

February 7, 2013

Josh Ritter captivates audience at acoustic coffeehouse

by Jack McManus '13
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Before the doors opened at 7:30 p.m. there were already a few dozen students in line to enter the Barn, a sure sign that excitement was running high for this week's special Tuesday edition of Acoustic Coffeehouse with Josh Ritter. Returning to the stage after a five-month hiatus—during which he became a first-time father and announced a new album—Josh's excitement matched the audience's, ensuring a special night of song debuts, intimate performances and the spirit of sublime wintertime joy that FebFest embodies.

Oklahoma-based singer/songwriter Samantha Crain opened the event with a charismatic solo set that included several songs from her upcoming album *Kid Face*. Crain's songs all shared a distinct sound that relied mainly on her dexterous guitar fingerpicking and confident vocals, which quivered with subtle vibrato on almost every note. Although she admitted a lack of experience performing in such a featured role, Crain engaged the audience with her honest lyrics and personable stage presence, once pausing to explain that a loose bridge pin on her mahogany Martin guitar threatened to end the show at any moment.

Without any drums or amps to be arranged, there was a quick set break before Ritter took the stage just after 9 p.m. Standing alone on stage, he started with a stirring version of "Ida-

ho," accompanying himself on guitar for the song, which he usually sings a cappella. He followed this haunting opener with "Monster Ballads," another old favorite, before inviting the mustachioed Zach Hickman to join him on upright bass for a reworked version of "Rumors." Usually a full band workout, this acoustic arrangement featured a frenzied, neck-climbing bass solo from Hickman that drew a mid-song burst of applause from the packed Barn. Guitarist Austin Nevins then joined Josh and Zach to perform "Wolves" as an acoustic trio, with Josh dropping to his knees to shout the passionate last verse into his mic from a distance. About half of the evening's songs would use this lineup, including most of the brand new tunes like "Joy To You Baby," "Nightmares" and "Bonfire," all from his upcoming album *The Beast In Its Tracks*, which will come out on March 5.

After a businesslike opening segment, Josh started opening up to the crowd after aborting "Temptation of Adam" during its first line to tell the audience about the song's inspiration—a 100lb. bag of potatoes he used to keep in his basement. While he spoke to the audience with his trademark wit and sophisticated silliness, these moments of banter sometimes exposed his nervousness as he struggled to organize his thoughts. Later in the show he admitted that unveiling his new set of personal songs made him unusually nervous, but the few mistakes were



PHOTO BY KEVIN PRIOR '13

Josh Ritter is now performing after a five-month hiatus.

graciously forgiven by the respectful audience.

Josh excused his bandmates after a bouncy "Me and Jiggs" about halfway through the set, unplugging his guitar and stepping away from the microphones to play a stunning unamplified version of "Girl In The War," which he smoothly transitioned into "Naked As A Window," an underrated bonus track from his 2007 album *The Historical Conquests of Josh Ritter*. He followed the emotional lover's lament with a fiery, aggressive take on "Rattling Locks," one of his most intimidating songs. Still solo and unamplified, he let loose with loud stomps of his feet

and wailing screams that that audience didn't seem to expect from the usually good-natured, upbeat performer.

Barreling straight past his 10:30 ending time, Josh followed up his lighthearted new song "New Lover" with his most humorous of the night, a narrative with a surprise ending entitled "Sir Galahad" that he released on an outtakes EP in 2011. Changing moods entirely, a student called out a request for "Here At The Right Time," one of his quietest ballads, and he happily complied. With curfew long broken, Josh ended the set with the bubbly new song "In Your Arms Again" and crowd-favorite "Kathleen."

Despite a few minor nervous moments, Josh's gracious and endearing presence quickly won over the crowd, who deserve acknowledgement for their respectful silence during the show's quietest moments. With many of the show's debuts focusing on the traumatic end of his marriage, Josh really exposed himself at times, even admitting that he's "not used to talking about this stuff" on stage, but the crowd was respectful and appreciative of all the new material. Josh's yearlong tour started Wednesday night in Albany, and when he left Hamilton on Tuesday night to start preparing he surely left a lot of new Josh Ritter fans in his wake.

Michael Ian Black fills Wellin with people, laughter



PHOTO BY SARA MEISSNER '13

by Taylor Coe '13
CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Michael Ian Black prefers uncomfortable situations.

When he has the opportunity to make an awkward moment more awkward, he leaps at it. After polling a crowded Wellin Hall, nearly filled to its 698-person capacity, about who had a Valentine and who was single (the singles let out a roar), Black asked all single heterosexual women to raise their hands. Only a few brave souls volunteered, and Black selected a woman in the front row. Then he asked the inevitable next question: Any single heterosexual men? Another front-row attendee raised his hand. Black, digging deep into the discomfort, paired them off, making them sit next to one another for the remaining half-hour of his stand-up act.

Handing the male student a five-dollar bill, he said, "Take Emma to the Commons after the show, get her breakfast and...who knows? Breakfast might lead to breakfast!"

One of the highlights of Black's set was this weird insistence on linguistic irregularity: his pronunciation of "subtle" with an audible "b" (a meta-joke in and of itself), his awkward definite article before every "pot" mention in the story of

his Amsterdam honeymoon and even his twisted use of the word "breakfast," which, in the context of his joke, provides a definition that you definitely would not find in *Webster's*.

"Strangers don't find me funny," said Black at the beginning of his act, "and that's really bad when your job is to be a comedian."

Black went on to narrate two encounters with strangers that sounded decidedly unfunny in context. One of them involved a waitress who made the relatively normal claim that her restaurant could make any pizza that he wanted. Black, choosing subtlety over silliness, asked whether or not pepperoni would be a possible topping. When the waitress replied that they could definitely create such a pizza, Black had a moment: Who was now messing with whom in this situation?

It is this strange awareness of how humor works, paired with all these linguistic oddities, that enables us to consider Black's work a kind of meta-comedy, extremely aware of itself. Humor clearly infects all areas of his life, along with thinking about that humor.

In an interview before the show, Black proved to be just as sharp-witted off stage as he was when on stage. When asked about how much

his two children, ages 12 and nine, understand his brand of humor, Black was frank, but weirdly funny.

"I'm basically an intellectual," said Black. "I'm like a philosopher-king. So my fart jokes probably go over the heads of 90% of adults, let alone children, little children who can't possibly understand the nuances and social satire of my fart jokes."

The only off moment in Black's entire set was a long story about the history of a high school punk rock band. After a string of riotously funny moments, this narrative forced audiences to endure minutes of silence. What felt like a build towards a gutsy punch line ended up being the minor revelation that the bassist who Black fired from their punk band—"the only legitimate punk rocker among us," as he noted—ended up being the leader of his own successful punk band twenty years later.

But the story lacked the punch that the rest of his material had; it was rambling, inconclusive and not very funny.

Thankfully, that longer story proved at odds with the rest of his set, which explored several episodes of Black's life so sordid that they cannot be printed in these pages. And that's a good thing, isn't it?

Black tells a humiliating and hilarious doctor's office story.