

BEING

BILLY

Ghita Loebenstein shoots the breeze with veteran musician **Billy Bragg** about guitars, prison, maintaining his rage...and turning 50.

Billy Bragg is off to a blazing start. He barely has the telephone to his mouth before he's barking on in his half Cockney, half Queen's English accent about his latest goodwill mission. "I'm in a hotel in London," he says. "I've got 12 guitars in my room and tomorrow morning half of them will be delivered to Pentonville Prison, just round the corner from here."

It's all part of a project called Jail Guitar Doors, and is typical of the sort of punk-humanitarianism with which Bragg has long been connected. This is a man who has made a name for himself as a compassionate punk, a 'one-man-Clash' who lets his socialist heart bleed profusely on to his sleeve.

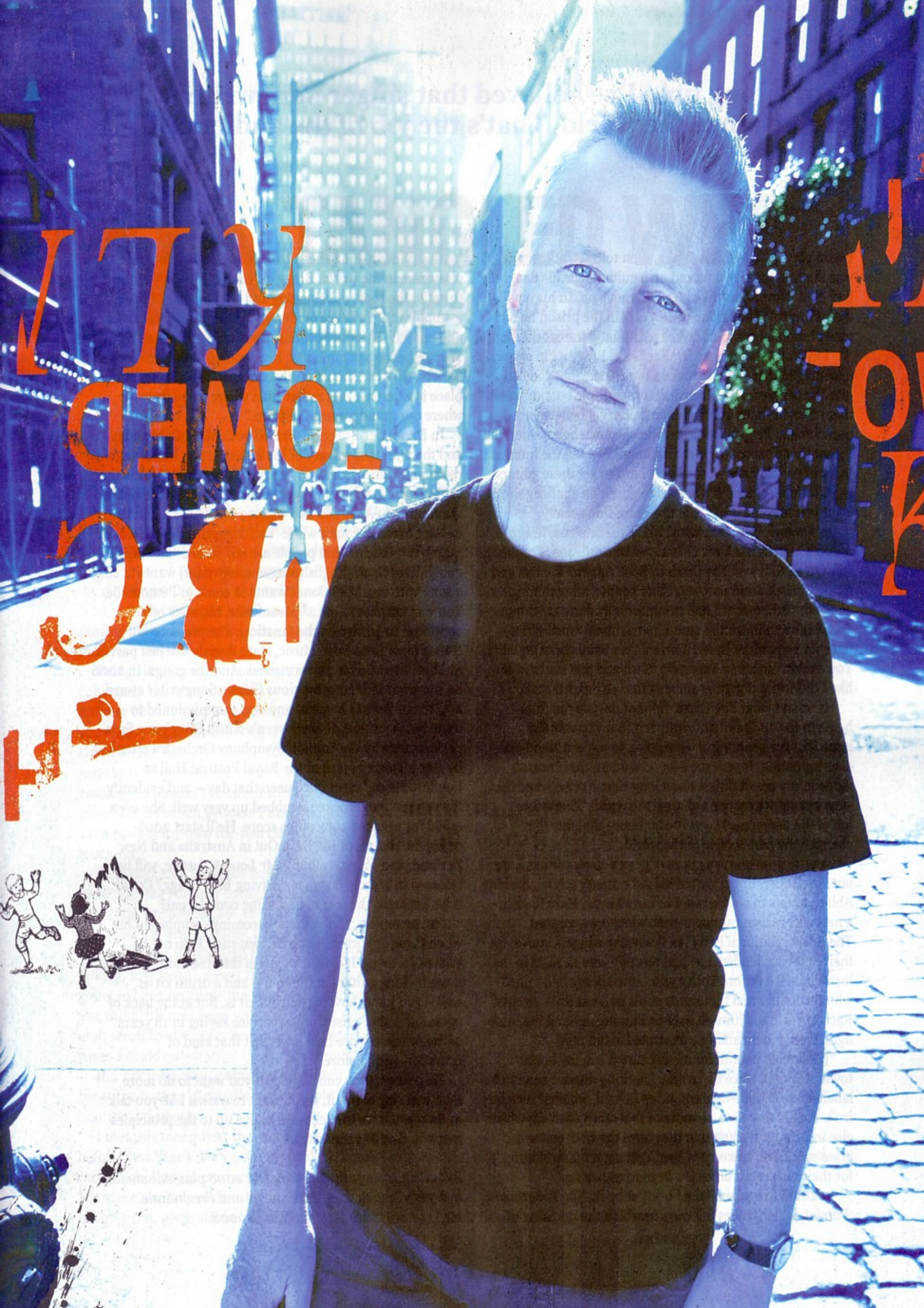
It has always been this way for the singer-songwriter from Barking, in east London. In the mid-80s Bragg publicly railed against British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, then formed the Red Wedge collective to persuade young people to vote Labour in the 1987 election. Since then, he has dedicated countless albums to politics, racism and 'Englishness'; campaigned for reform in the House of Lords; unseated a Conservative MP in his local constituency; and, on the universally adored album *Mermaid Avenue*, breathed life into two volumes of lost songs by Woody Guthrie, the American folk pioneer who was a forefather to punk-folkies like Bragg and political rockers like The Clash.

Now Bragg is helping prison officers rehabilitate inmates through music by finding guitars for prison

workshops. When a letter came in January 2006 seeking Bragg's participation in the project he recognised its great potential. "Around that time I was looking to do something in memory of Joe Strummer [former lead singer of The Clash], who died five years ago," Bragg says. "It seemed to me that getting guitars into prisons might be the kind of thing that Joe and The Clash would have thought worthwhile, so I decided to name this project after the B-side of 'Clash City Rockers' – 'Jail Guitar Doors'.

