

## Bragg's banter doesn't dim songs

Reminisces about the Clash. He wishes every generation could be inspired

**BERNARD PERUSSE**

The Gazette

*Friday, June 20, 2008*

During one of his many spoken interludes at Club Soda on Wednesday night, Billy Bragg joked about how a future generation of grandchildren would have to put up with grandpa rambling on about how great the Clash were. Then he became serious and got to the heart of the matter: "It was not so much (the Clash) as how we felt when we first encountered them, when we were 19. That's what I wish every generation could have," he said.

He elaborated, speaking of how he was changed by the first Rock Against Racism concert, with the Clash headlining, and how he no longer felt alone in his ideals from then on. This sense of shared values, he said, is at the heart of his own shows.

And so it was that Bragg's broadsides against the Bush administration, human rights abuses and Tony Blair were received with loud enthusiasm. "We come together and cheer at these ideas," he said. "But it's what we do when we leave that counts."

He then dedicated I Keep Faith to the audience, and what sounded like a smooth soul ballad on his latest album, Mr. Love & Justice, was transformed. Accompanied only by his electric guitar, Bragg turned the song into a celebration of community, a stirring love letter to his fans.

When he followed that up by ending his pre-encore set with a blistering version of There Is Power In a Union, he demonstrated what he was talking about: As voices were raised to join in, it seemed as if Bragg could have had a room full of Young Republicans singing with the workers' anthem.

There were lighthearted moments, as well. A bit about artists having to seek sponsorship for their music led to a mock commercial for Throat Coat Tea, which Bragg was drinking on stage. "Developed to help you believe you can sing in tune," he said. "It was recommended to me by Madonna."

At one point, he gave the audience a Carpenters song from his busking days and feigned outrage when no one joined in on Superstar. Other digressions touched on such topics as Marmite spread, sexual euphemisms and the breakdown of the toilet in the International Space Station.

But none of this banter diminished the power of the songs. Bragg remains a wonderful songwriter who is capable of turning his obvious limits as a guitarist and singer into a virtue. Alone on stage, mostly plugged in, he brought the rough-and-ready sound of his 1983 debut, Life's a Riot with Spy Vs. Spy, back to life. Amazingly, that attack has lost none of its edge or passion.

After the show-closing A New England, with the fans shouting the chorus, Bragg

looked out on an audience that didn't want to let him go and made his one rock-star gesture of the night. But it was a Billy Bragg rock-star gesture: He threw a wet tea bag into the crowd.

bperusse@thegazette.canwest.com

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

---

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.  
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.