

## Billy Bragg stays connected

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**Brett Debritz**

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### **IT'S hard to imagine a more unlikely duo: socialist singer-songwriter Billy Bragg and Her Majesty Elizabeth II.**

But Bragg had a close and pleasant encounter with the Queen at the Royal Festival Hall in London just three months ago.

"I was commissioned to write a new lyric for the fourth movement of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony, The Ode to Joy," Bragg says.

"Some schoolkids were going to sing it and they were having trouble with the literal translation, so they got me in to write some verses for the schoolkids to sing.

"They liked it so much they decided to do it again at the royal gala, and I got invited because I was one of the authors.

"They printed my lyrics in the program and the Queen was in the royal box and I could see her following my lyrics, which I thought was really wacky."

Things became almost surreal when Bragg, an avowed republican, met the monarch after the event, shook her hand and, by royal request, signed her copy of the lyrics.

The surroundings will be a little more humble when Bragg makes his trip to Australia this month for the Big Day Out festival and a few side gigs.

Bragg, who celebrated his 50th birthday last month, is back on the road after a sabbatical spent writing his first book, *The Progressive Patriot: A Search For Belonging*, which was published in May.

He says the BDO, which he first played in 1996, will give him the chance "to get the attention of someone else's crowd".

"I hope the audience at Big Day Out will get where I'm coming from," he says.

"Your own gigs are like your own website, but a festival is like MySpace. There's so many different people there moving around seeing stuff; people who are just checking you out, are just curious.

"If you want to reach a new generation, then festivals are a really good way to do that. People are walking by and you can connect with them."

The MySpace analogy is particularly apt since Bragg has been at the forefront of the social networking revolution. He even helped rewrite the MySpace rules concerning the ownership of the music streamed from the site.

He explains: "I had a real problem with -- if you don't mind me being jargonistic -- the proprietary rights clause.

"It was very ambiguous whether you owned it or whether MySpace owned it. Now I don't think they did that for pernicious reasons, I think they did that to cover their bases.

"It was only when the ramifications of it were pointed out to them, they moved quickly to rectify it.

"For the majority of people on the internet, they don't have a record deal, they don't have a publishing deal, so the MySpace terms and conditions will be the first legal agreement they've ever entered into in terms of their own creative material.

"In the spirit of the internet, MySpace moved very quickly when it was pointed out to them. I would like other websites to follow suit."

The fact that Bragg has so wholeheartedly embraced the web -- his own site, [www.billybragg.com](http://www.billybragg.com), is comprehensive and constantly updated -- marks him out as a forward thinker.

It's easy to forget that this is a man who has been making music for 30 years, first with his punk band Riff Raff and then, more successfully, as a solo singer-songwriter who sometimes collaborates with other artists.

"When I speak to people about when they saw me in the '80s it doesn't seem like a long, long time ago at all," he says, before breaking into a related anecdote.

"I got an award last month from Q magazine -- first time I ever got an award -- and it was for 'classic songwriter'. As is the way at these things, they show a video while you're walking up.

"I haven't made a video in 15 years, so in all the videos of me I look so young and beautiful. It was brilliant. Everybody else looked wrinkly in their videos. All my hair was one colour, I didn't have a double chin. It's a real good advert for not making videos."

Given his extensive back catalogue, including hit singles *Sexuality*, *Waiting For The Great Leap Forwards* and *Greetings To The New Brunette*, is there any one song Billy Bragg fans demand above all?

"Sometimes it's *New England*, sometimes it's *Levi Stubbs' Tears*. But I can't dwell on that, otherwise you feel like you've got to play that every night and you end up just going through the motions."

He then recalls a showcase performance at the South by Southwest music industry event in the US a few years ago to mark the re-release of his back catalogue, beginning with his first solo effort, *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy*.

"I said to the guy just before I went on, 'What should I play?'. He said, 'You've got 15 minutes, play something from your first album.' I said, 'In 15 minutes I could play my entire first album.' He looked at me as if I was joking. I said, 'Watch me.'

"I found out I could play my entire first album -- which was only 17 minutes long anyway -- in 15 minutes. So, as an encore -- if the audience is really gagging for it, and they've really lifted me -- I will try and play the entire first album in 15 minutes.

"It nearly kills me. The first time I did it, I was in my dressing room afterwards with a towel over my head, the keyboard player said to my manager, 'I feel like I seen him back in the days when he originally started.'

"And my manager (rock veteran Peter Jenner) said, 'No, he's much better now. He was shit then; he couldn't play those songs for toffee.'

"It was a wonderful slap of a backhanded compliment."

Bragg does acknowledge he has become not just musically more proficient, but vocally so as well.

He sees Mermaid Avenue, the collection of Woody Guthrie songs he recorded with US band Wilco in 1998, as a turning point in that respect.

"I think after the Mermaid Avenue album, I got a bit more relaxed about it," he says.

"I'm not trying to be Billy Bragg any more; I bloody am Billy Bragg.

"You'd think I'd have learnt that early on."

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