

Covering Joel with perfect pitch

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One of the remarkable things about Billy Joel's music is that his writing has evolved with the times, while still retaining a sound that makes it distinctly his own. His work is uniquely contemporary, capturing a wide diversity of moods, from wry humour and sophisticated contemplation, through psychological angst and frenetic stress.

An Innocent Man: The Music of Billy Joel marks the most recent in the Electric Thursdays series of concerts, a collaboration between the KWS and the Jeans 'n Classics band.

Who better to lead us on this tribute to Joel's musical career than Jim Witter, himself an accomplished singer, pianist and songwriter?

Witter is the creator of the hit show The Piano Men, a tribute to the 1970's hits of both Billy Joel and Elton John. His vibrant performance on Wednesday night potently demonstrated his strong affinity for Joel's work. At times, he sounded uncannily like the Piano Man himself, evoking both his timbre and enunciation. And yet, Witter also brought a presence that was uniquely his own to the performance.

The evening began with such favourites as Only the Good Die Young and Uptown Girl --both songs about love between the kind of boy your mother warned you about and the girl who's got it all. The upbeat opening set the mood for a stellar performance of Joel classics.

From the very first notes played, the audience sat up and took notice. Peter Brennan's orchestral arrangements, with Daniel Warren conducting, complemented the original songs, adding depth and resonance to the diverse range of songs covered throughout the evening.

With polished backup vocals from Rique Franks and Katalyn Kiss, the overall effect was second only to hearing Joel himself, live and in his prime.

Between songs, Witter joked with the audience, demonstrating his easy command of Joel's work by playing riffs from better-known songs, while remarking that they wouldn't be playing too many of those tonight.

While there were a number of hits played, the set list also included some of the

more obscure gems from a long and varied career --songs like the atmospheric Say Goodbye to Hollywood, which features Joel at his ambivalent best, contemplating the shallowness of Hollywood life with a surprising edge of wistfulness.

Another highlight was Goodnight Saigon, in which the simple melodic line, with its repetitive, singsong quality, contrasts with the dark, explosive power of the lyrics -- it's a song of psychological trauma, of a man stripped of his illusions and pushed to the edge. The overall effect was sombre and electrifying.

That one man could have written both Uptown Girl and Goodnight Saigon is a powerful testimony to the range and diversity of Joel's talent.

From Lullaby, sung as a moving duet with Rique Franks, to the vitriolic honesty of Big Shot, we were guided through the contrasting moods of the songs with wonderful humour and insight.

Of course, no tribute to Billy Joel would be complete without The Piano Man, the ultimate homage to the life of the barroom troubadour and his motley audience of sad dreamers, and Witter drew the audience in further by encouraging us to sing along.

No one wanted the evening to end -- and we were gifted with two encores. A New York State of Mind transported us to that particular way of being that is uniquely urban, while the second encore -- Where's the Orchestra? -- was a potent tribute to the evening.

Fortunately for us, it was not a question we had to ask, for the orchestra was most assuredly present. When combined with the more contemporary sounds of Jeff Christmas on drums, Ian Tanner's electric bass and Peter Brennan's guitar, the result was a fun, fresh take on familiar favourites and the altogether unique fusion of sound that is Jeans 'n Classics.

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