

THE BIG ISSUE

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UP FROM THE STREETS
HOW THE BIG ISSUE WAS BORN

JACKIE CHAN
BEHIND THE PUNCH LINES

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS
THE AIDS FIGHT GETS REAL



BILLY BRAGG

**TALKING WITH THE AXEMAN ABOUT
TERRORISM AND GLOBAL JUSTICE**



019 FREE BILLY

On the eve of his Australian tour, lefty singer-songwriter Billy Bragg talks to Peter Ascot about global politics, the terrorist attacks and his support for The Big Issue magazine.

Years ago, I wrote a song like Billy Bragg, and performed it under the alias Willie Boast. It started, 'My girlfriend's like a knitting pattern/I don't fink I understand her at all...' If you sang it in a Pommy accent with no consonants, it was a dead ringer for the real thing.

Not that I'd dare mention it, when Bragg spoke to me from his cliff-top home in Dorset, England. For a start, it was almost one o'clock in the morning over there. Which might be standard muso hours, but these days he is well known as a family man.

'Between midnight and one is a good time,' he says, sounding alert and totally at ease. 'Everyone's in bed, and I've finished my domestic chores.'

Dishes and dustbins might seem a little at odds with the 80s punk-folkie, the firebrand dead set on driving a red wedge into the black heart of Thatcherism. But that's fatherhood.

'Frankly,' he says, 'if it doesn't change your perspective on everything, if it doesn't make a complete and utter difference, you ain't doing it properly.'

Luckily, he's not yet ready for the cardigan and hedge shears. For the family man, politics is all the more vital. 'It's changed my politics in that I'm aware of what I'm doing it for now,' Bragg says. 'Before it was a bit of an abstract thing, and I was doing it because morally I thought that I should do it. Now I know that I'm doing it for the next generation. My son Jack and I don't really discuss politics much, but he has had cause to say to us in the last couple of days, "Is there going to be a war?"'

Oh yes, the Americans. Will dissenters such as Bragg have to scurry for cover in the aftermath of the

attacks on New York and Washington? 'The right will have the moral high ground because of what's happened,' he suggests. 'I think it will be difficult for a while to articulate a dissenting view. Obviously, what has happened in the USA is an unspeakable act of barbarism, and what makes it different from anything that comes before is its magnitude. And personally I think that now is really not the time for moral equivalence, for saying that the United States has done this and this and blah blah; that's really rubbing salt into wounds that are going to take time to heal. They're in shock, as

'The language we used 20 years ago to describe left and right doesn't really have that meaning any more'

any nation would be in shock if 5000 people were killed in 90 minutes.

'Obviously there is a message in this for the globalisation movement, and that message is that you can't have a global economy without having global justice. But what we want to do, rather than immediately come back with dissent, is to try to clarify what is happening here. The people who did this terrible act, to suggest that we're civilised and they're not, I don't think is necessarily right. But those who committed this act have absolutely no sense of the sanctity of human life — they don't care about their own life, so how can they care about anybody else's? I think that we have to make sure that our response is underpinned by our determination to protect the sanctity of life, rather than to go in there and act as if we don't care about it either.'

Talking of dissent, in one of his songs Bragg wrote, 'If you've got a blacklist I want to be on it'. But now the conservative Tories, whom he despised, have been smashed in successive British elections. I try to tempt him onto the Labour Party blacklist, by suggesting that New Labour has out-Toried the Tories. He's not biting.

'There are still some things that separate Labour from the Tories,' he says carefully. 'The Conservative Party lost the election and now they're moving further to the right, toward anti-Europeanism. I think they're going to go into a tailspin. If you don't have the Soviet Union, and the Labour Party

Englishness. I put it to him that in the face of globalisation, nationalism could be becoming a leftist pursuit. After all, national pride is one defence against global homogenisation.

'In the past,' he replies, 'any sort of nationalism would have been regarded as right wing. What I'm trying to get at is identity rather than nationalism. You have an identity as an individual. It doesn't really become a problem until somebody else comes along and says, "You are that sort of person because you've got that name or that accent or that religion."

