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Exile On Mermaid Avenue

07/01/1998 3:00 PM, LAUNCH
Steven Mirkin

There's a certain irony in talking to [Billy Bragg](#) about [Woody Guthrie](#) in the lush confines of Beverly Hills, and don't think Bragg doesn't realize it. "The only way I can survive here is to imagine I'm somewhere else," he jokes.

The somewhere else he's been mostly these days is Mermaid Avenue, the street in the Coney Island neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York where Guthrie lived the last 20 years of his life. It's also the title of Bragg's new album, which consists of unpublished Guthrie lyrics given new musical settings composed and performed by Bragg and the alt.country band [Wilco](#).

Bragg, who visits New York about twice a year, had never been to Brooklyn, much less Coney Island, until he toured the area on the 30th anniversary of Guthrie's death with Guthrie's daughter Nora and her son Cole. The experience, he says, was "very spiritual." They visited the block where the Guthries had lived, the boardwalk, and the breakwater where Guthrie's ashes were scattered.

What struck Bragg more than anything else about Coney was its timelessness. "The freak shows, the rickety old rides, even Nathan's, it doesn't have a modern feel about it." It evokes the 1940s, he says. "It's down there if you're attuned to it."

Guthrie, Bragg claims, is from that era, but "leaps out of the page with incredibly vitality and modernity." Referring to him affectionately as "the little guy," Bragg speaks of Guthrie with a rare passion. "There's not a movement in popular culture in the past 50 years that Woody didn't touch in some way--the beats, punk, the [Beatles](#), even hip-hop." Although well-intentioned, he says, the "lefties and folksingers who sold Woody as a political singer were in some way reducing him to a one-dimensional figure." The accepted image of Guthrie as dust bowl singer is only part of his oeuvre, Bragg says. "When you close you're eyes and imagine Woody Guthrie in a movie,

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it's *The Grapes Of Wrath*, but he could just as easily be on the subway going to Coney Island with [Frank Sinatra](#) and [Gene Kelly](#) in [On The Town](#)."

To prove his point, Bragg reaches for a brown folder with a photo of Guthrie taped on one cover and the word "Woody Guthrie lyrics" written in Magic Marker on the other. He turns to a page and points out a lyric for a song called "The Ten Spiritual Secrets From The Kingdom Of Tibet." "He was way ahead of his time," Bragg remarks with a smile.

[Mermaid Avenue](#), Bragg thinks, is the first step in showcasing the full picture of Woody Guthrie. "He only recorded 150 sides in his lifetime," he explains, "and there almost 2,500 songs in the archives. That means we've only heard five percent of his genius." Until those songs are heard, Bragg says, Guthrie "hasn't made his last record. His body and physical being is used up, but his mind, his genius his contribution is still there."

Bragg first saw the archives when Nora Guthrie invited him to view them, with the idea of Bragg producing an album. "I told her, 'You call the shots--whatever songs, what ever format you want.' I had one condition: I chose the musicians." Bragg wanted one band throughout the record to avoid a tribute album feeling. *Mermaid Avenue*, he says emphatically, is *not* a tribute album; it's simply "the first new album of Woody Guthrie songs in 50 years."

While he has "no idea what people mean when they talk about 'Americana' music," Bragg chose Wilco as collaborators on the project. "I knew [Uncle Tupelo](#), and knew Jeff was familiar with the music of that period." But he was determined to make a modern record. "We're not setting out to find some sort of purity, we're setting out to put a frame around lyrics that stand up on their own and are still very vibrant."

One of the reference points Bragg returns to when talking about *Mermaid Avenue* is [Bob Dylan](#) and the [Band's Basement Tapes](#). "I was reading *Invisible Republic* [Greil Marcus's book about Dylan's *Basement Tapes*] while making this record. And among of the many insights was that these guys were playing these songs that were writ 50 years ago, but they couldn't undo the fact that they heard [Little Richard](#). It occurred to me that we were also dealing with the same 50 years ago and couldn't undo the fact that we had heard [Blonde On Blonde](#) and the first [Clash](#) album and we'd heard [Exile On Main Street](#), and whatever input that Wilco and myself had taken during our life. There's no point in pretending we hadn't heard them."

Finding the frames for each set of lyrics was easy. "The lyrics just jump off the page," he explains. "You read 'Ingrid Bergman' and the melody just falls into place." And songs such as "Another Man's Done Gone" are "the first examples of the singer-songwriter genre...a self-reflective lyric with a bit of social commentary thrown in."

The process of writing and playing the songs was so easy and joyous that Bragg and Wilco ended up recording 40 tracks, of which 15 made it onto *Mermaid Avenue*. "If this is well-received, we'll release the rest." So far, early reaction has been overwhelmingly positive.

Reaching again for his folder of Guthrie lyrics, Bragg turns to "Another Man's Done Gone." This song is the key to the album, Bragg claims, pointing out the lines "I don't know/ I may go/ Down or up in the world/ But I feel like this scribbling will stay." For Bragg, those lines "could have been written about this project." When Guthrie wrote the song in the '40s, "nobody gave a shit about what he was doing, but he knew his work was worthwhile and people will come along later and appreciate it." Reading those lyrics today, Bragg feels that Guthrie "imagined someone--he didn't know our names, he didn't know when he didn't know how--would come along and finish the work." He pauses for a moment. "I'm just honored it could have been me."

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