



**OBSESSIVE  
LISTENING,  
COMPULSIVE  
READING**

**Lookin' for Loads of free (cool) stuff?**

**Music. Culture.  
Exclaim!**



**INTERVIEWS**  
**RECORD REVIEWS**  
**CONCERT REVIEWS**  
**FILM REVIEWS**  
**DVD REVIEWS**  
**MUSIC DVD REVIEWS**  
**FRONT FIVE**  
**CLICK HEAR**  
**MUSIC SCHOOL**  
**QUESTIONNAIRE**  
**COMMENTARY**  
**GOSSIP**  
**CRITICS' CLICHÉS**  
**BOOKS**  
**TV**  
**ZINES**  
**NET**  
**COMICS**  
**DVD**  
**TECHNOLOGY**  
**VIDEO GAMES**  
**MESSAGE BOARD**  
**CONTESTS**  
**CONTACT**

**SEARCH**



## Questionnaire: Billy Bragg

By Liz Worth  
March 30, 2006



PHOTO: WIGGY

### What are you up to?

I have a book coming out, if I finish it. It's all here, though. There's some here. I'm on the road for three weeks and I think that'll give me time to revise it, to read the 65,000 words I've got. See if it all makes sense. I'm doing about 10,000 words a month and I've just got to write the one big knockout punch chapter now. It's polemical. It's political. It's often autobiographical. It's like a Billy Bragg album, really. It's about belonging in the 21st century. We have a bit of a problem at home with who does and who doesn't belong, which has unfortunately been exacerbated by the July bombs last year. But I was writing already before that and that just caused me to sharpen my arguments. I came into politics through Rock Against Racism and listening to the Clash and this is an issue that we were originally fighting back in the '70s against the National Front, which were a far-right political party. There's now a new far-right political party, which is the British National Party and they want a council seat in my hometown. Can you imagine that? It's so upsetting. So that's what started me off writing and it's an incredible challenge, but when you've been making records for 20 years, you kind of need a challenge, you know what I mean? Doing something different. I've written for the newspapers, I've written articles, you know, three and half, four thousand words. I wanted to see if I could do something a bit beyond that. And I thought I might be able to get myself a bit of Michael Ignatieff style intellectual kudos. I didn't want people thinking I was like James Blunt, you know, just some lame-o from England.

**In  
memorium**

**How safe  
is your job?**

**Learn your rights.**

**Learn your  
responsibilities.**

**...on the  
EXCLAIM!  
MESSAGE  
BOARD**  
**CLICK  
HERE!**



[Privacy Policy](#)

I've been writing songs still. Once this box set volume one is out, volume two will come out in the autumn with the book, then I'll be making a new record. In theory. It's actually like the book is like a mountain. You're climbing a mountain and you think you're halfway up and you're not. If you've ever walked up one of those hills where you think there's the top and you get there and it's actually not the top, it's just the next bend, there's another ledge. It's been like that writing the book, but I have enjoyed it. I have enjoyed it but whether it all makes sense I'm not sure. That's what I've got to find out while I'm in North America, does it all makes sense.

