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## Billy Bragg: the complete Q&A

By *Luke Z. Fenchel*  
Correspondent

Ticket correspondent Luke Z. Fenchel recently spoke with Billy Bragg, who is set to perform at the State Theatre on Saturday, Oct. 18.

Q: It's interesting to me that people seem to be suggesting that love songs are a new genre for you, especially considering songs as far back as "Greetings to the New Brunette" and "Wishing the Days Away." Do you see this album as a radical departure from your previous work?

Bragg: You're absolutely right, and the only sort of person to suggest that I haven't done love songs is a person who has never heard my music. But it is a problem that I've always had that people think that my songs are only political. You know I don't mind being labeled a political songwriter, because that's one of the things I do, and people need labels, but what I hate is being dismissed as being a political songwriter.

If I had a dollar for every time I was at a show, and I spoke to some of the blokes at the club — maybe say the security guy — and he would say, "You know I always thought you were just political, and I really enjoyed that: it was funny, you sang love songs, and I thought it would be all about politics," and I feel, "Well, you know, it's some politics, but it isn't all politics, is it."

Music, like life, is a beautiful reflection or mixture or concoction of a lot of things and I have tried my best to reflect that.

Q: That said, there is something different on the new record. Do you think your work in the last six years, especially the work writing the book *The Progressive Patriot*, shaped *Mr. Love & Justice*?

Bragg: It really has. You have hit the nail right on head. I think the reason that there are so many love songs on this record is that writing the book is a huge polemical outpouring. I forced myself to right politically for weeks, and months even.

And the first song that I wrote within doing the manuscript, was...well I went to do some shows in Canada, and I strapped on a guitar during a soundcheck, and the tune and the chorus to "If You Ever Leave" just came to me. Out of the ether as if it was just patiently waiting to tune back in again.

And the more I did that, the more I tried writing songs, the more songs I wrote. I think that my inner muse, I suppose, was reasserting itself, and taking me back to things that that inspired me to write. You know I was writing love songs before I was writing political songs.

Q: Though *Mr. Love & Justice* is in some senses a solo album, the Blokes play an important role. How is it then to tour this material by yourself?

Bragg: The interesting thing about what happened was that we did some festivals together, me and the Blokes. And I said, "Let's just play acoustic instruments." And it really worked, and it really gave us a different angle on the songs.

So when we got to make the album, I decided that in the first week there would be no electric instruments. And so we got the basic form of the album with a much lighter touch on tracks like "You Make Me Brave" and "M For Me," and the aforementioned "If You Ever Leave."

And I was listening to Fred Neil [60s American songwriter] and "Dolphins" and "Everybody's Talking." And these love songs had a lighter feel to them. And it was only subsequently in the second week in the studio, that we came in with the heavier instruments and beefed up the tracks. And I think that that really worked. It made us all think about space rather than playing.

Q: Would you tell me how collaborating with the Blokes, which includes The Faces' Ian McLagen, is different than working with Wilco? Did the nature of the project — reworking Woody Guthrie songs — dictate the environment, or is the nature of the collaboration different?

Bragg: The thing about Wilco was that they were someone else's band. So there was always a bit of a demarcation line between us. But, the great thing was that they were capable of playing anything. So if I threw something at them then they still played like a band, but they weren't my band. But they connected with Woody; Woody was the conduit that allowed us to play as equals.

Instead of me getting in their territory, or they getting into my territory, we were both overlapping with Woody's territory. And I found that very fruitful to work with a band like that.

So to answer your question, I don't think I would have worked with the Blokes had it not been the experience of working with Wilco. Because they made me understand that collaborating is much more...it delivers much better songs and much better arrangements.

When solo everybody in the studio is looking to you for everything. You have to come up with all the ideas, you have to come up with all the schedules, you have to come up with everything.

When I was in the studio, they carried on with Jeff. When Jeff wasn't there, they worked with me. You know we recorded more than 50 songs, you've only seen half of them so far. It was incredibly thrilling to work with a band like that.

So when I came to next album, Enland, Half-English, I wanted a band that would also challenge me. And that's what the Blokes do with their arrangements and their ideas. When I was off doing promo or when I was sick for a few days, they continued working on songs, and had come up with a lot of ideas, and that's a great feeling to have, so the album becomes more of a collaboration, rather than a singular vision.

Q: Perhaps we could shift to a few broader issues. I read a fascinating Op-Ed by you in the New York Times last March about social networking sites and royalty rights. I wonder if you would extend the model to mp3 blogs and other websites that post songs on the internet?

Bragg: Well it's a really simple idea. You know, every year Myspace makes around 100 million dollars in advertising revenue, and they don't pay for content. I don't think that that's fair. The idea that content providers should be remunerated on the internet is a principle that has yet to be established.

Now you understand from me pointing that out, that I am in favor of artists of all kinds being remunerated, not actually by the user but by the advertising radio, in the same way as the radio. You know, when you turn the radio on you get the music for free don't you? But the artists are paid for that music. So there is a model there. Unfortunately they are not really responding to that idea yet.

Q: So getting a little more specific, do you think that the ASCAP model works, or would you rework the entire model of copyright?

Bragg: I'm afraid that the entire model needs to be reworked. There are a number of firewalls in place and ASCAP is one of them that are put in to protect artists. But they are not configured properly to protect us online.

What we really need to do is sit down as artists with the industry and re-think how about we use our rights. As artists it is very difficult to say to Myspace, "Just sort this out." Really we are dealing with five major record companies, and as artists, we are dealing with record contracts that were signed in a different era, where as artists they had to physically take records into shops in Ithaca. That doesn't happen in the same way anymore.

So there has to be a wholesale re-think of how we connect with revenue from the internet, and we haven't got there yet. Ultimately I think the internet has the possibility to bring us as artists so much closer to our audience. And right now I think that the old record industry model is prohibiting that.

Q: Even a little more generally, I was wondering because you've said that the real enemy to those who want to effect social change is not Conservatism or even capitalism but rather cynicism. And you are one of the artists that have really connected not only in singing about change but actually have effected political and social change.

Bragg: You know, I could sum it up in one word: engage.

As an artist, I strive to find opportunities to engage with the debate, to make the world a better place. Sometimes I struggle to do that, because it's elusive. But every day something comes across my desk that is an opportunity to make a difference. And I try to do that. For instance, I have been running a project for the last 18 months where we buy guitars for prisoners in Britain. And those sort of small-scale initiatives can make a difference.

But on top of that, on a meta-level, my wish for the election this year is that people engage in the debate and the electoral process. The fact that less than %50 vote in America and in Britain severely undermines your desire to be the greatest democracy in the world.

And it is a lack of engagement that allows Wall St. to shape the agenda. And until ordinary people engage and realize that their own cynicism is an enemy as much as everybody else is, and unless they engage in the process, I fear that we will find in the same difficulties that we are.

Now you guys are fortunate in that you have the opportunity next month to engage and do something positive. And I actually envy you.

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