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BRAGG UN CUT: THE FULL INTERVIEW

For die-hard Billy Bragg fans, here is a full transcript of Sky journalist Matthew Denholm's interview with the great singer-songwriter.

Below the Q&A is a list of the readers whose emails we incorporated into our own questions. Billy didn't necessarily like answering all the questions, but he commended their quality.

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Throwing Beer at Billy Bragg

Q: At your London gig you talked about a plan to take on the Sex Pistols over the Jubilee, can you

explain it for our readers?

A: The fact the Sex Pistols are re-releasing God Save the Queen has absolutely nothing to do with subversion, and has everything to do with nostalgia. It disappoints me and made me think that we should do something else, rather than wait for some young band to do something because they don't seem to be interested. That's not a criticism, we live in much less political times. I've got this song, Take Down The Union Jack, and it dawned on me this would be a real good way of sending a message to people like Simon Cowell and the whole pop idol phenomena. People who seem to think the process of making music is purely about consumerism and escapism and has nothing to do with music that says something. So I thought 'how can I do something with this song'? And it seemed the best way was word of mouth and through the Internet, to try to prime up enough people to two weeks before the Jubilee go out and buy this single and put it into the top five. The plan is to give the money to charity probably the living wage campaign.

Q: So what is the message you'll be sending to the monarchy and to the public if the song does make the top five?

A: The message through the song is to question what it means to be British in the 21st century with devolution for the Scots and Wales, with the European Union isn't a lot of that Union Jack type identity coming apart and isn't a new identity coming through which is based a little bit more on the nations of the United Kingdom certainly for the Scots it is. And it asks the question of the British monarchy, should they really be handing out Orders of the British Empire cos I don't know no British Empire, being a member of the British Empire, what does that mean?

The whole notion of what it means to be British and the British Parliament for that matter is coming under pressure. Being British has had less and less meaning since he 1940s, when it had a very serious and very important meaning because the fate of England, Scotland, Wales and to some extent Ireland was tied together hence the

Battle of Britain. Many people now are casually patriotic and casually British and I think if more people could become casually English in the way the Scots have become casually Scots, I think we could start to marginalise the racists and the football hooligans and start to feel more relaxed about belonging to that identity.

Q: But surely any identity which brings different groups of people together is a good thing people argue for the EU and the euro on that basis surely it's the same thing?

A: Look at this scenario we have a vote on the euro and Britain votes 'no', but Scotland as a nation votes majority 'yes'. It's clear that Scotland, a country with a similar size and economy to the Irish Republic, might say 'well look, we could benefit from being out of this and having our own referendum'. I'm not saying it will happen, I'm saying it could. And if Scotland and Wales becomes independent, England becomes independent too I just don't think we've thought about it enough.

Q: Do you favour independence for England, Scotland and Wales?

A: At the moment, that's the business of the Scots and the Welsh, particularly the Scots they have they're own momentum and a new sense of confidence. And if they want to go for it I&I can't help but see that the SNP are to the left of the Labour Party when you see the things that the Scottish Parliament - led by Labour and the Lib Dems have done with tuition fees, care for the elderly, and fox hunting. You've got to ask yourself whether - shame about the weather but whether it might not be better for people like me to move to Scotland. If it wasn't for the sectarianism and the pine trees.

Q: But as an Englishman do you favour an independent England?

A: It's partly because I'm disturbed about what that might mean that I'm stirring up the debate what we need is a mature expression of our identity that's what the Scots have found. Thirty years ago Scotland played England at Wembley and their supporters were like England supporters have recently been in Europe they were absolute ****ing nutcases you couldn't come into central London. Now they the best behaved and most hospitable of football fans. And they can't just be doing it to annoy us.

Q: Is there any role for the monarchy in this new vision of Britain?

A: You can probably sum up what I feel about the monarchy by saying that millions of people each week watch Coronation Street - and the fact that millions of people watch it says something about us as a nation, in the same way the monarchy says something about us as a nation. A lot of people get pleasure out of watching Coronation Street I don't particularly watch it or like what it stands for, but I don't want to abolish it. And that's how I feel about the monarchy. I feel very strongly you should take away their royal prerogative and make the people sovereign in Parliament not the Crown; I think we should have all that land back and let them have a few big houses and a couple of bicycles. But they represent to some people an important part of what they think this country is about. I can live with that they don't do no one no harm, it's not like fox hunting.

Q: But to have a head of state who holds that post because of who their father or mother was - is that something that belongs in your vision of a new Britain?

A: That's true, but there is another issue here that of continuity. You can't take away from the Queen the fact that she was in the Second World War, she was in the land army, they did stay in London. There is something important maybe not to our generation but to their generation, and a lot of members of that generation had members of their family die for king and country. But once the Queen dies, I think there will be a sea change in the way people feel about the monarchy.

Q: So if this single does hit the top five, it's not necessarily an anti-monarchy message?

A: I guess it is, but maybe more an anti-Jubilee message.

Q: We've had several emails from people calling you unpatriotic, and clearly some people are not happy with your attacks on the Union Jack and with you saying Britain isn't that great or cool, or a real country?

