

On which TV challenge did **BILLY BRAGG** get to thrash Suzi Quatro?

Interview by JUDE ROGERS

Billy Bragg has had a hell of a weekend. Blisters blight his fingers and his "Hobson's choice" has that telltale rasp that suggests 'barnstorming-gig-the-night-before'. He's spent the last few hours in the Leicester East Holiday Inn, resting between headline slots at Reading and Leeds. Tomorrow he's Cheltenham-bound for another bill-topping appearance at Greenbelt, a fortnight ago he tore up the Summer Sundae with Joan Baez and Emmylou Harris, and the bags are now packed for a tour of the US with Steve Earle. And this year being his Silver Jubilee, there's a compilation, from his punk roots in '77, through the love-and-protest songs of the Thatcher years and subsequent diversions into world music.

He strides into to the bar as accelerated as ever, apologises for being three minutes late, flags down a coffee, tears the top off the Volvic and launches into a stream of Reading festival war stories.

How was last night?

Great. It being Reading and me being on the spiky Carling stage, I decided to do what I did when I first started out – a kind of fast, clipped, full-on set. Reading is a festival where the guitar is king. Just cranked it up and had absolutely no qualms that people would get it. It's not like Glastonbury where there's a lot of dance tents. I have no problem with that, but Reading is still leather jackets and greasy hair. Sometimes you feel you're losing an audience's attention and you're like, oh shit, I'd better go up a couple of gears. But last night, it was clear from the off. It was dark, it was the end of the day. I broke four strings, and I never break strings. It must have been really special. Backstage it was all 'this bit belongs to this brand' and 'this is the Budweiser compound'. Just a load of guys in builders' pre-fabs checking each other out and asking each other for bottle openers. A normal festival!

You've got a nine year-old son. Do you try and influence his musical taste?

Oh yeah, I play him a lot of music in the car. We just went to France for a family holiday and I was listening to a lot of old ska, which he really got into. He also liked a Shirley Collins box-set I have, and tracks off the new Chumbawamba album. I'm also trying this tack with my godson, who's with us for the festivals. He loves the White Stripes, so driving up yesterday we played

him John Lee Hooker. We don't bond so much on what we like but on other things, like how much we hate Daniel Bedingfield.

You've clocked up 25 years as a performer now. Looking at your 20-year old self, would you advise him any differently?

God, no. The ideas, and more importantly the ideals of punk are still there in my music. If I hadn't had that experience, I doubt I would have been able to switch from being the thinking man's Jewel to the one-man Clash. The ideals and the ability are at the heart of what I do. I could have done some things differently but that energy and joy and the sheer sense of doing something – what I got personally from making those first records and holding them in my hands – I wouldn't change that for the world.

Mainstream bands used to be able to have political or social agendas. Is this still possible?

It's become much more difficult. What I did in the '80s came on the back of things like the miners' strike, but also on the back of punk. My generation, who were twenty in 1977, were the last generation to believe that you could change the world with music. We could remember what went down in the late '60s and early '70s with political music, and a lot of that has gone. The music industry has shed that idealism, but society has too. There's also less ideology in politics. With Thatcher, you knew what her politics were. With Blair, it's difficult to say. He'll do something great and then he'll do something unspeakable. There doesn't seem to be any clear, core belief that's discernible in everything he does.

What are your thoughts on New Labour?

There are things I'm fundamentally opposed to. Obviously, the war in Iraq. Having said that, they've done things that I feel strongly positive about. I agree with the idea of devolution and passing authority down to a more local level. But not enough power is devolved. If you want people to believe in local democracy, you've got to give them local autonomy. I find the government's shy attempts to reconcile our feelings about Europe quite endearing. I just wish they'd be more gung-ho about it. But things have changed for the better. I'm not one of these people that think they're the same as the Tories. And I really admire Robin Cook for standing up

and saying 'this isn't right - I can't do this anymore'. For putting his beliefs before his career. He understands foreign affairs, so he knew what he was talking about.

