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TIMELINE

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Billy Bragg

Working Class Hero

By Jason Schneider

"I'm mean as hell, and I want to change the world." These aren't the words of Billy Bragg circa 1984 during the depths of the Thatcher regime, but Billy Bragg speaking in 2008, about to tour North America on the heels of his first album in six years, *Mr. Love & Justice*. The title pretty much sums up Bragg's three-decade standing as Britain's punk rock troubadour; throughout that time his songs became modern day rallying cries for labour movements, anti-racism campaigns and the basic human rights espoused by his spiritual forebear Woody Guthrie. Along the way he also wrote his fair share of timeless pop songs, all while keeping himself unapologetically rooted in an East End London aesthetic that nevertheless endeared him to fans all over the world. As times have changed, Bragg's political and musical scope have both expanded, but the fire hardly diminished, as evidenced by his attitude toward this crucial election year in America. "I'm hungry for change," he says. "I'm hungry for Americans to make a generational leap to Obama. I'm hungry for the war to end. I'm hungry for people to get engaged in politics again, to get up off their asses and do something meaningful."

1957 to 1976

Stephen William Bragg is born Dec. 20, 1957 in the London borough of Barking & Dagenham. At school he gravitates toward history and woodworking, while listening mainly to folk rock. Paul Simon has a particular impact on Bragg, with songs like "America" and "Mrs. Robinson" creating an awareness of how aspects of a wider culture can be incorporated into pop music. As a confessed class clown and perpetual outsider, he leaves school at 16 for a succession of odd jobs and learns how to play guitar from his friend Wiggy.

1977 to 1980

Fired up by the rise of the Clash, the Jam and Elvis Costello, Bragg and Wiggy form Riff Raff, and begin playing pubs around London. The band sign with Chiswick Records in 1978, which releases the four-song EP *I Wanna Be A Cosmonaut* in June. The band members live together in a squalid country house for the next two years, playing infrequent gigs and recording eight more songs that are released as four separate seven-inch singles on their own Geezer label all on the same day, Oct. 27 1980. Bragg will compile and self-release them as *Riff Raff: The Singles 1977-1980* in 2002.

1981 to 1982

Three months after the band's break-up in February, Bragg enlists in the British Army but buys his way out after only 90 days of training. "I'd given up on the whole thing and joined the army really as a way of killing that notion that I could ever be a musician," he says. "But once in there I just started writing more songs and I realised that this devil wasn't going to go away. So I had to hatch a plot whereby I could get out and give music one more go. Going solo was the most kamikaze way I could think of — the 'death or glory' approach. I was up against a lot of Spandau Ballet kinds of stuff, so it did make sense to zig while everyone else was zagging." A job in a record store fuels a love for American blues and R&B, as well as the songs of Bob Dylan, which ultimately leads him to Woody Guthrie. Bragg starts performing original material with an electric guitar and small amplifier on the streets and at pub talent shows under the name Spy Vs Spy, lifted from the *Mad* magazine cartoon. His distinct image as a "punk folkie" gains attention in the London underground, although labels roundly reject his first demo tape. Feeling desperate, on Nov. 2 1982 Bragg bluffs his way into the offices of Charisma Records and gets his tape in the hands of A&R head Peter Jenner. The one-time co-manager of Pink Floyd is impressed and agrees to work with Bragg even though the dying label no longer has the resources to pay for a recording session.

1983

Bragg gets a publishing offer from Chappell Music and undertakes a three-day session to lay down his best material. Jenner takes seven of these raw recordings and releases them on his own Utility label as the "mini-album" *Life's A Riot With Spy Vs Spy*. The first limited pressing quickly sells out at the much-trumpeted bargain price of 2.99 pounds, pushing it to the top of the British indie chart. Audiences are particularly moved by the sharp social commentary of songs like "A New England" and "To Have And Have Not" that perfectly capture the country's mood. In November the album is re-released on the new Virgin imprint Go! Discs in time for Bragg's first major national tour of clubs and universities. "I've always tried to write songs that I believe in, and if you stay true to yourself, you'll find that those songs resonate," he says today. "I just sang 'A New England' in New York with Kate Nash playing tin whistle and singing on the choruses. I realise now that the song is strong enough that I can afford to mess around with it a little bit, mainly because my audience knows it so well."

