



Andrew Collins

KING OF THE ROAD

Billy Bragg makes music for the masses, but he wins his fans one at a time.

Article by Sue Cummings

Billy Bragg and I are backstage juggling record-industry jargon. "MOR, AOR . . . I can't even remember what they all stand for," he mumbles with a Cockney inflection of disgust.

"You're sort of like DOR—denim-oriented rock," I tease.

"What, these?" He points to his faded jeans. "I just wear them 'cause they only cost me £6.50." Now he's indignant. If this were a cartoon, the thought-bubble over his head would read, "These bloody journalists . . ." But he doesn't say that. I'm a girl, and he's too polite.

He rummages through his knapsack and shoves a guitar pick into his back pocket. The dressing room has no mirror. On the way downstairs to the stage, he

asks, "How do I look? Is this all right for playing a gig in New York?" As he straightens an imaginary collar above his plain white T-shirt, his voice is deadpan, but sarcasm flashes across his face.

To the initiated, Billy Bragg is already something of a new-age minstrel. In a country as small as England, the impact of his live performances garnered a feature in *Melody Maker* in the spring of 1983, even before the release of his first LP, *Life's a Riot With Spy vs. Spy*, on the independent Go! Discs label, has to date sold more than 110,000 copies in England. But it's not unusual for indies to climb the charts there, and though *Life's a Riot* went Top 20, cynics might think that English youth would buy Bragg's sin-

cerity even if it were hype.

But Bragg is a man of words and deeds. First the words: "The entire business is run on bullshit, as much in England as in America, but you don't have to fuckin' go up to your neck and eat it as well. With a bit of thought, you can sort of paddle across it. And if you're really gonna be a media Jesus, actually walking on the bullshit is the ultimate challenge. What enables you? Street credibility."

Bragg spent most of 1982 traveling around Britain with an electric guitar, honing his repertoire in pubs (" 'Cause I didn't have enough songs, I relied more on smart-ass one-liners"). Chappell Music donated three afternoons of studio time to him in 1983. The resulting low-budget demo, recorded live onto two tracks with only vocals and guitar, subsequently became *Life's a Riot*. When his second LP, *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, was released in America on CD Presents last year, he branded it with the "Pay no more than" warning of his first recording. "It doesn't cost me a lot to make these records, so I don't see why consumers should have to pay that much for them."

He has also refused, under pressure, to form a band, make a video, or release a single. Paradoxically, his songs' quirky wit makes them prime singles prospects. Bragg has discovered that when you play a wild card, the singles game is not without its share of ironies: "Kirsty McColl covered 'New England,' and for the price of that 12-inch you could get the whole LP [*Life's a Riot*] with the original on it. So people started buying it again, and it went back into the Top 30. When people see an LP for £2.99, they don't mind taking a chance on it. I believe it's a rip-off to make an LP for £2.99 and lift a single off it for £1.70."

But a record is only the next best thing to being there. A tireless performer, Bragg played a gig in a different city almost every night of his six-week American tour this spring. The absence of a band means greater mobility, as his entire entourage consists of manager Pete Jenner and one roadie.

"I know why I do it, and it's got nothing to do with football stadiums, videos, and Grammy awards. It's much more fun just sitting in the back of a car with the guitar and amp, driving around meeting people. It's about a need to communicate my ideas to people—the absolute bottom line—and a need to travel. I really enjoy doing gigs. It scares me 'cause I like it."

For a man who began his career in a punk band, Bragg has carved an unlikely niche as a busker with a social conscience and an electric guitar. "A whole generation's grown up without ever hearing records without bass and drums. They've never heard Woody Guthrie or those first two Bob Dylan LPs; to them it's all really new. To me it's not new 'cause I've worked my way back that far." But Bragg doesn't restrict himself to the folk tradition; a session as guest DJ at WNYU, a college station in New York, found him playing the Redskins, Die Toten Hosen, R.E.M. ("It stands for 'Really Excellent Men'"), Microdisney, the Kinks, and Sam Cooke's *Live at Harlem Square Club*. His own records owe as much to Paul Weller as to any whole-grain folkie: they offer the immediacy of punk tempered with a wariness of its self-serving excess.

"I wouldn't say I'm reinterpreting the ideas of someone like Dylan. I'm learning from the failures of the sort of turn on, tune in, and freak out generation that failed miserably, as did punk rock. In the end it all became just about buying records, haircuts, clothes, and drugs. It went from confronting the issues and spilled over into nihilism and decadence.

"When I first thought about playing again [after the breakup of his punk band Riff Raff in 1977], I realized that the most intense way would be to strip it right down but still play fast and loud. I couldn't do it with acoustic guitar—it had to have that scathing edge. I didn't want to play folk clubs and be the new James Taylor. I still secretly wanted to be The Clash."

It's not a secret anymore.

His political convictions are out in the open as well. Earlier this year, during his Jobs for Youth tour in England, kids found Labour Party MPs in attendance after the shows to press the flesh and address social grievances—unemployment, racism, the miners' strike. "Revolutions do not start in record shops. But if you write a song like 'Between the Wars,' you have to come up with the actions to meet it. I don't claim that the Labour Party has all the answers in the U.K., but they took the youth vote for granted in the last election and didn't get it. I do think that at the moment they offer a better opportunity for an egalitarian society than anybody else."

How will this banner-waving translate to American audiences? Slowly. Rather than belligerently point his middle finger at the music biz, Bragg has simply charted a course as an entertainer that rarely intersects with standard media channels. "What I do is best expressed person-to-person; it's a two-way thing. At a gig you have the opportunity to question what I'm saying. When I write a song, I try to put you in the song's context. To make a video starring me would cross purposes."

This has caused some confusion. "There was a great thing on Channel 5 News about me and Prince. It showed me walking around playing the guitar and a cut from the 'When Doves Cry' video. And the guy said, 'What do these two young men have in common?' Apparently, we were both 'new music.' The definition of new music was: You're under 25, make videos, and use all the new technology. Unfortunately, I failed on all three of those—it's a real pity.

"I'm still not sure who my audience is. I have a terrible feeling they might be yuppies."

After the show, the publicist gestures wildly to me and whispers: "That's Bob Dylan's son over there, the one with the dark hair. He came to see Billy play. They're good friends."

I inch my way through the crowd toward Jesse Dylan. I don't know what to say. Finally I ask, "Have you got a cigarette?" Bob Dylan's son doesn't smoke.

A month later, word reaches New York that The Clash are busking in northern England without their roadies, doing acoustic sets in pubs, clubs, and shopping centers. In Leeds, they perform for a crowd standing in line for tickets to see The Alarm.

It is May, and Billy Bragg is touring Canada.