



Activist-musician Bragg focused on "Justice"

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By Mark Sutherland

LONDON (Billboard) - Ever since his 1983 mini-album "Life's a Riot With Spy Vs Spy," folk-rock artist Billy Bragg has been known as a spokesman for a generation.

But where his politically charged anthems and offstage activism once urged fans to support striking miners or kick out Britain's Conservative government of the '80s and '90s, he's now become an authority on artists' rights for the Web 2.0 age. In the past year he has had high-profile clashes with Web sites including MySpace and MTV Flux over what he saw as unfair proprietary rights clauses.

Consequently, he's now as likely to be found addressing executives at music industry conferences as campaigners at political rallies or music fans at his legendarily heartwarming shows. This month he will play live and give a keynote address at the Popkomm music and entertainment industry conference in Berlin.

With a new album, "Mr. Love and Justice," scheduled for 2008, and current projects including everything from rewriting the lyric for Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" to raising funds for prisoners in the guise of a one-man Clash tribute act, Bragg took time out to chat with Billboard about his new role and the future of the music industry. "I've always been an opinionated so-and-so," he says with a smile.

Q: Now that you've got the chance to address the European music industry, what will you talk about?

A: "There are two things I'm absolutely sure about: Whatever the music industry looks like in 10 years' time, there will be people who want to hear music and people who want to make music. And as one of those people, it's our job to get the industry to understand that the old industry-led model is going to have to change and the artist is going to be in much more of a powerful position. I work with Ian McLagan, who played in the Small Faces ... wherever we stop on the motorway, there's always a '60s compilation with a Small Faces track on it that he doesn't make any money off of. The old idea of signing your rights away for life of copyright is over."

Q: What system would you like to see replace it?

A: "In my contracts, my albums ultimately revert to me, but what very often happens is I sign them back to the label that put them out, if that label's done a good job. But it allows me to update my recording contracts to take into account new technological developments. The records you made in your 20s you should be able to put out yourself in your 50s. Mac's got several solo albums that he could press up and sell at his gigs but he can't because of the lifetime of copyright ownership."

A: Are you happier with the artists' rights situation on MySpace now?

Q: "Yes. The problem was, when they set up the site, the language used implied that they owned the rights to the material posted on the site. I own the rights to my catalog, and I don't let those rights go lightly. But it was an ambiguity rather than a sordid attempt to steal the work of artists. And they clarified it -- the clause now begins, 'You own the rights to the stuff you post on MySpace.' And the most important thing of all is that, when you take your stuff off MySpace, the deal ends. That's absolutely crucial -- MTV Flux, the

last time I looked, didn't have a termination clause, and that really concerns me because they could be harvesting rights."

Q: Do you still see a long-term role for traditional record companies?

A: "Yes. The climate is changing and the glacial record industry is melting into something much more fluid and faster-moving, but much more difficult to control. That doesn't mean it's the end of the industry or good music, but record companies' mode of work has got to change. When the bank lends you the money to buy your house, you pay the money back and you own the house. Record companies lend you the money to make a record, you pay the money back but they still own the record. When you've paid it back you should own the damn record, not them."

Q: Why has it been so long since you made a record?

A: "Instead of making an album when I should have done, in 2003-04, I wrote a book ('The Progressive Patriot'). After the (far right) BNP (British National Party) got elected in my hometown, Barking, east London, I needed to do something more than write a song. 'Mr. Love and Justice' will be out in the new year, and it'll be the usual wonderful mixture of love songs and polemical stuff."

Q: What inspired you to start the "Jail Guitar Doors" project?

A: "Someone doing drug and alcohol rehab work in a prison near where I live got in touch to see if I could supply some guitars to help his work. I wanted to mark the fifth anniversary of Joe Strummer's death, so I took the name from an old Clash B-side, set up a Web site (jailguitardoors.org.uk) and started soliciting donations. The first person to give me any money was Mick Jones, who actually wrote "Jail Guitar Doors," and last month we delivered half a dozen guitars to Wormwood Scrubs Prison, west London. Anyone who's sat upstairs at their parents' house knows how a guitar can help to transcend your surroundings. As Mick said to the inmates, they can help you to escape ... there was a brief pause before everyone started laughing."

(Bragg's Jail Guitar Doors benefit single "Old Clash Fan Fight Song," released under the name Johnny Clash, is available via billybragg.co.uk.)

Q: Would you ever take a full-time post within the music industry?

A: "I don't think you can do that and be a musician. If you're going to hold an elected post, like in the Musicians Union ... you have a responsibility to those people who elected you, you can't just do it part time. As a musician I'm still a bit too busy for that. People often ask me that about politics as well, but I look really rotten in a suit and tie."

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