

MALCOLM ESSEX

● In the '80s, **BILLY BRAGG** was all lumberjack shirts, shouting and politics. In the '90s, he's all lumberjack shirts, pop tunes (with politics) and BRIT award nominations. **DAVID QUANTICK** unveils the "post-ideological" old Bill and watches as he sorts out the Seppoes. X marks the spot: **KEVIN CUMMINS**

Oh dear. I am going to marry Billy Bragg. It's like this; Billy and I are in a tacky sort of '50s retro gift shop in New York—like you do—and he is looking for some juggling balls to give his keyboard player Cara Tivey.

I pass the ball-hunting time playing with a WHO WILL YOU MARRY puzzle and, shaking it, discover that I am going to marry a "good-looking, politically correct poet". Bloody hell.

"Don't worry, Dave. I'll see you right," says Billy, and puts his balls away.

There's more than connubial bliss to Billy Bragg; he's in America for about the 75th time to tour his new band, The Red Stars, sort out the Seppoes (septic tanks—Yanks), and sing to Johnny Carson, the man who is like Terry Wogan, only real. It's a funny old time for both America and Billy Bragg; the former is boredly going through pre-election motions and the latter is gearing himself up to be something approaching a proper rock star.

You can tell how successful Bragg is at this because the coppers have heard of him. Driving away from a soundcheck (BOOM! CRASH! ONE TWO!) and ten seconds of Bill doing 'Positively Fourth Street', the tour van is stopped by a patrol car. After discovering whose tour van it is, one of the officers declares, "We won't let Mr Billy Bragg give us any shit," the other announces that Billy Bragg is "f—ing crap" and then—this being America and policemen being policemen anywhere—they let us off on condition that Billy gives them some autographed photos.

Later on, Billy takes me to a restaurant on Broadway to tell me who he is. The restaurant, natch, is Planet Healthy and we are seated in the weirdo section, ie the bit where you can't smoke. Billy orders something which is a haven for lettuce and off we go. What is Billy Bragg doing in a land where the police think he is "f—ing shit"?

Bragg eats something green. "I've mostly been doing concerts, just doing shows. Rockin' in the free world," he says. "Ostensibly I'm here to do *The Johnny Carson Show* . . . I've done *David Letterman*, which is the biggest chat show on this coast, and on the other side it's *Carson and Arsenio Hall* and I don't know if I'll get *Arsenio* for a little while. On *Carson* I'll play 'Accident Waiting To Happen' and 'Sexuality'. To 50,000,000 Americans."

Bloody hell again. Not very Dog And Paper Seller. How does he feel about that, then?



CONTINUED OVER

Post-ideologue Billy Bragg poses by the Malcolm X mural in New York, on his way to converting 49,999,999 Americans . . .

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"Phenomenal. Particularly with the subject matter of the songs. 50,000,000 Americans, 49,999,999 probably don't agree with me, but after doing gigs where the majority of people do agree with you, doing that show justifies the idea that says you have to deal with the industry to get access to these kind of people."

Given the nature of 'Sexuality's' references to being gay and safe sex, were there demands for lyric changes and stuff?

Bragg adopts a serious look and says firmly, "No. None at all. Not unless I wanna make 'em. It's good. A song like 'Sexuality', think of all these macho frat boys who come home from the bars and see me on Letterman singing 'Just because you're gay, I won't turn you away'. I mean, you won't change the world but at least you are challenging the stereotypes in what is a sexist, racist, homophobic industry. And maybe that's the limit of what you can do."

THE BRAGG of the early '80s was a lumberjack shirt-clad youth, all scratchy guitar, shouting and politics. The Bragg of the early '90s is a lumberjack shirt-clad older man, all pop tunes, Johnny Marr and BPI-nominated videos. He's not the man he was, of course; he knows the limits of agit-pop. But did he ever think he could change the world with a song?

"That's very hard to say," says Bill, frowning. "You write a song as it is and you hope the listener is going to take the ideas you're trying to put across and apply them to their own situation . . ."

