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State Theatre Thrilled By Folk-Punk Bragg-adocio

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“Welcome! Brothers, Sisters!” Eyes saturated with a sense of purpose, Billy Bragg inaugurated his Saturday evening performance at the State Theatre with scratchy, scathing electric guitar riffs as the firm backbone to a stream of political consciousness. Sporting dark blue jeans and a black 45-r.p.m. spindle throwback T-shirt, the graying folk-punk protestor drove the crowd to the verge of delirium by savagely pounding at his strings while firing off the words “democracy,” “unite” and “market fundamentalism.” Between songs, the Brit’s barely comprehensible rants featured profanities that we don’t even have in American English. Sipping on three cups of tea so he could “pretend that [he] could sing in tune,” Bragg worked the crowd over with cross-cultural comedy and charisma, hollering at both Yankees and Yankees’ fans to “just fuck off.” Comparing his rough, gravelly voice to “Johnny Clash” — the guy shot a man in Reno just to watch him dye his hair — Bragg cued the audience in on everything from when it’s appropriate to heckle to the oxymoronic nature of the word “democratic capitalism.”



Earlier in the evening, the Watson Twins treated the crowd to a disarming set of serene, humble harmonies, rich guitar hooks and elegantly gliding, crisp keyboard. Singing about the miracle of seasons, the two sisters charmed the audience with a discussion of the “special energy” of Ithaca and the path toward a better world.

In “How Am I To Be,” the two stunning brunettes sway to the beat as they beg rhetorically: Just how is one to move forward when another has left her behind? Set to a fluid acoustic guitar, the twins took on a cover of “Ain’t No Sunshine,” mourning lost love as two pain-stricken, bluesy vocals penetrated each and every row of the glorious theater. Deploying a folksy harmonica to paint a picture of simple Americana, the ladies chimed in on dysfunctional relationships and the boundaries of the power of love. On their final number, the twins skillfully incorporated a ragtime piano for an added twist. Soulful, pain-ridden, yet inexplicably hopeful, the shy and tentative Watson Twins perfectly channeled that incredibly sought after “reluctant sexiness.” The lovely ladies are finally back on the road again after their highly acclaimed collaboration on the 2006 Jenny Lewis record, *Rabbit Fur Coat*.

Soaking in the regal burgundy curtains and crest-lined balcony of the State Theatre, the hard-faced Englishman sarcastically noted that it was “bloody fantastic” that the venue was built in the image of a British medieval castle.

Folk-Punk Pioneer: British rocker Billy Bragg engaged the audience at the State Theatre with his political brand of folk-punk last Saturday

Blinding light reflecting off his silver-white ax amidst Townshend tribute windmills, the Essex-native exuded fun with a distinct fusion of raw, unrefined and unapologetic punk-folk rock. Meanwhile, Bragg's savage tongue gradually pursued the energetic radicalization of

the crowd in opposition to such injustices as the "American gulag" at Guantanamo, much to the delight of the politically charged audience.

As he swapped his electric guitar for an acoustic — a betrayal of his punk roots — Bragg let the crowd know that, "If you want to shout Judas, now would be the time." His first unplugged track, "Farm Boy," was a deeply personal waltz detailing restrictive origins and aspirations for escape. Themes of work, outsourcing and lean production's casualties highlight the mellow, downtrodden, exposed vibe that contrasts sharply with the visceral electric explosion during the set's first segment. "Oh Freedom, What Liberties Are Taken In Thy Name" weds Lennon's "Working-Class Hero" with Dylan's "Masters of War," as the musician tells a tale of the transformation from protector to oppressor. On "Waiting For the Great Leap Forward," Bragg showcased his songwriting prowess by expertly matching the stanza "Cant defeat the axis of evil" with "By putting smart bombs in the hands of dumb people." As his acoustic set wrapped up, the musician decried the tragic two-dimensional post-mortem categorization of Woody Guthrie as simply a dust bowl folkie. Bragg recently recorded a series of Woody tunes in collaboration with Wilco to help set the record straight.

Apologizing for the quality of his voice, Bragg admitted that he had been yelling at the television during the last Presidential debate, both at John McCain for being a "bullshit scary jack-o-lantern that grins at inappropriate times," and at Obama for the "important details he never seems to get around to." The punk rocker noted that this was a "very exciting time with the most politically engaged young people since 1968." He went on to voice his confidence that the youth would take it to the streets if "they" try to rig this election. Informing the crowd that "democracy is about more than voting," however, Bragg warned of the posers and cynics that inevitably emerge following any significant political shift.

Through Bragg's hodgepodge presentation of political rally, rock concert and pub ally rattle, a logical linearity of dissatisfaction, hope and change somehow emerged from the Brit's incoherence. Punk, profanity, protest and folk — no wonder the graying 50-year-old is as relevant today as during his Margaret Thatcher-ripping days in the '80s.

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