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# Casual racism makes me sick

THE political voice of rock and roll will be heard in Cambridge once again on Monday when Billy Bragg plays the Junction.

The date is part of the singer's second Hope Not Hatetour, a special series of concerts to support five of the UK's leading anti-Fascist organisations.

It's a subject that is dear to his heart and which has driven his music from the very beginning.

He started out 25 years ago, inspired by the Clash to fuse folk and punk, and created his uniquely recognisable early style by playing an unaccompanied electric guitar.

Tracks like *The World Turned Upside Down* and *Between the Wars* displayed his passion for political struggle and its importance in British history, while songs like *New England* - later covered by Kirsty MacColl - and *The Man in the Iron Mask* displayed a more tender side and examined the bittersweet angst of relationship woes.

He went on to work with his band the Blokes as well as recording with American alt.country band Wilco and reviving the works of Bob Dylan's muse Woody Guthrie - a singer whose guitar was famously adorned with the legendary 'This machine kills fascists'.

In his new book, *A Progressive Patriot*, the Bard of Barking examines his own life and the historical events that have surrounded it, and reflects on what it really means to love your country.

"I'd long been suspicious of what passed for patriotism in England, finding it far too narrow and constricting for my tastes," he writes in the book's introduction.

"The obsession with hierarchy and authority seemed designed to keep people like me in my place, and I felt sickened by the casual racism and quick tempered belligerence that simmered beneath its surface.

"Any residual patriotism I harboured was eventually knocked out of me by the sight of the neo Nazi National Front marching through the streets in the 1970s using the Union Jack as a symbol of their bigotry. The image of football hooligans rampaging through foreign cities, chanting my country's name, didn't help ether. If these people were patriots, as they claimed to be, then I knew for sure I wasn't."


But when he became involved in left wing politics in the 1980s, during the highly politicised era of Thatcherism, poll tax and the miners strike he discovered a long line of activists stretching back to Wat Tyler, the Diggers, and the Tolpuddle Martyrs and taking in the Suffragettes and the post war welfare reformists, who had battled against authority for the good of their country. This caused him to reconsider his view of patriotism.

"I do love my country, in a similar manner to which I love my son," he says. "My son is a part of me and I want the best for him; I want him to flourish, to be at ease with himself, to be admired.

"But I recognize that he is not perfect, and when he makes mistakes I am compelled to speak out and correct him - I can't merely accept and applaud everything he does just because he's my son.

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"If I love my country in the same way, does that make me a patriot? Well, no, not in the traditional sense. Patriots seem unable to accept any criticism, however constructive. They value loyalty above honesty; deference over respect.

"And yet I can't help but notice that patriots get upset when their country fails to live up to their expectations, just like I do."

The Progressive Patriot - A Search for Belongings available in hardback in bookstores now for £17.99.

■ Billy Bragg will perform at the Junction on Monday. Tickets are £16.50-£17.50. To book call (01223) 511511

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