

MUSIC REVIEW

Bragg blends politics, love, songs and speech

BY RAFER GUZMÁN
Newsday Staff Writer

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Halfway through his Friday night show, the British folk-punk troubadour Billy Bragg held up a copy of his new nine-disc box set on Yep Roc Records. "If you tot up all the tracks," he noted, "it's three-to-one love songs to political songs."

The concert, however, was roughly half-and-half. After all, this is wartime, when a protest singer like Bragg must answer his own call to action. During his two-hour set, Bragg mixed his own angry, eloquent songs with those of Woody Guthrie and Bob Dylan, sometimes combining them into one. He also spoke as much as he sang, delivering sharp yet heartfelt observations on politics and justice. And there were several love songs - though sometimes even those had broader implications.

Since he emerged in the early 1980s, Bragg has been part poet, part polemicist. His early records, such as "Life's a Riot With Spy vs. Spy" and "Talking With The Taxman About Poetry," combined punk-rock rage with beautiful songwriting, and his working-class accent lent him a grubby authenticity. His musical tastes are catholic: He's collaborated with The Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy, The Smiths' guitarist Johnny Marr and the alt-country band Wilco. (On Friday, he joined opening act Jill Sobule for a cover of Mott the Hoople's glam anthem "All The Young Dudes.")

When it comes to singing about romance, though, Bragg has few equals; his combination of cynicism and sensitivity can be a killer. The first half of the show featured a few of his masterpieces, including "Greetings to the New Brunette" and "The Myth of Trust." On "A Lover Sings," he noted ruefully, "You're the kind of girl / Who wants to open up the bottle of pop / Too early in the journey."

But Bragg soon got down to the business of politics, using tunes from ancient and recent history to address current issues. He tackled racism on "England, Half English," an update of the traditional ballad "John Barleycorn." He drew from Dylan's "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" to tell the story of Rachel Corrie, the young American activist who died protesting the razing of

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Palestinian homes. Bragg's own 1984 anti-war song, "Like Soldiers Do," needed no revising to make its point.

Bragg's monologues were equally illuminating and often dryly funny, whether he was discussing Iraq, the history of revolution or the way Texans make their tea. ("They put ice in it," he objected. "Next time I see a Texan coming, I'm going to give him a couple of boiling Coca-Colas.")

Near the show's end, Bragg sang the newly written "I Keep Faith," a gentle love song. But he dedicated it, on behalf of England, to America. And suddenly, it described a very different kind of relationship.

"I know it takes a mess of courage to go against the grain," he sang. "Let me rekindle all your hopes and help you start again / Because I keep faith."

BILLY BRAGG. Talking with the protest singer about politics. Friday at New York Society for Ethical Culture, Manhattan.

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