

Billy Bragg - Jail house rocker

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Jade Wright meets a 'national treasure' whose radical politics have brought him back to Liverpool

BILLY Bragg occupies the unusual position of being both an anti-establishment, socialist drum-banger and a lauded national treasure.

Over three decades he has made an indelible mark on the conscience of British music, becoming perhaps the most stalwart guardian of the radical dissenting tradition that goes back to the very origins of songwriting.

So, it was with some trepidation that I spoke to him ahead of his Liverpool gig next week.

I needn't have worried. In person, he's warm, funny and instantly likeable. Too funny as it turns out.

"Stop giggling and do the interview," he laughs, cracking another joke.

Obligingly, I ask him about coming back to play at the Philharmonic Hall.

"I was at the Phil last year and it was one of the best gigs I've done," he grins. "I always have a good time in Liverpool."

Bragg began his musical career in 1977, in punk band Riff Raff.

He didn't decide to become a musician full-time until after buying himself out of the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars tank regiment four years later. "Best £175 I ever spent," he says.

He became heavily involved in politics and political writing, backing the miners' strike and campaigning fiercely for Labour's Red Wedge drive to appeal to younger voters in the 1980s, touring with The Smiths, The Communards and Style Council.

He staged benefit concerts in support of the sacked Liverpool dockers, and formed a strong bond with the city.

He was here a couple of weeks ago to play an unusual venue – Liverpool Prison in Walton.

It was part of his Jail Guitar Doors project, which aims to provide musical equipment for the use of inmates serving time in Her Majesty's prisons.

It takes its name from the b-side of The Clash's 1978 single Clash City Rockers.

"Hearing The Clash as a 19-year-old changed my life, so I guess I was looking for a project that looked at the transformative power of music," says Billy.

"This year is the fifth anniversary of the passing of Joe Strummer, a hero of mine.

"I know there are people out there who question the work we do, but I believe the prison system has to be about rehabilitation as well as punishment.

"That doesn't work for everyone, but I'd say 75% of the men in there can be rehabilitated, and music can be a big part of that."

And it seems to be working. According to Jail House Doors, ex-prisoners who have participated in previous sessions have a re-conviction rate of between 10%-15%, compared to the national average of 61%.

"Normally I just supply instruments – but with Liverpool being city of culture this year, I really wanted to come over and take part," says Billy.

"The team at Walton were great. We did a little gig at the end. It was really interesting. The inmates played me some of the songs they'd written, I played them some of mine. It meant something."

Billy also visited Styal women's prison.

"I think prison is much harder on women," he says. "I know that's a sweeping thing to say, but I think it's questionable whether most women should be given prison sentences at all.

"Obviously you have the people who are too dangerous to be in society, but that's not the majority.

"Women are normally the main carers for children, and for families to be broken up is just heartbreaking.

"Children go into care, they lose their homes. It's devastating. The amount of self-harm that goes on in women's prisons is frightening.

"I'm all in favour of punishment when people deserve it. But the punishment has to fit the crime."

Billy says the experience of visiting Liverpool prison is something he'd like to repeat.

"You can't fail to be inspired by people's stories," he explains.

"We might even play one of the songs we wrote together at Walton for the Phil gig next week. I've still got the tune going round my head."

But then, collaboration is nothing new for the Bard of Barking. He's worked with Johnny Marr, REM, Kirsty MacColl, and recently with Kate Nash at this year's NME awards.

"She's great," he says. "I listen to her and I hear the same things that make me want to write. She asked to do New England together, and we mixed it in with her track Foundations."

That's the thing about Billy. He continues to inspire a new generation of musicians. His music has lost none of its power. If anything it has intensified rather than diminished, as shown in his new album Mr. Love & Justice.

It is perhaps the warmest, sweetest record he has ever made – the protest tracks having given way to old-fashioned love songs.

"Love songs touch people in a different place, in a deeper place," he says. "And you don't really need to load stuff in there."

But then again Billy has always written sublime love songs – just think about St Swithin's Day – it's just that he has never lost his passion for a good cause.

The left-wing firebrand has lost none of his spark. He's as uncompromising as ever, and that's the way we love him.

While he's in Liverpool next week he's planning to see some of the city.

"This time I'm hoping to get to the Tate – I love the Tate – and to get out and about and see the city during the day," he says.

"I used to be out in all the pubs, but I can't party as hard as I used to."

The glint in his eye and his obvious love of life tell a different story.

But then again, he's now an author as well as a musician. In the six-year gap between the last album and the new one he wrote a book.

"Yeah, I've a book about Englishness," he says. "It was something I'd wanted to do for a while."

The Progressive Patriot expressed his view that English socialists can reclaim patriotism from the right wing.

Later in the year Billy plans to tour America.

"America's an interesting place at the moment," he says. "They've got the chance of real change with these elections.

"I think I'd like Barack Obama to get it – he seems to represent a new generation – but a female president would be really good, too, so either him or Hillary.

"Let's hope one of them gets it."

Billy is hugely popular in America, which comes as a surprise given the subject matter for so many of his songs is based on England and Englishness.

"I'm in that alternative genre over there, which sits well with me. I'm going up the west coast for the first bit of the tour, then coming home for a bit to see the family, then going down the east coast.

"When I was single I'd have done it all in one, but now I try to get a bit of work/life balance."

I laugh.

"What?" he's laughing, too. "It's still a job. My brother is a bricklayer and he talks about his work/life balance. When I do it I get laughed at."

And, almost on cue, it's time for his real life to take over: "I've got to go to the dentist's," he apologises.

As we say our goodbyes, he asks: "I hope I didn't say anything too Ringo Starr-esque, did I?"

"I don't want my topiary statue to be decapitated. I don't have one, like, but you can't be too careful.

"Topiary ire is a difficult thing to live down," he jokes, referring to the vandal who chopped off the head of a foliage sculpture of Ringo recently at Liverpool's South Parkway transport interchange.

"When he comes back into town they'll be chanting 'What about the privet, Ringo?'.

"You don't want to mess with the privet."

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