

THE POLITICS OF ART Warren Kinsella shares quiche and quips with veteran Brit folk politico Billy Bragg.

Politics, as everyone knows, is showbiz for ugly people. In Canada, it is axiomatic. Lacking a Hollywood, or anything resembling Hollywood, we have Ottawa instead. The Canadian news media treats the nation's capital as our very own little Tinseltown, with the Grewals playing the roles of Brad and Angelina, Stock filling in as a couch-hopping Tom Cruise, and – naturally – Belinda method-acting Paris Hilton with élan. (No one comes remotely close to Scarlett Johansson, naturally.)

Stateside, Hollywood's stars and starlets pipe up about politics all the time, particularly during US presidential election years. You may find this irritating, as I do, whenever compelled to listen to Bruce Willis's stirring pro-GOP geopolitical analyses. But it is a fact of life, just the same: celebrities have become an important element in modern electoral politics because the media pay a lot of attention to them.

Which brings us, in circuitous fashion, to Billy Bragg. Sitting in an Austrian café in Toronto's Beaches neighbourhood, the most famous Leftist troubadour since Woody Guthrie muses about whether artists can, and should, opine about politics.

The lanky, gregarious Bragg, with his thick Essex bark, doesn't miss a beat. Yes, he says. "There are those of us who believe that rock & roll is not just about reflecting the world, but [is also about] trying to address it and do something about it. That belief is based on the ability of rock & roll to break down barriers. That's what Elvis Presley did. Elvis was a social revolutionary."

Actually, the Nixonian Elvis wasn't a social revolutionary, at all, but Bragg is so charming and so passionate, it is better to let the moment pass. As he gums down a quiche, it is evident that Billy Bragg – the guy who wrote the immortal 'Levi Stubbs' Tears' and who has been at the forefront of anti-racism and pro-Labour activism in Britain for almost three decades – is, truly and faithfully, a political artist.

Like many teenaged working-class Britons in the 1970s, Bragg was attracted to, and energized by, the politicized energy of punk rock – embodied, in those early days, by the likes of The Clash. Following a stint in a punk outfit and a rotation through the Royal Armoured Corps, Bragg commenced the 1980s gigging and busking around London. He had no backing band – just his electric guitar, a uniquely English way of singing, and a political consciousness stirred by The Clash.

Politics, to him, was not just natural, it was inevitable. In the Margaret Thatcher years, the enemy was clearly identifiable, and it made for many great songs. In the Tony Blair years, Bragg notes with undisguised bitterness, things are palpably worse. "Our biggest enemy, when we're trying to make a better world, is not capitalism or conservatism, it's actually cynicism. By going to [the Iraq] war, despite the huge manifestation of opposition to it, Blair has undermined this whole idea that people can participate in democracy and make a difference."

So why then did Blair, whom Bragg and other artists had championed for years, do what he did? Bragg dismissively waves a big hand in the air. "Blair is doing it because he doesn't believe in anything," he says. "At least with Thatcher, you knew what she was doing, you knew what she believed in, and in that way it at least made some sense. Not with Blair. [The war in Iraq] actually pushed up cynicism. That's the Blair tragedy, the Blair legacy."

"Young people have absolutely no belief in the ability of mainstream politics to affect their lives in a positive way, and that is very, very dangerous for democracy." Which is why Bragg, a guy with a guitar and a few songs, feels that it is right and appropriate for artists to get involved in politics in dangerous times. Says Bragg: "You can't change the world by writing songs. But I know – I know – you can change their perception of the world. If the circumstances are right, and you pitch your argument just right, you can offer people a different perspective."

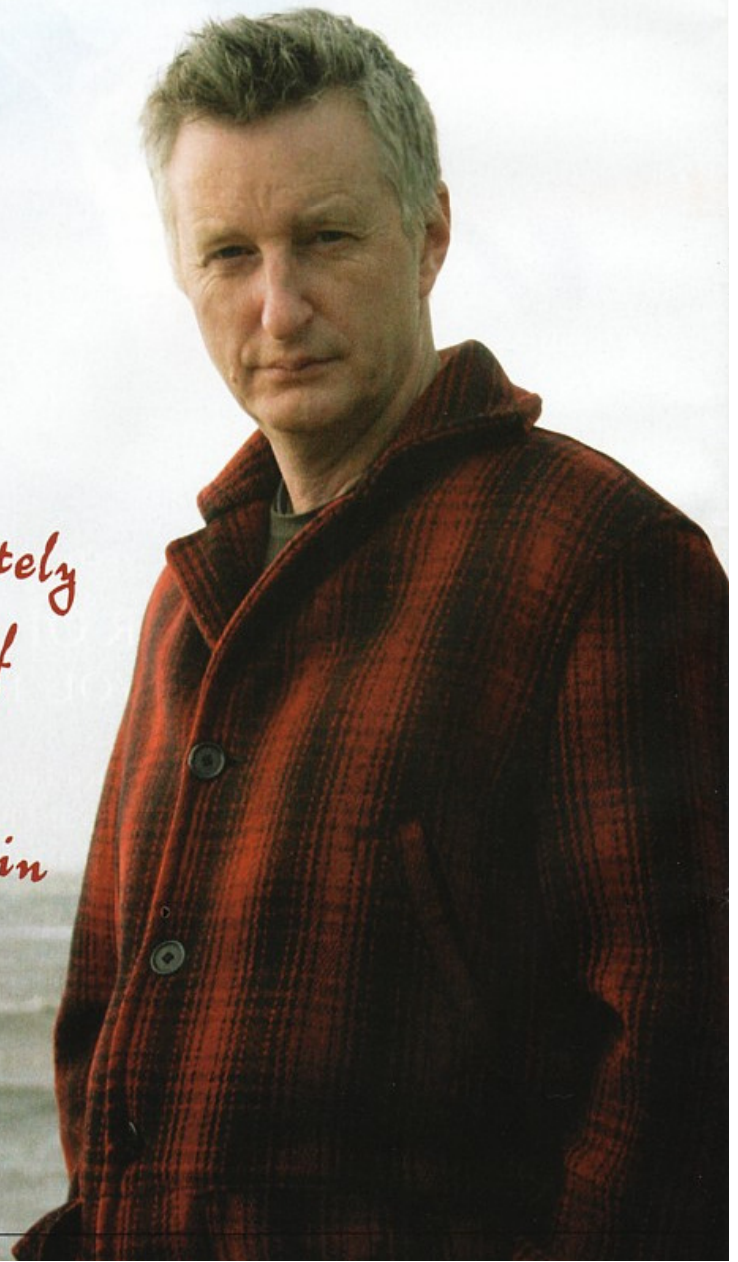
Fair enough. But at the end of a long workday, Bragg is asked, aren't people just looking for a little more Scarlett Johansson and a lot less Tony Blair?

Billy Bragg doesn't even blink. "People have been pestering me about my relationship with Scarlett Johansen, but I have been refusing to answer."

"I will not ask you any more questions about starlets. I promise."

"Bless you, Warren," says Billy Bragg.

Warren Kinsella blogs at www.warrenkinsella.com.



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