



Billy Bragg

Reviewed by [Christopher Bahn](#)

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For nearly 30 years, Englishman Billy Bragg has kept the faith as one of the most outspokenly political songwriters of his time. From anthems like "There Is Power In A Union," which Bragg wrote in support of striking mine workers in Thatcher-era Britain, to bringing forgotten Woody Guthrie lyrics to life in his collaboration with Wilco on the two *Mermaid Avenue* discs, Bragg has made a career of mixing leftist humanist sentiments with punk energy, memorable melodies, and emotionally vulnerable love songs. He's just released *Billy Bragg Volume 1*, a nine-CD box set comprising his 1983 debut, *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy*, 1984's *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, 1986's *Talking With The Taxman About Poetry*, and the 1990 EP *The Internationale*, along with other rarities of the era, including video of live performances behind the Iron Curtain. Bragg plays Austin, Texas' SXSW Festival March 17 before heading out on a tour of the eastern U.S. through the end of the month. *The A.V. Club* tracked Bragg down at his home in Dorset, England, to chat about pop and politics.

The A.V. Club: *The box set and the Must I Paint You A Picture best-of from a couple of years ago have given you an opportunity to look back. Are you generally happy with the way your career has turned out?*

Billy Bragg: I think so. I can't imagine going back and looking at the other artists that were knocking around at the time. A lot of them are no longer with us, and those who are seem to be more or less doing their own thing, people like Paul Weller and Elvis Costello. So I carry on doing my own thing, and, I guess, rely on people to get it. One of the reasons I wanted to put some of that back catalog out there was because I think some of the context of what I was doing in the 1980s, the politics of the '80s, are perhaps not so obvious to the 20-year-old of today. Writing the songs made a lot of sense to me then. But to put it into context, that's been the real reason behind putting the box set together.

AVC: *How would you try to explain what you were doing in those days to someone who's young now?*

BB: Well, if you can imagine what it's like in England trying to explain to people that you did gigs for the Labour Party—they find that very difficult to grasp, given the Labour government that we have at the moment. I think the politics that we had in the 1980s in America and in the UK were a lot more ideological than they are now. Reaganomics and the essence of what Margaret Thatcher was trying to do was a lot more aimed at pushing back at what had been achieved in the 1960s. So today, rather than talk in terms of ideology or ideas like socialism, I think more important issues [to discuss] are things like compassion and accountability. That's what we were trying to achieve then. We were trying to hold people who had power in account. Not just the government of Margaret Thatcher, but also the multinational corporations. I think there are echoes of what we were trying to do in the anti-globalization movement.

AVC: *How is the government of George W. Bush less ideological than the government of Margaret Thatcher?*

BB: When Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, she set out to reverse the consensus that had built up in Britain over the welfare state, over the idea of the individual having a responsibility over the community. As far as she was concerned, it was only the individual that was important. In some ways, everything that George Bush stood for and set out to do has been warped by September 11 and what has come since then. Certainly, the international image of the United States today is a lot less positive than 10 years ago. And that really shouldn't be, because you have been the victims of this awful terrorist attack, and I think America deserves the sympathy of the world. But unfortunately, the choices that the Bush administration has made since then have in some ways turned the things that we thought America stood for inside-out. The most obvious would be what's happening in Guantanamo Bay.

AVC: *Britain has had terrorist activity on its shores for a long time because of the Irish Troubles. It's something that other countries have had to deal with for a long time, and Americans are new to.*

BB: I think so, and I think that you're making some of the mistakes we made. What we first sought to do with the Troubles in Ireland—imprisoning people, detaining people without trial—didn't work. It just made martyrs out of the prisoners. Obviously it was easier to make that connection, because the prisoners were being held in their own country, rather than the Bush administration's shameful use of Guantanamo Bay, which to me is a tacit admission that what they're doing is illegal. If you can't do it in the United States... You know, it's almost like where you let your dog foul. It's like an admission that this is wrong. I mean, we did our dirty little war against the IRA and not many people noticed, but because of the high profile of the United States, it's a running sore not just on the United States' record, but on all of us in the West. It's not often we all are judged by what a particular government does. Recently, it's been what the Danes have done that makes things difficult for everybody in the West.

AVC: *With the cartoons?*

BB: Yeah. But we need to be addressing the issue within our own laws. We have laws to deal with people who defame other people's religion, or we do in England, anyway. We have laws to deal with people who try to blow up our citizens. We have due process. We have laws to deal with people who we capture during combat and war, but somehow Guantanamo Bay seems to be outside all that. And perhaps it's being maintained with the view to what people are talking about now, this idea of the "long war," that this is going to go on and on, and perhaps Iran is going to be next.

