

Billy Bragg

ROSELAND, New York City, April 15th, 1988

BY DAVID HANDELMAN

THIS IS LIKE THE SIXTIES," Billy Bragg announced after walking onstage in T-shirt and jeans. "But it's not *actually* the Sixties, so don't get carried away."

His cheerful reminder seemed necessary: the mixed-bag crowd had assembled for an evening of acerbic, witty protest songs by a funny-looking solo guitarist who had just been rousing introduced as "the most important songwriter in the world today" by hippie pooh-bah Abbie Hoffman. In the lobby, activists sought signatures for human-rights petitions and voter registration.

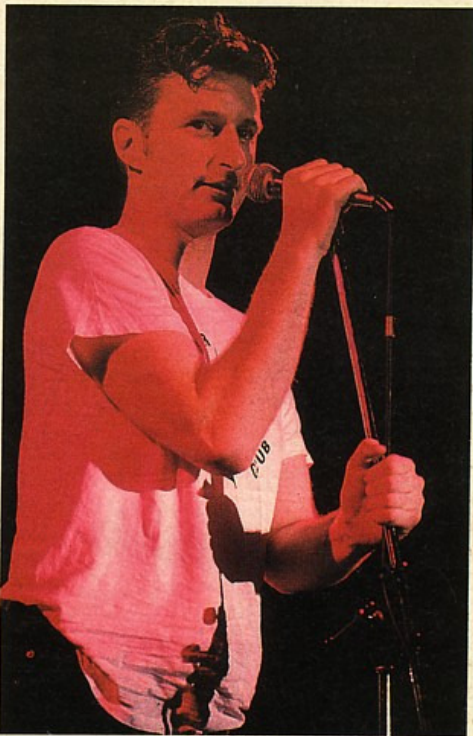
Considering the recent wave of Sixties nostalgia and the success of folkies like Suzanne Vega, it's surprising Bragg hasn't broken bigger. But the attention he gets for his activism — he cofounded Red Wedge, an artists' socialist alliance — often obscures his excellent songwriting. And an uncompromising cockney accent, usually accompanied by only the Spartan sound of his electric guitar, doesn't exactly encourage mainstream exposure.

That could change. On his most recent LP, *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry*, Bragg fleshed out his sound without going commercial; in concert he has added some piano playing (by Cara Tivey) and has tempered his slightly shrill espousal of a workers' revolution with self-effacing humor and songs concerning the more personal politics of relationships.

Still, a Billy Bragg show remains predominantly a stripped-down, ideologically charged affair. At Roseland he stood nearly still, bathed in harsh colored light in front of a backdrop depicting people huddled around a burning garbage can. Of the two-hour performance, a good half-hour was devoted to between-song mouthing off. "You'll have to excuse my voice," he said. "It's nearly gone from me leaning out of taxi windows yelling, 'Asshole,' at cars with Bush bumper stickers." At one point, condoms were tossed into the crowd.

Bragg proved equally compelling when he *was* playing songs. He not only sang "Help Save the Youth of America" (the Bo Diddley-flavored title track of his new live EP) to a crowd of middle-class Americans — he got them to cheer such apocalyptic predictions as "Washington will burn."

Assuring "those among the nonpolitically aligned" that he is also "a paid member of the romantic softies," Bragg produced some moving evidence, most notably the lilting "New England" ("I



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don't want to change the world. . . I'm just looking for another girl") and "Levi Stubbs' Tears." The last, a song about the catharsis provided by great old soul songs, neatly sums up the power of Bragg's own work.

He finished by bringing on his guitarist friend "Wiggy" for a sloppy version of Bowie's "Star." With lights flashing, Bragg growled, "I could play the part of a rock & roll star," but it didn't work. Bragg is at his best with songs like his new ballad "Waiting for the Great Leap Forward." By merging two rare traits, political conscience and lyrical romanticism, Billy Bragg should soon find the audience that he deserves — and that needs him desperately. ■