

washingtonpost.com

Billy Bragg at the Birchmere: Songs of Love and War

Advertisement

Tuesday, March 28, 2006; C04

Billy Bragg may be best known for his staunch left-leaning political views, but on Sunday night at the Birchmere he showed his tender side as well. He interspersed songs such as the earnest "A Lover Sings" among political numbers such as the plaintive "Like Soldiers Do" and "The Wolf Covers Its Tracks," a song based on Bob Dylan's "With God on Our Side."

Bragg even chose back-to-back Woody Guthrie covers to highlight that range, from the fiercely wailing "All You Fascists" to the lulling "Way Over Yonder in the Minor Key," which Bragg originally recorded with Wilco. He quickly pointed out that while he and Guthrie are both labeled political songwriters, the distinction lay in their love songs: "The difference between me and Woody Guthrie is stark," he said. "Woody almost always gets the girl. With me -- well, you know how it is."

Bragg spent much of his between-song time on his political soapbox, with lengthy diatribes about current far-right groups in the United States and United Kingdom and even obscurer topics such as the 1649 execution of King Charles I for treason. His political rants tied closely into his music, from "NPWA" ("No Power Without Accountability") to a new, moving narrative about Rachel Corrie, a young American woman killed in Gaza who was working with a nonviolent Palestinian resistance group. But despite such political lessons, Bragg continually returned to simple themes, closing the show with the rollicking "A New England."

-- Catherine P. Lewis

© 2006 The Washington Post Company