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In praise of ... Billy Bragg

Leader
Thursday December 20, 2007
[The Guardian](#)

Raw, strident vocals and clanging guitar chords make for less-than-easy listening. Billy Bragg would have had to work hard to succeed in any era, and especially in the 1980s, when his socialist politics and punk antecedents were deeply unfashionable. Clambering to fame involved him buying his way out of the army, posing as a TV repair man to get inside a record company and winning over a hungry John Peel by dropping off a biryani for him at the studio. But the determination paid off, and as Billy turns 50 today his distinctive sound is among the most recognisable in the business. There are memorable melodies (New England), but it is words that make the Bard of Barking stand out. From unrequited love, to the A13, he tackles his subjects with humour and warmth, drawing consciously on folk's radical tradition. Like the young Bob Dylan, Bragg sees the great dust-bowl protester Woody Guthrie as a particular inspiration. Unlike Dylan, however, Bragg has been consistently political - sometimes in very practical ways: he devised a tactical voting scheme that delivered Labour's only English gain in the 2001 election, and he is a near-obsessive agitator for reforming the House of Lords. At times the worthiness can be less than lyrical ("safe sex doesn't mean no sex/it just means use your imagination"), but Bragg's drollery always lightens the mood before long-fleeting lovers are not ships in the night, but "cars in a contraflow system". At 50 the Red Minstrel is not selling out, but still singing out.

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