#### **What are your current fixations?**

There are a lot of good guitar bands in England at the moment. You've probably heard of the Kaiser Chiefs. They're just the tip of the iceberg. There's the Hard-Fi. The Arctic Monkeys. There's a really good band called Editors. I've been listening to them a lot. They're really great. Coming to North America is really great film-wise because the DVDs are cheaper. But also there's a lot of shit that's out here that's still on general release in England, like Walk the Line. I just saw that on sale in the drug store. I was going to go try to see that with my wife. Good Bye, Good Night I would like to see that. I think I'm probably gonna have to buy that while I'm here. And V for Vendetta is coming out, isn't it? Next week. I actually bought that comic when I was - I must have been in my late teens when that comic first came out. I was working in a record store. I used to buy that comic. It was a brilliant, brilliant comic. I mean I'm not sure they will, what they will have done, it's the guys who made the Matrix, isn't it? So it might actually be, it might actually be. The original comic was by a guy called Alan Moore who wrote the League of Gentlemen and they made few other films of his, that Jack the Ripper Film, what was that called? The one Johnny Depp starred in? Do you remember? That was an Alan Moore story, and usually Hollywood totally fucks up his films but this looks like, I saw a bit of on the telly the other night, it looks like it's got a bit of edge. So that's my fixation is to find a night off in North America where I can go see V for Vendetta because I don't think my wife will come and watch that with me. I'm a bit of a Thai man. I like Thai food. And we don't have good Thai food where I live so when I'm out on the road if I can find an excuse for a bit of Thai. And Japanese as well. Don't have good Japanese food, I live out in the country, though. But having said that last night it was raining and I was feeling a walk around on my own in the rain and I found an Indian restaurant down here, went and had a curry. There's times when only a curry will do. Friday night is curry night where we live, but I had it on Thursday but that's because of the time difference. I had it on Friday morning.

#### **Why do you live where you do?**

If I stand in the bottom of my garden at high tide I can throw a rock in the sea. What more can I say? That's it, there you go. I can tell you more if you like. 'Cause we moved out of London, you know, people said, 'How can you live in the countryside, Bill? It's so green willy.' And I said 'I don't live in the countryside, I live in the coast.' And people go, 'Oh yeah, okay.' So it's just that, that's it.

#### **Name something you consider a mind-altering work of art.**

1984, by George Orwell. I'll tell you why I think it's mind-altering. When I first read it when I was a teenager, I thought it was all about totalitarianism. You know the standard thing. When I read it again, when I was in my 20s, I thought it was a critique of the 20th century. And when I read it again, just recently, I thought it was about, I think it's now, it think it's about spin. Winston Smith works in this Ministry of Truth and he's constantly trying to change the past by burning documents and it's just such an incredible book. The greatest novel of the 20th century doesn't involve small creatures with hairy feet who smoke pipes. Lord of the Rings is not the greatest novel of the 20th century. Don't let anyone tell you that. 1984 is, if you want to know about the 20th century. That's something I go back to now and again. I watched the film, my godson did it for his school exams when he was 14 or 15, and we watched the movie. They made a movie of it in 1984, ha ha, with John Hurt as Winston Smith. And there's a great scene in it where the guy's torturing him, tells him that the resistance don't

exist, that this guy, Goldstein, is supposed to be the leader of the resistance, they actually invented him and invented what he does and they need him. And I ran it back and I said 'Okay, just watch this again.' And when he says Goldstein just imagine he's saying Osama Bin Laden. And that just did our brains in. That is mad, that is really scary. So yeah, I would recommend the film or the book, but not the musical.

