

SCOTLAND on SUNDAY

Sun 12 Nov 2006



Billy Bragg performs in the Meadows, Edinburgh at the G8 Make Poverty History March. Picture: Danny Lawson.

## The gift of the Bragg

MILES SALTER

BILLY Bragg knows how to talk. Pick a subject - pretty much any subject - and off he goes, rabbiting on about music and politics and New Labour for all he's worth. This ability to talk the hind legs off a donkey is admirable. He's one of the most articulate singers in the world. While most pop stars struggle to use metaphors accurately, Bragg's ability to yap away coherently has earned him numerous appearances on programmes such as Newsnight and Question Time.

With so much to say for himself, it's no surprise that he has decided to put a lot of it in a book. The Progressive Patriot - A Search For Belonging was published last month, and deals with a subject close to Bragg's heart - racism and the search for English identity.

Back in the 1980s, when his music was making the occasional raid on the charts, his anthem, 'A New England' had a foot in two camps - romance and nationalism. But, says Bragg, writing the book has not been easy.

"It's been like climbing a mountain," he says. "I've been physically ill doing it. But I know when it's finished I'll be able to wave it in the general direction of Joe Strummer and the Clash and say, 'Look guys, the fire that you lit with Rock Against Racism in 1978 still burns fierce'. I can face up to being 50 knowing that I'm stronger and more articulate than I used to be. I'm still driven, unfortunately, and when you're driven, you never surrender to life being comfortable."

Bragg has become known as one of the entertainment world's most vociferous and articulate exponents of the Left. But he wasn't always political. "People ask me where I got my politics from, and I tell them it wasn't from my family," he says. "My Dad was just a normal bloke. He wasn't particularly political."

BRAGG'S POLITICAL baptism arrived in 1978, when the Clash played the Rock Against Racism event. At the time, Bragg was just a face in the crowd and inspired by Strummer's band of ragged street urchins.

"I was working for a big bank, as a messenger boy, and we'd sit around drinking tea and reading the tabloids," he says. "There was a lot of talk around me that was racist, or sexist, or homophobic.

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I didn't say anything. But after that march, I decided I would take a stand and started to speak out."

At around the same time, he played with a punk band called Riff Raff. Asked if he has happy memories of that band, he says: "Yeah! Yeah, I do. I remember once we went and lived on a farm in east Northamptonshire and got away from our parents. There was one night when we wrote and recorded a handful of brand new songs. We stayed up till dawn. We listened to the playback and they sounded great. We didn't sound like any of the bands that we'd been imitating for the previous three or four years.

"We went out and walked across fields in the sunshine. We were born in that moment - born as a band. Those moments were really precious. Being in Riff Raff was my equivalent of being in university - living away from our parents, learning all this stuff about life. Meeting girls. Trying out life and seeing how it fitted."

Riff Raff folded after a while, and Bragg joined the army for a brief spell. He paid his way out in what he later described "as the most wisely spent £175 of my life".

Returning to music, he began playing venues as a one-man version of the Clash. His early records on Utility, an indie-label subsidiary of Charisma in the early 1980s, were distinctive in both sound and price. "Pay no more than £3.49" enthused the stickers that adorned the front of his records and cassettes, at a time when other artists were charging the premium rate for their work.

Bragg soon became known as an artist who was unafraid to take a stand. He was a fixture of political rallies, and was involved demonstrations during the miners' strike. He also became involved in Red Wedge, the artistic wing of the Labour Party, and had his picture taken with the then Labour leader Neil Kinnock. An appearance alongside Tony Blair would, these days, seem more remote. The singer says he feels "heartbroken" over Iraq, but concedes that he's "very pleased" about Labour bringing European human rights into the UK's constitution.

Living in a house on the coast near Bridport with his wife Juliet de Valero Willis, 48-year-old Bragg is still a thorn in the side of causes which he regards as unjust. In April, in the run-up to the local elections, he toured the UK telling people to disregard the BNP. More recently, he's had a go at the new MTV station, MTV Flux, for wanting to take artists' work without any royalties or credit in return.

But there's more to him than agent provocateur. A recent boxed set retrospective, Billy Bragg Volume 2, showcased some of Bragg's great moments as a lyricist and melody-writer. For example, there are those great lines from the 1980s, such as "How can you lie there and think of England, when you don't even know who's in the team?" from his 1986 hit, 'Greetings To The New Brunette'.

"I was pleased with the reviews that said I'm a good songwriter," he says of the new boxed set. "I'm always in danger of being dismissed as a political songwriter. Because so few people write political songs, it's bound to be the thing that people know about me. But when they think that's all that I do, they miss out on the love songs that I've written.

"I get a lot of people who say 'I can't stand your politics Bill, but your love songs really do it for me'. And I think 'great!' That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to get into your heart.

"I'm trying to get into your brain as well, but heart first. Always heart first."

Billy Bragg Glasgow City Hall, December 4 (0141-353 8000); Perth Concert Hall, December 6 (0845 612 6328); Aberdeen Lemon Tree (01224 642 230), December 7