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Bragg's 20 years on campaign trail



By **Stephen Dowling**
BBC News Online entertainment staff

Billy Bragg has spent the last 20 years as the social conscience of the British pop charts. Now, the Bard of Barking is releasing a double-CD compilation of his most memorable moments.



Bragg started his pop career in 1983

Called *Must I Paint You a Picture?* after one of his earlier tracks, the album collects 40 songs, from Bragg's 1983 opening shot *A New England* (later covered by Kirsty MacColl) to last year's *Take Down the Union Jack*, a protest song in classic Bragg style.

"It doesn't seem like 20 years at all," says Bragg, on the phone from his home in Burton Bradstock, Dorset. "It's a fair old time, but I play some of these songs live and they still win over people. I'm just pleased after 20 years that people are still interested."

"I think it's very neat the way the first CD ends with *Waiting For the Great Leap Forward*, and the second one kicks off with *Sexuality*, takes in all the Woody Guthrie stuff and finishes with *Take Down The Union Jack*."

Classic pop

The latter song - which saw him most recently take to the BBC's Top of the Pops stage - perfectly sums up the fact that you can never discount Billy Bragg, the man who put the east London suburb of Barking on the musical map.

Over the past 20 years Bragg's career has encompassed everything from post-punk, one-man firebrand to Labour-backing agitator, to lovelorn poet, Woody Guthrie archivist and multicultural-England evangelist.

Along the way there have been truly classic pop songs, such as the spiteful *Greetings to the New Brunette* and the anthemic *Accident Waiting to Happen*.

It began in 1983 when a de-mobbed Bragg - a onetime punk

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pretender who had bought himself out of the army for £175 - began playing around London.

"Billy Bragg has to reflect what's happening and not just write about what he wants to, and I think the issue of identity and the concern about English nationalism, which a lot of people are thinking about," he said.



Bragg himself says "the world has changed considerably" since he penned the song *Between the Wars*, a mid-80s standard about the UK's bitter miners' strike

Bragg's career has included collaborations with cult US band Wilco

"I don't miss any of that, I don't miss Thatcher, or Reagan, or the Cold War."

'Engaged'

But does the ardent socialist - and former Labour Party member - find it more difficult to rail against a Labour government?

"Well, in as much as you knew what Thatcher's politics were, whereas it is difficult to judge sometimes where Tony Blair is coming from. One day he's doing something good, the next you're appalled.

"The thing about the 1980s was, the issues being addressed - like the Cold War and the miners' strike - were issues that affected everybody. Now with the Iraq war you can kind of opt out of it if you like. You couldn't really do that with the miners' strike."

Bragg says he is still "engaged" in politics and society - which is how he has been able to come up with songs such as *Take Down the Union Jack*.

"I have got fed up playing *Between the Wars* for people, so they could feel nostalgic about the 1980s. I can remember having an argument with an audience in Glasgow, saying 'yeah, I will sing it but then I'm going straight into this new song.'"



Bragg has no interest in 80s nostalgia

Bragg may no longer have the same targets that defined his early career, but there are still things to rail against.

"I still watch *Top of the Pops*. Just to keep me angry. And I must say my godson, my partner's eldest, shares my anger.

"I've said to him, 'You can fight all you like with your dad, you've got to love him, the same with your mum.

"But Daniel Bedingfield, you're never going to meet him. Make him pay! Go form a band! Wipe the floor with him in the charts.

"Actually, all he did was go and paint his fingernails black. But it's a start."

Must I Paint You a Picture?: The Essential Billy Bragg is out now on Cooking Vinyl

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