

true brit

**Phil Udell talks
music, politics
and patriotism
with Billy Bragg**



Photo: Johnny King

The first question is the key to any interview. It sets the tone for the conversation and points where the whole thing is going. As such it requires some amount of thought although, on occasion, the subject almost presents itself. With Billy Bragg, the course of action that went into producing the second volume of his career-spanning boxed sets would seem like a good place to start. "I was writing the book, so I didn't have anything to do with that," he answers briskly. Right, okay ... that's *not* quite the tone we were looking to set. The notion of Billy Bragg with nothing to say on a subject is somewhat difficult to entertain and here, happily, he does indeed have something more to add.

"Wiggy went in and did it all, bless him. They were trying to get me to engage with that process but I was writing a book – I could hardly engage with my family let alone my back catalogue. The day I finished the book they were waiting on my doorstep to get me to agree the tracks and the sleeve notes. It was really down to Wiggy and Grant Showbiz, which is fitting because they were there and knew exactly what went on. They got some video footage together for me; they did a really great job."

The period covered, from 1988's *Workers Playtime* to 2002's *England, Half English* was a remarkable one for the singer – one that saw him move from a cult figure to the pop mainstream, and on to being an omnipresent media commentator, known as much for his opinions as his music. "It was strange trying to put it together so that it made sense," he agrees. "That's why *The Internationale*, which is actually the fifth album, ended up with the first four because it seemed to belong to that more political pre-Red Wedge time. *Workers Playtime* seems much more in keeping with *Don't Try This At Home* and *William Bloke*."

Perhaps the greatest leap came in terms of *Don't Try This At Home*, the success of which saw him stake a regular claim to the likes of *Top Of The Pops* and Radio 1. In a sense, his career was never the same again. "It was all ... big pop records. I thought it was great and quite enjoyed it. Johnny Marr's production on 'Sexuality' raised the bar and really began the process. On the box set you can hear my original demo and see what a great job he did, taking it from something that sounded like 'Louie Louie' to this shimmering pop monster. Then we started to make the videos ... but at the end of the

process we still sold the same number of records we always had. It was a bit of a cul-de-sac because it left people expecting me to make another big pop record and I wasn't really sure what to do then, so I went off and had a family. And that brought me back down to earth and able to get into the second decade of ... being Billy Bragg."

Although the Bragg back catalogue has been given an extensive overhaul on more than a few occasions, the boxed set does offer enough unheard material to entice the long-term fanatic and, for the casual listener, an opportunity to find out what the fuss is all about. While *Workers Playtime* is still probably his finest hour, *Don't Try This At Home* is full of big name draws and *William Bloke* showed him heading back to his roots, albeit in a mellower, post-fatherhood manner. Only the rather uninspiring *England, Half English* lets the side down, although its subject matter has proved to be wholly prophetic.

"Part of my job is to have topical antennae. The best songwriters do that; they don't write about what everyone is talking about – they pick up on what are initially more peripheral arguments and bring them into the mainstream. The book is all about belonging – and who does and who doesn't,

which unfortunately is an issue that is slap-bang in the middle of the mainstream.”

So to the book, clearly Bragg's number one priority at the moment. *The Progressive Patriot* is part autobiography, part polemic on the nature of identity and belonging in a country increasingly racked by self-doubt and fear. “That's what I'm trying to get into in the book ... whatever it is to be English. It's a number of different traditions coming together, like folk music is. As far as I'm concerned the book has tried to pick out those radical traditions that have informed what it means to be English or British.”

fairness is what is at the heart of multiculturalism

Unsurprisingly, Billy is all in favour of the increasingly diverse nature of British society. “It connects with Englishness. If you're trying to define what British values are, time and time again it comes back to this notion of fairness. Fairness is what is at the heart of multiculturalism. I don't buy the idea that Brick Lane is the antithesis of Britishness. What is the Union Jack but a multicultural flag made up of different nations coming together? People mixing together has always been at the heart of being British, and English for that matter. That's what the hyphen in Anglo-Saxon is all about.”

As a fervent football fan, Bragg appreciates more than most that the game also acts as a barometer for the nation. While 1993's ‘The Few’ detailed the ‘wasted seed of the bulldog breed’ and their hooligan antics, he accepts that the Euro championships just three years later marked a huge turning point. “That was partly because we were playing Scotland and we couldn't use the Union Jack. We suddenly remembered who we were and it took the Scots to remind us. Since then people have become more aware that we have this negative reputation and that it needs some work. There has been a shift in the last 10 years away from the ‘no one loves us and we don't care’ attitude. Obviously there was still a lot of belligerence associated with England in Germany, where the majority of fans had a really good time and seemed to embrace the new idea of what it means to be an English football fan; there were still those knuckleheads with their ‘Ten German Bombers’ songs. Those people do

seem to be in even more of a minority now, which is encouraging.”

Encouraging it may be, but recent events have clearly had a hugely negative effect on the previous levels of interracial harmony, something that concerns Billy greatly.

