

Billy Bragg finds voice of protest

By Cain Burdeau

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS -- The world's in a fine pickle and Billy Bragg, the left-wing English troubadour and Woody Guthrie admirer, sings about it like a poetic, opinionated newsreel.

His new songs have the rhyme and rhythm of up-to-the-minute news flashes: Oil and war mix in the Middle East. Boat refugees come ashore in England. Workers stand up for a shorter work week. Like wolves, terrorists leave no tracks.

At the end of a tumultuous 2002, Bragg is singing protest songs from his latest album, "England, Half English," released in the spring.

The time is ripe for him, he feels, as it was in the mid-1980s, when his witty, sometimes gloomy ballads made it big on the English charts. Back then, unemployment was rife, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was battling Britain's trade unions, the Berlin Wall divided Europe, and AIDS was on the rise.

"You can only make political music if you have a context," Bragg says, grabbing some "jolly good gumbo" recently at a cafe in New Orleans, where he was on tour with organist Ian McLagan.

"You cannot make political music in a vacuum. It'd be like me writing songs now about Margaret Thatcher. It'd just make no sense. But I think in the wake of 9-11 people are trying to articulate their feelings."

A self-taught guitarist who can't read music, Bragg stormed the American market in 1998 with "Mermaid Avenue," an album of songs that he and the alternative rock band Wilco wrote from Guthrie lyrics that had never been put to music. Bragg had been approached for the project by Guthrie's daughter, Nora; the resulting Grammy-nominated album was later followed by a second.

In this interview, as at his concerts, Bragg launches with gusto into a discussion of politics, thinking aloud about the evolution of socialism, the rise of neo-Nazis in Europe and impending war in Iraq.

A TV in the cafe is showing the news. He grimaces.



■ English singer and songwriter Billy Bragg stands outside Tipitina's nightclub in New Orleans where he performed protest songs from his newest album, "England, Half English," in October.

Cheryl Gerber/AP ■

"Excuse me, would you mind switching the TV off because there's nobody else in here?" he calls out.

"It's really annoying. Thanks."

He continues. "A song is like a newspaper. It's capable of carrying a number of different messages. Some of them are advertisers, some of them are editorial, some of them are reportage, some of them are sport. So, as a songwriter you can use any of those."

At 44, Bragg describes himself as an "itinerant Englishman" with "graying temples and a teddy bear

■ English singer and songwriter Billy Bragg writes political columns in *The Mirror* and *The Guardian*. A commission is reviewing his recommendation on how to reform the House of Lords. And he gets the "quiet occasion," he says, to get his say in to top officials.

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their own situations. So that's what I'm trying to do."

Bragg never made it to college. "The only thing I regret was that when I was 11 years old I took an exam called the 11-plus," he says. "I failed ... somebody should have picked out that I was just a bright kid who couldn't do exams. I was useless at exams."

In his teens, he and a buddy, Phillip Wigg, got the bug to make music. It was 1977 and *The Clash* electrified them. But their band, *Riff Raff*, didn't take off. Looking for a challenge, Bragg signed up for a short stint in the army.

After that, he played the London pub circuit, got noticed, and in 1983 was topping the indie charts with his debut album, "Life's a Riot." An early reviewer called him "part stand-up comedian, part musical flying picket."

As a one-man show with an electric guitar, playing bittersweet love songs and minimalist sketches of English life, Bragg made the rounds of music festivals and road tours in the '80s with the likes of *The Smiths*, *R.E.M.* and *The Housemartins*. He made a name as a protest singer at benefit gigs for the Labour Party and for striking miners, and campaigned on issues ranging from gay rights to housing.

Bragg can't really say how he got so enthralled with politics. "Nobody in our family was political. My dad wouldn't even tell my mum how he voted," he says.

"We used to buy a newspaper called the *Daily Mirror*," a progressive read in the 1960s, striking out against the Vietnam War and poverty.

"I think that's probably where I got my politics from," Bragg says. "That and I was very, very attracted to singer-songwriters -- Bob Dylan and people like that."

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He befriended Neil Kinnock, Labour's opposition leader in the 1980s, and is adamant: Barking at the system gets you nowhere.

"The reason *The Clash* never changed the world was because they never really engaged with the political mainstream," Bragg asserts. "That's what I'm about -- getting engaged. Too many people don't wade in the mud with the politicians."

Bragg says his socialist politics underwent a transition when Marxist ideology collapsed with the Berlin Wall. But the musician who had penned "There Is Power in a Union," written new words to the socialist anthem "The Internationale," and played in the Soviet Union and East Germany, wasn't going to shut up.

Today, his passion is not ideology, he says, but compassion. He says he believes in liberalism, humanism, trade unions and controlled capitalism, as opposed to what he calls unfettered "American-style capitalism."

Going through the Guthrie archives in Manhattan, Bragg says, he found "a completely unheard voice. Here's this guy who wants to make love to Ingrid Bergman, here's this guy who wants to fly in a flying saucer, here's this guy going out with his drinking buddies chasing some woman who claims to be a niece of Walt Whitman. That's much more interesting, much more human."

He looks at himself. "That human aspect of him made me think a lot about my own songwriting. You have to be careful that just because you're talking about politics all the time you don't just write political songs and become a one-dimensional political statue."

tummy." He is intense, talkative, impulsive.

"A part of my job is to bring the news from elsewhere to here and to take back some news from here," he says. "That's what Woody did, that's what I do, it's what good culture does -- it informs. You can't change the world singing songs, believe me, but you can offer people an alternative perspective, even on

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