### **What has been your most memorable or inspirational gig, and why?**

In 1978 I went to see the Clash on a Rock Against Racism march, the first Rock Against Racism march through London, through Hackney, to a big park in Hackney where the Clash performed along with some other bands. And it was the first political thing I ever did, so it's memorable in that sense. But more important than that it gave me an insight into the way pop music can be effective, which I still rely on as a sort of foundation of what I do and why I do it. I went out to see the Clash, there were a hundred thousand people there, it was just brilliant. But there was another band on the bill called the Tom Robinson Band. Tom Robinson was gay, and they had a song called "Sing if You're Glad to Be Gay"; it was an ironic song. It was actually about how awful the police treated gays, this was in 1977-'78, and how society treated them as well. And when they started singing this song, this band, they were top of the bill, when they started singing, all the people, the guys standing around me and my mates started kissing each other on the lips. Now, I was only 19, I'd never met an out gay man, I'm sure I'd met a gay but I'd never met an out gay man. And we were like "woah." There was this huge banner, we stood under this huge banner that said "Sing if You're Glad to Be Gay" and we sort of shuffled away embarrassedly. And I thought to myself 'Why are these gays here, this is about black people, this is Rock Against Racism, this is stupid, why are all these gays here?' Bing — a little light came on in my head moments later and I realised that actually the fascists, the racists, were actually against anybody who was in any way different. Whether you were black or whether you were gay or whether you were a punk or whether you had a ring through your nose, it didn't matter. Anyone who was outside of their narrow definition of society they saw as a threat so I made a promise to myself to be as different as possible to annoy those bastards but I also came away realising that something really important happened. When I went home on the train the world had not changed. The world was still exactly the same. But my perception of it, the way I saw it, had changed forever. And that's the most you can do with rock music, with music. You can't actually change the world, that's the responsibility of the audience, not the artist. But you can change the perspective of the members of the audience. And I know that because of my own experience, and that's what I strive to do when I write a song and do a gig. It was a great day; it was a really great day. And there were a lot of people there, actually. I'll meet people now who are head of a labour union or member of parliament who were at that gig and it was the same sort of thing for them, it just genuinely politicised them. So it was a mixture of things. The Clash brought me there, Rock Against Racism organised it, Tom was brave enough to sing that song, those gay men were brave enough to come out in that sense. All that together, it wasn't just one thing, it was the context of atmosphere, the place. You can do that. Not much more can you do, but you can do that. And that's got to be worth trying. That's got to be worthwhile, my theory is. Everything else is just James Blunt and American Idol.

### **What have been your career highs and lows?**

My career high I think was organising and performing on the Red Wedge tour with the Style Council and the Smiths and the Communards and Madness and all those guys in 1987 supporting the Labour Party. Which has kind of defined me for most people in Britain, which I have no problem with. And my career low would have been that Thatcher still won the fucking election. So they came quite swiftly one after the other. Up and then down.

### **What's the meanest thing ever said to you before, after, or during a gig?**

At the Vancouver Folk Festival I was talking about, I was doing "Between The Wars," it's a political song and it's about this guy and how he struggles to make a living at a time when this political situation's getting worse. And there are no

women in the song, there are no women in that song. And at the Vancouver Folk Festival these women were heckling me and they were saying, "Aren't there any women in British politics?" And I shot back, quick as you can, "Yes, the fucking prime minister is one." And they got very, very upset at that. It was really a low punch; it was almost like I chinned one of them. And they came up to me afterwards and said, "That was so unfair that you said that," and I said, "I know but it's true, okay?" I didn't write that song to exclude women, you know. I wrote that song to make a point to everybody and when I came to write another song about power in a union, the first line, which came to me as "There's power in the factory, power in the land, power in the hand of the working man." And I thought of those women at the Vancouver Folk Festival and I thought, yeah, they're right. So it's actually "there's power in the hands of the worker." They were right and it was a low blow for me to cite Margaret Thatcher like that back at them. She was an exception.

### **What should everyone shut up about?**

That's a good question. If this was in an email I'd go on and read the rest of the emails and come back to this one. I think everyone should shut up about personal freedom and talk a bit more about collective responsibility. Because there are a lot of big problems out there that we can only resolve together. The environment is the obvious one. But you know what? We can only resolve poverty together. We can only resolve bad health together, by working together. And whilst I believe strongly in the rights of the individual I also believe they can only be guaranteed by collective action, otherwise only the rich and powerful will get to express themselves and everyone else will be exploited by them. I get fed up and I'll give you an example. In England we have — I don't know if you have them, I read some reference in this article about Bob Rae in the paper this morning, some reference to speed cameras. We have them in England, we're going to get more of them and they're going to be able to identify whether you're speaking on the phone. I saw some footage last night of this woman making her face up as she was driving. I saw it on the news. It was a woman, she was driving with both hands doing her make up and driving, and that was captured on a speed camera. And they want more speed cameras so they can tell when people aren't wearing seat belts and they're driving using the phone. And there's outrage from the motoring organisations about what this does to the freedom of the driver. But also, road deaths have fallen for the first time in decades, the number of people who have been killed on the roads, the number of children who have been run over because these cameras are around is falling. And it's just ridiculous. It's absolutely ridiculous. We're all in a hurry. I'm in a fucking hurry sometimes. But I go out and drive a big powerful car, and if I hit a kid with that big, powerful car I will undoubtedly kill him. If I'm reminded of that regularly, I might not. And if I had a choice between having to live my life knowing I've killed a child, or just being annoyed by speed cameras, I'd go for the latter every single fucking time. So that's what I mean by people should shut up about their individual rights to go fast or smoke themselves to death and that sort of shit, but you shouldn't go too far, or else I'll turn into some sort of terrible lefty puritan.

