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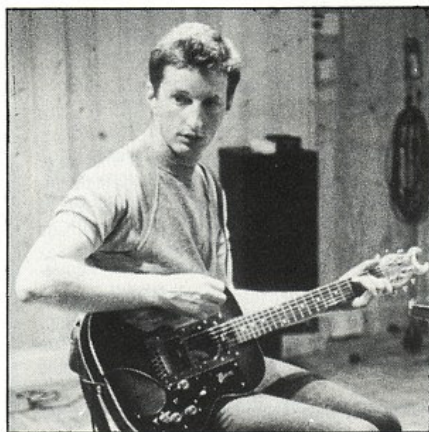
BRAGG

TRADE

Ziyad Georgis conjures up a puckish satire on long-distance driving. Billy Bragg regrets giving him a lift.

Last month, Billy Bragg played a string of benefits for local striking miners' families' food funds.

This past year has seen his emergence as a singer/songwriter, political activist, comedian and soppy romantic all rolled into one. His debut mini-album 'Life's A Riot With Spy vs. Spy' proved to be the surprise discovery of last year. He has been very busy recently with his first major headlining tour supported by Hank Wangford and The Frank Chickens, a US tour with Echo & The Bunnymen and the release of his second album 'Brewing Up With Billy Bragg'.



Apart from the paean to our so called free press 'It Says Here' and the anti-Falklands 'Island Of No Return' ("I can take the killing, I can take the slaughter, but I won't talk to Sun reporters"), the album is made up of songs about the changing nature of love.

Billy Bragg successfully intersperses tongue-in-cheek observations ("Some people say that love is blind, and I think that's just a bit short-sighted") with quirky romantic sentiments ("Our love is so strong, it moves objects in my room"). This diffuses any sense of self-importance in the feelings expressed — which are genuine — and betrays his respect for Elvis Costello and the penchant they share for the bad pun ("you're the kind of girl who wants to open the bottle of pop too early in the journey, our love went flat, just like that").

Billy's strength lies in his astute and witty commentaries about being young in this 10 ZIGZAG NOVEMBER 1984

new England. His stories are about ordinary people doing ordinary things like falling in love, getting hurt, going on the dole, becoming a milkman, fighting in the Falklands... The lyrics are clever enough not to have cleverness stamped all over them.

His songs represent the musical equivalent to Bill Forsyth films; they're whimsical, tinged with a romantic view and full of finely observed details. 'The Saturday Boy', a song about schooldays and an all-consuming love, could be straight out of 'Gregory's Girl' ("but I never made the first team, I just made the first team laugh, and she never came to the phone, she was always in the bath, and in the end it took me a dictionary, to find out the meaning of unrequited").

Billy Bragg is *ordinary* — he could be any number of people that you know — and for that he is extraordinary. He is at his best live. The comic patter in between songs very quickly establishes a rapport with the audience. Unlike other political bands (Redskins?), he avoids hackneyed macho posturing.

The following conversation took place on the A1 driving south from Sunderland. It may not be the A13 between Southend and London, but it had to do.

How have the miners' benefits gone?

"The atmosphere has been that of a willingness to face up to the reality of the miners' strike, and to do something positive. There's not a lot I can do to help them — I try to use my pulling power as a focus for local people to come to the gig and support the miners and get money for them. That's all I can do, I can't resolve the strike by making LPs. It's just a drop in the ocean but it's better than doing nothing. Being involved with the strike has politicized me in a way I wasn't before. I can put up a decent argument in defence of working people."

When did you first become interested in politics?

"Since Thatcher came to power in 1979. Up to then all governments had supported the welfare state, increasingly, lots of things I'd taken for granted have been eroded. I'm not a revolutionary, I try to be a realist."

"It's like the miners' wives support group, they don't want to change the world, they just want a decent living and they want

to get back to normality. That's what I mean when I sing "I don't want to change the world, I'm not looking for a New England". If we can vote another Labour Government in, that'll be the beginning of the turn away from this militant Toryism."

How important for you is it to become very popular so you can get your message across?

"The best way to communicate with people is by playing lots of gigs, not by having a smash hit. Maybe a song I write will make someone think about their situation, but that's the absolute extent of it. If people want to get involved doing things, they must do it themselves — buying a Billy Bragg LP won't make a difference."

