

Have guitar, will travel

BILLY BRAGG

Louise Chunn flags down The Milkman of Human Kindness.

Anyone who can write a song about once losing his heart to a girl "too young to shave her legs" deserves space in this magazine.

Billy Bragg agrees: "I learnt everything I know about girls from teenage magazines. And anyway, I've been just seventeen for years."

Actually, he's 26 and a singer-songwriter who plays guitar. For the past 18 months he's been riding the British Rails from one student union gig to the next club spot, asking only his fare plus a tenner in return. Along the way he's collected 25,000 buyers for his mini-album *Life's A Riot With Spy vs Spy*. Such success means his roadie-cum-publicist Andy Kershaw now drives Billy around the country in someone else's Volvo Estate.

"Doesn't do much for my street credibility but with all that train travel I was becoming the Jimmy Savile of pop. And sitting in the

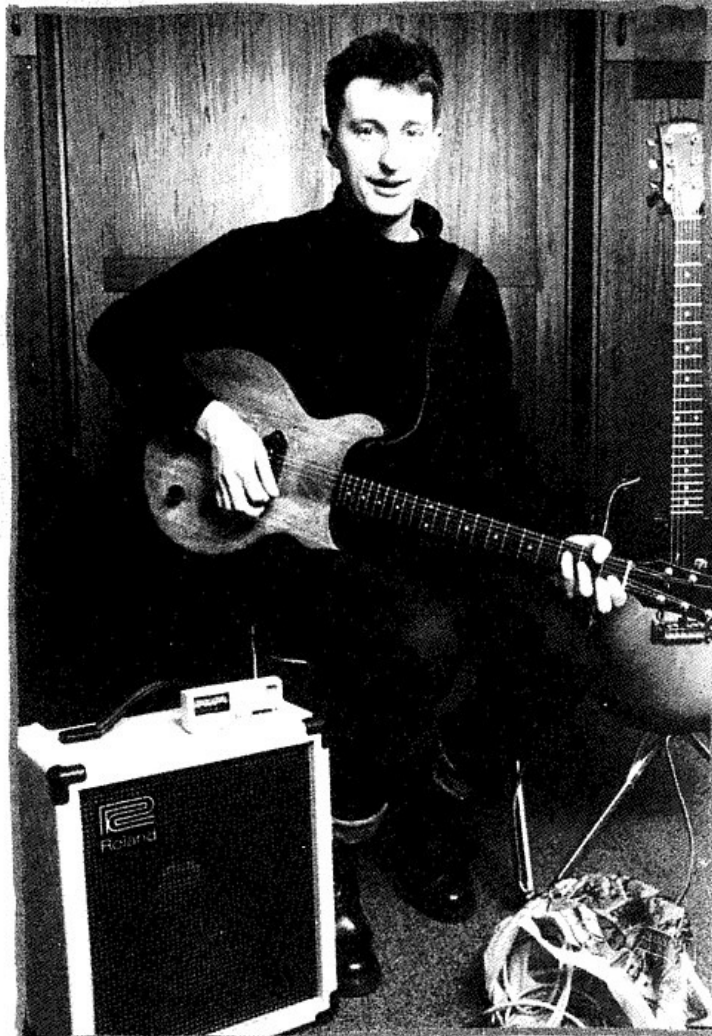
He changed his name from Stephen to Billy: "Stephen's such a daft name and people trust someone called Billy."

back of a car is easier on the arms than lugging two guitars, an amp, a tuner and a change of clothes from one station to another." His spot on the upcoming Style Council tour should be even more of a cruise.

Billy grew up in Barking in Essex. He mastered all the usual boys' skills but the art of girl-pulling eluded him. "I didn't get anywhere with them, so I stuck to football and records. That's why I started to learn the guitar. Guitarists were glamorous — girls always liked them. My reasons for doing this job have changed a little since then though."

Billy left school at 16. "I had one 'O' level — but it was a Grade A, in English Language. And I got two CSE's — in Woodwork and History. This led one teacher to say 'Well done Bragg, you can get a job making antique furniture'. And I've always remembered that advice," he mocks.

After working at several different jobs, Billy formed a band called Riff Raff. "It was 1977, the beginning of punk and everything was happening in London. So we made a serious career move and



The entire Bragg stage set-up (note carrier bag full of leads). Most bands use more equipment than this for just tuning-up!



Billy plus his entire road crew in the "tour bus", a borrowed Volvo.

went to live in Peterborough. Completely missed the boat. Mostly we just wanted to get away from our Mums."

Freed from the apron strings, Stephen William Bragg tossed off his old identity and re-surfaced as Billy Bragg. "For one thing there were two other blokes in the band called Stephen — plus the roadie. And anyway, Stephen's such a daft name. It should be reserved for use on American TV shows."

Bill, on the other hand, is not so hard to live up to. And as for Billy, "People trust someone called Billy. That's what it said in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* which I happened to be reading at the time."

Blessed with a non-aggressive name, Billy's next move was to join

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the Army. He was disillusioned and did it on impulse. "But, truthfully, I'd always wanted to drive a tank. All boys go through a stage when they want to do stuff like that."

After three months of fear and loathing — but having learnt how to drive a tank all right — Billy bought himself out of the services. He returned to London and went to work on that life-long ambition to be a guitarist. "I was really nervous getting up on my own at first. So I talked all the time and just sang a bit. I didn't have many songs, you see. I have more now, but I still talk a lot, don't I?"

Yes. He talks about travelling around the country, his fear of the dark, social pressure on girls to get engaged by 18 and married by 21. Then there's the effect of TV, the cruelty of teenagers to one another, the lack of understanding in this grim little world. It all comes out — slightly sad and very witty — in his songs. Like *New England*: "I loved you then as I love you now/I put you on a pedestal/They put you on the Pill." Or "I am the milkman of human kindness/I will leave an extra pint." He even adapted the R&B classic *Route 66* to sing the praises of the A.13. It's all delivered in a less than perfect voice with the aid of a single guitar. This man's gotta lotta bottle.