

**NEIL YOUNG: Neil Young, solo and soulful in Chicago (Toledo Blade, 5/11) He is 68 years old, but in overdrive. He introduces his corporate sponsor: water. And notes that the glass that holds it is brought to us by two other “great products” — fire and san**

COMMENTARY

Neil Young, solo and soulful in Chicago

By Keith C. Burris, Columnist for the Blade, 5/11/14

CHICAGO — Neil Young walks onto the stage of the ancient, elaborate Chicago Theater with an easy, slouching gait. The crowd begins the night on its feet — instant standing O. Mr. Young nods, bows a bit from his waist, his hands folded like a yogi, and he claps a bit back at the audience.

He sits down in a circle of six acoustic guitars and one banjo. To his left is a grand piano; to his right an upright piano; elevated and to the back of the stage is a pipe organ. There is at least one harmonica. Mr. Young dips the harmonica in water and then flicks the water out before he plays — a trick he says he learned from the jazz musician Sonny Terry.

Also present is a cigar store Indian, there for all of Mr. Young’s shows. He will pretend to consult with him at various points in the night.

No other musicians will appear on the stage.

Without greeting or ado at the April 22 show, he plunges in. He begins with “From Hank to Hendrix,” as in Williams and Jimi. Mr. Young owns Hank’s old guitar. He made his way to Woodstock with Jimi.

“From Hank to Hendrix, I walked these streets with you. Here I am with this old guitar, doing what I do.” His eyes are shaded by a black fedora, and they are often shut, just as Marian Anderson and Billie Holiday closed their eyes to better disappear into the music. His legs sway spastically as he plays. He scowls and grimaces. In the most tender-hearted of Neil Young songs there is a hint of menace and in the hardest, toughest song, tenderness. He is always working so damn hard trying to find it. “It” being the sound, the payment to the muse, the feeling.

Ushers have warned us that the first three songs are a “hold” — if you get up to leave you will have to wait for song four to reclaim your seat. The artist has begun to paint. The priest is setting the altar.

In another song he sings: “Come a little bit closer. Hear what I have to say.”

Mr. Young is loose and (for him) talkative this night. His voice is in exceptionally fine shape. He is 68 years old, but in overdrive. He introduces his corporate sponsor: water. And notes that the glass that holds it is brought to us by two other “great products” — fire and sand. He tells a story about one of his guitars (given to him by Stephen Stills): It has a bullet hole in it. And this segues somehow to a reimagined “Southern Man.”

“There came gem after gem. Less well known ones like “On the Way Home,” and “Mellow My Mind,” and the sublime “Philadelphia,” which has never been recorded. There was a wonderful, weird song from the album “Freedom” called “Someday” — as well as the biggies like “Harvest,” “After the Goldrush,” and his masterpiece “Cortez The Killer.”

His set list was a dream set for old Young hands. But the amazing thing is that he sang so many of his old songs as if for the first time, tinkering with keys and modulations, helping us, the listeners, hear them as new.

Mr. Young calls these concerts recitals. They are certainly not rock concerts. Bob Dylan once

asked David Crosby: How does Neil do that?

He closed with “Heart of Gold” — a song written as a youthful anthem of aspiration which has now become an adult prayer.

People react differently to a Neil Young concert. Some women just scream. A few young men yell out incongruously during the concert: “Neil!” or “Love You Neil.” He evokes this very personal response. I found myself audibly mumbling, “my gosh,” or “wow,” after almost every song — each delivered with such musical force and percussive power that, as my daughter once said to me, the experience is somehow symphonic.

Emmylou Harris once said Neil Young should have his own section in record stores: rock, folk, classical, jazz, blues, Neil Young.

By the end of the show, the ushers at the theater stood in the doorways, transfixed.

We all knew it was a special night.

Mr. Young himself seemed amazed at it all. At this concert, he actually thanked his audience, which I have never seen him do so expressly, saying, and then laughing: “Without you I am singing to an empty hall.”

Why do we come?

I think it goes back, in a sense, to the man’s work ethic — that snarl and grimace and attempt to dig to the essence of the music and the poem. “It.” The heart of gold.

Also, I once read that Neil Young’s dad said: “He sings in a way that twists my heart.”

Yep.

Keith C. Burris is a columnist for The Blade.

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