

AMONG the twitter and glitter and the familiar hawk's cry of "Consume, for tomorrow we are obsolete", what space could there be for an ungainly East Ender armed only with an electric guitar, a handful of songs and a sharp set of wits? Perhaps, like me, you'd be surprised?

The first-ever performance of this one-man band calling itself Spy Versus Spy took place in some pub out in . . . oh, Mile End or somewhere. God, moving in His customary mysterious way, had booked Billy Bragg (for it was he) as a support act for the Sensible Jerseys. At that stage, a year ago, Bragg used to cart a drum machine around with him, but since it would never regurgitate the required patterns on demand it was swiftly abandoned.

At any rate, Bragg learned at once that to make this unlikely experiment work, he would have to fly by the seat of his often-washed jeans and adopt that old maxim of attack being the best form of defence.

Twanging aggressively at his guitar and wringing maximum intensity from his rough but ready voice, he sang his songs with such titles as "New England" and "Love Gets Dangerous", and was surprised to find that people took a break from discussing used cars and West Ham and listened.

Part stand-up comedian, part musical flying picket, Spy Versus Spy was airborne.

Since then, Bragg has been finding more congenial surroundings for his bittersweet songs about love, loss, (lack of) career opportunities and the importance of having something to *hope for*. He's played at the Ad Lib, the classhouse in Peterborough, and has even been banned from the Latchmere in Battersea for being "too provocative".

Billy Bragg is a hefty five foot eleven, vehemently non-violent (perhaps the result of spending the minimum possible time as a trooper in the Royal Armoured Corps), and devoutly optimistic even as he sees many of the things he holds dear being blasted to tatters.

"I can honestly say to you that my inspiration for doing what I'm doing was Spandau Ballet," he explained through a mouthful of tuna sandwich. "I saw them on 'Top Of The Pops'. I can remember it as if it were yesterday, and they were doing 'Chant No 1'."

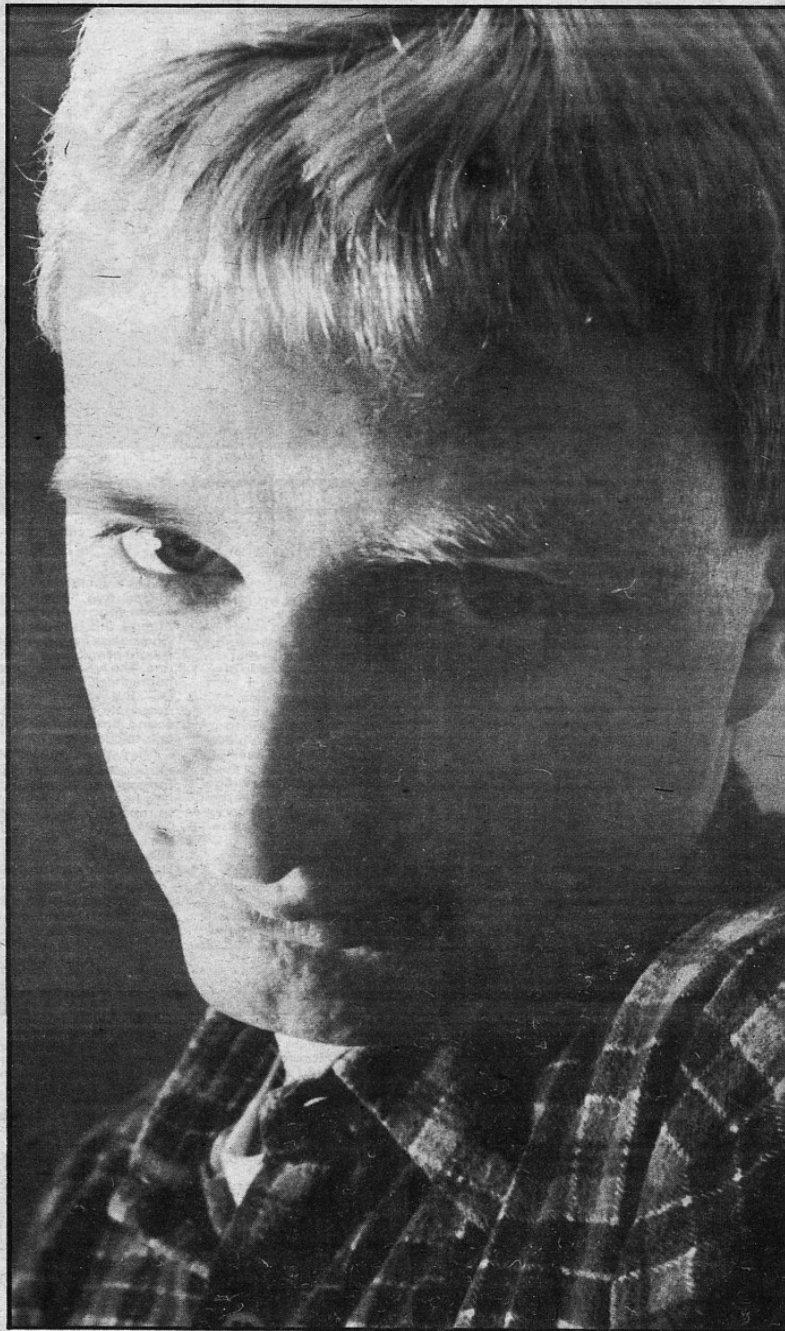
"I thought 'fuck it, this is the way it's gonna be, is it? This is how it's gonna go from now on. I can't believe it. Who is going to come along and sing the music I wanna hear? Nobody's gonna do it. Quick mother, give me that pen and paper!'"

