

## Still our Bill?

27 May 1992

By Nick Fredman and Julia Perkins

**Billy Bragg, Britain's rock poet, is currently on his third Australian tour, this time bringing a band, the Red Stars, and new songs from his latest release, *Don't Try This at Home*.**

Bragg's recording career is diverse, from the stark angry-young-man-and-his-guitar sound of 1983's *Life's a Riot With Spy vs Spy* and 1985's *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, the more pop-oriented and instrumentally broad *Talking to the Taxman about Poetry* (1986) and *Worker's Playtime* (1988), to *The Internationale*, the tribute to his political and folk-music roots.

The new album is a further step towards production values and pop sensibility, epitomised in the Johnny Marr-produced hit "Sexuality". Throughout, though, Bragg has mixed fine song writing and humour with themes of politics, love, relationships and football.

Live, at Sydney's State Theatre on May 15, the band rocked through new numbers such as "Sexuality", "You Woke up my Neighbourhood" and the anti-fascist "Accident Waiting To Happen" satisfactorily, but the most powerful moments were Bragg playing solo older songs like "Levi Stubbs Tears", "The Myth of Trust" and "The Saturday Boy".

The best new song was the moving tribute to Bragg's father, "Tank Park Salute", accompanied only by guitar and piano. Also, the number of songs, the length of the monologues, the political atmosphere and the feeling of crowd participation were down on the more stripped back tours of 1987 and 1989. We enjoyed the show but left thinking "is this still our Bill?"

It's not that Bragg has compromised his politics -- he was never that radical in the first place. At his Sydney press conference on May 12 he explained that the best he hopes for is a Social Democratic "mixed economy", a "pluralist, consensus" welfare state that supposedly exists in Sweden and existed in England before Thatcher.

Bragg uses the iconography of the left and consciously comes from a tradition of political singers like Joe Hill and Woody Guthrie who were revolutionaries. But at the same time he equates Marxism with Stalinism, contrasting it to his own "humanitarian socialism" and makes cliched jokes about people who are "too political" being dour and boring.

Worse yet, Bragg is scheduled to return in July to do a -- spoken, not sung -- recruiting pitch for Young Labor! As a political guru, Billy Bragg is a fine singer.

Best to treat him as what he is rather than what he isn't. Bragg sees his role as a "communicator" of personal feelings and progressive g in "accessible" directions that will not please all his older fans, but he stands for a society that "put the happiness of the majority of the people first" and writes great songs. Compared to the overwhelmingly boring and reactionary product of the music industry, he's still "our Bill".

From: [Cultural Dissent](#), Green Left Weekly issue #57 27 May 1992.