“It's always in danger at times when the majority feel that their security is threatened; they're going to look for people to blame and scapegoat. At the moment it's the Muslim community but it's not just about terrorism ... it may be that they're feeling economically insecure. You can see that with the rise of the British National Party in certain parts of the

country. You can't take any of this stuff for granted. Just because everyone's favourite meal is chicken tikka masala doesn't mean that there's not a lot of racism out there that has to be confronted. I think it's a constant struggle and events like the bombings in London destroy all attempts to create a cohesive society. Those people are the enemies of cohesion; they want to separate people and they're just as bad as the fascists as far as I'm concerned, except that they're worse – they kill people.”

As he had already suggested, he didn't find the process of writing a book the easiest of tasks, despite the fact that he has made his reputation as a wordsmith. Is writing an album and writing a book that different?

“Very much so. I'd compare song writing to taking a snapshot and writing a book to painting a massive canvas. It was much

more of a challenge and that's why I fancied doing it. I wasn't sure whether I could and there were times during the process when I didn't think I was going to be able to finish it, so I went off on tour and did some shows before coming back to it. It's the sort of thing that people have wanted me to do for a while but it wasn't until the issues that I raised on *England, Half English* needed further addressing that I decided to do it. In some ways I find it quite encouraging that, if I've got enough inspiration to write an entire book as I'm approaching 50 then my flame isn't dimming at all. If anything it's getting fiercer.”

The surprise is, perhaps, that it has taken Billy Bragg quite so long to put pen to paper in this form. As the boxed set shows, he has always had the keenest of eyes for social commentary, yet those songs have in reality been outnumbered by his musings on love and relationships. The outlet for his politics has increasingly been through the media and he is well aware that this book may well be targeted at those who have no knowledge of or appreciation for his work as a musician. “The bottom line is that I'm a communicator and there may well be people out there who are disinclined to enjoy my earthy vocal style but think that what I say makes sense.” □

Billy Bragg Volume 2 is out now on *Cooking Vinyl*. The *Progressive Patriot* is published by Bantam Press.

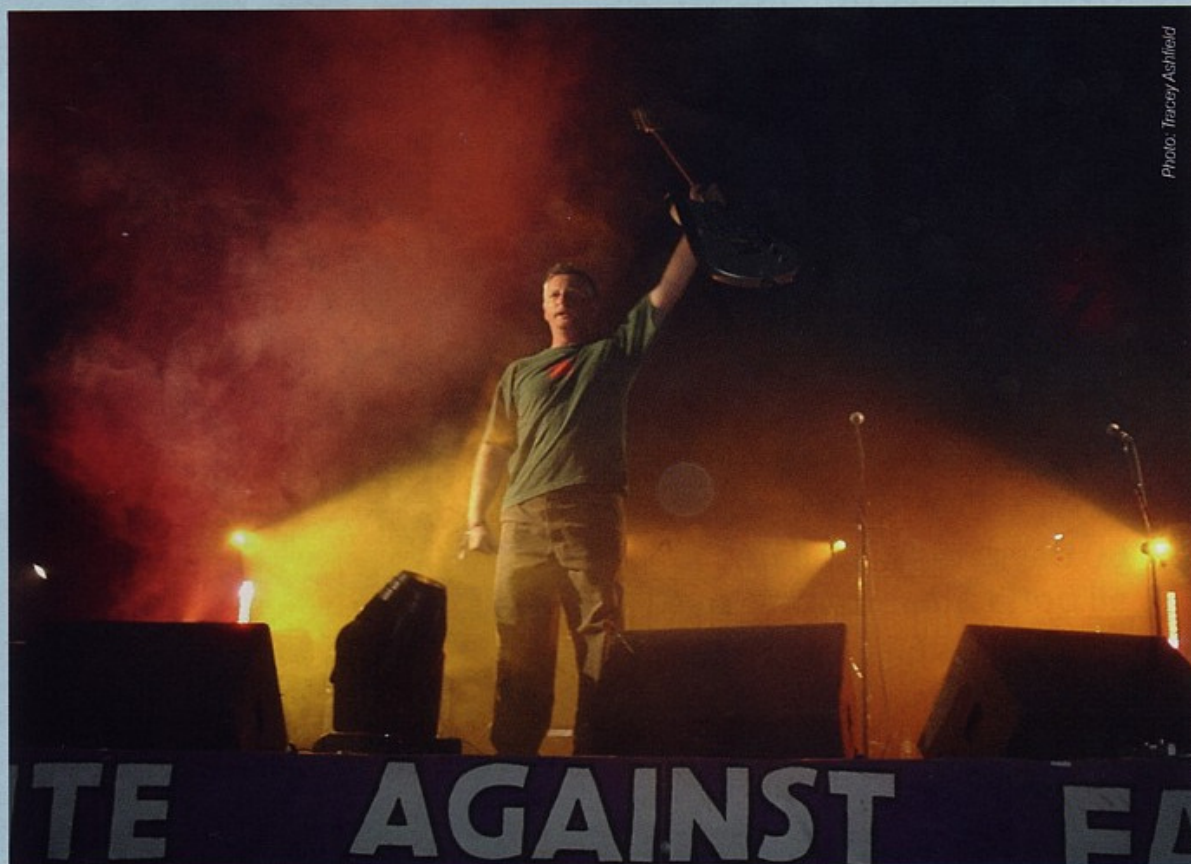


Photo: Tracey Ashfield