

## NEALA JOHNSON talks to Billy Bragg about giving inmates guitars, turning 50 and keeping the faith

**Last year you set up an initiative called Jail Guitar Doors, where you donate musical instruments to British prisons. What inspired it?**

A guy wrote to me. He was doing that kind of work in a prison about an hour from where I live in Dorset, and said: "Can you help me out here?" I did a songwriting workshop in a hospice in Weymouth, he would probably have read about that in the *Dorset Echo*. Now, a lot of stuff goes across my desk and I would love to be able to do it all, but there just ain't the hours in the day. But this one, it seemed the sort of thing I could do. So I sorted him out with six guitars — £300, nothing. I thought a) there's probably a need for this, and b) 300 quid, I mean, f---ing hell. Any band that can raise up a crowd could rustle that up.

**Are other musos supporting it?**

As musicians we have a duty to do that, because we know how a musical instrument can help you to transcend your environment, because in some ways we've all escaped from our parents' upstairs front bedroom. So I'm really nailing musicians. The great thing is, the first person who put his hand in his pocket was Mick Jones from the Clash — which, having named it after a Clash song and doing it in tribute to Joe (Strummer), just warmed the cockles of my heart. And he's come to two of the prisons, when everyone told me, "Oh, he'll never be there". I really feel vindicated about being an old Clash fan.

**Will you have to be more hands-off with it when your new album, *Mr Love & Justice*, is released?**

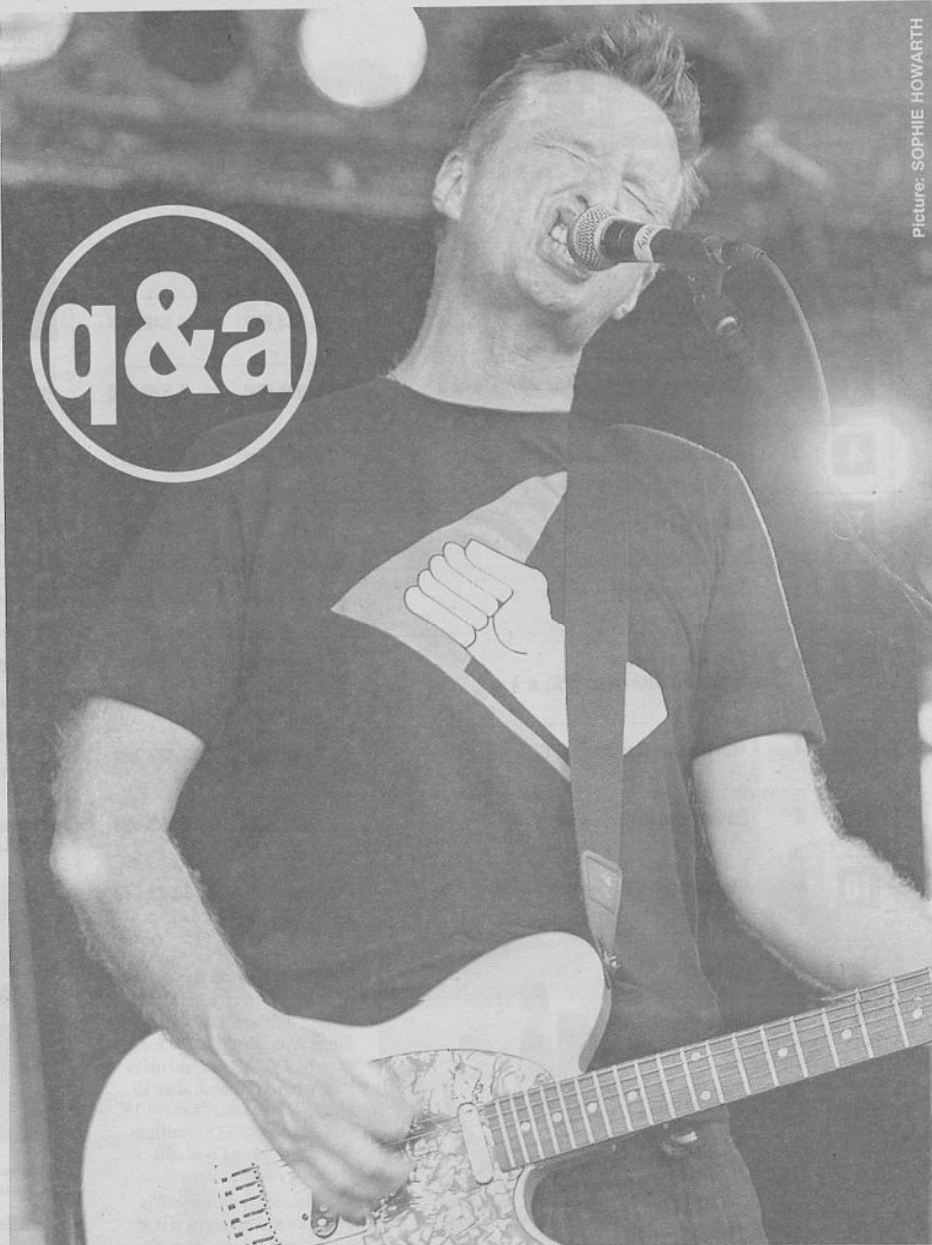
Jail Guitar Doors is me — I get the money, I put it in the bank, I buy the guitars, I drive it to the prison and I give 'em out. So if I'm in Australia doing a gig, it ain't happening. So that's a bit of a problem and I haven't quite worked out how to get around that. I had quite a good strike rate last year — from a standing start, we did 12 prisons. I figure, if I'm gonna do 12 this year as well, I can do that.

