

**REISSUE
OF THE
WEEK**

Poet with a purpose

Step inside the world of the '80s Alex Turner

Billy Bragg

Volume 1 (Cooking Vinyl)

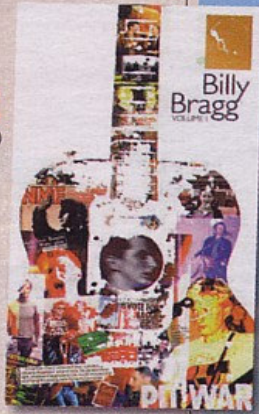
Long before Arctic Monkeys started writing painfully accurate love songs; long before Mike Skinner distilled all our drunken nights out into three-minute dramas; long before Radiohead discovered politics and The Futureheads started singing in regional accents, Billy Bragg was already doing it all.

Part of the Holy Trinity of '80s indie rock, with The Smiths and Echo & The Bunnymen, Billy was nonetheless completely unique. Armed only with a couple of cheap, treble guitars and his barking Essex foghorn of a voice (part wounded bullock, part argument at Upton Park) he wrote from a deep well of anger and love and attacked his songs with a rabid urgency. The set-up said "folk", but the style was pure punk rock: a fusion of Bragg's heroes, Bob Dylan and The Clash, that years later still sounds electrifying.

In the plastic world of '80s pop, Billy stood out as a big-nosed socialist firebrand. But his first two albums, 'Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy' and 'Brewing Up With...' (two of four albums, two DVDs and three CDs of rare/live tracks that comprise this box set) brought him a cult following that would regularly propel him into the charts.

For purists, those first two albums are Bragg's best work. Subsequently, Billy would spread his wings; fleshing out his sound, still writing great songs but on a different footing. On the first two albums, however, you get the unadorned essence of Bragg: guitar, voice, killer couplet. And, maybe, a splash of trumpet.

Bragg is known, primarily, as a protest singer, but, as these albums illustrate, his tales of heartbreak were just as important. If not more so. Twenty years on, 'The Saturday Boy' and 'A Lover Sings' sound every bit as sad and brilliant as ever. Expertly crafted, they capture the pain and



Billy's clothes are made from hemp fibre and hand-stitched by Chumbawamba fans on a vegan commune. Right on!

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embarrassment (and frustrated wanking) of love and rejection with rare poignancy.

As for the political songs, Britain has changed and some of the references have dated, but the sentiments - both in broad terms and often specifically - are still relevant. 'It Says Here' is the most succinct demolition of the tabloids ever recorded; 'To Have And To Have Not' will ring bells with any teenager rotting on a sink estate while 'Island Of No Return' - a squaddie's

bewildered report from The Falklands and a perfect example of Billy personalising the political - could be transposed to Iraq.

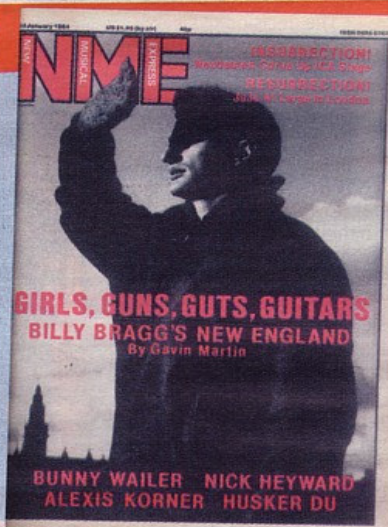
1986's 'Talking To The Taxman About Poetry', the third full album in this set (and the 51st best British album of all time, according to *NME*), marked a fuller sound, but the quality was constant. 'Greetings To The New Brunette' is a firework indie single, while 'Levi Stubbs' Tears' is one of those Billy Bragg songs that, simultaneously, cleaves your heart in two and makes your spirit soar with its tender humanity.

Chuck in some interesting obscurities and this box set is of equal interest to the long-term fan as it is to Bragg virgins. Certainly, if you have never heard these songs, you need to. Urgently. **Tony Naylor**

WHAT NME SAID

“ I had no qualms about 'Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy' being placed so high in the *NME* chart [Number Three in the 1983 *NME* Writers' Poll]. It's a great record, not merely because, with the minimum of trappings, Bragg managed to create tension and gain a genuine hold on the emotions but... it provided a glimpse of contemporary Britain, a collection of sepia-tinted postcards from the declining suburbs of the early '80s. A fervent and earnest sort of white soul music.”

January 14, 1984
Gavin Martin



WHY I LOVE BILLY BRAGG



RICHARD ARCHER, HARD-FI
“I saw Billy Bragg play Reading and it has to be one of my all-time favourite shows. He held the crowd captivated: just him and an acoustic guitar. 'Tank Park Salute' leaves me in bits.”



JOHNNY MARR, THE SMITHS
“Billy and I have written and recorded together. He means business but is good fun. His political songs are still relevant, sure. And he does write good love songs. There's a vulnerability to them that people don't realise.”