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From the Los Angeles Times

POP MUSIC

Billy Bragg puts words on a page and suspends them in the air

The English musician (and author) performs in L.A. in support of his 'Mr. Love & Justice' album.

By Christy Grosz

The Guide

June 5, 2008

ALTHOUGH it's been nearly six years since Billy Bragg has released an album, his hiatus can hardly be characterized as quiet.

In fact, the English guitarist-songwriter, who has spent more than two decades belting out politically charged, punk-tinged folk songs, continued to speak out on those same themes of politics and identity in 2006, only in book form: "The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging."

Now, though, Bragg says he's ready to get back to basics. Moving on from what he calls his "author phase," he returns to music, taking to the road to promote his just-released album, "Mr. Love & Justice," and hitting the El Rey Theatre on Tuesday.

"Being an author's great fun, and it gives you a platform to talk about lots of things that I think are really important," he explains. "But the audiences at book fairs are not the same as the audience at the El Rey."

Bragg, 50, says the process of writing a book informed his current album.

"As soon as I delivered the manuscript, I went off to do some dates. And as soon as I strapped on a guitar at the sound check, I started having ideas for songs," Bragg says. "The book was a polemic, and the songs that came through [for 'Mr. Love & Justice'] tended to be more like love songs. It says something about my creative processes."

Politics play as large a part as love in Bragg's overall repertoire, so in some ways, the book and new album appear to represent two sides of the same musician. Take, for instance, the album title, which came from a 1960 novel by British author Colin MacInnis.

"MacInnis is, I think, the hip Orwell," the musician says. "Although MacInnis never came up with anything as prescient as 'Animal Farm' or '1984,' he was a great observer of the way that national identity changes, but also at the same time retains some very important elements of its original core."

Bragg points to the Beatles as the perfect example of MacInnis' theories of how rebelling against a national identity often simply reinforces it. "Everybody knows they were inspired by the music of black Americans, but conversely that led to some of the most intensely British music of the 20th century," he explains.

Bragg has built his career on asking questions and demanding answers, and the El Rey show, no doubt, will incorporate some discussion of the American race for the presidency.

For the record, Bragg says he's heartened by the primaries. "The most encouraging thing for us over here," he said by phone from Britain, "is that the choices you have seem to suggest that the electorate will be a lot more engaged come the fall," he says. "A [voter] turnout of over 50% would make us feel that the Americans do have a commitment to democracy in their own country, never mind anyone else's."

Above all, Bragg says his six-year detour proved that he's more of a politically minded minstrel -- rather than author -- at heart. "I wouldn't [go onstage] if I didn't get that buzz," he says. "I don't feel 50 when I'm out there; I feel 25 again."

BILLY BRAGG