

NEWS EXTRA!

BILLY BRAGG stand in the courtyard of Glasgow's Barlinnie Prison as a weather-beaten metal door clanks shut behind him. All around the jail's stark, dull brick outline looms out of the drizzle—a miserable, moping leftover of Victorian architecture.

Today Bragg will play the strangest gig of his current UK tour, to an audience of 90 inmates of the jail. Organised as part of the Glasgow Mayfest, the 'gig' is to take place in the prison chapel—a reminder of the recent Strangeways riots, which started a month earlier in the Manchester jail's chapel and became the longest prison riot this country has ever seen.

Bragg, hiding any apprehension he might be feeling, is the first 'star' to play Barlinnie since Billy Connolly in 1977. Although the prison has a separate unit for 'hard cases' which has played host to a ground-breaking programme of entertainment, the main jail, which houses 900 inmates has rarely attracted members of the pop fraternity.

Not surprisingly the takers for seats at the gig were many. Whether because they wanted to see Bragg, or just wanted to get out of their daily routine for any hour, the 90 places were snapped up within a day. It is a weird scenario.

The Bragg posse, having signed in, includes myself and photographer Kevin Cummins, whose mobile phone is confiscated by security for fear of it falling into the prisoners' hands if anything goes wrong.

"Imagine that," says Bragg, "they'd be phoning up the takeaway, 'can we have two curries please, and if you can deliver them'..."

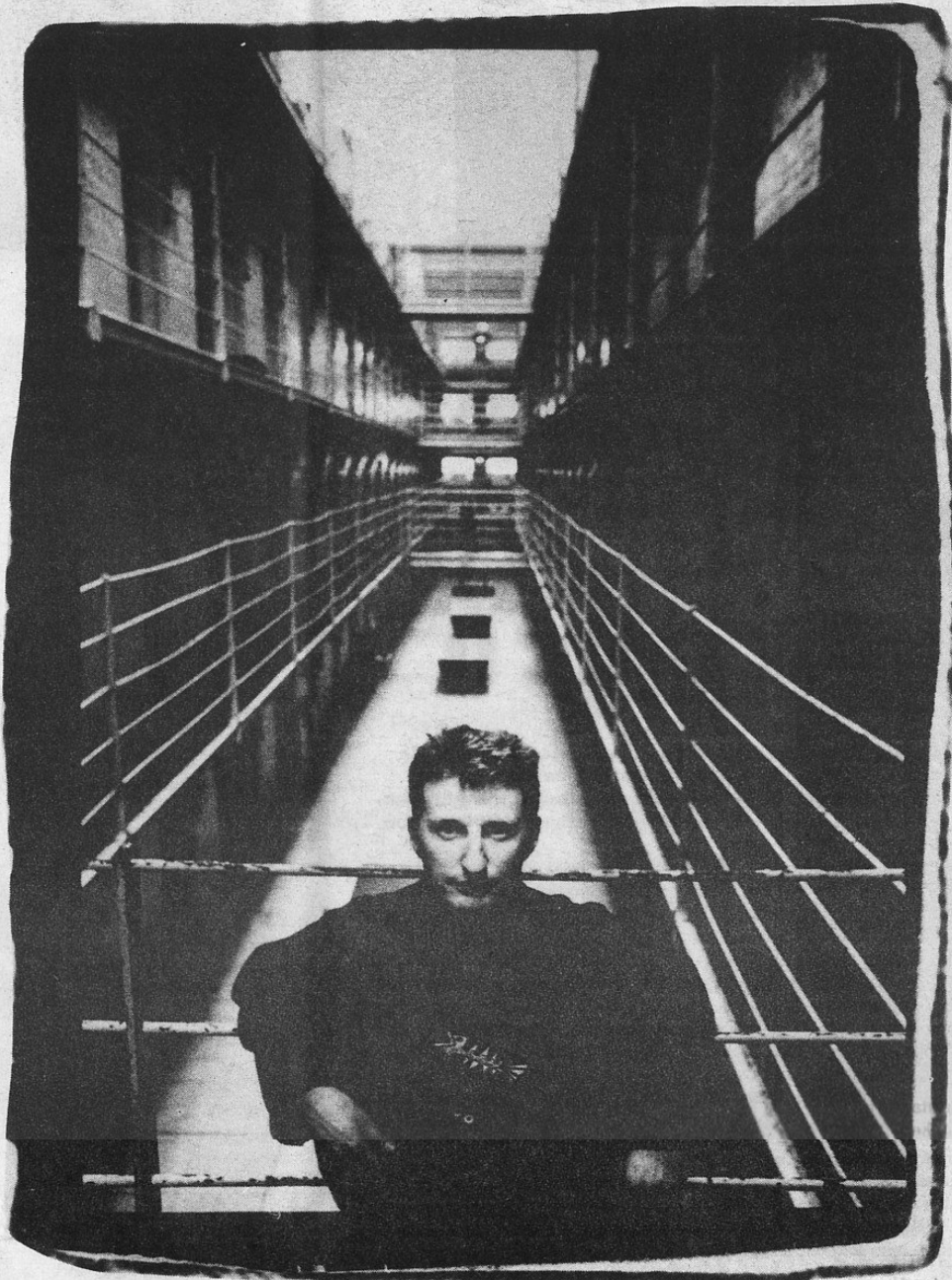
FROM THE courtyard it's into the claustrophobic corridors of the prison building itself. Bragg with his short-quiff haircut and familiar red and black bulky Canadian jacket is an easily recognisable figure as he walks ahead, past the yellow paint'n'peeling walls.

