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Ten things you may not know about the punk mistrel, Billy Bragg



1 In 1976, aged 16, Billy Bragg and his band Riff Raff took part in a talent contest in Hornchurch. So did Iron Maiden. They were both beaten by a 14-year-old Santana soundalike called Duggie Boyle.

2 Phill Jupitus, who went to the same infant school as Bragg, played bass in Riff Raff for a week. The pair opened the Broadway Barking in 2004, duetting on a version of 'Sexuality', retitled 'Bestiality'.

3 Bragg's version of The Beatles' 'She's Leaving Home' hit Number One in May 1988. When asked to perform live on 'Top Of The Pops' he wrote out the lyrics and taped them to the stage floor. As the song started, Bragg looked down to see his lyric-sheet obscured by dry ice. BBC TV cameras caught him mouthing 'oh fuck' before stumbling through the song.

4 Bragg wasn't always a West Ham fan; schoolfriends recall that he was a Manchester City supporter in his teens.

5 Bob Dylan mentions Billy Bragg on page 100 of his 'Chronicles'. The Woody Guthrie songs that Bragg recorded with Wilco on 1998's 'Mermaid Avenue' were, Dylan says, initially promised to him by Guthrie on his deathbed.

6 The London Borough Of Barking & Dagenham named a road just off the A1153 in Dagenham 'Bragg Close' in his honour. It is just around the corner from Bevan Avenue and Keir Hardie Way.

7 A 1985 songbook, 'Back To Basics', featured a flexidisc that explained how to play songs from his first two albums. 'There's a guitar solo here,' says Bragg, after illustrating the chords to 'Love Gets Dangerous', 'but I'm worried that, if I tell you how to do it, you might put on a false nose and put me out of work.'

8 During a gig in Tokyo, a Japanese teen jumped on stage during 'A New England', grabbed the mic, and sang 'I don't want to change the world/I just want to go to England'. He was roughed up by security, but Bragg invited him backstage. Caught without the traditional Japanese greeting gift, the grateful chap gave Bragg his spectacles before collapsing in tears.

9 His huge record collection includes everything ever released by Elvis Costello and a picture disc of the England Squad's 1982 World Cup anthem.

10 His current tour concentrates on towns where there is a danger of the BNP winning local council seats. These include Bragg's home town of Barking.

John Lewis, Mon Apr 24

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