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Funky old man

January 20, 2008

Mixing pop and politics still has its uses, says Billy

Advertisement

Bragg. The seasoned campaigner talks to Guy Blackman about performing for a new generation of fans.

Before a sea of sweating teenagers, with the sounds of the Hilltop Hoods or Spoon pouring in from another stage, it's hard to know how Billy Bragg - short, greying and just turned 50 - is going to fare at this year's Big Day Out. But the English songwriter, who has embodied Britain's left-wing musical conscience since his first record, *Life's a Riot* with Spy Vs. Spy, in 1983, isn't too worried. "I do have an electric guitar and it does go up to 11," he quips. "I really enjoy playing rock festivals. I think that an audience that's come to see Rage Against the Machine is going to find something in Billy Bragg that resonates with them."

This ability to connect with listeners across generations and genre boundaries is Billy Bragg's great strength, one that has sustained him through a 25-year-career. Since his back catalogue was reissued in 2006 by UK label Cooking Vinyl, Bragg has reached a whole new generation of fans. The likes of Kate Nash, The Enemy and Jamie T have all covered him or sung live with him, usually on his classic working-class love song A New England.

"Last year, I was opening for the Black Rebel Motorcycle Club...predominantly a late teens, early 20s-type gig," he recalls. "I thought, 'I'll just have to make sure the songs are big and fast and get their attention'. I played the first song and realised that everyone was singing along. I played the second song and they were singing along even louder. So I just relaxed then and got into it. And that's what I'll do at the Big Day Out."

Although his albums don't land in the top 10 like they did in the '80s, and his celebrated *Mermaid Avenue* collaborations with Wilco (setting Woody Guthrie lyrics to new music) are a thing of the past, Bragg manages to avoid superannuation through his ongoing willingness to mix politics and music. "There's always going to be a significant minority of people who are looking for music that says more than 'I'm great, you're shit, do you like my socks?'," he observes.

A recent campaign against social networking website MySpace, a favoured promotional tool for aspiring musicians, has also given him a degree of currency. Examining the fine print that very few members bother to read before joining up, Bragg found clauses that worried him greatly. "For someone like me, the phrase 'worldwide royalty-free license' always puts my hackles up. No kid in his bedroom who's just written a song he wants to put on Myspace has got a legal team sitting there with him. So I wanted to take issue with that."

And take issue he did, launching a challenge that successfully compelled the Murdoch-owned website to change their Terms and Conditions, which now acknowledge the fundamental rights of anyone who uploads their own music to a MySpace profile.

New album *Mr. Love and Justice*, though, may not capitalise on this forward-looking attitude. Due in March, it's a warm, expansive album lacking in any kinds of bells or whistles, which of course, is the kind of record Billy Bragg has always made - unadorned and open-hearted, blending the personal and the political while never preferencing one over the other.

"Some people still think I'm all politics, and how boring would that be?" he asks. "Life is not all politics, but those young bands who only want to write about going out with Kate Moss, they should know life is not all dating models either. It's a mixture of the two, and many other things thrown in."

And though the title is not a reference to Bragg himself, he realises many listeners will assume otherwise. "I guess if it was *Mr Love and Social Justice*, maybe," he says. "But that's not such a snappy title for a record, is it?"

Bragg celebrated his 50th birthday in December, and says the half-century figure doesn't bother him. He looks at it as a chance to take stock, and to plan for the future. "I suppose the real question of turning 50 is will I still be able to do this when I'm 60," he says. "And I hope I will."

By "this" he means more than just playing music. Recently Bragg has turned his attention to a project called Jail Guitar Doors, in which guitars are given to prison inmates in Britain. As a tool for rehabilitation, the program seems to have been effective, with the official website quoting re-conviction figures of 10-15% for active participants, as opposed to the national average of 61%.

"All of us who play guitar know it's capable of helping you to emotionally escape your surroundings," Bragg says. "I've got prison officers who have said to me 'I haven't had a feeling like that in 18 years in the prison service'. So clearly music does have a role to play."

It's projects like these that keep Bragg excited about his role in musical life, more so than the music itself. "If it's just making records and playing gigs, to be honest with you, it gets a bit boring," he admits. "It's those other things that you do that challenge you, particularly if you're the sort of performer that I am. The challenge is to take actions that match the things you're talking about. That's the really interesting challenge."

Billy Bragg plays the sold-out Big Day Out on January 28. Both his solo shows at the Prince Bandroom (January 30 & 31) are also sold out.

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