

How fares battling BILLY BRAGG in 'the fight to get our lives back'?

INTERVIEW BY JOE MUGGS

➔ *MR LOVE AND JUSTICE* IS THE SOULFUL new album from Billy Bragg with his extended band The Blokes and a guest spot from Robert Wyatt. The title alone sums up the twin poles of the Bragg canon – romance and politics. From his unforgettable live *Top Of The Pops* appearance performing *Between The Wars* at the end of the 1984-5 miners' strike through to his current anti-war campaigning, the man never seems have turned his back on political engagement.

Sipping cappuccino in the foyer of a convivial central London hotel, the 50-year-old Bragg looks extremely healthy – perhaps a little stylishly weathered – but then it's often easy to forget that he's sold a *lot* of records and lives in a very big house in the country.

Billy, you have a country house in Dorset, you walk, you keep dogs. These things can relax a man. Do you still feel angry?

Trust me, there are days I wish I could turn my back on it all, just watch the ocean,

help and advice on how they can engage with issues, I keep active.

Do you ever feel embattled, working away in a depoliticised age? Or like you're the last of the old-school socialists?

Nah, not really. My commitment to old-school socialism, in the sense of Marxism, was never that close; I prefer to think practically. Sadly, things recur. The rise of the British National Party mirrors the rise of the National Front in the 1970s, and that was what first politicised me. These are immediate practical challenges. Also I've just come back from playing huge festivals in Australia with Rage Against The Machine and Anti-Flag, and there are a generation of 20-somethings who write to them, write to me, asking how they can get involved – so no, I don't feel embattled.

Frustrated, yes, angry about what's happening out there, yes, but not embattled.

Aren't bands like RATM the rare exception, though? Youth culture isn't exactly fizzing with revolutionary fervour at the moment.

You know what, back in the miners' strike – which was as revolutionary a time as we've had postwar – people talked the talk but they could never answer the question I always had about revolution: "What's your Plan B?" I don't miss that time. I don't miss Thatcher, I don't miss Reagan, I don't miss the Berlin Wall. Fuck 'em. There's been a lot of progress since then – minimum wage, gay marriage, environmental concern, talking to the IRA to end the war in Northern Ireland. So many of the issues we were *lambasted* for as "loony lefties" in the '80s are now mainstream. Mind you, new issues always emerge.

Who would have thought back then that we'd be in an imperialist war against Iraq, who were our allies then?

You campaigned against this Iraq war, which few now still defend. Is there a kind of grim satisfaction in saying, "I told you so"?

No, no. Think of the Iraqi families and British and American families destroyed by the war, literally and emotionally. There's no satisfaction to be had in this situation whatsoever. What there is is a redoubled determination that we shouldn't be allowed to be marched into war in Iran, for example. And for all the sabre-rattling six months, a year ago, the urge towards that seems to have died down. I think a lot of that is due to a lot of people being politically engaged, and exercising pressure. The February 2003 anti-war march in London was the biggest thing I've ever been involved with, far bigger than anything in the '80s, so don't tell me people aren't engaged in politics. But far more important was that after it people began to understand that they need to organise and get involved on the micro level.

Are people really organising? The political left in this country doesn't look enormously organised.

Certain things, like the war, like ID cards, have motivated people, and they are *learning* to organise now. It's not there yet, but I think there is room for a mainstream political party to the left of Labour too, as there now is in Scotland. It's not Respect, sadly; Respect is a creature of the Socialist Workers Party, who I'm afraid have a difficulty with democracy (*chuckles*) – and also a creature of George Galloway, who's a bit of a charlatan, all personality and bluster, which is a shame because the basic idea of the party was good! There's so much sheer frustration, which is what's driving people to vote BNP, people aren't even racist themselves. Don't get me wrong, I think the BNP are racist fascists. But there are a lot of people who now find they are the only party in England talking to and about working-class people, which is a travesty!


You talk about the working class, but aren't the real workers who make our goods and services now in China, India and so on? Should we be concerned with their rights and needs?