OK. Has there been a shift in Bragg's attitudes now that he is old and wise?

"Old and rich? And wizened . . . I'm different, yeah." Bill counts the ways. "I used to think that an angry song meant you had to play it fast and loud, kinda like Steven Wells type, but now I'm aware that you can be just as political and just as angry, and just as moving by talking softly but directly on a subject. I used to think that videos were a total and utter waste of time and never anything but adverts for the egos of rock stars and, worse than that, stereotypical representations of women in rock as seen through the eyes of record company executives . . ."

Blimey. Talking to Billy Bragg is not like talking to other pop singers. Despite not having been to public school like everyone else in the NME, he is articulate like Player's Navy Cut are cough-inducing. Where most musicians talk in grunts, Bragg talks in paragraphs. Regaining his thread magnificently, Bill continues, "Now I've changed to the extent that I can get nominated for a BPI award for 'Sexuality'. I realised that, for most people outside the UK, the only way they hear my music is through the satellite video channels. And if you're going to set out to put a song like

'Sexuality' in the public consciousness, surely you're just being a Luddite if you say, 'oh, we'll just make a record'? Surely you want people watching *The Chart Show* to see and hear the ideas that are in your song and surely you want people living in Scranton, Idaho, watching their local cable show, to see and hear the positive images of sexuality that are in that song?"

Surely . . . Anything else? "Production . . . I'm now relaxed enough to allow Johnny Marr to do what he wants to do with 'Sexuality' without leaning over his shoulder and saying, 'Oop, hang on, this is Billy Bragg, you can't do that'. Now it's, 'Let's surprise people with what Billy Bragg is, surprise the people who like us, surprise the people who only know 'Between The Wars' . . ."

Bill looks stern. "If there's one misconception about me that annoys me, it's the one held by people who don't listen to my records. The people who do listen know that there is a political strain and a personal strain and they choose the one they like. The people who don't listen to my records only know the political strain, 'cos that's what I got the most publicity about. And that made me very marginalised. So 'Sexuality' set out to change that; that was why we did the dance mix. That caused a rattle of outrage . . . But why not? Why be constrained?"

The best thing about Billy Bragg — oh, call the fashion police and feed us all Blur albums — is that his songs are about things other than hair or baggy shirts. 'Accident Waiting To Happen' deals largely with fascism. 'Sexuality' deals with sex. In this, Bragg is like every political folkie and squatdog owner in Britain. Unlike them, though, he wants people who don't frequent folk clubs and squats to hear his records. That's a step on.

'Sexuality' was a big pop song because I wanted it to be on daytime Radio 1, I wanted people to hear it at school dinner time on their radio, in factories, at home. So there's a very strong difference there between that and the minimalism of 'Between The Wars', where I consciously wanted to make a record that was so different it stood out. Now, does that mean I've mellowed, does that mean I've sold out, or does that mean I'm getting more crafty as a songwriter?"

Hey! You tell me! Bill draws a deep breath. He is about to use the word "post-ideological" in conversation.

"I would argue that I'm trying to get the things I wanna say across to a wider audience . . . and also to deal with the larger issues that have got to be dealt with in a post-ideological world, instead of seeing it all in purely party political terms, which is very mid-'80s . . . Of all the people in your newspaper, I have been the one who has most played that ideological card in the 1980s, and I don't wanna live it down or disavow it but that language, the

language of 'There Is Power In A Union', is not necessarily the language of the '90s."

This is the weird thing about great pop, eh? It has to stand out to be great and at the same time it has to fit in to be pop.

"Perhaps in order to make timeless music," says Bill in full-on Zen mode, "you've first got to make music of your time. It's like you're trying to make something that does make sense when viewed specifically but also in a broader context, otherwise you're being bland or you're marginalising yourself. And I think I marginalised myself with some of my earlier records, some of the political stuff."

OH YEAH, Billy Bragg, the all-singing, all-touring, all-causes supporting non-dance act. It was fine by me — a house without 'Between The Wars' is a very small and useless house — but does Bill regret those days?

