



Punk's Not Dead

Billy Bragg is back—and boy, do we need him

by Joseph Hart

Punk-rock balladeer Billy Bragg first picked up the guitar after seeing The Clash perform live. But whereas hard core's essential emotional range tends toward rage (Circle Jerks: "I've got the world up my ass!") or hopelessness (X: "We're desperate, get used to it!"), Bragg's is expansive: bittersweet love songs,

songs of exhaustion and misery, and, yes, songs of passionate anger at injustice. But even a raging Billy Bragg is somehow affirming.

He's also unashamedly ideological—a socialist, a trade unionist—and many of his songs sound as if they are intended to be sung on the picket line, which, in fact, they are.

A new seven-CD box set of his music from Yep Roc Records (www.yeproc.com) serves up all of the above and includes remastered classic albums of the 1980s, as well as previously unreleased original songs and covers (a sweet cover of the Smiths "Back to the Old House" stands out). Also included are DVD clips of concert footage from Nicaragua, Lithuania, and East Berlin. It's on stage that the music really comes alive; the studios tend to grind the burr off his playing.

Bragg's heyday may have been the Reagan/Thatcher years, but after 25 years of conservative government (from both parties, mind you), we find ourselves in desperate need of someone who will stand up on the broad cultural stage and voice our outrage, pain—and values. It's what Billy Bragg did then. Here's hoping he will do it again.

Joseph Hart: Was it weird to go back and listen to stuff from 20 years ago?

Billy Bragg: Not really, I wouldn't say weird. I play these songs solo, so they still sound like they did on the first record. I'm still in touch with that vibe. Also, those first few records defined me politically. I often find myself in a context where I'm called upon to play some of those old political songs. It's not easy being a leftist when you've got a Labour government.

H: But at least the Labour Party professes to represent the values of the left, so you can hold them accountable.

B: Well, that's really one of the problems we have: the values of the left. How is that defined in the kind of postideological society that we live in? It's one of the things that worries me. We've got so far away from the notions of what socialism could be, partly due to the end of the Cold War.



I think we're in danger of losing any form of principled ideas. The left just reacts to things as they turn up rather than having an overarching ideal for what society could be. It becomes a matter of pragmatism.

H: We're struggling with that in this country, trying to define the core values that we're fighting for.

B: It's that chestnut argument, which unfortunately does have some weight to it: The antiglobal-

ization movement is a positive thing, but what is it for? You want someone to come out and say, "Another world is possible." And tell me what values that other world is based on. What is our alternative to globalization?

H: Well, what do you think?

B: In the old days, we would have talked about abolishing capitalism. Now we have to approach from a different angle. I would like to start aspiring to a world based

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upon cooperation rather than competition. That could be the slogan of the antiglobalization movement. I recognize that it's not an ideological idea, but it's as good as "Workers of the world unite," isn't it?

The social justice agenda is important, but it has to include economic justice as well. It's all very well for people to have their human rights, but what good are they if they can't get an education or feed their families? It is, unfortunately, still the economy, stupid, with regard to making the world a better place.

We're trying to find a political manifestation of the altruistic feelings that we all have toward one another. By talking about cooperation, not competition, we're making people understand that the rights of the individual can only be guaranteed by the collective responsibility of the rest of society. Human rights are reciprocal. You have no rights if I don't and everybody else doesn't respect your rights.

H: You're talking about power in the community?

B: Or the reciprocity of life. All of us have rights, but our rights are limited by our responsibilities to our fellow human beings. For example, no one has the right to fly an airplane into a building or put a bomb on the London Underground. We need to be restating those values, because since the late 20th

century, those ideas have been in a dangerous state of flux.

H: What role does the union have in a world where manufacturing takes place thousands of miles away?

B: If we're going to talk about cooperation, not competition, the unions have an important role to play. The reason jobs disappear to other parts of the world is all about competition, about trying to bring the American economy down to a competitive level with the Indian economy or the Chinese economy.

Unions really are about community. They seem also to be one of the few places where you can still find that basic fundamental urge to create a better society. In my hometown of East London we have some problems with a racist political party that won a seat on the local council, and it's been the unions that have gone over there and flushed these people out. The Labour Party is moribund.

H: Have you been involved in this fight?

B: I have. In fact, I'm doing a tour that specifically targets both places where the British National Party may well win council seats, including my hometown. It's sponsored by several of our big unions. We're going out and trying to put down some hard antiracist ideas.

Read the full transcript of this interview online at Utne.com.