

ALBUM BY ALBUM

Billy Bragg

INTERVIEW by SIMON GODDARD

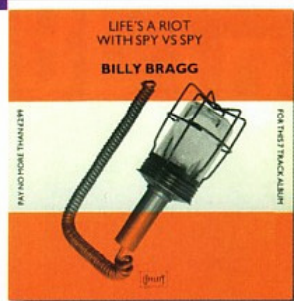


“W

ho you calling a James Blunt?” growls Billy Bragg, pop’s first soldier-turned-troubadour, shortly after greeting *Uncut* in his west London hotel room.

It’s still hard to believe that the big-nosed bard of Barking, a man synonymous with vilified (Old) Labour pop collective Red Wedge, was once tempted to take the Queen’s shilling shortly after the demise of his punk band, Riff Raff, back in 1980. Unlike Blunt, however, Bragg bought his way out (“the wisest £175 I ever spent”) to become the decade’s “one-man Clash”. Blending urban romanticism with an impassioned anti-Thatcherite social conscience, he soon gained patronage from John Peel, The Smiths and the legions of critics who likened him to Costello, Weller and Strummer as one of UK pop’s most important protest voices of the age.

Twenty-five years of civilian life later, Bragg is putting the finishing touches to his autobiographical study of nationalism, *The Progressive Patriot*, due for publication this autumn, and has just completed his ‘Hope Not Hate’ tour to raise awareness of racial issues in the wake of the British National Party’s local election campaign. In the meantime, Blunt comparison forgiven in good spirits, Billy talks us through six of his best...



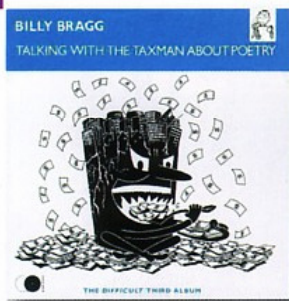
Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy

UTILITY, 1983

Named after a comic strip in *Mad* magazine, Bragg's debut totalled just seven tracks of raw vocal and electric guitar, retailing for the price of a 12-inch single (£2.99). Its contents were raided by Kirsty MacColl, who took “A New England” into the UK Top 10, and even '80s chart-topper Paul Young, who covered “The Man In The Iron Mask”.

BRAGG: I see this as my post-punk record. Or rather, me dealing with the pain of punk leading to nothing more than Howard Jones's haircut. I was pretty angry about that, because until then I was consumed by the effort of trying to change the world by buying Clash records. So there's an element of betrayal in there, certainly on “The Man In The Iron Mask”. It took three days to record, and actually we cut about 12 songs, but we kept it at seven as it needed to be short and sharp in keeping with that urgent minimalism. Back then it was considered acceptable to be solo, but only on acoustic. I didn't want that, though... to be a Nick Drake and play folk clubs, because I knew the audience I was looking for wasn't there.

There is politics on the album, but it was much more broad and humanitarian – “A New England”, obviously, and “The Busy Girl Buys Beauty”, which was a critique of consumerism. It wasn't until later that something happened which cast the classic Billy Bragg and changed me forever. And that something was the miner's strike.

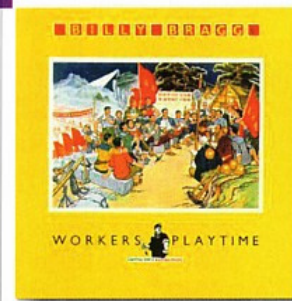


Talking With The Taxman About Poetry

GOY DISCS, 1986

Increasingly political both during and after the miners' strike (as evident on '84's *Brewing Up With* and 1985's “Between The Wars” EP), Bragg's “Difficult Third Album” was named after a Vladimir Mayakovsky poem (printed on the inner sleeve) and caught him while Red Wedge was at its most active. Smiths producer John Porter coaxed more ambitious instrumentation, while both Kirsty MacColl and Johnny Marr guest-starred. This was my first attempt to make a proper studio record. We were up in Wood Green with John Porter. Johnny Marr was there. In fact, The Smiths came in and recorded “Panic” for a couple of days in between. But the main difference between *Taxman* and those early songs on *Spy Vs Spy* is that this is me post-miner's strike. There's no way I'd have been able to write a song like “There Is Power In A Union” back in 1983 because I didn't have the political vocabulary then. The same can be said for “Help Save The Youth Of America”.