"In fact, Mick Jones [Clash guitarist] was with me in one of the scrubs and he said: 'A guitar can help you escape.' There was a silent pause before everyone started laughing...but a musical instrument can help you to transcend your surroundings. My guitar helped me to escape from my parents' front bedroom when I was a kid. Not literally, but emotionally. Ultimately, it was a literal escape because it was the skill that got me out of [Barking] and allowed me to earn a living. That also applies to people who are in prison. Giving them an instrument gives them a chance to reflect. While obviously we can't do anything to help their victims, we can do something to make sure there aren't any more victims."

Recently, one of the prison officers with whom Bragg had been working sent him an email. During one workshop it became apparent that one of the inmates had been a lead-guitar player. When he



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began playing he started crying, then told the officer that it was the first time he’d picked up a guitar since his daughter had died. Now he felt like he could move on. In his email, the officer told Bragg that in 18 years in the prison he had never before encountered such a dramatic transformation.

“I’m really encouraged by that,” says Bragg. “I’m very encouraged that you *can* make a difference, that you can give the people inside a sense that the people outside want them to come back and be part of society. I believe in punishment. People should be punished for their crimes, but I want those people to be rehabilitated. We tell the inmates: ‘A lot of people have worked very hard to get these guitars in your hands, mate. It’s not a free gift, it’s a challenge. We want you to come back from this place into society.’”

As a young, impressionable lad in the late 70s, Bragg found a hero in punk rock’s beloved warlord, Joe Strummer. In 1978 he followed The Clash to Rock Against Racism and found himself amid 100,000 other people, all marching for an ideal: “Before that I had never actually done anything specifically political. I’m sure I had political sensibilities, but they were more humanitarian, they were about equality. You couldn’t listen to Tamla-Motown and 60s soul music like I did without getting some of that civil rights stuff.

“It wasn’t what The Clash did that day, so much as being in the audience and realising that this was the issue that my generation were going to make a stand on: discrimination. It sent me away confident that I wasn’t alone in my sensibilities. For a long time I’ve believed that singer-songwriters can’t change the world. That’s the job of the audience. It was the audience that day that changed my perspective of the world.”

Now he does his own quota of perspective shifting. Late last November, Bragg visited his old primary school, Barking Abbey, to talk to students about Love Music, Hate Racism – a new anti-racism campaign with which he is aligned. The British National Party (radical right-wingers known for their neo-Nazi tendencies) had recently won 12 seats in the local council election. Thirty years since Bragg had rallied with Strummer and thousands of his peers at Rock Against Racism, he found himself back in Barking fighting the same fight. He’s understandably frustrated about this.

“It’s doubly painful for me because it’s in my home town,” he says, voice flattening. “Barking doesn’t need to be labelled as the race-hate capital of Britain, which it certainly isn’t. People there are no more or less racist than anywhere else in Britain. It’s just that they have the BNP on their arses spreading hatred and fear, stirring it up, exploiting it for their own racist ends. It’s beyond annoying.”

In 2006, Bragg published his first book, *The Progressive Patriot*, which traces the ways in which the meaning of

‘national identity’ has been bastardised in Britain and elsewhere in the world. Bragg explains: “It’s an attempt to get to the roots of belonging and why a sense of place is important to a sense of identity. [Place] is not the be-all and end-all. There are other aspects of identity that bind us together as a community. If we want to have a cohesive society, what we should really concentrate on in terms of place is where we are, rather than where we’re from, or where our grandparents are from.”

In December Bragg celebrated both his 50th birthday and the 25th anniversary of his first-ever gig. Reflecting on these milestones he says: “The thing I’m grateful for is that I’m still doing this at my age. People are still interested in me coming to Australia and want to talk to me about it. I haven’t been over for a while. You’d imagine people would forget, but the fact that people are still interested keeps you going. Kate Nash [English singer-songwriter] wants to sing a song with me. Mick Jones wants to come to Pentonville. You want to chat to me...” Meanwhile, his work ethic continues to border on the fanatical. The projects Jail Guitar Doors and Love Music, Hate Racism are just part of it. There are also his performances. And the gongs. In 2006 he was awarded the prestigious Classic Songwriter award at *Q* magazine’s *Q* Awards, and was commissioned to write lyrics for part of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony for a performance by the London Symphony Orchestra attended by Her Majesty herself at the Royal Festival Hall in London. He *did* meet the Queen that day – and evidently the veteran punk rocker scrubbed up very well. She even asked for a signed copy of his score. He’ll start 2008 doing the rounds of Big Days Out in Australia and New Zealand, and his new album, *Mr Love & Justice*, will be released in March. So what’s driving Billy Bragg? Could it be, perhaps, the fear of becoming complacent?

No, he replies, “I don’t fear becoming complacent but when these opportunities arise, you can’t help but be excited by them. It’s been a pain in the arse today getting these fucking guitars in the rain – and a drum kit as well – you know how big a drum kit is. But at the back of my mind is that prison officer’s voice saying in 18 years of the prison service he’d never felt that kind of transformation before.”

He pauses, then concludes: “If you want to do more than just sing about it, if you want to walk it like you talk it, then you have to seek ways to live up to the principles that you sing in your songs.”

Billy Bragg plays the Big Day Out 2008 plus side shows in Byron Bay, Sydney, Melbourne and Freemantle. Mr Love & Justice is out in March 2008.