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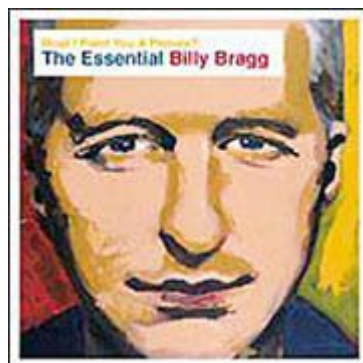
Melodic socialism

Music Myths & Legends By Martin Vengadesan

LIKE it or not, we live in a time when gun-toting ghetto pimps are cooler than peace-loving hippies, when Armani is cooler than Gandhi, and when Candace Bushnell is cooler than Karl Marx.

Given our profound respect for the superficial, it's somewhat surprising that one of the most enduring singer-songwriters of our time is Billy Bragg, a man who has made a career of marrying his socialist views with challenging yet melodic pop music.

As modern and angular as some of his music can be, Bragg belongs to a tradition that predates recorded music ... that of the protest singer. The idea that one person and his/her guitar can move mountains may sound ridiculous, but protest songs and their singers existed long before Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger made their name.



Born in December 1957 in the staunchly Conservative English county of Essex, young Billy was swept up in the punk rock explosion that hit Britain in 1976. Influenced by “cerebral” punk

bands The Clash and The Stranglers, Bragg formed Riff-Raff. While Riff-Raff spent three years plying their trade in obscurity, his rebellious ideals showed early with brash tunes like *I Wanna Be A Cosmonaut*.

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Nonetheless, he decided to abandon his musical dream when, in a drastic move, he quit music to serve in a tank regiment of the British Army! This madness didn't last. By 1983, Bragg had bought himself out of the army and settled down to a job in a record store.

He spent his time doing solo gigs. While hardly a virtuoso as a vocalist or a guitarist, it was his honesty as a songwriter that won him fans.

His willingness to perform anywhere at short notice and with minimum fuss also endeared him to promoters. Thus Bragg was able to build up a cult audience rather rapidly.

His first solo release, the *Life's a Riot with Spy vs Spy* EP, instantly charted, turning the busker into a poster-boy for those who chose to rail not only against the politics of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but the growing conservatism of the music industry.

In 1984, Bragg became a national figure as he tirelessly performed in support of the year-long miners strike and involved himself in Red Wedge (a tour featuring politically-active, pro-Labour musicians such as Paul Weller, Madness and The Blow Monkeys).

He topped it off with a Top 20 debut album, *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg* (which contained some early gems like *Island of No Return* and *A Lover Sings*).

Bragg's recording career then took a back seat to his role as spokesman for the left. The following year saw Kirsty MacColl (daughter of leftist songwriter Ewan) having a hit single with the Bragg composition, *A New England*. But by and large, Bragg the artiste was quiet.

In the late 80s, he hit another vein of creativity, churning out classy albums like *Talking with the Taxman About Poetry* and *Worker's Playtime*, which sandwiched a chart-topping cover version of The Beatles' *She's Leaving Home* that Bragg recorded for Childline, a charity for abused children.

Those who felt that Bragg would soften his political stance following the collapse of the Soviet Union (he always argued that the Stalinist

monolith had nothing to do with his humanist model of Marxism) were surprised when he followed those recordings with the rousing *The Internationale*.

This mini-album contained seven songs that ranged from the classic Irish anti-war tune, *My Youngest Son Came Home Today*, to Bragg's take on American imperialism (*March of the Covert Battalions*), to the anthems of the Labour Party (*The Red Flag*) and the Socialist International (*The Internationale* itself). Far from back-tracking from his beliefs, the man chose to fly in the face of fashion.

Ironically, his music got more and more sophisticated as he moved from the early punk-meets-folk voice and guitar style to something resembling contemporary pop on his early 90s album, *Don't Try This At Home*, a work that saw him break though on the American college circuit (a few years after he recorded the song, *Help Save The Youth of America*).

Armed with a new set of songs like *Sexuality* and *Cindy of a Thousand Lives*, and helped by members of The Smiths and REM, Bragg carried on the in-your-face social activism of *The Internationale* with a far more subtle look at the human condition, and made his most overt comments about adult relationships.

Once again, as the world was opening for him, Bragg decided to take a break from the scene. In fact, five years and fatherhood followed before this once-acerbic character turned up with *William Bloke*, an album that harked back to his early days.

It maintained his consistent record of getting his albums and singles on the British charts, although the man himself would fume at the thought of being a viable commercial entity.

Another lengthy break followed before Bragg hit pay dirt. His love for Woody Guthrie had brought him to the attention of Guthrie's daughter, Nora, who then approached him to work on a set of her father's unfinished material.

Teaming up with country-rockers Wilco, Bragg put together *Mermaid Avenue*, a work that is often touching and always compelling. (In fact he and Wilco eventually followed that up with a second

volume.)

Bragg's most recent album, *England, Half English*, emerged in 2002. This work saw him tackle the issue of what his nationality and ethnicity had come to mean. Backed by his regular live band The Blokes, he proved with nuggets like *Take Down the Union Jack* and *Some Days I See The Point* that he'd lost none of the old fire.

Nor has Bragg slowed down the pace of his attempts to change the world. Just this past week, he has appeared on BBC's current affairs programme, *Question Time*, in which he debated Britain's foreign policy with parliamentarians and ambassadors. He followed that up by playing a benefit concert for victims of the tsunami.

- *Martin Vengadesan, a music lover and history buff, combines his two passions in his fortnightly column. If you have any interesting stories you want him to research, drop him a line at starmag@thestar.com.my.*

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