

HOPE NOT HATE Billy Bragg on tour

In his pursuit of a rock 'n' roll lifestyle Matthew Collins accompanied Billy Bragg's Hope Not Hate tour across the country in the run-up to the local elections. This is his tour diary.

23 April, Wulfrun Hall Wolverhampton

On our way to our rendezvous with the FA Cup semi-final with Bragg our taxi driver tells us that she's never heard of him. "Is he *very* famous?" she asks. We pull up next to where Bragg is standing excitedly, waiting to go and watch his beloved Hammers on the pub TV. "Can you get me a ticket to see George Michael?" she enquires of Billy, who fires back an equally robust and unlikely request. "Can you get me a ticket to the Cup Final?"

A few hours later, the unlikely has happened. West Ham are in the Cup Final and Billy is asking the audience the same question he asked of the bemused cab driver. As with most gigs on this tour, everyone agrees it was the best Bragg concert ever, including an encore of his entire first two albums punctuated by the usual mix of politics and banter.

24 April, Sheffield City Hall

Billy does a press conference with legendary boxing trainer Brendan Ingle and World Champion boxer Johnny Nelson. Good stuff and sound bites about communities and the importance that sport plays in tearing down all kinds of social barriers. Searchlight's driver, Dan, is convinced he could take Nelson, if I would sit on him and keep him pinned down, that is.

The most amazing thing happens in the sound check, when a teenager turns up with his guitar and demands a lesson on how to play *A New England*. Billy duly obliges, and the kid gets plugged in for probably the most surreal guitar lesson he's ever had.

City Hall is a sitting venue and with Billy's unsurprising sore throat, it doesn't quite reach the highs of the night before. Billy turns into his alter ego Johnny Clash to get through the evening while downing mug after mug of herbal tea.

25 April, Bradford University

Andy Sykes, Searchlight's former mole in the BNP, takes us for a lunchtime curry before joining us for a press conference in the town square. Everyone gets interviewed (except for Dan) and yours truly gives the local paper its headline, in relation to Bradford's BNP councillors, "Kick them out and keep them out".

Bill's sore throat permitting and a packed venue to boot, there's a party atmosphere from the moment the doors open. You can still get a curry in Bradford at three in the morning.

26 April, Liverpool Carling Academy

Officially the fourth day and Geoff Martin (in charge of the union and campaign groups on the tour) wears his leather pork-pie hat. The venue is magnificently packed and sweaty. I take some union people back stage for a meet and greet and, like most people, they stand in stunned silence while holding out pieces of memorabilia to be signed. Billy's manager, Mushi, confesses to being scared of the dark so I have to go with her into the dark recesses of the venue afterwards to find the staff she has gifts for. She's not so tough after all, even if she can swear for England.

27 April

Day off. I do an interview with ITN late in the morning. Having slept through Billy's 7.00am radio debate with Norman Tebbit, I tell a lie and tell him that he was very good.

28 April, Manchester Bridgewater Hall

Workers' Memorial Day, the day when trade unions remember people who have been killed at work. Shoes are laid out at Peace Gardens representing those trade unionists no longer among us. Desperately sad and moving commemoration with all the trade



Jon Cruddas, MP for Dagenham, presents Billy Bragg with the shirt he thought had been sold on eBay
Pictures: Geof Wilson

unions involved holding their banners. The early frivolity of the tour subsides as Dan and I meet families still coming to terms with continuing injustices in work places that have taken their loved ones from them. Billy wraps up all the speeches with an a cappella version of a song I'd never heard before. His voice is so loud and clear that it feels like the whole of Manchester has stopped to listen to him.

Bridgewater Hall is another sitting venue, but it rocks none the less. Just as I thought Mushi was going soft she goes into near meltdown about the T-shirt and merchandising tax the venue imposes on performers. "Do I take a cut of their beer takings?" she demands incredulously.

Dan gets his photo taken with the Man City manager and footballing legend Stuart

Pearce. I spend the night with the BBC and members of the local Unison branch singing karaoke in the Press Club with the cast of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang who are also in Manchester.

29 April, Gateshead Sage

Dan sulks because I may have accidentally deleted the photograph of Stuart Pearce. Billy's legendary security staff, Brent and Dave, do a strange sort of chorus girl dance by the side of the stage which I end up doing with them too. Mushi gives me a beer from the rider and comments, "No wonder you're divorced".

1 May, Barking Broadway

Dagenham MP Jon Cruddas stands nervously by the side of the stage. He's got to come on stage and present Billy with a signed West Ham shirt that Show Racism the Red Card arranged for Searchlight before the tour started. Since they made the Cup Final, the value of the shirt has increased dramatically and Jon is worried I've put it on eBay. Jon made the presentation between Billy's two encores and Billy's

response gave me my most embarrassing moment of the tour when he said "I bet that Matthew Collins from Searchlight is responsible for this".

The show rocks as it should do for a local boy but Billy has to go home to his Mum's afterwards and move some furniture to make way for the decorators coming in the morning. Billy's security and the legendary Bragg collaborator "Wiggy" end up in my hotel later, asking for advice on where to get a kebab this late in the evening.

3 May, Shepherds Bush Empire

Union members everywhere before the gig, the pub next door is packed out with them. The talk is of the next day's elections, one of the reasons for the tour, and already people are gearing up for the next battle against the fascists. We all know the fight is far from over. The gig is fantastic, like a music hall sing-along. Back stage, Billy gives me a gift, pays for my hotel room and warns me of the post-tour comedown, "It's been a ball, but the work goes on". Indeed it does. Tomorrow it's back to Barking & Dagenham. ◀

The Guitar says sorry: Alter-ego Johnny Clash has a go on Bragg's guitar