"My playing a song on Top Of The Pops is nothing more than sticking two fingers up at the establishment, you have to do more than that."

I was expecting your new LP to follow the Mad Magazine theme and be called 'The Lighter Side Of Billy Bragg'. We'll have to use that to describe this interview instead. Be prepared to be funny.

"I have been funny. We've been through the jokes, the heavy stuff is to follow."

The first time I saw you was at a pretentious shop in Covent Garden trying on hats. It struck me at the time that it would be bad for your street credibility if that were to be publicised.

"I've always liked wearing hats. I'm part of the new generation of haircut revisionists who don't mind hiding a fabulous cut under a tatty hat."

"Anyway, you were in the hatshop too, so don't give me no grief. And you looked much more as if you'd buy something."

What would you describe the Billy Bragg image to be?

"I don't particularly think that image is important. That's why I don't have my photo on the front of my records. I'd rather people bought them for what's on the grooves."

If I looked like you, I wouldn't want to put my photo on the cover either.

"That's a good point. Thanks very much for sharing it with me Ziyad."

At this point, the car stops and I'm reminded that it's 300 miles to London. I think to myself, let's try another line of questioning.

Do you see yourself suffering a similar

fate to John Cooper Clarke...

"What, heroin addiction?"

Very funny. No, what I mean is that you're initially treated as a novelty act that's the flavour of the month, but after a while, people start saying 'he's doing the same stuff as before and it's not as good'.

"I've added some instrumentation to the new LP, but if I were to come back with a fully produced album, I'd be accused of using 'Spy vs. Spy' as a gimmick. That sound is a fundamental part of what I do.

"I'm not going to change to be fashionable. I've said before that if the papers were against me, I'd still be doing what I'm doing — though I probably wouldn't sell as many records. I'm determined not to form a band for a while."

I was surprised to hear that you went down well on your recent tour of America. I think of you as being wholesome and cuddly in a very English sort of way, much like Ken Livingstone, The Queen and Benny from 'Crossroads'.

"If they made an album together, it would probably sound like me. Ken would be able to write the lyrics. The Queen would supply the melodies and Benny would do the singing. I can sing about as well as Benny.

"Some of my songs are very English, others apply to all people. I wrote 'To Have Or Have Not' about my experiences on the dole, it turns out to be common to people from other countries. I just attempt to put my feelings to words."

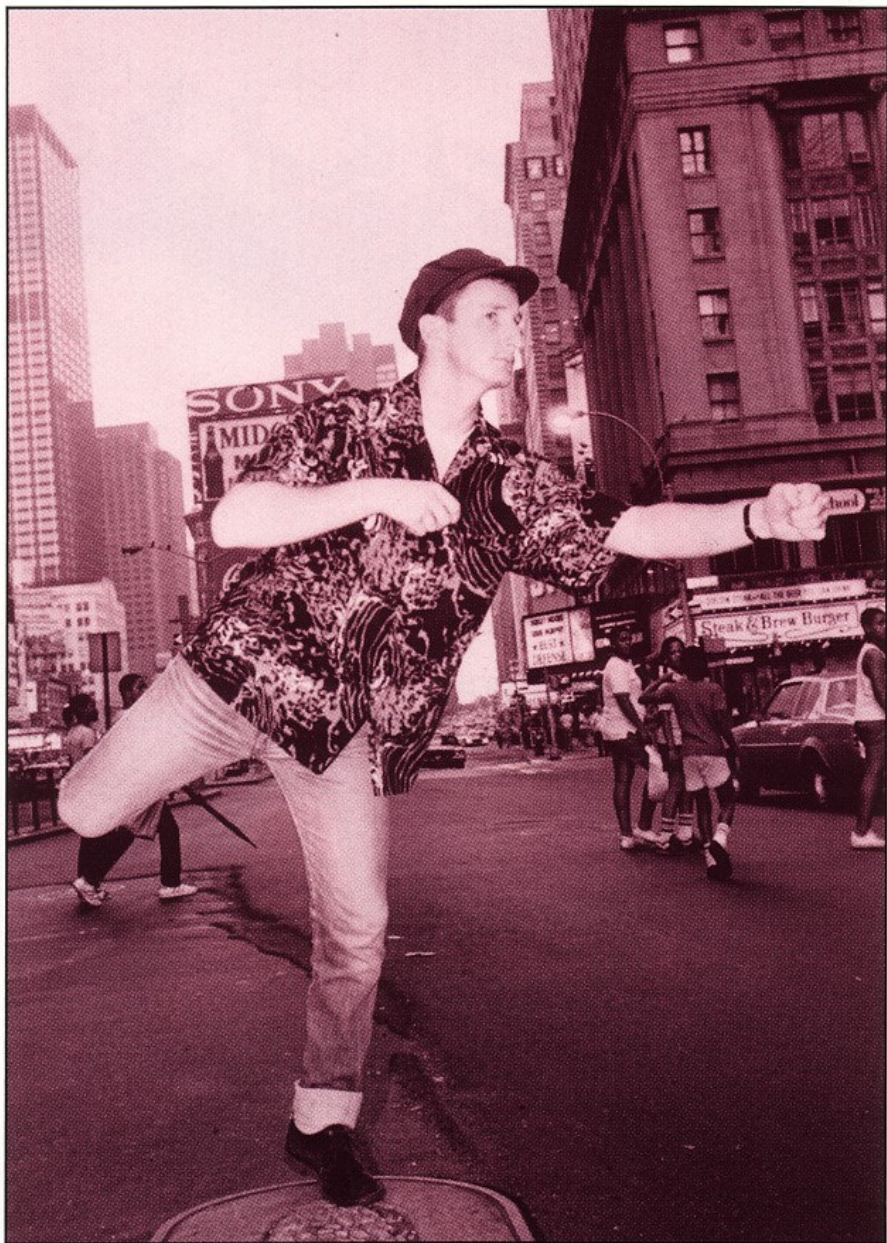
You've been quoted as saying that your view of music changed through seeing The Clash, and that you still believed in all that. What is all that?

