



## WILLIAM THE CONKERER

### BILLY BRAGG

Don't Try This At Home (Go! Discs/All formats)

SOMEWHERE ON the inner sleeve of this copious album is a quote from a chap called Michael Faraday, who I think invented the lightbulb or something. "All this is a dream," says Michael, presumably waving an all-inclusive hand about him. "Still, examine it with a few experiments". And thus Billy Bragg. Having observed the first two laws of life as a sensitive young political poet – that oppression is the norm rather than the exception and lots of women don't fancy you – Billy has devoted his pop career to exploring these two issues.

In the late 1980s, this seemed like a no-fun sort of option. 'Worker's Playtime', Billy Bragg's last (1988) album, was a glum thing; Bragg seemed weighed down by love and politics where previously he had revelled in wit, mockery, self-mockery and melody. 'Worker's Playtime' is a very good record, mind, it's just that between 'Valentine's Day Is Over' and 'Waiting For The Great Leap Forward' there are precious few jollies.

So Billy went off round the world, slumming and chumming it with Kershaw and Stipe and various Nicaraguans, occasionally performing 'Tank Park Salute' or Bowie's 'Star' at a festival or two. And then – CHANGGGGG!!! – who is this large-probosced gent a-singing 'I've had relations' / *With girls from many nations* on the TV and radio? Who is this pjama-ed goon in a video with Michael Stipe, Porky The Poet and Slim Tearjerker? Why did the coup in Moscow fail?

Billy Bragg returns once more, then, with 'Don't Try This At Home', an hour-long double album, and a fine thing it is too. We start with 'Accident Waiting To Happen' ("There you are standing at the bar / Giving me grief about the DDR") – a thunderous frenzied rock bastard about an, ahem, dedicated swallower of fascism (Bragg's addiction to the pun makes Elvis Costello look like a chap who would get stuck on the crosswords in the *Dandy*) – and thereafter, frankly, we get no let up because, despite it all, Bragg is once more resolved to enjoy himself.

All standard obsessions are present – the next song, 'Moving The Goalposts' actually gets in FOUR Bragg fetishes by mentioning *Top Of The Pops*, Gennady Gerasimov, football and sperm. In fact, football gets as far as it can on a Bragg album with 'God's Footballer', a song which is about as self-explanatory as can be and whose humour is drier than Dickie Davies' dandruff or some such sporting simile. And there is the obligatory C&W style moan about

an ex-girlfriend in 'Mother Of The Bride'; this time, Bill declares, "It should have been me," but offers no convincing argument as to why.

Said two tunes are the only visits to cliché city. Elsewhere, Bragg explores strange and new territories. There are cover versions, like 'Everywhere' by Long Ryder Sid Griffin, a lament for WW2 Japanese-American internees, upon which Bragg turns his patent Big Sad Voice, a thing of great beauty and power when it wants to be. There's also 'Dolphins' by one Fred Neil, a great bassy thing that sounds like Nick Drake crossed with Spiritualized.

Indeed there are many occasions when your actual Bragg sound is radically altered. Bill has oft betimes been overkeen to just bring on Johnny and Kirsty and Wiggy and Woodhead and come over like an overpaid Hank Wangford, but on 'Don't Try This At Home', Bragg and producer Grant Showbiz display imagination and there are staggering echo monsters like the huge 'Cindy Of A Thousand Lives' and the epic discussion of terrace Nazis, 'The Few', which acts like 'Jerusalem' with amplifiers and Uzis.

New ways of thinking abound. Bragg manages to consider child sex abuse from a victim's point of view on the powerful 'Trust' and offers fear, horror and sympathy. He gets his viola section to create an aptly unsettling mood on 'Rumours Of War'. He effects an alarming and neat Chi-Lites impression on 'Wish You Were Her'. Throughout all of this album, there are extraordinarily powerful moments. Most haunting is 'Tank Park Salute', a curiously military and very beautiful tribute to Bragg's late father.

What else? Both singles are here, which only leaves two songs to mention – the power-punk pot-pourri of epigram and couplet that is 'North Sea Bubble' and the bizarre lurching beast 'Body Of Water' – touched by the hand of Wiggy – that leads us out of the album in a frenzied sweating conga as guitars crash and wail. (This is an unusual ending, as normally albums like to end on a sedate note to indicate finality, but Bill goes charging out with his chums in large boots, as if in search of further entertainment) and thence pause a mo in contemplation.

The release of Billy Bragg's fifth album means more than another talented "bloke" has made a decent album. It means that Bragg has done the inconceivable, shrugged off the demons of despond and made his best album. It means that, once again, someone who combines intelligence and wit with feeling and decency is out there in the pop marketplace. Examining it with a few experiments. (9)

David Quantick