

YIP YAP

Yip Harburg, the man who wrote 'Buddy Can You Spare A Dime' and 'Over The Rainbow', is the subject of a new London-based musical. **FRED DELLAR** attended the preview, along with one **STEVEN WILLIAM BRAGG**, who's written a few songs about poverty and hope himself. Picabilly **PENNIE SMITH**.

"I feel that, in this age, unless the things you write about have some contact with the world you live in, your writing is meaningless."

Yip Harburg

E.Y. 'YIP' Harburg was one of the great lyricists of American popular music.

Between 1929, when Harburg first began writing, and 1981, when he was killed in an auto accident, he wrote hundreds of successful songs.

He collaborated with composer Harold Arlen to write the score for the film *The Wizard Of Oz*, worked again with Arlen on the songs to an all-black movie, *Cabin In The Sky*, and collaborated with Burton Lane to provide the songs for *Finian's Rainbow*, a stage show which eventually became a Coppola-directed screen musical.

An anti-fascist who never forgot his New York East Side Roots — "I came from a rough area by the East River, with all the derelicts, docks, lots of sailors and gangs" — Harburg wrote one of the great all-time songs of social significance in the Depression-era ballad, 'Buddy Can You Spare A Dime?' and never ceased to fight for left-wing political causes, writing 'message' songs in an age when involvement in such activities meant blacklisting by Hollywood's notorious Un-American Activities Committee.

When *Look To The Rainbow*, a musical based on the life and lyrics of Harburg, was recently brought to London's Apollo Theatre, it seemed a reasonable idea to take Billy Bragg, a leading contemporary songwriter and social commentator, along to judge his reaction.

After the show, amid chow and chopsticks, the battered cassette-recorder switched on, Bragg dunnis his final portion of sweet and sour and prepares to do his critical bit on behalf of today's working class heroes.

LYRICS — YEAH, I'm into that. But I'm up till now I've always thought of Gershwin and people like that as just someone whom Benny Green refers to in his Sunday column. I sat there wondering whether it'll all be the same for me. Maybe one day I'll be writing in some newspaper with deep reverence about Levi Stubbs and all the younger generation will be saying, Who? because it has no relevance to them.

"Harburg was in a much bigger medium than I've ever dealt with.

Films, for instance, that could be seen by millions and millions of people. I think a lot of his political stuff was a lot more watered down compared to what we're doing today, but he was a product of his times. There's a bit in the show where he's brought up before the Un-American Activities Committee because he's collected the second-highest number of anti-right wing citations in America. That was amazing."

Harburg was a member of the Civil Rights Congress and The Progress-Citizens of America. He wrote speeches for activists and provided lyrics for an anti-war musical called *Hooray For What?* as early as 1937. Following the McCarthy witch-hunt, he was unable to gain work in Hollywood for many years.

Bragg sees a similarity between the New Yorker's approach to a song and those of his own and such other writers as The Redskins' Chris Moore, though he has reservations about Moore's frenetic vocal style which often renders his lyrics incomprehensible to an audience.

"I think you have to realise that lots of shouted lyrics don't necessarily equate with anger. You can be just as angry — like Harburg sometimes was — even in a quiet song. Which, I suppose, is where 'Between The Wars' or something like that might come in."

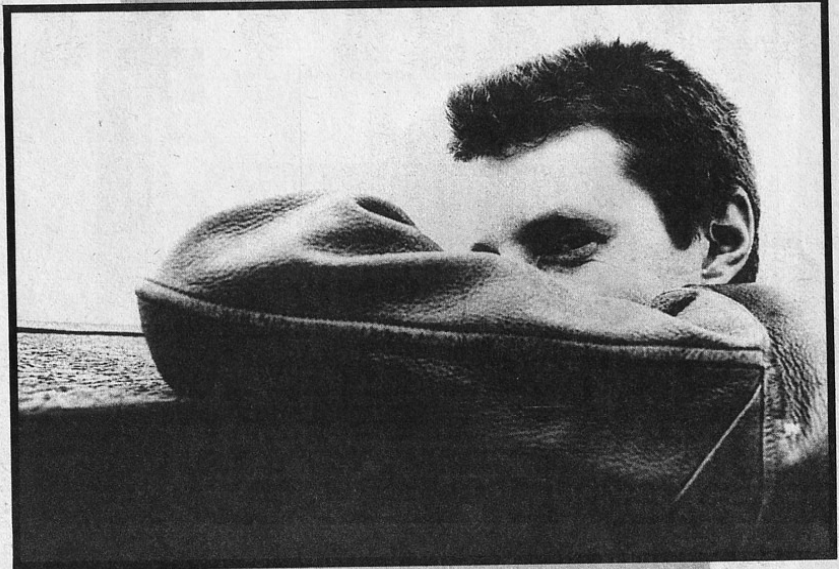
The Bard Of Barking would like his songs to have the audience potential of a Harburg song such as 'It's Only A Paper Moon' (used to provide the theme for a Bogdanovich flick in '73), or 'Over The Rainbow'. He's tickled pink that one of his creations is currently aboard a top-selling, TV advertised compilation.

"What's the point of writing a song if you've got to hide your light under a bushel? You've got to get your ideas over to as many people as possible, people that don't agree with you. Maybe you're putting an idea into words, something they can go away and build on. A different point of view, maybe. You might be giving them a new beginning.

"I don't believe that music on its own is capable of great things. If people can't hear the lyrics then you might just as well be Giorgio Moroder.