A: Yeah, I had someone in Brighton chuck some beer at me always a good sign. But I don't think Britain is that great - the way politicians say we have the best police forces in the world, the best health service in the world and 'oh to breathe the air of England'. Well everyone can see with their own eyes that is clearly not true. So the time for that kind of 'my country right or wrong' type patriotism is past. We need to have a real serious talk about who we are in the 21st century. If the Jubilee is just about looking back, I'm not really interested.

Ask the Scots about the Union Jack you can't tell me they're unpatriotic. When they come to Twickenham and sing the Flower of Scotland. Are they being unpatriotic I don't think so. The reason that the SNP are a mainstream political party is that their patriotism is reasonable. The reason that the BNP is a far right extreme party is because their patriotism is not only unreasonable it is irrational and based on the idea of white supremacy.

The knee-jerk reaction that he (emailer Paul Biggs) is having to me is not the reaction I'm having to the monarchy and the Union Jack. I'm trying to be reasonable, rather than just saying 'off with their heads'. I've had lots of arguments with people over the years who've said we should abolish the monarchy Red Wedge, the House Martins. I say you've got it wrong it's the House of Lords, the royal prerogative look at the people who have the power, that's what we should be looking at. The undemocratic, closed circle in Westminster is much more insidious and corrosive to public life than the royal family.

Q: At your London concert you criticised the Labour Leadership and we received many emails questioning your support for New Labour, such as one asking 'Which Tory party are you fighting now the Old Thatcherism or new Blairism?'

A: The implication of that question is that they are both the same as each other and I totally disagree with that. Just look at the minimum wage, the devolution of Scotland and Wales and the possibility of lasting peace in Northern Ireland. Those are the things I'm still glad I voted Labour for. There are many things I'm highly disappointed about not least the failure to bring in some redistributive taxation. If they really want to stamp out child poverty in 20 years you can't do that without redistributing.

Q: But isn't that the key to governing Britain and the whole future of Britain and its public services as far as the left is concerned - and they're never going to do it are they?

A: They're going to have to how else are they going to fund the London

Underground now that the PPI won't work because the shareholders will be afraid that what happened to the Railtrack will happen to LU.

The Conservative Party they have some reasonable ideas. And there's no reason why they shouldn't be in the mainstream. But they go to the extreme and stir up xenophobia over the Euro and the knock-on effect of that is to make the BNP feel confident enough to go to Northern cities and stir up trouble.

Q: Surely the Labour Government is also partly to blame on that count, because of some of its policies on asylum-seekers?

A: That's been bubbling on for a long time, and it continues to bubble on. All that happened over the summer was on the back of the election, I don't think the Labour Party is guiltless in that department. Their treatment of asylum seekers is just unspeakable. But it's a global problem, how to deal with a huge influx of asylum-seekers, and nobody's really making a good fist of it.

Q: Several people emailed to question why you were not supporting Socialist Labour or Socialist Alliance and whether you are happy to spend the rest of your life as a tactical voter?

A: Tactical voting for me is a sad option. I wish I didn't have to do it. And I'll continue to campaign for voting reform, so that my vote means something. If the House of Lords was reformed, and it was based on a proportion of votes cast at the General Election - so you didn't actually vote for the second chamber - all of these socialist alliance votes from all over the country would mount up and they might just get one member in a reformed second chamber. But then one member would be like the Scottish Socialist Party's member - Tommy Sheridan who got in on the list, he wasn't directly voted in. And he got so much publicity from speaking out; that at the last General Election, they were able to stand in all 72 constituencies in Scotland, and by the next Scottish Assembly election in two years, I wouldn't be surprised if they get some directly elected members. So I would say that what he should be doing is what I'm doing campaigning for a reformed second chamber that is made up of a proportion of General Election votes. It's a long haul, and it's not very revolutionary, but we're not in a revolutionary situation. This is not Russia in 1917; this is England in 2002. We should deal with that reality. We no longer live in an ideological society.

The language of Marxism that these parties are still using is past its sell-by date. Not the ideas, but the language, and we need to find a new way to articulate what the Socialist Labour guy is talking about words that may not have the word socialist and may not have the word Labour. But the politics of compassion are still out there.

Q: Is socialism a dead word - People talk about being anti-capitalist, but not socialist?

A: There's no ideology at the moment. I'm not even sure the SLP wants the abolition of the capitalist system any more I just don't think that's something that chimes in with people. If you say to my mum or a cab driver, for instance, 'do you want a capitalist society or a socialist society?' you've got a lot of explaining to do. Whereas if you say to them 'do you want to live in a society based purely on exploitation, or would you prefer to live in a society based on compassionate ideas?' people can see that. It might not tickle our SLP guy out there, but that's how people relate to the world. They don't relate any more in an ideological way. It's not my fault. It's a shame really, because when we did talk about that people had more of a grasp of the issues. But we're pissing in the wind if we try to keep on talking in the language of Marx when the world is talking, unfortunately, in the language of the

American model of capitalism.

Q: Many people also asked whether, five years on, you still count yourself as a supporter of the Labour Party?