1984

Bragg keeps up a busy performing schedule around the UK, sometimes using a "Portastack" — a small P.A. carried in a backpack that allows him to play anywhere. His rising profile brings countless requests to appear at benefit events. On May 20 he plays the Festival For A Socialist Europe in Manchester, his first public show of allegiance to the Labour Party. The next week he plays a trade union day of action in Cheltenham, foreshadowing the national miner's

strike later that summer, a crucial battle with the Thatcher government that bitterly divides national opinion. In between, Bragg makes his North American debut in New York, the start of a six-week trek across the continent opening for Echo And the Bunnymen. On Oct. 4, *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg* is released. This full-length album largely sticks to the stripped-down format of its predecessor, but is marked by a more even balance between politically charged material and relationship-based songs.

1985

The *Between The Wars* EP is released in the UK on Feb. 28, an overt tribute to the struggling working class. Bragg startles many by performing the title track on the ultra-mainstream *Top Of The Pops* the following month in the middle of his highly publicised *Jobs For Youth* tour. In May he embarks on a North American tour opening for the Smiths, then his first trip to Japan soon after. Upon returning home, he sets about strengthening his ties to the Labour Party by organizing Red Wedge with fellow musicians Paul Weller and Jimmy Somerville of the Communards. The intent is to rally young voters through concerts and other media events in order to defeat the Conservatives in the 1987 election. Although the group does build momentum throughout the coming year, Labour's ultimate defeat effectively puts an end to the movement. "I never felt comfortable being compared to Dylan or anybody like that," Bragg says. "I always wanted to reflect the times, not be ahead of them. I never wanted to lead anybody anywhere; I respond to things as I see them."

1986

Bragg breaks convention with a tour of East Germany in February, and later a gig in Leningrad. "I was as curious as anybody else about what socialism meant there," he says. "It was pretty dispiriting, but the people themselves were an inspiration. It was great to see the human spirit surviving under totalitarianism." The ensuing attention leads into the release of the single "Levi Stubbs' Tears" in June, followed by his next album *Talking With The Taxman About Poetry*. Both show the first signs of true pop craftsmanship, mostly through the tentative introduction of overdubs and the obvious influence of classic soul music. Johnny Marr adds guitar on "Greetings To The New Brunette" while Kirsty MacColl sings back-ups; the year before she scored a hit with a cover of "A New England." Bragg subverts expected criticism by calling it his "difficult third album" right on the cover, although his politics remain front and centre on the anthemic "There Is Power In A Union," and "Ideology," which borrows its melody from Dylan's "Chimes Of Freedom." "There were always misconceptions that the only music I ever listened to was punk," Bragg says. "The first time Paul Weller heard me play 'Levi Stubbs' Tears,' he said, 'Is that Levi Stubbs from the Four Tops? I thought you were supposed to be a folk singer?' But I always considered myself 'soul-folk,' which is a great tradition in American music going back to artists like the Staple Singers."

1987

In between Red Wedge concerts, Bragg also joins other recording artists in the growing anti-apartheid movement, leading him to place second behind Morrissey in the “Most Wonderful Human Being” category of the *NME*’s Reader’s Poll (Nelson Mandela comes in seventh). On June 1, *Life’s A Riot* and *Brewing Up* are re-released in a single package entitled *Back To Basics*, and at that year’s Glastonbury Festival, Bragg performs a 17-song covers set, from Hank Williams’ “You Win Again” to the soul nugget “Dark End Of The Street” and the Rolling Stones’ “Wild Horses.” In November he takes an extended trip to the Soviet Union, playing ten concerts in Tallinn, Moscow and Leningrad. The tour is filmed for the documentary *Mr. Bragg Goes To Moscow*, later released on video along with *Which Side Are You On*, a film of his 1989 concerts in support of a United Mine Workers strike in Virginia.

