

B-8
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BILLY BRAGG
Tireless pig

Bragg show a good mix of political, personal

REVIEW

Billy Bragg, with Michelle Shocked and Deborah Harry, playing at McGill University Monday night. Bragg and Shocked performed last night at Club Soda.

By MARK LEPAGE
Gazette Pop Music Critic

Billy Bragg has been accused of showing less of his wry, humanist music with his decidedly up-front political beliefs. However, the British singer-songwriter manages a near-perfect mix of the political and the personal on *Workers Playtime*, his latest album, and achieved a similar feat during a tireless gig at McGill University Monday night.

Bragg brings — and invites — preconceived notions at his concerts. Most in his audience admire him as much for his militant left-wing activism as for his eloquent songwriting.

Most personal

In fact, judging by the response Monday, Bragg's intermittent speeches went over as well as his generous performances of old and new songs. The show was one of the most personal to his Montreal in ages.

Bragg also invited two other acts to share this bill: Australia's Weddings, Parties, Anything and critically acclaimed Texan Michelle Shocked. The combination gave the evening the feel of an old-style blend of populist stamping and roasty folk music.

Bragg set the uproarious tone of his set during the first 10 minutes, when sound problems enabled him to launch into a screamingly funny monologue.

"They say Reagan is the only president elected in a year ending in zero not to die in office," he quipped. "I disagree. I think he's been dead for years."

The music was just as good-humored. Alone on stage with his scroopy guitar playing and that big Cockney rasp of a voice, Bragg delighted the crowd with older songs like *The Marriage and newer pop songs like She's Got a New Spell.*

Valentine's Day is Over, about while heaving, led into some pointed bits at feminism and beckons on his current North American tour.

Cara Tivey accompanied Bragg with some tasteful piano in *Waiting for the Great Leap Forward* and a reworked cover of Elvis Costello's *Cover's Army* as did bassist Wigg. Levi Stubbs' *Tears* was poignant and *Life With the Lions* was self-deprecating.

Explained position

Toward the end of the night, Bragg devoted a chunk of his stage time to political speechmaking. However, few in the audience complained, and Bragg patiently explained his position to those who did. Politics definitely played a role in the show, but Bragg's essentially good-natured personality and obvious love of the music made it memorable.

Michelle Shocked, whose debut studio album *Short Sharp Shocked* is receiving rave reviews, lit up the stage during her performance. With a Dylan-type peaked cap and black clothes over her slight, tomboy build, Shocked cut an endearing figure.

Her strong alto carried emotional resonance, and her personality and political stance made her a likable version of Joan Baez, especially in *When I Grow Up* and in a cappella version of a folk-protest song called *They Say the War is Over, But I Fear It's Just Begun*.

Bragg joined her onstage at the end of her set and the crowd, mostly students, surged forward, providing a measure of his popularity.

Weddings rumbled through an acoustic-electric set to kick off the evening. The stomping *Roar* (Dogs) and the waltz *Moray (Dogs For Fox)* were interspersed with playful gigs at Bragg's favored sport, soccer, and plugs for Australian-Football.

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