

The NI Interview

Billy Bragg

The British singer-songwriter talks with **Silja JA Talvi** about his career, his politics and a series of new recordings that breathe life into old Woody Guthrie songs.

Billy Bragg is a most unlikely pop music hero – well-mannered, flannel-shirted and decidedly unglamorous. Bragg has always placed greater emphasis on music and message than on a showy celebrity image. This is in part due to his strong grounding in oppositional politics.

After an explosive, genre-defying debut album in 1983, *Life's A Riot with Spy Vs Spy*, Bragg, a young musician from a working-class background, turned his attention to supporting the coalminers' strikes that polarized British class politics in 1984 and 1985. Fueled by the early influence of Britain's explosive punk scene and angered by the injustices which he saw being committed against working people, Bragg soon began to explore a political ideology to match his outrage.

'The people in the coal-mining villages who were involved in the struggle knew why they were there. But they couldn't understand why some pop star from London would want to be there. I found that I had to define my politics more in ideological terms, less in personal terms. By the end of the miners' strike I was defining myself as a socialist, clued in and looking for the next opportunity to defeat the Tories. It was Margaret Thatcher's "encouragement" that forced me to become ideologically politicized,' explains Bragg.

He committed himself to ousting the Conservative Government with the formation of Red Wedge. This musician-based pressure group attempted to influence the national debate and to politicize the nation's youth through the high-profile presence of rock and ska bands. 'We formed Red Wedge in order to focus in on the '87 election... to use the opportunity that we had in the [youth-oriented music] papers to have a debate about what we were voting for. We didn't go out and say, "People, vote Labour". We went out and said, "People, look at the issues – who is going to make a better society?"'

In subsequent years, Bragg was to attach himself to numerous political causes and benefits, ranging from the anti-apartheid movement to the support of pro-choice struggles. Despite having left school at the age of 16, Bragg continued to study and articulate sharp, intelligent commentaries on economic and social inequities. But he refuses to be pigeonholed solely as a 'political' songwriter.

With another Conservative victory in 1987, Red Wedge disbanded, although Bragg's ideals remained unshaken. In 1988, he released *Workers' Playtime*, with the slogan 'Capitalism Is Killing Music' unabashedly displayed on the album cover. But it was not until 1991's *Don't Try This At Home* that Bragg truly earned a widespread, international audience. In this album songs like 'Sexuality' highlighted a songwriting style of great warmth and honesty.

In 1992, Bragg was invited to play at Woody Guthrie's 80th birthday memorial concert, where he met Woody's daughter, Nora. The legendary US singer-songwriter is still alternately revered or disdained for his radical, pro-



union protest songs. Guthrie's untimely death in 1967 from Huntington's chorea left behind an archive of unrecorded lyrics. After their initial meeting, Nora sensed that she had found the artist to interpret her father's remaining songs, and so convinced Bragg (along with American rock band Wilco) to embark on a project which resulted in this year's well-received *Mermaid Avenue*.

Although political themes are evident on the CD, one of the greatest pleasures for Bragg was 'finding a much more three-dimensional human being than the two-dimensional icon that history has made Guthrie into'. The songs on *Mermaid Avenue* do speak of political issues, but of love, lust and loneliness as well.

Taken together, Bragg maintains, Guthrie's lyrics are as relevant today as they were back when he wrote them 40 or 50 years ago: 'Words are very powerful; they're timeless in some ways... that makes you want to strive and articulate more honest things and be more unflinching about whatever it is that you're writing about. Politics change, but people don't.'

Even in the time in which Bragg himself has been writing and singing, the world has witnessed dramatic, historic changes. Bragg puts down the ever-evolving framework through which he articulates his thoughts and ideas not only to the changing political landscape, but also to the personal impact of his marriage and to the birth of his son, Jack.

'I've thought about this, about whether or not the way I feel about politics now is because Jack was born or because the Berlin Wall came down. I guess it's a mixture of both. I think the Berlin Wall coming down, the end of the Cold War and the break-up of the Soviet Union gives an opportunity to those of us on the Left to reassess what we believe in, what socialism is out of the shadow of totalitarianism and Stalinism... Where I am in my thinking at the moment is that I've stepped back from my ideological language, because the language we used during the Cold War may actually be past its "sell-by" date.'

Does this mean that one of Britain's best-known musician-agitators has given up on his beliefs? Absolutely not, explains Bragg firmly. 'We haven't abandoned what we believe in, but we must find a way to articulate it to the majority of people ... In the end, we have to make people understand that they can either live in a society based on a compassionate idea, or a society based purely on exploitation. From that we will build our new ideals.'

Finnish-born **Silja JA Talvi** now lives and works as a freelance writer in Seattle, Washington.
Photo by **Silja JA Talvi**