1988

The *Help Save The Youth Of America* live EP is released on April 15 to mark the start of Bragg’s latest North American tour. At its conclusion, he finds himself on the top of the British singles chart with his cover of the Beatles’ “She’s Leaving Home,” recorded in aid of a children’s charity. This mainstream crossover builds excitement for Bragg’s next album, *Workers Playtime*, released in September. Although it once again bears a pointed message on the cover — “Capitalism Is Killing Music” — the album is his most fully realised production yet, helmed by folk-rock veteran Joe Boyd and featuring musical contributions from several notable names, among them his old pal Wiggy. Bragg admits that he was seeking to do something more musically expansive in order to distance himself from the political turmoil of the previous year. The album in turn contains some of Bragg’s best love songs, such as “Must I Paint You A Picture,” and “The Price I Pay” (also his first recording to feature drums). Closing song “Waiting For The Great Leap Forward” becomes an instant fan favourite.

1989 to 1990

Bragg tours East Germany again in February, but in the middle of a show in Leipzig he is taken offstage and promptly expelled from the country for remarks pertaining to the imminent collapse of the Communist regime. “I wear that as a badge of honour,” he says. “I wasn’t thrown out for trashing hotel rooms. It was because I said on live TV that you couldn’t have perestroika and the Berlin Wall — it had to be one or the other — and that put me in a difficult situation.” Bragg presses on, spending the remainder of the year touring the rest of the world. A six-night stand at Toronto’s Premier Dance Theatre in August is one of the notable highlights. On April 16, 1990 he takes part in the massive Nelson Mandela tribute concert at Wembley Stadium, and a month later he revives the Utility label in order to release *The Internationale*, a seven-song EP of highly politicised songs, kicking off with the Marxist anthem

title track, and including “I Dreamed I Saw Phil Ochs Last Night,” a tribute to the '60s cult hero protest singer. The mood of the record likewise reflects his growing disdain for the Labour Party and what will be its tacit support for the first Gulf War. “I did that record precisely because of the fall of Communism,” he says. “I’m the first one to accept that the language of Marxism is dead, but the issues that Marx was trying to address have not been resolved, and I think poets have a role to play in finding a new language needed to resolves those issues.”

1991 to 1992

Bragg joins R.E.M. for two surprise club shows at London’s Borderline in March to mark the release of the latter’s *Out Of Time* album (for which they are billed as Bingo Hand Job). The friendship leads to Michael Stipe and Peter Buck playing a major part in Bragg’s next album, *Don’t Try This At Home*, released in September. In the preceding months, the singles “Sexuality” and “You Woke Up My Neighbourhood” usher in a further exploration of a full-band folk-rock approach and both subsequently make a strong impact on the British charts. “Sexuality” in particular surprises many with its frankness, and the proclamation in its opening line that “I’ve had relations with girls from many nations.” Bragg tours with a band, the Red Stars, for the first time, but dates are cut short and the group is disbanded in August 1992 when he’s hit with an attack of appendicitis.

1993 to 1995

Bragg takes much of the next two years off to settle into domestic life with his partner Juliet and tend to their first child Jack, born Dec. 27, 1993. He returns to full-time performing in the summer of 1995 with a North American tour supporting the Barenaked Ladies. He states, “When people aren’t waiting with bated breath for your new record, when you can keep doing gigs and people will still come, it’s definitely better than dealing with the pressure of having to put something out every year like you have to when the first flash of fame comes. A lot of bands I had respect for were shattered by the pressure to make hit singles and videos constantly. I managed to dodge all that, and I wouldn’t want to go back to it.”

