

# Mellow perhaps, but never bland

Ani DiFranco's performance at her Singapore debut reflects her maturity and spontaneity, reports **CHRISTOPHER LIM**

**H**OW do you reconcile protest songs with sweet love ballads when they come from the same woman? It can be even harder to wrap your mind around that kind of drastic juxtaposition when the woman is Ani DiFranco, once famous for explosive-filled political songs.

"There was a phase in my life when every one of my songs had the F-word," DiFranco remarked self-deprecatingly during her Singapore debut on Tuesday night. "I'm much less angry now," she added with a chuckle.

But a lack of angsty rage doesn't mean that she has mellowed to middle-of-the-road blandness. Instead, what DiFranco presented to the receptive audience at the Esplanade Theatre was equal measures of aggression and joy.

## Confident and passionate

She threw out the original game plan of sticking to material from her latest album *Red Letter Year*, and instead went through a quartet of songs from various parts of her career before finally getting around to the new album's title track. You can only do that when you and the rest of your band know your entire discography inside out. There was no aimless strumming about while trying to remember chords or lyrics – just confident and passionate delivery, every time.



**Playing up a storm:** DiFranco proved that a single acoustic guitar can be thunderously raucous by itself

If you found *Red Letter Year* a tad too sedate and composed, you would have appreciated the juiced-up live versions that DiFranco fired off.

You may not agree with her politics. Her anti nuclear power stance may well be misguided. But there is no doubt that she believes every

single word that comes out of her mouth. And such sincerity can be compelling and infectious.

It remains palatable even when she gets a tad overwrought about United States President Barack Obama in the song that she wrote to celebrate his inauguration.

It will be interesting to see how

some of the more radio-friendly hits from *Red Letter Year* do on the charts and radio airwaves. One in particular stands out – *Smiling Underneath* – which DiFranco performed with style in concert.

There is no mystery about where her new-found mellowness comes from. She just got married, and sang a song that she wrote for her husband Mike Napolitano, who is also her producer.

And there was also *Present/Infant*, a tribute to her two-year-old daughter Petah Lucia that is featured in her new album. It's hard to stay angry when all is well with love and family.

## Value for money

The 100-minute concert may not match the total length of most Chinese gigs here, but considering there was no intermission and DiFranco performed non-stop without leaving the stage, she was definitely value for money.

It isn't easy to strum an acoustic guitar the way she does for more than one-and-a-half hours without a break.

If you've ever wondered whether a single acoustic guitar can be thunderously raucous by itself, DiFranco proved that this is indeed possible – provided that you attack the instrument with as much attitude as she does.

Although she remained at the core of the concert, without pushing the stage to someone else so she could take a bathroom break, she did not carry the gig alone. Her excellent band never faltered in its support, always keeping up with her but never overshadowing her.

Kudos to Greenhorn Productions for consistently introducing interesting artists to Singapore. The event promoter's previous gigs include Death Cab For Cutie and Suzanne Vega.

Whoever it brings in next, they will probably be worth seeing.