

## Billy Bragg's past keeps up with the present

Folk-punk icon's reissue campaign proves his passion and politics are as fresh as ever

**BERNARD PERUSSE**

The Gazette

*Wednesday, September 20, 2006*

The synths and drum machines on most pop records from the 1980s are among the most dated sounds you'll hear on any oldies station. But one thing from that decade is as fresh as this morning: the wild abandon of an idealistic, plugged-in folk-punker bashing away at a barely tuned electric guitar - with no accompaniment.

That was the raw sound of 25-year old Billy Bragg, delivered in a 16-minute burst on his 1983 debut mini-album, *Life's a Riot with Spy vs. Spy*. These melodic, stirring songs of passion, politics and hard-core humanity made tepid new-romantic bands like Spandau Ballet and Haircut 100 seem a little silly. Even as more instruments were added with subsequent Bragg releases, no quarter was really given.

Bragg, who performs Friday night at Club Soda, is now 48 - and he recently had a chance to revisit his early material while preparing reissues of the albums he recorded between 1983 and 1990. The four double discs, with plenty of previously unissued tracks, will be followed next month by a second set of re-releases.

The sole EP by his punk-era group Riff Raff, formed in 1977, is not part of the reissue program. The group fell apart within two years, after which Bragg did a very non-punk thing and joined the British army for basic training with the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars in 1981. "The band had split up, punk had come to nothing, (like) everything I believed in," he explained in a recent phone interview. "We were going to change the world. The Clash had made Sandinista! It was a waste of time. I needed to press the 'eject' button on my previous life."

When Bragg's need to write songs came back, he bought himself out of the army for 175 pounds and recorded that epochal mini-album. To Bragg's ears, his initial short salvo sounds like it could have been fired at any time in the last 50 years.

"The only point of reference I've got is when I first heard Bob Dylan singing on the album *The Times They Are A-Changin'* in 1972 or '73 - at the height of glam rock in England. I'd never heard anything so raw and earthy as Dylan singing solo. And I'd like to think *Life's a Riot* stands up in that same sort of way. It would still be a shock to hear it today," he said.

The musical landscape, however, wasn't exactly welcoming for bare-bones, no-net thrashing when Bragg made his move - and, to be sure, he didn't burn up the charts. But he piqued some interest.

"There's always a niche for someone prepared to zig when everyone else is zagging. If 80 per cent of the people were listening to Spandau Ballet, 20 per cent of the people might be looking for something different - and I guess I

picked up those people," Bragg said.

The singer-songwriter's left-wing politics were only part of the equation. While songs like *Between the Wars* and *Ideology* wore their socialist heart on their sleeve, compassionate slices of life like *Greetings to the New Brunette* and *Levi Stubbs' Tears* endeared Bragg to the Ray Davies lovers.

Bragg said retaining the rights to his own records has allowed him to pick the time to get them back on the shelves. "It's also nice to do something a bit tactile before buying music just becomes a matter of clicking on a mouse," he said. Indeed, technological changes in the music industry have pitted Bragg against social-networking sites like MySpace and Bebo over proprietary-rights clauses that might have allowed the sites to retain ownership of music posted there by artists. Both sites changed their terms of use.

"The greatest threat to a working musician is signing away rights to things that should, fairly, be your pension rather than somebody else's pension," he said. "I own my rights because I got good advice from my manager when I was starting out. In my live band on my most recent tour in the U.K., I was accompanied by Ian McLagen of the Small Faces, one of the great bands of the 1960s. Whenever we stopped by the road for coffee, in a gas station, there would always be a '60s compilation, which would always have a Small Faces track on it - which Mac would get no money for. And that should be his pension, not (a fund for) some guy he's never met at a record company."

Activism is still a major part of Bragg's life. Among other things, he's an advocate for torture survivors, and he worked against the Conservative MP in his own Dorset constituency in the 2001 general election. And if the kind of Labour Party that might have inspired him to write *There Is Power in a Union* seems a memory, he doesn't measure success by how much he's able to change the world.

"We're desperately trying to make Tony Blair leave office so we can get on with patching up our foreign policy and our economy," he said. "I'm trying to encourage moralists to engage. And I have to engage myself in order to be able to look them in the eye and say, 'You must participate.' If I didn't participate and I just sang about it, I'd feel I was a hypocrite. I don't measure the results, I just measure the activism. And I try to be true to myself in that."

Billy Bragg performs Friday at 8 p.m. at Club Soda, 1225 St. Laurent Blvd., with opening act Seth Lakeman. Tickets cost \$32.50. Phone 514-908-9090.

bperusse@thegazette.canwest.com

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2006



---

Copyright © 2006 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.