"No," he says, unsurprisingly. "I would regret it if I was still rattling like that now, if I was still rattling away at the Tories all the time. I'll rattle away at what they stand for,



Bill spells it out . . .

I'll rattle away at the country they've created, but I'm not about to write a whole album of songs about 'Maggie Maggie Maggie, Out Out Out'. The issue's moved on. It's why there won't be a punk revival, it's moved on and what we have now is John Major and the Manic Street Preachers. Woe betide those of us who try and stay in that groove."

Woe betide indeed. Bill skewers a carrot. "Don't Try This At Home" is my first move in that post-ideological bit, buy this album, know me, this is where we're going — 'Sexuality', whoosh. This album's nearly done 100,000 in this country, which is more than the other ones put together, so it's growing."

TIME TO GO and see if this is true. We get in a cab and roar through the mean streets. The queue outside the venue is large. A woman in a horrible red leather jacket and Ozzy Osbourne badges gets Bill to autograph her jacket. Inside the venue — the sticky and dark Marquee — the American Democratic Socialists have a stall. REM blare from the speakers. Which reminds me . . . Billy, are REM conspiring to destroy rock music?

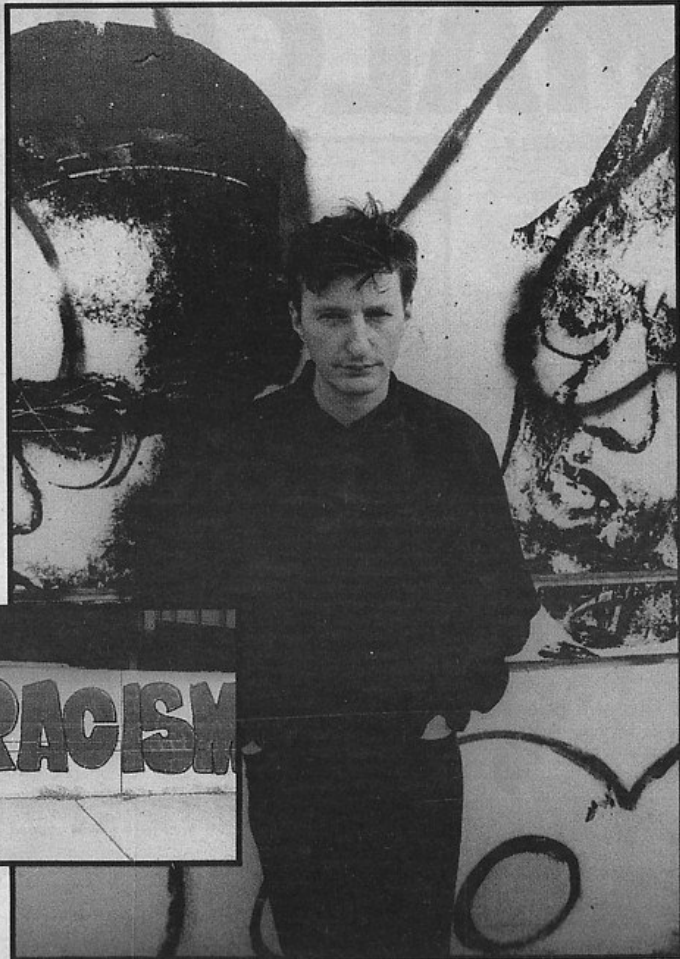
Bragg adopts a very sour look indeed. "In what way?"

Well, they keep working with all these dodgy acts. The Trojgs, Robyn Hitchcock, Nikki Sudden, erm, you . . .

Bill looks even more sour. "Well, you know, they've just had this huge album that's as much a shock to them as anyone else and the reverence they're regarded with, you know . . . they're pretty down-to-earth guys and the world is their oyster and they're trying to remain in contact with everyday life by carrying on what they were doing before."

What, ruining rock? Billy carries on, largely because I didn't think of saying "What, ruining rock?" until about ten minutes ago.

