

BRAGG

ART

BILLY BRAGG

Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy (Go! Discs)

DOWN WITH MISERABLISM! When pop's operative word is **WALLOW**, when all around is flat **INDULGENCE** and the Gallup machines on high click gamely to the grim beat of the dollar, a man like Billy Bragg is a sparkling tonic. Be lifted by his **AMBITION**, laugh at his **EXUBERANCE**, trust him to make a fool of himself — Billy Bragg is some kind of wonderful.

There's a time to be feckless and forgiving and a time to be honest. Let's be honest, huh? The charts are wilting once again under the weight of their own timidity, that pitiful, passive bleat of the easily satisfied, of a humble, grovelling conservatism that begs miserable acceptance. Pop plays eager pimp to Thatcher's no-alternativism, soft-selling the cuddly lie courtesy numerous sham hipsters, courtiers dressed as rebels — **The Alarm**, all back-combed hair and hot air; the **Wham!** scam, record company poodles *par excellence*, leather jackets and passion on Hire Purchase; a shabby Phalangist beat group called **The Truth** (who, like *Pravda*, betray their past and are nothing of the sort).

All dressed up and nowhere to go, flitty pop has never loomed so tame, never mumbled so meek, never looked so listless — the awesome **Boxer** beat is merely the beat of desperation, the sound of popular music marking time.

Billy Bragg hails from Romford, a suburb in search of a city. The

sound he makes is somewhat different. From the immaculate Barney Bubbles sleeve (a dead smart Penguin Classics pastiche) to the truculent talent inside, his album bristles with wit and wits. Billy Bragg is a rorty bugger. Hear that **GUITAR!**

Re-released this week on the Go! Discs label after an abortive appearance on *Charisma*, 'Life's A Riot' flies in the face of all that is trite and overblown. Simple and supreme, it adheres to the finer spirit of popular music — Do and Have Done With — minimum production, maximum rock 'n' roll. It boasts the best guitar sound heard this year and captures that essence rare — no mime, no fake, but roughshod enthusiasm — the essence of those early Presley TV appearances, no second takes just wallop! One to get ready and go cat go!

Of course it is flawed, magificently flawed, sometimes it aches, but why tart it up when you can slap it down? Billy is, phew, a performer and it shows. As with his brash Peel session (secured, as these things so often are, with the bribe of a mushroom curry), the groove is carried admirably by one man and his fretboard. Just as the percussive power of 'That's All Right (Mama)' spilled WITHOUT DRUMS from Elvis and Scotty, so too the rhythm's driven solely by six strings and Billy's vocal bottle (notably neat on 'The Busy Girl Buys Beauty' and 'A New England').

On 'The Man In The Iron Mask' he even stumbles across a new **FOLK MUSIC** — that diary of the masses, the memory of the class, a glorious musical tradition revisited. Sadly, Billy's



Billy Bragg lights up your life.

Billy Bragg lights up your life.

affectionate re-working of 'Route 66' is missing from this collection (young Bragg being banned by the song's publishers from including 'A13 — Trunk Road To The Sea' on the grounds that it "ridicules the American way of life", the present expansionist US administration being, presumably, particularly sensitive to references to Wapping). Lack

of comic patter and the A13 withstanding, 'Life's A Riot' is a winning set, a mighty, welcome sound.

Ignore the intolerant sourpuss soul-only divs and associated tinpot Sinatras — the electric guitar has *always* been a devil worth knowing. Freddy King knew it, Wilko Johnson knew it, wily old Peelie knows it... you have only

to listen once to Steve Cropper's guitar and know then that its voice has soul just as surely as Tony Hadley's voice has none.

And Billy Bragg? From frontline to grooveline and back again — I'm glad as hell he's made it. AVANTI!

X Moore