

Billy Bragg. He burst upon the scene in 1984: big nose and big guitar sound.

While other "folkies" imagined themselves Dylan, he went out on stage thinking he was The Clash. He sang that he wasn't looking for a new England, just another girl. Actually, he was looking for both, and more; assuming the minefield-laden role of "pop star"/activist.

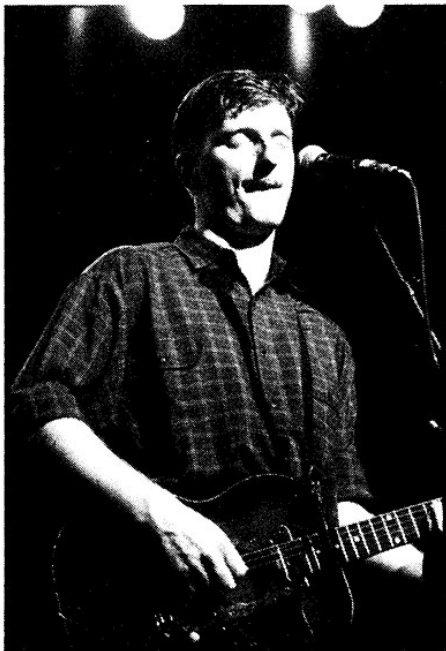
And that doesn't even begin to describe Steven William "Billy" Bragg. "I went out drinking with Thomas Paine" / "He said that all revolutions are not the same." So sings Billy on the Clash-meets-Surfaris 'North Sea Bubble' from his latest *Don't Try This At Home*.

Indeed, with the sociopolitical systems in the world moving at a mile a minute, all revolutions are not the same. Much has changed since Billy's last original studio effort, *Workers Playtime* (*The Internationale* was all covers): attempted coups, successful coups, war, and the "death" of "communism."

And, in this country, once-and-future Nazi David Duke is more well-known than any of the Democratic Party hopefuls.



# BILLY BRAGG



First, the late-summer attempt to oust Mikhail Gorbachev... "I was doing doodly-squat, walking down my street, when I saw the news that Gorbachev had been overthrown. I was stunned like everyone else but, I suppose, it was bound to happen."

With the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, reunification of Germany, dismembering of the Soviet Union, and the unshackling of the Eastern Bloc, the face of Europe eerily resembles the years following World War I. Now, ethnic, religious and political factions have declared

independence and are vying for power in one giant land-grab.

All the while, chortling greedheads are declaring the "death of socialism" and licking their chops at the prospect of exploiting Eastern Europe ala the Third World.

Given the state of affairs, with "free market" the current buzzword, Billy could be forgiven if he were reeling a bit. After all, here's someone who's championed the rights of workers (which is all of us) from the coal pits of Britain, West Virginia and the Andes to visiting Nicaragua and Russia to see revolutions first-hand.

If you think he's bummed about the changes in Europe, think again. "Hmmm...the most prevalent, among a sea of misconcep-

tions, is that I'm a communist. I come position."

asked whether likely to challenge the

"socialism." In this country, the answers usually consist of paranoid, cartoonish versions of the "Red Threat" straight out of 1950's propaganda films—in short, Stalinism.

"Stalinism is dead. The communism of (Leonoid) Brezhnev is dead. But, as I see it, basic concerns, in other words, the humanistic needs—housing, medical care and education—those haven't been met by capitalism. That "socialism" is not dead!"

So, while the Buses, Boeskys and Keatings laugh all the way to the banks (and run from the ruins of S & L's), poverty, joblessness, homelessness and despair run rampant. Back in Blighty, the situation is much the same. Gorbachev emerged triumphant from the August crisis (granted, a temporary victory). Margaret Thatcher was not so fortunate. Tired of her corrosive, bad-ass attitude, as well as the massive backlash following the levying of the poll tax, the Iron Lady's own Tories not so gently pushed her off center stage. In her place, the Tories put the "amiable" John Major.

Since Maggie's demise was courtesy of fellow conservatives, rather than at the polls, are you the slightest bit disappointed, Billy?

"Yes! I wish I could've had a hand in it through the electoral process but... She's very bitter that it was at the hands of her own party. If she had been voted out by the peasants, she would've been angry, but would basically have accepted it. But she's very bitter toward her own party."

And John Major?

"Thatcher was a confrontation politician; a radical politician where Major is a consensus politician..."

Speaking of radical, *Don't Try This At Home* and resulting tour marked a departure from his usual modus operandi. Whereas in the past he was the lone guitar-slinger, backed only by the ever-present sideman Wiggy and pianist Cara Tivey (in the studio and on stage), the current album and road show had more the look and feel of a "rock band."