"I like other singers to do my songs too. It's interesting to me to see how they turn out. Sometimes they come out very different and you start wondering what could be done with all the other ones. I'd like Shirley Bassey to do one of my love songs. I would, really. And maybe Dionne Warwick could do one of the meatier ones."

BILLY BRAGG GOES RAINBOW CHASING



IN *LOOK To The Rainbow*, Harburg (portrayed by Jack Gilford, a life-long friend and fellow McCarthy victim) claims: "I never say 'I love you' directly in a song, I always look for some other way."

A statement reiterated almost word-for-word by Billy Bragg during a recent *South Bank Show* interview.

"Yeah, that was really strange. But there are different ways, without going all moon and June about it. I used to think that '30s and '40s songs were all moon and June but now, having seen the show, I know better. If you're going to rely on the lyric of a song everything depends on the richness of the picture you paint in word.

"In the programme there's a Harburg quote that goes 'Music makes you feel a feeling, a song makes you feel a thought', and that's great. You have to point out to people how they do things that show affection without actually saying anything at all. Stupid things like staying up all night waiting for the phone to ring, or maybe just dropping a pencil bag in front of someone at school."

Are love songs an essential part of the Bragg way of things?

"No, not really. But I wouldn't like to write all political songs — or all love songs for that matter.

"Love and politics are very similar in some ways though; both are very emotional subjects. If you can get into such a state about the fall of Capitalism why can't you get just as emotional about love? In some ways bands like The Redskins reflect that unsmiling face of the militant — that all work and no play attitude. If the revolution is only going to be about ideology then I don't want to be part of it. If there isn't room for a laugh, there's no alternative. It worries me a bit. That's why I agree to differ with some militants."

Would Steven William Bragg liked to have written 'Over The Rainbow' then?

"Well, that's a great song. I love the optimism in it. I think 'Buddy Can You Spare A Dime' was almost the American national anthem during the Depression. To have written that would have been enough. But to have written 'Somewhere Over The Rainbow', as well!

"I mean, I've never been a fan of Judy Garland but that line, 'All the dreams you ever dared to dream come true', is great. I'm not one for the '30s and all that getting away from it stuff but that one song

embodies tremendous hopefulness."

ONE DIFFERENCE between Bragg and Harburg is that the latter provided lyrics only, while the Go! Disc go-getter fashions both words and music. But in one instance Bragg did provide new lyrics to a Hollywood song — 'Route 66' by Bobby Troup, penned 'way back in 1946.

"I've got a version by Nat King Cole which I think is the first-recorded version. I re-wrote it as 'A13'. (Bragg's wonderfully hilarious version runs: "If you ever go to Shoeburyness/Take the A road, the OK road that's the best/Go motoring — on the A13".) But Troup's publishing company wouldn't let me put it out. They felt I was just taking the piss out of it. But afterwards I came to the conclusion that it was a good song live anyway, so why bother recording it?

"Funnily enough, they loved my version in the States. I used it on my gigs there and it meant I could strike a common chord, starting off with something they all knew, yet Anglicising it. They all liked that. I mean, none of us over here know what places like Gallup, New Mexico, are like. And by turning it around and singing about places that the Yanks hadn't heard of — well, that worked.

"I've always had an eye for the



JACK GILFORD as Yip Harburg. A life-long friend of Harburg's, both he and his wife, actress Madeline Lee Gilford, were blacklisted during the McCarthy era.

ridiculous. I do a Cliff Richard song called 'A Voice In The Wilderness', and now I've got a re-write called 'The Voice Of The Wildebeeste'. That came about because after one gig, a guy came up to me and said, 'Ere, what's that song you did about a wildebeeste, mate? And I thought, 'The Voice Of The Wildebeeste' — what a great title!

"It's a terrible pastiche. It's all about this man whose wife has an affair with a wildebeeste and the last line goes: 'Although there was nobody left to see, my wife and the wildebeeste left hoof marks on me'. My version is very true to the original. I'm very proud of it and it goes down a storm on gigs.

"Me and my mate Wiggy wrote most of it in a McDonald's in Acton."

WELL, EVEN Harburg came up with a nuttily flagwaver called 'The Son Of A Gun Who Picks On Uncle Sam', when drunk on World War Two patriotism and anti-Fascist feeling. But Bragg, despite his wish to become as much a family favourite as Bet Lynch's earrings, is unlikely ever to become quite as showbiz as the East Side's rainbow-chaser.

However, he admits that he's not impartial to some of Hollywood's excesses.

"When I was last in New York, Pete Jenner (his manager) and me went to see Johnny Cash and Waylon Jennings at Radio City. The Cash gig was really weird. You know how James Brown used to fine his band 50 dollars if they missed a beat? Well, I reckon Cash fines his band 50 dollars if they break into a sweat. All the songs he did were so sincere. He told us this was the best year of his life and nothing had pleased him more this year than playing to us. Me and Jenner were doubled up laughing at him.

"Then he brought his family on at the end, the entire cast, and they all did, several verses of 'Amazing Grace' while on a big screen they had this film showing a blond, blue-eyed Jesus, walking through the Holy Land! That's when me and Jenner walked out!

"The Radio City Music Hall is a beautiful place though, all art deco. Apparently the show to see there is Liberace's. He arrives onstage in a mirrored Rolls Royce and amid all these lights, he gets out of it at the piano, then waits while the Rolls drives round and then comes back to pick up his mink.

"Now that's great showmanship. If you're gonna go, you've got to go the whole way like that!"