

# Out Times

The Canberra Times,  
Thursday, October 4, 2001



## Return of the Bard

Musical poet Billy Bragg finds a new fire in his belly.

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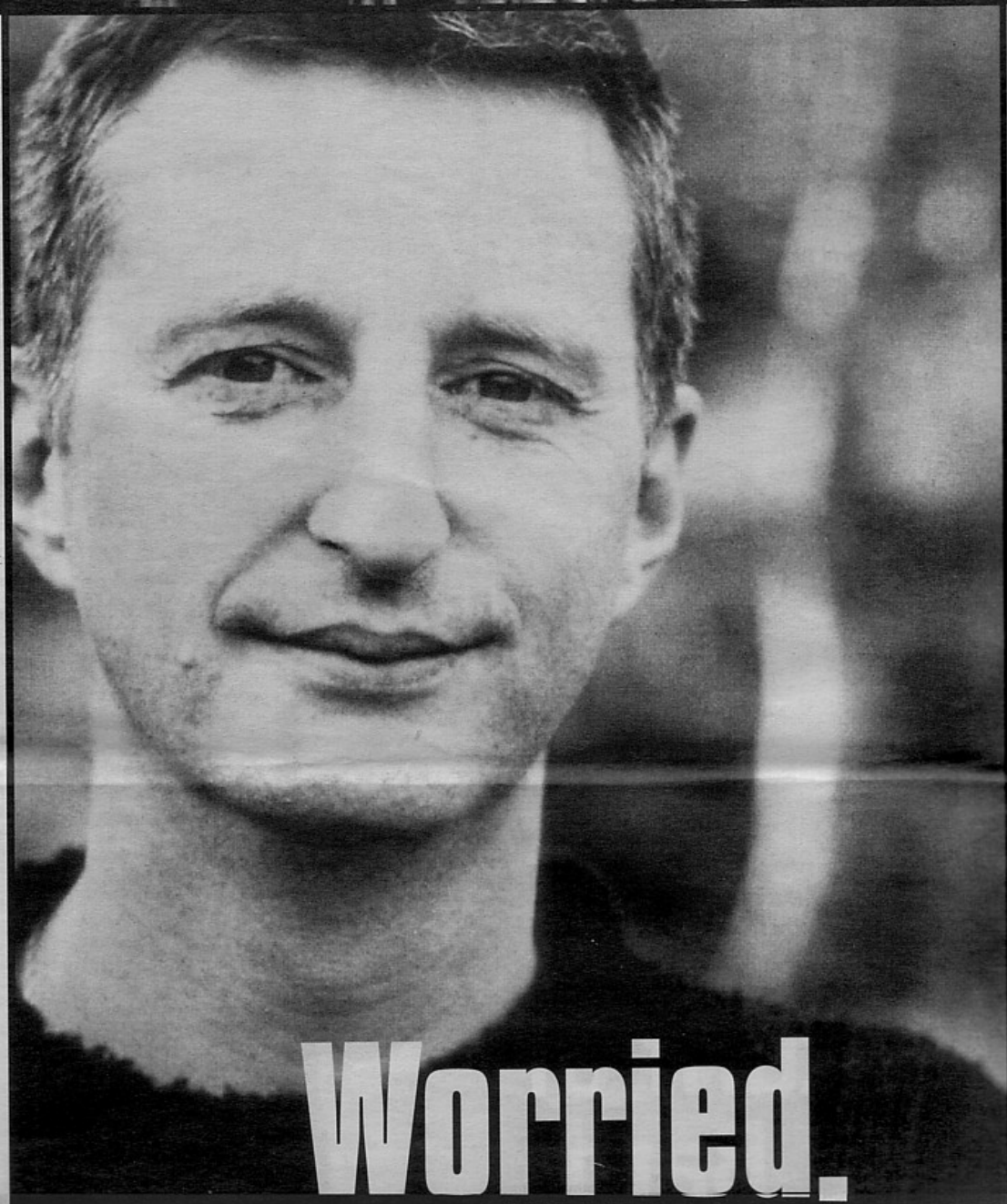
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## Worried. warrior

The justice fighter of the '80s tries to make sense of the US tragedy.

By Peter Brewer

**L**ike most of us, Billy Bragg is a man worried by the events of recent weeks.

The British singer-songwriter who used six strings, a cockney twang and thought-provoking lyrics to rouse us with his passionate rail against the corporate exploitation, greed and corruption of the 1980s is now middle-aged, greying around the temples and with two young kids.

"My boy is, like, seven years old now and was saying to me: 'Dad, is there going to be a war?'," Bragg says.

"His idea of war is like the Second World War, you know, the kind of war where they come stormin' up the beach.

"I live on a beach now and he plays around the old Second World War battlements down there so in his mind, he thinks these are going to be used again because that's the only kind of war he understands.