"Torn shirts with 'White Riot' printed on them, monkey boots and bondage trousers. Yeah, I believe in all that!

"It's the realization that it is possible to have ideals and stick to them. Otherwise I wouldn't be doing what I do, I'd get myself a band and become the..."

New Paul Weller...? You've also said that on the golf course of life, you were at the first tee. Have you reached the second tee, or are you still flailing in some bunker?

"I've gone back to the clubhouse. I must have been well drunk using that metaphor. 'Life's A Riot' was the first hole and I managed to get around it in less shots than I expected. 'Brewing Up With Billy Bragg' is the next, how many holes on this course I'm



not sure but my handicap is being a solo performer."

The big question of the day is will you ever get a hole in one?

"The big question is have you been taking something Ziyad? You've got the wrong end of the club."

Time to change the subject again. Do you spend as much time falling in and out of love as singing about it?

"No, all of the lessons I learnt on the subject happened to me before 1980. It still amazes me that people grow up with this incredible faith in love.

"I felt bitter that I'd grown up believing Smokey Robinson when he said that love would make everything alright. I felt I was undersold. I could take there being no Father Christmas, but love not lasting forever made me feel cheated. I am by nature someone who's, uh..."

A soppy romantic?

"Yeah, I am. But I try not to be about politics though I can be in some of my other songs. I'd like to think that my view of love is tinged with reality."

As long as you're not in love.

"When you're in love, reality doesn't really come into it."

You finish the song 'A Lover Sings' with

the line "Theresa and Steve are finding out all about love". Who is Theresa, Steve?

Long pause. The driver turns up the cassette player to drown out any possible embarrassing reply. I get the hint to move on before the car stops this time. What's your most typical East End hobby?

"What, like racing whippets?"

That'll do. What's the least obvious, apart from trying hats on in Covent Garden?

"Shark tagging. People are put into cages surrounded by sharks. You've got sticks with tags on them which you have to stab onto the sharks. You win if you tag the most sharks."

Very nice. As a kid, did you ever consider enrolling in a Charles Atlas bodybuilding course?

"No, I used to hide in my bedroom from the guys who'd taken the course. That's when I learnt to play the guitar."

Billy Bragg is obviously content to have sand kicked in his face at Southend beach. I'll wait till we get back to London before I pass that thought on. Have you a funny line to finish off with?

"I'm not wasting it on you."

Braggadocio.