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**News, Info, Letters & More**

ISSN 0964-3257



9 770964 325044

£2.50/\$5 Issue 35

Robb Johnson takes a trip down Mermaid Avenue and pays a visit to

# Billy Bragg

Billy Bragg has been having a bit of a holiday lately. Instead of being *Our Bill From Barking*, he's been dressing up as Woody Guthrie, which has entailed playing acoustic guitar a lot, and enjoying himself immensely by sitting around, playing around and working songs out with other musicians.

Apart from the prospect of fun with Wilco, the band Billy worked with to create the two 'Mermaid Avenue' albums, providing the music for some of Guthrie's vast store of unused lyrics, I wondered what it was about Woody Guthrie that engaged Bragg's attention and commitment.

"Woody Guthrie is the founder of the tradition that I'm a part of. He inspired people like Dylan and The Clash; he's the founding father of protest music ... for white guys."

I ask him where he thought Guthrie had got his inspirations from; what were the elements that he utilised to create this genre of music? Billy says it partly owes something to the blues, and quotes Joe Strummer's remark that "Every generation needs to find a way to relate to the blues," but also it is a result of Woody's intention to engage with and relate to the contemporary world. Billy identifies this as a common concern they both share.

"I would define myself as an honest songwriter," says Billy, "Trying to write honestly about the things around me. The first thing most writers write about is relationships, but they don't take their honesty out of the bedroom. I did, and that's what made me political in the 1980s."

Billy notes that they also both grew up in ideologically charged times, and notes how Wilco, a younger band, were "not touched by the political stuff" whereas, in that respect, Woody and Billy are very much on the same wavelength.

The impression I have after reading about and listening to the 'Mermaid Avenue' recordings is that Woody was almost an obsessive lyric-writer, and not just about the social concerns for which he is usually noted. Billy agrees.

"There are two-and-a-half-thousand completed lyrics in the archive. The lyrics are so good, so strong. If you made a twelve track album a year, it would take you two centuries to record them all."

Billy is quite adamant that there won't be a 'Mermaid Avenue' volume three. He admires the motivation that kept Woody writing profusely even through the difficult period of the late-40s and 50s. Blacklisted for his radical views, and with no chance of a recording deal, the only concerts he played were at Union Halls, where Woody's song about wanting to shag Ingrid Bergman would have seemed very out of place after a speech about pay differentials.

was homeward bound".

"Woody was a completely unselfconscious writer," concludes Billy, "With no conscious idea of 'being' Woody Guthrie."

This is not the case with Bragg, who feels there is a very definite public perception of what it means to be Billy Bragg.

"Being Billy Bragg is great fun, but I don't want to play 'Between The Wars' all the time. It would be terrible if I was only singing all those 80s songs now."

Billy goes on to identify what for him is the greatest differentiation between the times then and the times now.

"We live in a post-ideological world now. Since the end of the Cold War, there is no

Photo: Tom Sheehan



We talk about the range of Woody's subjects. Billy is quick to point out how even the quirky 'Flying Saucer' is rooted in Woody's experience of being three thousand miles from his family and thinking about the quickest way to get back home. I think how much more enjoyable it is when writers transmute the experience with the imagination, rather than just whinge "I wish I

framework to talk about our aspirations. There were universal things in the 1980s, like anti-apartheid and Nicaragua, that you could write about and everybody would understand, and Marxism gave us a language for articulating our ideas about them. The height of anti-capitalism now is 'Let's smash up McDonalds', but what sort of world are they gonna make afterwards?"

## Bragging again

In conclusion, Bragg says "You have to say 'Is it dogma, or do I have a clear idea here?' The language of Marxism is past its sell-by date; you can't talk about 'class' anymore. But 'compassion' and 'exploitation' – my mum understands that."

One of the most significant consequences of the failure of ideology, says Billy, is a greater emphasis on issues of nationalism, and this is why lately Billy Bragg has been appearing in various media publicly engaging with the question of 'Englishness'. Billy is firmly in favour of defining our society as a "multi-cultural society with Englishness at its centre."

For Bragg, this means definition not by lists of attributes deciding who is or isn't 'English' but more definition by a set of common experiences and a sense of belonging.

"Where you are is more important than where you're from," says Billy, "And it beats the shit out of the idea that if you're English then you must like morris dancing!"

But having recently played at Sidmouth Festival, Billy also points to how folk music in England has positioned itself with world music, as an illustration of how a defining characteristic of Englishness is its willingness to embrace and enjoy such multi-culturalism.

I suggest that the political positioning of folk music in England also owes much to the ideological definitions it acquired during the Revival by the work of people like Ewan MacColl, and this is one of the reasons why it is unlikely that the Right in England could use folk music in the same way as they do, for example, in Serbia, in support of a nationalism that is clearly racist and fascist.

I have to say I think that trying to establish a kindly nationalism is rather like trying to establish a kindly way of fighting a war. Billy thinks I should 'come out' and admit that I'm English, and be comfortable with being English. He insists identity should simply be about what country you live in, what language you speak.

"National identity is down to you personally; what you are. There's no problem until someone else tries to tell you what you ought to be." Or, as far as the Far Right is concerned, he adds, what you ought not to be.

In the recent Radio 4 series *Singing In The Wilderness*, Billy spoke enthusiastically about Asian Dub Foundation, even suggesting that these were the voices with something to say that needed listening to, rather than 'white boys with guitars'. I suggest that it would be a very interesting discussion if you got Bragg and ADF talking about their perceptions of Englishness and cultural identity.

Billy qualifies his attitude to ADF's music by saying that it's all very definitely political

hardcore, whereas he prefers to leave his music with love songs and humour. I ask him if he had considered using more electronics to soundtrack his music in the way ADF do, and he replies that although the electronics don't appeal to him, the danceability certainly does.

Which leads us to Billy's next step, which will be an album with "lovely dancey tunes" very much aided and abetted by The Blokes, and "reconnecting with being Billy Bragg after having been Woody Guthrie." On a recent tour, Billy says he tried out half a dozen new songs.

"Unlike Woody Guthrie, I don't generally write at all until I have to. I have notes, ideas, but until I have to go into the studio, I don't write it. But once the eye is in, the stuff starts coming."

And as a result of the experience with Wilco, he wants the new album to be much more of a musical collaboration, with the songs being evolved in conjunction with The Blokes.

Finally, I ask him how he feels now about having a reputation for being a political songwriter.

"I'm proud of what I did. I like to think I'm just as political now, but the majority of the songs that I write are not political, and I'd hate my gigs to be some kind of weirdo rally. I don't mind being called a political songwriter," he concludes, "But I object to being dismissed as a political songwriter."