### **What traits do you most like and dislike about yourself?**

I suppose, one of the great things about this job is I do have the ability to talk to anyone, which is very helpful but you do meet some strange people. So being able to talk to anyone helps a lot, being a communicator. The trait I most dislike about myself I guess is my inability to apply myself to the task at hand. I'm really bad at displacement activity, you know what I mean? You know, I've got to write two thousand words but first I'll go walk the dog or whatever. Do the washing up, make some phone calls. I always have to get a little bit more focused some days. It's really annoying. Yeah, I'd like to be a little bit more focused. Or be a bit more relaxed about not being focused, that would help as well. Because if you get to the end of the day and I haven't been able to write I do growl a bit at my kid and my missus.

### **What advice should you have taken, but did not?**

My mum told me that I shouldn't hang around with girls because they'll only

break my heart. And I should have taken that advice. But if I had done that I wouldn't have wrote all those songs, so maybe it's not bad.

**What would make you kick someone out of your band and/or bed, and have you?**

Voting Tory, I think. I have worked with musicians, but not in the sense where we were a band in the strict sense. I used to be in a band, I was in a band called Riff Raff and that's slightly different from working with musicians, it's kind of like we're in this against the world. And that band broke up when I joined army. I never could chuck anybody out because we'd all come together and we all shared the same dream. It's hard when you're in a band because it's the guys you went to school with, you have the same dream. It must be very hard to kick someone out of a band like that. Kick someone out of bed because they voted Tory, I think that's fair.

**What do you think of when you think of Canada?**

Canada's always been a happy place for me, because generally from the United States of America and the Canadian sensibility is so markedly different to that of the United States of America. The relentless, relentless American-ness of America, which I miss when I don't come for a while, but when you've been there for a couple of weeks you long to switch on a TV station and see news that has a global perspective as much of just a narrow perspective. To pick up a newspaper and the international pages be more than just half a page surrounded by adverts. To be able to sort of talk with people who have a knowing sense of their place in the world. The Americans have no grasp of their place in the world. They have no idea how annoying they are or what great responsibility they have for doing stuff. The politics of Canada have always been much more conducive to what I'm sort of trying to do, as well, you know, the language that I speak. To be able to say to you Tory and you be able to just write that down and know what I mean, that's an example. A decent cup of tea. And bilingualism. I think that's really important. When we first went to Quebec I thought it would be like going to Wales, there will be people who speak a bit of French but they might be doing that to annoy you because you're English. Took me a while to realise these people, this is what they do. They've managed to hold on to their francophone culture in the middle of all this anglophone, not just in Canada but America as well. You have to respect that, you have to really respect that. Canada without that wouldn't be the same without the bits of French everywhere.

**What is your vital daily ritual?**

Coffee.

**What are your feelings on piracy, internet or otherwise?**

I've always been very relaxed about that. My first record, the cassette, had a blank b-side that said "Bootleg the Bragg." I think people who bootleg your stuff are gonna come to your gigs anyway. And the argument that downloading free stuff on the internet undermines a band's ability to sell records has been blown out of the water by the Arctic Monkeys who gave away most of their album for free and when it came out they had the largest selling album in the history of British music in the first week, so I'm kind of relaxed about it.