**What do you do when you go to the prisons?**

I'm not sitting down with the prisoners and writing songs — I go and I've got a spiel I give to the prisoners about why I think this is important and what the potential is, but ultimately we rely on charities and people at the prison. Sometimes prison officers themselves who can play a bit of guitar step up and make that connection.

**Have you heard back from the prisons you visited last year?**

I've had some very positive reactions. It's like someone coming in from outside and saying to the inmates, "We still have faith in you and your ability to reform and that's what we want from you". The guitar is a challenge, it's not a Christmas present; it's a way of getting on that first step to rehabilitation. One guy wrote to me to say he had a man who hadn't played guitar since his daughter died — and it was his daughter dying that set him down this path of drug use, which landed him in prison. So for him to



Picture: SOPHIE HOWARTH

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pick up a guitar again, that was his first step. It's not for everyone in the system, it's not a panacea, but for those people looking for a way back, it can be the key to starting the process of rehabilitation.

**It's been six years since your last album. You spent a lot of that time writing a book, *The Progressive Pilgrim*. What is it about?**

I wrote about how my life was transformed by music by going to Rock Against Racism (in 1978). The book was inspired by the British National Party, who are a racist party, inheritors of the National Front who we fought against in Rock Against Racism. I wanted to write the book for young people who have never encountered this sort of thing before; to explain how we dealt with it last time. But I ended up not just writing about my politicisation; it really made me think about how my perspective on the world changed. The most important realisation was that it wasn't the Clash — the Clash got me to Rock Against Racism — (and) it wasn't what was said from the stage, what was said from the stage illuminated ideas for me. But the ultimate thing was seeing 100,000 kids the same age as me and realising this is where we're gonna make our stand as a generation, on these issues of discrimination, racism, sexism and homophobia in the way previous generations had stood against the Vietnam War and nuclear weapons.

**So the audience had more effect on you than the band on stage?**

Yeah. That's something I've known from personal experience for a long time but have never been really able to articulate, which is: singer/songwriters can't change the world, only the audience can change the world. So that led me to write *I Keep Faith*, on the new album. When I do it live, I explain to the audience that it's about my faith in their ability to make a difference and how that's what keeps me going after all this time.

**Young artists such as Hard-Fi have been shouting about you. Has that brought new fans in?**

I don't know, but it certainly helps me to keep focused ahead. Much better than I'm on the 1980s tour with Kim Wilde and Tony Hadley, you know? So when Jamie T covers *New England* or Kate Nash invites me to play with her, rightly or wrongly I feel they're my contemporaries anyway. Anyone trying to say something other than "I'm great, you're s---, do you like my socks?" to paraphrase Oasis, I feel a kindred spirit with. When I see Get Cape. Wear Cape. Fly and he's making people do the anti-fascist salute, and sign up to Love Music Hate Racism, I'm there.

**You turned 50 last month.**

The only thing I've really thought about since turning 50 is how lucky I

am to still be doing this, that I come to New Zealand and Australia after 10 years and people are still interested in what I have to say. It's just f---ing amazing. It's been 25 years and people are still into it. What a lucky bastard I am. How am I gonna keep doing this 'til I'm 60? I don't feel any older than I did when I first came here and when I step up in front of that audience and they give it to me, I just feel I'm 25 again.

**Didn't you revisit those early days recently, playing your first album?**

Last year, I realised I could play my entire first album in 15 minutes, 'cos it's only 17 minutes long. So I started doing the first album as an encore — not every night 'cos it kills you — and the first time I did it, I was in the dressing room with my head under a towel, trying to get my breath back, and Ian McLagan from the Small Faces, my keyboard player, said to my manager, "Oh, that was f---ing incredible. I feel now I've seen Bill as he was back in the day". My manager said, "Mac, no, that's not what he was like at all. He couldn't play those songs for toffee, and he's so much better at it now". And under my towel, my heart pounding, I thought, "Yeah, that's it. I'm the champion".

*Mr Love & Justice (Shock) out March 1. Billy Bragg, Big Day Out, Flemington Racecourse, Mon, Essential Stage, 4pm; Prince of Wales, Jan 30-31, sold out.*

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