



The Ol' Bill and 'non-moody' social realism backdrop. Can't see it catching on with the Sisters Of Mercy...

Pic Adrian Boot

B. BRAGG IN 'JOBS FOR YOUTH':

HOW TO GO ON TOP OF THE POPS AND STILL BE SUPER-HIP . . .

Billy Bragg's profile – a substantial item at the best of times, but let's leave his nose out of this – became considerably higher last week, with his debut appearance on *Top Of The Pops*. The same night saw him in Essex fleshpot Southend-on-Sea, for the final night of his "Jobs For Youth" tour as sponsored by the Labour Party.

Thrills was on hand to record these momentous events, and gauge the lad's reaction to his sudden elevation from underground cult acclaim to political presence in several million living rooms.

Apparently indifferent to the fact he'd become about 50 times more famous in the few minutes it took to screen his live performance of 'Between The Wars', the Bard of Barking took it all in his Hush Puppie'd stride. Top pop personality-dom remains a long way down his agenda; politics comes very much higher, as the lyrics of all his current EP suggest.

"You can write a song like 'Between The Wars'," he reasons, "which goes up the charts and that's all very well. But you have to ask yourself, what *action* did you take? Well, I went on *TOTP* and I got me piccy in *Smash Hits*. But what did I do? So at least I can say,

I wrote these lyrics, and these lyrics were backed up with *this* action."

By action he means a gig like tonight's, at which there were Labour MPs in attendance to answer the punters' questions, and maybe generate some real involvement in the fight to banish Thatcherism. While support acts Porky The Poet (funny and great and see him) and The Sid Presley Experience (mean, murderous rock 'n' roll) played in the main hall, the two MPs faced a queue of young interrogators in the foyer. I went out to quiz them myself, but found they'd slipped in to catch Billy Bragg's set.

Has the tour been of any practical value, Bill?

"As far as the Labour Party goes, we'll just have to see whether it's just been one geezer pissing in the wind, or what. Nobody who's come along has been put off by the politics, which has been a relief to me, but I'm looking more to the way the Labour Party react to it. . . The MPs have been intrigued by what people are asking them: really tough questions on the miners, racism, but mostly, 'What are you gonna do for me?' They don't have all the answers, and they admit they don't, but I'm encouraged to see

they're prepared to try out something like this.

"I don't want to be up there being people's conscience for them, singing 'Between The Wars' and they go out and buy it and feel as if they've done their bit. They might as well listen to Howard Jones, in that case. . .

"So much was learned from the miners' strike about music and politics, it'd be shameful to let it all drift away. We don't have to have charts full of political music – I'd hate that cos then The Redskins would get to number one – but so much politics in music is just imagery. Y'know, the clashing Stakhanovite bodies, red flags and moody Russian backdrops. And what are they trying to say?"

As for 'Between The Wars' itself: "It's about using history as a lesson. The phrase *between the wars*, well, we might be between the wars *now*. When you think of it that way, you might wanna do something about it, if only turn up at Molesworth this Easter and stare at the fence."

The EP marked a break from BB's albums-only pattern, spurred by his urge to get something out – and quickly – that reflected events in Britain in early '85. He's accordingly

keen that the main track doesn't overshadow the other three: the Kentucky miners' song 'Which Side Are You On?', the Fleet Street flattener 'It Says Here' and Leon Rosselson's socialist folk polemic 'World Turned Upside Down' which tells of 17th century radical sect, the Diggers.

Interestingly, the record's caused as big a stir in folk music circles as in the fab fun hit parade itself: "I certainly couldn't make the records I'm making today without having heard The Clash, The Jam and Elvis Costello. But you hear something like 'World Turned Upside Down' and it's *just as potent*. I think the trouble with folk clubs is they've taken it out of its context, away from people and into those tiny clubs, the real ale finger-in-the-ear brigade."

Late that night we take the A13 from Southend back to London, and Bragg calls in to his mum's house. Yes, she says, she'd watched him on *Top Of The Pops* and yes, she'd liked it – he had a nice shirt on.

"Marvellous, innit? They'll be asking her in work tomorrow, 'Ere, wasn't that your son on telly, singing about International Socialism?' 'Yes,' she'll say, 'didn't he have a nice shirt on?'"

— Paul Du Noyer