**What was your most memorable day job?**

Driving a tank in the British army.

**How do you spoil yourself?**

If I really want to spoil myself I make space in the evening to watch an entire live soccer game on the telly. And I go in another room where the family can't find me to do it.

**If I wasn't playing music I would be:**

Driving a tank in the British Army.

**What do you fear most?**

Flying. I hate flying. I just don't like it. Which is tough because if I don't fly I

can't come to Canada. So it's one of those things I just have to overcome. I'm never happy going up, I'm always happy coming down.

**What makes you want to take it off and get it on?**

I'm sorry, I think you might have to rephrase that question for me. Bare in mind I'm a married man. I guess in the old days when I was perhaps a little bit more active in that sense it was curiosity, which as we know killed the cat. I was almost tempted to make some sort of pussy remark but I'm gonna resist. I'm gonna completely walk away from that.

**What has been your strangest celebrity encounter?**

Russell Crowe invited me out to dinner and it turned out that he was a huge Billy Bragg fan from when he was a teenager and he knew all my stuff and we sat around playing guitar together. Isn't that great? And I'll tell you what is the best thing about this — I really admire him as an actor. His movies are really good. It could have been someone awful like Tom Cruise.

**Who would be your ideal dinner guest, living or dead, and what would you serve them?**

These are harder, aren't they, than you originally imagined. I suppose you could say something flippant or something a bit more thoughtful. Oliver Cromwell, he chopped off King Charles I's head. What would I serve him? I bet he's never had my special pasta in pesto with bacon bits. I don't know if he likes it but my son really likes it, which is handy because it's one of the few things I can actually cook.

**What does your mom wish you were doing instead?**

A proper job. I don't know what that means at all but she's always saying to people, "When are you gonna get a proper job?" When I was in the army she thought I had a proper job so I guess killing people was included as a proper job. I think what she means by that she means something where she knew where I was every day and that I was coming home regularly. A regular job is probably the North American equivalent. A regular job, I could have said that, but she actually says a proper job. In fact, if you look in the box set in the dedications, the last dedication is to my mum, thanking her for finally accepting that I'm never gonna get a proper job. She once said to me when I was earning gold records, "If this all ends tomorrow you haven't got a trade. You have no qualifications, what are you gonna do?" My brother is a bricklayer who was unemployed at the time. He was driving, almost bumped up the curb when she said this. So her conception of what I do is not proper, if she knew how fuckin' hard I worked she would understand this is quite proper.

**Given the opportunity to choose, how would you like to die?**

In a fit of laughter, given the opportunity.

---

Billy Bragg's 20-year plus career has encompassed as much controversy as success. Bragg has not only established himself as a solo artist but an activist as well, and his politically charged lyrics and off-the-cuff comments, like violent remarks towards right-wing extremists in England, have typically left him compartmentalized.

With his back catalogue being reissued as a box set, he's ready to hand out the acknowledgment – or perhaps the reminder - that his music and the work he has put into the last two decades deserve just as much attention as his message.

"(Journalists) can write about what the fuckin' hell (they) like," he says. "I'm a musician, I can sing about what I like, talk about what I like. And they try and sort of pigeonhole you as a political songwriter...you know? I don't mind being labeled as a political songwriter, I'm proud of that. I object to being dismissed as a political songwriter and that's the thing that they do that most fucking annoys me."

While his music has often garnered comparisons that land anywhere between folk and punk, Bragg says that the box set has received at least one comment that he hopes will be a label that sticks around.

"There was a nice review of that box set which claimed that soul music was about content and not about style and look and sound, it was actually about what was in the grooves," he says. "And this guy who wrote this review was absolutely adamant that what was in the box set was soul music and that I was a soul singer, and I was very pleased with that."

**GOT SOMETHING TO SAY?**  
**VISIT THE EXCLAIM! MESSAGE BOARD**