

Fans are uplifted by Dolly's greatest hits

Pop Stephen Dalton

Dolly Parton

Capital FM Arena, Nottingham

★★★★☆

Dolly Parton began her latest British tour with her razzle-dazzle outfit, her million-dollar smile and her syrupy vibrato all set to stun levels.

She is a tinsel-covered, one-woman industry peddling an evergreen mix of exaggerated drag-queen femininity and wholesome Southern charm. Still impressively agile at 65, wasp-waisted and surgically remodelled, she looked amazing in an almost post-human way — the missing link between Liberace and Lady Gaga.

Disappointingly, the uneven two-hours-plus musical marathon that followed was not so much deliriously camp as creaky, corny and condescending. She may be promoting her latest album, *Better Day*, but Parton's core set list and scripted jokes ("it takes a lot of money to look this cheap") have barely changed in decades. Playing guitar, banjo, piano, autoharp, harmonica and several other instruments, all customised with glittery trim, she punctuated her own huge self-penned country-pop songbook with standards including

Son of a Preacher Man and *River Deep, Mountain High*.

Parton hinted repeatedly at a life of struggle and sacrifice, yet there was scarcely a flicker of sorrow in this relentlessly upbeat set.

The only dark clouds came in the feminist-baiting infidelity drama *Jolene*, one of her biggest signature hits, and *Little Sparrow*, an achingly lovely lament stretching back to the Celtic roots of Appalachian folk

music. Otherwise Parton maintained her fixed plastic grin through endless foot-stomping hoedowns and cliché-clogged, blandly optimistic ditties.

Nostalgic bluegrass numbers such as *My Tennessee Mountain Home* were served with a side order of memories from Parton's remarkable early life as one of 12 children raised by dirt-poor farmers. But every well-worn vignette soon became a folksy homily about family and roots, drenched in such rose-tinted sentimentality that this show began to feel like an episode of

'She is far too elusive and polished to touch the deeper emotions'

Dolly Parton: a tinsel-covered one-woman industry

The Waltons narrated by Sarah Palin.

The singer's Christian faith also loomed intrusively large at times. Banal

pop-rock sermons such as *In The Meantime* and *He's*

Everything had none of the passionate uplift of great gospel music, sounding more like Cliff Richard rocking out with Ned Flanders. Not once did she mention her husband of 45 years, nor indeed any reference to her private life. For all her saucy posturing as a kind of Southern-fried Barbara Windsor, Parton projects an oddly facile and asexual image. She tells everything and reveals nothing.

In fairness, Parton finally swept the sedate middle-aged crowd to their feet during her closing run of all-time classic hits, which included the immortal *Islands in the Stream* and an agreeably understated honky-tonk version of *I Will Always Love You*, the 1974 composition that Whitney Houston later transformed into a record-breaking chart-topper. The Backwoods Barbie clearly remains an extraordinary talent, but far too elusive and polished to touch the deeper emotions of a true diva. *The tour continues at Echo Arena, Liverpool, on August 31*

