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Billy flies flag for all shades of England

12 October 2006



Billy Bragg

NEVER has the issue of patriotism been so much in the public eye as it is at present.

With St George flags having flown across the country during England's ill-fated attempt to win the World Cup, national newspapers like the Daily Mail and the Daily Express whipping up irrational hatred and mistrust of all things foreign and the

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British National Party making inroads amid such fears, it is indeed a strange time to be English.

One man who has never been afraid to talk about the issue and indeed tackle it head on, is "Bard of Barking", Billy Bragg.

As he says: "I love my country so therefore I'm a patriot. but what does it really mean to be English?"

In the two and a half decades of his career Bragg has made an indelible mark on the conscience of British music, from the early days of New England and Between The Wars through the more popped up delights of Sexuality and Accident Waiting To Happen and his number one single with a cover of The Beatles' She's Leaving Home.

But although music is his first love and the cornerstone of his life, it has also provided the passionate and humane backdrop for Billy's political beliefs and given voice to his own sense of radical Englishness.

Bragg first tackled the issue on his last album England, Half English, but has been able to expand on the themes a great deal further than in a few three minute pop songs by writing his first book, the Progressive Patriot (£17.99, Bantam Press).

The Progressive Patriot addresses the issues of identity and belonging. It pulls no punches in its insights, and its radical vision offers a positive hope to a nation struggling to find its sense of self. Described by The Times as a "national treasure", Bragg is one of the most successful and lauded singer/songwriters this country has produced.

A firm believer in tolerance and diversity, Billy was appalled when the BNP won seats in his home borough of Barking and Dagenham and horrified by the atrocities of the July 7 bombings in 2005.

These events focused his thoughts on the continuing debate about what it means to be British and the need to challenge the far right's monopoly on patriotism.

He says: "We have to get to grips with this issue, not of race or nationalism, but with belonging. What is it that we have in this country that binds us together?"

"During the debate after the July bombings, there was a growing suggestion that those attacks were the fault of multiculturalism and the way to resolve it was to reassert British values.

"I like to think of myself as a supporter of multiculturalism so I wanted to see what these British values were. Google it though I did - I even went on to the CIA website - I could not find a definition of traditional British values.

"So there's a real problem there - those people are asking us to move towards this mythical idea of something that doesn't exist."

Part autobiography, part social history, Bragg delves into his own family history and childhood in Barking, and the influences of such luminaries as George Orwell, Rudyard Kipling, Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan and most importantly The Clash (to whom

the book is dedicated), to reflect on how this shaped his own sense of Englishness.

He also considers the historical impact of the Magna Carta, the People's Charter, the English civil war, World War Two and the miners strike on today's national consciousness.

It also turns up some interesting and little-known snippets of cultural insight. For instance, did you know that Paul Simon wrote Bridge Over Troubled Water, while living in Dagenham, about a girl from called Kathy from Hornchurch. Or that Barking was the second biggest and most important town in England in Roman times?




But, most importantly, it tackles the issues of race and racism, and challenges the likes of the BNP, by casting them as unpatriotic for casting doubt on the facts of the Holocaust and thereby actually expressing support for a nation that tried to invade us.

It also pricks a lot of the media-led myths that multiculturalism isn't working and urges people to look again at the diversity around us and celebrate it.

He says: " I don't care where you're from or where your grandparents are from. All I care about is how my children are going to get on with your children. That's what we have to bequeath to our children - a cohesive society not a divisive one."

The Progressive Patriot is a book that we all need to read. In a world where British citizens can lay bombs to kill their countrymen, where religious fundamentalism is on the increase and where the BNP are somehow part of the democratic process, what does patriotism actually mean?

Ask Billy, he knows.

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