"They've been doing this for ages, it's just now because of this album it's WOW! They're kind of the alternative Royal Family of rock. They're trying to diversify, rather than be successful and pull the damn ladder up. And quite honestly, if I should ever be as



"Perhaps in order to make timeless music," ponders Zen Bill . . .

humungously mega as REM, I would certainly try and do what they're doing rather than just disappear and say, 'F— you Quantick, you can kiss my arse now, I'm a big rock star . . .'"

Fair enough. It was, however, a major weird moment for star-spotters, seeing the 'You Woke Up My Neighbourhood' video with Bragg and Porky The Poet and Michael Stipe . . . It's like, where's Michael Jackson on bongos?

"Nah! It's not like that! Come on, you must admit I have more in common with Peter Buck and Michael Stipe than I do with Michael Jackson . . ."

Maybe, but from a TV viewer's point of view . . . Bill goes shouting overdrive barmy. "No no

He knows bloody everybody, bloody Billy Bragg. He knows his audience, too. The gig starts with a bit of solo scratchy guitar. Bragg brings in the band and they rock out for a bit and then the talking begins. 'Everywhere' is introduced, it being the anniversary of the day Roosevelt passed the order to intern Japanese Americans during WW2. This is Bragg on top form; educating, agitating and then hammering the emotional point home afterwards.

The show ends with an epically absurd 'Message To You Rudy', tour manager Vaughan toasting very impressively, despite being as Jamaican as The Jetsons. Afterwards Billy and the band run around the dressing-room smiling

Audiences cheer you if you say you've just got your laundry back . . .

"Yeah," nods Bill. "The other strange one is when I say 'Britain is an endemically racist nation' and everyone cheers. You think to yourself, wait a minute . . . They're showing their agreement, but there must be another way other than cheering or saying 'Right on!'"

Things are packed up. Today New York, tomorrow Texas. What is Billy Bragg in America that he isn't in England?

"What is I in America that I isn't in England?" ponders Bill. "I'm still in the realm of cult here. In England, I'm not in the mainstream, but the average person who listens to pop will have heard my name, BPI nomination, all that kind of guff. In this country I'm not by a long stretch, despite the two cops earlier . . . I'm a focus when I come here, for people like the Democratic Socialists who have a stall at the gigs . . . In a broader sense, I'm an international perspective, that's my angle."

NEXT DAY we get in the van, avoiding the police, and drive down to a major Malcolm X mural by the river for photos. Bragg runs up and down and Vaughan films him. People driving past ignore this frightening spectacle. Nearby a cop car stops and arrests some other people for a change. It's bonkers in America, isn't it, Bill?

"Yeah," nods Bragg, trying to hide from Vaughan. "You'd be foolish to think it was just another culture; we're in it whether we like it or not. There's no point in sitting on the sidelines and letting it wash over our own cultures, you have to offer your own point of view — not answers, but point of view — and then we're making a contribution."

Bill ponders a moment and finds the right words. "Not . . . taking the piss."

Quite right, too. America! Marry this man!

"Think of all these macho frat boys who come home from the bars and see me singing 'Just because you're gay, I won't turn you away'. You won't change the world but at least you are challenging the stereotypes."

no NO!" he bellows, then calms down. "From a musician's point of view, from a — dare I say it — artist's point of view, I have more in common with a band like REM than I do with EMF, don't you think? It would be more ridiculous to see me with Kate Bush or George Michael. There's a logic when you consider my track record and REM's, our paths were bound to cross. Same with me and The Smiths and me and The Redskins. We were all bands who were willing to meet for causes. That's how I met Natalie Merchant and KRS-1 . . ."

a lot. They are so hopped up with rock joy that Bragg's roadie can even be forgiven for making me put my cigarette out.

Was that fun? Bill beams. "Gigs, some nights you wanna wind the audience up, sometimes they're too wound up. You want 'em to pick up on what you're saying, rather than just cheer everything. Last night in Boston I got the results of the Primaries and everyone was cheering. I mean, what the f— were they cheering? Paul Tsongas wins — cheers — Buchanan gets 35 per cent — more cheers. I do wonder sometimes."