AVC: *Perhaps surprisingly, you weren't always so politically active—you didn't actually vote in the first election that you were eligible for. How did your political awareness develop?*

BB: It was the inspiration of one person, whose name I should never forget—Margaret Thatcher. When Thatcher was elected in 1979, there was a sort of spurious feeling that having a woman as prime minister was a sign of how progressive we'd become. Everyone was pretty laid-back about it. That was when we realized what a genuine radical she was. And over the course of that first Thatcher government, when she began to start to chip away at the ideas that I've benefited from—free health care, free education, affordable housing—as well as the Falklands war... By 1983, I was wide awake, *wide* awake.

AVC: *And you were also involved in the miners' strikes that were going on at the time.*

BB: After the election of '83, which Thatcher won—as soon as she won the election, she turned on the National Union Of Mine Workers, and that for me was the definitive politicizing experience. I'd had politics before, but they'd just been purely humanitarian. The miners' strike forced me into more ideological

expression—you know, it's the difference between something as humanistic as "just because you're better than me doesn't mean I'm lazy" [a lyric from Bragg's "To Have And Have Not"], to, within three records and 18 months, "There Is Power In A Union." That was really down to my experience going out and doing gigs in the marches in the miners' strike.

AVC: *Around this time you also joined the Army briefly, right?*

BB: Well, that was before. The army was '81. That was after I failed to vote. [Laughs.] After I failed to vote, after I failed to change the world by playing punk songs [in his first band, Riff Raff], and after I failed to make my way into the world and ended up back at my mom's house. I needed to press the eject button on my life up to that point, and that was how I did it.

AVC: *But that only lasted about three months.*

BB: I realized I'd made a bit of a mistake. Plus also, you should tell your readers, when you've driven one tank, you've driven them all, mate.

AVC: *The box set also has video from several concerts that you did behind the Iron Curtain, in Germany and Lithuania. You were one of the first Westerners to do that.*

BB: They assumed that because I was anti-Margaret Thatcher, I would be pro-them, but it actually wasn't quite as simple as that. I was anti-arbitrary power, so it put me in a difficult situation there. But the great thing about going to those places was to talk to ordinary people—to talk to people in the audience, to talk to the young people who came to the gigs—because the whole Cold War rhetoric that these people were going to take over our country really didn't seem to be borne out by their attitude and their concerns. They thought *we* were going to take over *their* country. So it was highly educational, particularly for someone like myself who believed in a more egalitarian society to see what a fuck-up East Germany was. That was pretty salutary. It didn't stop me being a socialist, but it certainly stopped me just sticking up for totalitarian regimes.

AVC: *It's almost hard to remember now just what a radical concept it was at the time just to recognize that we're all human beings no matter what government we have. Back then, for many of us in the West, the Soviets were The Enemy.*

BB: That's right. I can remember the East Berlin Political Song Festival in 1985 or 1986—I think it was the first time I went there—and Gorbachev for the first time had just mentioned the words "perestroika" and "glasnost." The Russian musicians were very, very excited about this, and to get to talk to them about the change that was possibly coming, I found it very, very exciting. And to actually get to go to Moscow, Leningrad, and Lithuania and those kind of places, I really learned a lot. History is different in them places, you know.

AVC: *There's also a short clip in the box set of you in Nicaragua leading people in song.*

BB: They were veterans, I think. I was singing "Nicaragua Nicaraguita," am I right? I went there a couple of times. I was very active in a group called the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign, who were providing nurses and equipment for the Nicaraguan people. And they asked me if I would be interested to visit the country and see what they were doing. And we went down there and got to see a little bit of the sharp end of politics—what it really meant to a country that was trying very hard to struggle for its independence whilst being leaned on by its local superpower.

AVC: *The shorthand, two-word description of Billy Bragg is that you're a quote-unquote—*

BB: Big nose?

AVC: *[Laughs.] Well, I guess I can't disagree with that. I meant—*

BB: Lazy bastard?

AVC: *"Political songwriter." But obviously you've got a lot of songs about love and relationships.*

BB: I would say the majority of them.

AVC: *Do you feel that people focus too much on your political side?*

BB: I don't mind being labeled as a political songwriter. I've chosen to do that. What really annoys me is being *dismissed* as a political songwriter. That really pains me, because life isn't all about love; it's not all about politics, either. It's a beautiful mixture of events that absolutely baffle you, and you think, "Why can't I do something about that?", whether those events are in your bedroom, or out there in the wide world. In our daily lives we engage with them at different times, and I'm trying to write about the whole human experience, or my perspective on it anyway. And to ignore one or the other would be foolish. I've done gigs with bands who only write political songs; every single one of their songs is polemical. And you know, they just beat the audience into submission with these ideas. There's very little concession to entertainment. My experience has been, if I can entertain people and get them to open up a little bit, then they're much more conducive to any ideas I might have, whether they're about relationships or politics. The most interesting songs, I think, are the ones where the two overlap.

