

Music note: Billy Bragg takes brave stand against fascists and bad tea



Billy Bragg performs in England in 2006. Photo by Ray Kilpatrick, courtesy Billy Bragg.

BY JAY GABLER , TC DAILY PLANET
June 15, 2008

Onstage in Minneapolis Friday night, Billy Bragg took multiple opportunities to let us know that he appreciated the fact that not all Americans are supporters of George W. Bush. The enthusiastic response he received confirmed that Republicans are distinctly in the minority among Bragg's fans. In fact, if the crowd attending Bragg's performance at the Cedar Cultural Center were representative of the American voting public, not only would Bush not be president, we'd have a national health care system offering medical marijuana for paper cuts and stubbed toes.

The title of Bragg's new album, *Mr. Love and Justice*, accurately represents the twin themes that have dominated his songcraft for the past three decades. Although he's a generation younger than Bob Dylan, Bragg has fallen less far from the Woody Guthrie tree: animated by fiery political convictions, he's at his best when he applies his sly sense of humor to songs about romantic relationships. (Performing "Shirley" on Friday night, Bragg paused for a comment suggesting that even

he needed to take a while to appreciate all the possible meanings of the line "I'm more impressionable when my cement is wet.") His finest songs, such as "Shirley" and "Accident Waiting to Happen," explore the territory bridging sexual politics and geopolitics—territory that Guthrie and Dylan never braved.

For more information on Billy Bragg: billybragg.co.uk. C.R. Avery (Bragg's opening act, who combines beat-boxing with beat poetry): cravery.com. Upcoming shows at the Cedar Cultural Center: thecedar.org.

Guthrie's daughter Nora recognized that Bragg was the perfect choice for a project setting lyrics by her father to new music in cases where Guthrie's original melodies had either been lost or never existed. The resulting project yielded the two *Mermaid Avenue* albums, written and recorded by Bragg in collaboration with Wilco. Jeff Tweedy, of Wilco, would have been content focusing on Guthrie's quirky and moving story-songs to the exclusion of his political numbers, but to his credit, Bragg appreciated that any Woody Guthrie tribute would have been incomplete without a few roaring denunciations of fascism.

The transcendent *Mermaid Avenue* albums brought Bragg to a new audience after decades of playing largely to loyalists; now that those albums are several years in the past, however, Bragg has more or less returned to the loyalists. A few of the concert-goers in attendance on Friday night looked like Wilco fans who might have discovered Bragg through their collaboration, but most of the crowd seemed likely to have been following Bragg since the Thatcher Administration. The hearty response Bragg received when he apologized for vocal problems he had during his last Minneapolis appearance, at the Fine Line Music Café, made clear that a large percentage of the flock on hand at the Cedar were not attending church for the first time.

If he had to drink American tea, said Bragg, "I'd throw it in Boston Harbor too! Of course, we get our revenge when you come to Britain and try to order a cup of coffee."

Their patience and rapt attention—despite the stifling temperature in the packed room—allowed Bragg to take his time with deliberate, searching renditions of songs new and old, and of course to tell his typically generous helping of jokes and stories. Bragg joshed across the room with his producer Grant Showbiz (manning the sound board) like Jay Leno bouncing punch lines off of Kevin Eubanks. A running joke involved Bragg's favored Throat Coat Tea, which he was initially not supplied with. Criticizing American tea, he said that "I'd throw it in Boston Harbor too! Of course, we get our revenge when you come to Britain and try to order a cup of coffee."

Bragg seems to be in a gentle mood these days. He sounds relaxed on *Mr. Love and Justice*, and even if that results in a few songs that float by rather than command attention—the opening track and first single "I Keep Faith" is an example—that quality is a pleasant contrast to the thin, strained energy of 2002's *England, Half English*. Like vital veteran artists from R.E.M. to Neil Young, Bragg seems to be taking a cue from Dylan, who at age 66 is doing some of the best work of his career. As Bragg stood among his adoring fans Friday night and banged away at his electric guitar, once again making major chords ring out for love and justice, a line from Dylan's 2000 song "Things Have Changed" seemed particularly apt. "Only a fool in here," sings Dylan, "would think he's got anything to prove."

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