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# Bragg puts geography in music melting pot

[Nov 17 2007](#) By David Whetstone, The Journal

*Billy Bragg tells David Whetstone about The Imagined Village, a very real gig coming our way.*

BEAUTIFUL gig, beautiful gig," says Billy Bragg before his appearance at The Sage Gateshead on Monday. Thus, in typical fashion, the Essex-born musician describes the region's world-renowned concert hall.

He could be describing a pub venue in Dagenham where there's a street, Bragg Close, named after

who's the guy behind the Afro Celt Sound System, which has been playing great gigs mixing traditional Irish tunes with African rhythms for at least a decade now," says the 49-year-old modern master of the protest song.

"He has been hugely successful at festivals around Europe for a long time, finding new audiences for Irish folk music. This is the result of him trying to bring English folk music to the fore."

Billy Bragg played in a punk band called Riff Raff in the late 1970s, but became truly famous in Thatcher's Britain of the 1980s when he put fire in the bellies of the pickets who then proliferated across the land. His songs were raw, heartfelt, sung with a grating passion but also poetic, tuneful and catchy.

In the 21st Century he lives in some splendour in rural Dorset – far away from urban sprawl but not too far from the village of Tolpuddle, whose famous martyrs stood up against their overbearing agricultural masters and paid the price. At the Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival Bragg has been a regular speaker and singer.

He recalls that Emmerson came to see him a few years ago in Dorset to explain his desire to do for English traditional music what he had already done for Irish. His aim was to make it a bit more contemporary and cutting edge, more of a reflection of multicultural modern England.

"He asked me to collaborate on it with these traditional songs and I was happy to help. I've always been a big fan of folk music and used to buy the records as a teenager.

"I supposed I shied away from it when I was a punk rocker and although I'm not really of that tradition, I do have a feel for it. The people I've always admired have been informed by the folk tradition. I'm a great admirer of Woody Guthrie, the father of the folk tradition in America."

The Imagined Village, says Bragg, is a new attempt to cast the English folk tradition in the 21st Century. "The idea is to reflect a more multicultural society, the sort of place which includes the likes of Sheila Chandra and Benjamin Zephaniah." At Womad, the big World Music festival, The Imagined Village was performed before an enthusiastic audience of 400-plus. A reviewer was impressed with the concept and parts of the performance, but suggested it sounded like a work in progress. There was a discussion on English identity involving Bragg, Emmerson and Chris Wood.

A CD came out subsequently to a mixed response, one reviewer calling it patchy but praising the "rousing performances from such folk stalwarts as Martin and Eliza Carthy and Billy Bragg". As Billy Bragg says, anything that has stood the test of time can stand a bit of experimentation or revision, so it seems perfectly reasonable to add the beats of other continents to the traditional music of these shores.

The live tour of The Imagined Village began a few days ago, so by the time it arrives in Gateshead it should be about as polished as it will ever be.

Billy says he's looking forward to coming to the North-East again. "But I've got to go and walk the dog now before it gets dark."

The Imagined Village is in Hall One of The Sage Gateshead on Monday at 7.30pm. For tickets tel:

 (0191) 443-4661 .

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