



/ARTS WEEKLY/CULTURE:

Musician to Sing the Links Between Trade, U.S.' Big Media

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Disgusted that "the media is no longer reporting the stories that really matter", British folk-rocker Billy Bragg is taking his message directly to the people with a 'Tell Us The Truth' U.S. tour that brims with outrage over corporate swashbucklers and talking head tele-zombies.

NEW YORK, Nov 8 (IPS) - "You could argue that the goal of this tour is to discover why a majority of the American people believe that Saddam Hussein was in some way responsible for 9/11," Bragg told IPS.

"Since that awful day in 2001, the facts about who perpetrated such an atrocity and why have been obscured by propoganda and conspiracy theory alike. The Bush administration was able to sell the invasion of Iraq to the people because the mainstream media failed to inform the American public of the facts," he said.

When the first show kicks off on Nov. 7, Bragg will be joined by R&B legend Lester Chambers, country-blues guitarist Steve Earle and Audioslave's Tom Morello, who is performing under the moniker 'The Nightwatchman'.

Bragg said he was approached by the organisers of an upcoming U.S. conference on media reform and asked to perform at the event in the state of Wisconsin. Around the same time, Jobs With Justice, a union-led activist movement the singer has worked with in the past, asked if he would be able to attend the ministerial meeting of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in Miami in late November.

The FTAA gathering is expected to draw tens of thousands of labour, environment and human rights activists from North and South America who object to the secretive nature of the negotiations and say the neo-liberal economic model underpinning the FTAA will inevitably worsen poverty and inequality.

"It seemed to me that it might be worth putting together a series of gigs that travelled between these two events and helped to illustrate that media monopoly and globalisation are related," Bragg said.

A coalition of media reform and free trade groups will be attending the 13 concert dates, passing out literature, registering young voters, and building support in the run-up to the FTAA meeting in Miami.

"Our message is that NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement, a scaled-down predecessor of the FTAA) has been a disaster for all three countries involved," said Dan Beeton of Citizen's Trade Campaign, which is affiliated with Bragg's tour.

"We absolutely oppose extending these failed policies throughout the region."

Created in 1992, NAFTA includes the United States, Canada and Mexico.

Josh Silver, the managing director of Free Press, warned that the FTAA could also usurp laws limiting media ownership. Multinational corporations could then seek cash compensation under the idea that these limits are "unduly burdensome to competition".

"This is all about democracy," said Silver, whose group put together the Wisconsin conference. "Major multinational corporations have consolidated their control over the U.S. media. Under this system, we are finding staggering levels of hyper-commercialism, dumbed-down journalism and political campaigns that

have turned into horse races."

"If we can make media consolidation a bona fide issue, a real campaign issue that is on the laundry list of what candidates have to answer to, we can win," he said.

"Another aspect that is not often discussed is the role of advertising and how it affects journalism," Silver added. "When TV stations portray controversial news fare, such as graphic depictions of war, that's a turnoff to advertisers. They want to attract advertisers, not repel them. It's not a conspiracy, it's the bottom line."

Media activists are especially worried about new rules recently issued by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that would allow major daily newspapers in any market to buy television and radio stations in the same market.

Other changes let a single corporation own stations that collectively reach 45 percent of the U.S. viewing public (as opposed to the previous 35 percent), and that permit one corporation to own two television stations in the same market.

Different arms of the U.S. Congress have already signalled they will fight the proposals.

"The European public, including a majority here in Britain, remained sceptical about the benefits to be gained by attacking Iraq, not because of a latent anti-Americanism, but because their mass media refused to accept the link with al-Qaeda," Bragg said. "And remember, these were nations that broadly supported the invasion of Afghanistan."

"This evidence suggests that media consolidation has had the effect of marginalizing voices in America that question the logic of those in the Bush administration who wished to invade Iraq. If that is the case, then we need to be taking this message to the American people, because their sons and daughters have been put in harm's way as a result."

The 'Tell the Truth Tour' continues a long tradition of musicians as activists in the United States.

In his book 'Stand and Be Counted', David Crosby, a two-time inductee into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, goes back 150 years to describe an anti-war benefit concert held shortly after the U.S. Civil War.

Through interviews with dozens of rock and folk stars, Crosby also explores the active roles that musicians played in the union movement in the early 1900s and in the civil rights movement and Vietnam War protests of the 1960s.

More recently, the Live Aid concerts of 1985 raised money for famine relief, while other high-profile benefits have focused on human rights and the Free Tibet movement.

"As an artist, all I can do is to offer my perspective of the situation and hopefully inspire the audience to engage with the issue," Bragg told IPS.

"Look what happened with the Vietnam War. Once pop culture engaged with the anti-war movement, the tide began to turn in public opinion. That's what the neo-conservatives fear will happen again, which explains why Bush wants his pals to buy up as many radio stations as possible." (END/2003)

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