

Harvey Pekar : A Visit with Billy Bragg

Columns / Up Front

Date: Dec 10, 2003 - 11:54 AM

Musician/activist fights media consolidation



I went down to Nashville not long ago because I heard rock artist/political activist Billy Bragg would be performing there. I'm not exactly a running buddy of his, but I met him some time ago and we've managed to stay in touch.

Lately, Billy's been doing very well, partly due to a project involving Woody Guthrie's music that goes back to 1992. In that year he performed at a memorial concert for Guthrie in New York and was approached by Woody's daughter, Nora, curator of Woody's archive.

She had discovered piles and piles of her dad's lyrics that had not been, to her knowledge, put to music and wanted a songwriter in Woody's tradition to do so.

Nora decided not to ask the obvious choices, Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen, to do it because she felt they were too close to Guthrie to give his work a new interpretation. She chose Bragg instead, who was honored by her offer and chose the Chicago alt-country band, Wilco, to work with him on the project. Together, they came out with 1998's *Mermaid Avenue*, an album of Woody's words and their music. It was later followed by a second volume. Both received great reviews throughout the world and helped solidify Bragg's status as an important musical figure.

When I got to Nashville, I was kind of surprised to see that Bragg was sharing billing with some other people — Steve Earle, Lester Chambers and Tom Morello. So when we hooked up, I asked him if this tour had any specific political goals. He said, "Yeah, Harv, we're on this 'Tell Us the Truth tour' and what we've been doing is fighting consolidation in the media. We're being sponsored here by Common Cause, the Future of Music Coalition and the AFL-CIO."

I realized that concentration of ownership in media was bad for the music business and beyond that, bad for democracy. I found that out last June. The FCC voted to raise the cap on how many TV stations one company could own, eliminated a ban on TV stations owning a newspaper in almost all markets, and allowed one company to own up to three TV stations, a newspaper and eight radio stations in a local market.

FCC deregulation has had some unfortunate effects in this nation over the past decade. In 1996 Congress gave companies the right to own an unlimited number of radio stations. Since then, to cite just one example of what's happened, Clear Channel Communications has bought 1,200 radio stations. In cases like this, the "chain" radio stations aren't locally controlled. They've got uniform playlists, and don't support local artists.

On top of this, we have radio stations that own local music venues. They ask artists wanting airplay to perform free at these venues for station promotional shows. And even when the artists give the stations free concerts, the stations won't necessarily give them airplay, according to the testimony I heard at a Common Cause meeting in Nashville.

So it's worse than the old form of payola. You give the stations something, but don't necessarily get anything back. And these stations arbitrarily ban artists, such as the Dixie Chicks, who were pulled from playlists all over the country when they made some

negative comments about President Bush.

Billy mentioned to me in Nashville that "I asked an English booking agent of mine not to work with Clear Channel. Next time I turned around, Clear Channel had bought his booking agency. They're expanding, horizontally and vertically."

When I said to Billy that "this sort of thing goes beyond the music industry; it affects international politics," he replied, "Right. Look how the American people haven't been given accurate information about the Middle East. In America, they think there's a connection between Saddam Hussein and the events of 9/11. In Britain, we don't believe it because we have access to more diverse news sources."

He went on, "The mainstream media can't be counted on any more. I made a record called, 'The Price of Oil.' I could've waited and included it on an album, but by that time the war would've been off and running. So I put it on my website the next day, and in the four or five months leading up to the war I got 70,000 downloads. It was better than waiting around."

I remarked to him, "Yeah, man, these FCC decisions are really inimical to democracy. They're so wide-ranging they can cut the artists on a radio play list, or affect war and peace decisions made by governments."

He answered, "I guess someone in the Bush administration remembers the powerful effect music had in ending the Vietnam War."

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