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Mr. Love and Justice

Political rocker Billy Bragg plays Asheville two days before the election

by John Schacht in Vol. 15 / Iss. 14 on 10/29/2008

As the writer of songs like “To Have and Have Not,” “There Is Power In a Union,” and “Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards,” Billy Bragg has never shied from Aristotle’s maxim, “Man is by nature a political animal.”

He’s built a career on it, actually, and done so in a medium that hasn’t lately rewarded the overtly political. But whether rockin’ against National Front fascists and Margaret Thatcher’s Tories in the ‘70s and ‘80s, agitating for union solidarity and an end to the Iraq war, or decrying homophobia and sexism, the power of Bragg’s music comes from the beating human heart at its core.

Bragg’s songs transcend mere sloganeering and dead-end agit-prop by putting face to a familiar tenet of the left: Everything is political. His records are as much about relationship politics as they are about the great political currents that filter down into our everyday lives, his characters as real and three-dimensional as any in popular music.

His latest, *Mr. Love & Justice*, takes its name from a novel by Colin MacInnes, who chronicled immigrant life in late-’50s London, and Bragg’s themes are the most intimate he’s penned on what is arguably his most musically mature release yet. He suggests the record’s leitmotif was in part reaction to the book he wrote in 2006, *Billy Bragg: The Progressive Patriot*.

“It was quite a polemical book, and when I put down my pen and picked up my guitar, the songs that broke through were all much more personal,” Bragg tells *Xpress*. “I was quite pleased about that. I found it quite refreshing and I chose to go with that and not wait around ‘til more political ones turned up ... When the muse delivers you of something, it’s not your role to question the why and the wherefore.”

Bragg hasn’t by any means abandoned his “post-ideology” ruminations on justice and fairness. The title track, in fact, wasn’t inspired by the MacInnes novel, but by the plight of single mothers, an “issue I feel very strong about,” he says. “When society leaves women to bring children up on their own, that is political.”

“Oh, Freedom,” as well, chronicles what we’ve lost in that department since the Bush Administration’s response to 9/11. Over a Middle Eastern bouzouki riff, Bragg sings of late-night renditions and evidence-free interrogations, and the “liberties taken” in freedom’s name that render hollow our calls for the



Progressive Patriot: Bragg’s songs transcend mere sloganeering. Personal honesty, confessional intimacy and some toothsome rock round out the formula.

spread of democracy abroad. And “The Johnny Carcinogenic Show,” despite its painfully ham-fisted title, is a damning indictment of the tobacco industry and those whose sense of responsibility only extends to providing their “investors some return.”

But an essay by MacInnes, “England, Half-English” (also the title of Bragg’s last record in 2002), inspired Bragg to explore the nature of identity, which runs like a red thread through *Mr. Love & Justice*. “You Make Me Brave” plays a simple acoustic riff over a gentle bass-and-brushes shuffle, and like several cuts here, has a confessional intimacy even more discernible than some of Bragg’s earlier kitchen-sink-like narratives.

“My experience as a songwriter has led me to believe that the deeper you’re willing to be honest about yourself, the more likely you are to resonate with other people,” he offers.

What’s most impressive is the great leap forward musically that this record takes. Though it’s now his second with The Blokes, this album better highlights his stellar backing band, which includes former Faces’ keyboardist Ian McLagan. “Something Happened” is Bragg’s toughest rocker yet, while “Sing Their Souls Back Home” and “I Keep Faith”—a hymn of endearment and endurance featuring the angelic voice of Robert Wyatt—play like the rich gospel-tinged twang of The Band. The record even plays like a cousin to the Wilco/Bragg *Mermaid Avenue* collaborations.

Bragg will be playing Asheville two days before our election, and discussing it found him in his element. In this post-ideological era, Bragg suggests, both Karl Marx and Adam Smith have not proved up to the job of making ours a safer, more enriching world—unless you happen to be a party apparatchik or a CEO with a golden parachute. Now a two-decade veteran of American tours, Bragg has an intriguing two-continent view of the upcoming election, and is most heartened by the generational change Barack Obama represents.

“This is the first election in which I think the American people have been as engaged as the rest of us,” says Bragg, who performed and protested outside the GOP convention in Minneapolis in August. “(Europeans) pay real close attention, because whomever you pick, we have to live with them, too.”

[John Schacht is editor-in-chief of *Shuffle* magazine and a regular contributor to online magazine *BLURT*.]

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