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 towers 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 Wanta Wear My Red Shoes."

Ten years ago, he was your usual angry, young, one-man band, the ballad singer. But his whispers, chokes, sings with surprising tenor. Sometimes he wails and changed over the years, always strained, 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 old 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 star 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 tracks such as "Want You," for example, the show embarks on a journey of emotional redemption. Other times, he picks a fight with the audience. Performing "I'm Not Sure," for example, the show almost wades into the local coffeehouse. In the same way, singing now in the hockey arena, his show seems 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 embarks on a journey of emotional redemption. Other times, he picks a fight with the audience. Performing "I'm Not Sure," for example, the show almost wades into the local coffeehouse. In the most moving songs of the evening — "Suit of Lights," "I'm Not Sure," Costello sings about 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 harmful 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. His 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 brooding, drunken fool, wailing like a squalid cat, 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.