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Billy Bragg Is Mr. Love & Justice

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By: [ChartAttack.com Staff](#)

Billy Bragg hasn't released a new album since 2002's *England, Half English*, but he's written a book, issued two career-spanning retrospective boxed sets, received a variety of honours and been as active as ever on the frontlines of fighting for social justice. So even though he turned 50 in December, don't think he's slowing down.

Bragg's 11th studio effort, the aptly titled *Mr. Love & Justice*, sees "the bard of Barking" leaning more towards the former than the latter, though "I Keep Faith" can be viewed as either a love or a political song — and there's no mistaking his left-leaning sentiments in "The Johnny Carcinogenic Show." But then you have "If You Ever Leave," which Bragg wrote about the partnership he shares with his wife, and the family-oriented "M For Me."



Billy Bragg

"I think I'm writing songs about people who have been in relationships for a while, as opposed to the 'flash bang wallop' of romance that I used to write about in the '80s," says Bragg.

You won't find anything as overtly political as such early masterpieces as "It Says Here," "Between The Wars" or "Help Save The Youth Of America" on the new LP, but Bragg believes he still has a vital anti-cynicism message to convey to fans who, he hopes, will spread it further among the masses.

"Cynicism is behind so many of the excesses behind the capitalist system," Bragg argues. "It's what the 'small c' conservatives rely on. If we feel cynical, we won't vote.

"That's the corrosive effect of cynicism. It destroys hope. In a post-ideological world, that's as good a case as any for trying to start and getting engaged in trying to make the world a better place. That's what I want my audiences to do. I want them to engage. I don't want them to give up. I don't want them to think that they've done their bit by buying Billy Bragg records. It's about trying to inspire people."

Bragg is joined on the **Grant Showbiz**-produced *Mr. Love & Justice* by his band **The Blokes**, who are comprised of former **Faces** keyboardist **Ian McLagan**, **Ben Mandelson** (lap steel guitar, bouzouki), **Lu Edmonds** (electric guitar, vocals), **Martyn Barker** (drums) and **Simon Edwards** (bass). The deluxe version of the album includes a second disc featuring just Bragg and his guitar, just like in the early days. Unlike on *England, Half English*, *The Blokes* played no part in writing the music this time around.

"I had a much better idea of what I wanted to do and had a longer time to think about it," Bragg explains. "But the band's contribution was still very important.

"For the first week in the studio, I asked them not to bring any electric instruments, and the space they put into playing with acoustic instruments was beautiful on songs like 'If You Ever Leave,' 'M For Me' and 'You Make Me Brave.' It gave the album a different tone, I think. We brought in electric instruments later for other tracks, but it was those early acoustic tracks that set the tone. That was good and it turned out the way that I hoped it would. I think this album has more in common with *Mermaid Avenue* than it does with *England, Half English*."

Mr. Love & Justice opener "I Keep Faith" also features backing vocals from former **Soft Machine** member and uniquely voiced solo artist **Robert Wyatt**, who Bragg met by chance for the first time in more than 20 years while on a quest for — of all things — rhubarb.

"The woman who was cooking for us and doing the catering for the studio said she could make any dessert we wanted, and Lincolnshire is the rhubarb basket of England," elaborates Bragg on the background of making the

album. "So I went off to get some fresh rhubarb for a rhubarb crumble, and who should be sitting there but Robert Wyatt, who I haven't seen since the days of Red Wedge.

"He treated me like a long lost brother, and we talked politics and acquired rhubarb. Then I gave him a demo of 'I Keep Faith,' and two days later he came into to the studio and sang those backing vocals beautifully. It was a win-win situation for me. I got rhubarb crumble and beautiful backing vocals from one of my heroes. How great is that?"

Start working on your rhubarb recipes if you want to impress Bragg at one of these Canadian shows:

- June 5 Vancouver, BC @ St. Andrew's-Wesley United Church
- June 17 Toronto, ON @ Harbourfront
- June 18 Montreal, QC @ Club Soda

—Steve McLean

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