

Ask: Billy Bragg

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by Robert Weatherall, Sunday Sun

BILLY Bragg is well known as a performer who concentrates on politically-inspired folk music. Born in Essex in 1957 as Stephen William Bragg, he first entered the music industry aged 19 with punk band Riff Raff.

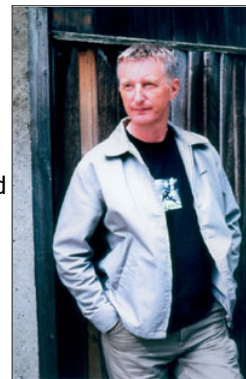
The band had a number of single releases before eventually splitting after four years together in 1981.

During the 1984 Miners Strike he became a regular at political rallies and fundraising benefits.

During his long and varied career he has performed with big names including Kirsty MacColl and REM as well as with Johnny Marr, Leon Rosselson, Less Than Jake, and Wilco. He often plays and speaks at the Tolpuddle Martyrs' festival.

Billy will be appearing at The Sage in Gateshead tomorrow as part of the Imagined Village festival. He will be appearing alongside Chris Wood, Eliza Carthy, Martin Carthy, Sheila Chandra and Simon Emmerson.

Tickets costing £7 to £19 can be bought at the box office by visiting www.thesagegateshead.org or by calling 0191-443 4661.

**IS it true you used to be in the Army?**

Yes I used to be in the Royal Armed Core and drove a tank. I wasn't in there for very long though. I mean after you have driven a tank there isn't much left to do is there?

DO you think socialism is dead?

No I don't think it is dead. I think the language of Marxism which we used to use has died. I think the idea of education and healthcare for all along with decent affordable housing and freedom are ideas which everyone subscribes to and these are socialist ideals so I don't think that they are dead.

WHO are your musical influences?

There are a few but most notably there is Bob Dylan, The Clash and Woody Guthrie

DO you think decent people will be able to reclaim the flag of St George from racists?

I think it is a shame that when you see the flag of St George on the back of a transit van you automatically think the worst. We need to get to the same situation as in Scotland or Wales where they can fly their flag without anyone thinking there is some sinister motive behind it. That has got to come about by having an increased sense of Englishness. What can actually be termed as English is another topic.

YOU'RE approaching 50 yet still idealistic. How come you haven't become cynical?

I have come to realise that the one thing which holds a society back as a whole is cynicism. When people become cynical they become apathetic and there is never going to be any chance of change or progress if people are apathetic.

It is not something which I find easy.

There are times when I really have to will myself to not to fall into a cynical way of thinking because it can be very easy to do so but when you catch yourself falling into the trap you just have to snap out of it.

YOU met the Queen recently and seemed to get along OK. Doesn't she stand for everything you oppose?

As an institution the Royal Family does represent everything I stand against. The idea that someone should be the head of state just because they were born into it is something that I find bizarre. Also the number of hangers on is a drain on the public purse. As a person however, I have a lot of time for the Queen.

She is someone who has conducted herself impeccably in public for all of her life. She is the only one I respect though.

If I was walking down the street and saw any of the others coming towards me I would go out of my way to avoid them.

HOW do you spend your time when you're not performing?

Well apart from trying to bring about constitutional reform in the House of Lords I do all the things that other people do.

I enjoy reading, going for relaxing walks and spending time with friends and family.

Having said that though I don't have a great deal of spare time and politics is a big part of my life.

IF you hadn't been a musician what would you have done?

I would probably still be driving tanks around muddy fields.

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