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'I've said my piece'

It will be a long, long time before Billy Bragg stops singing about politics. But his new album reveals a softer, more human side. He talks to Laura Barton about love, faith, tears ... and the importance of rhubarb

Laura Barton

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"I don't mind being labelled a political songwriter," says Billy Bragg, his voice snouty and rough, and his eyes sharp little specks in a well-freckled face. "I am a political songwriter - that's the life that I've made for myself. What really upsets me is being dismissed as a political songwriter." He pivots on the word "dismissed". People do dismiss Billy Bragg. He has spent 25 years in the music industry, and is one of our greatest living songwriters. Yet for all those who adore him, Bragg still exists in the wider public imagination as the Bard of Barking, the voice of the miners' strike and Red Wedge, a voice still singing a refrain of Old Labour and New England.

It has now been six years since Bragg released his last album, *England, Half-English*. "But in mitigation, can I just say that I did write a book?" he offers hastily. "I wasn't just sitting around." The book, *The Progressive Patriot*, was a political discourse in which he proposed that patriotism need not belong to the far right, and mused upon "the issue that I'm greatly agitated about, which is identity, belonging, immigration". He found that book writing, much to his surprise, brought a certain tonal shift in his songwriting. "It's altered how I write songs in the sense that there are fewer overly political songs on the new album because the book was such a polemic," he explains. "I've said my piece now on that."

Indeed, the new album, *Mr Love & Justice*, is perhaps the warmest, sweetest record he has ever produced, his voice sounding softer than before, the political tracts having given way to old-fashioned love songs. "Yeah," he says gently, "and I kinda like that. Even better, they're love songs that could also be political songs. That, to me, is the really interesting place to put a song - where politics and relationships overlap." Those songs that reside in the overlap work, he concedes, because the romance makes the politics easier to digest. "With a political song, you're giving them your opinion whether they want it or not. But love songs touch people in a different place, in a deeper place. And you don't really need to load stuff in there."

He offers a song from the new record, *You Make Me Brave*, as an example. "It doesn't really say a huge amount; in fact, I could've easily gone back and rewritten that to make it more focused about what I was thinking at the time. But why didn't I? Because when I said I was going to do that, Grant, my producer, cried." He grins. "That's what you wanna do, though, isn't it? Make people cry. What is that great line in *Young Americans*? "Those songs that make me break down and cry ... ?" That's what you want."

It first dawned on Bragg that he was capable of writing such a song in the early 1980s. "I played *St Swithin's Day* to the woman I was living with at the time, and she just burst into tears," he recalls. "I thought, 'OK, that seems to have done the trick.' Because before that, having been a punk rocker, there were other ideas I was trying to get across, there were other feelings I was trying to get out of people."

Bragg began his musical career in 1977, in a punk band named Riff Raff. He was a different creature then - 20 years old, and full of rebellion, refusing to vote in the general election because he was a punk rocker. "And Margaret Thatcher got elected," he says flatly. Growing up in Barking, Essex, having failed his 11-plus, there were no greater expectations upon him than to work at the local car factory. "That was it. That was where I was gonna go, and if you didn't want to work there, the career teacher said, 'You've got three choices, son: the army, the navy or the air force.'" Bragg chose the army. "I wanted to drive a tank," he says, voice bone-dry.

It was 1981, Riff Raff had made little impact, and Bragg conceded defeat. "I'd been in a punk band, I'd thrown everything into that, I'd hung everything on that, and it didn't work, and I just wanted to go somewhere where I could forget I'd ever dreamed that dream. Firstly, I'd run out of options: I really didn't know what else to do, and it seemed to me that the easiest way was to press the eject button on my previous existence, to go somewhere else and find something to push against. Secondly, if you go back and look at the history of the early 80s, there was a feeling that something was going to happen. You know: Tito died, the Russians were rearming ... I remember reading Margaret Thatcher saying, 'What's the benefit of free school meals if they're given to you by Russian paratroopers?' At the time I thought I didn't want to be sitting around on my arse in Barking when it all went off. And looking back, my dad wasn't around - he'd died six years before, and he'd been a tank driver in the second world war, and I think I was looking to see if I could do what he had done. It was a mixture of all those things. But most of all I'd run out of options."

As soon as he got into the army, however, he found himself writing songs again. "And so I thought, 'I'll get out and I'll have one last go, and I'll do it as scary and as raw and as kind of kamizake as I can - one guy with his guitar. And if it doesn't work out, I can say I did my best.'" The experience in the army gave him a fearlessness, he says. "When you've done basic training and you've more or less told the British army to stuff it ... yeah, it does. What made me resign was the night after the final exercise, when every-body else got lost except for my platoon and I was map-reader, and the corporal had come and said, 'Bragg, you're going to be best recruit after that.' So I thought, if I become best recruit, they won't let me leave. I was in the bath, and I got out and went up and put my suit on and said, 'I'm sorry, I'm leaving.'" It cost him £175 to buy himself out. "Best £175 I ever spent," he says. But the experience has stayed with him - the new album, for example, closes with a track named Farm Boy, a song about a young man in the army "dreaming of the time when I can go home".

