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# Raising A Ruckus



Billy Bragg  
 Singer-Songwriter and Political Activist  
 Wednesday, November 19, 2003; 2:00 PM

To British singer/songwriter and political activist **Billy Bragg**, music and politics are tied together. Since the 70s he's been a crusading musician engaged in a number of social projects and still believes in changing the system.

This "go out and do it yourself" attitude has been his mantra and is also the philosophy behind the Tell Us The Truth Tour: Raising a Ruckus for Media Diversity, Fair Trade and Democracy, which features Bragg, Steve Earle, Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello (The Nightwatchmen), Lester Chambers and others. The tour comes to the 9:30 club on Monday, Nov. 24.

Bragg was online **Wednesday, Nov. 19 at 2 p.m. ET** to talk about music, the media and democracy.

## The transcript follows.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

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**Washington, D.C.:** Billy, aren't you sad that you're not at home to welcome Bush to Britain?



**Billy Bragg:** I am sad to miss that, yeah, but you know there's also important business here in Miami which perhaps has a more internationalist agenda and also it's kind of cold and damp in London just now.

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**Washington, D.C.:** How does this show work. How much time are you singing. Does everyone play together or do you do separate sets.

**Billy Bragg:** It starts with us all on stage together. We sing a song or a couple songs together. Then Lester Chambers does a short set backed by me and Steve Earle and Mike Mills of REM who might possibly come to the D.C. show is also part of the band that backs up Lester. And then Lester is followed by about a 25-minute set by The Nightwatchmen followed by our guest artist of the night which will be Jill Sobule. Then we have an interval (intermission), then a 25-minute solo set by Steve Earle. The Boots Raleigh from the Coup ... he does a 20-minute set backed by the Nightwatchmen, Lester Chambers and Michael B. Holden and then I come on a do a 25-minute set solo and then we all get together for a song in the end and if there's an encore, we play a song together again. The whole thing is threaded together by our compere (emcee) Janeane Garafolo.

**Washington, D.C.:** Hello there Mr. Bragg, I ask this only half tongue in cheek. But when can we expect your DJ album? I remember back in the 80s you did a tune called "I Won't Talk About It" on an album by International Beats (Fatboy Slim in disguise) which had a funky R&B vibe to it. Do you plan anything similar in the future? Thx.

**Billy Bragg:** I've been listening very closely to the OutKast album and Boots Riley who's a hip-hop star from Oakland who's on tour with us has been threatening to get jiggy with my back catalog so who knows.

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**Alexandria, Va.:** Will you be doing anything besides playing your concert while you are in Washington. Are there any places you like to visit while you're here?

**Billy Bragg:** Yeah, I like Washington as a city to hang out in because I like book shops and I like museums but really what I like is a bit of history as I walk around searching for a decent cup of coffee and in D.C. the history is mostly visible, whereas in other U.S. cities it can sometimes be hard to discern.

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**Alexandria, Va.:** Dear Bill:

The important question of the day: who wins, Scotland or the Dutch? Wales or Russia?

Keep up the good work!!

**Billy Bragg:** From my hotel room in Miami I have not had the chance to see the football (soccer) results which would answer this question but I'm hoping that Scotland and Wales both qualify.

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**Bedford, Tex.:** Hi! It's a pleasure to speak to you. "Mermaid Avenue" is one of my favorite CDs. Here's my question -- how do you keep up with U.S. politics and writers? For instance, what media do you watch and how often? Also, I understand a Molly Ivins column influenced one of your campaigns. Is that right?

**Billy Bragg:** The thing that you must understand is that due to the nature of 20th Century geopolitics, what happens in the USA has important ramifications for us in the rest of the world so the British media do give coverage to events in the USA. And the paper that I read, The Guardian, recently ran a 3-day series of investigative articles on poverty in the USA which was quite shocking. It had details such as the people who get food stamps ... 40 percent of them are in work and that's really how I pick up my news about the U.S. Information gets to us in the U.K. European news doesn't permeate into the mainstream in America.

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**San Francisco, Calif.:** Do you have any suggestions for those of us stuck listening to bad, overhyped, corporate radio? Is there any way to fix this system, other than to overthrow it by subscribing to XM radio, downloading MP3s and giving up on Clear Channel?

Steve Earle, Billy Bragg and Boots Riley ... three of my all time favorite political troubadours on one stage! Ah, that I was in D.C. tonight!

**Billy Bragg:** We've been talking about these very issues on the whole tour and one of the most promising prospects is the possibility of low-powered radio stations which, I hope, would have a rejuvenating effect on music-making and localism in the way college radio did in the 1980s.

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**Los Angeles, Calif.:** Years ago, on the album, *Workers Playtime*, you wrote a cautionary note to the voters of America about how our choices affect the world and how, hopefully, we'd be smarter in the future.

It's been well over a decade since then and 'we, the people' arguably didn't take those words to heart the first time. What are your thoughts on what we've wrought and would you like to update or reprise your statement from all those years ago?

**Billy Bragg:** As frustrating the results of your last election may be I see a cause for hope there. The way I figure it, whoever had won the election -- whoever had been declared winner -- neither man could claim to have a mandate from the American people. This suggests to me that the debate about what America is going to be like in the 21st Century has not yet been resolved. The neocons have the administration and the airwaves and the money but they don't have the argument. All they have is Bill O'Reilly shouting at us to shut up. I'm hoping that this situation may improve in the coming 12 months.

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**Columbia, Md.:** Hey Billy, love your stuff. I remember reading about you in *NME* in the mid-80s, and the articles depicted you as a pretty intense Bolshevik -- Lenin posters around the flat, harsh comments about capitalism, etc. I'm just curious -- did you ever advocate the kind of system that the old Soviet Union had, or did you always push for your beliefs through the democratic institutions?

And also, why did you leave *Mystery Shoes* off the American release of "England Half English?" I caught you in Philly about a year and a half ago and you opened with it; great tune.

**Billy Bragg:** I think *Mystery Shoes* wasn't even on the English album. It might have been on the Japanese album. I opposed the situation in the Soviet Union because I'm opposed to not just monopolies of capital but also monopolies of power. I think of myself as a democratic socialist. If you want to know what that means, it means a society with free universal health care, free education up to university level, decent, affordable housing and progressive taxation. I did really like those Lenin posters though.

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**New York, N.Y.:** Are there specific ways you plan to keep activism on media and trade issues and the message of *Tell us the Truth* alive, once the tour ends next week?

**Billy Bragg:** Yeah, the tour is sponsored by a number of groups here in the U.S. including the AFL-CIO. Most important among them for us musicians is the Future of Music Coalition. I think they've been so amazed by the reaction to this tour that they will do something like this again, I feel very strongly and the issues that we're talking about here -- media consolidation and free trade -- are not going to go away. So I would encourage you to check out the *Tell Us The Truth* Web site for more information about the Future of Music coalition and how you can get involved.

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**Billy Bragg:** Thanks everybody for your questions. I wish I could've answered them all, but things

are heating up on the streets of Miami because people are beginning to protest and I need to get out there with my comrades and make my voice heard.

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