

# “ALL THE PALAVER IN BETWEEN”

Dodgy food, dodgy radio reporters, dressing room doors that won't open, in store record signing. . . and those magical 90 minutes on stage. This is life on the road with *Billy Bragg*  
Barking instructions:  
**Jane Wilkes**  
Big nosed snaps:  
**Patrick Quigly**



“One of the first times I played Nottingham was at this club where the dressing room, instead of being behind the stage, was right on the other side of the club. I just couldn't get off the stage, the crowd were physically pushing me back on. I ended up playing 'New England' three times and even the Clash's 'Garageland' before they'd let me off!”

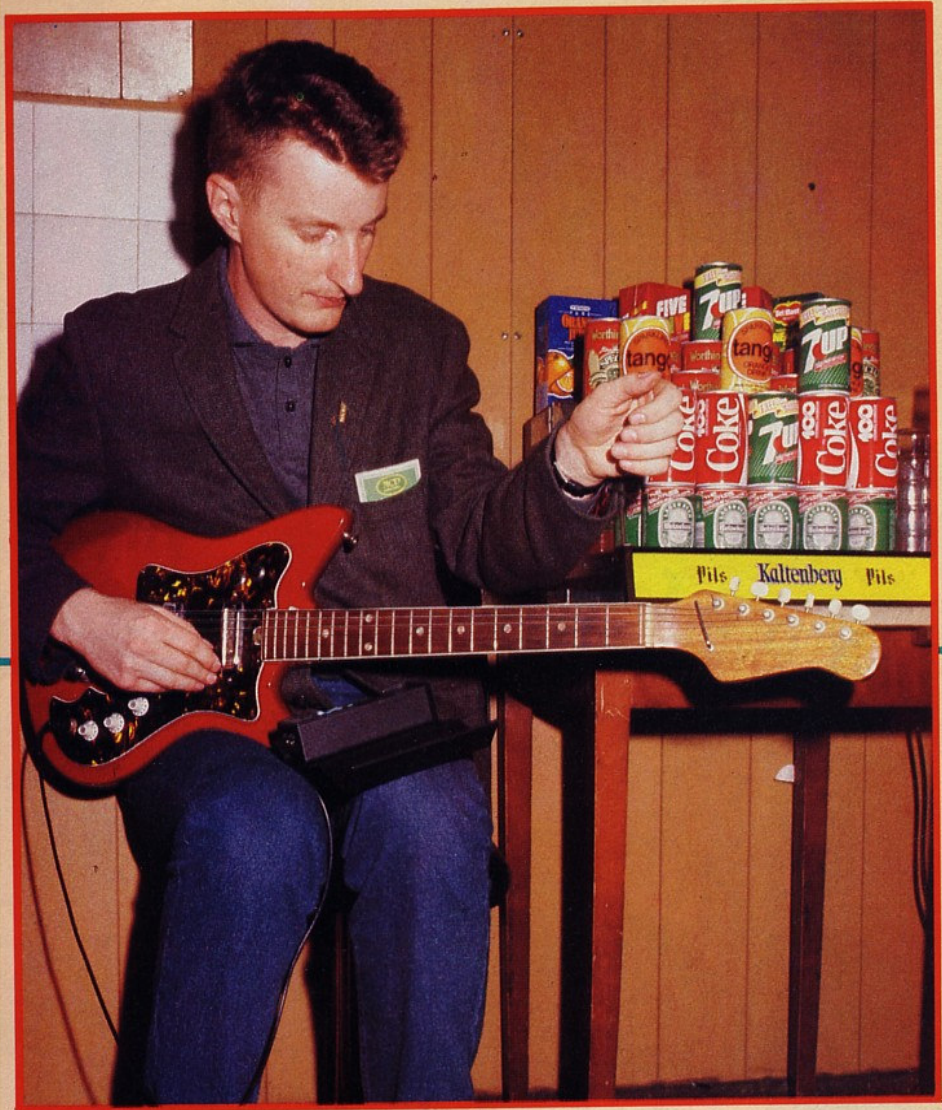
A couple of years on, and many a performance later, Billy Bragg makes a return to Nottingham for the third date in his 'Talking With The Taxman' tour. Bragg mania has reached fever-pitch proportions these days, so it's fortunate that his dressing room is well within reach as he disappears after an explosive set. But this is not enough. The insatiable crowd demands an encore. The screams and stamping feet combine with the chants of “BRAGG! BRAGG!” to create quite an uproar, a racket that any spokesman for a generation would be unwise to ignore. Appearing again, a bit sweatier this time, Bragg launches into 'Days Like These' and 'A13' (the Barking bard's interpretation of the old classic 'Route 66'). Bidding Nottingham a fond farewell, Billy Bragg makes his exit.

Back in the dressing room, everyone can wind down a notch. The show may be over, but a day on the road still holds a few more hours before the man Bragg and entourage will see their pillows. There's all the packing up to do, there're more interviews and, of course, there're the fans who want a good old natter with the immediately personable star of the night.

Life on the road is as hectic as the clichés say. You eat dodgy food, you don't get much sleep and you're allowed even less privacy. The punters only see the 90 minutes or so that Billy Bragg is on stage, yet the time and energy spent making sure every last detail is just right is phenomenal. Everything is geared towards that 90 minutes. As Billy says: “Being on the road is like working a night-shift.” Only snag is, this type of night-shift includes a dayshift as well — a dayshift of preparations and travelling.

