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## Interview: Billy Bragg Keeps Faith

By **Political Affairs**

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Billy Bragg. (Photo courtesy of Anti Records.)

*Editor's note: Billy Bragg, the well-known British musician, released his latest album Mr. Love and Justice earlier this year with Anti Records here in the US and is about to launch the second leg of his North American tour on the east coast later this month. Check for dates and places for this tour at BillyBragg.com. Hear the audio version of this interview on the latest PA podcast.*

**PA: Tell us about your upcoming North American tour.**

BRAGG: It's the second leg of my album tour for "Mr. Love and Justice." I was out West earlier this year in June, and I swung through the Midwest as well. Now I'm picking up several dates on the East Coast. Because it's three weeks ahead of the elections, it's taking me to some interesting places I don't normally go to – outside

of the big cities, places like Lebanon, New Hampshire and Asheville in North Carolina. So that's quite exciting for me.

**PA: I read that earlier this year you played a show in Minneapolis with Boots Riley and the Coup and Tom Morello. How did that happen, and what was it like?**

BRAGG: Well basically I was invited to come to Minneapolis to do a "Take Back Labor Day" show for the SEIU (Service Employees International Union). That involved two buddies of mine, Tom Morello and Steve Earle. It was on Labor Day in a park across the road from the Convention Hall where the Republican Convention was going on. Afterwards we got together, because a dear friend of mine who lives in Minneapolis runs a kind of a Hootenanny where he invites song writers to get up on stage and sit together – three or four song writers – and just swap songs. I knew Tom was in town so I invited him along, and unbeknownst to me or Tom, Boots Riley was also around. He just sort of appeared in the audience, and Tom and I hauled him up on stage and we did some songs together, which was brilliant. It was very spontaneous and very down home. It was in a little cinema in suburban Minneapolis, really nice and funky, and we had a great time. The audience loved it.

**PA: "Mr. Love and Justice" is your new album. Some reviewers are**

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**emphasizing the personal aspects and the emotional and introspective elements in the album. Do you agree with those reviews? Because you've been more known for your political songs.**

BRAGG: I do agree with them actually, and I think it's a good thing, because before beginning to write the songs on the album, I was writing a book on the politics of identity, as a response to the rise of racist political parties in my hometown of London, England. That was 18 months of polemical writing, so when I finally put my pen down and picked up my guitar, the songs that were there waiting to break through the concrete were not surprisingly love songs. I was quite pleased about that because, as you mention, most people know me as a political song writer, and I think sometimes my love songs get out of the loop. The best ones, I think, are ones that can be seen as both love songs and political songs, songs like "I Keep Faith," for instance, which leads off the album.

**PA: In listening to that song in particular and "Mr. Love and Justice" in general, that theme of commitment, whether personal or political, really stood out for me. What personally inspires to write about that?**

BRAGG: Well I think it's about your own personal commitment. You need to commit yourself to nothing more than to engage with the world in a positive way – however you do that, in your neighborhood, in the environment in which you live. I think that the times are too desperate to just walk by on the opposite side of the road, and that it is time to commit ourselves to try to make the world a better place – in whatever way we feel we can do that.

That's the sort of message I have always had on my records. It's just coming over in a more personal way now, and I'm kind of pleased with that, because the ideological stuff I wrote in the 80s was for that time, but we now live in a post-ideological environment. We are now talking about broader ideas and issues such as compassion and accountability.

I think these are ideas that appeal to ordinary people of different political persuasions. For instance, there's the issue of how we hold the bankers to account whose behavior got us into the kind of financial difficulties we are in. I think the response of Main Street to the idea of bailing out Wall Street is all about Main Street wanting some accountability from the capitalist system. Obviously we can hold our elected officials to account, but we also need to extend that accountability – or at least some sort of sense of responsibility anyway – to those who have financial power over us as well as political power. This is going to be one of the big challenges of the 21st century, how does the individual make those who have power over them accountable?

**PA: That's both an individual issue as well as a collective and social one, right?**

BRAGG: It is. Ultimately I think of myself as a socialist, but that doesn't mean I am against the individual. I still believe that the individual is the most important factor in society. It's just that I happen to believe that if each individual is to realize their full potential, then as a community we need to provide people with health care, with education, with adequate housing – and probably with a pension as well. We need to have collective provision for people's needs through the state, not to the extent where the state controls everything, nor, on the other hand, to the extent where some people in my country and yours would say that the state is always bad. Because that isn't true. There are some things the state represents – our collective responsibility for each other – in a way that capitalism never can. It's about trying to find a balance, I think. What we are about to see with the markets is a correction, because in the last 20 years or so, in my country and in yours, the balance or momentum has all been in favor of the market, while the idea of collective responsibility, and in some cases even the idea of individual responsibility, has been overshadowed, unfortunately, by greed.

