

TALENT IN ACTION

BILLY BRAGG
MICHELLE SHOCKED
MAMBO-X

Troy Music Hall, Troy, N.Y.

THERE IS POWER in a union, and there is power in the stripped-back songs and stories of Englishman Billy Bragg.

Bashing out his anthems with an electric guitar, Bragg enchanted the crowd with a two-hour show here April 13, the opening date of his latest U.S. tour. The acoustically renowned venue's stuffy atmosphere seemed transformed to the cozy feel of a pub, with Bragg drinking, swearing, joking, and chatting as though with friends and even scoffing at the room's grand history.

Bragg, touring behind his new Elektra/Nonesuch EP, "Help Save The Youth Of America," leavened his confrontational politics with plenty of humor and send-ups of every rock-star target from Deep Purple to Bruce Springsteen to Gene Loves Jezebel.

A good deal of new material, including the bitter "Valentine's Day Is Over" and the gentle a capella "Tender Comrade," was introduced along with old favorites such as "A New England," "Greetings To The New Brunette," "St. Swithin's Day," and "The Man In The Iron Mask."

Bragg brought along pianist Crara Tivey, obviously shy in her U.S. debut, for a few numbers that opened up his rough-and-tumble sound and left him seeming bare with just a guitar.

His new songs sound hardly more marketable than his past work, but for fans of pure pop with raw beauty, real honesty, and conviction he's a rare alternative.

The stocky singer responded in kind to his appreciative audience, making up for the early looseness of his scheduled 70-minute show with 50 extra minutes of songs and chatter, including four encores and his rousing anglicized takeoff of "Route 66."

Texas-folkie-turned-English-cult-star Michelle Shocked and local favorite Mambo-X preceded Bragg. PolyGram artist Shocked charmed a crowd almost completely unfamiliar with her quirky material, and the Mambos made an impressive large-hall debut, proving that their kinetic funky rock can work on a higher level.

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