



WHY BILLY BRAGG IS FEELING ELECTRIC

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From tomorrow, Camden plays host to one of the most exciting musical initiatives to hit the capital in years. Centred on the immaculately refurbished Roundhouse and its new Freedm (sic) Studio, the BBC Electric Proms will also occupy other venues in the borough, such as the Jazz Café, Barfly and Koko for a five-day extravaganza in which both young and established artists present new live material, accompanied by an eclectic programme of films devoted to rock, pop, jazz and soul.

Concerts will be broadcast across the BBC's TV and radio network and the acts lined up read like a Who's Who of popular music, from The Who, James Brown and Paul Weller to Kasabian, Jet and bands such as Tigerstyle and the Bombay Dub Orchestra showcased by the BBC's Asian Network.

One of the headline acts is veteran singer/songwriter Billy Bragg, the Bard of Barking, whose ineffable blend of blokishness, touchingly poetic imagery, and fierce political commitment has made him a fully-fledged national treasure.

Now 49, Bragg is back with some new songs after a four-year break from recording, during which he has seen his eight previous albums released in two box sets, Billy Bragg Volumes 1 and 2 (Cooking Vinyl), and written his first book, *The Progressive Pilgrim* (published by Bantam), an investigation of what it means to be English.

"I'm excited at the opportunity to work with new people," says Bragg of the Electric Proms. "Collaboration is what it's all about, especially at live gigs. Since the process of selling CDs has become more volatile [thanks to downloads and social networking websites such as MySpace] live music is having a resurgence, which I think is good. If you can do it live, if you can move an audience, then you've really got something, and maybe you don't have to go and work in an office or in a car factory."

Before he turned 21 in 1978, Bragg had been scratching a living in record shops in his Essex hometown, and a job at Ford's in Dagenham beckoned. Then he saw The Clash play live at the Rock Against Racism Carnival in Victoria Park, and his future, both political and musical, was reshaped.

"People still underestimate the impact The Clash had," he says. "You'd be surprised how many people working in politics now were at Rock Against Racism, or have Clash tattoos under their suits." Bragg is chuffed that while he is playing the Freedm Studio on Thursday, the Clash's bassist Paul Simonon will be upstairs on the main stage, road-testing his new collaboration with Damon Albarn, The Good, The Bad and The Queen.

"I know all those guys well enough now to say hello, how are you," says Bragg. "In fact, when I played five nights with Hard-Fi last year, I bumped into [Clash guitarist] Mick Jones, who'd produced their album, and I told him I was dedicating my book to The Clash." Jones presumed the dedication would be to the late lead singer, Joe Strummer; Bragg said no, it really would be for the whole band. Like he says, for him it has all been about collaboration.

The Progressive Pilgrim is all about how we can work and live together, and it is Bragg's chief preoccupation at the moment. A personal history of our mongrel race and its attempts at creating a fair, just society through such reforms as Magna Carta and the creation of the welfare state, it culminates in a call for a bill of rights to enshrine "British values" for Brits of every race and creed.

As a committed campaigner against racism, Bragg was shocked into the idea of writing the book when the BNP won a council seat in his native Barking in 2004, but it was the 7 July bombings that were the



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real spur.

"Those evil men did more damage to social cohesion in this country than the British National Party and the NF did in the past 40 years," he says. "After that, there was a debate about the failure of multiculturalism and the need to return to 'British values'. But there is no definition of British values, no single document you can hold up and say, these are our beliefs. All I came up with, again and again, was the idea of fairness and tolerance."

His investigations in the course of writing the book led him to some conclusions his fans and fellow-travellers might find surprising. He thinks ID cards are a fair idea, as long as they are counterbalanced by a bill of rights. He thinks it is probably legitimate to ask a Muslim woman to remove her veil if she is to teach children.

Less surprising, perhaps, is his assertion that "not just the government, but the entire political class" failed to gauge the depth of resentment to the Iraq War, which he believes motivated the 7/7 bombers. And as an ex-soldier himself ("I wanted to drive a tank," he says of his brief 1981 enlistment) it's no surprise to find that he is on the side of British squaddies abroad.

"They didn't decide to do that job because they wanted to shoot civilians in Afghanistan," he says. "It was because they wanted to protect our country." He approved of Sir Richard Dannat speaking out in favour of withdrawing from Iraq: "But he told the wrong person. He should have told George Bush."

Bragg concedes that the book may have been partly prompted by the sight of a milestone birthday heaving into view next year. "I am approaching 50 and I did have that Paul Weller moment - you know, 'has my fire gone out?' In the past I only had a quiver of songs to show you how passionate I am. Well, look in WH Smith's now - there's a big, fat 80,000 word book proving my fire is still burning bright. I've been re-energised by writing it."

At the Electric Proms he will be showcasing songs from his forthcoming new album, and some compositions he recorded during a songwriting residency last year in a hospice for terminally ill women. And there is another reason why he is excited about the BBC event.

"I played my comeback gig at the Roundhouse in 1995, after taking a year off after my son, Jack, was born," says Bragg. "I was a bit nervous and I walked up Primrose Hill to calm myself down." Then, in the middle of the gig he forgot the words to his big 1980s hit St Swithin's Day. "But the audience sang it for me, all the way through. I just played my guitar."

Although Bragg now lives in a house on the coast near Bridport with Jack, his wife Juliet de Valero Willis, and a lively dog, he still regards himself as very much a Londoner. "In Dorset I've got horizon, and lots of it, and moving there helped skew my work-life balance slightly more in favour of my family," Bragg says. "But it's made me appreciate more what London has to offer." Like, for instance, the Electric Proms? "Yeah," says Bragg. "I still listen to new bands, and things like this just make me feel like a fan again."

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