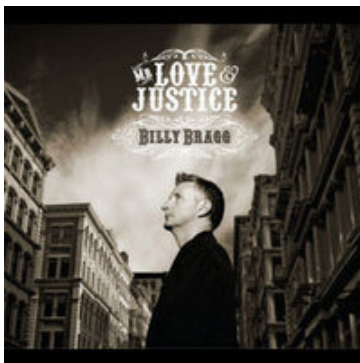
I'm not saying this in an ideological way. It's just a way of explaining what is going down. Most people can see this. That is why most people don't want the bailout. They can see that it rewards irresponsibility. The American people aren't against the bailout because they hate capitalism or want to destroy the system. But the very fact that they are able to recognize that the financiers have acted irresponsibly, and that they now want some accountability, gives me cause for encouragement, because I believe in that collective sense of responsibility – that ultimately none of us is an island, that we all rely on each



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and trust one another, and to some extent have faith. In my song "I Keep Faith" I am talking about faith in humanity. I am not talking about faith with a capital F. When the American people say, "just a second, we shouldn't reward the people who got us into this trouble," then my faith in humanity shines.

**PA: You mention the term post-ideological. Could you develop that idea a bit more?**



BRAGG: Well, in the 20th century, in order to explain the world, America's foreign policy was couched in terms of opposing communist totalitarianism, especially in the Soviet Union. They had an official idea of how the world should be, based on a political theory written by a guy named Karl Marx. But since the Soviet Union disappeared, we don't really talk in those terms anymore. Look at China. Is China capitalist or communist? The ideological framework that we used to explain the world isn't really there anymore.

That doesn't mean that people no longer care about what happens with capitalism. It doesn't mean that capitalism has won. People still want accountability, responsibility and respect – all the ideas Marx talked about in *Das Kapital*. In their response to the 700 billion dollar bailout, the American people are looking for the same social justice that Marx talked about, but in a purely non-ideological way. They see this in moral terms – and they are right. They are saying that the people who got us into this trouble shouldn't be rewarded. You don't need an ideology in order to have social justice.

In the old days, it was quite convenient for people of a conservative persuasion to foist anything negative the Soviet Union had done on anybody who spoke about social justice, no matter how they spoke about it. Well, the American people are speaking about social justice when they ask that the bankers not be bailed out, but they are not saying that because they want to overthrow the capitalist system. They are purely saying it because they recognize that irresponsibility and greed should not be rewarded. And they are right! So, it doesn't matter that we live in a post-ideological period – that's neither here nor there. The ideology just gave us a framework to have a discourse. But when you see the American people taking a moral stand on what is going down in the markets, and not just accepting that what is good for big business is good for them – something which has been in my country and yours a kind of the credo for the last 20 years or more, I find that very encouraging. That is why I am really looking forward to coming over there in a couple of weeks – I'll be there on the 15th or 16th of this month.

**PA: You mentioned the election right off the top. It's an election that not only the American people are fascinated by, but the rest of the world seems to be too. Could you give us some perspective about what is happening?**

BRAGG: I hate to disagree with what you just said, but we're always interested in your elections, because whoever you send out to us we have to accept. The great thing about this election is that the American people seem to be just as engaged as we are. And that is really, really encouraging, because in a country that claims to be the great democracy, when only half the people bother to vote, that does somewhat undermine the claim. But if this time the candidates, because of the nature of this election, enhance the participation, I think that will be a great step, whatever the outcome. I just hope that one candidate gets a clear mandate, because the last two elections have really not given the incumbent the sort of mandate you need to get us out of the trouble we are in now. So let's hope there is high participation and that the result, whoever wins, gets a mandate to go out there and govern, because we are in serious need of a strong and determined course of action to avert this gigantic economic crisis.

**PA: Do you have a personal favorite?**

BRAGG: Of course I do. Because what so many of us want in the world is a change of course from what happened in the shadow of 9/11. Obviously the

Bush Administration and its entire program was distorted by the events of September 11. Probably any president would have had the same problem, but some of the things that have happened in the wake of that have severely tarnished the image of the United States abroad. And while it's fine for me, because I get to visit America and I realize that there are many people in America who are just as concerned, the majority of my fellow Europeans don't have that luxury. In some ways we have lost faith in the idea of America as the last best hope. So in order to have a change of direction and a change of generations as well, I favor Barack Obama, but not just because he is a Black man. I think because there is a change of generation there. It's the kind of change we had with Tony Blair. It doesn't mean it will all be great if Obama gets in, it just means it will bring in a completely fresh perspective, and I think that's the change, the generational change, that people want. So that's the reason I will be supporting the Democrats.

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