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Billy Bragg sinks a few

BILLY BRAGG pic by Paul Slattery

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THE BILL



IF PLAYING solo was just a gimmick, then after selling 50,000 copies of 'Life's A Riot' I'd have moved straight over to making mega-produced singles, gone out and bought a Hepworths suit and come back on the next album with the London Symphony Orchestra."

Billy Bragg just can't seem to convince people that he's not about to form a band. The rock business has a particular prejudice against soloists: you might have to start up on your own to get noticed but you'd better form a band sooner rather than later if you don't want to end up like Don Partridge. Agents are still trying to push Billy onto the folk club circuit.

But they misunderstand the determination of the Bragg. "I'm attempting to prove that you *can* progress without forming a band. Maybe I will form one sometime in the future but I'm not thinking about it at the moment."

"I'm thinking about all the things I can do which don't involve forming a band. I can't tell you what they all are right now because I don't know them all and anyway I don't do things that way, but I'm confident I can do it."

That seems clear enough but while Billy's pinned to the back of his chair by this microphone I'll just confront him with another recurring prejudice: that he's just a wally liberal, marked out by his Barking background and his political stance.

"Yeah, I'm aware of that," he replies in his thoughtful Cockney drawl. "I'm very, very wary of message songs which promise a lot but don't deliver anything. That's why I find it harder to sing slow songs."

"But then I *don't* believe music will change the world. And it's not enough to buy 'Sandinista' and think you've done your bit for the people in El Salvador."

"I put a lot of thought into my lyrics but I'm not going to tell people how to live their lives. I don't have an instant plan for a better world, I just write about the things that matter to me. And I'm not here to make your consciences any easier. I'm just confronting you with my songs and the fact that I can't do much about the things I'm writing about."

The fact that Billy Bragg is a solo performer and thinks about his lyrics drops him through yet another trap door: it's almost impossible to find an article in his press clippings that doesn't mention the word Bob Dylan somewhere (even this one does now!).

Billy's reaction to this is to get in before you can, calling himself 'the new Melanie' as soon as he scents the word Dylan in the air. He was even going to call his new album 'Bringing It All Back Up'. Instead he contented himself with a song called 'From A Vauxhall Velox'.

'Brewing Up With Billy Bragg'—the title is pretty self-explanatory although I will refer you to a line in 'This Guitar Says Sorry' which goes 'The time that it takes to make a baby can be the time that it takes to make a cup of tea'—is a sophisticated progression on his first.

But then it would be difficult to be less sophisticated than 'Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy' which was recorded in three days. 'Brewing Up' took three weeks and utilises such technological breakthroughs as double tracking, although feeling still counts for more than technical perfection. But notes and vocals are left in if

the overall feel is right.

"I couldn't just have gone back into the studio and recorded another 'Life's A Riot'," explains Billy. "There's still a place for that kind of spirit on 'Brewing Up' but there also has to be room for progression to make it more interesting."

"People keep telling me you can't make good fast-paced songs without bass and drums. Now, I don't believe that's necessarily wrong, but I'm trying to find out if you can or not without going the traditional way."

LISTENING TO him talking about how he recorded 'Brewing Up' tells you a good deal about the nature of the Bragg—a straightforward, sharp and purposeful geezer but one who is always prepared to listen and be open minded. And that's what you get on the album.

"I didn't sit at home writing songs for the album. Nearly all of them I'd been playing live and getting to know gradually. And when it comes to recording them I wanted to improve on every version I'd done up to then. I used the John Peel sessions to try out some things and it gave me something to think about while I was in the bath."

"I decided to try out a couple of them with other instruments so I landed up with a trumpet solo on 'The Saturday Boy' and organ all the way through 'A Lover Sings'. I think it makes them more interesting without compromising anything."

"But there were a couple of songs I wrote just before the album where I had to commit myself to an arrangement before I had the chance to play them in live."

