Joel's Kontsert redeems him as ambassador to Russia

KONTSERT
Billy Joel, on CBS Records.

By JULIAN WEST

Billy Joel's performance as an international ambassador on his trip to the Soviet Union left something to be desired. As the first major US pop musician to tour in the USSR, he did little to ensure that there would be a second — kicking over chairs, complaining about his audience, and generally behaving boorishly.

He has redeemed himself with this double-album set, a concert recording made in Russia, titled simply Kontsert. Packaged in red, and with a cover photo of young Russians holding up Soviet and US flags, the album makes a strong statement for international understanding and glasnost.

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As you would expect, some of the songs go over extremely well in concert, others less so. "Stiletto" has some beautiful keyboard licks, but too-visceral sound effects by Joel. "A Matter of Trust" is far too heavy, but it was never his best song anyway.

Another poor choice was not editing out some of the speech. While it helps to capture the full flavor of a live performance, listeners will not want to hear the band introduced every time they play the album. And while Joel's occasional screeds and"nyet, nyet, nyet"(in "Big Shot") are cute, the on-stage translation is a little tiresome.

The recording is also available on a single double-length cassette. One advantage is that where the vinyl must be flipped, the tape is continuous, and the tracks blend together over the gap. "Goodnight Saigon" goes straight into "Stiletto.""Goodnight Saigon," the opening helicopter effect flies on one side of the tape, the other. The selection of material is less commendable, if somewhat understandable. It has been said that the fate of all artists is "people saying they preferred the old stuff." This is true of no more than 10% of Billy Joel, which is one good thing about this album: if you liked nothing after Glass Houses, you can still enjoy half of the album.

But there is still not enough of the "old stuff." There is no track taken from Piano Man, and only one from The Stranger (that not the best). Thus the concert encapsulates only the past ten years of Joel's career.

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More crucially, another advantage of the tape is that you can flip it right after "Stiletto," rhythmically exciting three of the newest songs and going straight into the excellent final sequence: "Only the Good Die Young"(the oldest original song on the album), "Sometimes a Fantasy," "Uptown Girl"(the best of the newer songs), "Big Shot," and the two well chosen covers, "Back in the USSR," and "My Fair Lady." The first of these covers provides the audience with a chance to show that they remember the Beatles as well as Joel's older, the second is Joel's optimistic assessment of glasnost.

Who is to say he is not right? Albums like this are not enough, but they are a step in the right direction.

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