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Billy Bragg

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By [Daniel Saney](#), Deputy Editor



Having spent the six years since his last album penning his first book, *The Progressive Patriot*, touring with folk-based collective The Imagined Village and supplying instruments to prisoners with his Jail Guitar Doors initiative, Billy Bragg has returned with a well-received LP, *Mr. Love & Justice*. With his new single 'I Keep Faith' released today, we caught up with the Bard of Barking to find out more about his return to music-making.

What is the new single about? What do you keep faith in and why?

"I think 'I Keep Faith' is a song that generally works on two levels. There's a personal commitment of faith in another person, but I choose more to pitch it as the antidote to the rather cynical times we're living in. I've come to realise over the years that the conservatism, capitalism and, to some extent, racism that I've been fighting all my political life are manifestations of a deeper malaise that can be summed up in the word 'cynicism'. 'I Keep Faith' is my way of articulating that, trying to reach out and touch those people who are struggling to do their best in their individual circumstances. In a nutshell, it's faith in humanity."

And the name of the new album, *Mr. Love & Justice*, where did that come from?

"Actually, it's the title of a book by Colin McInnes who also provided the title of my last album, *England, Half English*. When it came to choosing a title for the album, it seemed to me that "*Mr. Love And Justice*" kinda summed up who I am. "*Mr. Emotional Love, Mr. Personal Love and Mr. Social Justice*", that's a bit unwieldy for an album title, so *Mr. Love And Justice* ended up as the title. It looks better on a T-shirt, the shorter version."

Love and justice: they're two very distinct kinds of songs that you write...

"They are, but the best songs, they overlap. And in the song 'Mr Love & Justice', it's clear that the politics of the relationship have overwhelmed the emotional content. 'I Keep Faith' works on a couple of levels too. They're the interesting songs, where the two overlap; it's not either or."

Do you consciously try to balance your political songs with more emotional material?

"No, no, no. When you're writing songs, you open the tap and what comes out comes out. Then you stand back and look at what you've got and think, 'OK, well there seems to be more love songs this time. That's interesting'. But I don't then go away and think, 'I'd better write more political songs, I'm Billy Bragg'. I've never felt that. I've always tried to reflect the world as I see it and that's what this collection of songs are: a reflection of the world I see at the moment."

You're playing some international dates after your UK tour. How well do your political songs, many of which seem quite specific to the UK, translate abroad?

"They are specific to the UK, but they're not. I mean, we were in Australia in January and they've just had a Labour government elected after a long period of Conservative rule. With my experience of talking to the audience about not becoming cynical, you know, I had a warning to them. Within a year, people are going to say the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, is as bad as the old Conservative prime minister, John Howard. I was able to use my experience to talk to them about their politics. The idea you've got is not an English idea, although the way you're expressing it in a song may be specifically English. The idea that underpins that is often an international idea or a universal idea."

With the crowd-pleasing element of what you do, are there any songs that you don't really like playing anymore, but you feel forced to?

"'New England' I play almost every night, but I generally let the audience sing that. With certain songs, I go through periods of thinking 'I'm not going to play this anymore', but it's all about context. For instance, I didn't intend to play 'Between the Wars' the other night, but I did play it because it seemed to be the right context there."

You've got to be a bit nimble on your feet and be aware of that."

You often cite The Clash and The Smiths as influences - bands that "mean something". Do you think there is that kind of band around at the moment?

"There are bands around that mean that, but you've got to remember there was much more ideological discourse going on in society in those days... Now, increasingly, young musicians who want to write political songs find themselves, if they're overt about it, castigated. Then again, someone who you don't think would be political can be. Look at Kate Nash at the Brits: when she won the British Female award, she said: 'Look, female's not a genre'. I was so proud of her for saying that; I think it was a very astute thing to say. She chose her moment and said the one serious thing anyone said on the stage all night."




What did you think of the reception to your book, *The Progressive Patriot*? Would you go down that path again?

"I was very pleased by the reception. It did what I wanted it to do; it gave me a different platform, a different audience with which to throw these ideas around. It certainly helped me to really focus my ideas, so writing it was like a sabbatical... Going back and thinking about how I was politicised by Rock Against Racism allowed me to reflect on what it is that I do. Discerning that cynicism is the real enemy was a part of that process, so it was really, really good. Whether I can do it again, I don't know, but if someone came up with a feasible idea and I felt I could do it, I would certainly try to put my mountain boots on and climb that mountain again."

'I Keep Faith' is out now.

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