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Brit singer uses music to further a cause

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 The Virginian-Pilot
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 By *DeAnne M. Bradley*

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“When I go out onstage, I have the potential not to change the world, but to change someone’s perspective of the world,” said folk musician Billy Bragg.

The British singer and songwriter has been at it for 25 years with political anthems and live shows filled with narratives about current events. He’s also written a book, “The Progressive Patriot: A Search for Belonging,” in response to the 2005 terrorist bombings of the London Underground.

“People consider me to be a predominately political songwriter, and I don’t mind that,” he said in a telephone interview from a hotel in Bochum, Germany.

Tonight, as part of the Discovery Music Series, the Essex native will share his political opinions – and his tunes – in his first Norfolk show.

Bragg is thrilled to be in the United States just days before the presidential election.

“The potential of a black president, I have to say, is perhaps the most exciting prospect of any election I’ve witnessed.”



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He sees how far the U.S. election will reach: “For us in the rest of the world, one of the things we would like is change – really.

We would like the United States of America to regain its place as a responsible defender of democracy and freedom.”

That’s why he’s excited about Tuesday, Election Day : “When you elect a leader for yourself, you elect a leader for all of us.”

Still, expect his show to go beyond politics.

“Anyone who comes to see me live knows that I write more love songs than political songs.”

Bragg showcases that on his 11th studio album, “Mr. Love & Justice,” which came out earlier this year.

“The world isn’t all politics, and it isn’t all relationships,” he said.

The title track combines the two. Above a mellow, twangy groove, he sings: “Mr. Love & Justice, I ask you, is it really fair if all of that commitment just vanishes in the air? Feel I’m on a one-way ticket to the end of the line. It won’t stop the children crying, but I want some justice this time.”

When he’s not onstage or in the studio, Bragg is still using music to further a cause. For the last year and a half he has been working on Jail Guitar Doors, a program to get music instruments into British prisons.

“A musical instrument can help you escape from your surroundings,” he said.

Bragg started the program after getting a letter from a drug and alcohol rehabilitation counselor who uses a guitar to help inmates.

“People should go to prison, and the punishment should fit the crime,” he said, “but I want prisons that rehabilitate people.”

The program is named after the B-side of The Clash’s 1978 single “Clash City Rockers,” in honor of the ’70s punk band’s founder, Joe Strummer, who died suddenly in 2002.

“This would be the sort of thing The Clash would do,” Bragg said.

