

April 6, 2008

PLAYLIST | RY COODER

## Guitar Licks That Resonate and Lyrics That Linger

By BILLY BRAGG

ON his 12th studio album, “Mr. Love & Justice” (Anti-), due out April 22, Billy Bragg, troubadour of the oppressed and bard of the lovelorn, sings about — you guessed it — love and justice. Mr. Bragg, 50, fancies himself a bit of a punk rocker who writes songs tinged with soul and folk. His inspiration lies in the protest songs of the 1960s. His blend of humor and outrage is evident in songs like “The Johnny Carcinogenic Show,” in which he sings about “grandchildren you will never know.”

After playing at [South by Southwest](#), on “Late Night With [Conan O’Brien](#)” and on a bill with the Pogues last month, Mr. Bragg returned home to England to relax with his family at their house on Chessel Beach. He begins his European tour this month with three days of songwriting workshops and a concert at Liverpool Prison on behalf of his foundation, Jail Guitar Doors, which puts guitars in the hands of inmates. He comes to America in June. While looking out his window at the waves, Mr. Bragg spoke by phone with Winter Miller about what he’s listening to now.

### [Ry Cooder](#)

Ry Cooder is probably my guitar hero, as much for what he doesn’t play as what he plays. The economy of his playing is something to be admired at a time when guitar players tend to think the more notes you play the better you are. “My Name Is Buddy” (Nonesuch) is up my street because it’s capital-P Political. It’s the story of the Depression told by a cat named Buddy. This does sound a bit odd — he travels around with a mouse and a frog — but it works and hangs together beautifully.

There’s a lot of love in the songs; they fit well in the tradition. [Woody Guthrie](#)’s spirit runs through this record very strongly. Cooder plays stuff that we now refer to as Americana, but nobody called it that then. His excursions have been great, but for him to come back to where he began is pretty cool.

### The Hold Steady

I was drawn to them by their lyrics; they have a wonderful levity. They come out of Craig Finn’s mouth at a great velocity. The band looks really ordinary, but their guitars are ecstatic. To my untrained ears they’re a mixture of early [Bruce Springsteen](#) and Cheap Trick. “Boys and Girls in America” (Vagrant) has mostly up-tempo songs, good for jumping up and down in the living room.

There are some albums that take you back to your early teens — before they invented Guitar Hero III — when you’d get by with your bedroom mirror and a tennis racket for a guitar. This would be my tennis racket album of the year.

### Grinderman

I really like “Grinderman” (Anti-). It’s Nick Cave’s side project, and it’s very garagey, back-to-basics. He said it’s not like “The Birthday Party,” but he’s a bit disingenuous because it is like that album.

There are songs on here that deal with the aging process and how to grow old gracefully. My favorite song is a laugh-out-loud track in which he’s trying to get a young lady to consummate their relationship. “I read her Yeats, I tried my best to stay up late, I fixed the hinges on her gate, but still she just never wanted to.” He gets more and more exasperated as the song goes on. It’s just a cry from the soul. The whole idea of how to be a 50-year-old rock star, Nick Cave gives us a shot in the arm: We can do this. I’m not recommending it out of middle-aged solidarity; it’s great.

### Duke Special

He’s a very interesting-looking guy. He’s got dreadlocks, wears eye makeup and a kind of old-style army uniform — slightly Sgt. Pepper — and he has a bit of an Ulster brogue. “Songs From the Deep Forest” (V2) is a lovely album. Americans might refer to his music as vaudevillian; we would say it’s got a musical twist. He writes beautiful songs, mostly love songs, which he sings in a plaintive voice. He’s a bit like an Irish [Rufus Wainwright](#); he’s got that sort of vibe. He has that sense of drama, except he’s not quite as fey as Rufus, he’s a little bit more up close and personal. Being a songwriter, I get sucked into the lyrics first. The song “Portrait” makes my son and me want to hoof around the kitchen, [Gene Kelly](#) style.

### The View

“Hats Off to the Buskers” (Columbia) drew me in with a really great guitar track on the second song, “Superstar Tradesman.” I heard it on the radio, got the single and played the hell out of it. It has Clash-like guitars, and the lyrics are very funny. It’s basically talking about someone who’s a carpenter or plumber making a lot of money in a town where people aren’t making a lot of money. “You have a house in the ferry and a new guitar that’s never been played before and it never will.” I know guys like that with a [Les Paul](#) on a stand in their living room, gathering dust. Might as well put it on the mantelpiece.

The View sing as if their lives depended on it, and they have a great joy in what they sing. They’ve got self-knowledge about what a stupid job we do. I like bands that give a wink and a nod that they know they’re having a great time and getting paid for it, hurrah.

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