

"I WAS so wound up from seeing Nelson Mandela in the flesh that if he'd asked me to walk onstage naked with a big sunflower over my privates I'd probably have done it."

Deary me. For a man so thoroughly experienced in the wicked ways of the rock 'n' roll machine, it's heartening to hear Billy Bragg gush with euphoria over an event like the recent Mandela Day, where he guested on an impassioned rendition of 'Sun City' with Little Steven.

"I wasn't supposed to be playing," grins Bill. "I just had a backstage pass, but when I got there, Mandela himself came in.

"It was dead emotional meeting him, and in the excitement Little Steven twisted my arm. A stronger man might have said, Me? Oh, I couldn't... but well, call me weak or impulsive, what could I say? Ha ha ha!"

**W**EMBLEY STADIUM seems a whole universe away from the days when Billy Bragg equipped himself with a loud, carnal guitar, his 'personal PA' (ie a 50 watt amp) and a bittersweet selection of pop/politico anthems to tout around the country.

Then again, his debut mini-LP, 'Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy' – on the then

**A new decade, a new album but Billy Bragg is still as politically impassioned as ever, as Tim Peacock discovers. Ian Lawton lens a hand**

embryonic Utility label – *does* date back to 1983.

The new decade sees Bragg once again in tandem with Utility; a vital part of their revitalisation programme which also includes promising acoustic acts like Clea & McLeod and the excellent Caroline Trettino.

His return to the fold is marked by the release of a blatantly political seven track mini-LP, 'The Internationale'. However, Billy doesn't envisage 'The Internationale' as advance Labour publicity for the next general election.

"No, it's got nothing to do with the election. It's me wanting to re-evaluate my political ideals and also my ideas about folk music. Right now, socialism is being re-evaluated throughout the world, but if we leave it to the press in this country they'll totally destroy it and we'll end up with no



BILLY BRAGG: not a simple mind

# BEAT POET INTERNATIONALE

“Socialism is being re-evaluated throughout the world but if we leave it to the press here they'll totally destroy it.”

political culture, like in America.”

He gazes out the window for inspiration before continuing.

“We've really got to be careful. If we get rid of all the bad things about socialism like Stalinism and State Capitalism we'll probably also lose our political roots on the way – roots we can't get back without another struggle.”

**T**HE INTERNATIONALE – which includes intensive reworkings of standards like ‘The Red Flag’ and ‘Jerusalem’ – is quite a departure for Bragg.

The title track and former Soviet Union national anthem enlists the Christie Tyler Brass Band and there's the acappella original ‘I Dreamed I Saw Phil Ochs Last Night’ – a tribute to the infamous, late protest singer whose impact has often been blunted by Bob Dylan.

“I think everyone from the singer/songwriter movement of the '60s was overshadowed by Dylan,” muses Bragg. “The trouble was, Dylan stopped being dangerous and was embraced as a messiah who would only talk in riddles. Phil Ochs, though, was clearly saying the system's rotten through and through and everyone went, Oh bloody hell, we can't have *that* on radio!”

Sadly, Ochs committed suicide in 1976 but Billy's a staunch believer in his legacy.

“He's not very well known in this country, but he did lots of important things and was really a man before his time. He was into a World Music thing years before anyone else and travelled around Chile and Africa. I suppose he was more politically motivated than the musicians he got involved with, but he's a very positive role model for today's politically minded artists, despite his demise.”

Ironically, though, guess who first tempted the fledgling Bragg to pick up a guitar.

“Yeah, it was Dylan,” he beams.

“Comparing him to Ochs, though, is like comparing Tracy Chapman with Kylie Minogue. Chapman is political compared to Kylie, but she never gets around to really discussing this ‘revolution’ she's on about. What revolution? How's it going to happen?”

If Billy Bragg talks revolution, it's usually in his own country. But despite noting Britain's political shortcomings, Bragg's still patriotic enough to tackle William Blake's classic Anglo hymn ‘Jerusalem’.

“That song's quite symbolic,” he says. “They slip it in at Last Night Of The Proms with all those horrendous, chest-beating Empire songs. Even The Fall do it. It's a totally English song, but I thought I'd try to sing it straight – like you would at school assembly.”

But even in such a moment of misty eyes and lumps in throats, old Bill's still the realist.

“Blake's vision is strictly Utopian, isn't it?” he admits. “But it's important, because we should be working towards some kind of Utopia. Regardless of what changes come about, England's gotta be a fairer place than it is now.”

With all this change in the air, it seems strange that Bragg has never considered discarding his pop career for the political platform.

“Oh, I don't think so,” he says. “But then it's different for me. I'm not Simple Minds who could split up, I'm just some geezer who can go on playing as long as I feel like it.”

And to think he hasn't even considered working in a shoe shop like Spinal Tap's Nigel Tufnell.

“Ha ha ha! It's the unspoken rule for musicians to see that. Every f\*\*ker's seen it, but it's odd, because now and then a bit of it comes true. I've even done the instore PA bit in Nashville when nobody came!”

Tennessee doesn't know what it's missing.