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## Bragging rights

**BY TIM SHELLBERG**  
Times Correspondent

It can be argued that the twain between punk and folk meet at the feet of Billy Bragg.

Referred to rightfully and often as a "one-man Clash," Bragg was a band unto himself. Armed on early classics such as his 1983 debut EP "Life's a Riot with Spy vs. Spy" and 1984 with "Brewing Up with Billy Bragg" with nothing more than an electric guitar, the songsmith was a thorn in former Margaret Thatcher's side. He was creating politically and socially conscious songs that went staunchly against the grain of the then-sitting British Prime Minister.

Bragg would later be joined in the studio by the likes of former Smith Johnny Marr and R.E.M.'s Peter Buck on subsequent sets such as 1991's "Don't Try This at Home," and with Chicago's Wilco, he released a pair of near-universally hailed "Mermaid Avenue" discs of original music set to words penned by Woody Guthrie in 1998 and 2000.

Last month saw the release of "Volume 1," a superb seven-disc set featuring remastered versions of "Spy" and "Brewing," as well as a trio of EPs, 1986's "Talking with the Taxman About Poetry," 1988's "Live & Dubious" and 1990's "The Internationale." The set also includes a pair of live DVDs taken from shows between 1985 and 1988 as well as more than three dozen rare and unreleased tracks.

Although "Volume 1" finds Bragg, who spoke to The Times earlier this month from his home in England, looking back, he is hardly hanging up his hat.

He is expected to publish a yet-to-be-titled book, his take on the world around him after Sept. 11, this fall, and plans on returning to the studio for what will be his first album of original material since 2002's "England, Half English."

He also is scheduled to perform a 21-and-over show March 20 at Chicago's Double Door in support of "Volume 1."

**T.S.** What was the impetus for you in deciding to re-issue these songs and put together the box set?

**B.B.** Elektra Records had been kind to me for about 20 years and put my records out, even though I wasn't selling loads and loads of records. But they sadly got swallowed up in the shenanigans of the American record (industry). They folded in on themselves and I was left out in the cold with my back catalog. And the good people at Yep Roc (Bragg's current U.S. label) took me in kindly and said they'd like to make (the original recordings) available again, and that gave me the opportunity to come up with some extra tracks and unreleased stuff, and someone came up with the idea of a box set. And I thought that I'd better do it quick before the entire tactile aspect of record collecting disappears completely, and we're just left with MP3s put into a machine the size of a ball-point pen.

**T.S.** I don't think that'll ever happen. People are always still going to want something tangible, where you can read the liner notes and have the thing you can hold.

**B.B.** Tim. Tim. We're showing our age, buddy. I agree with you on that, but we're showing our age. But there are kids out there now who are just zoning in on the music, I guess. I'm not saying that it's a bad thing, but what does an MP3 smell like? I can still smell the original vinyl, that smell (of a record) from when I bought it.

**T.S.** How was it for you to go through all that bonus material, all that rare stuff and all that stuff that wasn't released until now?

**B.B.** Some of it was lying in my basement in cassette form, that wasn't archived, and there was some stuff there that was on reel-to-reel. One afternoon, me and Grant Showbiz (Bragg's longtime producer) sat here and listened to the tapes and went through the tracks that I thought were worthwhile. And Wiggy (another longtime Bragg cohort) was waiting in the archives. Wiggy was really good with it because he was around when I was recoding those first few albums, so he kind of knew where those bodies were buried. He would go in there and find the tracks and burn the songs (onto disc) to listen to, and I would give Grant my cassettes and he would take them and master them.

**T.S.** How was it for you, artistically to go back and look at what you had done listening to the material, looking at it from your perspective now?

**B.B.** The first albums, particularly the first album (1983's "Life's a Riot With Spy Vs. Spy"), I think particularly stands up. I think that still has an edge, an attitude. If I was putting that album out today, and I was (U.K.-based pop chart topper) James Blunt and I heard that album, I think I'd s\*\*t my pants. I'll stand by that. And I think that the stuff that wasn't released is good for people to listen to and reflect (upon), particularly the stuff on the first album, because that's where I was trying to work out how to be Billy Bragg. After being in Riff Raff (Bragg's pre-solo punk band), I kind of reverted for a while to my singer-songwriter roots. And then out of that pupae came the diabolic butterfly that is Billy Bragg. You can hear the evolution there. I was playing all these ballads and stuff and being with friends and thinking "this really isn't working for me. I need to get a bit more edge."

**T.S.** Tell me about the book. I can't wait to get my hands on that one.

**B.B.** Well, my last album, "England, Half English," (was recorded) before 9/11, and there were these changes that happened, specifically the way a new strain of nationalism reared its head. It's a vacuum where the Cold War ideology used to be. Nationalism raised its head, and I think of that (effect) obviously in England, and in Europe in places like France and Denmark and Holland and to some extent in Germany. But I hate to say that in America with George Bush with the stars and stripes on his lapel and the implication that "either you're with us or you're with the enemy" and that sentiment needs to be everywhere, I question that. I question the idea of one country, right or wrong, and I think there's another way of seeing the world, and I wanted to write more about that. But realizing I had already made an album on that subject with "England, Half English," I thought I had better find another outlet for my patriotism.

I'm about 15,000 words from home. Hopefully the book will be done by Easter and it should be out in October.

**T.S.** When do you see yourself working on a follow-up to "England, Half English?"

**B.B.** I think that'll start in the autumn, once I've gotten the book delivered and it's out of my system. I've got a number of (new) songs that we plan on doing when we come through. It's just a matter of getting back into the studio and getting focused on that again.

Writing a book is completely different discipline than making records. You've got to be 24/7 on a book. When you're making an album and writing songs, you can stop and come back to it.

## **onstage**

Billy Bragg

When: 7 p.m. March 20 (21-and-over show)

**Where:** Double Door, 1572 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago

**Cost:** \$22 in advance, \$25 day of show

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