Passing one of the prison workshops, he's met by a shouted greeting from one of the inmates, almost impossible to understand in its tough Scots brogue.

"He said he saw me last year before he came inside," says Bragg translating into East London. A few smiles are

Celling out Billy Bragg goes to Barlinnie jail

PICTURES: KEVIN CUMMINS



The Barking bard behind bars

exchanged... plus the inevitable jokes about Bragg playing to a captive audience. No-one, it seems, really knows what to expect here. Bragg's only previous gigs in this vein have been in an army barracks in East Germany and a borstal near Heathrow airport. However everyone is on unknown ground today—keeping their preconceptions in the wake of Strangeways to the back of their minds.

We're assigned someone to make us tea as Bragg soundchecks in the chapel with trusty sidekick Wiggy and keyboardist Cara Tivey, who we fear is in for a harder time on stage, simply because she's a woman in an all-male jail.

The chapel meanwhile is cold

and austere as the inmates are led in, in small groups, wearing regulation pink shirts and brown jumpers. Among them are men serving sentences from six months to life. Around the sides of the chapel eight prison warders sit on curious wooden high chairs, eyes focussed on the prisoners.

This is the freakiest part of the whole day, because we don't know any of them—or what they're thinking—and they don't know us. On the face of it, there's no common ground. And yes, from an outsider's point of view, we're unsure of what's going to happen.

But after a ten minute wait Bragg takes the stage—framed from behind by the chapel's altar and imposing arch window—and

starts to forge a line of communication between us and them. Kicking off with 'A New England', which gets a heartening round of applause, he plays for the people who know him and entertains those who don't.

Having worked out a precise set beforehand he mixes cover versions with Bragg hits and songs tailored to make a point. But, as his voice and razored guitar boom round the tall stone building, it's the tracks he plays for the inmates which really strike a chord.

Arriving at 'Power In The Union', Bragg digs around for his anecdotes about the bouncers at the Glasgow Apollo "the only people who could throw you down a flight of stairs and call

you sir”.

“When I told a friend of mine I was playing Barlinnie, they said you’ll probably find all the bouncers are in there,” Bragg continues. “And I said ‘yeah, they’ll all have uniforms on’.”

The dig at the warders brings a roar from the crowd. In return the warders react with a mixture of smiles and stern faces. To even up the score, Bragg dedicates the song at the end to “everyone in here with a peaked cap”. And at this point he’s won himself a kind of cheeky trust.

Bragg in jokey mood claims he was thinking of playing a cover of ‘Up On The Roof’, meanwhile a loan voice heckles for a Deacon Blue number.

The other highlight is ‘Rotting On Remand’, taken from his ‘Workers Playtime’ LP, about people who’ve found themselves in jail, unconvicted but awaiting trial. Though none of the 200 remand prisoners in Barlinnie are at the gig, the prison theme hits home again among the audience who cheer vociferously.

Other memorable moments include ‘Levi Stubbs’ Tears’, ‘Wishing The Days Away’ – Bragg straying into dangerous territory by mentioning how he met Terry Butcher two days earlier coming out of a hotel lift. The Rangers fans cheer again, but the minority of Celtic supporters go menacingly quiet. There’s a poignant ‘Tracks Of My Tears’ and to finish, an encore of The Smiths’ ‘Ask’.

