

Socialist bard wins a royal fan

At 50, Billy Bragg finds himself busier than ever as a musician and an activist. **Iain Shedden** reports

IT'S not exactly rock 'n' roll central in the backstage world of Billy Bragg. A cup of tea and a good chat takes precedence over debauchery.

We're sitting on a sofa in the artists' relaxation area at the Big Day Out festival on Queensland's Gold Coast. Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello saunters past — rock stereotypes in shades and tight jeans do lunch in clusters — and in the middle of it all the Bard of Barking's unmistakable Essex vowels pierce the air.

He likes to talk, does Billy, and as he celebrates 30 years in the music business and 50 on the planet, he has a lot on his mind and his plate. In the past year he has met the Queen, spoken out against the rise of racism in Britain, been commissioned to write new English lyrics for the *Ode to Joy* that concludes Beethoven's Symphony No 9, created a music rehabilitation program for British criminals, and has had his songs embraced by a new generation of musicians and fans.

"You'd think I might be slowing down or running out of steam," he says, "but it has been quite the opposite.

"I don't think I've ever been so busy. "I don't feel 50. When I stand up in front of the audience, I feel like I'm 26, like when I first came here. I get so much from my audience. They inspire me to keep on doing it."

It's clear from his performance later in the day that his gift of the gab is a factor in winning over audiences that aren't always familiar with his material. "I'm more of a person who turns up and steals an audience," he says. "That's always been my plot."

Bragg's matter-of-fact manner and his outspokenness on political, social and racial issues have been central to his career. He has rallied for the British Labour Party, backed striking miners and been a regular commentator from the stage and in the media on a variety of topics. In 2008 he is still raising his voice when he feels the need.

In 2006 he published his book *The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging*. The work continued a theme explored on his

last album, 2002's *England, Half English*, trying to unravel what it is to be English in the 21st century. He used promotion of the book as a platform to speak out about the rise of British racism and its advocates, such as the British National Party, which has been winning seats in local council elections.

"They are pushing immigration to the top of the agenda," he says. "That has been exacerbated by those evil men who let off bombs on the London underground. They did more damage to multiculturalism in Britain than the British National Party and the National Front put together."

He says he feels "beset from all sides" on the racism issue.

"Those of us who want to live in a society that is diverse and cohesive are under threat from organised racist political parties and mad jihadis who think killing innocent people on the underground is somehow going to further some ridiculous agenda."

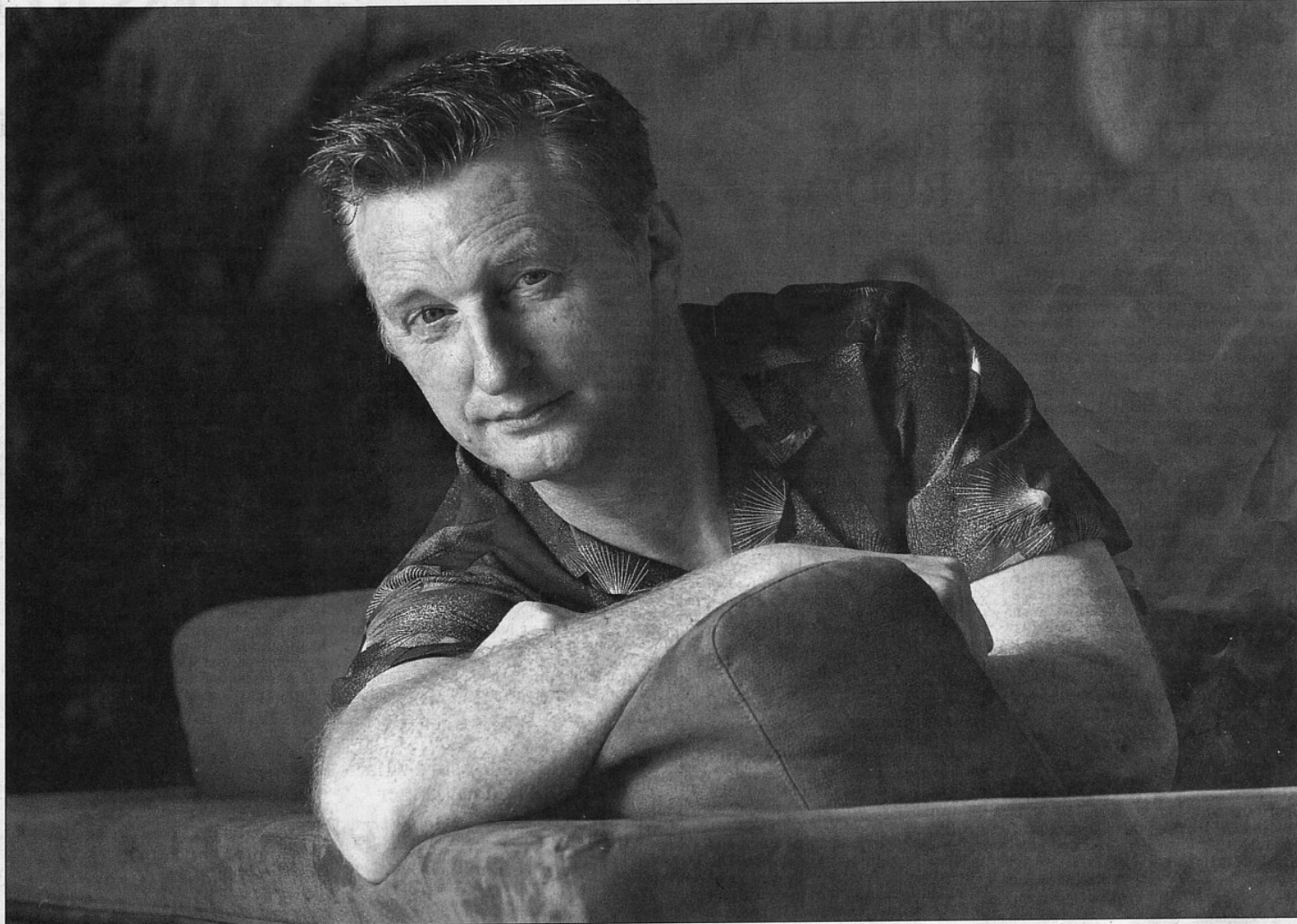
Bragg first became interested in politics after attending a Rock Against Racism rally with celebrated British band the Clash. His friendship with that band's guitarist Mick Jones led last year to Jail Guitar Doors (also the name of a Clash song), a project designed to buy instruments that are distributed to British prisoners. The two men publicised the campaign by performing at London's Wormwood Scrubs prison in July.

