



The Republican.

Bragg bringing tour to Northampton

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By **GEORGE LENKER**

Billy Bragg is highly regarded as a songwriter in his own right, so when he decides to collaborate with someone, he has chosen some fairly renowned, if unlikely, writing partners - like Woody Guthrie and Ludwig van Beethoven.

Bragg's two "Mermaid Avenue" CDs, on which he collaborated with Wilco, put music to some long-lost Guthrie lyrics. Earlier this year, Bragg found himself writing a new set of English lyrics for the "Ode to Joy" chorus from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

"I collaborated with Woody and now with Beethoven. Not too shabby, is it?" he said with a laugh.

Bragg will perform some of the results of these high-level collaborations at a concert tonight at Northampton's Calvin Theatre. The show is one of just five concerts Bragg will play on a short trip to the United States this month.

The re-writing of the words to the Ninth Symphony's chorus was the result of Bragg's offer to help 1,500 children who were scheduled to perform it at the re-opening of the Royal Festival Hall in London.

"The kids were having trouble with literal translation from the German and so when I was at a meeting about the re-opening, I just happened to say that if they liked, I would write a couple of new English verses," he said. "They liked what I did so much that they asked me to write lyrics to the entire fourth movement."

Bragg noted that his lyrics aren't simply a new translation of the original lyric by Friedrich Schiller, but a whole new set of words. He kept the sentiment behind one of Schiller's lines as the theme, however.

"A bit of it is inspired by one line of Schiller's: 'All men become brothers,' which I think is the most important line anyway," Bragg said.

Bragg enjoyed writing new lyrics for such an old and revered piece, but admits the process may not have been as pleasant for his family.

"The way I approached it was, I found an old recording of it and drove my family mad singing along with it at the top of my lungs," he said with a laugh.

Bragg has also been busy with nonmusical pursuits in the past year. After the election of 12 councilors from the whites-only British National Party in his home town in east London, Bragg wrote a political book called "The Progressive Patriot" last year. This year, he used the launch of the paperback version of the book to speak out again against the rise of racism in Britain.

Earlier this year, a musician engaged in rehabilitation work at a prison in Dorset, England, asked Bragg to donate some guitars so that the inmates could have access to instruments between lessons. Bragg responded not by just donating guitars but by creating a program called Jail Guitar Doors, an initiative that provides instruments for inmates in rehabilitation. The campaign takes its name from a B-side of a 45 record by The Clash. The song was written by Mick Jones, who, fittingly, was the first musician to make a donation to the fund.

The initiative showed some early bits of fruition at the Glastonbury Festival this year.

"One of the inmates who was just released came to the festival and he played this beautiful song he had written," Bragg said. "Everyone was just blown away."

Bragg said the program is a positive one that also challenges the inmates. He likes the people who raised the money to donate the guitars to be the ones to hand them to inmates.

"It tells them that, 'A lot of people worked hard to get you this guitar, so what are you going to do with it?'," he said. "We challenge them by saying, 'You're in bad place, but we're not giving up on you.'"

As far as Bragg's own music, he has a new CD scheduled to be released early next year.

For the Calvin show, he plans on mixing new material with the old. When asked if his older, more polemical political songs still speak to today, Bragg sighed a bit.

"Unfortunately, they do. I wish they didn't because that would mean our leaders have learned something," he said. "I'm sorry my political songs seem to still be relevant but the same problems always seem to come around again, unfortunately."

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