"I wrote 'It Says Here' just at the time Maxwell was buying the *Mirror* Group. It all came together in one fell swoop. I recorded the backing track one afternoon and it went so well I was feeling really inspired so I went home and polished up the lyrics and I was still polishing them up on the bus the next morning."

"I was really excited about it and I played it much louder on record than I do on stage now. I think it's a good track to open the album with too. I wanted to think 'Hello, Billy Bragg's changed' and wait for the bass and drums to come in. But they don't, and I'm quite proud of that. That's why it's the first track and the most produced track."

"I also had to be wary of hiding behind the production and technology while I was making the album. I have a lot of energy inside me when I play and I try to get it out as percussively as possible. Even on a slow song like 'A Lover Sings', I can keep it going with just one string."

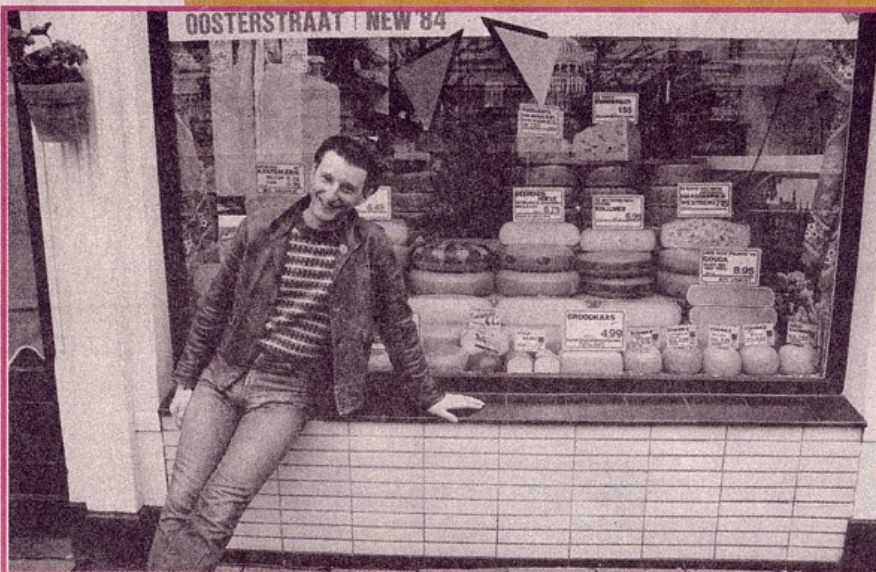
"It's like those Otis Redding songs we've been listening to in the car. Take away the horns and there's almost nothing there except the voice. It's the horns that are giving the song the punctuation."

"And that's the whole thing about it solo—at a time when everybody seems to be going for as much as possible in terms of sound and production, I'm trying to keep it as minimal as possible and still keep the same effect. I'm using the lyrics to deliver the punch instead of a horn section or a syn-drum."

THE OTIS Redding tapes we've been listening to have formed part of a non-stop musical backdrop to a brisk trek across Holland in the back of the Bragg-mobile just before his current British tour.

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HUGH FIELDER ON THE BRAGG TRADE



THE MOODY and matured Billy Bragg (pix by Paul Slattery)



We hard-nosed the Dutch highways to an audio barrage of country music, soul and R&B over which we enthused with continual relish. Abstemious in body if not in mind, Billy was cheerfully tolerant of the hipper indulgences of the other three occupants of the car, keener to find what we had in common rather than any differences between us.

Such an attitude helped him to win over two contrasting audiences in successive days without ever having to be condescending.

At Groningen, a university town in northern Holland, he played at the Club Vera, run in the style of a commune for and by the town's high proportion of unemployed.

Upstairs the club's most active members mingled around the dressing room/coffee bar and a blackboard on the wall listed the prices of five different kinds of dope. Downstairs in the basement they were showing videos sent over by the miners.

After starting with a speedy, intense thrash through John

Cale's 'Fear Is A Man's Best Friend' to warm himself up, Bragg used his familiarity with 'The Busy Girl Buys Beauty' to clown around a little and insert a jokey Alarm guitar solo stance and then compare it with the Clash. The bi-lingual crowd got the joke easily and from then on he could do little wrong.

