



and start winning prizes



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September 21st, 2006

Billy Bragg

Fort Bragg

Martin Siberok

The U.K.'s Billy Bragg stands resolute on issues of national(ist) security in new book and solo tour

A conversation with Billy Bragg is always a pleasure. Never known for being the shy type, he's a man with strong views and opinions who never pulls his punches.

Back in the 1980s, Bragg spoke out against socioeconomic changes in British society caused by the monetarist policies of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Along with many like-minded musicians, including Paul Weller (The Jam), Jimmy Somerville (Bronski Beat, The Communards) and Jerry Dammers (The Specials), Bragg used the stage to speak out against racism, bigotry and the right wing. Bragg has always put his politics where his mouth is.

Hailing from the working-class East London suburb of Barking, Bragg continues to fight the good fight. It has become even more acute now that the British National Party, an anti-immigrant, whites-only party, has won nearly a dozen seats on the local municipal council in his hometown.

In order to make sense of the ever-changing political landscape in Britain, Bragg has just written a book called *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging*, which will be released on Oct. 9 in the U.K.

Speaking from home in Dorset, southwestern England, the ever-talkative Bragg is pumped. "I just came back from Germany to find a copy in the mail - my very first copy. I've been stroking it for the last couple of days and thinking to myself: 'I am an author. I am an author.'"

Originally the book started out as an investigation on the notion of Englishness. With the United Kingdom in the slow process of devolution as Scotland and Wales gain more regional autonomy and England transforming itself into a multiracial and multicultural country, the question of who is or isn't English has raised its ugly head at the forefront of political debate.

"The question these days is about belonging," explains Bragg. "The issue of who does and who doesn't belong in Britain, America and Canada is a pretty hot potato. Immigration is apparently now the biggest issue in British politics. In fact, it's a big issue all over Europe and even in North America."

Police crackdowns in the U.S. since 9/11 and in Britain since the 2005 London suicide bombings are transforming long-established liberal societies. Even Holland has hardened its resolve since the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004. "Holland, the most liberal country you've ever been to, is threatening to deport people if they don't fit in. It's really shocking when you see the knee-jerk negative way people react."

"I wanted to write this book because it's time for people who believe in multiculturalism to speak out.

Our society has to be free and fair for everyone."

In 2002, Bragg released *England, Half-English*, an album that addressed issues of racism and anti-immigration. He wanted to underline the fact that English culture has been shaped and influenced by immigrants over the years.

"Englishness is a state of mind. You can't be English in law. There's no such thing as an English passport - we all have British passports.

Bragg will be by himself on his cross-Canada tour this fall. "It's just me on my own sweet lonesome -

classic Bragg as we call it now," he says. "I'm promoting the release of my box set so there will be a lot of back catalogue, plus I've got a few new songs. They will be part of a new album due next year."

Asked if there was a future book or speaking tour in the plans, Bragg laughs and adds, "My tours are all speaking tours with a few songs thrown in."

Billy Bragg



Bragg: From Barking, mad

