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Diary - Billy Bragg

Diary
Billy Bragg
Monday 27th March 2006


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As I stuff my dirty laundry into a plastic bag I wonder: is it possible to go commando for a day, most of which will be spent flying to Minneapolis for a show tonight? By **Billy Bragg**

I have been in Austin, Texas, for the past four days to attend the annual South by South-West music conference, and in a hectic 96 hours I've done five performances and a dozen radio interviews, seen a bunch of bands, celebrated St Patrick's Day, taken part in an anti-war demo and talked activism with American musicians, all on a gallon or two of coffee a day and roughly five hours' sleep a night. Now, packing at 8am to dash to the airport, I realise the one thing I haven't done is my laundry.

Austin is a great town for musicians and activists, a haven of liberal thought in the vast conservative desert that is the Lone Star State. It's a wonderful place to spend a few days, but the truth is, it's easier to get a tattoo than it is to get your smalls washed. And although tattoos are important in rock'n'roll, clean undies are more important to this itinerant Englishman. So I wonder, as I stuff my dirty laundry into a plastic bag and bury it deep in my suitcase, is it permissible to go commando for a day, most of which will be spent in the air flying to Minneapolis for a show tonight?

South by South-West, better known by its acronym SXSW, was celebrating its 20th anniversary, two decades of promoting alternative and roots music. The event itself brings together people from across the music industry - artists, radio people, managers, agents, record company heavyweights, little folk running independent labels, even the lawyers - and puts them on panels to

discuss issues in front of lively audiences.

The record industry is going through huge changes. Corporate consolidation is threatening to create even fewer opportunities for artists to break through in the usual way. The bigger companies tend to support only products that they can be sure will sell in huge quantities, while in radio more and more local stations have been bought up by mega-corporations that would rather choose their playlists by computerised phone polling than hire enthusiastic DJs.

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With the US regulatory authorities preparing to raise the limit on the number of stations that can be owned by one company, the artists are beginning to fight back, working with lobbyists in Washington to support politicians sympathetic to community input and the cause of diversity on the airwaves.

There was much talk in the coffee shops and tattoo parlours at SXSW about the clumsy manner in which the record industry is responding to the challenge of digital distribution. The immediacy of the internet, coupled with the power of peer-to-peer recommendation, has great potential benefits for both artist and music fan.

I first heard Bob Dylan in 1972, having swapped my copy of the Jackson Five's *Greatest Hits* with a school buddy for his dad's old copy of "The Times They Are a-Changin'". After that, it took me another couple of years to find out anything about Dylan. Even then, having borrowed Anthony Scaduto's Dylan biography from Barking Library and learned that Bob was hugely influenced by a guy named Woody Guthrie, I had to wait until I came to America in 1984 to be able to buy a selection of Woody's recordings.

Now, if a kid comes across my name, in a few clicks of a mouse they can go to my website, read my blog, hear my music and buy some tracks. They can maybe even get some of my stuff for free. But that's OK: maybe they will come and see me play live next time, or buy a T-shirt from my site. In this new environment, the consumers are interested only in the content provided by the artist. However, the big record companies are attempting to hold their position by insisting that this is just the same old business as it ever was, and that whatever the format, a sale is still a sale.

In the past, the companies charged the artists heavily for distribution and production of copies, and all of us have signed long-term contracts which tie us to such deductions. The challenge for artists now is to convince their record labels to pay them royalties that reflect

the true economics of digital distribution.

The industry trembles at the thought of such a revolution.

I couldn't resist going along to see Morrissey at a packed Austin Music Hall. He played a blinder, mixing songs from his new album with half a dozen Smiths standards. Singing along to "Still Ill", I felt 17 again - which is odd, because I was in my late twenties when the Smiths were at their peak. He closed with a stomping version of "How Soon Is Now?". Eat your heart out, David Cameron.

We land in Minneapolis and there is snow on the ground and a wind-chill factor of minus five. Looks like I picked the wrong day to go commando.

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