

Singer Nick Lowe in Louisville, Kentucky

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1 October 2012

Louisville, Kentucky, was the fifth stop on British singer-songwriter Nick Lowe's latest tour of the US. Best known for having written such songs as "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love, and Understanding" and "Cruel to Be Kind," Lowe, at 63, has a rich catalogue of music behind him and continues to record significant material today.

The Louisville show September 23 was an intimate affair, with Lowe performing solo, accompanied only by his own acoustic guitar. The loose and casual quality of the show was very appealing, allowing for a special kind of give-and-take between performer and audience.

Lowe's music is well-written and thoughtful. It is also accessible, even danceable, without sacrificing any of its substance or in any way "dumbing down." The more humorous and satirical works, of which there are quite a number, are perceptive and convey good-natured amusement rather than a cynical skewering. There is a *humane* quality running through all of it. It was a pleasure to attend a pop music show in which one heard communicated such a wide range of emotion and recognizably human moments, including triumphs and failures.

Lowe's set drew equally from newer works, including songs from albums *The Old Magic* (2011) and *At My Age* (2007), and older favorites from *Labour of Lust* (1979), *Nick the Knife* (1982), *The Impossible Bird* (1994) and others.

"Stoplight Roses," from *The Old Magic*, opened the show. Lowe has said that he wrote the song after a man approached his car at a stoplight one day and tried to sell him a bouquet of roses. Lowe, who prefers to write from a character's point of view rather than creating purely autobiographical works, then began to imagine a somewhat self-centered man who might impulsively buy one of these bouquets in a last-ditch attempt to

apologize for yet another wrong committed against his lover. So the song in question, featuring a beautiful lyrical turn, was born. "You'd better steel yourself and prepare for some blues to descend, 'cause you've broken something this time," sang Lowe, "stoplight roses can't mend."

"What's Shakin' on the Hill" is among Lowe's more eloquent works. In it, a man sings of the "good life" of the affluent crowd of which he cannot be a part. He is both attracted to and repulsed by this impossible dream. The song's lyrics are settled in the most delicate of chord progressions:

There's a cool wind blowing in the sound of happy people

At a party given for the gay and debonair
There's an organ blowing in the breeze
For the dancers hid behind the trees
But I ain't never gonna see
What's shakin' on the hill

The warm and generous "Long Limbed Girl," about a man who happens upon a picture of a former flame and wonders whatever became of her, hoping she has found some kind of happiness, was another standout from the first portion of the show.

In "I Trained Her to Love Me," on the other hand, Lowe assumes the character of an unrepentant chauvinist, full of himself and ridiculous. "If you think that it's depraved and I should be ashamed," sang Lowe, "So what?" Lowe played up the character, improvising asides not featured on the original recording, to the delight of the audience.

Many of Lowe's more "rocking" numbers were left for the second half of the show. "Cruel to Be Kind," the power pop classic which first appeared on the 1979 album *Labour of Lust*, was a crowd favorite. Everyone seemed to be singing along with Lowe on the song's familiar chorus.

The anthemic "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace,

Love, and Understanding” became a clap-along celebration. “When I Write The Book,” first recorded with Lowe’s excellent band Rockpile, could have been a hit for Motown. The beat of the song and its spirit are completely infectious.

It’s a testament to the strength of Lowe’s songwriting that so much of what he plays, whether Tin Pan Alley-styled torch songs, country songs or driving rock ’n roll numbers like “Cruel to Be Kind” hold up so well when his band is stripped away and they are heard played on an acoustic guitar.

“I Knew the Bride When She Used to Rock and Roll,” another of Lowe’s bigger hits, in which he tells the story of a girl who used to “rock ’n roll,” but has now gone over to conventional, married life, was featured toward the end of the performance. After getting off to an exciting start, Lowe forgot the words going into the second verse before laughing at himself and asking someone to remind him. An audience member quickly picked up where Lowe left off, and the singer jumped back in. It didn’t matter. Somehow the wheels never came off.

Lowe is an entertainer in the best sense of the word, in which serious art and “entertainment” are not mutually exclusive. His performances and recordings are highly recommended.

To find out where Lowe will be performing next, readers may go to the tour page of his record label’s official web site.



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