"He was the first person to put his hand in his pocket and give me some money for the project, which, for an old Clash fan like myself, warmed the cockles of my heart. Part of the problem with it, though, is that we can't be there all the time to do the work. People send me money. I buy guitars and I take them to prisons. But here I am doing an interview in Australia, so not much is happening with it right now."

He can console himself with the fact that similar projects have now sprung up in the US, Canada and Ireland.

Bragg is clearly committed to addressing political and social issues, but not everything he does is politically motivated.

Since the release of his first album, *Life's a*



Plenty of love songs: 'I don't mind being damned as a political songwriter, but to be dismissed as a political songwriter really pisses me off,' says Billy Bragg

Picture: Lyndon Mechielsen

Riot With Spy vs Spy, in 1983, love songs have sat alongside more strident calls to arms. In fact his new album, *Mr Love and Justice*, due to be released in March, has a more romantic feel than usual.

"There are more love songs on this album and it even surprised me," he says. "But I'm glad about that. I think some people just dismiss me, they put me in that pigeonhole and that's that. I don't mind being called a political songwriter. I don't mind being damned as a political songwriter, but to be dismissed as a political songwriter really pisses me off, because my favourite songs are the love songs. Those are the ones that resonate with me."

His songs resonate with other artists, too, including some who weren't born when Bragg, fresh out of a dispiriting two-month

spell in the British Army, embarked on a musical career. Young British artists such as Hard-Fi and Dizzee Rascal are among his admirers, as is 23-year-old pop star Kate Nash, who is also on this year's Big Day Out bill. "She has said some very nice things about me," he says. "I have a lot of respect for the new generation of singer-songwriters. For them to be coming through, articulating issues, not just escapist issues, is good. And the fact that some of them are covering my songs and playing with me is great, too."

Perhaps the most surprising new fan the Essex tunesmith has acquired in recent times is the Queen. As he relates the story, you can tell he was as incredulous as anyone about how that came about.

Last year, to help celebrate the reopening of London's Royal Festival Hall, Bragg was

asked to rewrite the *Ode to Joy*, which was performed at the opening ceremony by 1500 amateur choristers.

"I was standing there with my son, who is also a big fan of *Ode to Joy* ... the two of us were grinning from ear to ear.

"Then they ring me three weeks later and say they're going to play it for the Queen and would I like to come along and meet her."

One could be forgiven for thinking that mixing it with royalty might go against his leftist convictions, but not so.

"I had no qualms about it at all," he says. "You can't write a book about Britishness, about belonging, without wanting to look into her eyes. She gave me a look that said, 'What the f... are you doing here?', so I just went into a thing about how I came to write the song, how I was commissioned. If that wasn't

wacky enough, word comes through that she wants my autograph on the score. It'll probably turn up on eBay soon."

He says he has no truck with the monarchy, "although I'd like the monarchy to be outside our politics. I've never been a republican in that sense, because I think in a multicultural society you have to acknowledge certain beliefs that you don't necessarily adhere to yourself.

"I know a lot of people have a lot of respect for the monarchy, and I respect that. But I don't think that respect will transfer to her son, and I don't think the idea of Queen Camilla will impress a lot of people. I can't see those two on a \$20 bill. Can you?"

Billy Bragg's Australian tour, which is sold out, continues until February 4.