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MOMZINE

Worried Man Blues: Twenty Years Later, Billy Bragg Is Still Waking Up The Neighbourhood

It's either a great time or a horrible time, depending on how you look at it, to be a leftist folk singer. A conservative agenda drives the United States, and hence much of the world, while war has shrouded the headlines for months and likely well for the foreseeable future, if not for years to come. Yes, there's plenty to sing out about.

Which is why Billy Bragg, perhaps *the* preeminent leftist folk singer, has spent much of November on stage in America with fellow politically-charged artists Steve Earle and Audioslave/ex-Rage Against The Machine guitarist Tom Morello. It's called the "Tell Us The Truth Tour" -- the truth in question being the information that world leaders and politicians present to their constituents and the role, or lack of, that the media has in determining veracity.

It's really nothing new for Bragg -- he's made a career of combining politics and chords ever since emerging as a sort of punk-rock Woody Guthrie in the U.K. some 20 years ago. Many of the recorded highlights of Bragg's two-decades gone by are captured in the new three-disc Rhino release, *Must I Paint You A Picture? The Essential Billy Bragg* -- including his brash bloke-with-electric-guitar beginnings ("A New England," "Between The Wars,") iconoclastic explorations of romance ("St. Swithin's Day," "Greetings To The New Brunette," "She's Got A New Spell"), cultural sirens ("There's Power In A Union," "Waiting For The Great Leap Forwards," "Sexuality"), and, of course, the seemingly dream-come-true role of adding music to rare Guthrie's lyrics along with Wilco.

Must I Paint You A Picture? is a fabulous entry point into Bragg's career. What it is not, though, is a send-off. "This isn't my farewell," he impresses. "*The Essential Billy Bragg* is not my retirement fund. It's just the first 20 years." That he's again helping save the youth of America in its rock clubs, and is currently mapping out a new album for 2004 with his backing band the Blokes, only



IN THIS ISSUE

- ▶ Billy Bragg
MoM Primer
The MoM 5

FEATURED ALBUMS



Billy Bragg
Must I Paint You A Picture?: Essential
[More Info.](#)



Collin Herring
Avoiding The Circus
[More Info.](#)



Walter Clevenger & the Dairy King
Full Tilt & Swing
[More Info.](#)



Carla Bozulich
Red Headed Stranger
[More Info.](#)



Mark McKay
Live From The Memory Hotel
[More Info.](#)

BACK ISSUES

- [Vol 2 Issue 8 \(Thad Cockrell\)](#)
- [Vol 2 Issue 7 \(Josh Rouse\)](#)
- [Vol 2 Issue 6 \(Beat Farmers\)](#)
- [Vol 2 Issue 5 \(Hazeldine\)](#)
- [Vol 2 Issue 4 \(Jim Lauderdale\)](#)

- [Vol 2 Issue 3 \(Grey DeLisle\)](#)
- [Vol 2 Issue 2 \(Clem Snide\)](#)
- [Vol 2 Issue 1 \(Caitlin Cary\)](#)

punctuate the point.

MoMZine editor Neal Weiss takes a seat in the first pew for Bragg's latest sermon.

MoMZine: It's the "Tell Us The Truth" tour, so what are the lies?

BRAGG: The lies are the facts that are coming out of Iraq through the administration and its press office. The fact that Paul Wolfowitz can go there to boost morale and find that the compound that he's staying in, which everyone thinks is the most secure place in Iraq, is not actually secure, that the people aren't joyous in the streets, that they're actually mighty pissed.

MoMZine: Some are calling this a quagmire, referencing Viet Nam, of course. What's your feeling on a solution?

BRAGG: It's a difficult one to talk about -- a solution -- at this point because there was a principle about getting into this involved in the first place quagmire, as you put it. The sign at the front of the quagmire was, "Don't try and cross this quagmire without the United Nations." And I'm afraid your government and my government have both ignored that sign. And now they're in trouble, having eschewed the United Nations, it's making it very difficult for the United Nations to kind of get involved. And when they have come to get involved, they've become the focus of suicide bombers. This is a quagmire that's sucking everybody in. How we get people out is a very complicated question.

