

After his royal encounter, an old Leftie makes an unlikely confession ...



Pleased to meet you, Ma'am: Billy Bragg with the Queen at the Royal Festival Hall

HOW THE QUEEN CHARMED THE PANTS OFF ME

by Billy Bragg

LAST week, I shook hands with the Queen. It was a Tuesday evening, at the Royal Festival Hall. I was there with my family for the Royal Gala to open the refurbished hall, and to see a performance of Beethoven's exhilarating Ninth Symphony, which was sung with my lyrics.

Afterwards, we were whisked downstairs to the ballroom floor, where there was a line-up to meet the Queen. I'd never met her before — you don't get many opportunities to mingle with royalty in my line of work.

She was a small, grey-haired woman, smartly dressed in light colours to stand out against all the suits, and with a neat little handbag on her arm.

She worked her way down the line of dignitaries, nodding politely as they said their bit. It did make me laugh that both my neighbours in the line-up whispered to me as we stood together: 'Of course, you know I'm not a monarchist' — before dropping into a curtsey as the Queen came into view.

As I watched her approach, I couldn't help thinking that this is what it must be like to play for England, lining up to shake hands with the Queen before the big match.

My mind was drifting back to 1966 when suddenly there she was, offering me her hand with a look that seemed to say: 'Well, well. I didn't expect to see you here, Braggy.'

I found myself explaining how I'd written the new lyrics to Ode To Joy, and how fantastic it had been to hear Beethoven accompanied by my words. Earlier, I had noticed her in the Royal Box, following the lyrics in her programme. I had to smile.

I joked that I'd wanted to become the new Bob Dylan and had become the new Friedrich Schiller, the original 18th-century author of the Ode lyrics, instead. She laughed.

When she had gone, I spent some time speaking with members of the choir. They had done a great job with my lyrics, and I welcomed this chance to tell them so.

Later, I heard that the Queen's private secretary had asked if it would be possible to get a copy of the score — signed by me. That just about topped the evening off.

So I guess I have a bit of explaining to do. How could I — a life-long socialist who believes that God Save The Queen should be replaced as England's national anthem by Blake's Jerusalem — find myself shaking hands with Her Majesty?

After all, as a punk rocker during the Queen's Jubilee year back in 1977, I bought my copy of the Sex Pistols' anarchic God Save The Queen like all my mates.

Indeed, I woke up the morning after the performance to find columnists in the Mail wondering how a 'dyed-in-the-wool republican' like me could shake hands with the Queen.

THE simple truth is that although I am a Left-winger, I have never described myself as a republican. I've always felt that campaigning against the monarchy distracts us from addressing the issue of where the power really lies in this country.

Back in the Eighties when I fronted the Labour-supporting movement Red Wedge, I had a spat with the band The Housemartins over this very issue. They refused to join Red Wedge because we would not come out in favour of abolition of the monarchy.

I hit back with an article in *Well Red*, our house magazine, in which I argued that it would make a much greater contribution to altering the balance of power in this country if we abolished the House of Lords and replaced it with a democratically elected upper chamber — a view I still hold.

Ultimately, I'd like to see the monarchy removed from the political process. It's not just the charade of the Queen's Speech that I object to. The Prime Minister has, in the form of the royal prerogatives, the power to declare war, sign treaties and appoint peers without recourse to Parliament. Such issues ought to be a matter for our elected representatives.

I believe the people should be sovereign in Parliament, not the Crown. That magnificent gold

throne in the House of Lords would look lovely in a museum.

Once that happens, I don't have a problem with having a monarchy that is symbolic. After all, the Queen already plays that role, especially for the generation who lived through World War II. They do seem to revere her more than the rest of us.

So I believe that while there are still those among us whose loved ones fought and died for king and country in that conflict, then we owe them a debt of respect, not only for the sacrifices they made during the war, but for the legacy of the Welfare State, which they created and handed down to us. By respecting the Queen, we respect them.