A: I worked very hard to get a Labour member elected in Dorset, but I actually voted Lib Dem to do it. You can draw whatever conclusion you like from that. I've been a lifelong Labour supporter - not because the Labour Party can solve all of our problems and not because I support everything they do, but while we have a Labour Government after 18 years of Thatcherism we now live in a world of possibilities. Some of those possibilities I don't think will be realised, but some might be.

Q: Would you consider entering politics, given that there are so few independent voices being heard in the Labour Party today?

A: I don't think I could have as much effect as a backbencher as I do doing what I do. And if I was a Labour MP, what chance would I have of getting my records played on radio? Zero. So I would have to give up music completely, and I'm not prepared to do that. It would also really destroy my family life. So why should everyone who wants to talk about politics become a politician? Politics is much too important to be left to politicians.

Q: One email asks whether you find fatherhood or music to be a more creative process, and whether you experienced any prejudice from fellow musicians when you took time out to raise your son?

A: The guys who I worked with at the time in my band were a bit pissed off because they all had to go and find another gig, but parenthood is the next level. And if it doesn't alter your perspective on everything, you're probably not doing it properly. It's put extra stress on things would I rather be sitting here or would I rather be sitting at home with my missus, my son and my dog it's nothing personal. Before, when I was a single man, I didn't give a shit. I'd do this day in, day out, till the cows came home I loved it. But everybody has that problem trying to balance their family life with their job and moving to the country has been a way of tilting the balance a little bit toward my family.

Q: Has fatherhood influenced your perspective of politics and if so, in what way?

A: Of course it has. I never thought about this before, but when you push a kid around in a pushchair his face is about the same level as the exhaust pipe on the taxi. Then you start looking at the rates of asthma among children in west London. And you find your kid's been put down to go to a school by the Hammersmith roundabout, where the lead levels must be the equivalent of eating a pencil every day. You start asking yourself questions about the environment, about education, about health you looked at the headline stuff before globalisation, international socialism, Cuba, Nicaragua all this stuff becomes a bit real when you've got a littl'un. Besides, it doesn't do any harm for pop stars to have to clean up someone else's shit that's always a very salutary experience.

Q: It's the first album of Billy Bragg lyrics for six years did you have any nervousness about how that would be received?

A: Not really and it saved me from having to write any songs about the New Labour Government.

Q: Talking about getting your songs played on the radio, how

difficult is it as an 'independent' artist?

A: It is difficult, because it's music with an agenda, and radio doesn't want to play music with an agenda. I can understand Radio 1 might not want to play me because I'm too old, frankly, and I accept that. But you'd think that Radio 2 and some of the other broad-based stations would pick up on it. But we're having a bit of a struggle. Partly that's why I want to make a point with the single during the Jubilee. Not to get it played on the radio it won't get played on the radio, because it's got those rude words in it. The point is that there are people out there still who want music that has an agenda, and I want to prove it by giving those people an opportunity to express their dissent against the Pop Idol phenomena I suppose it would all come together if Will Young plays the garden party at Buckingham Palace, that's really what I'm against. I think that would really sum it up.

Q: On the subject of music today not containing any worthwhile messages, a few people have emailed asking about your relationship with your old mate Paul Weller. Are you disappointed that he hasn't written a political song since the 80s?

A: Paul came to the conclusion that all politicians can't be trusted. I haven't quite come to that conclusion. I'm very grateful for all he did in Red Wedge. When I see him, we don't talk about politics.

Q: We've had a few emails from people who think you've sold out some referring to your continued support for New Labour, another, for example, asking how it feels to be a property-owning millionaire, and pointing out that all property is a crime.

A: One, I ain't a millionaire. Otherwise, why would I still be flogging my arse around Britain? I do own a nice, big house in the country, but I only half-own it it's as much my missus' success, it's as much her house, and she gets so pissed off. It cost £300,000, and compared to house prices in London, it's not really that spectacular. If your readers are concerned about this, you know I sold my house, not my principals. It's an old Tory myth that anybody who owns their house should vote Tory. Why he (emailer Andy Warner) is giving it to me as a socialist, I just don't know.

Q: In the song, No Power Without Accountability, you talk about having to find a way to hold the politicians to account, and you talk about them not taking any notice until the petrol bombs start flying. Do you think that form of violent protest can be justified in some circumstances?

A: No. I am only interested in non-violent direct action. Action has to be moral. It has to be constructive. You can't change the world by smashing up McDonalds. If you want to change the world, organise a union at McDonalds.

Q: If not justified, then understandable?

A: Yeah, I mean if you've ever been pushed and pushed and pushed I have, I was in a poll tax riot, it was really, really scary but in the end, I think it's self-defeating to think that lashing out is going to change anything it's not. In fact, it's going to subvert the issues that you're trying to express, because that's what's going to be on the TV not your message.

- The following emailers had their questions incorporated into our interview with Billy (apologies to all those whose questions we ran out of time to cover): Paul Biggs, Stuart Phillips, Neil Smith,

Andy Warner, David King, Damian McCusker, Mark Ramsden, Gordon Munro, Wayne Shannon, Colin McDonagh, Tim O'Neill and Andrew Franks.

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