The album opens with a song named I Keep Faith. It is one of those overlapping songs, a perfect Venn diagram of the political and the personal. "Firstly, it's about some of the people that I work with closely - Labour backbenchers," Bragg explains. "It's probably the closest I've worked with politicians, those bright young Red Wedgers who are now ministers. I did some shows for them during the 2005 election campaign, and I got to see how hard they work, and how little they get back for that. And then also it's about my missus, Juliet, and the struggles she went through to do what she wanted to do with her own life, and she's setting up a business as well, and that was a great inspiration for me."

The final verse was inspired by a songwriting workshop that Bragg held at a women's hospice in Weymouth, working with half a dozen women over a six-week period in 2006. "Trying to help them write songs, songs that allow them to say the things they can't say over the dining table in the evening but that you can say in a song - that are namely, 'I love you, but I'm not always gonna be here,'" he says softly. "That probably is one of the things I'm most proud of. And that last verse, that whole idea of, 'I know it takes a mess of courage to go against the grain/You have to make such great sacrifice for such little gain' - what those women went through, how they retained their dignity and kept their self-pity at bay was just phenomenal to witness. And yet they were able to communicate to me deep, deep feelings they had which then we were able to make into something for their families to treasure. And I just came away every Friday incredibly inspired by these women and their fortitude."

"So," he says, leaning forward in his chair a little, "I'd like to think it works on a number of levels - on the level of a personal commitment to another individual, on the level of a song about faith as in the sense of solidarity, faith in humanity. I'm not sure I want to live in a world without faith, you know? Faith in one another, faith in community, faith in humanity: I don't think I'd like to live in a world where everything's a matter of science and reason."

The song has allowed him, he says, to speak to audiences about something of which he has grown increasingly aware: "Our real enemy in trying to make a better world isn't conservatism, or capitalism or racism - they're manifestations of a deeper malaise, which is cynicism. And there's so much of that about, in our political and social discourse. And I speak as someone who has to fight to overcome their own cynicism - I helped get Tony Blair elected. In some ways I'm complicit in the invasion of Iraq because of that, despite our best efforts to stop it happening. So you know, I am overcome by waves of cynicism. But as Woody Guthrie said, 'I never want to write a song that puts people down.'"

I Keep Faith also boasts backing vocals by fellow Red Wedger Robert Wyatt, whose services he enlisted after running into him while buying rhubarb. Bragg was recording the album in Lincolnshire - "the rhubarb basket of England", he explains - and the women catering at the studio agreed to make rhubarb crumble and custard, which Bragg regards as "the pinnacle of desserts", only if he could find the fresh rhubarb. "Rhubarb," he adds as an aside, "is the celery of the gods." Off Bragg went to Louth market. "And as I was parking in the town square, who should be sitting there with his missus, on a bench smoking a cigar, but the grand old man himself, Robert Wyatt! Who I hadn't really seen since Red Wedge, and who welcomed me like a long-lost son." Bragg handed him a demo and invited him into the studio. "For a Stalinist," he smiles, "he really knows how to sing like an angel."

Bragg no longer lives in Barking. A while ago he moved to Dorset to spend more time with his family. It is perhaps this, as much as anything, that has occasioned a general softening of his demeanour and his songwriting, not to mention lyrics about beaches and cliffs and oceans. "Your environment's got to inform what you're talking about," he agrees. "I'm trying to reflect the world as I see it. It couldn't be any other way. And all those characters in those songs that I wrote before are walking around places I was living at the time. When I play them, I think of them ... " He quotes a line from the song Rule Nor Reason: "The wind shakes the trees, and the raindrops on the leaves/Tumble down, down my back in the breeze.' I know where that tree is. And I can see it in my mind now. It's in Chiswick. So anyway, when you sing a song, you connect with that. I don't see how else you can do it."

Does he ever miss Barking? He wonders, and frowns. "I miss feeling like it was the source of all normality in my life, which it was. It was my spirit level - things were either better or worse than Barking." It remains, he says, the place he identifies with. "I'm that bloke from Barking and therefore I've got to write about what's happening in my home town, which is being called the racist capital of Britain. You can't ignore that. And every night when I finish my gig I say, 'I'm Billy Bragg. I'm from Barking, Essex.' That's who I am. That's who I am. I know that, I'm absolutely sure of that. If it all stops tomorrow, everybody says the album's shit and I lose my job and I have to go off and drive a taxi, I'll still be the guy from Barking, Essex."

Pride in identity is what has dominated Bragg's thoughts over the past few years. When he took part in the Imagined Village tour last year, he wore a costermonger's suit and his tie in a docker's knot - what he describes as "my vernacular garb" - as a symbol of his patriotism. His last album culminated in the line "Oh my country, oh my country, what a beautiful country you are," and, he insists, he meant it. "I've seen other countries that I like, but this is the one that I love. Where else would you get rhubarb?"

The last album's title was a reference to an essay by Colin Maclnnes, and Mr Love & Justice shares its name with a Maclnnes novel, too. On the album it is a song about desertion, "about fathers leaving children and leaving women. It's actually for other men, to have another man say, 'It is just not acceptable to do this.'" But it is also a title that winks to Bragg's own identity, to his roles as the sweet balladeer and the political songwriter. He smiles at the suggestion. "Someone said to me, 'Mr Love & Justice - is that about you?' " His eyes soften. "It was going to be Mr Love & Social Justice, but that was a bit unwieldy. But I am Mr Love and Justice, in the same way that I am the Milkman of Human Kindness, and the Bard of Barking. They are my numerous identities, the many names of Bragg" · Mr Love & Justice is out now on Cooking Vinyl.