

# IF SEX WAS TAXED, BILLY BRAGG WOULD GET A REBATE

**BILLY BRAGG** may have a lot to say about the state of the nation, but when it comes to his private life he's surprisingly quiet. **JAMES BROWN** finds a jilted lover in Lytham St Annes. Photo by **MICK PEEK**

**B**ILLY BRAGG is crossing the road back to his minibus.

His raincoat is wrapped around his shoulders almost as tightly as my fingers cling to my tape recorder.

We're in Lytham St Annes, fifteen minutes south of Blackpool. It's 8.30 in the morning and it's cold.

We've just left two mildly amused pensioners putting their way around the miniature-golf course. They're happy because this young man with a Cockney accent has just joked with them in the same cheery sort of way they fondly imagine their own sons talk to old age pensioners. They did not hear him suggest we rush over and push them into the hedge.

Do you have any trouble chatting people up, Billy?

"Yeah, I'm like the world's worst at it. I'm one for spending ages trying really hard to get someone on their own and then freezing and crawling up the wallpaper. Then when I see people just go up to strange women and start talking to them, I think, How do they do that? I suppose it's fear of rejection or something, isn't it?"

The two old women don't know that this was the first time the polite young man had laughed sickly to himself in days. Nor that the night before he'd enthusiastically entertained his Winter Gardens audience to rampant grinning point only to usher two old friends back to his hotel to get miserably shitfaced. The Jack Daniels went out of the

bottle into the glass and down the throat until it went swiftly back up the throat, past the lips and onto the carpet. Hank Williams was on the tape recorder and Billy Bragg was getting grim.

Even his manager kept away.

Why was the Berk Of Barking the soul of gold acting like a shame-faced and tearful old alcoholic bore? Because, ironically, within a day of my *Sounds* LP review suggesting his life needed a good shaking, he's been chucked.

A good time for me to stick the critical Stanley knife in.

**B**RAGG'S THIRD LP, 'Talking With The Taxman About Poetry', is the clumsiest stage in his development from frothy sub-Weller Barking Brat into mature but articulate singer/songwriter. What Bragg calls a "focusing of ideas", I call mellowing. The LP isn't without quality songs — what is missing is precision.

Where Bragg's confusion in the past had been channelled into anger, verbal aggression, and pointedly obvious but biting social and political commentary, it has now been pushed towards an attempt at untangling the harder topic of personal relationships. He still understands his political targets and stabs as deftly and accurately as is expected, but it's the attempted exploration into the wider field of adult relationships that's revealed his bark to be sharper than his bite. And when you've a quality control the level of Billy Bragg's for everything else in life, it's disappointing when your songwriting slips.

Sex, pregnancy, marriage — Bragg's songs increasingly seem more suitable as *Play For Today* scores than as relatives to the yapping puppy dog enthusiasm and social snarling of the 'Life's A Riot' LP.

Doesn't your own break-up make

a lot of the songs on the new LP seem redundant now?

"No, not really, because when I'm singing them live I think, Yeah, ouch, I can feel that right now. Like 'Honey, I'm A Big Boy Now' is very meaningful at the moment. I'm really cynical when it comes to relationships. Anything really good has to come to an end.

"This is the first time I've just waded in blind in ages and ages and it's all rebounded onto me in a really bad way. And it's my fault because it was me who walked into it so gormlessly.

"I think there's a lot of humour involved in relationships, I think they're very funny. There are few things more hysterical than being naked in bed with someone. It's so serious to so many people, and so important, that for you to be able to admit that you were lying there wondering what time the train leaves is achingly funny."

Why should people put any faith in what you're saying politically and socially when they know so little about your private life?

"They shouldn't. They shouldn't look up to my ideas any more than those of the person next door. As for there being a veil of secrecy around my life, well there aren't any great secrets or anything, but as far as my privacy goes, yeah, I do keep things to myself and long may it remain that way."

**T**HE MOST disgusting thing I have ever seen at a concert is people dancing to a slow Billy Bragg song, out of political empathy.

Utterly styleless and stiff, and completely lacking in life, innuendo, or physical presence, this arseless liberal sloth boogie was revolting, yet it was probably as much an indication of why people like him as anything.

The popularity of The Clash, The Au Pairs, The Redskins, Psychic TV (before B Jones), and The Special AKA, shows that certain people do enjoy the fusion of pop and politics. And while most concentrate primarily on the music, there are Billy Bragg fans who will gladly tell or show you that their main reason for paying the man cash and attention is that they enjoy this



**BRAGG: Fencing off the amorous attentions of Young Socialist girls . . .**

political polemic.

Your live performances are very sexless. Don't you ever want to go on stage naked so that we can see what it's all about?

"No, because that's not what it's all about, James. That's just sensationalism. It's just the lowest common denominator. Aren't we supposed to be appealing to something a little higher? Don't you think there's enough sex being sold in popular music at the moment without me joining in? I'll quite happily give it out if people want to ask, but me walking onto the stage

stark naked would just be sensationalism."

What I mean is, you don't have people down the front screaming and trying to take your pants off, do you?

"Oh yes I do! At the Young Socialist Conference there was a young girl down the front who grabbed me by the ankle during 'The Marriage' and wouldn't let go."

Well, if that's your idea of sexual hysteria I'll be giving your bed a miss tonight. Throughout the interview I've sat and picked at the seams of my 501s. Now, hours on, standing

all roadfaced and niggling beside the white Bedford minibus, we both know what's been bothering the other.

Bragg understands that my main beef with him is that, instead of getting wild and tearing into the grim reality of our country and our existences, he's decided just to tug away and document it. He knows we're both having difficulty growing up, artistically and personally, and that it's a bit strange. And he knows I think the guitars should be faster.

I know that Bragg is suffering emotionally and that he is extremely

lonely — that's why he puts himself in front of so many people each night. It hardly sweetens the bitterness but it's likely the songs he writes now will be far better than those he's written during his last months of contentment.

It's frosty. We exchange smiles, Bragg smacks me round the head, and the two of us set off in different directions. Him to soothe his jackhammered heart, and me to mend my trousers.

Emotionally disturbed pop stars? For God's sake keep them away.