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Billy Bragg

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Billy Bragg

For the past few years, British folk singer and punk rocker [Billy Bragg](#) has immersed himself in the archives of America's greatest folk singer, Woody Guthrie. With the help of Guthrie's daughter Nora, Bragg combed through hundreds of Guthrie's lyrics that had never been performed, and he began to select material to record. Bragg soon drafted Jeff Tweedy of the alt-country band Wilco into the project and the two set to work recording dozens of [Guthrie's songs](#).

Today Bragg is **Live Online** from the Smithsonian Museum of American History for a discussion about Woody Guthrie, the man and his music.

Join [Bragg](#) as he explores Guthrie's legacy and talks about the future of his own music.

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Billy Bragg: Hi everybody, this is Billy Bragg here live in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC. I am going to attempt to answer as many of your questions as I can in the next hour before I have to go soundcheck.

Washington, DC: Thank you, Billy, for all your hard work and great music. I have been a fan for many years, and your new work with the Woody Guthrie songs is fascinating. Thanks also for your recent "Reaching to the Converted" record-- it's nice to finally have a copy of the song "Ontario Quebec and Me."

How did you get hooked up with Wilco to record the Woody Guthrie songs?

Billy Bragg: How did I hook up with Wilco? I knew Jeff Tweedy from doing shows with Uncle Tupelo in the 80s and I really liked the sound of

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"Being There" so I tracked him down and asked him.

Washington DC: I tried to get tickets for tonight's show but was already sold out. Will you be repeating the show in DC?

Billy Bragg: This show is a solo performance at which I talk about the Mermaid Avenue project. I have so far done it in London, LA, New York and will be doing it in Toronto on 29th June. I think a recording the LA show can be heard at Amazon.com if you want to check it out

Storrs, CT: Any equivalent to Woody Guthrie over in the UK? Or does folk music basically mean Pentangle, Steeleye Span, and Fairport?

Billy Bragg: Any equivalent to Woody. Sheesh..... thats a tough one. Woody is one of those artists that it's hard to compare. He is The Source.

Ben, Washington DC: Although Bob Dylan has always described Woody Guthrie as one of his greatest influences - it seemed that many of the end of the century pundits last year tended to emphasize Dylan as the "real" folk singer of the millennium (whatever that means). How would you compare and contrast the contributions to modern music of Guthrie to those of Dylan?

Look forward to the show tonight!

Billy Bragg: Dylan's influence has been greater because of the effect of the mass media. Woody never had that benefit. So maybe Bob was more influential but without Woody maybe Dylan would have stayed in Hibbing.

Prince George, VA: We all know you love Woody Guthrie. What do you think of his son Arlo? & Would you ever want to do an album with him? Which was your favorite of the 2 MERMAID AVE records to do? Thanks!

Billy Bragg: Funnily enough, I was buying Arlo's albums before I ever got into Woody. Yes, I'd happily do an album with him. MA2? Love 'em all.

Washington DC: 1. How much of an influence has Woody Guthrie been in your life, both musically and politically?
and on another topic altogether..
2. Do you think Alan Shearer should be dropped for the England v Germany game?

Billy Bragg: Well the two artists that most influenced me were the aforementioned B. Dylan and the Clash. I loved the Clash because they painted anti-fascist slogans on their guitars. Where'd they ever get that

from? As for Shearer, sometimes it's good to be in the land of American Football.

philadelphia, pa: Just wanted to say I am enjoying MA II, much better than the first one. I hear you are planning third one? What about an album of your own songs? We have been waiting a long time.

Billy Bragg: I am hoping to record a new BB album early next year. I have the songs and the band. I just need the time.

Washington, DC: How have the folks back home reacted to your recording of the Woody Guthrie songs? While his songs are often of universal themes, he is often described as a uniquely-American artist.

Billy Bragg: Well, Woody is not so central to our folk culture as he is in the US. If people know him it is via Bob Dylan. Having said that, the reaction at home, both to MA and MA2, has been overwhelmingly positive.

Washington, DC: Billy,

The songs on "Mermaid Ave. II" seem to be less "verse-chorus-verse" format than those on the first album. Is there a reason behind your choice of such songs for the second album, and is it more difficult to come up with the music for these lengthy, descriptive songs?

Billy Bragg: I guess the songs on the first album were more straightforward because we were trying to engage an audience. Now we have your attention we are able to submit songs that are darker and more convoluted. But not any more difficult to write music for.

San Francisco, California: Hi Billy. Welcome to America. A debate is going on among your fans on your web page forum concerning "socialism of the heart." Does this phrase mean that you support a form of compassionate capitalist "liberalism", and that you no longer consider yourself a socialist? And what do you think Woody would call himself in this 21st century consumer capitalist world?

Billy Bragg: Can't speak for Woody. But for me, in the post ideological culture that we presently live in, there is a need to find a non-Marxist language to express the ideals that we have managed to hold on to. I don't presume to invent that language but want to contribute to the debate. To me, compassion is socialism of the heart and the debate seems to be between living in a society based on a compassionate ideal as opposed to an exploitative one. Now we could argue that socialism is that compassionate ideal but then we must define what we mean by socialism. Am I a socialist? I think I am but it depends on how we define that word in the 21st century

newcastle, england: How is the responsibility for writing and arranging music organised between you and Wilco? Do you collaborate or work on separate songs?

Billy Bragg: Basically who ever writes the music sings the song. We arrange the songs together and record them as live as is possible. I have written more songs that Wilco, because I have been working on the project for longer, so I asked Natalie and Corey and Jeff to sing a few of mine as well.

