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For Bragg, songs of politics and romance matter

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To those who share Billy Bragg's hard-left political views, it probably seems like the world needs him now more than ever.

From the very beginning, the politically conscious and socially active Bragg used his barbed folk-punk music to speak out on the issues that made his blood boil. He was never a fan of conservatives, whether in America or in his native England, and he always gave a good skewering to the policies of Margaret Thatcher, Britain's conservative prime minister in the 1980s.

Bragg, who comes to The Ark for a sold-out show tonight, has reason to be hopeful, though - the new head of the conservative party in England, David Cameron, is a fan of the Smiths whose favorite album is "The Queen is Dead."

"It's like Karl Rove coming out and saying he always liked Black Flag," Bragg recently cracked to Rolling Stone magazine.

Currently, Bragg is pushing 50, and a parent. And, believe it or not, it has now been nearly 25 years since he first began using his ragged guitar and blustery voice to rouse the rabble. So the time seemed right for someone to release the definitive Bragg overview, and Yep Roc records has done just that. A couple of weeks ago, the label issued "Volume 1," a box set that includes expanded editions of his first four albums, as well as a pair of live DVDs. "Volume 2" comes out in the fall.

Yep Roc has also made the reissues available as individual releases, with a second disc of outtakes and rarities. Those discs - the albums "Life's a Riot with Spy Vs. Spy," "Brewing Up With Billy Bragg," "Talking to the Taxman About Poetry" and the disc that comprises the EPs "Live and Dubious" and "The Internationale" - span the first phase of Bragg's career, from 1983 to 1990.

The outtakes offer a deeper look at Bragg's artistic evolution. For example, the bonus disc on "Life's a Riot" features a few tracks from Bragg's transitional period from the singer in the punk band Riff Raff to a solo performer. The Clash were Bragg's primary touchstone, and to hear him solo for the first time, shouting from the rooftops, armed only with his electric guitar, is to remember how brilliant his synergy of the Clash and Woody Guthie really was.

"When you're trying to break out, you have to have a fever; you can't do it any other way," Bragg recently told The Globe and Mail, the Canadian national newspaper. "You've got to go over Niagra Falls in a barrel. I was so angry. I had been in the audience at Clash gigs, and I thought we were going to change the world."

And some of the outtakes from the "Talking with the Taxman" CD are more countrified folk tunes, including a cover of Guthrie's "Deportee" - which foreshadowed his work in the '90s, when he hooked up with Wilco to set old Guthrie lyrics to new music for the "Mermaid Avenue" recordings of '98 and 2000. But Bragg was not all protest and no romance. In and around his political songs were tunes about the travails of romantic entanglement.

"Yes, most people think of Billy Bragg as a political songwriter, but I think one of the reasons his work has continued to matter is he can write about human emotions as well as he writes about issues," says Mark Deming of the Ann Arbor-based All Music Guide. "Bragg is a guy who cares about people first and foremost, and that's why he can write marching songs for the miner's strike and witty tunes about lost love, and they both work just as well.

"He also has a fine way with a tune, and while his voice sure isn't pretty, it fits his 'regular bloke' attitude

perfectly," said Deming.

Bragg still takes a dim view of the dark forces of political expediency, but he's enthusiastic about the increased social activism of today's young people, both in England and America..

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