“Levi Stubbs' Tears” was a really important song for me; my first real single, very minimal, and still political, even though it's essentially a love song. And “Greetings To The New Brunette” with Johnny and Kirsty, that was me trying to bring a pop sensibility to what I did. There's some great lines in there, though playing it now I've changed that football lyric: “How can you lie back and think of England/When you don't even know who's managing the team?”



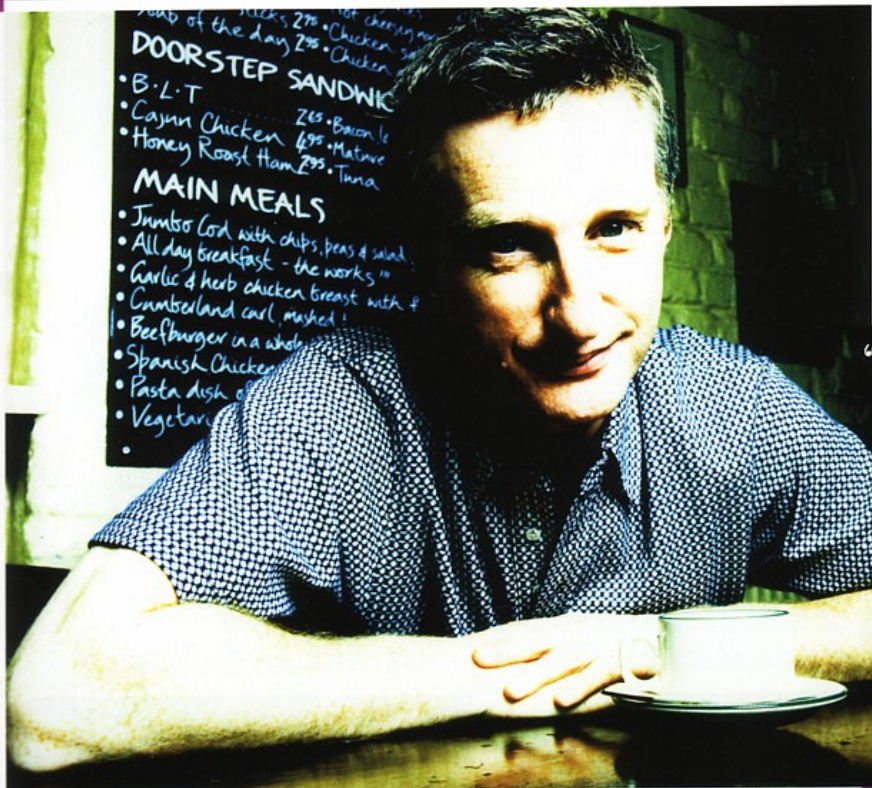
Workers Playtime

GOY DISCS, 1988

Disillusioned by the ‘failure’ of Red Wedge in the wake of Labour's 1987 election defeat, Bragg's fourth shied away from political dogma in favour of a *Blood On The Tracks*-style rumination on a recently failed relationship. It remains his most personal work to date; the bard of Barking at his most romantically bruised.

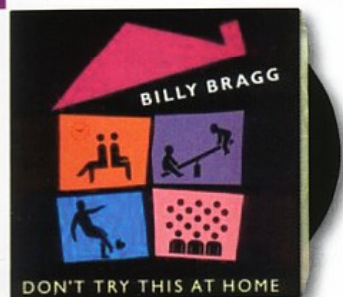
The ‘Mary album’, yeah! It is the diary of a rather crazed and fabulous love affair [with ex-lover Mary Bollingbroke]. A huge, sad indie bloke record, definitely! Except for “Valentine's Day Is Over” which obviously isn't about that relationship. I once had an argument about this song with some women in Vancouver. They told me I had no right to sing it since I had no idea what it was like to be the victim of male violence. I said, “You're right, but I'm not writing this for women, I'm writing it for other men to say that this is not acceptable.”

But it's also the post-Red Wedge album, so kind of a step back, a recalibration of love songs. I'm a love songwriter who writes political songs, not the other way round. I don't mind being labelled a political songwriter, but not being dismissed as one. The only political song here is “Waiting For The Great Leap Forwards” which is where I say “mixing pop and politics, they ask me what the use is?”, and I shrug and say, “You gotta try.” It's an admission that you can't change the world through singing about it, written not through disillusionment, but through honesty and weariness.