In the '80s musicians often directed political activism. Why do you think they took more of a back seat in the recent anti-war movement?

Partly because the anti-war movement didn't want musicians to be playing concerts. These days, the movement is also a different movement, bearing in mind the sheer size of participation. What's lacking, from my perspective, is a political pop movement. You have bands like Coldplay who make statements which is great, and, in some ways, very important. But they belong to a different generation to Bono, for instance, who is still actively doing things at the highest level. And he's got that sense that music should be something more than, 'I'm great. You're shit. Do you like my socks?' Which a lot of pop and rock seems to be about.

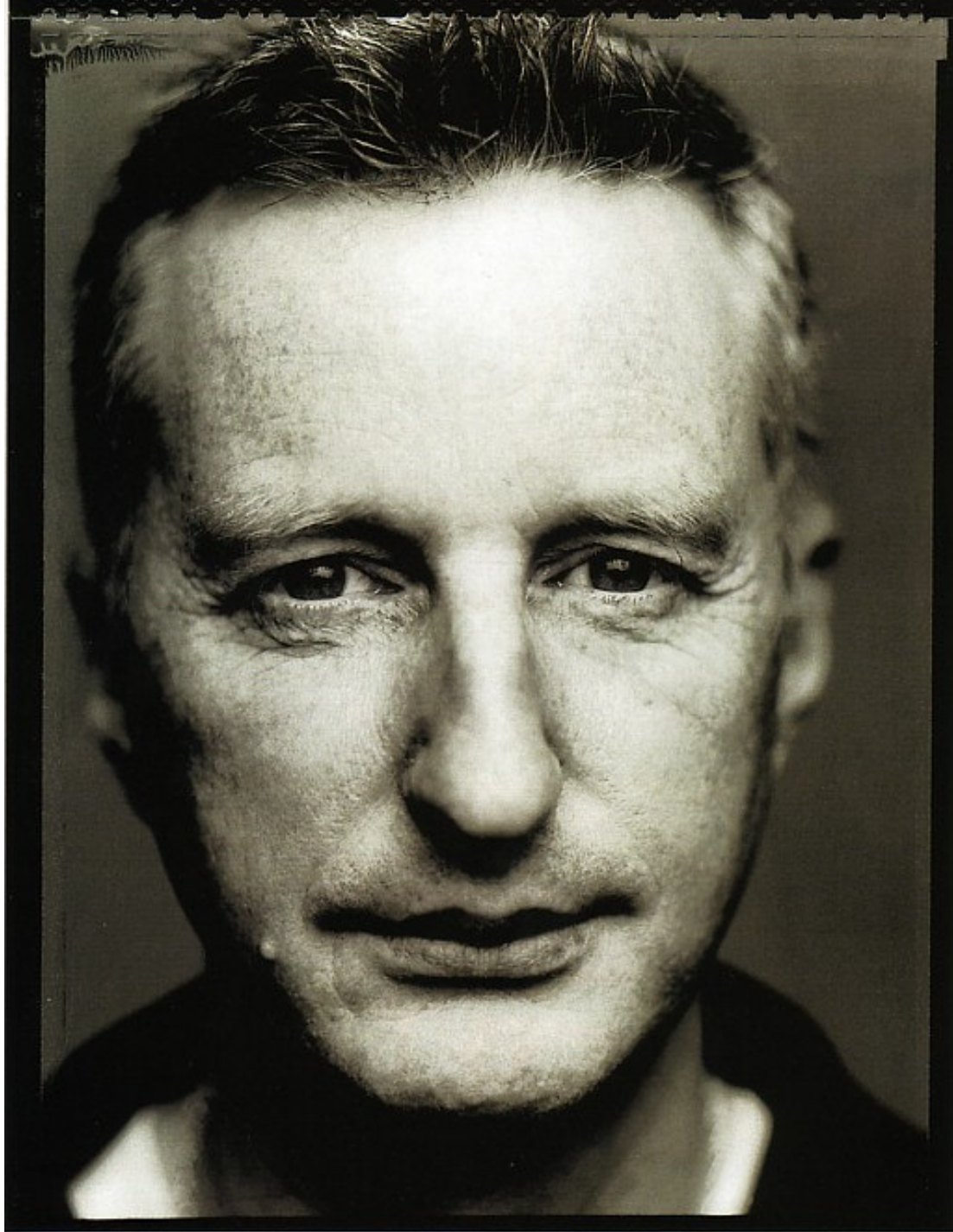
You've always loved collaborating. Do you keep in touch with bands you've worked with?

