

Review: Billy Bragg at Birmingham Town Hall

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Was it a gig or was it a political rally? The lines were well and truly blurred, if not invisible in the first place and Billy Bragg made no apology for the fact.

Nor did he need to. The angry not-so-young man from Barking was (p)reaching to the converted and what a sermon he delivered.

Smart, warm, fiery, funny Bragg was all these things and more on a night that saw him paying tribute to the teachers (big round of applause), The Clash (another big round of applause), Rock Against Racism (even bigger applause) and Arthur Scargill.

There were songs aplenty but lots of self-deprecating banter and, unlike many musical artists, he was able to blend the two in such a seamless way that the momentum never faltered on the opening night of the venue's English Originals Folk Festival.

As his themes Englishness, political action and justice grew stronger, so did the warmth of the audience response, cheering on their hero (not too strong a word) to even greater heights.

At 50, thick set with middle age and a newly-quiffed barnet showing off his grey hairs, Bragg is arguably a performer playing at the top of his game.

One man and his guitar (two if you count the acoustic), a hall and an audience.

You might think that even someone with 25 years experience under his belt must find it a bit daunting. Not a bit of it. Bragg seemed to enjoy the show every bit as much as the fans.

The cranked up, slightly jagged, jangly guitar and a voice that, despite his own putdowns, has clearly come of age filled the hall with a strong yet soulful energy that recharged this old codger's batteries and sent him home with an ear-to-ear smile.

And yet there is the inevitable question: why does he keep playing? His answer to the self-posed question was touchingly frank and had the ring of truth about it.

It was us, the audience. We re-energise each other, he explained, dedicating a sparse yet beautiful version of I Keep Faith opening track on the well-received Mr Love & Justice album to the singalong gathering of 40 and 50-somethings.

The pattern was set by the time he reached the closing verses of old favourite Shirley.

The crowd couldn't help joining in on the chorus and by the time he reached his finale yes, it was the truly appropriate New England the audience had taken over completely, with Bragg's happy complicity. A sparkily atmospheric St Swithin's Day was another highlight in a night that will be fondly remembered for years to come. And Bragg didn't stint on the encores, returning first with a

musical mate for a pair of traditional songs, and then treating the audience to three more before the lights went up.

Even the venue was perfect. Birmingham's revamped Town Hall was built in 1834, a time when truly great orators from England's history like John Bright were in full flow, and nearly two centuries later was playing host to another great orator.

A Marmite artist he may be "you either love me or ***** hate me" but once you've acquired a taste for his rock and roll rhetoric, you'll keep coming back for more.

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