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Local Entertainment News

Tell Us The Truth: Music for a Cause

Billy Bragg at the Chicago gig

By [Sara Galer](#)
WISHTV.COM

It took a while to sink in, but by the time the chorus rolled around there was no mistaking it: Mike Mills of R.E.M. was singing Macy Gray's "I Try." And Billy Bragg was singing back-up, along with the incredibly, soulfully cool Lester Chambers. (Now there is a man who knows how to use a tambourine.)

It was one of many bright moments in an eclectic performance at The Vogue Wednesday night by the troubadours of the Tell Us The Truth Tour. The music felt fresh and had an improvised feel to it as its members did solo sets and ensembles of familiar songs. Mills also did a slightly imperfect (but charming nonetheless) rendition of the Soft Boys "I Wanna Destroy You" with Bragg and Jenny Toomey – presumably of Tsunami fame – singing the three-part staggered harmony in the refrain. Lester Chambers led "People Get Ready" and the Chambers Brothers' "The Time Has Come Today" for the finale.

It was all for a cause: Tell Us The Truth wants the public to know that the media has dropped the ball when it comes to the real stories of the day. The Free Trade of the Americas Agreement was one rallying point, with British folk singer Billy Bragg urging audience members not only to oppose the FTAA but to go down to Miami later this month. That's where the FTAA meeting will be held.

Not everyone agreed with the messages being put forth; when Bragg talked about how Europeans don't believe there's a connection between 9/11 and Saddam Hussein, one outraged audience member shouted, "You're wrong, Billy!" and finished up with, "I voted for Bush and I'm happy!" He seemed to have come to the wrong gig, because nobody else joined in. All the same, it meant that Bragg wasn't preaching to the choir. At least not 100 percent of it, anyway.

Boots Riley of The Coup provided clever socially-conscious rap, both a capella (Love For the Underdog – "This is for my folkers who've got bills overdue...") and with some help from Chambers on backing vocals (Wear Clean Drawers, a hilarious song of fatherly advice written for Riley's daughter) and the unforgettable Five Million Ways to Kill a CEO. Steve Earle provided a blistering set, as did The Night Watchman.

It's hard to say why some protest or politically-charged songs work and others don't. Tom Morello, aka The Nightwatchman, did a powerful set armed with a guitar. In his song "No One Left," he sings, "On the streets of Manhattan, a dusty wind blows; Letters and wishes, a girl with a rose; On the streets of Baghdad, a dusty wind blows; Letters and wishes, a girl with a rose."

Perhaps it's simply because the terrorist attacks are still relatively fresh in my memory that I'm not sure I want to hear songs about them. On the other hand, when Bragg did Dick Gaughan's "World Turned Upside Down," it was riveting. But maybe that's because I heard Dick Gaughan sing it at Glasgow, Scotland's Big Day festival in 1991. And as Bragg said himself – it's hard to think of something that rhymes with "accountability."

[Tell Us The Truth](#)

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