



BURN OUT? FADE AWAY?

Bollocks!

Despite a head of gray hair, **Billy Bragg** remains socially, politically and musically active — often all at once.

A folk-punk pioneer and one of the great songwriters of his generation, [Bragg](#) has been an indie-rock and college-radio staple here and in his native **England** for his own work. But he's been best known in recent years for his collaborative efforts with **Wilco** and **Woody Guthrie's** estate: the two "**Mermaid Avenue**" records.



Bragg's [latest single](#), "**Old Clash Fight Song**" — released under the name **Johnny Clash** — uses an infectious punk riff to underpin allusion-filled lyrics that discuss the benefits of independent radio, the possibility of aging gracefully and reasons for hope. Proceeds from sales of the tune will benefit **Jail Guitar Doors**, Bragg's initiative to provide musical instruments to prisoners.

"I was at a jail this morning, handing out guitars," Bragg said. "It was quite powerful, talking to the men and telling 'em that these guitars are a challenge. We're not just giving them guitars because they're in prison; we're giving them guitars because we want them to come out of prison and be rehabilitated. That's the challenge, and

it was very positive to see them take that message."

Bragg said that as important and inspirational as **The Clash** has always been to him, the band's "failure," was that it merely commented on politics without getting involved.

"You can write, you can talk, but do you actually do anything?" Bragg asked. "'[Jail Guitar Doors](#)' is something that gives me and others the opportunity to do something. And it's that on which I wish to be judged, rather than [on] what I thought."

As Bragg prepared for a short U.S. tour (including a sold-out show at the **Birchmere on Monday**) and continued his work to ready a new record, **Express** spoke with him about his relationship with the Queen, working with the terminally ill and why he's the anti-**James Blunt**.

» **EXPRESS:** How many prisons have you visited?

» **BRAGG:** In the U.K., eight or nine. There's one prison in America — the musicians of the **D.C. Acoustic Underground** did a fundraiser in D.C. and raised some money for a prison in Maryland and I'm hoping to meet them at the Birchmere.

They did it of their own initiative. They saw what they thought was a good idea and they set the whole thing up themselves. All I did was say, "Yeah, do it."

I was very proud that they used the name "Jail Guitar Doors" and very pleased that they went in there and did it, because I've had a lot of inquiries from people in the United States who were interested in trying this stuff out. I can now direct them to the people of the [D.C. Acoustic Underground](#) who actually pulled it off and showed it can be done. So, I'm hoping to have a couple of beers with 'em when I get to the Birchmere.



» **EXPRESS:** You've described yourself as "The Anti-James Blunt." What do you mean by that?

» **BRAGG:** [*Laughs*] I mean that James Blunt has spent a huge amount of time trying to be popular, while I've spent a huge amount of time trying not to be popular.

» **EXPRESS:** Then why are you doing this interview?

» **BRAGG:** Oh, this isn't about popularity. This is about communication. The bottom line with me is always about communication. If I'm speaking to your readers, or to a radio station, or doing a gig, there's an opportunity to communicate my ideas. I'll try and take that. I'm not sure James Blunt feels the same way.

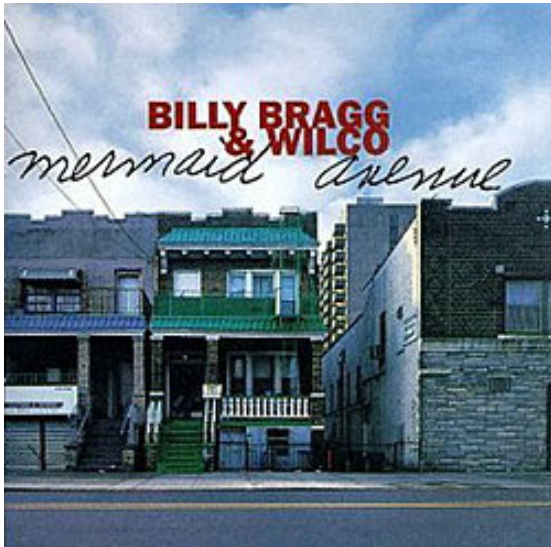
» **EXPRESS:** Right, but do you honestly feel that you've tried not to be popular?

» **BRAGG:** Well, when you think of the things I haven't done in the last 25 years — I haven't made many videos. In fact, I was at an award ceremony last week and they showed four video clips and none of them was younger than 20 years old. I looked really handsome. Not a gray hair in sight. ... [I've also generally] played solo and sang in an English accent. I could have looked a bit

more stylish. I've resolutely put content over style, which is not always a good proposition in pop music.

