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Watch Billy Bragg perform 'All You Fascists' live

'My songs are more about love than politics'

Billy Bragg's heartfelt music is inspiring a new generation. **Andrew Perry** meets him

There's something disgraceful on here – you've got to print it," said Billy Bragg, as he handed me a fun camera. It was June 1999, and we were standing in our wellies amid the muddy carnage of that year's Glastonbury festival.

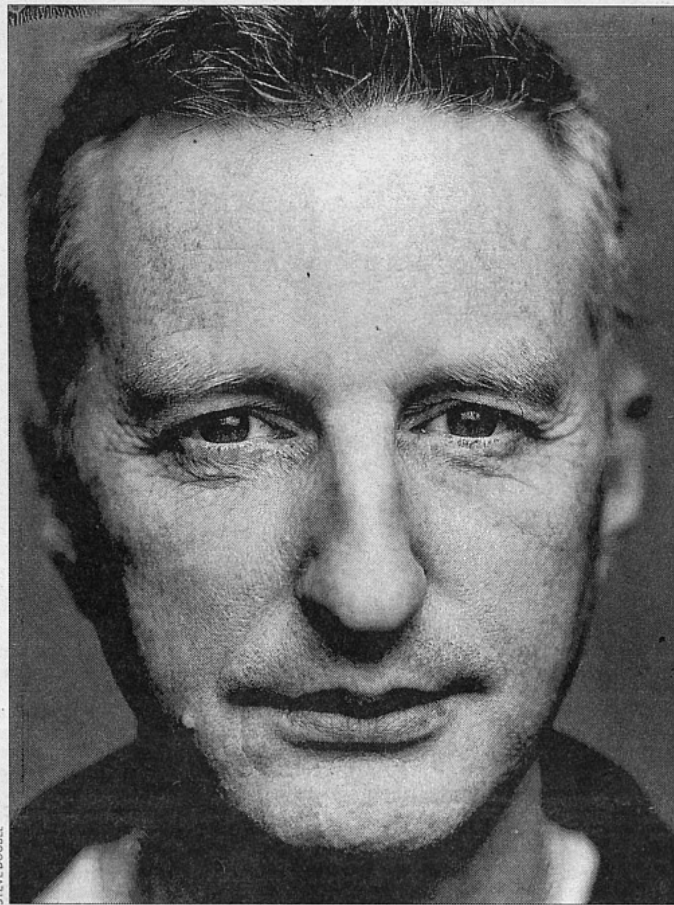
The disgrace turned out to be a picture of a Portaloos in the backstage enclosure, with a sign on the door ruling it for the exclusive use of the Manic Street Preachers. Bragg was so incensed at such elitism at a festival that he took a snap of the offending cubicle that ended up being printed in several national newspapers.

Seven years on, he has published a book called *The Progressive Patriot*, which elaborates on the principles that motivated him that day. He began writing it, he says, in response to the rise of the British National Party in Barking, the London borough in which he was born and raised. "It was something I couldn't respond to by just writing a song," he says. "Write another anti-fascist song? I've been doing that for years. It needed to say that I hate racism, but also that I love my country. I was trying to get to grips with the idea that I really am a patriot."

Bragg is best known, perhaps, for his involvement in the Red Wedge movement, which aimed to mobilise young voters against Margaret Thatcher in the 1987 election. In many people's minds, it was his big moment – albeit one that ended in disappointment – so it might come as a surprise to find the author of caustic polemical songs such as *Between the Wars* scribbling at length about his feelings of national pride.

For a new generation of songwriters, however, Bragg is not a failed ambassador for Old Labour, but a classic British artist, fit to champion alongside Paul Weller, Joe Strummer or even Lennon and McCartney. Much to his surprise, old songs from Bragg's repertoire have been covered recently by Jamie T and Get Cape. Wear Cape. Fly. A few weeks ago, he was also reverentially called in by Hard-Fi as support act.

For these youngsters, there are no



STEVE DOUBILE

The rabble-rouser turned patriot: Billy Bragg

divisive memories of Red Wedge, only a legacy of timeless tunes, written and sung without affectation, their creator transparently an Englishman trying to get to grips with the world's injustices. Two recent box sets of his recorded work have also prompted a critical rehabilitation.

Bragg first emerged in the early 1980s as a politically minded troubadour, who, inspired by punk rock, wielded a kerranging electric guitar. As was explicit in *A New England*, one of the most beloved of his early songs, romance was always highest on his agenda, even if the quest for social equality in his homeland ran a close second.

He was once tagged "the one-man Clash". I remember spotting him in Tottenham Court Road underground station on his way to support Paul

Weller's group, the Style Council, at a London theatre. He trudged up the escalator with everybody else, his guitar case in one hand, a battered little amplifier in the other.

"I toured the country like that," he recalls. "I had the longest arms in showbiz, from always carrying my gear. I was doing this hit-and-run thing, supporting all sorts of people, and stealing their audiences."

As well as his mobility, the idiosyncrasy of his act certainly helped, especially when he made his television debut on the soon-to-be-revived live music programme *The Tube*. His manager equipped him with "an amp fitted on to a backpack frame which made me look eight feet tall – running around with that thing on, I definitely got noticed". Bragg

didn't escape the attention of the nation's women either and says that he used his songwriting to help him navigate the resultant emotional entanglements. In the early 1990s, he married, fathered a son and moved to the West Dorset coast, along the way making increasingly pretty records, mostly "about the difficulties of keeping a long-term mature relationship going".

"It angers me," he says, "when I get dismissed as a political songwriter. If you totted it up, I reckon it would be two or three to one, love songs to political songs."

Equally, if you weigh up his staunchly English-sounding singing voice, and his detailing of British society and culture, as well as his humanist track record – shopping the Manics, taking the Northern Line to his own gigs, etc – *The Progressive Patriot's* subject matter shouldn't come as such a big surprise.

"I write a lot about my country," he says. "Sometimes I'm appalled by it, other times I won't listen to anybody bad-mouthing it. It's like Lily Allen's *LDN* – does she love London, or does she hate it? There's an ambiguity."

The book is Bragg's effort to disentangle that ambiguity, and to stomp up a positive historical tradition for Barking, and by extension Britain, as ammunition against the BNP. He traces the area's multi-culturalism back to the Venerable Bede, and links together the Suffragettes, the Chartists, punk's Rock Against Racism benefit gigs and even the Barons of Runnymede as proof of our country's innate sense of fairness and tolerance. Towards the end, he attacks the Labour Government for disregarding that tradition by chipping away at civil liberties in its "war on terror".

"I'm prepared to accept an ID card," he says, summarising the book's conclusion, "providing it has a bill of rights printed on the back. You know, we're asking our Muslim population to integrate into our society without offering them a model of what our society stands for."

He says his reading tour has brought him before some audiences that would have dismissed him out of hand during his rabble-rousing days in the late 1980s, but, again to his surprise, he has received standing ovations for his idea of a bill of rights. Perhaps now is the time for him to consider a career in politics.

♣ Touring now. See www.billybragg.co.uk