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Billy Bragg Gets Boxed

Evolution of punk-folk singer's career evident in slew of rarities

How much has the world changed since leftist icon Billy Bragg began mixing pop and politics nearly twenty-five years ago? Here's one clue: Britain's new conservative leader David Cameron is a Smiths fan whose favorite album is *The Queen Is Dead*. "It's like Karl Rove coming out and saying he always liked Black Flag," says an incredulous Bragg, who worries he might be next on Cameron's hit parade.

Another way of marking the progress of Bragg's career, however, will arrive February 21st, with the release of *Volume I*, a nine-disc box set that includes four of the British punk-folk singer's early releases, plus a pair of live DVDs. The music documents Bragg's rise from a singer-songwriter to the full-fledged political activist who helped form a coalition of left-leaning pop stars called Red Wedge.

Each of the remastered albums -- his 1983 debut *Life's a Riot With Spy Vs. Spy*, 1984's *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, 1986's *Talking With the Taxman About Poetry* and a disc that combines the EP's *Live and Dubious* (1988) and *The Internationale* (1990) -- comes with a bonus disc of outtakes and rarities that shed new light on the forty-eight-year-old singer's development. *Life's a Riot*, for example, is accompanied by extras that show Bragg's transition from singer in the punk band *Riff Raff* to solo performer, armed only with his electric guitar, Cockney accent and sharp wit. "There's some strange transitional stuff there where I'm veering towards Elvis Costello, who I've always admired," he says. "I'm trying to find my way, and I guess I discovered it on 'A New England.'"

Brewing Up's bonus disc includes Bragg's first attempt at a dance-style number, "Won't Talk About It." He would recycle the riff for the song "Levi Stubbs' Tears," and years later, turned the tune over to Norman Cook (the future Fatboy Slim), who released his own version of "Won't Talk About It" on the *Beats International* debut album. "So playing around with that riff did bear fruit," says Bragg. "Two great songs."

Meanwhile, the rootsy, countryish outtakes from *Talking With the Taxman* -- including a cover of Woody Guthrie's "Deportees" -- give the first hint of the direction Bragg would take in the late Nineties, when he teamed with the band *Wilco* to set some of Guthrie's old poems to music on a pair of acclaimed albums. "Before [Taxman], I'd been traveling around America for the first time," explains Bragg, "listening to Gram Parsons and Hank Williams, and finding all these things that you could never find in England."

The box set's rarities were resurrected by Bragg's former guitarist Wiggy. "He was at a bit of a loose end, so I sent him into the archive," says Bragg. "And he came up with a lot of stuff which I'd totally forgot about." Wiggy, Bragg adds, is currently assembling outtakes for a second box set.

Bragg is also at work on a book, *England Made Me, Too*, about English national identity. And while he's disappointed hardcore leftists by supporting a few pro-war candidates for Parliament, he remains a vocal foe of involvement in Iraq. "I did a lot of marching during the 1980s against Margaret Thatcher," says Bragg. "But I never saw the numbers in the streets that I've seen marching against the war. From what we understand in Britain, the American people are starting to move 'round toward that view as well."