

When stars collide: Billy Bragg, Ike Reilly, Tom Morello converge for hootenanny

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I can't think of a better way to come down from narrowly escaping a riot: Late Tuesday night, a handful of larger-than-life musicians convened at a small theater tucked away in south Minneapolis to exchange songs and stories before an awestruck audience. The Mad Ripple Hootenanny, led by music writer/musician Jim Walsh, has earned a reputation around town for attracting the Cities' best musicians and presenting them in an intimate, no-frills environment, but Tuesday's round-robin concert was by far the most star-studded hoot yet.



Billy Bragg at the Parkway Theater. More [photos by Stacy Schwartz in the slideshow](#).

This week's hootenannies are occurring in tandem with comedian Lizz Winstead's *Wake Up World* show at the Parkway Theater, and the main musical guest for Tuesday's show was Billy Bragg. Those who have seen Bragg perform know that an opportunity to see him perform in a small theater should be cherished, as his politically-charged folk music is best ingested in an environment conducive to sitting and thinking. Unfortunately, I missed the *Wake Up World* show and Bragg's solo set due to the mayhem surrounding the Rage Against the Machine debacle, but the events that transpired once I arrived at the Parkway more than made up for the lost time.

The hootenanny portion of the show started with four musicians: Bragg, host Jim Walsh, and local folk singers Eliza Blue and Jen Markey. The quartet took turns playing mostly cover songs, pausing before playing to explain the significance of each song or opine on the political climate. Bragg brought the show to a standstill with a riveting performance of Randy Newman's "I Think It's Going to Rain Today," which he said he normally didn't regard as a political song but found a particular attachment to as he ventured to Minneapolis and saw the effect the RNC had on the city.

Jen Markey followed with a short story about feeling hope for the future, stating, "I'm more excited about this Presidential campaign than I have been since I was 18 years old." She followed with a somber version of Willie Nelson's "Opportunity to Cry."

All attention was taken off the performers, however, when two more musicians emerged from the corner of the room: Ike Reilly and Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello. The audience erupted in loud cheers as the two climbed on stage and sat down, with Reilly comically teetering on the edge of the stage in a plastic lawn chair, and Morello regaled the room with tales from his experience at the Capitol [earlier in the evening](#).



Tom Morello at the hootenanny. Photo by Stacy Schwartz.

"We pulled up to the Capitol and got out of the car, and an officer approached me and asked, 'Are you Rage Against the Machine?' I said, 'Well, yeah.' They told us we weren't going to play, and then a phalanx of cops restrained the band. We tried to argue with them, but we lost the argument. While this was happening, the crowd started chanting "Let them play," they sang the national anthem, and they chanted the lyrics to 'Killing in the Name Of,' which goes 'Fuck you I won't do what you tell me.'"

"That should be the national anthem," retorted Bragg.

"We decided to go into the middle of the crowd," Morello continued, "and we did a capella versions of a couple of our songs while the cops scowled on the sidelines. So at least on this day of the Republican National Convention: Rage Against the Machine, one. Cops, zero."

The songs started up again and the two new additions joined the rotation, with Morello singing "Midnight in the City of Destruction" and Reilly dedicating "Broken Parakeet Blues" to a soldier he knew who was killed in Afghanistan.



Ike Reilly at the hootenanny. Photo by Stacy Schwartz.

At one point, Walsh looked out into the audience in disbelief. "You do realize this shit is history, don't you?" he asked, grinning wildly.

And round and round they went, with Markey and Blue holding their own against the heavyweights in the room. Soon enough, every song was a highlight: Bragg covered the Stones' "Street Fighting Man" while the rest of the musicians sang along, Markey cracked up the men on stage with her original song "Minneapolis Or You," Morello told a story about the Veterans Against Iraq gaining the delegates' attention at the DNC and led his stage mates in a sing-along of "Flesh Shapes the Day," and Reilly brought many close to tears with the graphic verses of "The War on the Terror and the Drugs." As far as the transfixed audience was concerned, they could have played all night.

"I don't mean to be a buzzkill," interjected Walsh. "But should we do one more round and call it a hoot? Some of us have to play the Target Center tomorrow."

Bragg led the audience in an alternate version of Bob Marley's "One Love," swapping out the chorus for "One Love, One Heart/Let's drop the debt and it will be all right" and splicing in verses about the economy and political strife (which sounds way lamer on paper than it sounded in person; it was actually quite stirring). Morello used his last song to play an acoustic version of Rage's "Guerrilla Radio," which was much more endearing in the small setting than at the previous day's Take Back Labor Day festival. Ike Reilly stood up to deliver the crowd favorite "Put a Little Love in It," and with the house lights up The Coup's Boots Riley bounded to the stage to join in on Bragg's closing song, "Great Leap Forward."



Boots Riley and Tom Morello at the hoot. Photo by Stacy Schwartz.

The audience rose to its feet with applause and looked around at one another in a daze. David Carr dashed to the front of the stage to snap photos and scribble in a notebook, his New York Times press badge dangling from his neck. Chuck Olsen from The Uptake posed for a photo with Tom Morello. And the rest of us just shook our heads in disbelief, wondering if we what we had just seen had really happened.

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Posted by [Andrea Myers](#) at September 3, 2008 3:46 AM