

**T**he bouquets of critical praise that *Billy Bragg* was receiving as the year began only served to emphasise the fact that this 26-year-old solo performer has more than one trap to be wary of in the coming months. Naturally enough, he takes this media adulation with a shaker of salt: "You can't believe that sort of thing or you just end up as the God-like genius of Gary Kemp!" So to keep his feet on the ground (and his head out of the clouds), he plans to carry on just as he always has — playing support to other bands with only his guitar, an amplifier and a stream of humorous asides which are mainly fed by nervous energy. "It really is a job of work, and my job is to entertain people," is his assessment of his position in the merry pop whirl, and it is on the stage that his wry mixture of love and politics, backed only by his enthusiastic hammering of a six string electric guitar, make the most sense. Confessing to being a bad guitar player and attempting to sing in the same way that he talks, Bragg is forever being compared with early Elvis Costello (the songwriting) and Paul Weller (the vocal style); but we'd describe his music as Jonathan Richman sings *The Clash*. Of course he admits to having influences, but: "You have to make a conscious decision as to whether you want to grow up to be Smokey Robinson or Billy Bragg — I chose Billy Bragg." Living in a one-roomed, self-contained Barratt Home ("My Barratt garret!") in West London, he cannot see himself battling it out in the star system with the big boys (George, Marilyn) and girls (Annie, Marilyn). Nor is he a latter-day protest singer: "It's stupid to expect someone who's only got one 'O' level and was silly enough to join the army when he was younger to have all the answers to the world problems. Someone who hasn't even got a television set!" Avoiding change just for the sake of it, Bragg doesn't know how his style will evolve as yet, although he does see how his current act could become formulaised and his tentative plans include an EP of new songs in the spring and an LP in the summer. His first record, a mini-LP of seven songs titled "Life's A Riot With Spy Vs. Spy" (after a book of Don Martin cartoons), was taken from a batch of 12 songs recorded over three afternoons and was a deliberate attempt to get to the basics and start from scratch. The critical acclaim is a surprise and a bonus. His parting shot: "If this time next year I haven't been to America or Europe I won't be upset. If this time next year I'm working in a record shop in East Ham again I won't be upset, because I will have had a crack at it and this is what it will have come to. It really is, to me, a job of work." *Chris Burkham*

DAVID CORIO