It brought out several witty comments, not to mention his first ever venture into rock theatre with an appallingly kitsch illuminated glossy painting in a fake antique frame purchased in Brussels and perched on his amplifier.

At one point he leaned over into the audience to pull out a tape recorder and give the bootlegger a personal message of endorsement. And when someone called out for 'Egyptian Reggae' (well, it was that kind of audience), Bragg was able to pick his way hesitantly but correctly through it.

Introducing his beloved 'It Says Here' with a short lecture on the British press scene, he added 'and I wanted to write it because I'm the voice of our

generation after Howard Jones'.

Next morning over breakfast he's utterly non-plussed when I suggest that he has more in common with Howard Jones than he might think. Not because both are also solo acts or even because they are among the more genuine people I've come across in rock and roll but because they've both set conditions and standards on their bids for success that are stricter than the norm. Billy remains singularly unconvinced by my theory however.

And any similarities seem pretty far-fetched a few hours later as we stand huddled outside the Mazzo Club in Amsterdam, a trendy disco that has no word outside of any appearance by Billy Bragg this evening.

We know there is somebody inside the club because Andy the road manager has just talked to them on the telephone but they seem incapable of coming to the front door to let us in. Morale is low.

It takes a warm French meal



to raise our spirits, courtesy of Billy's Dutch publishing representative. This might sound like a joke but it's true and what's more he becomes yet another in a succession of professional rock people who become prepared to put themselves out for Billy Bragg after coming into contact with him.

The arrival of 200 or so people at the club is a further boost. But they are a more metropolitan crowd, sympathetic but less interested in the politics and polemics behind some of the songs. And he keeps being distracted by a video in one corner of the club which doesn't help. But he concentrates harder on the songs to compensate and it's on that level that he wins through.

EARLY THE next morning we are hurtling towards Zeebrugge to catch the cross-ferry channel in time for Billy to make an unannounced appearance with Echo And The Bunnymen

at Hammersmith Palais that evening.

He supported the Bunnymen on their American tour during the summer as a way of introducing American audiences to himself and vice versa. He clearly got on well enough to be invited back to the warren.

After we've made the boat with minutes to spare and re-acquainted ourselves with greasy English food, Billy and I sit down to wait for the white cliffs of Dover to hove into view and I ask if there's anybody he wouldn't support. Perhaps his strangest support bill this year was for David Gilmour at Hammersmith Odeon—he even gave them a few bars of 'Arnold Layne'.

"That was a wonderful opportunity to play in front of people who had never heard of me and weren't particularly interested in me. They just wanted to relive their Pink Floyd memories and then go home to their semis and play 'Meddle' one more time. So I jumped at the chance and gave them one of my fastest sets—none of the drippy stuff. "Is there anybody I wouldn't support? Apart from Screwdriver (a skinhead band with declared National Front sympathies), I don't think so. And maybe even then if the circumstances were right. "My criteria for opening for anybody is: 1. Where are they playing—is it somewhere I haven't played before? 2. Are they different or similar to me?—if they're different it's often better. 3. Do I like what they're doing? Because, if it's someone like Death In June I'd have to weigh up very carefully whether I'd be attracting more people to see them because I personally believe, despite their denials, that they have a very strong flirtation with fascism, whether or not they are fascists themselves."

What does Billy think he's learnt in the busy year since 'Life's A Riot' came out, as a musician as well as the business end.