'The problem we have in the UK is that the right will use nationalism, particularly in its arguments against the European Union, to win votes. We on the left, the more progressive side of politics, have got to discuss an inclusive sense of identity, a sense of belonging that is really based on where we are, rather than where our parents or our grandparents are from.'

Bragg is on the record as saying that one motivation for his songwriting was to express thoughts and opinions that were absent in the mainstream media. In recent years, he has been sought after for comment in the media, but it hasn't diminished his songwriting desire.

'One complements the other,' he says. 'I've been writing articles for broadsheet newspapers, and things like that. The great thing about all those things is that I can do them from home, you know what I mean. I can more or less make a living being at home and playing occasionally and then going to do a month here and a month there.'

'On tour, there's so much hanging about waiting for something to happen. You've got to have a certain discipline to do it. You don't just switch off in the

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▷ morning because you know you're not on stage till 10 in the evening, you work your way through the day, through the interviews, the soundcheck, and you're building up for that 10 o'clock thing and you come off buzzing. The road can be a bit harsh. If there was also a way of making a living from writing, I'd be very pleased about that. But I wouldn't stop playing.

'I'm a supporter of *The Big Issue*,' he continues. 'You can even get it where I live in Dorset now, in the west of England. There's a homeless problem here. I think it's important, because it gives people a sense of independence, which is what people need. They can get out and begin to get control of their lives again.'

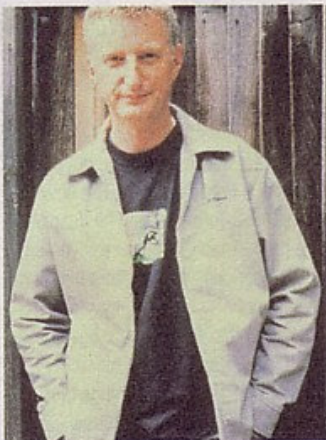
Well, the interview's nearly over and I realise we've barely touched on his music. I blurt a banal question, 'What are the new songs going to be like?'

'The new CD's not been mixed yet,' he informs me, then really puts me in my place. 'They're going to be like Billy Bragg songs. I'll play some in Melbourne for you, alright?'

I'm suitably chastened, and the line cuts out before I can tell him that if he wants another song à la Billy Bragg, I've got the perfect one. Lucky, that. □

Billy Bragg plays Melbourne 11 & 12 October, Brisbane 13 Oct., Sydney 15 Oct., Canberra 18 Oct., Adelaide 21 Oct. and Perth 23 Oct.

019.1 BRAGG ABOUT...



Billy Bragg loves talking almost as much as he loves singing – and he's always got something to say.

'The artists that get downloaded the most are the most popular. Show me one artist who has been made poor by Napster... If free

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

Washingtonpost.com online chat, 13 June 2000

'What are the things that are really distinctive about England? Chalk horses on hills. No one else has that. You need chalky hills.'

Financial Times, 30 September 2000

'I don't give a shit what people think about me. People think I'm arrogant, and I probably am. I'm Billy Bragg, take it or leave it.'

The Guardian, 2 September 1999

'I can't be arsed to make singles every three months, and I'm excused videos – I've got a note.'

From the same interview

'I'm not holding out for them to get in touch.'

On whether he'd work with the Spice Girls, from an interview with *The Independent*, 29 November 2000

'The Manic Street Preachers had brought their own private portalo to the Glastonbury festival and I had suggested from the stage that, by creating two classes of ablutions, they had somewhat undermined their much vaunted street cred.'

Evening Standard, 4 November 1999

'This one's for Billy Bragg, the biggest-nosed twat in the world. I wouldn't want his dick pissing in my toilet for all the money in the world. Get back in the fking army. The dickwit...and stop stealing Woody Guthrie's songs!'**

Nicky Wire of the Manic Street Preachers, on-stage in 1999