MoMZine: What's the message from the tour?

BRAGG: For starters, we don't believe that the media being held in the hands of monopolies is good for diverse opinions. We're very concerned that since the FCC changed the rules on cross-media ownership, and took away the ceiling of allowing any one company to own more than 40 radio stations, there's been a rather undemocratic consolidation of media ownership. This is very bad for diversity of views, diversity of culture, diversity of opinion. We live in highly politicized times at the moment because of the awful events of September 11th. And what we need to deal with those events are facts -- hard facts, reality. We don't get that. September 11th has been spun ever since it happened. And from the other side of the spin there's all these conspiracy theories coming. If we're ever gonna catch the people who planned this and sponsored it and encouraged it we need to cut through all the shit and cut to the chase. And everybody knows these guys were not in Iraq. There was no connection between Saddam Hussein and Al Qaeda. Al Qaeda [comprises] Islamic fundamentalists; Saddam Hussein, for all the evil unspeakable things that he did, was actually a secularist. He went to war with a fundamentalist Iran, if people have that kind of long memory. So the very fact that it was possible for the American people in opinion polls, I

understand, to believe that somehow Saddam Hussein was connected to September 11th just shows how confused, how desperate we are for fact and truth, because fact and truth would have saved us from going into Iraq in the very first place.

MoMZine: Yes, opinion polls this summer said something like 70 percent of American believed the link.

BRAGG: I think people want the world to be a simple place where these people are bad, these people are good. It's not really that simple. The old certainties of the cold war are no longer there and it doesn't help when George Bush says "You're either with us or you're against us." The world isn't like that. If you think of your neighbors, some of them agree with you, some of them don't agree with you, but you still get on with them even though you don't share their politics. But if you went around saying to your neighbors, "You're either with me or you're against me... get out of my fucking driveway if you're not with me 100 percent," what kind of neighborhood would you end up living in? You can't base a society on that, and unfortunately, that's where we are at this present time. Now, how we get out of that is difficult because we've given the initiative to the terrorists by invading Iraq. Before we invaded we had the initiative. Now we've lost it to them and it's gonna be damn hard to get back.

MoMZine: It's an interesting group that's touring together. Do you know those guys from the past?

BRAGG: I knew Tom from when he was in Rage. If you do political stuff you tend to meet the same kind of people. We kinda, like, check each other out. When I read someone talking about politics in the press or on a record or in a video, I make a mark against their name to remember to send respect to them if I ever have the chance, or if I ever cross paths with them to shake them firmly by the hand and say, "Keep doing what you're doing." Particularly someone like Tom, who's doing that in a hard-rock arena, where you don't get very much of that. Or Steve, who's doing it in country [which is] even tougher, you could argue. It's great to be working with them.

MoMZine: People often say that good art comes in conservative times. Do you feel like there's a greater sense of urgency and muse these days?

BRAGG: Yeah, but I think something like September 11th can come anytime, and I think that's what's really driving the agenda, an event beyond all of our understanding really. My parents lived through the Blitz but I will never understand what that felt like. And what happened in New York, particularly, on September 11th is beyond most of our understanding, a singular event like that. You have to look a long, long way back in the history of America and a generation back in my country

to see any way of dealing what that sort of thing. So, immediately we're in uncharted territory, and how do we respond that that? The reality that for all the technological power of the United States of America, a bunch of determined guys with box cutters can do something like that is just so chilling. I want to think of the huge, emotional outpouring when Princess Diana died in the U.K. That was a similar kind of thing. If that can happen to her, it can happen to all of us. That was bit of a sudden reality check for everybody. I don't wish to compare the two events -- September 11th and the death of Diana -- but there was a huge emotional outpouring that went with that, a moment of shock that lasted several weeks. And in some ways there still are ramifications from that. But something as enormous as September 11th, you know we didn't watch Princess Diana's car crash, but with the Twin Towers we damn well sat and watched it all happen. And in some ways it's in our souls now.

