



Billy Bragg immerses himself in English history

By Tony Montague

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An interview with Billy Bragg feels like a brisk walk with him through England—in time as well as space. As his semi-autobiographical 2006 book *The Progressive Patriot* revealed, the bard of Barking is fascinated by history—not the stuff of kings and battles, but where and how the commoners lived, fought for their rights, and forged an identity. Bragg likes to go back a very long way.

“When we finish talking I’m going to take my dog across the valley from where I live, across a medieval field system, past a World War II concrete bunker, to the top of a hill where there’s a Bronze Age burial mound,” he says on the line from Chesil Beach, on England’s south coast, where he and his family have been living for several years. “All these things are in my present. They’re part of my landscape. Knowing why they’re there helps me to understand more about that landscape, and about our society.”

Bragg is also an avid reader, and the book that’s inspired him most in recent months is A. C. Grayling’s *Towards the Light: The Story of the Struggles for Liberty and Rights That Made the Modern West*. “I know the English side—Magna Carta, the Civil War, the Chartists, the suffragettes, and the founding of the welfare state—but his narrative isn’t confined to this island. It’s broader, stretching back to the start of the Enlightenment and taking in things like the American and French revolutions. I knew a bit about all this, but not how it all fits together.”

Bragg doesn’t dwell in the past, however. As a couple of tracks on his recently released album *Mr. Love and Justice* reveal, he’s deeply concerned by the erosion of those hard-won freedoms in our own time. “The Beach Is Free” is a rockabilly surfer anthem that contrasts public ownership of the shoreline with private ownership of the land. “O Freedom” is a mid-tempo song with a folk- and world-music flavour, denouncing the abuse of basic rights in the so-called war on terror.

“The song is about the possibility of all of us falling through the gaps if we suspend the right to jury trial, to have evidence produced, and to be charged within 24 days—or whatever it is,” Bragg explains. “As we start to cut into those age-old rights we need to be reminded that they’re there to protect innocent people and not criminals.”

Personal politics and music remain inseparable for Bragg. He’s currently spearheading a project to help improve conditions in Britain’s overcrowded prisons. “As a musician I know that an instrument can help you transcend your surroundings and focus your ideas. In the past year-and-a-half I’ve been into about 15 or 16 British jails and supplied guitars to people doing rehabilitation work with prisoners. I decided to do it in memory of Joe Strummer, so I named the initiative after a Clash B-side, “Jail Guitar Doors”. I’ve raised around 40,000 pounds [approximately \$79,000] so far. It’s a slow process, but if I can get into a prison a month I think I’m doing pretty well.”

Billy Bragg performs a solo concert tonight (June 5) at St. Andrew's–Wesley Church.

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