

“ON THE RECORD”

A CONVERSATION WITH ... BILLY BRAGG



Twenty years ago, Billy Bragg dropped out of the British army, dyed his hair and started playing electric guitar in the London Underground. Slamming power chords and singing in a thick, working-class accent, Bragg became an immediate anti-folk hero, recording two albums of agit-punk (1983's *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs. Spy* and 1984's *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*) and turning into a public figure in left-wing politics. As he's grown older, Bragg's songs and socialism have grown more complex, with albums like 1991's *Don't Try This At Home* and 1996's *William Bloke* expanding his focus to include the politics of love, sexuality and fatherhood. In 1998, after three years of writing music to unpublished lyrics by Woody Guthrie, he teamed up with Wilco and released *Mermaid Avenue*. The Grammy-nominated album was such a success (it sold more than twice as many copies as any of his previous records), Bragg and Wilco recently released *Mermaid Avenue Vol. II* (Elektra).

What do you say when people call you a pinko?

I don't mind. I'm the pinko punker. I hope that one day I'll be revealed as a feeling human being, a bit like Woody is with his albums, instead of being stereotyped just because I sing about the politics of the left. When people say I'm a political songwriter, I think, "No, I'm not. I'm just an honest songwriter." And I don't mind a bit of discourse; the only thing I disapprove of is people telling me what my politics are.

What are your politics?

I suppose you could call me a democratic socialist. I'm a humanitarian looking for political ways to make the world more humane. If you asked me for the one thing I believe in most, I would say compassion, as opposed to exploitation.

How do the "Mermaid Avenue" albums do that?

Well, it's more difficult to be Billy Bragg, because firstly, I'm using somebody else's lyrics. But I'm also collaborating with Wilco. I think they were expecting me to be a lot more hard-line. And, you know, I'm not, really. But it was good; they kind of sized me up, and after a few days, they realized I wasn't going to be ramming politics down their throats. I wasn't coming in clutching *The Thoughts Of Chairman Mao*.

How much did you know about Woody Guthrie before you started working on these songs?

I knew a few of his famous songs, but Woody didn't really have much of a profile in the U.K.; all the focus was on Dylan. And because this land isn't our land, we don't sing that song in school. I kind of knew who he was and why he was important, but I didn't really know the story. The first time I met Nora (Guthrie), Woody's daughter, was in Central Park in New York in 1992. It was an 80th

birthday party for Woody—everybody had to play a Woody Guthrie song. And the only one I knew all the way through was "Pretty Boy Floyd," and even then I wasn't sure. I had to go out and buy a cassette, go back to the hotel and listen to it, to make sure I didn't fluff the lyrics in front of everyone. If someone before me had played it, god knows what I would have done.

How did you decide which (Guthrie) songs you wanted to write?

It's like going into a book shop. How many books are there in a book shop? I don't know. But you manage to find the ones that you want, don't you? And those books that you find reflect something in you, don't they? If you look at the songs I chose, like "All You Fascists," you'll see they're very much Billy Bragg songs. And if you look at Jeff Tweedy's songs, like "Secrets Of The Sea," well, I'm sure Jeff wouldn't mind me saying this, but the lyrics are a bit post-*Summer Teeth*.

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How does the Woody Guthrie you've found in the archive feel like the Billy Bragg that you already knew?

His love of kids—I've got a son who's six years old—really struck me. His feelings of being an outsider. But mostly, it was the idea that he wasn't actually a political songwriter; he was just trying to write as honestly as he could. I think it's hard for the present generation to really get a handle on Woody, because he seems so far away. In rock 'n' roll terms, he's prehistoric, he's emerging from the mists of folk music. So, hopefully, by choosing songs where he's writing about people that we think of as being in our modern, post-war world, people like Ingrid Bergman or Joe DiMaggio, I'm hoping to bring Woody a bit closer to us all in time—and maybe we'll think of him in Technicolor as well as in black and white. Like on the manuscript for "My Flying Saucer"; although there's no musical notation at all, the tempo that he wrote for it was "supersonic boogie." When I read those words, I realized that I had justification there, from Woody's own hand, to put any damn musical style I wanted onto these songs. Nobody could

ever lean over to me and say, "Do you think Woody would have done it this way?"

Do you?

I think Woody would have done anything. Here was a man who'd spend his last dollar on something new, like a brand new toaster or a brand new car or a brand new cooker. What do you think he would have done if he'd got a Les Paul guitar in 1952 or '53? He would've played the blues like John Lee Hooker, he would have gone electric at Newport Folk Festival in 1955—never mind Bob Dylan in 1965. That's the image I have of Woody. People think of him as an Oklahoman, but he lived half of his life in New York City. The last thing they've deciphered in the archive is from 1957. He's in the hospital, writing about Sputnik. And the only way he could have seen that would've been through the TV—and if he was watching TV in 1957, then he must have seen Elvis. Just think of him sitting there, checking out Elvis on *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

What would he have thought?

I don't know, but let's just use that image. I'm riffing on him now, I'm trying to evoke a life that was more than just being out in the dust bowl, of being in the Navy and then being ill in the hospital. I'm trying to pick up a Woody that was stimulated by what he saw, because that's the feeling I get from the archive. Not of a man losing his mind, but of a man refining it. And to me, "Grassy Grass Grass" is part of that. That's my favorite Woody Guthrie track. You just want to sit down in the dark and put it on, just a bit above talking volume: "Grassy grass grass/Growy grow grow." It's like a mantra. I've never heard anyone else in the Western tradition do anything like that, with that kind of intensity. It's fucking intense. Because he's not goofing, although it's clearly a kids' song. Have you ever read *The Wind In The Willows*?

A long time ago.

Well, there are these little river animals; they go down the river and meet Pan. That's how I imagine meeting Woody Guthrie: I'll be walking down by some river, dappled in sunshine, and I'll hear that mantra: "Grassy grass grass/Growy grow grow." And there he'll be, sitting under a tree, and he'll give me a wink. He won't say nothing, he'll just give me a wink, and I'll walk on by. That's how I'll know he's OK with what we've done.

And what about the other Billy Bragg? How come nobody's asking you to record "William Bloke Vol. II"?

That's true, they're not. But I'm gonna make it anyway. If I was waiting around for people to ask me to make a fucking record, I would have stopped doing it years ago.

—Kenny Berkowitz