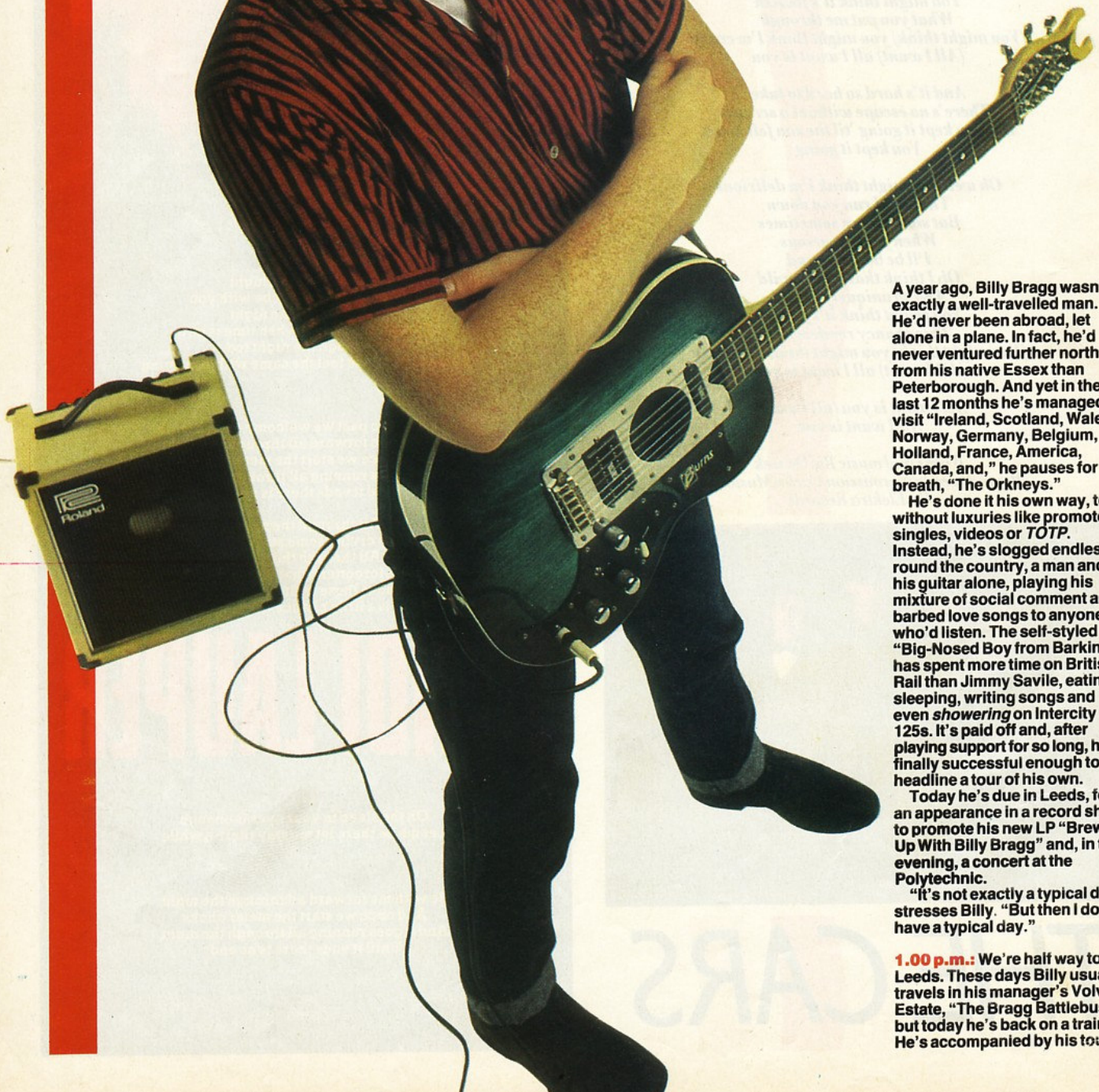


“THE BIG-NOSED



HE said it, not us. Billy Bragg's winning way with words has taken him halfway round the world. Not a huge production with expensive stage sets — just him, his guitar and a handful of songs. He's sold a lot of LPs, but doesn't release singles or make videos. "I do things on my own terms," he tells Vici MacDonald.



A year ago, Billy Bragg wasn't exactly a well-travelled man. He'd never been abroad, let alone in a plane. In fact, he'd never ventured further north from his native Essex than Peterborough. And yet in the last 12 months he's managed to visit "Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Norway, Germany, Belgium, Holland, France, America, Canada, and," he pauses for breath, "The Orkneys."

