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Billy Bragg plays politics - and more



By Dan DeLuca

Inquirer Music Critic

AUSTIN, Texas - Billy Bragg stood on stage at the South by Southwest Music Festival with an electric guitar around his neck and a brand-new song to play.

> "I want to dedicate this to everyone who is taking their ability to articulate themselves and forging it into some kind of weapon to change the world," said the 50-year-old British punk-folk songwriter, whose first album in six years, *Mr. Love & Justice*, comes out Tuesday.

> With that, Bragg bashed out "Old Clash Fan Fight Song," a rumination on the middle-aged battle against cynicism, and the enduring power of the band that first changed his world 30 summers ago.

> "Ooh-oh-oh-oh, people are moving on

Ooh-oh-oh-oh, George Bush will soon be gone," sang Bragg, the foghorn-voiced agit-pop artist from Barking, Essex, in the crowd-pleasing chorus.

> But there was poignancy in verses about an aging punk-rock fan who "has to put food on the table, you know how that feels

That doesn't mean he's lost his ideals," and self-mockery, too: "These heavy matters don't worry me, 'cause I'm a heavier guy than I used to be."

> On *Mr. Love & Justice* (Anti-***), Bragg further explores maintaining romantic and political commitments, settling ever more comfortably into a country-soul groove on such lovely songs as "I Keep Faith" and "You Make Me Brave."

> *Mr. Love & Justice*, which features art-rocker Robert Wyatt and former Rolling Stones keyboardist Ian McLagan, is the singer's second consecutive album named for a book by late

British novelist Colin MacInnes, after 2002's *England, Half English*.

> And though the title song is sung from the perspective of a woman looking for fair play from her wayward spouse, Bragg acknowledges that the rubric neatly encapsulates his approach.

> "It is descriptive of the two sides of what I do," he says one afternoon, sitting for a between-gigs interview over a tuna sandwich. "So I suppose I am Mr. Love and Justice."

> His road to becoming Mr. L&J began at the Rock Against Racism Carnival in 1978, where he first saw the Clash, the band to whom he dedicated *The Progressive Patriot*, his 2006 memoir.

> In the book, Bragg digs at how identity is shaped "not only by blood and soil," but also by popular culture. "One of the first things that gave me a sense of English identity was 'Scarborough Fair,' by Simon and Garfunkel," he says. "It just sounded medieval to me. So one of the things I tried to get my head around was, why did it take two Jewish guys from Queens to make me feel English?"

> Seeing the Clash made Bragg feel "like I was different person when I went back to work on Monday morning," he says. "But the crucial thing about that is that it was the audience that made me feel that way, not the Clash. It was being in that crowd.

> "The world didn't change when I left that park. But my perspective on the world changed. And that's how it works. All you can do as an artist is offer another perspective. That's your job. You convene the crowd. And then you try and inspire them."

> As the author of broadsides such as "There Is Power in a Union," and pointed new tunes like the effective exploration of extraordinary rendition "O Freedom" and the less successful "The Johnny Carcinogenic Show," Bragg is happy to be considered a political songwriter.

> "I don't mind," he says, though he figures that in a career that began with the 1983 EP *Life's a Riot With Spy vs. Spy*, love songs outnumber political ones 2-1.

> "What I object to is people who dismiss me as that. Because life isn't just about politics. If it was, it would be dull," says Bragg, who is married and has a 14-year-old son who doesn't play music but is an enthusiast of the video game *Guitar Hero 3*. ("It's terrible," he says, with an exaggerated moan. "My son is growing up to be a Foghat fan.")

> Bragg is never at a loss for words, and he's written many a wryly amusing heart-tugger, from *Mr. Love & Justice*'s "M for Me" to "A New England," which was a hit for the late, great Kirsty MacColl in 1985. "I saw two shooting stars last night, I wished on them, but they were only satellites," he rhymed. "It's wrong to wish on space hardware, I wish, I wish, I wish you'd care."

> Career highlights like the Joe Boyd-produced *Workers Playtime* (1988) and two *Mermaid Avenue* collaborations with Wilco, in 1998 and 2000, which put music to Woody Guthrie lyrics, have earned Bragg elder-statesman status in the U.K. Last year, singer K.T. Tunstall said: "I wish he was my history teacher, I wish he was my big brother, and I wish I could vote for him."

> The cause stirring Bragg's passion of late is musicians' rights in the Internet age. "Both the corporations and the kids, it seems," he wrote in a New York Times op-ed piece in March, "want the use of our music without having to pay for it."

> He says, "I don't know what the industry is going to look like in years to come. But people are still going to make music, and people are still going to want to hear music." He warns about "criminalizing our audience - that's not the way to go," and adds, "I don't think people are interested in giving money to corporations any more, but they're willing to fund people who make music they love."

> What's at stake is how future generations are going to make a life making music.

> "Who's looking after these guys who want to do what I've done, making a living doing a job I love more than anything else?" he wonders. "I'm not a millionaire. But I travel around the world playing music, and I still love doing it. This is success. Playing the Enormodome - that's for somebody else."

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