



[Coming up](#) [Story archive](#) [Top Sites](#)
[About Us](#) [Around Australia](#) [Front Page](#)

[ABC Online](#)

[ABC News](#)

[Lateline](#)

[Four Corners](#)

[Foreign
Correspondent](#)

[Australian
Story](#)

[Landline](#)

Transcript

13/04/1999

Billy Bragg, the pop star, still packs a political punch

MAXINE MCKEW: When British singer/songwriter Billy Bragg was nominated for a Grammy Award earlier this year, it's hard to say who was more stunned — the music industry or Bragg himself.

After all, Bragg has carved a career for himself railing against capitalism and just about everything that the Grammys stand for.

Still more perplexing was that the album that won him the nomination was co-written by folk legend Woody Guthrie, who died 32 years ago.

Billy Bragg and his band The Blokes are now touring Australia with the fruits of this most unusual collaboration as well as a selection of his more familiar work.

Steve Letts reports.

BILLY BRAGG: I think love and ideology overlap and sometimes things that politically occur have ramifications for people's relationships and that to me they are the best kind of song.

STEVE LETTS: Billy Bragg is not a song writer who attracts equivocating reviews.

He's seen as either a dangerous polemicist or a lonely voice of conscience in an egregiously materialistic industry.

And that's very much an echo of Bragg's most recent collaborator, Woody Guthrie, a musical legend who died 32 years ago.

When Woody died in '67, he left behind him thousands of complete lyrics to songs, the tunes of which he kept in his head.

STEVE LETTS: His unfinished songs and other musings, have been gathered up at the Woody Guthrie Archive in New York City run by his daughter, Nora.

NORA (reads): "My body position had a rhythm which, if counted, would be the set up for pieces of cheese on a board.

BILLY BRAGG: Chess! Pieces of chess.
[They both laugh]

STEVE LETTS: An ability to decipher tricky handwriting was a help but it was Billy Bragg's kindred spirit that Nora Guthrie was looking for in resurrecting Woody's work for a new generation.

BILLY BRAGG: That was what I got from Nora — "Don't go in and make a Woody Guthrie records.

"Go in and make a record that adds to people's idea of Woody Guthrie.

Perhaps a Woody Guthrie purist wouldn't have latched on to a song like 'Ingrid Bergman'.

(Billy sings) "Ingrid Bergman, Ingrid Bergman, let's go make a picture on the island..."

STEVE LETTS: As Woody underwent a transformation, so did Billy's stridently East London accent.

BILLY BRAGG: "Ingrid Bergman you're so perty..."

I have to say that in Ingrid Bergman, where I sing 'perty', that's what Woody actually writes — he writes 'perty'.

He may mean 'perty' like in a Bruce Springsteen song or he may actually mean excessively pert as he's talking about Ingrid Bergman so I leave it up to your own taste.

But it's very difficult to sing "I lived in a place called Ofusky" in a barkin' accent. It doesn't work.

Woodrow Wilson Guthrie's political views were galvanised by the plight of his Oklahoma brethren in the 1930s.

His songs chronicled dust storms, depression and dispossession.

In the politically-charged United States he was derided as a communist and traitor, his verses deemed subversive.

While he inspired the likes of Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, Middle America has never felt comfortable with Woody.

(Woody sings) "Rich man took my home and drove me from my door..."

(Woman) Somebody took the sign and put...(points to sign)...

BILLY BRAGG: Called me red, the draft dodger.

(Woman) But they didn't even spell it right!

STEVE LETTS: Nonetheless to the disbelief of many the album Bragg crafted with the American band Wilco won a nod from the mainstream music industry with a Grammy nomination.

BILLY BRAGG: I don't think I would have been nominated for any of that kind of guff, so I was very chuffed.

Everyone was very excited about it. My American record

company – I shot up in their estimations.

(Sings) "Ain't nobody that can sing like me "Way over yonder in a minor key..."

BILLY BRAGG: To be perfectly honest I wasn't even a Woody Guthrie obsessive.

I knew who he was, I knew why he was important, I knew his stuff. But I was by no means Mr Woody Guthrie fan.

But after a while I found that this distance actually helped. It allowed me to be a bit more objective about Woody.

STEVE LETTS: The project has changed the way Billy Bragg looks at his own work.

BILLY BRAGG: One of the things have I learned about myself from doing this Woody Guthrie project is that I'm actually not a political songwriter.

STEVE LETTS: Not that he's anything but a proudly unreconstructed leftie but times move on from the days of his red wedge when he marshalled musicians against Margaret Thatcher's Tories.

BILLY BRAGG: We lived in a divided society and now it is not quite like that and I'm not surprised that our younger songwriters aren't specifically political.

It doesn't surprise me frankly. You can't make political music in a vacuum. There has to be something going on.

It's very difficult to write songs about neo Labour.

They are a rather quicksilver group of people and they are the kind of government that's hard to feel angry about.

STEVE LETTS: But scratch an old polemicist and there's anger not far from the surface looking for a voice.

BILLY BRAGG: In time of war there's always room for polemic and political comment.

So I think these times may be coming again.

[Front Page](#) | [Coming Up](#)
| [Story Archive](#) | [About Us](#)
| [Top Sites](#) | [Around Australia](#)

email: 730syd@your.abc.net.au



© Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1999