mitsubishi Zero"? Which other lyricist moves with such agility from the personal to the political? There used to be a poet from Ayrshire who did that stuff, but he's long dead now.

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