

## Folk music is not just a bunch of bearded guys

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ENGLISH folk music has a bit of an image problem. It conjures thoughts of earnest chaps in sandals, geeky girls in floral prints, and possibly a touch of Morris Dancing.

It's an image which is not totally accurate, but one which Billy Bragg and fellow musicians are setting out to change. He is headlining a curious concert at Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall, titled *The Imagined Village*, which aims to give a new perspective on English folk.

The concert and an accompanying recording is the brainchild of producer and musician Simon Emmerson, who has a history of mixing music styles with bands like the jazz-soul group *Working Week* and the *Afro Celt Sound System*, as well as recording world artists such as Manu Dibango and Baba Maal.

His plan to re-imagine the English folk tradition had a willing listener in Bragg, a musician known for giving his own twist to the folk tradition with his powerful political songs.

"There has always been a folk sensibility in what I do," he says. "And I have always had an interest in the issue of national identity. *The Imagined Village* is trying to create more of an interest around the subject and move the whole idea forward."

He agrees that English folk music lacks a modern identity. "If you look at Irish folk music, it has this kind of Celtic brand which stops it from being seen as something backward-looking and this project is an attempt to bring English traditional music into the same space."

There are a lot of young English folk musicians playing today who have been doing their best to given a modern slant to the music, he says.

"It's not just a bunch of bearded guys in pub cellars drinking flagons like it was in the folk revival."

Bragg does not like to be part of any particular tradition, but if forced will admit to being "a political songwriter in the tradition of Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan and The Clash."

Folk music always had a strong political songwriting tradition running through it, he says.

"During the miners' strike, when I came north to do gigs in the coalfields, I was shocked to find that not only were the folk musicians there before me, but their music was more political than mine!

"Traditional folk has always written about contemporary issues like shipwrecks, mining disasters and stuff like that, it was part of the folk, oral tradition which spread news around."

But what is Englishness?

"You know, it worries me that nobody thinks ill of someone with a Scottish flag on the back of a white mini van, but if they see a cross of St George they think the worst. It is a real problem we English have to deal with.

"There is a nasty strain of Englishness based on belligerence and resentment, but also a powerful tradition of fairness and willingness to work together exemplified by the founding of the welfare state in 1948."

What would help, he suggests, was if a city like Liverpool had the same power as they have in Edinburgh to vary its tax rates and make choices like the provision of free school meals and caring for the elderly.

"If we were offered that sort of devolution in England, they would bite your hand off. It's nothing to do with nationalism but running your own lives."

Essex-born, Bragg today lives in the countryside of Dorset, where producer Simon Emmerson also lives, after encouragement from Bragg.

Bragg admits he will always be a bit of a townie, but points out he does not live in the country, but on the coast. "It's very different from the green wellie, hunting, shooting Deep England and it's more Kiss-Me-Quick where I live and I think anyone in Liverpool can relate to that."

The Imagined Village will bring together traditional music with contemporary rhythms, varying from Indian sitar music to fiddles and squeeze boxes. Among those taking part will be Eliza Carthy, Martin Carthy, Sheila Chandra and Simon Emmerson himself. Poet Benjamin Zephaniah will deliver his piece from an on-stage screen, as will traditional singer John Copper.

"It will be a lot of fun, really," says Bragg, who denies being part of any Grumpy Old Man club. "For a start, I am not old" – he's 49 – "and I think there is already enough English cynicism out there without my joining in."

\* THE Imagined Village is at the Philharmonic Hall, Liverpool, on November 20.

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