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Interview: Billy Bragg

Mr. Love & Justice on the Clash, the Queen, and preaching to the choir

By JIM SULLIVAN | October 15, 2008



"Many people in the UK have given up on the US, but by nominating a black man for president, you've really got our attention."

English singer-songwriter Billy Bragg once called himself "a one-man band who thinks he's the Clash." There was the boldness, the brashness, the *English-ness*, the mix of punk and politics. Over the years, Bragg has crafted a persuasive body of music, merging the personal and the political, and he's advocated socialism and worker solidarity from the stage. With Wilco, he composed two albums of songs from Woody Guthrie's unpublished lyrics. He released his latest CD, *Mr. Love & Justice* (Anti-), this spring, and he plays Somerville Theatre this Tuesday and Wednesday.

Let's start with the Clash — a force throughout your creative life.

I managed to get to the age of 20 without doing anything political, and they were the catalyst, the band that politicized me, really made me see how music and politics could be mixed. They played Rock Against Racism, and that induced me to take my first political action, going to the march in 1978. [Organized by the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism, the march, in April, from Trafalgar Square to the East End, culminated in a huge concert featuring the Clash and others.] I realized this was the issue that was going to define my generation: opposition to discrimination of all kinds. The Clash was a band full of contradictions. They didn't change the world. You can't change the world through music, but you can give people a different perspective on the world. By evoking the Clash, I make people realize we're not alone trying to do this.

With the program "Jail Guitar Doors," you're helping to get guitars into prisons. Why?

You can take 'em back to your cell; you can use it as therapy. That's how I use the guitar. When I'm feeling a bit low, I'll sit down and have a strum, and it gets me to another place. And that's what we're trying to facilitate.

You always seem to show up in America before our Presidential elections.

It really gives me an opportunity to make a contribution to the debate. I'm a foreigner, I don't have a vote, but I can add my voice, and over the years I've said, "When you vote for president, you vote a president for all of us, so be careful next time."

I've been at concerts where people yell: "Billy, we're *with* you! Shut up and play!"

I know, the whole idea of preaching to the choir. Actually, what you're trying to do is inspire people, make those people feel they're not alone. You are trying to recharge the batteries of your audience, and you do want to be a bit challenging. Sometimes they think they're coming to a rock gig and get offended when you talk a bit, but anyone who's been to a folk gig knows the bottom line with Woody Guthrie was communication. This is too good an opportunity to pass up when I'm in your country. Many people in the UK have given up on the US, but by nominating a black man for president, you've really got our attention. We're pretty psyched about this election now; it would be great if you guys are as well. We're on the verge of economic meltdown. What we wanna hear about is how we're gonna create a fairer society.

Mr. Love & Justice is sweet and soulful. Your vocals are certainly less harsh.

They are, aren't they? I think I've found as I've got older, it's been easier for me to sing. I seem to be growing into my voice. I've always had that kind of soul side — like "Levi Stubbs' Tears" and "Must I Paint You a Picture." If you go into a record store, you'll find my records in alternative, folk, pop, rock, and I've always wanted to make a record that fit into the soul section.


You wrote new lyrics to "Ode to Joy" for a gala festival at the Royal Festival Hall. And you met the Queen.

I'm not a huge supporter of the idea of the monarchy, but having written a book about Britishness [*The Progressive Patriot*], out of sheer curiosity I couldn't resist the opportunity to look her in the eye. She's the only head of state that's been on every coin in my pocket, all my life. I could look into the royal box where the queen was and, blimey, she was following my lyrics in the program with her finger. She did give me a look when I came down the line that said, "What the fuckin' hell you doing here?" That was cool. I had the same sort of thought myself.



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