

THE PHOENIX

Q&A: Billy Bragg

By: MICHAEL ALAN GOLDBERG

3/16/2006 3:41:20 PM



MICHAEL ALAN GOLDBERG: *Thanks for taking the time to chat. How are you?*

BILLY BRAGG: I'm doing well, thank you. I've been waiting patiently this afternoon for [Woody Guthrie's daughter] Nora Guthrie to get to her office. We have a little difficulty with ... there's a fascist party in Britain called the British National Party -- they're a racist/fascist party, they have a record label, of course, and they just put out this album by this guy who writes white supremacist songs, and one of the songs is a rewrite of "This Land is Your Land."

MAG: *Oh man, that's awful.*

BB: Someone said to me earlier today, how do you think Woody would feel? I *know* how the guy would feel, I've always resisted speaking for him because it's not my job, but lemme just tell you, it said on his guitar, "This Machine Kills Fascists" ...how do you *think* he would feel? Hopefully Nora will be able to do something because she's got the moral authority to do something about it, because they're gonna give the song away in schools, believe it or not.

MAG: *Is it depressing at all to know that in 2006, these things are still happening?*

BB: You know what's worse? These bastards won a seat on the council in my hometown. The first seat they've won in London for 10 years, and in my hometown, an industrial area in East London. My *own* people. It was just unbelievable.

MAG: *So when you think of all the years you've spent fighting this kind of thing around the world and then you see it happen in your own backyard, what does that do to your spirit?*

BB: Well, it just reminds me that the fight goes on. I came into politics to fight against these people with Rock Against Racism, you know, and if you look at my last album [2002's *England, Half English*] I'm trying to address issues of identity again, and I think unfortunately that in the wake of 9/11 and in my country, since last summer's June Bombings, which were done by British citizens, the issue of who does and who doesn't belong has become a real big hot potato. In fact, I've been writing a book for the past year on this subject, and it really was inspired by this party, the BNP, winning a seat in my hometown. It made me think, is this all I am? And if this isn't who I am, why not? What happened to me that makes me different from those people?

MAG: *What do you think it is?*

BB: Well, I didn't really get any politics from my parents when I was a kid. This is the weird thing -- all the politics in my childhood came from music, and all the music that gave me politics came from America. The music that moved me as a kid when I was 14, 15 years old was Aretha Franklin's *Young, Gifted, and Black*, Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come," and Bob Dylan singing about the civil rights movement. That's what politicized me, listening to that kinda music, and then when the Clash came along in 1977, the outburst of anger and the fact that on their first album they had a cover of a reggae song ... all these things seemed to light the cultural path that I followed. So when they began doing concerts for Rock Against Racism it seemed the most natural thing in the world for me to go along and support that, because the fascists, their opposition was mainly to black culture, and black culture had been an important part of my life and still is. So you know, I felt that they were attacking me, and sure enough, they *were* attacking me because they didn't like punks either. That was how I was politicized, so these guys turning up again is just, in some ways it's reaffirmed my politics, it's taken me back to those issues, because unfortunately, nationalism has raised its head in the West, partly because of the end of the cold war. There's a vacuum where there used to be strong ideological positions, now you've got these weird people called neo-cons who don't seem to have any ideology but keep doing shit, and then you've got [Tony] Blair, who doesn't even seem to have *any* politics, and then you've got the traditional left who are still talking in terms of Marxism, which doesn't mean shit to anybody anymore. So into this space has come the absolute certainty of nationalism. And it's not just in Britain -- look at the riots in France last year. I even see it in the United States of America. George Bush is still wearing the stars and stripes on his lapel. He's still sending a message every time he appears on TV -- you're either with us or against us, you're either behind this flag or you're not, and that's nationalism. That's not any kind of sort of patriotism at all -- loving your country does not mean subscribing to "my country right or wrong."

MAG: *Some people say that true patriotism means that you love your country so much you're willing to question your government*

when you think it's going in the wrong direction.

BB: The greatest American patriot I ever came across was Woody Guthrie. He loved his country, and if you ever doubt that, listen to "This Land is Your Land." Woody's Huntington's disease robbed his family of a father, and robbed music of a great artist, but it also robbed the American people of someone who would've been prepared to take on McCarthyism as a patriot. If you woulda gotten Woody in there to testify ... as much as I love Pete Seeger, he's a Northern college boy and Woody was from Oklahoma. He coulda whooped that Wisconsin guy's ass! It doesn't get any more down-home than Woody, and one of the great things I regret is that Woody never got to testify, because he would have shown us what a real patriot was. Reading his stuff in the archives, that was the conclusion I came away with -- that it was possible to be a patriot but also to be progressive. Learning that from Woody in the past 10 years, or however long it's been since I first went in the archive, that's been a real inspiration.

