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## Billy has something to Bragg about

By DAVID SCHMEICHEL -- Winnipeg Sun

After nearly 30 years in the game, there's still plenty of the ol' rabble-rouser left in Billy Bragg.

Only now, the British folk-punk institution -- and likely influence on everyone from Wilco to Winnipeg's own Greg MacPherson -- isn't using his trusted electric guitar to bang out more politically charged protest anthems.

Instead, he's put pen to paper and come up with his first book, the soon-to-be released *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging*.

"It's very easy for all of what we do in this industry to become trite or self-parody," Bragg says from his home in West Dorset, where he's just shipped his young son off to his first day of school. "The book is proof that I'm still angry enough to bother with all this stuff."

He describes his book as "part polemic, part autobiography," one that examines questions of identity and belonging in a country still reeling from subway bombs planted by its own citizens last summer and in which members of the extreme-right (and many would say racist) British National Party have begun winning seats on town councils.

"It's about the issue of who does and does not belong in 21st-century Britain," the 48-year-old Bragg says of the book, due Oct. 9. "Starting with me of course: Do I belong?"

Obviously, there are parallels to be drawn between the U.K. and the U.S., where so-called illegal immigrants have been demonstrating over their right to work in California, and where post-9/11 paranoia has resulted in stepped-up (and sometimes racially specific) security measures.

"Last year, when the London bombings happened, there was quite a bit of debate as to whether this was the fault of multiculturalism," he explains. "Those who thought that it was were in favour of a return to British values. But no matter how many times I Googled it, I couldn't come up with a definition of British values."

In the end, Bragg decided most of his countrymen would consider "fair values" to be chief among those making up the British tradition, a realization that brought him one step closer to the mainstream that has always kept him at arm's length.

"The tradition I represent would be said to be the dissenting tradition, and yet the centre of my tradition is also fairness," he says. "So far from being the dissenting tradition, my tradition is the central tradition."

Much of Bragg's inspiration for the book came from memories of his own childhood, like hearing Simon and Garfunkel's *Scarborough Fair* for the first time on the radio.

"How was it that two Jewish guys from Queens playing with Bob Dylan's backing band could make me feel English?" he laughs. "Shouldn't I be hearing those songs from my own culture?"

Besides the book, Bragg is also about to release his second boxed set, featuring remastered copies of his last four solo discs, plus five more discs of bonus materials. With so much material under his belt, it's no surprise he's got a theory on why some listeners are so hostile towards performers with politics on their mind.

"They don't want to hear any criticism," he says. "Because their worldview is so irrational -- my country, right or wrong -- and because it's based on such a black-and-white mindset, any grey area they find threatening. Ambiguity might suggest they might have been wrong."

Bragg, who plays tomorrow night at The Garrick, was last in town to play the Winnipeg Folk Festival in 2004, when he remembers scoring a now-cherished hat from the Army/Navy Surplus store on Portage Avenue.

"I love those kind of stores, where the farmers go to buy their clothes," he laughs. "After a certain point, once you get past the age of 35, you just can't be bothered with fashion anymore. A good Army/Navy store -- that's the way to go."

Tickets to Bragg's show are \$32 at Ticketmaster ([www.ticketmaster.ca](http://www.ticketmaster.ca) or 780-3333) or the Folk Festival Music Store.