There's still fifteen or so Woody Guthrie songs to be worked on with Wilco, so at some point we'll get together. I see Johnny Marr sometimes and I occasionally bump into Paul Weller. I saw the REMs at Glastonbury and we had a good old chat. And me and the Manic Street Preachers go inspecting toilets together! [At the 1998 Reading Festival, Bragg derided the Manics for having their own private toilet while purporting to be men of the people onstage.] Everyone took that so damn seriously!

You recorded with the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy. Do you keep in touch with hip-hop and R&B, or do you get put off by the sexism and violence still present in much of the music?

I try to keep in touch – I have my own filters. I have so much respect for artists like Ms Dynamite. To work in that genre and stick to your guns is great. But there's always people occupying the lowest common denominator, who let the line between reality and unreality get blurred. See, this is a really stupid job. I mean, who am I? Am I some guy who slept 'til midday, came down here, had a roll and a coffee, went to

"My generation were the last to believe you could change the world."



life where she was really happy, recording with a band she really clicked with...people never said to her how great she was when she was alive, releasing records, and that's the fucking tragedy. We can't afford to lose people like Kirsty and Joe.

People have fixed ideas about your place in the pop canon. What do they get wrong?

People think I'm a dour, po-faced, earnest bloke. That's the fundamental flaw of the Billy Bragg tribute artist. They're too bloody serious – they don't have a laugh! I cracked a joke last night about how folk festivals have got really hardcore, how a Morris Dancer had got a razor blade and carved the words 'Real Ale' into his forearm! People think all my music is political, whereas if you listen to it, two thirds of it is love songs. I only have myself to blame in some way, because I've made my bed, but I've got no regrets about that.

You sang on *Top of the Pops* last year. You were on a *Weakest Link* Singer-Songwriter Special.

Remind me – did you win?
Of course I fucking won – I'm an intellectual! Suzi Quatro had no chance! *Top Of The Pops* was like a teacher doing a song in assembly, a bit weird but I'm glad we did it. To be playing *Take Down the Union Jack* the

night before the Jubilee – it was a great scam.

How would you like to be remembered?

Well I'm still very young, young enough not to qualify for the Rolling Stones Club Juniors! I suppose I'd like to be remembered as someone who walked it like they talked it, who wrote these songs and took the actions to match them. Sometimes I've managed to do that, sometimes I've missed by miles, but by and large I've tried to communicate with people. I've always tried to give people a different perspective on the world. You can't do that by trying to be on the radio between Shania Twain and some golden oldies. You have to try and connect with people in a way that's very real to both you and to them.

Billy Bragg's retrospective MUST I PAINT YOU A PICTURE? is out in October.

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his room and surfed the TV channels like a saddo, or am I this rock god who last night had 4,000 people chanting his name? If you choose to believe that's who you are 24-7, you become a complete arsehole. Whereas you should understand that you have a special relationship with the audience, but that it only exists there, in that context. You can spend the whole day hearing people say, 'Hey, your stuff's great', but it's not like that when you go to Safeways.

Joe Strummer and Kirsty MacColl were

two of your close contemporaries. Your tributes to them were very moving.

Joe and Kirsty meant a hell of a lot. I never shut up to my wife about how influential The Clash were to me. I wasn't as close to Joe as I was to Kirsty, but we always caught up. I remember buying Kirsty's records early on when I was working at a record shop in East Ham – about '82, '83 – working there in the day, doing gigs at evenings and weekends. They both came from the same position as me; had similar musical influences. Kirsty had just got to a point in her