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Lots of heretofore unthinkable cover versions assure first place for the little British guy

Nobody Can Touch Him

by **Rob Sheffield**

December 31, 2003 - January 6, 2004



Tom Waits and Eddie Vedder are relieved.
(photo: Tom Sheehan)

Billy Bragg

Must I Paint You a Picture?:

The Essential Billy Bragg

Rhino

Some bad singers whine and moan. Some bad singers wheeze and groan. Some bad singers wait to exhale. Others work the soulful wail. Some testify, and some emote. Others sugar every note. Some sing too little, some sing too much, some sing "Sometimes When We Touch." But of all the bad singers in the world, the third worst has to be . . . Steve Earle.

The second worst is Tom Petty.

Billy Bragg is the worst.

I'm not 100 percent sure about the order, but I do know these are the worst three ever. Earle is a mile ahead of whoever's in fourth place. (Steve Miller? Peter Gabriel? Robyn Hitchcock? Peter Gabriel.) Bragg versus Petty, that's the tough call, and it's a topic I often ponder in moments of solitude and meditation. Last year, I figured Petty had settled the issue with *The Last DJ*, adding new layers of autumnal sentimentality to his smug little drawl. But now Bragg has forced a recount with his new best-of, *Must I Paint You a Picture?* And while the album has scant reason to exist for anyone other than serious devotees of this particular rivalry, it does attest to the sinus-clearing penetrative power of his quavery, heroic, doomed, snivel-driven bitch-poodle of a voice. At this point, Bragg's got the edge. Oh man, does he ever.

He really seems eager to claim the heavyweight crown—why else would he add a bonus disc of rarities covering Rod Stewart, Mick Jagger, or God help the little guy, the Three Degrees? No matter what he's singing, he sounds so full of himself that he reduces his brow-furrowing moral issues to stage props. Although he's a nice man by all accounts, or at least his own, he's stuffed with the vanity of the sad clown and the street poet—Charlie Chaplin chapping Harry Chapin's lips. By the end of disc two, after Bragg gets his nobility validated by the dream gig of updating Woody Guthrie for *Mermaid Avenue*, who can touch this guy? Nobody, that's who. Nobody.

A key argument against choosing Petty is that unlike Bragg, he has sung actual radio hits and therefore spreads his voice around more. But there is the "American Girl" problem. Not only did Petty write a great hit once—so did Bragg, who penned Kirsty MacColl's 1985 U.K. gem "A New England"—but he sang it, and did a fine job. (Compare his 1977 "Breakdown," where Tom snuggles up to a *très* seductive French accent for what still holds up as his career performance in terms of all-around revoltingness.) But even if Petty hits more often, Bragg hits harder. Just a few weeks ago, he forced me to abandon a still-warm plate of *huevos rancheros* at the L Café on Bedford Avenue because they put on *Mermaid Avenue*, which meant only a few minutes before he started singing. And I can go get another breakfast somewhere, but I can't just go buy myself another day after it's been ruined, now can I?

Perfectly titled, lovingly packaged, *Must I Paint You a Picture?* calls for more than respect. It demands a thorough reconsideration of titans such as David Crosby (#11, just missing the top ten because Mariah Carey beat him to "Hero"), Glenn Frey (#6, outranking all past and present Eagles on the basis of "Peaceful Easy Feeling" alone), and whoever sang lead for Blood, Sweat & Tears, tied neck and neck with whoever sang lead for Living Colour, and way, way ahead of whoever sang lead for Michael Bolton.