He's done it his own way, too, without luxuries like promoters, singles, videos or *TOTP*. Instead, he's slogged endlessly round the country, a man and his guitar alone, playing his mixture of social comment and barbed love songs to anyone who'd listen. The self-styled "Big-Nosed Boy from Barking" has spent more time on British Rail than Jimmy Savile, eating, sleeping, writing songs and even *showering* on Intercity 125s. It's paid off and, after playing support for so long, he's finally successful enough to headline a tour of his own.

Today he's due in Leeds, for an appearance in a record shop to promote his new LP "Brewing Up With Billy Bragg" and, in the evening, a concert at the Polytechnic.

"It's not exactly a typical day," stresses Billy. "But then I don't have a typical day."

1.00 p.m.: We're half way to Leeds. These days Billy usually travels in his manager's Volvo Estate, "The Bragg Battlebus", but today he's back on a train. He's accompanied by his tour

BOY FROM BARKING

manager/driver/good mate Andy Kershaw, a bluff, no-nonsense Northerner. There's no fawning lackeys around Billy Bragg.

Together they go through a pile of mail. Billy's played quite a few Miners' Benefits and gets lots of letters about his socialist beliefs. He tries to answer them all personally. "It's good when you have to justify yourself, it's the only way to keep in touch. It's very important to me what people think."

He shows me a cranky letter he's just received from 'A Conservative'. "This one's got to be a wind-up," he laughs. "We've decided to send him a year's free subscription to *Soviet Weekly!*"

2.15: We arrive in Leeds; it's bleak, wet and windy. Feeling extravagant, Billy splashes out £1.60 on a taxi to the Poly and we're soon cosily ensconced in the Students' Union office, warming up with a welcome pot of tea. Billy's heard there's an article about him in today's *Guardian* and fruitlessly searches through a local copy (which turns out to be the wrong edition). Munching on a wafer, he tells me he's also done a "quite interesting" interview with the *Daily Express*, a paper not exactly noted for its left-wing views.

"Well, I'm a great believer in not always preaching to the converted. Given the opportunity of appearing before an audience that wouldn't normally buy Billy Bragg records I'd always take it. With the exception of appearing in *The Sun*, that is."

And indeed, he's just refused to grant *The Sun* an interview. So why was that?

"There's just something about it. They twist everything their own way. I'd be the Wacky Working-Class Lad Made Good."

2.40: Someone tells Billy his gear's arrived (it came by road), and we troop downstairs to the hall where he's due to play tonight. When he appeared in Leeds a year ago, a paltry 50 people turned up; this time he's sold out all 1,000 tickets. However, apart from two swish metal flight cases (about which he seems faintly embarrassed), Billy's equipment remains reassuringly tin-pot – two extremely battered guitars obtained for £55 and £79 ("Johnny Marr's guitar cost about £1,200"), and a couple of plastic bags "for the bits and pieces".

Andy relates how, when they were playing in a huge Belgian festival this summer, he had to carry Billy's stuff onstage in front of thousands of people in only a Sainsbury's carrier bag – "which was fairly revolutionary,

I thought".

The final piece of equipment is, of course, the famed 'Portastack' (featured in *Smash Hits* October 11). At the moment it looks like an innocent rucksack, but cunningly transforms into a portable sound system enabling Billy to produce live music wherever he pleases. He's using it for this afternoon's 'in-store appearance', but seems wary of relying on it too much.

"It could easily become a gimmick. I don't want to be known as Billy Bragg, the man with the funny Portastack."

3.25: We set off for the record shop. Billy and Andy carry the equipment between them, and there's no taxi this time – this isn't Duran Duran, after all. We trudge through a distinctly unappealing concrete underpass and emerge in a tacky shopping centre full of plastic mock-Tudor beams and fake windows. *Jumbo Records* is easy to spot as there's a goodly crowd of earnest-looking student types spilling out of the door, ranging from a couple of pallid Mohicans to a spotty bloke in a badge-laden quilted anorak. Billy and Andy nip behind the counter and struggle manfully with the Portastack which, when assembled, is an impressive if slightly wonky contraption.

With it strapped to his back, Billy closely resembles a particularly low-budget monster out of *Dr Who*. Quick alteration of the shop's spotlights takes care of the light show. "All we need now is some dry ice," quips Billy as he leaps on 'onstage' (a box) and launches jokingly into an ancient heavy metal riff. The Portastack's batteries promptly run out, so Billy decides to plug himself into the mains, a risky business: "I've never tried this before, so who knows – it could all go BOOOM!! There'll be a big blue flash, a pile of ash and a shrine to Billy Bragg."

