

Solo performance by Costello brings out harmony, sweet harmony

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The arena is dark. The spotlight falls on one man. A slide projector casts images of the Eiffel Tower and the Sphinx upon a widescreen. A television set sits atop the grand piano in the background. The Red Sox are playing the Angels. Maybe it is just coincidence that Costello starts his set with a driving "(The Angels Wanna Wear My) Red Shoes."

Ten years ago, he was your usual angry, young man from Great Britain. But his pop instincts and thinking-man lyricism helped him wade his way to the forefront of the punk movement with songs like "Red Shoes," "Less than Zero," and the tender "Alison." His debut album, "My Aim is True," was so dumbfoundingly good, channeling the punk frenzy of that day to riffs reminiscent of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and the Animals. But, in taking on the namesake of a man who had just died from the pills of success and stardom, Declan Patrick Aloysius Macmanus also marred his debut with arrogance.

His voice — his signature — has not changed over the years, always strained, always burning. Sometimes he wails and screams — the rocker. Other times, he whispers, chokes, sings with surprising gentleness — the ballad singer. But his

musical style has changed, as he has dabbled in country-western, rhythm and blues, Motown, and, more recently, the folk style of Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens, and Harry Chapin.

In concert, his older songs — "Green Shirt," "Oliver's Army," "Radio Sweetheart," "Party Girl" — do not hold up as well as his newer ones. They seem to call for the color and punch that Costello's band, the Attractions, could have lent to the tapestry.

In contrast, his songs from the 1986 album "King of America," many moody and autobiographical, soar when sung solo. They could be played on the street corner or in the local coffeehouse. In "Brilliant Mistake," Costello bemoans the trap he's set for himself in America, "the boulevard of broken dreams," where stardom is "a trick they do with mirrors and with chemicals." He confronts the conflict between his desire for fame and his fear of selling out.

Costello has always been a college favorite, but it was only with "Armed Forces" and "Trust" that he started gaining mainstream attention in America. In tackling this stardom, he stumbled with his next three albums, experimenting with large orchestras and more complex arrangements. The critics jumped on him.

He was a fine idea at the time, now he's a brilliant mistake.

Costello had clearly lost control by the time the indulgent "Goodbye, Cruel World" and his "Best of" collection hit the stores. So he pared down his writing and instrumental arrangements with some help from T-Bone Burnett and came out with the simple, more personal "King."

In the same way, singing now in the hockey arena, his show careens from wall to wall and threatens to tumble out of control, at times flowing smoothly upon the musical ice. Other times, he picks a fight with the audience. Performing "I Want You," for example, the show embarrassingly bogs down as Costello puts on a maudlin display of crying out to his lover (or, on a different level, his listening audience): "I want you, I want you, I want you. . ."

But perhaps Costello wants the show to bog down at this point, to show his frustration, to show that he wants to control his obsession, but that the obsession really controls him. Most of his songs, in fact, concern control: the control that dirty politicians use to run a country, the control that lovers try to tie around each other, the control that the bland pop culture holds over the artist.

In the most moving songs of the evening — "Suit of Lights," "I'll Wear it Proud-

ly," "Poisoned Rose," "Sleep of the Just," and "(What's So Funny 'Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding" (played as a duet with Nick Lowe, who ably warmed the crowd with his opening act) — Costello sings about these matters and how he personally reacts to them.

He knows that he is not a good guy. He knows that he has done some very hateful things in the past. But he is also surprised that there is a woman in his life who loves him, a woman whom he loves, as well. The new wedding band on his finger gives weight to these songs.

* * * *

Costello is asking members of the audience to spin the giant wheel of songs. Where it stops, nobody knows. When a beam of light falls upon the name of a song, Costello plays it. The people who have just spun the wheel sit by the piano, listening to this man play as if he were an old friend.

At times, he can act like a blubbing, drunken fool, wailing like a squalid tomcat, alone in the midnight alley. For the most part, though, he acts like a man out of time. He's one of the few musicians trying to change the music, rather than letting the music change him. He's screaming for help. The words spew out.

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