*Don't Try This At Home* rounded up the usual suspects, including Kirsty MacColl and Johnny Marr, as well as new-found friends Michael Stipe and Peter Dinklage from REM. The Bragg/ Stipe/ Buck

collaboration stemmed from their mutual appearance on public radio's live show, *Mountain Stage*.

In a show that featured Billy, REM, Robyn Hitchcock and Gregson and Collister, the highlight was Stipe's endorsement, on behalf of the band, of Billy's views. After Billy's set, the show's host made the disclaimer that, "The views of Billy Bragg are not necessarily those of *Mountain Stage*...but they might be." Later, before introducing one of his songs, Michael Stipe said that, "I think it's appropriated at this time to state that the views of Billy Bragg most certainly do represent the views of REM." Subsequently, Billy and Peter Buck penned 'You Woke Up My Neighborhood' (with Stipe on backing vocals). Peter also lent his mandolin talents on the beautiful 'Everywhere,' which was written by Greg Trooper and Sid Griffin (ex-Long Ryders).

'You Woke Up My Neighborhood' was the product of a marathon recording sessions that, according to Billy, was the norm for Peter Buck. Billy laughs, "Peter's idea of 'fun' is to go into a studio at sundown and not come out until sunup..."

But the most notable and provocative song (and first single) is 'Sexuality.' The lines "And just because you're gay/ I won't turn you away/ If you stick around/ I'm sure we can find some common ground" raised eyebrows and generated questions about the Bard of Barking's own sexuality.

So, Bill, was 'Sexuality' an attempt to show that Bragg the socialist could be "sexy"? "Well, I dunno about *that!* The song's about a person's right to express his or her own sexuality. It's not about homosexuality or heterosexuality, but both... especially in terms of HIV."

Feedback? "The reaction's come mainly from people, rather than organizations. I've gotten some wonderful letters from individuals thanking me for the song."

The importance of 'Sexuality' was upstaged a bit by another of Billy's songs when he toured the States. As mentioned earlier, Klan/ Nazi/ Republican Party candidate David Duke campaigned for governor of Louisiana in 1991. Although he lost, Duke's candidacy and surprise showing was a manifestation of trend that gained momentum with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

# THE BARD

Namely, the Reagan (and now Bush) Administration's attack on civil rights ushered in an era where racism and fascism are fashionable. As a result, the Klan and neo-Nazis no longer felt inhibited in airing their poisonous views.

During the "Time O' The Signs Tour," Billy condemned Duke and everything he represents. At the same time he noted that Duke's gubernatorial defeat was not the end of the story (as the subsequent presidential bid proved). "Duke's people are looking at the mailing lists of out-of-state contributors to see where they can run Duke-like candidates in other parts of the country," explains Billy.

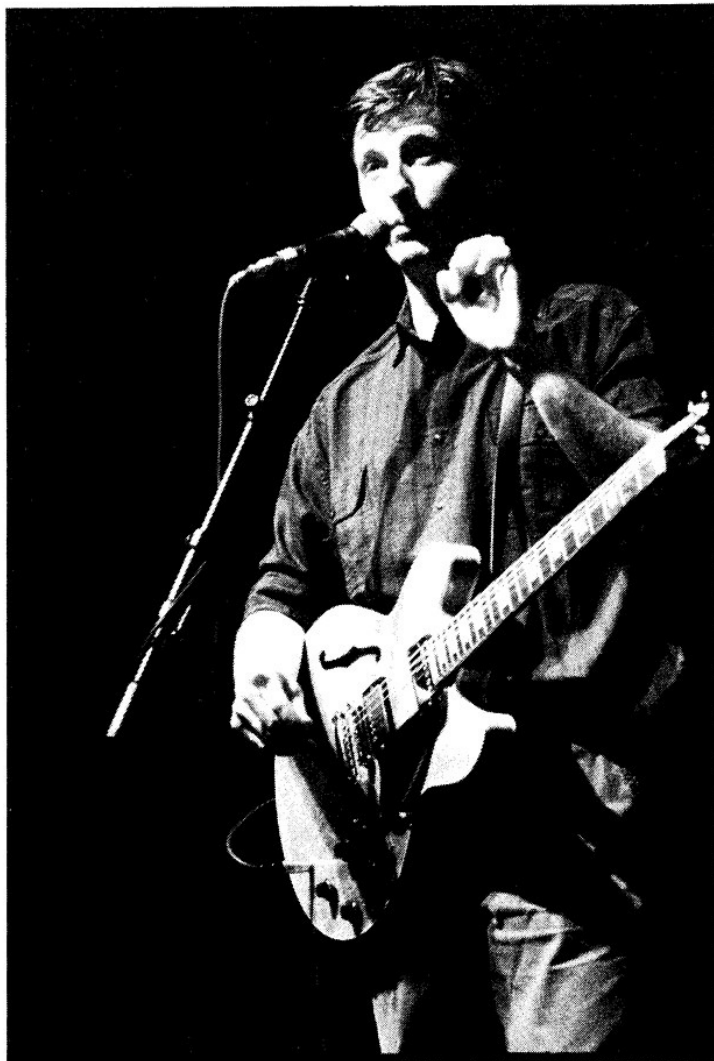
The situation's so serious, that Billy took time out during his concert in Philly to compliment mega-mediocre superstar Bryan Adams on his decision to sue Duke for purloining his '(Everything I Do) I Do It For You' as his campaign anthem. Then, after loudly wondering if Duke sang Adams' song while gazing longingly at Hitler's picture, Billy tore into the opening track on *Don't Try This At Home*, 'Accident Waiting To Happen.' The lines "Goodbye and good luck/ To all the rubbish you've spoken... It'll give you pregnant pause for thought/ You're a dedicated swallower of fascism" were never more appropriate.