"So we had to have a bit of a chat and try to explain to him how different this war will be.

"It's a time for reflection, I think, before action."

The bloke who mercilessly rattled the cage of Thatcher's Britain has steered a fresh musical path in recent years, reviving the songs of Woody Guthrie through the critically acclaimed *Mermaid Avenue* albums.

For those of us who were emotionally moved and politically inspired by Bragg's earlier works —

albums like *Talking to the Taxman About Politics* and *Workers' Playtime* — we were appreciative of the new music but a little dismayed at losing such an important and angry voice shouting over the battlements.

We figured Bill had mellowed a bit with age and with Tony Blair's New Labor well entrenched in Britain, had more than done his bit in steering the leaky HM Britannia on a more conscientious political course.

However, it seems that raking over the wealth of Guthrie's largely unpublished material and exposing it to a fresh audience has recharged Bragg's creative batteries.

It's as if there's a rekindled desire for his own words to be heard again amid the fresh terror and fear in the world.

"You want to stop terrorism, you want to be less vulnerable, you want to feel secure and that's what's changed; the Americans now know what it's like to go to sleep at night afraid.

"Sadly, billions of people do that every night and I'm not saying this is a good thing, I'm not saying, you know, 'Here's your wake-up call, America, you deserved this'; no-one deserves it, no-one deserves what happened. It's just unspeakable.

"But the response to that has to be more than just gesture, to make the Americans feel more bullish again. The response has to be designed to make the Americans feel more secure — and indiscriminately going around blowing people up won't do that.



**'I really did owe the Australian audience a trip of doing this material'**

"But more importantly ... those [terrorists] in those planes declared a war on those of us who believe in the sanctity of life. Those people don't care about their own lives, let alone anyone else's.

"Then surely whatever response we make must be based on that principle: we believe in the sanctity of life and that's difficult ... it's difficult to wage a war against a terrorist who has no demands.

"The only agenda I can perceive in all this is that they would like there to be dreadful conflagration between the Christian world and the Muslim world ... It's piss-poor justification.

"We have to make sure that our response doesn't give them what they want."

Bragg put his latest as-yet-unnamed album "in the can" just a few weeks ago — it's due out early next year — so he doesn't feel the immediate urge to sit down and write how he feels.

He intends to mull his thoughts over for a time because, as he says, "there's so much to think about now".

His shows in Australia will be solo performances, such as the Bard and his guitar — a bit like the old days.

"I'm aware that the audiences in Australia have been with me for quite a while and they really love the old stuff as much as they love the new stuff so I'm going to try and strike a balance," says Bragg.

"Because this is a solo show and I can do it at my own pace ... the onus will be on me to vary the set over the tour so I'm going to play some songs I haven't played for a while, which will be nice for me as well.

"In some ways this tour will be like a fond farewell to the Woody [Guthrie] thing.

"I'm focused still on the narrative aspects of the Woody project and I thought that before I re-configure around Billy Bragg, I really did owe the Australian audience a trip of doing this [Guthrie material] ... not exclusively Woody stuff, but some elements of it."

Although he has always hated flying in aircraft and the emotional tug of his family home in Essex is more powerful than ever, Bragg believes that travelling stim-

ulates his muse and provides him with an important fresh perspective.

As those fans who have been to his gigs here down the years can attest, he scours the newspapers to present the often-amusing and thought-provoking Bragg 'spin' on local issues. Expect more of the same.

"Before I do a tour like this, I do like to pick up on my antennae about things that are happening in Australia ... to at least have an idea about the issues going around."

He said that the recent Tampa refugee crisis "dragged your (Australia's) good name into the dirt".

"It's Cathy Freeman I feel sorry for. I mean, that girl almost singed off her eyebrows at the Olympics to prove what a friendly, multicultural society Australia is and John Howard has just chucked all that in the dumper, really.

"Leaving those people on that ship ceases to become an immigration issue and becomes a humanitarian issue; you should have got them (the refugees) on to Christmas Island and dealt with them in your own sweet way."

Bragg once said in another interview that 'having a kid gives you perspective by the bucketload'. That perspective is sharper than ever after the war-torn poverty and despair inside Afghanistan arrived in our living rooms.

"Instead of them being an abstract bunch of people wearing turbans ... everyone in Australia now knows what's going down in Afghanistan."

"From what happened on September 11, everything has changed; hopefully our new perceptions will help us reach better decisions about things.

"These refugees are humans and they're looking for something better. And you know as well as I know if there was some place in the world where our children would have a chance at a better life, we'd f...ing go there tomorrow."

**Billy Bragg plays at the ANU's Lewellan Theatre on Thursday, October 18, with support from Dave Graney. Tickets are \$49.95 from ANU Ticketing (6125 5491).**

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