



Billy Bragg combines fiery politics with love songs 🗝

08:11 AM CDT on Tuesday, April 22, 2008

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AUSTIN – "I don't mind being labeled a political songwriter," says Billy Bragg. "What upsets me is being *dismissed* as a political songwriter."

It's a valid complaint. While the English singer is best-known for his sharp-tongued commentary, he's spent a large chunk of his career writing about politics of the heart. He tackles both topics on *Mr. Love & Justice*, his first album in six years, which comes out today. (See review on Page 4E.) "The title summed up me," he said, explaining why he named the CD after a book by British author Colin MacInnes. "Some of my songs are about love. Others are about social justice. I'm neither one nor the other."



Maybe not, but love walks out the door as soon as Mr. Bragg sits down for an interview. Hours before a show at South by Southwest in Austin in mid-March, he's already revved up, ticked off and speaking at warp speed in his thick cockney accent.

He can talk the legs off a chair about politics. But every now and then he'll turn to slightly lighter topics, like growing up in Dagenham, a London suburb that was once dominated by the Ford Motor Co.

"I'd been educated to go work in the car factory, but there was no way I was gonna work in that [expletive] ... car factory, so I had to find an escape plan," he said.

"And that's why I'm sitting here today."

In 1977, he formed the punk band Riff Raff. But he made his name as a Woody Guthrie-style folk-rocker on *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg* (1984) and *Talking With the Taxman About Poetry* (1986). Unlike most punks and folkies, he was obsessed with R&B.

"When I wrote 'Levi Stubbs' Tears,' which references the lead singer of the Four Tops, Paul Weller said, 'I thought you were supposed to be a folk singer.' And I said, 'I'm a *soul* folk singer,' " he

says.

"The most formative music of my youth was Motown and Simon & Garfunkel. Punk didn't quench the burning fires that those two particular genres lit."

There's plenty of soul influence on *Mr. Love & Justice*, from the gospel vibe of "I Keep Faith" to the Memphis groove of "The Johnny Carcinogenic Show." The latter was inspired partly by Mr. Bragg's father, who "smoked himself to death," the singer says.

"But it's also about the way capitalism sells stuff it knows is bad for us, and distracts us with advertising. The line 'Poverty is toxic' is true. People with bad diets aren't stupid They don't have time and money to be eating stuff that is healthy."

Even more pointed is "O Freedom," a song about the torture of prisoners at Guantànamo Bay. As critical as he can be of the United States, Mr. Bragg worries that things could get even worse in England.

"We don't even have a written constitution," he says. "Our constitution consists of laws passed by the government. If it decides to abolish the right to a trial, we lose that right."

The 50-year-old singer is part of a growing choir of musicians who are writing songs critical of the Iraqi war. (Eddie Vedder, Sheryl Crow and R.E.M. address the topic on recent CDs.) The fact that such anti-war tunes get little or no radio airplay doesn't surprise him.

"What percentage of *The Dallas Morning News* has to do with the war?" he asks. "People work very hard to get the subject on the agenda, but it's marginalized by other news, and that's happening in our business, too."

Yet he refuses to grow disillusioned. At recent shows, he's prefaced "I Keep Faith" by warning fans about the power of negative thinking.

"Instead of talking about how the capitalists are bad and the Republicans are bad and the racists are bad, which we all know, I talk about how cynicism is destroying our society," he says.

"Woody Guthrie didn't have a cynical bone in his body. He wrote songs that lifted people up, and that was a powerful lesson for me to learn: If you're gonna criticize, you have to say something positive."