Okemah, OK: Hi Billy, I really liked MA1 and would like to get MA2. I'm having a debate with my finacee. I think "Guthrie" is a great middle name for a kid (she doesn't) - he was a great and thoughtful humanitarian after all. She's also watching this discussion, so can ya help me out at all by winning her over. She's a big fan of yours. Thanks!

Billy Bragg: Hmmm, gotta watch my step on this one. Well, Woody was named after the president of the day - Woodrow - why not use that formula - preferably before November.

Washington, DC: Why is Woody important for now, we're in the middle of an economy boom, he wrote during the depression? And secondly, why are you and other rock musicians, at the beginning of a new century, raising Woody's voice? And could you try to answer the question of who are the inheritors of Woody's vision?

Billy Bragg: Why now for Woody? The end of the Cold War is finally making it possible for his legacy to be appreciated. What does Woody say to us today? Check out All You Fascists on MA2. Woody wrote that in 1942 so you'd think it was about the war but what is he talking about in the verses? Jim Crow racism, poll tax exploitation and corporate greed. Makes sense to me.

Germany: Hi Billy,
Do you really think that we should turn our backs to the real marx, just because the ideologie-marx is dead and gone.
Isn't this the time for us to "hold that line"?

Billy Bragg: I think that it is the language of Marxism that is past its sell by date. If we want to speak to the mass of the population we cannot resort to the old terminology. The ideals will resurface and be reinvigorated in that way.

Washington, DC: I've seen you perform several times, and during your shows, you always have something to say about American politics. In regards to the earlier question about "compassion" and "socialism of the heart", I'd be curious to hear your thoughts (if any) about George W. Bush's "compassionate conservatism."

Keep up the good work! I shall have to pick up the new record post

haste.

Billy Bragg: It's an oxymoron.

Somewhere, USA: You sang "I Don't Need This Pressure Ron" during your last UK tour. It seemed the timing was a bit of a reminder, from you, to your more demanding fans that you could not be expected to give answers to solve the problems of the world. Did you mean it in that way or were you merely plugging "Preaching to the Converted" ?

Billy Bragg: Yeah, "I Don't Need..." is my mission statement and I guess that "Reaching..." had reminded me that I still remain true to those words.

Washington, D.C.: Billy--I've noticed on the MA albums that you seem to be singing with less of a British accent. Is this intentional? Also, when you wrote music for these songs did you try to imagine the way that Woody Guthrie would have played them or were you creatively entirely free?

Billy Bragg: Our job was to collaborate with Woody not imitate him so we had total artistic freedom to do what we felt was appropriate for the lyric we were working on. The mid Atlantic accent is because I find it difficult to sing other people's words in my Estuary English.

Washington DC: I've heard a lot about how you and Wilco ended up hooking up to do MA1 and MA2. How did Natalie Merchant get involved? Is she actively involved in the Guthrie work as well?

Billy Bragg: Natalie knew Nora Guthrie and she wanted to become involved but didn't have the time to write her own material so I loaned her a couple of mine.

Springfield, Missouri: Billy,
Thanks for all the years of great music....
Any chance you'll get out to the Guthrie Folk Festival in Oklahoma again?

Billy Bragg: Hope so.

Morgantown WV: Billy, Was "Levi Stubbs Tears" based on a real life situation, if so what? That song always breaks my heart

Billy Bragg: Well, it was a song about heartbreak so it should break your heart. No it was not based on a real situation.

Minneapolis, MN: What do you think of the whole Napster thing?

Billy Bragg: I'm still here folks. I was just scrolling through the questions to see what I should deal with before I have to sign off.

The Napster thing is getting a bit silly to my mind. I believe that artists should be payed for their work. However if my records get played on radio in the US, I, as the artist, get nothing. Why hasn't Metallica come out complaining about this?

Sure we may lose a few sales but how many people will come along to a BB gig because they first heard my music on a free download? Is that any different from a free radio play?

Also, the artists that get downlaoded the most are the most popular. Show me one artist who has been made poor by Napster.

Finally, if free access to albums will destroy the music industry (not), why don't Random House burn down libraries?

Hamburg, Germany: Your show in Hamburg last week was very nice, but did you notice that you shocked the audience with your speech about "All you fascists"?

How can you declare a song like this to be something like the unofficial Nato-anthem?

Billy Bragg: I didn't say that All You Fascists was an unoffical NATO anthem, I just said that introducing it at gigs allowed me to comment on the complex situation regarding intervention in Kosovo last April. Everyone cheers when I tell them that Woody wrote THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS on his guitar, but they all get upset when I explain to them what this actually entails.

Billy Bragg: I am afraid that I have to nip off and do a sound check for this evening's show here in DC. I'm sorry that I couldn't answer all your questions but you might find some enlightenment at my home page www.billybragg.co.uk

I will be touring with my band The Blokes during what our American cousins refer to as the Fall. Dates are scheduled for places such as Boston and Belfast. I hope very much to be able to hook up with Wilco to do an integrated tour during this time.

Plans to visit Australia with the Blokes in the Spring are being discussed and I hope to record a new album sometime around then.

The Woody Guthrie Exhibit is here in DC at the National Museum of American History until 17th July.

I will be appearing with Wilco on the David Letterman Show this coming Friday.

I will also be appearing at the Barnes and Noble store on Union Square in New York City at 1pm on 16th June.

The film of the making of Mermaid Avenue should be coming out in the USA in late summer.

My tip for Euro 2000 has been and remains Portugal. Pleased to see they got off to a flying start. Alas!

Thats all folks. Hope to see some of you tonight and the rest of you in the near future.

How's my punctuation?

Billy Bragg

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