

NOTHING ABOUT BRAGGING ABOUT

BILLY BRAGG is Britain's leading political singer-songwriter, known, variously, as the Big Nosed Bard from Barking, the People's Poet and the Labour Party's greatest asset. In 1988 he scored a freak Number One hit with a charity cover version of The Beatles' *She's Leaving Home*. Recent appearances include many Stop The Gulf War benefits. He is currently recording a new album, which will be out in the Autumn on Go! Discs.

"My earliest memory of West Ham is seeing them bring back the Cup in 1964, when I was seven. I didn't go to the game but I stood in the Barking Road near East Ham Town Hall where they end up. I've stood there in '64 and '75 and '80. The players were all on top of an open-topped Routemaster bus. It seemed like the Barking Carnival but for some greater occasion which I couldn't quite grasp then. I remember being shopping with my mum in Green Street, near Upton Park, and hearing this incredible chant coming through the air: 'Osgood, no good!, Osgood, no good!'. I said to my mum, 'what's happening in there then?'. She saw the claret and blue gates and said, 'don't go near there!'.

I started going regularly to Upton Park around 1969/70. I remember Moore and Peters and Harry Redknapp — he had a great sense of humour — and Geoff Hurst in front of the goal kicking the ball literally onto the roof of the stand instead of into the goal. They were great players, the trio that won the World Cup. That's something that's indisputable in West Ham theology, that we did indeed win the World Cup, which is incredibly tenuous.

We used to be in the East Stand, well away from the trouble, which always happened in those days on the North Bank. It seemed to be between people who had sprayed-silver DM's and sprayed-gold DM's, but I've no idea what it was about because, coming from Barking, I was a bit away from the day-to-day core cult of West Ham.

From 1970-74 I went semi-regularly, not fanatically. They had this terrible period of being knocked out of Cup competitions by teams like Tranmere. Then they had a really good run in the League Cup and got to the semi, against Stoke, where Banksy saved a penalty — one of his *great* saves — and in the replay Bobby Moore had to go in goal for West Ham. We lost, needless to say. And I remember we all bunked off school to see West Ham play Hereford United in the afternoon. We were always better in cups than the league.

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West Ham have such great traditions. They embody a very, very strong local feeling. Like the summer after they won the FA Cup, I remember seeing members of the team walking around Barking on a Saturday afternoon. They'd be shopping and you could go up and talk to them. They weren't like rock stars or anything; they'd just be in

Blake's Market in Barking. It seemed a much more down to earth team than your flash Arsenal or Man Utd.

West Ham's style of football is also a great tradition. It's always been style over content. We've played interesting football and been crushed out by the Leeds mentality in the 1970's, what today you'd call the Arsenal/Everton boring-but-gets-results approach, or Wimbledon's hoof it and run. We've always been a team of weird extremes, like finishing third in the First Division then getting relegated a few years later. The mistake we always seem to make is spending



Sir Billy treats innocent New Yorkers to a rousing chorus of *Bubbles*

Photo by NORTH BANK NORMAN

loads of money bringing in an outside player, like Ted McDougall was the worst player I ever saw at Upton Park...

During the 1970's, black players like Clyde Best used to get really bad treatment at West Ham. I stopped going to West Ham altogether after the 1-1 draw in the 1981 League Cup Final against Liverpool, just before I went into the Army. It was the first match I'd been to for a while, but there was so much seig-heiling at that game, like 1000 people giving a Nazi salute at Wembley, and I felt revulsion. I thought, 'Fuck this, I really don't need this'. This was after Rock Against Racism and everything!

I stopped going because it stopped being something I wanted to take part in culturally. I've been to see West Ham play since and it's been real fun, but never at Upton Park. I've never seen such a display of racist behaviour, but it's something that's always in the back of your mind. I haven't seen enough of the fans to know if they've changed.

I meet West Ham supporters around the world who are always incredibly vociferous. I send *Fortune's Always Hiding* and other fanzines to one dyed-in-the-wool West Ham fan in New York. His father-in-law rings through all the re-

sults and sends over videos of the games. I got talking to another guy in Kansas City about West Ham and he sent me a West Ham book — he sent it to me, in London, from America! You find Man Utd and Liverpool supporters all over the world; they're ten a penny. But West Ham fans...

When I'm abroad I desperately try to find out the results on the BBC World Service. In America, from the stage on a Saturday evening, I'll ask, 'anyone know how West Ham done today?'. At the end of the gig on the back of a beermat some Brit in America will have written the whole of the First and Second Division results on it for you. You know in pubs there's people who can recite the entire results if you ask them? Well those people come to my gigs all over America.

There's a great loyalty to West Ham. Anyone who's had to support the Labour Party in the last five years what it's like being a West Ham supporter. There's a great similarity in the 'oh fucking hell', head-in-hands response you have to what they do, the own goals and the ridiculous defeats. There is a great tradition that I feel part of. Like I've got my spot for seeing them bring back the Cup and they'll undoubtedly do it again eventually. I'd like to think I'll still be there then, maybe with my kids." □