

"I'M NOT THE ONLY SPOTTY PALE AND UNLOVED PERSON IN THE WORLD"

Billy Bragg, big-nosed boy from Barking, opens his heart. Sylvia Patterson wipes away the tears.

I look like an over-grown, monstrous school-kid!" chirps a short-trousered Mr William Bragg, quite correctly, skipping down the path to a sun-soaked park in East London. "Oh well, people have accepted my nose, they'll just have to accept my legs now!"

He likes a bit of a laugh at his own expense, does Billy. And like most people who've learned to laugh at their own... er, "misfortunes", he knows a thing or two about misery—in fact, he's a bit of an expert. On the surface he's the jolly japester, the larkabout bloke—but underneath it all, as he says himself, "I'm a tortured soul—which everybody is, really, aren't they?" Sniff! Still, it's just as well for us he is, otherwise he probably couldn't begin to write such wonderfully weepsome songs as his latest, "Levi Stubbs' Tears".

"I wrote that on a cross channel ferry when I was with Kershaw—Andy, not Nik!—and we were really bored," he tells us, sprawling all over the grass, the sun reflecting off his snow-toned legs. "I just sat down with a pen and an idea and wrote it straight off, sort of like a poem.

"I wanted to put across the idea of loneliness being alleviated by music, because I'm someone who really loves music and it brings out certain emotions in me. So when I get depressed or feel sad, I play a particular music and that'll not make me *happy* again, but sort of sum things up, or bring out the sad feelings quicker. Levi Stubbs (*singer of old soul group The Four Tops*) has this great emotional cry in his voice—he expresses with his voice the sadness and frustration the character in my song is feeling—and she has to turn to *him* because she hasn't got anybody else. She's left home, nicked her Mum's coat—so she won't be talking to her!—and she's been mutilated by this complete bastard that she ended up marrying. It's a very sad song, but it's also a very true song.

"For a lot of people, violence in their relationships is a reality—not just something that happens on *Brookside* or whatever. Half the time you can talk to the man next door about the weather or something and he's a wife-beater, y'know? And you hear the raised voices coming through the walls late at night and you *know* what's going on, but people find it difficult to talk about these things, don't they? So again people can turn to music for solace, and if any of my songs can comfort people in the way that, say 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' (*weepie old tune by Simon & Garfunkel*) did for me, then that's *everything* to me. That's better than half a dozen gold discs or whatever. That's job fulfillment, just to let people know that they're not alone in their sadness, which they *never* are. I mean, what would I do if I didn't have the great soul songs there to tell me that I'm not the only person in the

world who's spotty and unloved and pale?"

Surely he can't mean that?

"Yes, I do! I *was* unloved—for a very long time..."

Billy looks out mistily over the trees and I do believe he's gone all wistful...

"Yeah, when I was between about ten and 18, I felt very unloved. I failed completely to communicate to girls and women—I became withdrawn and uncomfortable in their presence. And all I wanted to do was love them one hundred percent and for them to love me one hundred percent, as if nothing else mattered in the whole world. But it wasn't like that. And *when* it wasn't like that, when it wasn't all fireworks and violins, I was really bitter and disillusioned and angry... as if somebody had lied to me. And that someone was Matt Monro (*wobbly old balladeer of the early '60s*)! And it was Nat King Cole (*smoothy old balladeer of the '50s*) who sang 'When I Fall In Love It Will Be Forever'... Will it hell! He *lied* to me, I'm telling you! And Frank Sinatra lied to me. Even The Beatles lied to me! Smokey Robinson didn't lie to me though! Smokey *told* me... 'The Tracks Of My Tears', 'The Tears Of A Clown'... Smokey, SMOKEY! Thank God you're out there! You saved me! God, I thought having it off would solve all my problems! The biggest disillusion of them *all*, that was..."

Calming down a little, Billy continues in this melancholy vein.

"When I was 17 I loved a girl... I loved her and loved her and *loved* her, but she didn't pay any attention to me whatsoever... Looking back it was a very trivial relationship but at the time it meant everything to me. But you learn, don't you? You learn there's no such thing as the perfect woman or the perfect man. The other great thing that music taught me is that until your heart has been completely broken and smashed on the rocks, you'll never really understand what love is and how precious it is. I mean, if you fall in love with the first person you meet and love them forever and they love you forever I should imagine that would be really boring. How *boring!* What would you talk about in bed? Every one always talks about the other people they've ever been to bed with in the bed, don't they?"