AVC: *You're a father now.*

BB: The little guy is in grade seven. He's flying along. He's playing the piano, he's talking about girls. I'm having trouble keeping up with him. He's growing up incredibly.

AVC: *How has fatherhood changed your perspective?*

BB: It changes your perspective on everything—on life, and on shit and nappies. It changes your perspective on sleep, definitely. It pretty much changes everything. It should. If it doesn't change everything, you're not doing it proper. From a political point of view—from the Billy Bragg point of view, I suppose—it just underlines why you're doing what you're doing. You know, there you have manifested the future, and if you're doing this as you've always said, to make a better world, then you know why. I was picking my son up on September 11 from school, between the first tower falling and the second tower falling, and I had to explain to him what was happening. The next school day, the headmaster brought them all together and said "What would you like to do about this?" And they decided they all wanted to write to the American people and say how sorry they were. So they did. They all wrote and sent it to the American Embassy in London and they got a very nice letter back. You realize that everybody is someone's kid. It connects you more meaningfully to ideas like compassion. I sometimes think that the sort of change I underwent in the early '90s might have been something to do with the time, with the Berlin Wall coming down and Margaret Thatcher going into retirement, but it was as much to do with getting together with Julia and our son being born. With any one of those things, I probably would have had to change what I was doing, but I think the three of them together, and particularly the arrival of Jack, really gave me a different perspective from the one that I had for the previous 10 years of my life.

AVC: *How did the fall of communism change things for you? The political playing field was suddenly far different from when you first started.*

BB: First of all, I was very happy. I was in Knoxville, Tennessee, actually, playing in a supper club. We were late. I think we got lost somewhere. I'm not very good in Tennessee, it's not one of my strongest states, and we got lost somewhere past Chattanooga. When we turned up late, the guy said, "The toilets are over there,

you're onstage in an hour, and the Berlin Wall has come down." [Laughs.] It's one of those fuck-the-world moments. I think it was perhaps the greatest thing that was achieved in the second half of the 20th century. The First World War never resolved those issues, it had to be fought again as the Second World War. To all intents and purposes, around 1980, you'd have thought we would have to fight again in Europe over this issue, and drag everybody into it again, because of our failure to resolve issues that really belonged in the 19th century. The fact that we were able to resolve these issues peaceably is a real victory for humanity. And I'm very proud that we were able to do that—that the people in the East felt brave enough to do it, and we felt compassionate enough to respond in a positive rather than a negative way. It couldn't have happened in a better way. It wasn't a deal done between Gorbachev and Thatcher and Reagan—it was the people who made it happen. I'm a great fan of people power, whether it's there or the Philippines or the Ukraine. I'm always encouraged when I see that happen. Because so often, when armies make a revolution, it all ends in blood. But when people make a revolution, it can often actually deliver, if not everything everybody wants, certainly a peaceful transition to the next stage. And I think that's what we got in Europe. We were all fortunate for that. Resolving it any other way would have been so costly for humanity that it just totally freaks me out to think about it.

AVC: *Do you feel that we've lost ground post-Sept. 11?*

BB: I think we've fallen into an elephant trap of our own making. The enormity of what happened is still difficult to come to terms with. It will take some time, but when you actually go down to the absolute detail, and you realize it was done by a bunch of guys with box knives—that realization, to me, really should help us get a perspective on it. It wasn't the first act of war, it was the most unspeakable act of murder and terrorism. But it was construed by a very small group of people—there is no army out there in the dark waiting to take over America. There are no intercontinental missiles aimed at Minneapolis or Boston or New York or London. There are individuals out there willing to do unspeakable things, but going out and invading other peoples' countries is no way of dealing with that. It's like being stung by a bee and going out and smashing up a beehive, and thinking you've solved the problem. There are more beehives out there; more bees will come. But they're bees. They're not grizzly bears. If I'm extending this metaphor a bit too far, I do apologize.

AVC: *We don't even know if the bee that stung us came from that particular beehive anyway.*

BB: Exactly. And I'm not wishing to in any way belittle what happened on September 11. It's an absolutely devastating blow. I can't think of another act of terrorism that has been so devastating. And that it should be visited on the United States, it's doubly appalling, because you're not used to that response. You're not used to those kinds of things happening. In some ways, it was an open goal. So that is awfully heartbreaking. But our response to it, I think, has been beyond that. And soon the number of Americans killed in Iraq is going to top the number of people killed on September 11. And we're going to have to ask ourselves, "What is the point of this? Is the world a safer place because of our response, or is it less safe?"