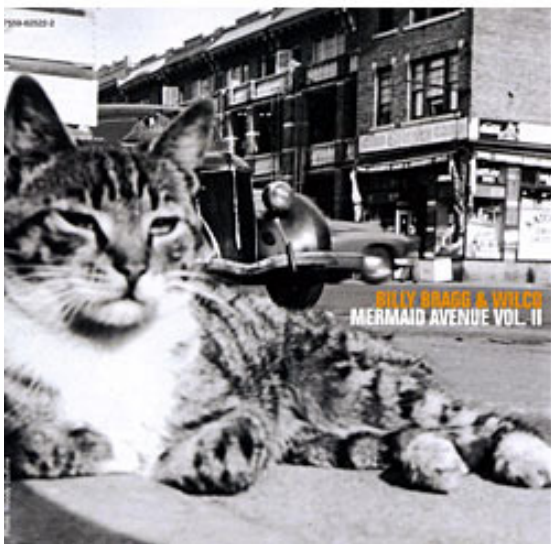
» **EXPRESS:** Americans wonder why English people don't sound English when they're singing. Is that something people do to attract American audiences?

» **BRAGG:** It's easier to sing in an American accent than it is to sing in an English accent. Even I've recognized that. If you listen to me singing on "Mermaid Avenue," I'm singing in more of what we call a mid-Atlantic accent, because Woody Guthrie's words sound really trite if you sing 'em with a flat Cockney accent. My words don't sound trite, because I've a flat Cockney accent, so I can carry on.



» **EXPRESS:** How do you feel about the fact that, in America, "[Mermaid Avenue](#)" might be what you're best known for?

» **BRAGG:** I'm very proud to be best known for that. I'm very happy with that. And you're probably right. Both the albums were nominated for Grammys. One of them was in "Rolling Stone's Greatest Records of the 20th century." I can't argue with that. To be known for working with Woody Guthrie and Wilco — I'm pretty proud of that. ... The [forthcoming] album sounds a bit like that. I wanted to try and do something different, so I told my band not to bring any electric instruments to the sessions. And the album pretty much comes from the same sort of place where we were when we made "Mermaid Avenue."



» **EXPRESS:** What are the proudest moments of your career?

» **BRAGG:** Ten years ago, I ran a songwriting workshop with a half a dozen women who were terminally ill with breast cancer. And we wrote some songs together and recorded those songs. That's what I'm most proud of, because I helped them to articulate to their loved ones things that are very, very difficult to say over the dinner table — which is, basically, "I love you, but I'm dying." I don't think anything I've done in my career in any way lives up to that achievement.

When my father was dying of cancer in the '70s, the doctors told us the best way to deal with it was not to talk about it at all. So I understood the value of the project. It means a great deal to me. ... One of the women, I asked her for a sheet of paper with some ideas for a song on it. She wrote 32 pages. At that point I thought, "I don't even have to write a song — I've done my job. I've legitimized her expression of self and how she felt how she felt about the situation to her family."

» **EXPRESS:** Turning to a lighter subject, I just read **Jeremy Paxman's** book "[On Royalty](#)" and

you're quoted on the book's back cover. What's your take on the royal family?

» **BRAGG:** I don't know how I should explain this. I don't know what it'll do for my reputation. I shook hands with the Queen the night before last. Is that OK? Am I now lost in America?

I'll tell you how it came to pass. I was commissioned to write, for school children, two verses for the **Beethoven's** "Ninth Symphony," the "Ode to Joy." They asked me to write a couple of verses for these children to sing at the reopening of the **Royal Festival Hall**, in **London** — which I duly wrote. And they liked them so much, they asked me to write the whole thing for the big choir and the **London Symphony Orchestra**. And I consequently wrote that and they played it at the reopening of the hall.

And on Tuesday night, they had a real gala performance and the queen was invited and they played again my Fourth Movement of the "Ninth Symphony" and afterwards I got to line up and shake the Queen's hand with the conductor and the soloists and everything. And afterwards, the word came back that the Queen would like me to send her a signed copy of the score.

» **EXPRESS:** That must have made you feel good.

» **BRAGG:** Well, lots of people turn up after gigs asking me to sign things, so it's not that big a deal.

» **EXPRESS:** You've called the song "[Waiting For the Great Leap Forwards](#)" your theme song. What's the song mean?

» **BRAGG:** The central meaning of the song is that I don't think we're there yet. We still have a way to go before we get to that better world. Wherever we are, really, there's still some way to go. I hope there's enough self-effacing lyrics in the song that you understand that I know that being a singer-songwriter is not enough. You need to be more — and better — engaged than that. I hope that's the message that comes across.

[It's my theme song because] it talks about still trying, not giving up, although we haven't succeeded — and that kinda sums up what's kept me going for 25 years. Not everything is gonna change, but we are making progress and as long as we continue to make progress, maybe we don't need a "Great Leap Forwards," maybe we'll get there incrementally. I know that doesn't sound exciting or revolutionary, but it still makes a difference.

» [Birchmere](#), 3701 Mt. Vernon Ave., Alexandria; Mon., 7:30 p.m., sold out; 703-549-7500.

Written by Express contributor Tim Follos