

BILLY BRAGG

Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy

★★★★★

Cooking Vinyl COOKCD 302 (16:02)
(28:15)

Brewing Up With Billy Bragg

★★★★★

Cooking Vinyl COOKCD 303 (34:53)
(33:40)

Talking With The Taxman
About Poetry

★★★★★

Cooking Vinyl COOKCD 304 (38:33)
(31:01)

The Internationale

★★★★★

Cooking Vinyl COOKCD 305 (44:26
+ DVD)

Milkman of human kindness leaves loads extra, boxed or separately

These albums laid the foundation for Bragg as the UK's greatest living protest singer with a happy knack of getting himself heard. Not just by investing a soulful emotion into his subject matter but also, as A New England went on to testify, by penning brilliant, biting pop.

1983's *Life's A Riot* is an indelible calling card – one of protest folk delivered with the raw power of The Clash. It's aged well, with a bonus disc revealing Elvis Costello to be an early role model. The following year's *Brewing Up* is more of the same; kicking off with the fierce political solidarity agenda on *It Says Here*. The bonus disc includes the *Between The Wars* EP, Billy's first UK Top 20 hit.

1986's *Taxman* is the strongest set here, bringing added production and some soulful songs of love and loss to the table, like *Greetings To The New Brunette* and *Levi Stubbs Tears*. Bonus highlights include rare country B-sides with Hank Wangford on mandolin. By the time of 1990's long since deleted *Internationale*, Billy was heavily re-engaged politically, following the disap-

pointments of Red Wedge. Also added here are the *Live & Dubious* EP and a selection of scarce protest recordings. The bonus disc this time is a DVD featuring rare live footage (including an entire 1988 Lithuania gig). There is another DVD exclusive in the box set, featuring *The South Bank Show's* 1985 profile, together with film of a 1986 concert in East Berlin.

Q&A BILLY BRAGG

How do you relate to that person on those early albums?

I was listening to *Life's A Riot...* the other day, and thought that's how I would respond to the menace of James Blunt. I'd record an album like that and say, "Singer-songwriter? Stick that in yer pipe and smoke it mate!" James Blunt – is



that cockney-rhyming slang? It's bloody stage school singer songwriting, it really gets on my nerves.

Because I write topical songs, I'm always in a danger of subjects dating. During the first Gulf War I got letters from British service men saying 'I was listening to [Island Of No Return] yesterday just after we got back from doing such and such Bill, and it really touched a nerve.' Although songs may seem topical at the time, they do have an unfortunate habit of becoming topical again.

Do you have an under-rated soul voice?

I've always heard myself as a soul singer, in my head when I'm singing I'm thinking I'm Smokey Robinson. That might sound daft, but again, Smokey Robinson is one of the greatest singer-songwriters of all time, and to me soul music really communicated great

emotion. I mean, I loved Bob Dylan and the singer-songwriters, but there was something in Otis Redding that I'm afraid Tom Paxman just didn't have.

I can remember playing Levi Stubbs' *Tears* on the first Style Council tour – I was the opening act – and I played it one night and Paul Weller said to me, 'Is that Levi Stubbs out of the Four Tops?' I said, 'Yeah, it is' and he looked at me and he said, 'I thought you was a folk singer!?' I sort of said, 'Well, yeah I am, but that doesn't mean I'm not a soul boy as well!' We got on like a house on fire from then on; I suppose I'd sort of shown him my credentials.

Was keeping your retail price down a hard battle with the record company?

No, but it was a battle with the retailers. They wanted to set their own prices; they didn't want someone dictating the

price of what they were selling. I suppose they were thinking about their overheads. We tried to promote *Life's A Riot* as a 12" at a 12" price. I feel somewhat vindicated now by the internet, when a band like Arctic Monkeys can give away their MP3s and then have the fastest selling debut in British history.

Your track, *A13 Trunk Road To The Sea*, made me wonder, have you driven on the A13 lately? It's lost its romance now, surely?

It has! I drove back to my mum's from the M25 and as I was driving I couldn't work out where I was. All of a sudden I was driving through the middle of Ford's main plant and then I was out the other side and I realised, quicker though that may be, I'd missed driving past the Princess Bowling Alley near Chequers. That disappointed me. *Danny Neill*