Given the length and breadth of political/ social topics Billy's covered, it comes as a surprise that he's never tackled the Spanish Civil War (the last "romantic" conflict) and the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. "I've tried to write songs about Northern Ireland, but

it's hard to write something that's not too obvious, or something that's been said before about the North. Because of that, I recorded the best song written about the North, 'My Youngest Son Came Home Today,' by (Australian folk singer) Eric Bogle.

"As for Spain, there's so much going nowadays to sing about, that I haven't gotten around to writing about it. I guess I'll have to go back and reread (Orwell's) *Homage To Catalonia*..."

Political topics (temporarily) aside, *Don't Try This At Home* con-



# plays ON

tains Billy's most personal, heart-rending song, 'Tank Park Salute.' "It (the song) goes back to about...1988. It's about me and my father. But it's also about the loss of a friend or loved one. 'Tank Park Salute' (the title) concerns something between me and my father; something that I want to keep personal between the two of us. But the song tries to be both personal and universal."

With a topic that cuts so close to the bone, 'Tank Park Salute' can't be an easy song to sing. In his usual post-concert chat with individual fans and admirers, a young man related how he had recently lost his father and how the song encapsulated his feelings.

Billy: "You know how I can sing that song? I got a letter from a guy who said that, after he heard 'Tank Park Salute' he rang up his father to tell him he loved him — something he had never done before. And his father told him he loved him — something the guy could never remember his father say before... *That's* how I'm able to sing the song." A handshake, embrace, and the fan departs...

On stage, 'Tank Park Salute,' with Billy on guitar and Cara on piano, was a rare quiet moment on a tour which more than amply

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**BILLY BRAGG** (*Con't fr.pg.48*)  
demonstrated Billy's ability to "rock."

From 'Sexuality' and 'Waiting For The Great Leap Forward' to 'North Sea Bubble' Billy showed that his songs were as equally effective in a charged-up atmosphere as in an intimate folk setting.

The "rock" setting didn't inhibit Billy's between-song dialogue. From socialism and sexuality to Duke, Billy was funny, self-effacing and serious in reiterating the importance of each person doing his/ her own part to make this world a better place. Whether shaming a heckler who whined that he "only came to hear the music", or laughing at his own shortcomings, Billy's established himself as the preeminent singer/activist.

On *Don't Mourn--Organize! Songs Of Labor Songwriter Joe Hill*, Billy sings a song about the labor songwriter/ activist/ martyr which was written by another legend, Phil Ochs. Both Joe Hill, who was murdered by the state of Utah in 1915, and Phil Ochs, who tragically committed suicide, were rebels who wrote and sang about the downtrodden, the greedy and the abuses of power. Billy Bragg is a rebel who sings about the downtrodden, the greedy, the abuses of power, and sexual politics.

Billy's voice is a solitary one in the music world (aside from Australia's Roaring Jack); a voice that continues to say that socialism, *real* socialism from the ground up (rather than imposed from the top) is more fair and just than the free-market smash'n grab of capitalism. "It all boils down to supplying people with the basic needs: medical care, housing and education; making people *happy*." **B**