

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Jackson Browne

Festival Theatre

Fourteen guitars - all in a row. The show is billed as solo acoustic but it looks like the set up for the Eagles. Jackson Browne admits it is "obnoxious" for one person to have quite so many instruments but, he confides, he needs all those special tunings.

He certainly has plenty of special tunes. For more than thirty years and twelve albums, Jackson Browne has had the patent on the California sound which so dominated music in the latter half of the 1970s. A star for David Geffen's Asylum label, his songs of literate, melodic introspection were framed by the kind of smooth country arrangements which we also associate with the Byrds, the Burritos and Gram Parsons - and would make megastars of the Eagles.

Jackson Browne embodied the poetic soul of American pop - especially with his boyish good looks, his skinny frame and hippie brown hair. At seventeen his songs were being picked up by folkies like Tom Paxton and Tom Rush and pop acts like the Jackson Five. Unkind critics called him chilled white wine, but for many Browne represented, and still represents, the late Sixties spirit under siege in the decades which followed. Jackson Browne kept on singing of high Western skies and the shape of the heart, as well as on behalf of citizens concerned about nukes and Contragate, rainforests and the collective follies of the Bush family tree.

His current tour, it would seem, is especially devoted to connecting with the fans. Travelling for the first time without a band, Jackson Browne is solo and vulnerable. No hot session musicians to provide that LA studio sound, no David Lindley with his splendid lead work. Just the singer, his famous repertoire, and fourteen guitars plus one piano lined up for whatever may be.

It is a relaxed Jackson Browne who greets us with a giddy and, from *Looking East, The Barricades of Heaven*. That sweet tenor voice is still in very good shape and at fifty five this man is still unbelievably youthful. Shifting to the piano he plays *Rock Me on the Water* and then, after dithering with an

untuned guitar, goes back to the keyboard for the sepulchral opening bars to *For a Dancer*, a classic Browne song with its melancholy minor chords and his keening vocal - this time eerily bereft of the sweet harmonies on his records.

It becomes apparent that there is no setlist and the singer starts to take requests from the audience. This is all very democratic but the show starts to lose momentum as it appears we are hostage to the craziest person in house, or at least the noisiest. Someone bellows out "you decide!" but even after *Something Fine*, *Jamaica Say You Will* and *Running on Empty* the first half ends with some fine performances, but not a settled set.

It is after interval that things really lift with *For Everyman* and, after a short and sharp preamble on current American foreign policy, a cluster of protest songs - the excellent *Lives in the Balance* and Steve Van Zandt's *I am a Patriot*. Early songs *My Opening Farewell* and *These Days* still stand strong, as does his lament for the ideals of youth, *The Pretender*. He follows with a highlight, *Sky Blue and Black*, from his tellingly named *I'm Alive* album. Played with dirge-like pace but beautifully phrased with churchy keyboards it is only matched by what is surely one of his very best - *Late For the Sky*. Warren Zevon's *Mutineer* is the only other cover of the night, so nicely captured Browne should do more such departures.

It is fitting that he might conclude with *Take it Easy*, not the Spanish rap version he briefly demonstrates but a cut down reading with Browne on busker guitar. And for a final encore - another mid-seventies favourite, *Before the Deluge*. "Now let the music keep our spirits high" - and the rapt response from the audience suggests that it has. Jackson Browne only played with six of his guitars but he played with all of his singular talent and he is still running on plenty.