But how we deal with that problem is hard for everyone because we are in uncharted territory. But as I said earlier, these things have to be confronted with facts and it's times like this that you expect your songwriters and your filmmakers and your journalists to be looking for facts to be imparting information that's to the best of their knowledge. To be objective, even though it might be hard. That's what's Steve Earle's done with his John Walker Lindh song ["John Walker's Blues"]. You know, it's a hard fact there -- a guy from Northern California went to fight with the Taliban. That's a hard fact to take. And you don't deal with that by attacking Steve, by shooting the messenger. You deal with that by asking yourself, what might attract him to do that? Where might he get that perspective? Sean Penn has got a lot of shit now for going to Baghdad. People are calling him a traitor. I think quite the opposite. It's not like Saddam Hussein was attacking New York and he went there to speak to him. It was clear that next hot spot for this terrible, terrible tragedy unfolding was going to be there. And it is a tragedy that is happening in Iraq. Every Iraqi citizen that is killed is a tragedy. Every U.S. serviceman or woman that is killed or injured is a tragedy. And it's an unfolding tragedy that's happening to the American people and to the Iraqi people together. Not only are we in a quagmire but it's dark and raining and it's not clear where the edge is.

MoMZine: Have you been able write about 9/11 at all?

BRAGG: Not directly. I've tried a few times. But I've alluded to it in a song called "The Wolf Covers Its Tracks," which talks about the terrorists but also the retaliation of military ordnance and in the end they're both as bad as each other because they are using God and religion to justify what they do. It's not an easy one to come at, you know? But I think we all of us have to try and focus ourselves on it.

MoMZine: Have any old songs that you've maybe cast off become suddenly viable again based on never events?

BRAGG: There are some songs I wrote about the Falklands War, which was in 1982. When the Gulf War came around I was playing them again and with the second Gulf War, I get letters from servicemen saying I was listening to such and such a song. That's definitely true. It's a real shame, but it's true.

MoMZine: How much of a role did you have in putting together the new Rhino collection?

BRAGG: I kind of wrote up my list and then we put a poll on our website and people voted and after a couple months we looked at the results and strange enough, they were quite similar. I think the top 20 all got onto the album. Of the 40, I had to sneak a few in. The things that people on the website don't get is people shouting song titles at me every night, and I do, so I had to factor that in as well. I snuck a few in because I know they're loved and they are songs that I felt were fairly representative of what I have done.

MoMZine: Was that the goal, to present the essential?

BRAGG: The goal really was to say, if you were 20 years old and you were looking for political music and you heard the name Billy Bragg and you don't know where to start, here's a place to start. It was really a little inspired by me thinking about how I got into Bob Dylan as a 14-year-old. I didn't know his albums and I didn't know where to start so I just went out and got his *Greatest Hits* and I got into him that way. I realized I wasn't making it easy for people to connect with where I was coming from because there was no guide to Billy Bragg. So that's what we were trying to do with the album. And then put the bonus CD in for people who had already got the complete catalog already.

MoMZine: What did you learn from the voting on the website?

BRAGG: Some of the songs I really liked didn't get any votes at all, or one or two votes. And then they voted for some songs I'd never even heard of, which is a bit weird, isn't it? So, democracy's a strange thing.

MoMZine: In your early days, you referred to yourself as a "fresh-faced annoying bastard." What would you consider yourself now?

BRAGG: Oh, now...what do they call me?... I supposed I'm more of a "heritage" artist [laughs]. I'd like to think that I'm still an annoying bastard, I'd like to think that

some people read what I was saying earlier in this interview and think to themselves, "How dare he say that?" Because that's our job, really. We can't change the world by making records and singing songs but we can challenge people's perceptions and I still strive to do that. I've tried to stay true to things I've believed in. And I think that shows on the selection of tracks on [Must I Paint You A Picture?](#)

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