I look at it this way: starting with our own families, we *do* care for other people in our society. It's not a great leap to extend that around the world, particularly now that we are ever more connected by everything we buy or do. This is nothing to do with Marxist doctrine – it's underpinned by real concepts of fighting totalitarianism, of community responsibility, of wanting to live in a compassionate society. So



Bragg at the Red Wedge launch, House of Commons, 21 Nov 1985. One point for each '80s pop star or MP you identify.

but we all have a certain responsibility and I am not willing to shirk that. Whether it's actively working on things like my Jail Guitar Doors campaign getting musical equipment in prison, or just answering the emails of people asking for



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yes, we need to support people wherever we see the beginnings of organisation, the same as people organised to get the vote, to lower working hours, to have trade unions here. Somewhere like China, the cracks are showing, people are starting to want representation and practical solutions at a local level.

The sheer scale of trying to affect this globalised world sometimes feels daunting to ordinary people here, especially as their own jobs become more freelance, people work longer hours...

In *this* country they do. In Germany, in Europe, corporations are not able to get away with forcing people – working-class or middle-class people – to work inhuman hours or to accept precarious positions with few rights, because the unions have been allowed to gain some purchase there. Unlike here, where New Labour didn’t push back the Thatcherite agenda in the workplace. Politics in the western world is about different responses to capitalism, with how to moderate the avaricious undertow of capitalism. Many years ago, my great-grandfather was very

involved in getting working days down from 12 hours to eight hours, then moving on to securing weekends. You may think those battles have been won now, but work/life balance is still a huge issue for so many people. Unless we are vigilant, our lives get taken away from us by the corporations. So it’s the same fight – the same fight goes on to get our lives back.

So do you align yourself with the “Anti-Capitalist movement”?

Capitalism isn’t the enemy. Capitalism is a natural force, it’s like the ocean we all swim in. *All* political ideologies have to deal with, and regulate, the power of the capitalist system. So-called free-market countries are the first to bring in government mechanism to clear up when it all goes tits-up. Take this sub-prime mortgage thing – the very people who are the first to cry out against “nanny state” and “government interference” and “red tape” are going to be the first people knocking on the US government’s door asking them to bail them out. Because they know, of course, that if we just

let capitalism, red in tooth and claw, do its thing unchecked it will consume all of us.

Let’s talk about the war on terror. Do you think we have surrendered too many freedoms now?

Not in France. Not in Germany. If we’d been a bit closer to our European partners, we might have been able to avoid some terrible things. The things that the government are doing haven’t been seen here since the height of the Second World War. In the war, they were actually *going* to come over and kill us *en masse*, they were bombing our houses by the thousand, and yes, the government saw fit to curtail some freedoms. But now, four blokes blow themselves up and the government tries to bring in the same or *more* draconian legislation. It is out of all proportion. There will always be people willing to do dreadful things in any society but they are not in the same measure as the threat this country faced in 1940. We have to find ways of dealing with it, yes, but something has gone very wrong when a Guantanamo can happen.

Why do you think this country more than others went along with the American programme?

You may say it’s a cliché but we’re an island nation, and we’re insular. It is a part of our character to be easily scared by an outside threat. It’d be simple to blame the *Daily Mail* but they are just an illustration, the tip of the iceberg. People think, “If you’re innocent you have nothing to hide”, but innocence didn’t stop people being tortured in Guantanamo Bay. It didn’t save the Guildford Four from 20 years in prison. Innocence won’t protect you. All that will protect you is basic rights. Maybe we *do* need ID cards – I don’t want to be blown up, after all – but if we do have an ID card then I bloody well want a Bill of Rights. I want it written on the back of that card, a fundamental Bill of Rights that strengthens my rights against the intrusions that an ID card entails

You – like Robert Wyatt, who appears on your album – are very keen to present an alternative, more enlightened, vision of “the Englishman”.

But isn’t this a bit of a fantasy?

That *Daily Mail*/David Blunkett insularity is just one thread through our culture. We’re not all paranoid nutcases. The majority of people are just trying to make a better life. They get on with their neighbours, and if push came to shove would stand together for their community. I strongly believe that, because I have faith in people, in humanity – as I say in the new album, “I keep faith”. That may sound trite but in this world where there aren’t the great political behemoths to follow any more, committing yourself to fighting cynicism in your heart, and in society, that’s as good a place to start as any. People say I write political songs and love songs. But there’s no difference. Everything begins with love for – and faith in – those closest to you. It all springs from there.

MR LOVE AND JUSTICE is out now on
Cooking Vinyl Records