“The majority of the time spent on the road, is just that — travelling. Like, in three nights you might do Austin, Texas, New Orleans and Atlanta, Georgia. And people say to you, 'Wow, what was New Orleans like?'. You can tell 'em what the airport was like, what the hotel was like, and what the gig was like. It's really frustrating. You might never go to these places again.

**What with an “orrible” breakfast regurgitating inside his stomach (“the world's worst cheese and ham toastie”), taking the wrong road out of Birmingham, and ending up going the 'scenic' way through Tamworth, this day had not boded well for Billy Bragg. He was just a little bit on edge. A phone call to London settled him down.**



"LP reviews are a bit like getting your school report," he says. "You're a bit nervy about it." There was no need to worry on this count. The album reviews were unanimously commending.

The album in question, 'Talking With The Taxman About Poetry', is Billy's third. Bringing to the fore his penchant for the wittily dressed, schoolboy love song, it might appear that standing on the podium, taking on the role of mouthpiece against the country's ills, has slipped into a supporting position. Well, it seems not. Separating the man from his mission was to prove a hard task. Billy Bragg and his political persuasions tied the knot many moons ago. And no divorce is imminent.

We start off talking about his new love songs, and playing them for the first time to an audience. Before I know it, he's cleverly manipulated the conversation back to politics.

"I love playing at the moment with all these new songs, seeing how they fit in, how they work, just doing them on impulse. Travelling around the world is stimulating because you have to work out 'how does this have any relevance to the audience I'm playing it to?'. Here I am, standing on a stage in Japan singing a song about South Africa. Now, what do these kids know about South Africa? In Japan, not a lot. So you have to try and make it relevant. You have to read a lot of newspapers and watch a lot of television and work out what happened in Japanese history that's similar in South Africa. They did the same to the Koreans.

"Or in the Soviet Union, or East Germany, or in the States, you have to look for items in the news that offer you a bit more insight into what you're trying to say. To me, playing live remains the most important part of my life. If there was a way of clocking on at 10pm and clocking off at 1am, I'd do it. It's all the palaver in between."

**Back to exotica UK** and all that palaver in between. Having arrived in Nottingham, we eventually find the venue (with the infamous one-way system, you keep seeing the place you want as you whizz past on another road). Time-tabled in today's schedule is a personal appearance at the record store 'Select-a-disc'. According to Billy, this is one of the best record shops in the country "because they sell my already cheap LP at a huge discount price.

"I asked the guy why he did that and he looked me in the eye and said 'Because it's overpriced Billy'. He meant it as well. I really respect him for that. Also, after I'd finished, I was allowed to pick some freebies. It was like being on 'The Generation Game', running round the shop trying to remember what I wanted in five minutes."

Next stop, Nottingham City Hall to meet with members of the Labour council. Flying the flag over a

couple of informal cups of tea, Bragg offers a few suggestions for a free festival in the Nottingham area, something akin to the one he had played a couple of days previously at Fulham Palace.

Time then, to get back to Rock City, the venue for tonight's performance, and get on with the mundane tasks of setting up and soundchecking. On entering the hall, Billy is accosted by a young reporter from Radio Derby who, armed with reel upon reel of tape, wishes to deprive Billy of a few minutes of his time. Adjourning to the dressing room, the interview begins. First question up: "Billy, do you ever write poetry?"

I sense that this interview might be fun, so I hang around. I'm right. Young Mr Radio Derby is intent on discussing Billy Bragg's sex-life. Billy is explaining his method of writing love-songs, the angle from which he approaches them, and the way in which he adds personal details about his relationships into the songs. This sparks off the intrepid reporter. The ensuing interrogation goes something along these lines . . .

Radio Derby: "Do you still have relationships then?"

Billy Bragg: "Yes, even as I speak."

RD: "What about tonight, are you going to take any of your fans to bed?"

BB: "I think my fans are more interested in my mind than my body. Two women came to the dressing room last night specifically to discuss Marxism. They were ideologically sound to the nth degree and we discussed the decline of capitalism and that was it. I went back to my . . ."

RD: "So you've never had any women proposition you?"

BB: (With his tongue firmly in his cheek) "Of course, ever since I came to terms with my own sexuality when I was 26, they've been queueing up!"

**At this point** Wiggy, best friend and looker-after of Billy, appears to rescue him from this ordeal and whisk him off to sound check. After a quick Hank Williams medley, he's joined by first supports the Mint Juleps to practice the show opener, the acappella 'Change Gonna Come'.

After some 'scram' (nosh, grub, et cetera), all there's left to do is sit around and wait for showtime. In this brief interval, Billy recalls some funny tales of incidents that have occurred on tour. One of his most memorable performances was the first time he played on the South Coast.

"We played a place called Rumours in Hastings, and it was one of the earliest examples of Bragg mania where the audience were just going mental. The dressing room was a cellar at the back of the stage. It was an 'orrible place. I played me stuff and the audience was going, absolutely crazy. I finished the last song of the proper set and went in the dressing room slamming the door behind me.

"The audience were really giving it some," (imagine an animated Billy Bragg impersonating a cheering, stamping audience), "so I went to go back on stage, but there was no handle on the inside of the door. So I'm bellowing 'Help! Help!', but they couldn't hear me. So I try to open it with me fingernails and end up with blood everywhere. Eventually, I found a big metal chisel and managed to prise the door open with that, but there was a real good minute of absolute panic of how I was going to get out."

Show time is fast approaching, so we leave Billy to prepare himself. In the club, there's a prickly tension, an anticipation in the air that's immediately released as Bragg runs on-stage. Lunging straight into the old favourite 'Milkman Of Human Kindness', the climax of another day on the road has just begun.