

## The Essential Billy Bragg

"SXSW, for me, has always been a forum for ideas as much as a forum for selling records," states veteran artist/activist Billy Bragg, who'll be a featured speaker and performer at SXSW Music 2006. "For me, it's a venue for talking with your peers in the music business and discussing serious issues. We need to have a forum for wacky musical ideas, wacky marketing ideas and wacky world-changing ideas."

The English troubadour's SXSW visit coincides with Yep Roc's expanded repackagings of his early catalogue, including his classic albums *Life's A Riot with Spy vs. Spy*, *Brewing Up with Billy Bragg* and *Talking to the Taxman About Poetry*, as well as a fourth package that compiles the EPs *Live and Dubious* and *The Internationale*, with each of the four releases adding a second disc of rare bonus tracks. All of that material is also combined in a new box set, *Billy Bragg Volume 1*, which adds a pair of DVDs of vintage live Bragg performances.

The reissues document Bragg's evolution from brash D.I.Y. rabble-rouser into an uncommonly skillful songwriter with an equal knack for socially conscious anthems and intimate love songs, illuminating the connections between the political power conspiracies and the dynamics of personal relationships.

"You can hear me being politicized during the course of those first three albums, into the Billy Bragg we know and love," he notes. "The first one was written before I was really political, so the politics in those songs were very personal. By the time *Brewing Up* was recorded, it had gotten sharper because the National Union of Mine Workers had gone on strike in Britain, and the titanic struggle between Margaret Thatcher and the forces of organized labor unfolded in all its epic glory. And by *Talking with the Taxman*, it's fully formed and I'm writing songs like 'There Is Power in A Union' and 'Which Side Are You On.' I was learning to write in an ideological language that I hadn't thought about at all before."

Despite the retrospective nature of the reissue project, Bragg insists that he has no interest in nostalgia. "After 20 years of making records, the little bit of Elektra Records that nurtured me all those years was finally extinguished by the machinations of the American record industry," he explains. "These records all suddenly fell back into my lap, and the dear people at Yep Roc took them in. So it seemed like a good time to have a look back and see where we've been, as a way of moving forward."

"I don't want to live in the 1980s," he adds. "I don't miss Reagan, I don't miss Thatcher, and I don't miss Spandau Ballet. I'm concerned with moving forward, because there's lots to do."



INTERVIEW

**Billy Bragg**

Thursday, March 16

4:15-5:30 pm

Room 18

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MUSIC

Bragg, who's been busy writing his first book as well as working on songs for his next album, asserts that his experiences — particularly his involvement in the two *Mermaid Avenue* albums, on which he and Wilco unearthed previously unheard songs by folk icon Woody Guthrie — have given him a perspective broader than the punk ethic he started with.

"I have more of a feeling of being a link in a chain," he says. "I'm a lot more aware of the tradition that I'm a part of. Songs have an ability to help change people's perspective, particularly when you're trying to put across a message that people don't get in the mainstream media."

"We can't change the world, but we can change people's perspective of the world," Bragg concludes. "That happened to me as an audience member at a Clash gig for Rock Against Racism, and I came away with my view of the world changed. That gig began my political journey. I always look back on that, because that showed me that it could be done. It doesn't happen every single night, but it's worth striving for."

— Scott Schinder

For us, the last ten years of winter break in Austin are at best a blur. The blurriest by far was in 1999, when me and bandmate, Alan, got up early for Lonesome Bob's noon show at the Yard Dog. We remained mostly upright (heh heh) until our 1:00 am headlining slot at some 6th street cavern where men in Mardi Gras masks invaded the stage. We fought them off bravely, rocked our little socks off, and basked momentarily in the glory before being tossed onto the sidewalk at 2 am by muscular security men, and sat sobbing with our backs to the door.

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WACO BROTHERS