"And the outcome of that is Spy Versus Spy."

"People say to me 'Bill, your songs are all understatement. Everything you do at your gigs is an understatement — you don't have a band, you don't dress up, and your lyrics are understatement too'."

"Well, that song I do called 'To Have And To Have Not' is an understatement of how I feel about the country as a whole." (Sample: "Just because you're better than me/Doesn't mean I'm lazy/Just because I dress like this/Doesn't mean I'm a communist".)

"It's creating two nations again, and I don't mean North and South, I mean Them and Us. Down in the south here I suppose we all think we're



doing pretty well, especially in London. And it reflects on people who live out there, they think that by coming to London they'll be doing something. But London is not somewhere for running away to, but for bringing something you've got to."

BILLY Bragg would never suggest that there are any simple answers, but he'd like people to realise what they're in the process of losing before it's too late. "I'm a great believer in lyrics, right, lyrics to me are the most important thing. I buy Smash Hits religiously."

What to read Tears For Fears' lyrics?

"No, there's 'Speak Like A Child' in there as well, and 'Hope', the Wah! single. But Wylie's not talking about hope, he's talking about boys and girls again — that's only one part of hope."

"I'm not saying to anybody 'this is the end of the world, we're all gonna die if we don't get a job and Mrs Thatcher doesn't get out of Parliament'. But what I *am* saying is that before we wake up one morning and find that all the things we ever wanted to do don't exist any more, all the things there used to be to work for . . ."

"You can't keep taking people's hope away from them, the hope that there won't be a World War Three, the hope that there will be jobs eventually. How can somebody take being told 'you'll never work again', and they're like 35 or something? What must they go home and say to the missus? What must they say to their kids, and what about all their hopes of retirement and everything?"

"The welfare state's being taken apart, and that's something I really feel passionately about. Some of the things the Labour Party does I can't believe in, but I

remain, despite it all, a socialist. It's not the sort of thing I want to whine about, I don't want to preach, but there's no harm in confronting it every now and again and facing up to it."

SOMEHOW, Bragg manages to be a realistic idealist. He freely admits that "To Have And To Have Not" is the only one of his songs which he feels successfully looks beyond his more usual framework of personal experience or relationships, and he's terrified of just singing a mouthful of slogans.

Nevertheless, his songs manage to compress a whole spectrum of angles into their skeletal frameworks, from the chilling "Man In The Iron Mask" to the more whimsical "A New England" ("I saw two shooting stars last night/But they were only satellites/Is it wrong to wish on space hardware?/I wish I wish you'd care . . ."). He avoids the sententious prissiness often associated with "singer-songwriters" by virtue of his tough-but-understanding voice, the crudely clanging chords of his guitar and most of all his witty, compassionate lyrics.

Anyway, you'll have a chance to judge for yourself when a seven-track mini-LP appears on the Pre label in May. It was recorded live onto two-track, just Bragg plus guitar, and it'll be called "Life's A Riot With Spy Versus Spy".

Having overcome his initial terror at standing up and singing to people, he now relishes his solitary status. "I'm a great believer in the fact that one man can move faster than a group, if you see what I mean. I've played in bands but, y'know there's all those boring things about bands — nobody can be bothered to hire the PA and nobody can be bothered to get a van together to carry the gear in, no-one wants to rehearse. . . that's all the reasons for not playing in bands."

"This way I know exactly what I'm doing, where I'm doing it and who I'm doing it with. I have no problems about motivation and I don't have to worry if the bass-player's girlfriend has left him or the drummer's too pissed to stand up."

"People come up to me after gigs and say 'if you ever want to form a band mate, I'll play guitar' — I've got loads of guitarists' phone numbers at home. I take it as an insult when people say that! I think, 'It's taken me that long to get the bottle together to do it on me own, and now everyone wants me to form a band! It's lack of imagination in people's minds, I think."

"A guy from CBS came down to see me at the Latchmere and I spoke to him at half-time, 'cos you have to play two sets there. He said 'very entertaining Bill, but do I hear a hit single?' — sort of rhetorical question. And having just played a set with me guitar and me, I felt like saying 'for fuck's sake, have you got no imagination whatsoever?'"

The minimalist Bragg is not a great believer in the current fetish for lavish studio production. He'd rather people just heard what he was singing about.

"See, with these big production songs I think too much is done for the listener, and it gets lost on the radio or coming out of a tinny little cassette. All those things that Trevor Horn sits up all night putting in, only the band knows they're in there. When I play on me own, every word gets heard."

Lately, he's started including an ancient Cliff Richard song called "Voice In The Wilderness" in his set, as a sort of tongue-in-cheek theme tune for himself.

"I'm asking for it really, singing that, but who cares?"

Who indeed? But that's something we'll have to wait to find out.

THE CLIMATE OF REASON

Adam Sweeting investigates SPY VERSUS SPY, aka Billy Bragg. Pic: Tom Sheehan