

# The Bard from Barking

A man and his guitar are the bases of the myth of rock and roll; here lies its purest expression and the romance of the possibility that the lone guitarist can take on the world or, at least, reveal its shortcomings.

Billy Bragg, born 30 years ago in Barking, East London, surfaced in 1983 just as the intelligent-sia that grew out of punk were making way for a new era of company-strangled rock and roll and specialisation.

His naked six track mini-album of that year, *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy* (costing \$300 to promote and selling 150,000 to date) targeted a Thatcher Government flushed with triumph from a colonial war at the expense of an ailing country, and showed that you didn't need the stifling support of record moguls to make an important record.

## The Dirtiest Word

Politics.

Bragg is well known for his Labour sympathies and his support of the miners' strike. Did this strong interest in politics stem from his home background?

"No, I grew up in a safe Labour seat. There were no real politics when I was a kid at home. It wasn't until Thatcher was elected in 1979 that most of my generation started to get interested in politics. There was no stimulus in the 70s to get interested, in fact punk, which I was a great fan of, was very anti-politics. We all pretended we were anarchists without knowing what anarchists were. So I've no political education at all."

So you saw Labour as the lesser of the two evils?

"Yeah, in any two-party system you're not gonna get the perfect situation. Labour's past record isn't as good as it could be but they're open to new ideas. Their policy on nuclear weapons [banning American missile bases there] is a very important point to make, in as much as it is very radical and if they don't do that as soon as they're elected then they're gonna do fuck all else. If they don't do that, my faith in a democratic socialist party is shot."

The New Zealand Labour Party's nuclear-free zone stand must have made some impact in Europe?

"Yeah, it got a lot of publicity over here and the consequences of your stand were particularly interesting to us, because if we're gonna remove their missiles then they're gonna be very angry

with us as well. We've got a lot of respect for David Lange, he's done New Zealand no end of good in the world — he's brought you out of the shadow of Australia. He's made something clearly and distinctively New Zealand for those of us around the world whose consciousness of issues there is small. If you wanted to ask me what's happening in Australasia this week all I could tell you is that the America's Cup is on."

## Mixing Politics With Song

Politics is life, mana, face, influence, prestige and power. But in its literal, specific form it takes second place to love when the best tunes are being written. Bragg's repertoire is no exception, his best personal songs ('The Man in the Iron Mask', 'St Swithin's Day', 'Greetings to the New Brunette' and 'The Passion') have a pathos that his best political tunes can't muster. Agree?

"Yeah, I think so. You can be gentler in the lyrics in a love song which helps the tunes to flow a bit more, you don't have to be so strict with the lyrics. That's a good point."

Bragg's new album is probably the best record he's made, although it's hard to put a true value on the bare, brave beauty of *Life's a Riot*, but *Talking with the Taxman about Poetry* is streets ahead of the flat one-D *Brewing Up*. His songs have more variety and depth and the presence of guests like Johnny Marr ('Just to see him working in the studio was a great help') and John Porter have helped Bragg stay the distance.

It's no coincidence that the weakest song is his most specifically political song, 'There is Power in a Union', a sloganeering anthem:

"I made a very definite attempt to write that sort of song. I wanted to write something in the mode of Joe Hill [famous American union organiser who used folk songs to strengthen the labour movement in the 20s and 30s]. When I started doing gigs with the Trade Union movement during the miners' strike you'd get all these old folksingers from the mining communities singing all these old TU songs and a lot of them were based on hymns."

"I suppose they are sloganeering but I wanted to write something that touched on the strong folk music element of the TU movement. I think 'The Home Front' is much more political, it's personally political. It deals with the way a family dissolves and the way British society dissolves."

At first glance 'The Home Front' looks like a Ray Davies domestic account but Bragg is much more vitriolic:

"The Americans often compare me to Davies. To us in England he wasn't the person who wrote the most like that. Looking from abroad I can see



how English he appears to all of you and I'm well aware of him, but for me it's people like Costello and Weller that really matter."

Davies was much more whimsical and accepting of the lives he was describing:

"Yeah, but he's never seen the Clash play. If he had then he might've written from a different point of view. Punk changed a lot of people's attitude to making music."

## Talking With the Axeman About Taxman

*Talking with the Taxman* has only one non-original on it and that's Bragg's hotted-up version of the Count Bishop's superb 'Train, Train'.

"It's a great song, innit? I started playing it live after I went back to my record collection and found that the song was slower than I remembered which disappointed me. So I played it faster."

Bragg has played America five times and some of his observations are collected on the bitter 'Help Me Save the Youth of America':

"No, it's not bitter, it's questioning and provocative. What shocked me the most over there was that people don't seem to care that there's people literally sleeping in the streets opposite the White House. Nobody seems prepared to accept the responsibility."

"Yet when I played the song over there it often went down better than others, and people would come up to me after and say that there were people helping the youth and they pointed out what I couldn't see as a tourist. So I was pleased with that."

Many of Bragg's songs — 'The Marriage', 'The Passion' and 'Levi Stubbs' Tears' on the new album — deal with the hypocrisy or consequences of a bad marriage. On 'The Marriage' he bites, "I dare you to wear white":

"I come from a big family and the be-all and end-all was getting married. When I was a kid all

of mum's sisters were getting married and when the kids didn't get married when we came of age — I'm 30 this year and still not married — there was this unspoken pressure."

"I'm not anti-marriage, I just think that you should have a better reason for it than wanting to get a mortgage or getting away from your parents."

In the last line of 'The Marriage' you insert the word "probably" making the song less dogmatic:

"It's very important to not suggest that in the way you address issues that you know all the answers. A little bit of doubt never hurt anyone. I just hope that my audience don't take as gospel everything I say. If they do they're expecting far too much from someone who is only a singer-songwriter. It's very dangerous when we allow ourselves to expect people like Bob Dylan or the Clash to have all the answers."

On 'Levi Stubbs' Tears' and 'The Busy Girl Buys Beauty' (from *Life's a Riot*) Bragg has tried to write from the point-of-view of women as the victims:

"Yeah, too few people write about that area. Too few men look at things that way up. I don't claim to understand it but I'm prepared to write about it. There's in-built sexism in all of us that we just grow up with and it's hard to overcome. It's a blindspot, so when you're trying to write from that angle you might've missed something completely obvious. Although I'm very pleased with 'Levi Stubbs' Tears'."

On 'Ideology' and 'To Have and Have Not' from *Life's a Riot*, Bragg attacks privilege:

"Yeah, 'Ideology' attacks parliamentary privilege on both sides of the house. It shows my distrust of MPs and I have to tell you that all the MPs I've met have been Labour."

"'To Have' is more personal, it's an anti-yuppie song, about people being a success and then you measuring your life on their success and finding yourself a failure. That's how I felt when I was unemployed in 1982 and everyone else was at work."

And the class system?

"One day we'll look at classes as a handicap like racism and sexism. There's far too many people from the far left in this country who see the working classes as if they're some pure untainted group of people. They're not, they're the people who read Murdoch's newspapers and want their TV and two cars."

"Pop music is full of people who view the working classes in a patronising way, and if they were working class, they wouldn't want to be. People like that get right up my nose. Being working class is not something you want, you don't want to live in all the scummy areas and grow up there, it's crap."

And your new album's your best:

"Yeah, you make the best you're capable of at the time. As a progression it's going the right way." **George Kay**



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