

Billy Bragg is happy to brand himself a patriot

By tony montague

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It's been four years since Billy Bragg released *England, Half English*, his most recent album of new songs. But fans of the lefty bard of Barking needn't fret that the muse has deserted him, or that he's any less fired up by social and political causes. Bragg has been channelling his creative energies into writing a book, *The Progressive Patriot*, and he's as actively engaged as ever.

"I'm working with elements of the Labour government, shall we say, on reform of the House of Lords," says Bragg, reached at a Montreal hotel. "And culturally, I'm involved in issues of artists' rights on the Internet, particularly the burgeoning social-networking sites like MySpace and MTV Flux, a new one in Britain. They're very tight in terms of conditions, and some of them seem intent on harvesting residual rights to the content put on their sites, which I find disturbing."

A visit to www.billybragg.com/ automatically launches a recording of his voice, denouncing MTV Flux's practice. Visually, Bragg's home page is dominated by his portrait on the cover of *The Progressive Patriot*, due out this week.

"I've spent a good 18 months talking about the book, and then 18 months writing it—which took more concentration than anything I've ever done," says Bragg. "It was like a sabbatical from songwriting, and may have been what I needed after 20 years of making records."

Patriot has become a loaded word, usually associated in Britain with the far right of the political spectrum. Bragg doesn't flinch from tackling the matter head-on, and in typically provocative style. "A patriot is someone who gives a shit about their country—and I do. I refuse to accept the traditional view of 'My country, right or wrong'. I represent a different, dissenting view, and I've every right to have that tradition present in our national culture."

In the book—subtitled *A Search for Belonging*—Bragg tackles issues of identity and inclusion in British society and how they relate to his own experience. The process of self-examination is complex, and at times ironic.

"The first time I ever felt English was listening to Simon and Garfunkel singing 'Scarborough Fair' when I was 12. How two Jewish guys from Queens [New York], playing with Bob Dylan's backing band, could make me feel more English is something I think is worth exploring. I spend a chapter on that, and there's also one about Rock Against Racism and the Clash, and where my politics come from."

Refreshed by the challenge of creating *The Progressive Patriot*, Bragg is writing music and lyrics again. He promises he'll be in the studio in the next six months with his band, the Bloses. "In March, once I had the book almost finished, I did a little tour of the U.S. East Coast, and I was coming up with songs all the time. I'll be playing some of that stuff when I come to town. It will be the usual mix of the polemical and personal. The book's like that really—a very long Billy Bragg song."

Billy Bragg plays the Commodore on Friday (September 29).