

# Billy Bragg's jailhouse rock project cuts reoffending rate

By Amol Rajan

Billy Bragg has backed the miners, campaigned against racism and promoted perestroika in the Soviet Union. Yet the folk-rock singer from Barking has embarked on his most ambitious socio-political project to date; an

attempt to wean convicted criminals serving time away from a life of crime. And it's working.

In an exclusive interview in *The Independent Magazine* today, Bragg reveals an initiative he set up last year is producing radical results for some of the country's most damaged prisoners.

Through the Jail Guitar Doors campaign – named after the B-side to The Clash's 1978 single "Clash City Rockers" – Bragg is raising money to provide inmates in British prisons with musical equipment. By encouraging them to express themselves in music, Bragg insists it raises morale and minimises the

risk of recidivism. Among those who have engaged in sessions with Bragg, the rate of reoffending is much lower than the national average. His campaign has enlisted the support of several public figures, including the TV presenters Dermot O'Leary, Jonathan Ross, and Phil Jupitus, as well as influen-

tial musicians such as The Clash's Mick Jones. It has raised more than £10,000 to date, and this week won the support of the manufacturer Gibson Guitars.

"It seemed to me something that all musicians would be able to see the value of immediately", Bragg says in the interview. "If only because all musicians are already keenly aware of just what a contribution music can make to life, and how it can help you transcend your surroundings no matter how bleak they appear".

The 50 year-old activist, who last year published an acclaimed polemic on the condition of modern Britain, goes on to explain his campaign's early success.

Bragg visited Guy's Marsh prison in Dorset last year, working closely with many of its inmates. Of those prisoners who participated in his therapeutic sessions before parole, only 10-15 per cent have reoffended. That is significantly lower than the national average of 61 per cent. "So there's your proof", says Bragg. "It works".

His efforts have not gone unnoticed, and Bragg's initiative is developing an influential fan base. The prisons minister David Hanson wants the scheme to be introduced in more jails.

"I was delighted to accompany Billy Bragg at HMP Pentonville last year," Mr Hanson said. "I'm looking to enable the extension of his scheme to prisons in the North-west very shortly. We're looking to use Billy's charitable efforts to support people to have positive activity in prison, to help them learn life skills, and to be able to equip them

better for when they leave prison, so they don't reoffend when they go out."

According to Frances Crook, director of the Howard League for Penal Reform, "Projects like Billy Bragg's can absolutely make a difference. That's one reason prison overcrowding is so damaging: it stretches resources and makes it difficult to perform this kind of creative work with prisoners more widely".

Bragg's prison work is only the latest political project of a musical maverick with impeccable socialist pedigree. After buying his way out of a tank regiment in the British Army for £175, Bragg campaigned vociferously against the Thatcher government, coming to public attention for his support of the 1984 miners' strike.

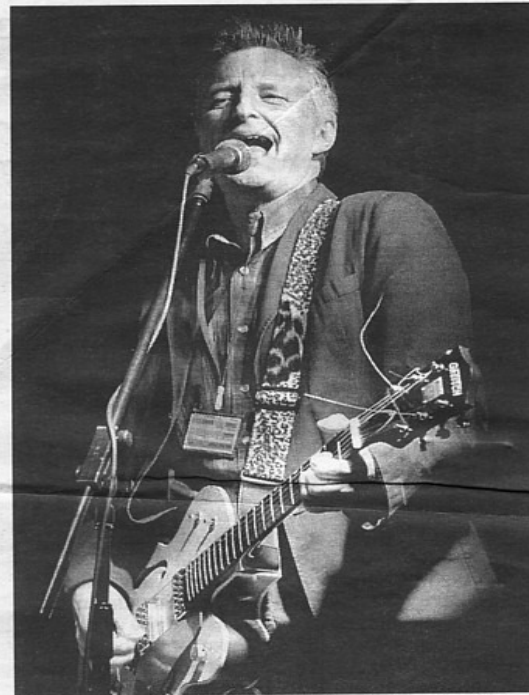
A former member of both the Labour-supporting music collective Red Wedge and the pressure group Charter 88, which

campaigned for radical electoral reform, Bragg has always worn his politics on his sleeve. He once qualified his support of proportional representation by saying: "It would shine a torch into the dirty little corner where the BNP defecate on our democracy".

Commenting on penal policy in today's interview, he says: "We just can't keep sticking people in prisons without trying to rehabilitate them in some or other way."

"I never ask prisoners I meet why they are inside. When I'm with them, I'm dealing with them strictly as individuals. And anyway, these instruments aren't presents; they're a challenge, a challenge for them to try to make something of themselves. My hope is that they will see this as an opportunity to take that first step on the path back to society."

READ THE FULL INTERVIEW IN TODAY'S MAGAZINE



Billy Bragg performing at Styal Prison in Manchester