AVC: *What do you think the American left should be focusing on right now?*

BB: One thing that's always impressed me about America is your ability to do things when you set your mind to it, even if it is something fucked-up like invading Iraq. You know, you guys logistically are right up there. None of us have got that capacity for moving shit from A to B. It's very powerful. And I would like America per se really to get back in touch with what you Americans refer to as "barn-raising." You know what I'm talking about? When someone in a community wants to build a barn or a house, everybody in the community gets together and spends an entire weekend to help the person to raise the A-frame of their house or their barn. That ability to go out and help people.

You know, if everyone in the Middle East who met an American met one who had come to help them, rather than an American armed to the teeth who had come to police them, I think we could begin to move away

from the situation we've found ourselves in. There's a great film to be made, or maybe a book to be written, called *Go Home, Yankee, And Take Me With You*. So many people out there look to the United States as a place of great opportunity. And I think that maybe your manifest destiny is to help people rather than to hinder people. I would like to see the American people live up to that.

I don't think that Bush represents the American people per se. I still think that because of the closeness of the last two elections, that the American people have not yet decided what they're going to be like in the 21st century. The jury's still out; they haven't made that decision yet. So much of what's happened since 9/11 has been overshadowed by that, it's going to be hard to just walk away from it. But for the sake of the next thousand National Guardsmen who will come home from Iraq in pine boxes, it's worth doing that. Because the whole idea that you can somehow run this whole "long war" that people are talking about without things getting worse, I think you're in the wrong situation. The smart countries of the world are all gearing up their economies for the 21st century, and America could do a lot worse than gearing this economy for helping and logistically supporting these developing countries that have resources, so that they don't grow up to be oppositional to the United States. That's what I'd like to see. How you manifest that on the left is a hard question.

AVC: *Do you have a new album in the works?*

BB: Actually, I spent the last year writing a book. That's another whole story, man. [Laughs.] Do you want to know what it's about?

AVC: *The title is England Made Me Too?*

BB: No, that's the old title. Originally it was going to be a book about England, and then the London bombings happened in the summer, and those guys were British. That's what me and them have in common, we have British passports—and I had to get to grips with that aspect of it. I know it's perhaps difficult for an American to understand the nuanced difference between "English" and "British," but there is one there, and I have been writing about that. But mostly I've been trying to get to grips with how we build an inclusive society so the people don't feel so alienated that they want to do something so unspeakable.

AVC: *Is it a novel, or is it non-fiction?*

BB: It's non-fiction, but it's very autobiographical. It looks at how I got my politics in Britain, how I got into music in Britain, how I got my values, how I got my sense of place—and surprisingly, my first sensibility about being English. I got from hearing "Scarborough Fair" by Simon and Garfunkel, so it explores how two Jewish guys from Queens make a 12-year-old English boy feel national sentiment for the first time. How the fucking hell does that happen? Well, there's an explanation of the cultural forces at play there, among other things.

AVC: *You've also been doing a lot of work in English politics around Dorset, where you live now.*

BB: Yep, and reforming the House Of Lords, and stuff like that. I think if you're going to make political art, you have to engage at some level. You can't just write about politics, you have to try and *be* politics as well. I'm always looking at issues, and the book in some ways is an extension of that. It takes the lead from some of the issues that I wrote about on [the 2002 album] *England, Half English*. I didn't want to make that album again, I wanted to make a different album, so the book is a way of addressing those issues about reform, about accountability, about the words that are going to be important in the 21st century wherever you live—compassion, accountability, those kind of things.

AVC: *Is there any chance for another volume of your Mermaid Avenue series of Woody Guthrie songs?*

BB: Well, there are another 15 or dozen or so tracks that you haven't heard yet. Perhaps they will. It's all a matter of seeing what [Woody's daughter] Nora Guthrie wants to do. You know, in six years' time, it will be Woody Guthrie's centenary, and I would hope that by then, all of the tracks will be out. And if not, that would seem to be a damn good excuse to me.

AVC: *How about a new album of your own material?*

BB: I think later this year. The book should be finished by Easter, and it should be out in October. So I will have some time on my hands over the summer, particularly as there's no Glastonbury [Festival]. I'll be road-testing songs when I'm out on tour. So I'm already a go, it's just that I kind of have to do this book thing first.

AVC: *You've also been writing opinion pieces for some English newspapers. Do you think your writing might be headed more in that direction in the future?*

BB: No, I think what we do is all about communicating ideas. You can write songs, you can write op-ed, you can write books, you can write blogs. There's so many opportunities to make your views known other than just standing up and doing gigs, and I like to explore them. I promise you I'll make another record, don't worry. I won't be disappearing off into Michael Moore territory.