Fortunately, no such catastrophe occurs and Billy energetically delivers several songs, breaking into long and extremely funny monologues in between and even during numbers. He demonstrates the Echo & The Bunnymen method of guitar playing: "never take your eyes off the strings in case someone nicks them". He explains why Paul Weller stoops: "I thought he'd had an accident on his pushbike, but then I realised it's the weight of all our consciences pressing on his shoulders."

He even sends up The Smiths, one of his favourite groups. "Morrissey can say more in two verses than I can in five," he admits to me later.

It's an irresistible performance, and the crowd love it; the minute he's finished they surge forward *en masse* and proceed to buy both his albums by the cartload. Half an hour later he's still signing albums and joking with the customers, but eventually it quiets down and by 5.00 we're splashing through the rain back up to the Poly.

8.30: Soundchecks are over, the hall's packed tight and Billy bounds onstage.

"Country'n'Eastern" is how he describes the show, which is pretty apt as he shares the bill with weird Japanese duo The Frank Chickens and the equally eccentric Country & Western combo The Hank Wangford Band. Billy tells me he could have made far more money by appearing solo, but wanted to present a "value for money package".

Strangely enough it works, as all three acts share a quirky sense of humour, while being diverse enough not to become boring. The audience certainly enjoy it, simply refusing to leave until the lights are switched back on at 11.30.

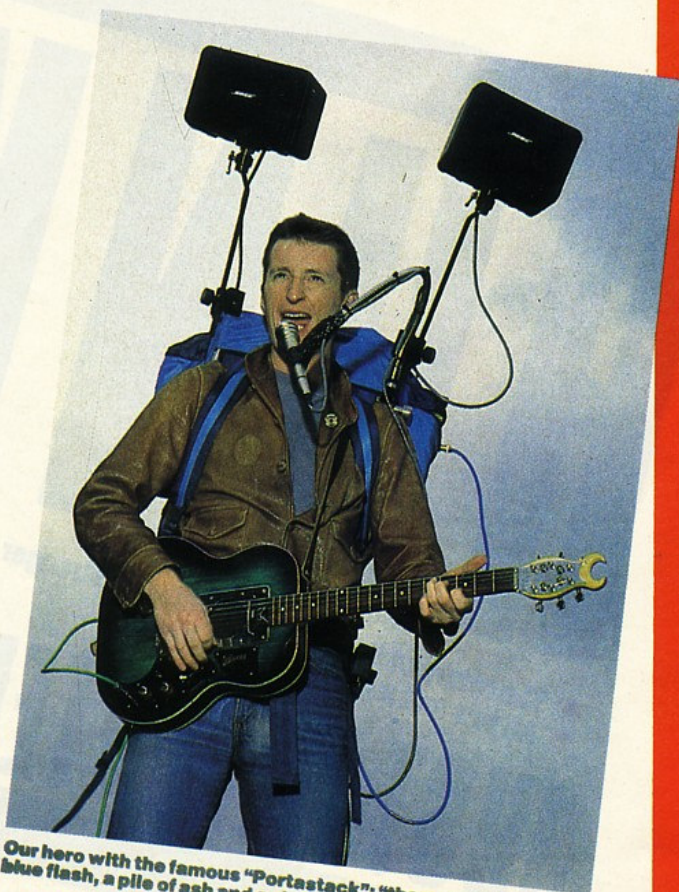
But no sooner is Billy offstage than he's being harangued about his motives and beliefs by

a group of local lads who think he's a "soft Southerner", with no right to pronounce on such issues as the miners' strike. The exchange swiftly escalates into a heated political debate and, after 40 minutes, Billy practically has to be dragged away by the rest of the crew, who are eager to set off to Andy's nearby flat for a party.

1.00 a.m. Back at Andy's, the celebrations are in full swing. Sipping a coffee, Billy tells me it's the first "after-gig party" he's ever had. He seems happy; things are finally going his way. He's travelled half way around the world and his LP's just entered the charts at Number 16. He's even paddled in the Pacific Ocean at dusk. "It was something I promised myself ten, even more years ago, that I'd do. And I'd done it on my own terms. I was choked when I got off that beach, I can tell you. That's one of the most important things that's happened to me. It meant more to me than being in the charts this week."

Is there anything else he'd like to do?

"There's nothing else I'm good at. At the moment it's a good laugh and I get paid for it. You can't ask for more than that."



Our hero with the famous "Portastack"; "there could be a big blue flash, a pile of ash and a shrine to Billy Bragg."