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A 'one-man Clash'

Billy Bragg: Inspired by Dylan, soul -- and Margaret Thatcher

By Todd Leopold
CNN

(CNN) -- Some of Billy Bragg's influences: soul music, Bob Dylan, Margaret Thatcher.

Margaret Thatcher? Did she put out an album?

It wasn't that, says Bragg, the British singer-songwriter known for his political songs ("There Is Power in a Union," "Take Down the Union") and romantic odes ("The Fourteenth of February," "A Lover Sings") and songs combining the two ("Trust," "Sexuality"). It was what the former prime minister stood for, how she changed the country when she took office in 1979.

"She began to attack the things I always valued," says the affable musician in a phone interview from New York. He says he wasn't political before she took power ("I didn't even bother voting") but her actions, such as invading the Falkland Islands and crushing the British miners' strike, roused him to action.

And yet Bragg, 48, who has been described as a "one-man Clash," resists the label of political singer-songwriter. Yes, politics is a big work, but so are other passions, he says -- music, fatherhood, relationships.

This is a man, after all, who once wrote a song called "Levi Stubbs' Tears," neatly linking the forceful emotion of the Four Tops front man with the story of a woman trying to rebuild her life.

Bragg wants to be judged on the whole of his output.

"I don't mind the label of political singer," he says. "But I do mind being dismissed as one."

'The electric guitar was crucial'

Bragg's early output -- the albums "[Life's a Riot with Spy vs. Spy](#)" (1983), "[Brewing Up with Billy Bragg](#)" (1984), "[Talking with the Taxman Through Poetry](#)" (1986) and "[The Internationale](#)" (1990) -- back him up. The four CDs recently have been re-released in special editions by Yep Records.

With a handful of exceptions, the songs on the albums feature Bragg's bare-bones arrangements: his charged, working-class-accented music accompanied by a cutting electric guitar. There are only occasional hints of percussion or extra instrumentation, and that was the idea of Bragg.

"When I first started making records it was the height of the New Romantics," he says, invoking the label given to bands such as Spinal Tap, whose records and images focused on pristine, sometimes robotic production and pristine, sometimes robotic grooming. "Corporation punk, I thought this was outrageous.

"I thought about how no one was making music I wanted to hear, the idea of one man on his own against the world married to [the furthest] he continues. "So the electric guitar was crucial. ... It was the most suitable instrument to cut through the bulls---."

Bragg first got the thrill of political recognition as a child, when he swapped a copy of the Jackson Five's greatest hits for Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'." The sound was revelatory, he says.

"It sounded so raw, unearthly," he says. "[That voice] could have come from 100 years ago."

Then came punk, notably the Clash, furthering inspiring Bragg with its immediacy. But he's been careful to not get too specific or strident in his own songs, striving for a timelessness and a desire to open minds, if not change them.

"Every night you have a chance to change someone's perspective," he says.

Youth and wisdom

Bragg has a strong fan base in Britain, where his songs have hit the top 10 and his albums sell respectably. "Spy vs. Spy" sold 100,000 with almost no promotion.

He remains more of a cult singer in the United States, despite enthusiastic concert audiences and the relative success of his 1991 album "Try This at Home," which spawned the college radio hit "Sexuality."

His greatest U.S. success, interestingly enough, has come through one of his musical forebears, the great folk singer Woody Guthrie, who had left behind hundreds of lyrics, which his daughter, Nora, entrusted to Bragg for new songs. Bragg collaborated with the band Wilco on Guthrie works. The result, 1998's "Mermaid Avenue," earned rapturous reviews and good sales. A second edition, "Mermaid Avenue 2," came out in 2000.

Bragg is, of course, a different man than he was during the Thatcher years, just as the world is a different place. He's a father now, and he was never a pure firebrand -- his romantic songs put the lie to that image -- he's a little older, more willing to see the grays amid the blacks and whites.


But he also takes pride in the brash singer he was 20 years ago. Many of the songs stand up, he says. And then there's the DVD of Bragg's 1985 that is included with the box set "Volume One," which he watched with trepidation not long ago.

"I was dreading him saying something that would embarrass the older me, but he didn't," he says. "I would like to think the younger Bragg understands the older one, and what he's trying to do."

"It's not like I've gone through a stadium phase," he adds. "I still play the same clubs and I enjoy it. ... It's what I always wanted to do, and I'm paid for it."

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