Cara, when she joins Bragg on stage, gets the predictable whoops and cheers from the crowd, but Bragg diffuses the situation with some sharp sarcasm. The surprise hit of the day though turns out to be Wiggy, who plays bass on the final third of the set.

The audience have seen him nodding his head earlier on by the stage side, looking “like a chicken”. So when he struts on stage, feet-tapping and head bobbing, the crowd are with him all the way. He’s the closest we get to the Birdman Of Barlinnie.

WITH THE gig over, the inmates are lead back to their cells, and we fortunately get a chance to visit D-Wing, led by Diver – a Bragg fan with four weeks left to serve inside. Chatting away,



The crowd respond enthusiastically to the offer of a night out on the town with Kevin Cummins

Bragg gives him a cassette copy of his new LP ‘The Internationale’, Diver saying he’ll get a warder to put it with his possessions so he can pick it up when he gets out as there’re no cassette players in the jail.

In contrast to an hour ago, there’s a bond of friendship in the air. Any built-in worries Bragg or the rest of us have had drummed in before arriving have gone. A guy called Paul is amazed to find that myself and Kevin are from the *NME*, which he reads every week.

D-wing looks uncannily like the set for *Porridge*. The tea which swishes round the communal urn near the entrance looks like Thames water and is described to us as “Dog’s piss”. No-one mentions things like “What are you in for?” There’s an unspoken truce here over the ethics and effects of crime, a really bizarre situation where everyone’s walking round talking – not knowing what the inmates have done and whether you’d forgive them for it.

Instead Bragg directs his attention to the problems of the rehabilitation system. As another inmate says later on, “They put you in here to take away your liberty, but they shouldn’t take

away your dignity.” The men in Barlinnie are comparatively fortunate, with one man to one cell. But as Bragg and ourselves stand in a pail-yellow painted cell the size of a small bathroom, the thought of sharing this with two other people is too horrific to think about.

The Barlinnie inmates know about *Strangeways*, having seen it in the newspapers – even though they haven’t seen anything on TV because their viewing time is restricted to 6.30 pm to 8.30. It was a similar riot a few years ago at Barlinnie that prompted the Scottish authorities to stop housing more than one man to a cell.

Bragg poses for pictures – including one with a chap called Francis who’s spent over 40 years off and on in jail, and apparently prefers life on the inside. Others here can remember seeing Bragg on the *Whistle Test* or tell us how good The Waterboys are... it’s like a meeting over the trenches or something. Except we leave 15 minutes later, and they’re still there now.

“IT WAS a bit less restricted than I thought it was going to be, the atmosphere seemed less strict,” says Bragg later, as he re-adjusts to life on the other side. “I didn’t detect any needles in the conversation. Obviously when the screws weren’t around they were telling stories about different blokes, but of all the institutions I’ve played that was the least informal.

“The thing that attracts me to playing gigs like this is playing to a different audience, without the confines of a normal gig. That’s not just playing a prison, that’s playing unemployed centres and the afternoon gigs we’ve been playing up here.

“Last year we played a gig in Scotland in a back court and no-one came – they only came

out to see us when *Neighbours* had finished – and that’s reality. That’s much better than walking on stage and everyone cheering, because that’s not real. People don’t cheer when you walk down the street.”

But why play a prison, have you got some feeling for the people inside?

“I think in any society that decides the answer to law and order is to extend custodial sentences, anybody would have a feeling for people who are banged up for not paying £50 fines and stuff like that.”

But some of the people we met today have committed worse crimes than that.

“Yeah but they’re still under the same regime of being in system – more in England than we saw today probably – which is rotten through and through. I mean, we saw that with *Strangeways*. People don’t go and do those things if everything’s hunky dory.

“The way the government has treated custodial sentences, or custodial remands – one prison officer today told me that about 200 people on remand in there would have benefited more from community service than being put inside – I feel that although we’re putting people into custody, we shouldn’t be leaving them out of society. They have to return to society and they shouldn’t have to come back as aliens.”

Later that night Bragg plays the more salubrious surroundings of Glasgow’s Apollo Theatre, retelling most of his Barlinnie experiences between the songs – right up to the ban on Kevin’s mobile phone. He takes on the hecklers – including a five minute stand-up discussion over the *Poll Tax* – and dedicates ‘Rotting On Remand’ to “the lads in D-wing”.

Neither side of today’s meeting will forget this gig for a long time.

Steve Lamacq



Bragg declines the invitation to stop over...