

A very royal connection

What happened when socialist king Billy Bragg met the Queen?

MUSIC
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BILLY BRAGG once carried his amp on his back and played his folk-rock songs in Red Square, added music to the lyrics of Woody Guthrie (the folk singer whose guitar bore the scrawl "this machine kills fascists"), happily sang to US audiences "help save the youth of America, help save them from themselves" and reminded crowded rooms from Enmore to Edgbaston that there is power in a union.

His gig companions do not normally include Ludwig van Beethoven and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. Well it didn't until one night last year at the refurbished Royal Festival Hall where Bragg, the Essex boy from a comprehensive school and a punk background, was pictured shaking hands with the Queen and exchanging pleasantries.

"When you work with someone like Ludwig you never know which girl he's going to bring to the show," says a jocular Bragg, who has just turned 50 and is in Australia this month for his umpteenth tour. "Next thing I know, after the show she's hanging around - 'Can I shake your hand? Can I have an autograph?' She didn't even buy a T-shirt."

This was not the 15th fame-filled minutes of the royal autograph hunter. The Queen was there to mark the reopening of the hall, which was opened during the 1951 Festival of

Britain, when the country was physically and mentally still battered by the war. Beethoven was there in spirit as his Ninth Symphony was being performed. And Bragg? He was there as the new lyricist for the *Ode To Joy* section of the Ninth, the one time "Bard of Barking" (he lives in Dorset now) rewriting the German poet and playwright Friedrich Schiller.

The reaction when people saw the photos of the Queen with the singer-activist, whose closely cropped hair is now distinguished grey but who declined to don either a tie or penguin suit, was probably variations on "what the hell is going on?"

"That was the Queen's reaction actually when she looked at me," Bragg says. "Bloody hell, what are you doing here?" I didn't realise I was going to shake her hand. I knew she was coming to the gig but, to be perfectly honest with you, it's funny enough writing new lyrics to *Ode To Joy* and 600 people singing them with an orchestra. That in itself is funny enough but when you're doing that and you can see down in the royal box the Queen following your words in her program, it's pretty wacky. Then they say, by the way, she got her private secretary to ring up [asking], 'Can you sign a copy of the score?' It's just mad. It's too funny. One of those 'how daft can it get?' moments."

As the less amused righteous Left launched into him, Bragg responded with a newspaper column that argued the Queen was both admirable and hardly a first order issue for any agent of political change. Plus he got to shake the hand of the

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Billy Bragg

woman who handed the World Cup to Bobby Moore in 1966.

"If the Queen was abolished it wouldn't make a huge difference to the politics of our country; the problem is an unelected House of Lords and the royal prerogative that the Prime Minister has to allow him to do things without the scrutiny of Parliament," Bragg argues now. "Change those things, and I've always campaigned on changing those things, but the woman who's been doing this job for 50-odd years has such a unique position in our culture above any sort of fame that anybody else has any connection with, [so] as a citizen, never mind as someone with a real interest in notions of identity and belonging, just out of pure curiosity, you could not turn down the opportunity to look in her eyes and shake her hand."

There's more to this encounter than the baiting of a stroppy columnist or two as can be seen in lines from Bragg's libretto such as "Brothers, sisters stand together/Raise your voices now as one/Though by history divided/Reconciled in unison". The rewritten lyrics for *Ode To Joy*, with their calls to "All humanity as one!" and "Brothers, sisters, all humanity stands together/'neath the heavens" are really an extension of a long-running fascination.

It kicked off on Bragg's 2002 album *England, Half English* (with songs such as the title track's multi-ethnic celebration and more polemic *Take Down The Union Jack*), flowered in a series of newspaper columns and culminated in the deeply researched, fluently argued social history treatise he published last year, *The Progressive Patriot: A Search For Belonging*.

In it Bragg considered what it means to be English (not limited to white triumphalists in denial), what there is to be proud of in Englishness (for a start, a history of radical thought and activism, from the Levellers to the post-World War II education act) and, along the way, what it has meant to be Billy Bragg socialist, singer and West Ham supporter.

That combination means that reading *The Progressive Patriot* rings true for anyone who is trying to make sense of who they are as a human being, not just readers of the broadsheet opinion pages.

"That was very, very important for my readers because for someone coming from



The Bard of Barking ... Bragg has taken a fresh approach to English patriotism.

Photo: Tony Mott

the Left as I do, traditionally we don't put much stock by those ideas of patriotism," Bragg says. "And if I was going to convince people that I do love my country, I had to place myself in it, write about it in a way that people understood that I do love where I grew up and that I had that strong connection with the place. I had to express that partly because I don't have clear ideas of exactly how Englishness stacks up and

what Englishness is. If I did, and even if I had defined [it], it would only be a snapshot. Get three people in a room and all of them would have different ideas. My intention was to express my love for my country without getting into the belligerent side of things and that notion of patriotism - that it's not enough to love your country, you have to hate other people's countries - I've never subscribed to that."

The shame of it may be that he even felt the need to declare his love of country. But then, as we've seen often enough in Australia, the almost reflex reaction from some quarters whenever objections to nationalism arise is that the critic hates his country and, in effect, hates himself. Which is as reductive an argument as saying that you can't shake the Queen's hand because you're a socialist.

"Unfortunately, nationalism is a place

where often the shading of argument disappears and you are left in a very stark landscape where you have to be careful where you tread," Bragg says. "But taking the opportunity to write a book which gives you much more space to explain and address and draw issues made a lot more sense than writing another set of songs."

Has he cut through, made a difference?

"My sense of how it works is that you offer people a different perspective. So those people who are torn between loving their country but also wanting a fairer society no longer feel that they have to choose one or the other. The thing I am most proud about my country and my people is that we founded the welfare state in 1948, the ultimate culmination of struggling for a thousand years for a fairer society. That we continue to pay at least lip service to those ideas makes me proud to be British.

"What I was trying to show in the book was a radical tradition that I am part of that is actually a core tradition in our country. If you look into our history you can find that tradition of people struggling for a fairer society and when the traditionalist comes along and says that it's always been about deference and kingship and generals we've got something else to build our sense of belonging on."

Which in a way is the argument which can be used by all those who, like Bragg, opposed Margaret Thatcher, George W. Bush or John Howard and were told, "Shut up. You lost." The struggle and the resistance is the point.

"Exactly, exactly because although we may be defeated, our ideas and the validity of our ideas live on and carry on to inspire another generation," Bragg says. "For those of us who struggle to try and make a better world, if we are to overcome the cynicism of the public and our own cynicism we have to hold onto those kinds of ideas. It's not about what we achieve today is what we pass on to the next people to come along."

Billy Bragg plays at the Metro Theatre on January 26 and the Big Day Out on January 25. *The Progressive Patriot: A Search For Belonging* is published by Black Swan.