



Pop

By George, Britpop was never like this

Billy Bragg's celebration of Englishness takes in everything from folk to punk to, er... rockabilly

Kitty Empire

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Looking For a New England

Barbican, London EC2

Most Observer readers would probably feel a little uncomfortable holding up bits of paper to form a flag of St George at a gig. But that's precisely what the audience does tonight, albeit in a very coy, English sort of way. Looking For a New England is a celebration of St George's Day curated by Billy Bragg - Essex foghorn, Red Wedger and, now, Progressive Patriot, as his 2006 treatise on Englishness styled him.

Bragg is on a mission to reclaim Englishness from the far right by celebrating the radical tradition from the Diggers to the Clash. Tonight, his auxiliary weapons include humour, tea and a guest bill of music that spans shivery folk and rockabilly. 'St George was an immigrant worker who hitched a ride back here with the Crusaders,' Bragg points out early on. You leave more confused about his vision of Englishness than when you went in, but three thought-provoking hours pass very agreeably.

By far the most rigorous of Bragg's supports is Rachel Unthank and the Winterset. Rachel and Becky Unthank are two Northumbrian sisters with voices like bawdy ghosts, abetted by fiddle, accordion and a pianist fond of diving inside the piano lid to prang the strings. Obviously, they begin their St George's Day set with a Scottish song, 'Blue Bleezing Blind Drunk'.

'I Wish, I Wish' is another spectral female lament that chills the beer in the audience's cups, plunging the evening back to a time when England was at least a greener, if not a more pleasant land. Best of all is 'Sea Song', a tune borrowed from Robert Wyatt, which features on the Winterset's most recent album, *The Bairns*. Billy Bragg joins them for 'The New St George', a song by Richard Thompson. 'Great English songwriters,' notes Rachel Unthank, unwittingly recalling Al Murray's pub landlord.

Sandwiched in between the Winterset and Camden rockabillies Kitty, Daisy and Lewis is Tom Clarke, lead singer of the Enemy. Bragg admits the urchin-like rocker might be a fish out of water in tonight's polite company, but he praises Clarke's 'strong sense of place'. (The Enemy are from Coventry, aggressively so.)

You suspect Bragg actually sees in Clarke a younger version of himself. The Enemy's 'This Song is About You' (which he doesn't actually play tonight) features girls pushing prams before their time, as does Bragg's own anthem, 'A New England'. 'You're Not Alone' (which Clarke does play) was inspired by touring the post-industrial cities of England and Scotland. Performing solo with acoustic guitar, the big-voiced Clarke cuts a more appealing figure than he normally does. But he goes and spoils it all by playing a song about Sophie Lancaster, the girl murdered for being a goth. It's prosaic and unfinished.

Scotland creeps in again and again tonight. During his set, Bragg plays a Dick Gaughan song, 'Both Sides the Tweed', with the Winterset, which celebrates the amity between the two nations. Talking as much as he plays, Bragg cannot disguise his admiration - envy, really - for the devolved Scotland under the SNP. It's not the only notional inconsistency. For all their talent, verve and style, it's hard to discern how a family of American-style Fifties throwbacks - siblings Kitty, Daisy and Lewis and their double bass- and guitar-playing parents - fit into St

George's Day. Granted, rockabilly is related to skiffle (and everyone knows John Lennon was in a skiffle band before the Beatles). Perhaps Bragg just knows double bassist Ingrid Weiss from her days drumming for punk band the Raincoats?

The confusion becomes acute when they play a Hawaiian number, complete with ukulele and lei. 'What's Honolulu got to do with England?' comes a quizzical heckle. Bragg has an answer to that: the Hawaiian flag has a Union Jack in the upper right-hand corner.

'What does St George have to do with England? He was Lebanese! What's Jerusalem got to do with England?' he exclaims, warming to his subject. It's a theme that continues all night. You name it, it's English - the logic seems to run, much like it does on Al Murray's show. You can only conclude that Bragg's vision of Englishness is muddled, in part because Englishness is itself a muddle. Bragg's vision is both progressive (like Scotland's) and inclusive (Hawaiians welcome), but most of all, it is his own. The night ends with an ensemble singalong of 'Swing Low' - a black spiritual that has somehow become the national anthem of rugby.

Armed with an emerald green guitar of terrific range, the solo Bragg mixes old favourites such as 'Sexuality' and 'Greetings to the New Brunette' with more recent songs. 'England, Half English' sets to music the night's inconsistencies, with its plate of 'Marmite soldiers washed down with a cappuccino'. In between, he lays out a more coherent version of how Englishness needs to proceed. We need to protect freedom of speech, and the right of habeas corpus. We need a Bill of Rights, one that enshrines the right of a Muslim woman to wear the niqab. 'But she has to allow Salman Rushdie to pen The Satanic Verses.'

He ends with 'A New England'. 'I don't want to change the world/ I'm not looking for a new England,' chant the audience. 'I've changed my mind about the premise of that song,' Bragg admits.

For all the bonhomie, the absence of British Asian or Anglo-Afro-Caribbean performers at this celebration of Englishness is never properly addressed. Kitty, Daisy and Lewis, by contrast, end their jaunty set with a ska number. They're joined by veteran Jamaican trumpeter Eddie 'Tan Tan', once of Aswad. He gives perhaps the most passionate account of Englishness all night, bigging up the London he adopted in the Sixties. 'This heaven is my heaven,' he exclaims. You can't help but conclude that Bragg's St George's Day celebration would have been enriched by more input from adoptive Englanders, bringing the event more in line with his own beliefs.