

Jet lagged Billy asks our questions about where are we all going?

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The insomniacs sword in **Billy Braggs** hand is not that of a cock rocker - *NO!* it represents the seemingly never ending enthusiasm and energy this man has for his music and his beliefs. **The second part of his Anthology** is released this week and Music Towers got a chance to catch up with the man that has been an inspiration to **Bobs** and **Bonos** of this world.

**Bills** mission to enlighten continues to be earnest, prolific and poetic. Anthology And so late one evening as the candle burnt down to its last, the man himself picked up his pen once more to answer our questions....

#### **Who have you most enjoyed collaborating with and why?**

My most enjoyable collaboration has been the opportunity to write music for the lyrics of **Woody Guthrie**. To work with the artist many consider to be the founder of the political pop tradition, to be given access to his archive and to choose the songs myself was a great privilege.

#### **Given that most of your more political work is a grass roots level, do you ever feel the urge to do a higher profile campaigning of the Bono or Geldof type, and how much real value is there in that - (bearing in mind jarvis cockers new single 'running the world' - about the lack of real change to world poverty) – do you think people get the impression they are effecting change but in actuality not a lot really happens?**

It is hard to measure what difference campaigning pop stars make we have no real power and cannot effect change. What we can do is change the perspective of our audience. That is what I aspire to and I'm sure **Bono** and **Bob** are the same, although they work in much grander projects. I respect artist who takes that challenge on, be it at grass-roots or at the **UN**.

#### **Did your early experiences in the army and with red wedge spur you on to continue your political work or did you have a political conscience before then?**

The politics I had before I joined the Army in 1981 came from punk specifically from **Rock Against Racism**. However, my conscience was not so developed to stop me from joining up. The Army taught me about class politics all the officers were upper class and had very few shared experience with their working class charges. It took **Margaret Thatcher** to turn me into a fully fledged socialist and the 1984 Miners Strike to turn my songwriting into a more ideological manifestation of my political beliefs.

#### **Do you seek a balance between your musical work and campaign work or does it reach its own level that you're happy with?**

I do what I can, given the time I have. When I'm busy with making records and touring, the politics has to fit around the job. When I'm off the road, I have more time to devote to campaigning. Some times I am asked to do very worthy events, but just can't get involved due to over commitment on my part.

#### **Given the optimism that we had on that night in 1997 when we all so elated the Labour government finally took power - how surprised are you at what has transpired since or was the writing on the wall?**

No the writing was not on the wall and things were moving in the right direction until 11th September 2001. That day has distorted our politics and led **Tony Blair** down the path to his own destruction.

#### **Who would you have liked to work with that is no longer around?**

**Joe Strummer**. Plans for the two of us to tour the US together were in the making when Joe died.

#### **Are you ever frustrated with artists who don't use their status to effect social change when its obvious there is so much to be done?**

I get frustrated by those artists who write songs addressing issues and then fail to come up with actions to match those sentiments. That smacks of exploitation.

#### **Do any up and coming artists inspire you, who, how and why?**

**Joanna Newscombe** has a song called **Sadie** that I admire for the dark brooding content of its lyrics.

#### **What are you listening to at the moment? What was the last album you bought?**

Just got back from a Canadian/US tour so I've been buying more albums than usual. Among the artists who crossed the Atlantic in my horrendously overweight baggage were **Harry Nilsson**, **Ann Peebles**, **Little Feat**, **Ray LaMontagne**, **Iron and Wine**, **Dan Berner**, **Delaney and Bonnie**, **Chairmen of the Board**, **Anti Flag**, **Bob Dylan**, **Otis Gibbs**.

#### **You always seem to have alot of energy and enthusiasm - do you ever feel cynical - do you think you'll get cynical when as you get older?**

I don't think so. Over the years I have come to realize that the real enemy of those of us who want to create a better society

is not **Conservatism** or even capitalism, but cynicism. It is at the heart of so much that is wrong with society.

I admit that I have to bite back my own cynical feelings working for 18 years to get **Labour** elected only for them to then suck up to the worse US president in a generation will have that effect on you.

**As a democratic socialist**, I have to be optimistic because I believe in fundamental human decency and the ability of the majority to opt for that given a choice. That's what happened in 1945, when the British people voted wholeheartedly in favour of free education, free health care, decent housing and proper pensions, all funded out of their own pockets. I believe we need to get back in touch with that collective spirit in order to guarantee the individualism and realize the potential of each member of society, no matter what their circumstances.

#### **Where to next musically and campaigning wise - what is happening with Charter 88?**

I am planning to make a new album with my band **The Blokes** sometime in the next six months we have already begun demoing songs. Campaigning wise, I am still involved in the fight against the **BNP** and will be working with **Charter 88** to ensure that constitutional reform a democratic House of Lords and a British Bill of Rights are on the agenda of Blair's successor.

#### **Billy Bragg the Anthology Volume II is out now on Cooking Vinyl**

##### **Links:**

[Click here](#) for Billy's Website

[Click here](#) for a cool live performance stream.

*Alison Charles*