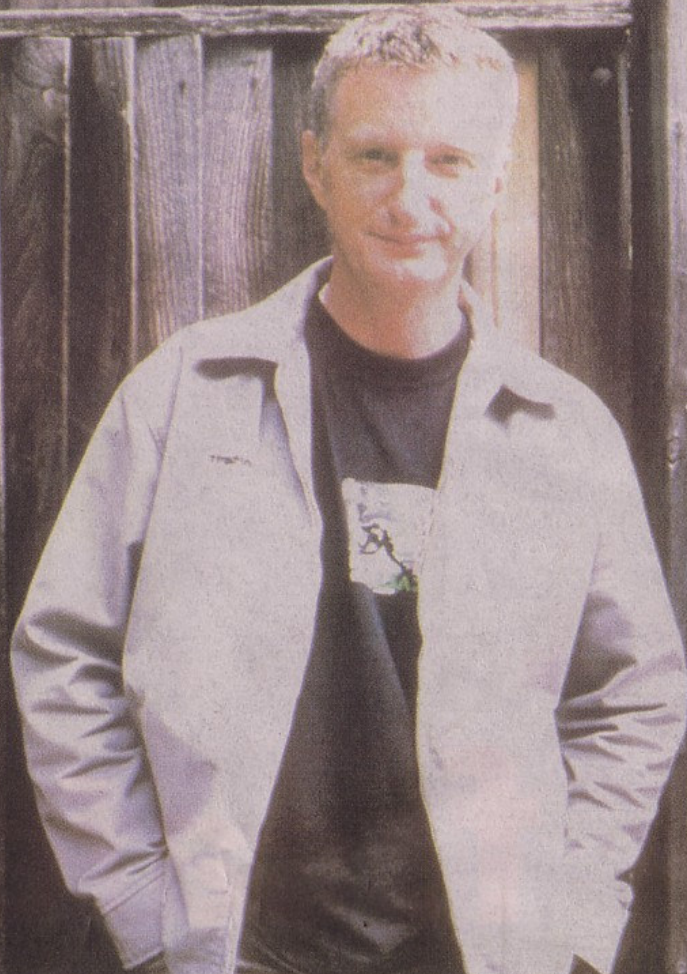


billy bragg



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Reasons Billy Bragg has decided it's time to share the spotlight:

Over 20 years ago, Billy Bragg, with the snotty sounds of British punk egging him on, formed a band. Riff Raff didn't last long, and a few years later Billy made a name for himself as a solo artist. One man and his electric guitar. Until 1998, that is, when this artist who had stood up through the years for the causes he believed to be right, found artistic reinvention with the help of another band, Wilco.

But Wilco weren't exactly *his* - they were lending Billy some of their fairy dust to help make *Mermaid Avenue I* and *II* (the words of Woody Guthrie set to new music) a magical success. So when *Mermaid Avenue* needed touring, Billy formed a band, The Blokes.

Eventually, Billy found it was time to record a new Billy Bragg album. But, earlier this year, instead of entering the studio alone, Billy took The Blokes with him. And they don't look like going anywhere anytime soon.

So what was it that finally made Billy Bragg - the iconic lone troubadour - want to work with a band again?

"Working with other musicians, it gives me different colours to work with, they bring different textures and different ideas, they think things a different way," says Billy.

"And although in order for me to write lyrics for what they're doing I sometimes have to put the bits that they've come up with into different order, they still remain ideas that are coming from somewhere else rather than me."

"Because if it's me in the studio, I'm in a position where I have to lead from the front and push from the back all the time. But with The Blokes, everyone comes up with ideas and I'll go away and come back and they'll have pursued an idea after I've given up on it, and they'll breathe life into something. It's much more of a collaborative effort, and to me it's a bit more inspirational."

Reasons Billy Bragg, and everyone else on the planet, has cause to pause and re-evaluate:

The events of September 11, and the ongoing fallout from a wave of terrorist attacks. Is something like this bound to come out in Billy's songwriting?

"I suppose so, yeah," Billy agrees. "The thing is, I've just finished an album so it's a bit late now for the album. But what I'm trying to do when I make an album is write about the world around me, you try and pick up on what's happening around the world from your viewpoint and write about that. So if things do get pretty grim, I guess it will filter through. But sometimes it's tough to get a purchase on certain things - like for instance the politics of Tony Blair, it's not so easy to work out what they are, in order

to write about." Is he a bit slippery that way?

"You can't get purchase on him. You don't know where he's going."

Reasons Billy Bragg has been forced to share the spotlight:

Unbearably cute children.

Billy has a talent not only for telling a ripping good yarn in song, but also for setting a brilliant scene in conversation. "We live by the coast," he begins, "and we have a phenomenon here that we call Andy Warhol weather... 15 minutes of this, 15 minutes of that. It's great, we had two

"We made a documentary of the making of *Mermaid Avenue*, and Jack features in that actually," Billy continues. "He comes in while I'm trying to explain to the director the meaning of life, he's butting in and saying, 'What's that dad?' He was about four at the time. And he's so unbearably cute, he just destroys my whole screen persona."

"And again everyone mentions that they saw him in the film, and is he really that cute or was he putting it on? Cos I'm doing my best in the film not to say to him, 'Get out, get out!' cos I know the director will use that if I put him out. So he's just *exuding* cute."

Not that you've ever been the Jon Bon Jovi type rock star...

"Working with other musicians, it gives me different colours to work with, they bring different textures and different ideas, they think things a different way"

"I've had me moments..." ...but do you have to change to let a family into your life? Because obviously you're very used to being the focus of attention and the one everyone wants to hear from.

"Yep. You do a bit. Cos you're still just dad to them, or the old fella. There's no point bringing those airs and graces home with you."

Did you have to learn that the hard way?

"Yeah. There's a song on the new album called *You Pull the Carpet out from Underneath My Feet*, which refers to my relationship with my missus, and her ability to cut me down to size. Which is necessary sometimes. Because I think in everybody's job, you're trying to get a balance between your life and your work, if you have a family, it's tougher - you're trying to balance between the time you spend with your family and the time you spend working."

"It used to be when I'd come to Australia we would go to New Zealand as well, and also probably Japan on the way in and on the way out, we would do a whole couple months. Now it's three weeks in Australia, and hopefully we'll get to New Zealand next time. I don't think I've been to Japan for maybe 12 years. Just because it's time away against time spent doing what you really ought to do."

"you try and pick up on what's happening around the world from your viewpoint and write about that. So if things do get pretty grim..."

now... when you've got kids, you'll find that tornados are a bit like dinosaurs... So he was able to explain to this guy from the local TV what happened out there, 'the cold air dives under the hot air, blah blah blah...' and I'm sittin' there lookin' part proud father, part guy who flunked his science exam."

Young Jack hasn't got a taste for the spotlight now, has he?

"Ohhhhh, *not many*," Billy groans.

"A friend of mine also saw it in New York on BBC World news, and didn't mention that I was in the piece at all, just 'I saw Jack on the telly!' Oh great."

"But the reaction from the Australian audience to *Mermaid Avenue* volume one, I really ought to come. Because I'm at the stage where I'm starting to revert back to Billy Bragg, and move away from *Mermaid Avenue*, but I think if any audience deserves some solo *Mermaid Avenue* stuff, it's the Australian audience, because they were so good in support of *Mermaid Avenue*, that before I put Woody to bed, I really wanna come and do these shows."

Billy Bragg plays the Melbourne Town Hall, City on Thursday October 11 and Friday 12 with guests the Dave Graney Show. Book at Ticketmaster.