

## Billy's village people

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by Peter Grant

TROUBADOUR, singer-songwriter, political activist, broadcaster, writer and a bandleader of the cult group The Bloses.

Since his arrival on the music scene in the early 80s, the 'Bard of Barking', Essex man Billy Bragg, has become a one-man institution.

Always politically correct, this fine writer has written for the late Kirsty MacColl, notably the electric folk song New England, and had a hit with his cover version of The Beatles She's Leaving Home.

Now he is a fully-fledged member of a unique troupe of musicians, under the banner The Imaginary Village, which are coming to Liverpool later this month.

And he is thoroughly enjoying this folk project.

"I am going to enjoy this latest tour so much that I will stand in the wings most nights and listen to these brilliant musicians. Audiences new to it will have a great time, believe me.

"We are re-defining English folk.

"Not Welsh, Irish or Scottish – but English folk."

Billy decided he was going to be a musician after buying himself out of the Tank Regiment in 1981. "Best £175 I ever spent," he says.

John Peel was an early champion for his music, playing BB's Life's A Riot on air.

A maverick Bragg saw his career take off and he was a central part of Labour's Red Wedge drive to appeal to younger voters in the 1980s, touring with The Smiths, The Communards and Style Council.

Billy has never lost his passion for a good cause. And now that's English folk music.

The Imaginary Village album features classic folk songs re-interpreted for the 21st century and also features a track by Billy with the song Hard Times Of Old England.

It appears alongside recordings by Paul Weller, Martin and Eliza Carthy, The Copper Family, Sheila Chandra, Benjamin Zephaniah and Trans-Global Underground.

Says Billy: "The idea came from producer Simon Emmerson.

"The name is borrowed from Georgina Boyes' book about the Edwardian folk boom and, yes, there was one.

"It's an album that, in the time-honoured way of folk, is about sex and death," he says with a laugh "But it's also about honouring England's very own distinctive traditions."

The ensemble crew will be finishing their UK tour with a date at the Royal Festival Hall.

But Liverpool is definitely a place Billy is looking forward to playing.

"Liverpool is always a great place to play and I'm sure there's a folk base there," he says.

"If people come along and think again about the whole English folk music scene, then the show is working and I know it will surprise a lot of people."

For those expecting Billy Bragg's greatest hits and tracks from his current album they will have to wait until next year.

But he is playing with The Pogues for a Christmas show in Manchester and he will be 'in conversation' at the South Bank in London on the evening of his 50th birthday on December 9 when he will be talking about his political and musical influences with Liverpool's Jude Kelly, artistic director of the South Bank Centre.

His tour next year, he says, will hopefully include a Liverpool date.

The city is a place he feels very much at home in.

"I've played there many times. I once did the People's Festival in the 80s. I do like the people and the audiences they always have time for you.

"It's a city with great history and a great folk tradition and spirit."

For now he's giving his all for the re-branding of English folk culture.

The Imaginary Village, featuring Billy Bragg, November 20, at the Philharmonic Hall. Tel:

 **0151 709 3789** .

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