“Woody Guthrie wasn’t a dust bowl saint. He was the kind of person who’d piss in the sink and steal the cutlery”

Hard travelin’ man: doing justice to Woody G. Inset above: Bragg with collaborators Wilco – “It did get fractious”



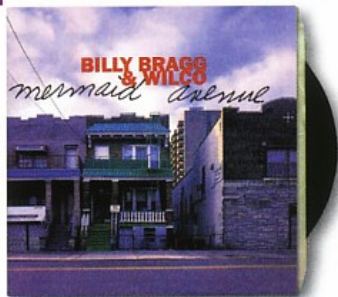
Don't Try This At Home

GO! DISCS, 1991

After reawakening his political muse on 1990's *The Internationale*, Bragg's next would be his last until *William Blake* five years later. An epic (by his standards) 16-tracker, it featured R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe and Peter Buck alongside old faithfuls Marr and MacColl. On the back of “Sexuality”, Bragg's label, Go! Discs, vainly anticipated pop success.

The big pop album. It started with “Sexuality”. There's a demo of it on the next boxset – it sounded like “Louie Louie”. But then Johnny Marr came along, got hold of it, and started playing these beautiful glistening chords. So he took it back to Manchester and fiddled around and sent back this shining pop vehicle. Because Johnny had raised the bar, it was up to us to build an LP around that and try to pitch everything on the same level.

My label convinced me that as “Sexuality” was so great, we needed to do things their way – release three singles, make videos, the whole thing. Which is what we did and it sold exactly the same amount of records as the last one. So in the end I was proved right. I enjoyed making it, but after this album I did feel that I'd begun to succumb to the nightmare of singles and videos which, until then, I'd studiously avoided. So I was thinking, “What am I gonna do now?” And then I got appendicitis and was off the road for six months. By the end of that six months I was into a relationship which led to the birth of my son. So I decided to have a break.



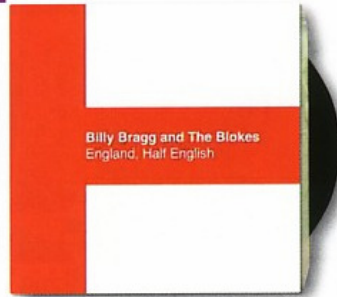
Mermaid Avenue

ELEKTRA, 1998

Invited by Woody Guthrie's daughter, Nora, to provide new music for her father's ‘lost’ lyrics, Bragg undertook this, in part fractious, collaboration with Wilco. Named after the Coney Island street where Guthrie lived, *Mermaid Avenue* spawned a TV documentary (*Man In The Sand*) and a sequel volume released in 2000.

Nora was great – she protected me from the Woody Guthrie industry, Pete Seeger and all those guys, who'd always known about these tracks, but wouldn't let anyone record them because they were for Arlo Guthrie. Of course, Arlo never recorded them; nobody did. So she gave me my own space and told me to use the songs that added another dimension to Woody. Things like “Ingrid Bergman” and “Walt Whitman's Niece”, where he's going out pulling birds and getting drunk with sailors. Because that's who Woody Guthrie was. He wasn't this dust bowl saint. He's the kind of person who'd piss in the sink and steal the cutlery from the dining hall. Nora wanted me to bring that out.

It did get fractious with Wilco's Jeff Tweedy, but only after we'd recorded it. When we parted, they started mixing songs I'd written, but it was just a couple of weeks of needing that went down. Credit to Jeff, when we came to release *Volume 2*, Wilco went in and cut another four or five tracks at their own expense to balance my stuff, and they're some of the best songs.



England, Half English

COOKING VINYL, 2002

Now backed by The Blokes (featuring The Small Faces' Ian McLagan on keys), Bragg's only LP of the millennium thus far amounts to a musical thesis on England's national identity. By way of official protest, the self-explanatory “Take Down The Union Jack” was released as a single during Golden Jubilee week.

Working with Wilco changed the way I made music, that idea of riffing with a band, which is how the songs on *England, Half English* came about. I wouldn't have even been able to articulate my thoughts on the title track, without The Blokes coming up with that Arabic riff. Politics and my music are more intertwined now, but you can make a political point without hammering folk over the head with it. A song like “Some Days I See The Point” is me saying I want to make the world better, but I can't do it on my own. The politics is still there, but post-ideological. The political discourse that was going on when I made *Taxman* isn't there. There's no point in me writing big pro-union songs any more. When people say to me now, “Why write about nationalism and identity?”, it's because that's at the top of the political agenda at the moment. I don't choose these subjects, they choose me. I'm as proud of the flag of St George as the Manics are of the Welsh flag, but we need to repossess it in the name of a multicultural society. We mustn't let “Englishness” fall into the hands of people like the BNP.



The Billy Bragg Volume 1 boxset is out now on Cooking Vinyl. Volume 2 will be released later this year.