

it all started about 24 years ago in Barking, but we can skip almost everything until his mid-teens when he owned a tape with "Motown Chartbusters Vol 3" on one side and classic American singer-songwriters Simon and Garfunkel on the other, which he played endlessly. A diet of reflective composers like Bob Dylan and Jackson Browne followed until he formed a punk-inspired band called Riff Raff. Most people have skeletons in the closet. Not Bill. He has dead goats.

"We spent some time recording in a studio in the country where there were goats in the field outside, but they kept dying and ..." to cut the story short (he tends to tell very long stories) it was always Billy who got the job of goat burying. Last to die was "Desmond the Mutant, sort of a cross between a goat and a skinhead" who won his free ticket to paradise by eating gradually up the bark of a tree to which he was tethered, until he fell over backwards and hung himself (*Charming!* — Ed.).

But it wasn't the goats that convinced him to quit Riff Raff. He had to find a way to present his music so that the words could be heard and was toying with the idea of becoming a solo performer, when he was struck with an inexplicable wayward urge to join the army.

"Almost inexplicable," he corrects me. "Especially for a geezer who knows 'Career Opportunities' by The Clash and 'Armed Forces' by Costello as well as I do. I really wanted to drive a tank, but it ended up as my journey to darkness, the furthest thing possible from everything I believe in." After three months he bought himself out, determined to return to music. "All those idiots who pose in uniforms and write macho songs about guns ... it's nothing to write songs about." Which brings us swiftly back to Go! Records.

So far, Billy hasn't even tickled the pop charts. In fact, he may never do, because he's not prepared to sweeten his abrasive sound just to win daytime radio play. So why are people buying his album? "Certainly not for the disco mix, John," he tells me, loud and hearty, making his tenth cup of coffee of the day. "Not because I'm a snappy dresser, or they like my nose. If they're not buying it for the lyrics, then I don't know why."

I know why. They're buying it because everything he does is stamped unmistakably with originality, melody, power, passion and wit. That's all.

Johnny Black

Q: Who can't stand disco mixes, has problems with dead goats and very nearly joined the army?

A:
Billy Bragg

Singer-songwriter!

There, I've said it. Billy Bragg is a singer-songwriter. If those words conjure painful memories of suffering souls like Cat Stevens and James Taylor (and, dare I say, Nick Heyward) baring their innermost souls for fun and profit, forget it.

Billy Bragg is something else. With just one highly-strung electric guitar and his own sandpaper tonsils, Billy has been climbing, night after night, onto stages in fuggy Student Union

bars all over the country for the last year or so, winning over new fans at every gig with songs that make people literally laugh and cry at the same time. The man is an entertainer, pure but not so simple.

In the middle of last year, Billy released a mini-album, "Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy", on Charisma, a medium-large record label which almost immediately went out of business, leaving Bill and his album precisely nowhere. It should have

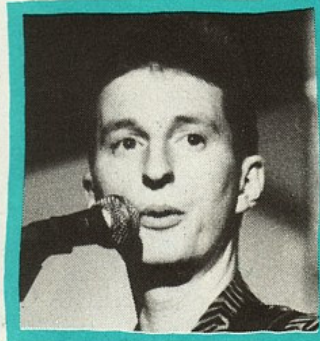


Photo: Virginia Turbert

been a disaster, except that Andy McDonald of the medium-tiny label Go! picked up the album and put his massive resources (a telephone and family-sized packet of paper clips) behind re-marketing Billy.

Since then, things have been looking up — good reviews, more gigs, two spots on *The Tube*, lots of radio play and suddenly everybody wants to know who, what and why is Billy Bragg?

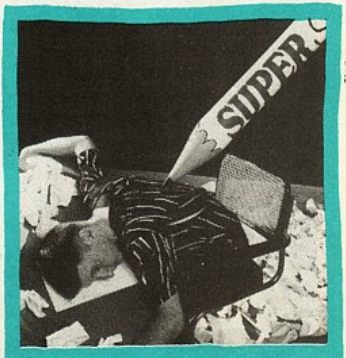


Photo: Bob Hall