1996 to 1997

William Bloke is released in early September. It is his most sonically varied album to date, while lyrically it reflects changing social attitudes over the passage of time, as heard in “From Red To Blue” and “The Space Race Is Over.” Bragg credits much of this to fatherhood, but also to observing many of his left-wing friends losing faith in the political system after John Major assumed the Thatcher legacy in 1992. As part of his North American tour that fall, Bragg performs at a massive rally at Queen’s Park in Toronto as part of the “Days Of Action” protests against the provincial Tories. A few days later, he donates proceeds of his Detroit gig to striking local newspaper workers. By

spring, 1997 Bragg is swept up by the wave of enthusiasm for Tony Blair's "New Labour" campaign, and on May 1, Bragg stops his gig at the Mean Fiddler in London to celebrate Blair's election victory with those in attendance. The following month he releases the *Bloke On Bloke* EP containing the recent poppy single "The Boy Done Good" as well as remixes from the album. During a trip to New York later that summer Bragg finalises plans with Woody Guthrie's daughter Nora — who had first heard him at an 80th birthday concert for Guthrie in 1992 — to write music for a collection of her father's unpublished lyrics. Seeking American input on the project, Bragg taps Wilco to participate on the strength of their *Being There* album, and they begin writing and rehearsing together in Chicago in December.

1998

Sessions move to Dublin in January but as recording begins in earnest, Bragg and Wilco leader Jeff Tweedy begin butting heads over a musical direction. However, the two persevere and *Mermaid Avenue* is released on June 29 to universal acclaim. Bragg and Wilco play a handful of festival dates together that week, but he continues touring on his own for the rest of the summer. "Any problems that we had were nothing that we couldn't deal with when we were together," Bragg says. "It was only after we went our separate ways that we started looking at the project slightly differently. The only real difference was who was going to produce which tracks. We had an agreement that whoever wrote the track would produce it, and that's pretty much what we did." In September, his official biography, *Still Suitable For Miners* by Andrew Collins, is published.

1999 to 2001

In between stints as a guest presenter on BBC Radio, Bragg builds upon the momentum of *Mermaid Avenue* by assembling a new band, the Blokes, featuring former Faces keyboardist Ian McLagan. In August comes *Reaching To The Converted*, an odds and sods compilation highlighted by a jangly full-band version of "Greetings To The New Brunette" (re-titled "Shirley"), a cover of Anna McGarrigle's "Heart Like A Wheel," and the Canadian fan favourite "Ontario, Quebec, And Me." On May 30, 2000 *Mermaid Avenue Vol. II* is released, although Bragg's contributions are mainly leftovers from the initial sessions. That doesn't prevent him from continuing to put on periodic "Talking Woody" shows in major cities consisting entirely of Guthrie material. "Wilco went in and recorded five new tracks on their own, so I look at that one as more of their album," he says. "But there are still about a dozen songs that nobody's heard, so hopefully one day all of it will come out. The strange result of those records was that they connected me to a younger generation that didn't know what I'd done in the '80s, and also people of the Pete Seeger generation who were fans of Woody and early Dylan. Woody touches everyone eventually." At the start of 2001, Bragg sets up a "tactical voting" website for Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters in order to unseat Tory MPs in several

key ridings. Despite losing faith in the Blair government, his distaste of the Conservatives still runs deep. By the end of the year he also publishes a pamphlet on reforming the House of Lords.

2002 to 2003

England, Half English, with the Blokes receiving co-credit, is released March 4. A ragged folk-rock record still much in the *Mermaid Avenue* style, the predominant theme of the songs is Bragg's notion of British identity in the 21st century. Much of this is condensed within the scathing "Take Down The Union Jack," which is released as a single to coincide with the Queen's Golden Jubilee at the end of June. The song enters the Top 20, competing with a remix of the Sex Pistols' "God Save The Queen," which in its original form had been a response to the Silver Jubilee. Bragg finds himself sparring in the press with John Lydon when the Pistols' singer states that he was never for or against the monarchy and considers them "good earners." Bragg spends much of the next year on tour, both solo and with the Blokes, taking every opportunity to protest the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. On Oct. 6, 2003 *Must I Paint You A Picture: The Essential Billy Bragg* is released, and that month he joins Steve Earle, Tom Morello and other left-leaning performers on the *Tell Us The Truth Tour* in America.

