

rare capacity to give emotional reality to reported fact.

Michael Billington

Until December 2. Box office: 020-7928 6363

Pop

Kinky Friedman

Underworld, London

★★★★☆

A hefty proportion of the sold-out audience have seen Kinky Friedman perform once for every gallon in his hat, and it's immediately obvious why they keep coming back for more. The country singer meets dime-a-crime novelist is a crowd-pleaser of the highest order, the kind of old-fashioned entertainer who thinks lighting a cigar should be played for laughs. His eyes twinkle cheerily and that huge

moustache twitches with pleasure as he knocks out the same songs he's been playing since the 1970s with an infectious enthusiasm and enjoyable, only slightly ironic, appreciation of his own brilliance.

This isn't so much a gig as a variety show: a little music, a little stand-up, a literary interlude as Friedman swaps his guitar for a copy of his latest novel, *The Mile High Club*. His banter is so honed you could slice cheese with it; the daft gags linking each song are old as his hometown of Texas, but Friedman knowing this just makes them more amusing.

Friedman has Little Jewford, the only remaining member of his 1970s band, the Texas Jewboys, a man who looks like a hybrid of Jeremy Clarkson and Matthew Kelly, and whose main talent (apart from deliciously cornball synth and kazoo skills) is an

ability to sound like he's on helium. He happily plays Friedman's foil, recoiling as Friedman mimes bashing his head with a guitar, even falling off his chair at the end of a chromatic scale. You can't but laugh at such stupidity.

It's not all tomfoolery, however. Friedman radiates a burnished reverence both for country music and for fine writing, so that, even at their silliest, his songs and prose are impeccably designed and a delight to hear. The show is bookended with Friedman playing solo, and the tunes he chooses — *Western Union Wire* at the start, *Sold American* and *Rapid City*, *South Dakota* to close — are as honest and affecting as anything by his heroes Gram Parsons or Hank Williams. It's hard to reconcile this Friedman with the chauvinist of *Get Your Biscuits in the Oven* and *Your*

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