

LIFE'S A RIOT WITH BILLY BRAGG



Way back in pop's murky past, before the Smiths' first Peel session, there were murmurings of a return to The Song. We were quickly smothered by the powder-blue blanket of Ben Watt, Tracey Thorn, a whole gaggle of bleary-eyed dribblers adopted wholesale by Cherry Red. They tried to convince us that they'd discovered a gold-mine of fragile songwriting talent, which they'd tapped and manhandled onto a record—"Pillows and Prayers—So sensitive—So honest—99p mate." The great non-song scam appeared to work, despite the heartless cynics who put the record's success down to its negligible price. To anybody with two braincells, one to operate the mind while the other moved the feet, this was a false alarm.

The only thing Ben Watt has in common with Billy Bragg is that he plays guitar and removes the excess baggage:

BB—"The good songs have to be there in the end, with good lyrics and a good melody. If there's anything lacking of those you start relying on production and packaging to make up for the deficiencies. The whole idea is that I'm going against all the production and Trevor Horn stuff that's made up 99% of records in the past couple of years."

While the impressionable masses went out and shang'hai-ed Marine Girls in Elmhelm Crescent, the rest of us settled down by our radios to wait for a tapeable Peel session.

Summer '83 brought the Bragg session, followed by a repeat in October. The first time it was played I hated it, what kind of idiot would write a love song to a poltergeist for God's sake? I'd obviously got it wrong somewhere. In fact, that song, 'Strange Things Happen' turns out to be quite logical once you've grasped the fact that the girl concerned died in some kind of accident, and now throws things around her former paramour's bedroom, face at the window, that sort of thing. Makes sense, doesn't it?

Here I'm deliberately ignoring 'New England', a potential classic of 'Teenage Kicks' stature which you should be allowed to discover for yourself. Bragg is charmingly dismissive of the session: "I just stomped my foot and played the guitar, and kept going till we got a version we liked." Two of the songs recorded then were finished at the first take.

In October Bragg overconfidently said "the FME won't touch me with a bargepole, I don't think they're sure how to weigh me up," but in a matter of months the music press have moved into a threatening position vis-a-vis Bragg's headlong career. After spending a year battering down doors on Carnaby Street, the loudest shouter with the dreaded manager (Jock Scott, well known tautologist and one time attention seeker with Rip Rig and Panic), he has been drawn into the black hole of mass discovery. He is in danger of attracting too much attention too fast, from X.Moore to the Smash Hits Yearbook and everyone inbetween. His fans are as valuable as the critics, and Gasbag now receives a weekly half column where some saved soul can testify that he's seen the glory of the coming of Billy Bragg/the Redskins/New Model Army. These acts are apparently inseparable, and although they've probably been lumped together because they look likely candidates for

the Working Class Hero spot, Bragg is undoubtedly part of a recent influx of thoroughly honest in-juns who are at last giving voice to the mumble of the nation's consciousness. What they have in common is an openness characterized by a tendency to use plain words for plain purposes, everything from 'fuck' to 'unionize'. The Bragg vocabulary also extends to 'love'.

But even following the success of the record, playing live remains the most important aspect of his work:

"If you can't crack it live you're wasting your time. I enjoy playing live more than anything, it's better than pissing up and down Oxford Street getting record companies to do things for you, even making records. Doing gigs is far and away the most dangerous and the most rewarding thing, and therefore the most fun."

"One of the things that spurred me on to do solo gigs after leaving the army was seeing Elvis Costello at the NEC. He did four songs with just a guitar, and it's so much more powerful when you pare it down to that level. What I do is very stark and minimal."

In spite of the fact that the LP and Peel session are mostly made up of love songs, there is a sharp political edge which Bragg has so far been shy of wielding publicly. While most of the so-called spokespersons for the nation's youth—'so-called' because the nation's youth can speak for itself when it needs to—while the public and it's mouthpieces are showing an alarming degree of low morale and slack morality, Bragg still comes up with 'To Have and Have Not'. This he rates as his meister-work of the moment, and if nothing else his performance of this song on 'The Tube' made him the first person to say 'communist' on C4 without looking embarrassed.

"Before that Spandau Ballet were a big influence on us, seen them do Chant No.1 in kilts in TOTP! I thought, if this is how it's going to be I'm wasting my time sitting around waiting for some band to come along and play what I want to hear, I'll have to do it myself. And the Clash were a big influence too, though obviously in the opposite way."

That reference to the army will need no explaining by now, it looks set to become part of an uncomfortably expanding Bragg mythology. And having established that the tall tales of the music press peripherals are superfluous, it's time you stopped reading his reviews and went to see him play or bought the record. "Life's a Riot with Spy vs. Spy" is a god-awful title to fit into a sentence, by the way, but it's on Go! Discs, £2.99

cheap at twice the price and half the price of a packet of crisps in the Hacienda. Anything I've forgotten Bill? 'Hang loose.'



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NOISY LITTLE BUGGER ISN'T HE? LET'S CALL HIM BILLY.



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