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[Blogs](#)
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[Glastonbury
Diary](#)
[Multimedia](#)

INTERVIEW: BILLY BRAGG

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Billy Bragg slaps the wheel of his spaceship-with-wheels 4WD car ("I wanted one of them electric cars but the bottom of my road back in Dorset always floods so y'know, what would I do?") and laughs broadly.

I've just told him that he was mentioned on the previous night's Have I Got News For You? and he's still chuckling away. "The only time they've ever invited me on the show was in the middle of the last election, and that was the one night I'd organised the one Vote Dorset meeting! Obviously I couldn't not do the meeting, because I'd done all the leaflets and it was what we'd been working for, so instead of being on TV and getting my cred up, I held a meeting in Tolpuddle Village Hall with one man and his dog!"

Such activity is hardly rare, however, since the impending election means that "every weekend I'm off in some school hall. Obviously during an election campaign there's a lot more opportunities so I get a lot more active during one. I've always been doing a lot of anti-racism stuff anyway."

This sums up William Stephen Bragg, since he's so infectiously passionate about the causes he believes in but never feels as if his work is finished.

Today I'm accompanying around the area he grew up, Barking in Essex, as he goes door-to-door leafletting for the anti-fascist magazine Searchlight and plays a small awareness-raising gig in a local school to drum up support for the anti-fascist movement. "Every gig I play, I always finish the same way, saying 'My name's Billy Bragg, and I'm from Barking, Essex.' It's quite important to me that my home town doesn't become the Burnley of the south. The BNP has already won a council seat here and I don't want them to take hold, to win. They won't win in the election but they've got their eyes on the '06 council elections, trying to build up support. Now seems to be a good time to stamp on them and get them out."

Billy set up the Vote Dorset scheme (www.votedorset.net) in order to oust the Conservatives in his new home. Perhaps influenced by the state of Barking, which he says has "had the heart ripped out of it when the car factories closed down...it's like a mining town with a closed pit" and is seeing disturbing gains for the BNP, Bragg decided to act. It's designed to

swap votes between Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters in order to ensure that the Tories lose their status as the official opposition.

"We can't be rewarding Michael Howard for running an anti-immigration, xenophobic campaign. Wherever I've been I've always voted anti-Tory. I also like to think that the Lib Dems could make a breakthrough, that New Labour could be forced to the left. I'd like to see the policies that are happening in Scotland [due to the coalition government] happen a bit more over here."

Today, Billy plays alone for almost an hour, ensnaring the audience with his wit and rousing them with the strength of such incendiary anthems as A New England, Power In A Union, and No Power Without Accountability. He plays the same version of Waiting For The Great Leap Forward that he aired at The Barbican last March.

The passion with which he plays these songs in a draughty school hall to twenty-odd left-wingers is startling - if it's good enough for The Barbican, it's good enough for Barking - and only reaffirms Billy's status as, above all, a fantastic performer with a clear message. Political activism and rhetoric is his forte, but he never comes close to the empty sloganeering that many 'pop stars' align themselves with to gain a few more column inches.

The Thatcher government that so tainted his home town pushed him into being categorised as a 'One Man Clash' of sorts, but the truth is that his music has always been intensely personal at the same time. Bragg says that "there are songs where the personal and the political overlap, like Valentines Day Is Over" and that he "really detests being written off as a political songwriter", and it's tough to know where to draw the line.

Billy's main appeal to many is that his political and his personal songs all paint his own portrait, the picture of a man growing up under a repressive Conservative government and struggling to find a coherent voice for him and his fellow man. The purity and sincerity of songs like Between The Wars sit comfortably next to The Milkman of Human Kindness and The Saturday Boy in terms of honesty and relevance in growing up. "When you look at my back catalogue it is predominantly love songs but there is also an overlap - we're talking about compassion, about love, about caring, about emotions. Believing in politics is all about emotions and causes - what greater cause is there than trying to win someone else's love? That's the greatest cause anyone can be involved in, and when you come together for things like this it's all amplified."

Watching Billy stand around with the gig-goers and chatting about the football, or sitting with him as he drives me to Barking station to catch a train, it's easy to forget how well-known he is. He's toured the globe, played Glastonbury the most times out of any performer, been personally invited by Woody Guthrie's daughter Nora to put music to Woody's old lyrics, recorded with Less Than Jake, been nominated for a couple of Grammys and influenced everyone from Rancid to Razorlight - all without feeling the need to resort to cheap publicity stunts like meeting the Pope. Yet he feels his work is by no means done:

"All music that challenges people's perceptions has a role to play in bringing about change. Music that highlights how pretty people are, or how much bling they have doesn't interest me. Music that challenges that, that gets in your face and annoys people is always good and I hope that music like that, whether it's called punk or not, will be around."

While a younger audience might be more aware of him through his collaborations with Less Than Jake or his namechecking from Rancid ("Little Sammy was a punk rocker / His mother never understood him / Went into his room and smashed his Billy Bragg record / Didn't want him to hear that Communist lecture" from The Wars End on ...And Out Come The Wolves), Billy's more than happy about this.

News Home

"Those guys, they're trying to do what I'm doing, but in a harder political atmosphere where they perhaps don't have as many freedoms as we do over here," he says. "We're all part of a tradition - we're all inspired by The Clash, and the Clash were inspired by Woody Guthrie, so it's all part of the same chain, trying to make music that makes a difference. I'm glad that there are still bands out there trying to do this. It's because when you're doing gigs for a cause you often meet the same musicians. Like when we were doing Red Wedge there was a lot of us on platforms together. We didn't want to just be pop stars again, so we formed Red Wedge to try and keep the Tories out of the next election. It must sound strange nowadays to hear of pop stars trying to help the Labour Party, but at the time it was very different. Britain was a different country, and there was a huge ideological difference between the two parties."

What is there left to learn from Billy Bragg? Everything. Anyone that's ever had any human feelings whatsoever should check out Back To Basics as a starting point, and then go from there. In an age when homogenised pop idiots and their ethical haircuts are colonising the nation's youth, a bloke from Barking might just be on the right track in terms of wanting to eradicate sexism, homophobia, racism and everything that the BNP and Tory party stand for. Revolution's just a t-shirt away.

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