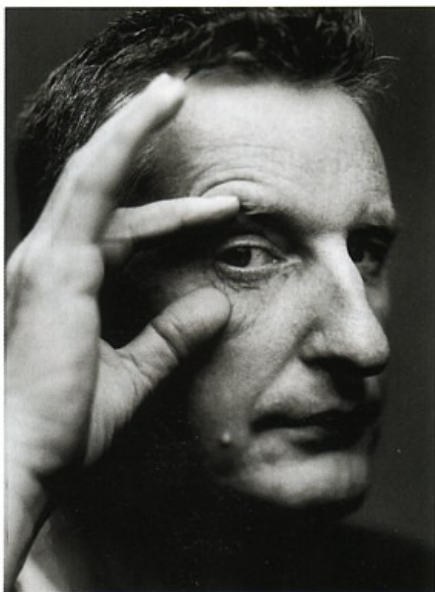


“All of my dreams came true”

THE CAMPAIGNER **BILLY BRAGG**



The Miners' Strike, the return of folk protest and the battle of style over content – for Everyone's Favourite Singing Commie's the main aim was “to be ziggly when everyone else was zaggy”

Bragg's first promotion break came in 1983 when he heard John Peel announce on air that he was hungry. The ambitious folk protest singer rushed to Broadcasting House with a mushroom biryani and the grateful DJ played an extract from *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs. Spy* – albeit at the wrong speed. The Big-Nosed Bard From Barking, now 47, has since made 17 albums and loudly maintained the left-wing political campaigning he began with the Red Wedge movement in the '80s. He was recently asked by Nora Guthrie to set some of her father's unrecorded lyrics to music. He lives with his wife and children in Dorset.

“IF YOU COULD SUM UP my whole schtick in the early '80s, it was to be anti-Spandau Ballet – to be ziggly when everyone else

was zaggy. So one of the defining moments of the '80s for me was when Gary Kemp came to play a Red Wedge gig, 'round about Christmas 1985. Everyone was going, 'Don't let Braggy know!' and he only came to find me before I went on, the poor sod – he'd never played solo before and wanted some advice. I had to give it to him. He came to that gig having written *Through The Barricades* – no *Free Nelson Mandela*, admittedly, but even so – and I thought, *shit*, if he's on my side, I can't hate that side of things any more.

The way politics and pop came together defined the '80s for me. In the early '80s, before the Miners' Strike, it was very us versus them: the masses of people riding in off the back of the New Romantics, all style over content, and the few people like me, who were resolutely content over style. The people who wanted Maggie Thatcher out rather than some new Haircut One Hundred woolly jumpers. Of course, there has to be both camps in pop, and the fact that we were doing the opposite to everyone else at that moment did help my career, I know that now. People who read the inky hadn't expected punk to die on its feet in 1982 with *Sandinista*, and they wanted music to keep being reactionary and political. Bronski Beat, The Redskins, even The Smiths to some extent, got that inky support on the back of their songs or statements – there were people who supported that homegrown, proper songwriting rather than, 'Her name is Rio and she dances on the sand'.

That punk or DIY ethic found itself into our political goals. I'd play Nicaraguan Solidarity gigs with The Style Council – give Weller his due, he was one of the few that managed to be in both the style and content camps – and I'd play gigs with people like Elvis Costello organised at specific coal pits during the miners' strike. I'd hear miners' wives, these women who'd never spoken before in public, giving these incredible speeches. The pit gigs were very, very powerful. Day-to-day political education touring around the northern coalfields.

And then Live Aid came along. The miners' gigs had definitely made it hip to step up on stage and make a point, and Live Aid took that a stage further. It allowed the stylish lot to have content. I'm not denying Live Aid's power, but hardly any of those groups helped the miners and it's not hard to be against the idea of starving children. Live Aid wasn't anti-Thatcher or against monetary capitalism, against things that actually made



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Bragg addresses the Red Wedge faithful in 1985 – with fellow campaigners Robert Wyatt, Neil Kinnock, Robbie Coltrane and Heaven 17.

famine worse. And it seemed to lead to bands thinking about how politics could help their image rather than how their image could help change politics. Those bands were more worried about their careers fading out than anything else – we couldn't give a stuff about ours; we just wanted to use music as a platform.

But some of those people have gone on to do great things. Bono's first political gig was Live Aid. Every time an IRA bomb would go off in those days someone would stick a microphone under his nose. He used those opportunities to do something positive, which has to be applauded. You see the effect of that still today with people like Chris Martin. I'm all for it. And at that time, it felt a little like the hippy ideal of the '60s was somehow transforming itself, for better or worse. All the rhetoric about actually changing the world through peace and love, big American stars singing how *We Are The World*, charity records shifting units back home. I was very pleased to have an honorary Number 1 that way (the double A-side of Bragg's *She's Leaving Home* and Wet Wet Wet's *With A Little Help For My Friends* for Childline in 1988) and not worry about a follow-up. That killed bands like The Housemartins. I was happy for Marti Pellow to

do the heavy lifting.

And *Smash Hits* changed pop completely. Before *Smash Hits*, pop music had been stuff for the girly, teeny market. For magazines like *Jackie*, that were all about David Cassidy and Donny Osmond centrespreads. *Smash Hits* rode in on the back of the *Prince Charming* and all the New Romantic stuff coming in, and made image so much more important than it had been before that. It is very important, rock and roll wouldn't be the thing it is without it. But things got interesting when bands like the Eurythmics would be in both papers, liked by both sets of people. That hadn't happened before.

But the '80s also saw monopolies like MTV and major labels getting a grip again. That was very unfortunate. I'm so glad it's going the other way these days – the industry now is as exciting as it's ever been. You can make a record on Monday and Tuesday and get it on the internet on Wednesday. By the time *Between The Wars* came out, the miners' strike was done and dust-



ed. You had to rely on being championed by a DJ or get your promo on MTV then, and you don't now. MTV doesn't even show pop videos any more.

It's very easy to romanticise the '80s, and we shouldn't. I don't miss Thatcher, I don't miss Reagan, I don't miss the Berlin Wall. All my dreams came true in the '80s – I toured the States, got *NME* covers – but I don't play *Between The Wars* and get misty-eyed. But something did make me laugh the other day. I was in New York walking down 46th Street past Radio City Music Hall, and who was playing there but Tony Hadley, Howard Jones and Boy George, doing an '80s revival tour. And I thought, 'Billy, son, be proud that Everyone's Favourite Singing Commie isn't up there in the lights. The old boy isn't ready for the end of the pier yet'."

Interview by JUDE ROGERS

BILLY BRAGG: VOLUME 2 is out in October, bringing together all his albums from 1988-2002. >>