

Billy Bragg: 50 And Still Vital

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By: [ChartAttack.com Staff](#)

By **Steve McLean**

The seemingly tireless **Billy Bragg** made the rounds in a variety of roles over four days and nights at the recent South By Southwest Music And Media Conference in Austin, Texas, caught a 7 a.m. Sunday flight to New York City to perform a St. Patrick's Day-themed show with **The Pogues** and **Kate Nash**, flew home to England, then wrote an op-ed piece for The New York Times. In between all that, he found time to call ChartAttack news editor **Steve McLean** to talk about his new Mr. Love & Justice album, U.S. politics, his latest activist endeavors, and what's happening with the **Woody Guthrie** Mermaid Avenue tribute collaborations with **Wilco**. Here are excerpts from their conversation:

I confess I haven't had much time with the album and wasn't expecting to talk to you until tomorrow, so are there any predominant themes running through the album?

Billy Bragg: I think there are more love songs than there are political songs, if you take that as a bellwether for a Billy Bragg record. I think that may well be down to the fact that I spent a couple of years writing a book about identity and belonging and I think that was quite polemical. When it ended, I found that the songs that sprouted through the concrete were love songs. I was quite pleased about that.

There's a deluxe version of the album where one disc is you performing the songs solo.

That's right. I had to play several of the songs solo anyway, and the record company always wants a few extra tracks for downloads, so I decided that we might as well record the lot of them. They said, "Let's put it out as an extra CD." Now there's a huge debate going on the Billy Bragg website about which is the best, whether the purists love the solo stuff or the band. The band album is winning, I'm pleased to say, because that's the actual album. Someone told me that the solo album sounds like it was recorded in a day, just like Life's A Riot With Spy Vs. Spy.

What are your thoughts on the U.S. election and what's been going on?

I would like to see **[Barack] Obama**, more because he represents a generational change than because he's a black man. It would be great to have a woman president of the United States — that would be brilliant — but what they really need now is a generational change. That's what **[former British prime minister Tony] Blair** represented, and I think Americans could do with that, too. Out with the old guard to bring in some fresh ideas.

But after Blair came in, he fell back after a few years in power.

He did, and that's been the source of a lot of bitterness. You must let your readers know that I fight my own cynicism and my own battles as well. After helping get Blair elected, the reality of that... you have to balance it out: War in Iraq, peace in Northern Ireland. Which is more important? It's a tough one to call.



Billy Bragg

What's happening on the activism front?

The issue of artists' rights is something that I've picked up on my antenna. We're in a bit of a bind because the social networking sites are using our music to get members and sell advertising and make money, but they don't want to pay us any royalties for that. On the other end, the kids download music and don't want to pay any royalties either. We're in a bit of a bind, really. I'm trying to work out how the next generation of musicians will be able to do what I do, which is make a decent living for 25 years — maybe not by playing Maple Leaf Gardens — but to be able to make a living and have a nice life just by writing songs. I don't know how that's going to happen. This issue of artists' rights will have to be addressed sooner rather than later because there's a lot of stuff before the American congress and the European parliament that would lock in copyright laws for the web 2.0. This is an issue that needs to be addressed.

When I talked to you two years ago, you said there was a possibility of more Mermaid Avenue material coming out. Can you give me an update?

Because I have a deal in which my work reverts to me and I retain ownership, the Mermaid Avenue albums will be returned to me soon. Then I'll be able to sit down with **Jeff Tweedy** and work out what we'd like to do about all of that. Hopefully, it will be possible to go back and go over the material. Some of it's just Jeff and I playing Woody Guthrie songs. It's not another monumental album, in that sense. But there are songs that you haven't heard from those sessions, so it would be lovely if we could do something with the whole of the sessions and maybe add some copies of the manuscripts that we worked with in time for Woody's centenary, which is 2012. That would make a lot of sense. I'm actually hoping to meet [Woody's daughter] **Nora Guthrie** for lunch tomorrow and see where she is with everything and what her plans are for the centenary. She has some brilliant stuff going on because she's that sort of person. If she's conducive to it and I can chat with Jeff to see how he feels about it, I'd really love to do Woody justice for his centenary. And it would be great to play those songs again. I have to choose each night which ones I can put in a set. I can't play an entire set of Woody Guthrie songs. But if we could do something where we were just playing Woody Mermaid Avenue songs, it would be a lot of fun. We never actually did tour.

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