"That's the thing, y'see: I'm not much good at relationships—it's more a case of thinking about them all the time rather than doing 'em! The experiences that I sing about in my songs have usually been nicked from other people. I get them round to let them pour their hearts out, stay up all night with them and then, when they've gone, I reach out under the bed for me pen and pad. I'm not joking! I've got a pen and pad under my bed! Some of them happen to me personally though—God, if *all* of them did I'd be dead by now!"

Aw—poor old Sir William, it must be such a strain being meaningful all the time. "Well, I can't write any other way! It's the only thing I've ever been any good at—I'm useless at everything else! People shouldn't take it too seriously though. There's nothing worse than playing to an audience when they're all very reverent and silent—the thoughts of Chairman Bill or something. I hope they're listening, obviously, but sometimes I just want them to shout out 'Piss off big nose' or just anything! I mean, I take what I *do* very seriously but I don't take *myself* seriously. I mean, look at that (*grabs weedy, white thigh*)—could you take those legs seriously? I can't!"

He's back to having a laugh again, is Bill. But how easy is it I wonder for a Socialist to look out over the blue beyond of popdom and see his first million rolling in?

"Well, I find it very easy to be sensible about money. I still haven't forgotten what a huge amount one *thousand* quid is. If I made a million—and I'd be very pleased and very *proud* to do so—I'd stick it in the bank so that when I'm 50 I won't be back to where I started again. Don't get me wrong—it's not that I think it could bring me happiness—because I know it *can't*. I tell you one thing that rich people know that poor people don't... rich people *know* that money can't change anything. The disappointment of luxury is a terrible discovery. Poor people at least still have the *hope* that if they win the pools or something it just might lift them out of all the shit they're in. Rich people have been there, done it, seen it and they *know* that it can't. So therefore they're much more miserable people—money *makes* you miserable.

"I should imagine most people reading this would like the opportunity to find out, but they'd be foolish to think that they can only be happy when they've got it, because they won't be. Any money that I make is just over and above being lucky enough to do what I love doing and getting me wages paid for it—and that's the difference. I've got all the success I need—it's success on my own terms."

He's 28 now, is the sprightly lad from Barking. Will he go on being successful on his own terms till the end of time?

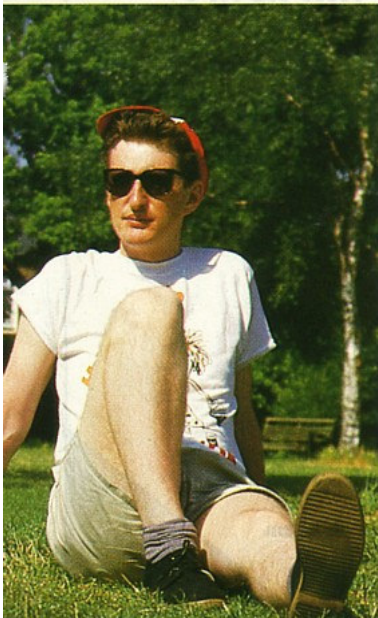
"Y'know *seriously*, I'll do this until I stop getting the letters, because if they stopped, that would mean no one is listening anymore. As long as people still write to me saying 'you're great' or 'piss off back to Russia you raving Commie' or *whatever*, I'll still feel of some use. The day I'm ignored is the day I'll just... disappear."

And off he goes to play on the roundabouts with the local and rather amused kiddies—the wisest, most overgrown and monstrous school-kid in the land.





LEVI STUBBS' TEARS



With the money from her accident
 She bought herself a mobile home
 So at least she could get some enjoyment
 Out of being alone
 No one could say that she was left up on the shelf
 It's you and me against the world kid
 She'd mumble to herself

Chorus
 When the world falls apart some things stay in place
 Levi Stubbs' tears run down his face

She ran away from home in her mother's best coat
 She was married before she was even entitled to vote
 And her husband was one of those blokes
 The sort who only laughs at his own jokes
 The sort a war takes away
 And when there wasn't a war he left anyway

Repeat chorus

Norman Whitfield and Barratt Strong
 Are here to make right everything that's wrong
 Holland and Holland and Lamont Dozier too
 Are here to make it all okay with you

And one dark evening he returned home from the sea
 And put a hole in her body where no hole should be
 It hurt her more to see him walking out the door
 And though they stitched her back together
 They left her heart in pieces on the floor

When the world falls apart some things stay in place
 She takes off the Four Tops tape
 And puts it back in its case

When the world falls apart some things stay in place
 Levi Stubbs' tears

*Words and music by Billy Bragg
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