MAG: *Does listening to Woody Guthrie or Bob Dylan now still carry the same meaning and impact for you as it did when you were younger?*

BB: The first time I went back to New York after 9/11, I got into town, couldn't sleep, did what I always do – went to some 24-hour Tower Records somewhere, I think up on Broadway and 60th Street, around Columbus Circle, and there was a listening post there, and on that listening post there was Bob Dylan singing "With God on Our Side." It just chilled me to the bone, man, chilled me to the bone. Those songs retain their potency even if it's been a long time since I've heard one of them. As soon as I hear them again, man they have that power, they have that great power.

MAG: *What did you think when you listened back to some of your old songs when putting this new box set together? Are you still happy with your early stuff?*

BB: Oh yeah. I wanted it to be raw, and I wanted it to be...I wanted it to have its own velocity. I stand by those records. I was listening to them after they remastered them, I was listening to them in the car and I was thinking, "If these came out today, if I was James Blunt and this came out now, I'd shit my pants if this guy was on my tail!" I'm too old to be the anti-James Blunt now, but that's who I would be. I feel that's who I'm up against – don't watch that, watch this!

MAG: *I noticed you've been offering free downloads of some of your songs on your website, and selling downloads of your live "bootlegs" relatively cheaply. What's your take on file sharing and illegal downloading and such?*

BB: I think it's great. When you have that kind of peer-to-peer exchange, and people are recommending this particular song or artist, I think that helps, you know, because in the end a lot of what I've achieved has been through word of mouth. I bet you didn't first hear me from an advert -- you probably heard me from a friend or on some college station.

MAG: *That's true – I heard something from Talking With the Taxman About Poetry on a college radio station when I was 16.*

BB: Word of mouth, man. And peer-to-peer is nothing more than word of mouth. It's like the Arctic Monkeys -- they spent the past 18 months giving their songs away, and then their first single came out and went straight to number one, and then their album came out, with all the songs they've been giving away, and it sold more its first week than any other British record. It sold a third of a million records first week. So all those people who they've given their music to were so blissed by it and felt like they owed that band to such an extent that they went out and bought the record, and told other people about it. That seems to be the new paradigm for our industry.

MAG: *The industry still seems somewhat resistant to giving things away for free.*

BB: When I first put my records out, I sold them for less than the market value. I sold them for 2.99 or 3.99, and sold more records that way. More people checked me out because my records were cheaper, so I sold more records. I tried to explain that to people at the time, so I feel absolutely vindicated now!

MAG: *Some things do change, other things don't. What do you think now about some of the other battles you waged twenty years ago?*

BB: Well, you know, there are specific issues we lost on, like the miner's strike, but when I see the guys that I hooked up with during that period and they're in charge of the labor union, or they're a member of parliament, or, you know, running a company and still trying to make the world a better place, when I look around me and see those people I feel that what we did back then, although we didn't win, we made a bond amongst ourselves, and we're still trying our best to remain true to that. And there's some big issues I feel really proud about – I was very active in Artists Against Apartheid in the 1980s, and whenever I hear the South African national anthem, "Nkosi Sikelel'iAfrika" [Long considered the country's national anthem by oppressed blacks, and sung as an act of defiance against the white government that held "Die Stem van Suid-Afrika" as the national anthem, until apartheid was abolished in the early '90s], I feel really proud about that, you know? And for all the damage Margaret Thatcher did to my country, she was never able to make people pay for their health care. That's one of the few things I remain very proud of. If I had to make a list of things of why my country is better than your country, that's right up there with the fact that we play *football*. With our feet. Not that runny runny runny catchy shit!

MAG: *A lot of Americans on the left feel pretty hopeless about what's been going on in the U.S., and have a hard time imagining winning their battles.*

BB: I think they'd have a right to feel hopeless if Bush had won a landslide, but they need to feel like all that's happened is that the ball has been dropped, but the game hasn't been lost. My take is that the American people have not yet decided what America is

gonna be like in the 21st century and I have great faith in the American people to be able to do the right thing. I do feel that, and I get awful shit from anti-American friends of mine who have never been to the United States and have never seen how strong its people are. That's my great privilege, that I've been to America and I've worked with people and I've seen the grassroots-level efforts to make the world a better place. And I've been completely inspired by those people.