However, I don't think the respect that people have for Elizabeth II will automatically be extended to Charles — I know

from experience that even ardent monarchists have trouble with the notion of Queen Camilla. And I just can't see the Aussies wanting to put King Charles III on their banknotes.

On the night of the performance, I certainly wouldn't have stuck around to shake hands with any other member of The Firm — and let's not even get started on the Queen's grandchildren, falling out of nightclubs with their braying Sloaneys friends.

In contrast, just look at how our Queen comports herself. She does her job pretty well, playing the role of our national figurehead with diligence and decorum, giving us a sense of continuity in a world where change seems to be getting faster. My respect for our monarch is entirely personal — it is not vested in her office.

The Queen is going to be a very

hard act to follow, if only because her place in our national life is unprecedented. After all, she is the only head of state most of us have ever known.

I sometimes feel very old, because I can remember having small change in my pocket which bore the austere profile of Queen Victoria. But anyone under 40 will have known only one face adorned with coins and stamps. When she dies, the monarchy as we know it will die with her. The institution itself may not survive her passing.

Up close, the Queen really isn't majestic, more like a grandmother in twin-set and pearls, but the dignity that she brings to the role of head of state utterly transcends the need for the flummery of majesty.

Ask yourself who else could have opened the new National War Memorial in Staffordshire last

week? Would a politician have made a better connection with the veterans? They stood in line to meet the woman who embodies to them the very things that they were fighting for.

Could anyone else signify to the families of the fallen how important we believe their sacrifice to be? Hers is a fame beyond the transitory celebrity which has become the debased currency of modern life. Posh and Becks fade into insignificance alongside her ubiquity and place in modern British history.

That's why the BBC found themselves in such trouble over the 'Crowngate' affair (in which film of the Queen for a trailer for a documentary was shown out of sequence).

It's pretty much standard practice for reality TV programmes to stitch up their subjects by editing the footage to create a sense of tension and conflict. The independent production company who supplied the show reel were just doing their 'job'.

What they didn't realise is that what might seem permissible when done to the poor souls who put themselves at the mercy of reality TV is just *not* acceptable where the Queen is concerned. Whether we like it or not, she is a special case, a national icon who has to be treated with respect. It's just a shame that we don't treat all our 81-year-olds that way.

I know I'll get lots of stick for shaking her hand — one of my fan websites, the Braggtopia, is offering a prize for the best photo caption for my royal moment.

MY TOUR manager has even asked if we are going to have the full coat of arms on the side of our tour bus with the words 'By appointment, songwriter to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II'. And I'll probably get struck off Morrissey's Christmas card list.

Of course, some argue that the monarchy makes us all subjects, but take a look at your passport — mine says I am a citizen, of Great Britain and of the European Union. Clearly, being a subject is a state of mind.

There are those who will doubtless seek to portray my actions as some kind of a betrayal, but that sort tend to be narrow-minded people from both sides of the political spectrum who would prefer me to be a stereotypical Leftie. I guess they'd find that easier to deal with.

The fact is, you won't see me standing outside Buck House waving a flag at the Trooping the Colour any time soon; nor will you find me accepting any honours that might be dangled my way.

However, that doesn't mean I can't show some respect for a woman who clearly means a great deal to many of my fellow citizens. Surely that's what living in our multicultural society entails, isn't it — showing due respect for beliefs that you don't necessarily adhere to?

I could have been snifty, I suppose, and refused to shake her hand, but she was good enough to come to my gig and follow my lyrics while they were sung. She even asked for my autograph.

Last Tuesday night was very special. I sat with my mother, my missus and my son while we listened to a great orchestra and a massive choir passionately sing my words to one of the greatest pieces of music ever written.

And afterwards, I got to shake hands with the woman who gave the World Cup to Bobby Moore. For a boy from Barking, it just doesn't get much better than that.

What can I say? The Queen charmed the pants off me.

■ Billy Bragg's fee for this article has been donated to Jail Guitar Doors, www.jailguitardoors.org.uk