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Billy Bragg: Box Set Retrospective Doesn't Mean He's Living In The Past

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by **Steve McLean**

Billy Bragg has released eight albums since he brashly broke on to the music scene with just his voice and electric guitar in 1984. Equally at home writing political diatribes or bittersweet love songs, Bragg has become one of the most respected songwriters of his generation. But many North Americans know him best for his two Mermaid Avenue albums of songs written by folk music legend **Woody Guthrie** that he recorded with **Wilco**. Bragg has just released Volume 1, a nine-disc set of his '80s releases, bonus tracks and DVD content. When he was in Toronto recently to promote the Outside Music Label box set and play a show at the Opera House, he invited ChartAttack to his hotel suite to show us a shirt he had just purchased, recommend some cough syrup from the "chemist" across the street and talk music and politics.

ChartAttack: Why now for the box set?

Billy Bragg: It was perhaps time to do something tactile before the entire process of buying music becomes nothing more than clicking a mouse. What does a pile of MP3s look like? I don't know. If you're walking down the street with an MP3 under your arm and someone else saw it, would they come over and want to form a band with you? That's how **Mick Jagger** met **Keith Richards**. He had a blues record under his arm. That's the great thing about albums. You can almost wear them. "This is me. I'm fucking cool. Look what I've got: Aladdin Sane by **David Bowie**. And I can walk down the street with it and it doesn't attack my manhood to admit that I like David Bowie." Some girls in my class also liked David Bowie, so it was a real plus.

What type of material do you have for your new record?

Personal, political, the usual kind of Billy Bragg stuff. Being a topical songwriter is a little bit like being a journalist. You have to have your own intuition where you spot what's going on. You have an antenna that picks up on stuff that other people aren't writing about. So you think, "Maybe I should write about this." And having written some articles for newspapers, I thought that it might be kind of interesting to write a book. I'd never done that before and after 20-odd years of making albums, I thought it would be nice to take a bit of a sabbatical to do that.

Is the book completed now?

No. I've got about 65,000 words and I've got about 15,000 words to go. My agent likes it and my publishers like it, but I just want to make sure that it says what I want it to say. It's a polemic. It's a fuckin' Billy Bragg book, so what else would you expect it to be? It's quite autobiographical and explains a lot about where I got my culture and my politics from.

Is that why the box set doesn't have much in the way of liner notes? You've been putting all of your writing energy into the book.

Yeah. When you read liner notes, I think they can often have a bit too much looking back. And I'd like to put the political context in there without doing a "Those were the days" thing. I don't really miss the 1980s: Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, **Spandau Ballet**. It sucks and I don't really want to go back there.

Have you found yourself slowing down or mellowing with the years and with your family life?

I'm not sure if mellowing is something that you can actually measure in yourself. You think that you're the same as you always are. I think that people are going to have to listen to the new record and judge. I've always had people, when I make a new album, measuring the politics by the metre to work out if there's more or less. Am I



Billy Bragg

selling out, am I going off? I just write the songs I write. If they're all love songs or they're all political songs, that just happens to be where my head's at at the time. I'm still as focused on trying to say something in my songs as I ever was. In the box set, one of the DVDs is a documentary made about me in 1985. And I'll be perfectly honest with you in that watching it back to see if it was worth putting in, I did dread that my 25-year-old self was going to say something to embarrass my 47-year-old self. But, bless him, he didn't. I've never been a revolutionary. I've never been one to go around saying, "Abolish capitalism and shoot the rich." But I'd like to think that if that cocky youngster should meet me now, he wouldn't feel too bad about the way things turned out.

Have you talked to (Wilco main man and Mermaid Avenue collaborator) Jeff Tweedy at all recently?

I haven't spoken to Jeff for a bit. But I must talk to him soon because I think that the rights may revert to us for the record, and there's still a lot of stuff that hasn't been released. There's another dozen tracks, and they're good. They're not all up to the same sparkling standard as "California Stars" or "She Came Along To Me," but they're good songs all the same and they deserve to be out there. So I'd love to have a chat with him about how we might do a proper package with all of the tracks, and we made a film as well. I haven't talked to him for no other reason than we just haven't crossed paths. I don't think that there would be any problem if we did. We both contributed recently to a book of Woody's drawings. There is a possibility that we could do some shows together. I'd really be up for that.

So who are the Woody Guthries, Bob Dylans and Billy Braggs of today?

I think there are people out there trying to make music that matters. Whether we are doing the right thing by looking for white boys playing guitars, I'm not so sure. I think that the interesting music is being made in other places and other countries — places like Algeria, where you can be put in prison for making a record. Those kind of activist musicians who won't be in the mainstream. If you'd have said in 1940, the year that Woody Guthrie wrote "This Land Is Your Land," to Paul Robeson, "Who are the great political songwriters?" He certainly wouldn't have mentioned Woody. Even when Dust Bowl Ballads came out, what did it sell, maybe 500 copies? It wasn't until Dylan locked on to Woody that you got to know these things. But what I am absolutely sure of is that it's not **James Blunt**.

Paul Weller has made up with him now, though.

Has he? That fuckin' turncoat. I'm disappointed. But all joking aside, I'm pleased and encouraged by the fact that there is a bit of a return to the singer/songwriter. The darker, alternative songwriters have made sure that the songwriting tradition hasn't disappeared in the way that the punk tradition has sort of disappeared up its own wazoo.

Going back to the '80s, with Reagan and Thatcher and all of that. Do you see now with Bush, and in Canada where we've just elected a Conservative prime minister, a return to that era in any way?

No, I think it's more complex now. The situation that makes it more difficult, particularly for American artists, to really speak out is 9/11. That sort of changed the landscape and made a lot of Americans feel that they can't say what they want to say. I speak from experience from what it was like when the IRA was blowing up my town. You couldn't stand in a London pub and audibly say, "Perhaps the Irish do have a point." You couldn't say that because someone would punch you out. So I'm not going to get on my high horse and have a go at the American artists. I don't think that helps.

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