MAG: *Do you think you've been misperceived at all, based on your political stances over the years?*

BB: Of course. My job is to try to overcome that. People are always trying to tell me what my politics are -- that's *always* happened. I mean, if I could tell you the number of radio station phoners I've done where people have said, "You're a socialist, you believe this, this, this, and this," and I'd say, "Well how do you know that?" And that was one of the problems we had in the old days, because people thought they knew what socialism meant, and in some ways that's one of the handicaps of why we shouldn't be using that terminology. We have to be talking about a world in which we believe in *compassion*, that our most important value is not democracy because in some ways democracy has been devalued by events. We should be talking about *accountability*. How do we hold those in power accountable to us? Those in power may be the government, they may be an NGO, they may be your employer, they may be a multinational corporation that has the power over your town's economy ...how do we hold people who have power over us to account?

MAG: *So how do we do that, what's your solution?*

BB: Participate. We don't sit on our hands on Election Day, we go out and vote and we participate. All of us, in this country as well, we've lost the feeling that politics can make a difference. But things can and do change -- that's one of the great things about how our democracies work. Things do change, and change may take a long time to come. We all have to struggle to get what we want. You don't get it on a plate.

MAG: *People on all sides do seem to want change to happen overnight.*

BB: Yeah, they want instant gratification, that's the kind of world we live in. One of the problems that we have is that because we believe in universal ideals, we wanna move everyone forward together, whereas the other lot, they're just saying to every individual, "You can move forward *now*. Buy this product, vote for this congressman, make this decision, and you will move forward, nevermind everyone else." So their ideas move quickly, our ideas by their nature are slower. But around the world people are coming to realize that capitalism cannot deliver, and that it needs to be either controlled or we need to find an alternative way of doing things.

MAG: *What do you hope that people, especially maybe younger kids, who've heard of you but never have actually heard your music, take away from your albums these days if and when they decide to listen to your stuff?*

BB: If there was a kid out there ... when I was twelve or thirteen, I was writing songs, I was in a band, but I had absolutely no conception of how I was gonna get from playing in my parents' back room to becoming the Rolling Stones or the Faces, who I worshipped at the time. I had no concept until I went to see the Clash, and when I saw the Clash and they were just doin' it, I realized that the way to do it was to just *do it*. So I would like to think that some kid listening to my first album, how naked and how angry and how pared down that is, they would listen to that and think, "Well that guy is so raw and it's just him and he's just doin' it. I'm gonna just go out there and do it. I can't wait around and worry about what the budget on my record is gonna be, I've just gotta get out there and do it. This guy is kicking off sparks and I wanna do that -- clearly he did it, shit, I can do that!" *That's* what I want kids to think.

MAG: *Still, it takes a lot of courage to take that leap.*

BB: I think you underestimate how desperate I was to escape the fate that my upbringing had prepared me for! I didn't wanna go work in a car factory. I tried the army -- that didn't work, so I'd run outta options. I had to do this, or ... bust. I don't know what else I would have done. Like I was saying, I've been writing this book for the past year, and I hafta do that. It's the same thing. I've been talking about it for a while, I've started it, now I wanna do it. It's a completely different discipline and it's much more difficult to keep focused and keep an argument going and come to it every day. It's like climbing a mountain -- you know, you're standing at the bottom of a mountain looking up and going "Oh yeah, I can climb it" and then you get up there and you realize there's no air, "Shit!" It's a bit like that but I have to do it, I'm driven to do it, I can't *not* do it, so I'm doin' it, and if it comes out great, brilliant, but as long it comes out, I've done it. I have that same feeling in doing it as I had making my first record, and I'm glad to feel that at my age. My first record had a long gestation period as well -- there was a long time after it was recorded that I didn't know if it was gonna come out or not. The fact that it did finally come out was after a lot of gnawing and worrying and wondering, and the book is kinda like the same experience and I'm enjoying that. You need a challenge after a while, and the book is that.

MAG: *How does it make you feel to know that you still have this loyal contingent of fans interested in what you've got going on?*

BB: Really old! I'm very fortunate in that way -- the people that I have played to over my career, whether it's been here in the U.K. or in the United States or elsewhere around the world, have generally come around again to see what I'm up to. That's very gratifying.