"Technically I'm still not a particularly good player although I'm getting better. I don't read music. Instead I play around with chord shapes in the Buddy Holly/Wilko Johnson style. "But I've learnt to invest the songs with more rhythm. They used to just explode out of me. "I try and have as little to do with the business end of it as possible. Obviously I'm a part of it and I don't pretend to exist outside of it but I think the punters are much more important than the business and that's what I concentrate on. "There are some things you just have to accept. In order to sell records you have to take a certain amount of shit and there are some things that just won't happen however hard you try—and if you're not careful you can finish yourself trying—so sometimes you just have to ride it out and stick with the things you really believe in. "For example, I won't take a record company advance

because that keeps the cards in my hand, and I won't sign a long-term deal for the same reason. My deal with Go! Discs (who rescued him after his original Utility Records got frozen out of Charisma when Virgin tried to swallow them) is finished with this album but the chances are I'll go back to them because they've been so good to me. They've given me the freedom to do what I want so there's a relationship based on trust instead of a contract that gives them an arm and a leg and gives me two houses in Weybridge.

"I'm not prepared to put bass and drums on my records just to please American record companies who think you can't sell records unless you do. And I'm not prepared to compromise yet over choosing the price for my albums.

'Life's A Riot' cost five grand and 'Brewing Up' cost about twice that I think, but the first paid for the second. And although the second is a pound more the songs are actually 25 per cent cheaper if you work it out," he says with impish acumen.

But how far is he prepared to promote himself to sell his records?

"Making records is part of the job and doing interviews like this is part of the job. But playing gigs is the job. That's how I earn my living. If the records start selling then I'll earn my living from them as well.

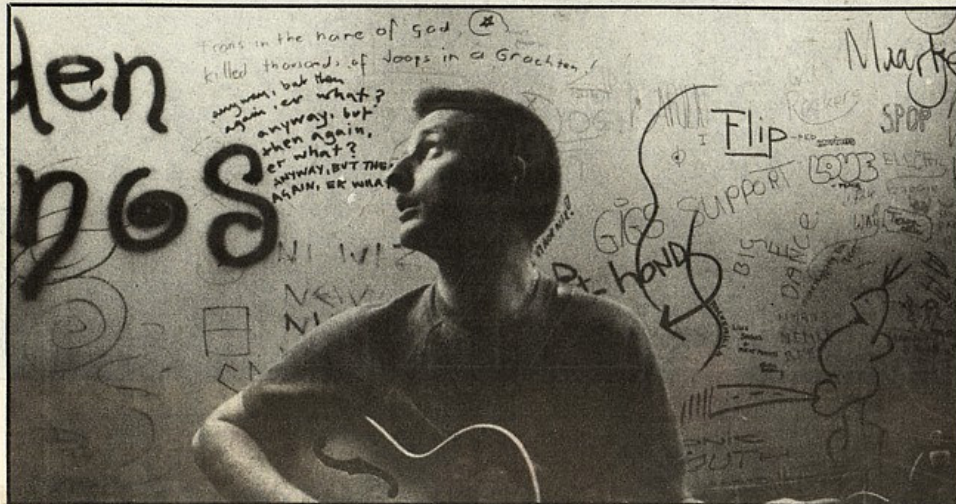
"Singles and videos are also a part of promotion and I didn't play gigs then I'd do them but I'm willing to play anywhere so I don't have to bother with them.

"I've been on television. And I got on MTV in America as well because they came and filmed me walking around with my portastack (in which his entire stage gear is packed into rucksacks) at the New Music Seminar in New York. That's OK, anybody can come and watch me working. But I'm not interested in making videos.

I also feel uncomfortable about being a celebrity which is why I wouldn't do Pop Quiz or any of those sort of shows—even though I like watching them. I don't mind doing Eight Days A Week because you're being asked for your opinion as a professional musician. But I don't want to be treated as some kind of celebrity just because I've had a record in the charts.

"I won't talk to the Sun either because I don't think it would do any good. X-Moore of the Redskins takes the opposite view and thinks it would be good for them to expound their views in the Sun but I think he's being naive if he thinks that they'd print it the way he said it—and he's a journalist!"

He's not quite so harsh with Sounds though. Last Christmas we asked him to write a piece for us and he duly obliged. When he came in to pick up a copy we jokingly suggested he put an invoice on the editor's desk. He did and three months later he got paid.



BILLY BRAGG surveys local graffiti (pix by Paul Slattery)