2004 to 2005

Upon completing *The Essential Billy Bragg Solo Tour* in April 2004, he appears live sporadically throughout the rest of the year. In early '05 he once again engages in tactical voting to help Labour win a third straight election. However, his most significant accomplishment that year is the song "We Laughed," part of the *Rosetta Requiem Project*, consisting of collaborations between artists and terminal disease sufferers. The song is released on Oct. 31 to mark World Hospice and Palliative Care Day.

2006 to 2007

A major career retrospective kicks off with the *Volume 1* box set in February that compiles the first three albums along with a slew of rarities. *Volume 2* follows in October. Bragg does extensive media promotion for the releases on both sides of the Atlantic, in between his *Hope Not Hate Tour*, aimed at discouraging Brits from voting for the far-right British National Party. By the summer he is also embroiled with a battle with MySpace over copyright ownership. Bragg claims that once music is posted, the site is under no obligation to pay royalties despite having unlimited broadcast capability. Bragg's challenge quickly forces the site to change the wording of its policy in order to clearly state that artists retain full ownership of their material at all times. October sees the publication of his first book, *The Progressive Patriot*, a more extensive exploration of his ideas concerning British identity. "The problems that we have mostly have to do with resources rather than people," Bragg says. "Belonging should be about where you *are* rather than where

you're *from*, and I wanted to try to flesh out those ideas with the book." In March 2007, Bragg announces the launch of Jail Guitar Doors, a program intended to provide musical instruments to prison inmates, as well as pay tribute to one of his primary influences, Joe Strummer. On Oct. 9 Bragg is introduced to Queen Elizabeth at a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony featuring his own new lyrics for the piece. Bragg's reaction? "[She] charmed the pants off me."

2008

Bragg signs with Anti Records and releases *Mr. Love & Justice*, a rootsy, and generally optimistic collection. Although at 50 his performing style has mellowed almost to the point of a classic country crooner, his trademark wit remains sharp and direct throughout the album. "I'll always feel the need to strike a balance because it's so easy for me to be labelled as just a political songwriter," he says. "Writing the book allowed me to get some of my opinions out that I might have otherwise channelled into my music, but it's always nice to remind people that I can write love songs. The idea of being Mr. Love & Justice applies both in the bedroom and out of the bedroom."

The Essential Billy Bragg

Back To Basics

(Cooking Vinyl, 1987)

This combination of Bragg's first two releases clearly shows how he got tagged "a one-man Clash." It's hard to imagine now what a voice in the wilderness he was in the early '80s pop wasteland, but these stirring, unvarnished performances quickly turned a new generation on to the power that one person with a guitar can wield. Despite a few dated lyrical references, they still have the power to do so today.

Talking With The Taxman About Poetry

(Go! Discs, 1986)

On balance, this remains Bragg's most affecting record. All of his basic elements are well represented: the pop craft of "Greetings To The New Brunette," the soulful passion of "Levi Stubbs' Tears," the roots rock of "Train Train," the wit of "Help Save The Youth Of America," and the solidarity of "There Is Power In A Union." This album demanded respect, and received it from fans from nearly every genre.

England, Half English

(Elektra, 2002)

After diving into Americana with Wilco, Bragg brought that approach back

home with his own band the Blokes. The English identity crisis that is the album's predominant theme seems to have only deepened since its release, making songs like "Distant Shore" and "Take Down The Union Jack" no less relevant today on first listen. The rollicking, good-time pub rock in other places is pretty enjoyable on its own as well. No doubt Ricky Gervais is a fan.

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