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Bragg combines causes with song

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Oct 31, 2008 (The News & Observer - McClatchy-Tribune Information Services via COMTEX) -- TWX | [Quote](#) | [Chart](#) | [News](#) | [PowerRating](#) -- Billy Bragg's latest, "Mr. Love & Justice" (Anti Records), might be his least-political album.

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Not that it's entirely apolitical -- "O Freedom," a scathing indictment of sins done in the name of "liberty," sees to that. But the bulk of the album focuses on the first half of the title rather than the second, the personal over the political.

This happened because of a career detour Bragg took after his 2002 album, "England, Half English." The six-year gap is the longest Bragg has gone between albums, but he didn't spend it idly. Bragg wrote a 2006 book, "The Progressive Patriot," which he says is "about the politics of belonging and identity." He was inspired to put down his guitar and pick up a pen after an election in which the far-right British National Party unexpectedly won a dozen seats in the East London neighborhood where Bragg grew up.

"That was a shock," Bragg says by phone from his home in London. "I just did not feel like I could make another record until I wrote this book first. So I told my manager, 'I have to do this. Put things back a bit.' Then as soon as I delivered the manuscript, songs started coming again. More of the love songs came this time. I'd been through this long period of intense polemical expression, so the other side of my persona reasserted itself, and I'm pleased about that."

Consequently, "Mr. Love & Justice" has relationship songs such as "I Keep Faith" (which concludes, "in you") and "I Almost Killed You," about a love that's almost fatally intense. It's long on low-key charm, playing up Bragg's thick brogue over classic English pub-rock arrangements.

Nevertheless, it's entirely possible you'll hear very little of Bragg's new album at his show in Durham on Saturday night. That's because he's back to acting as a provocateur on his latest tour, as a solo troubadour in America in the run-up to Tuesday's Major News Event.

"What, is there an election?" Bragg quips, deadpan. "Yeah, the timing of this tour is no coincidence. It's a coincidence that I have a new album out. But an autumn East Coast tour this year was a given, because the election will make the shows a lot more dynamic from me reading the papers, watching CNN. I can't get involved in mainstream American politics, obviously. But during an election, I do have an opportunity to remind my audience in America of the responsibility that goes with their position in the world.

"When you elect a leader over here," he continues, "you're electing a leader for all of us because of America's economic and military might. It's what goes with being No. 1. The leader of Switzerland or Canada doesn't matter like that -- no disrespect to either. But the reality is that the president of the U.S. is someone we're all in for whether we like it or not. The rest of us have no vote, but we do have opinions."

Bragg has long been a guitar-wielding soldier for progressive causes all over the world, which made him the perfect performer to collaborate with Wilco on the "Mermaid Avenue" Woody Guthrie tribute project. He also wrote one of the more prescient protest songs about Wall Street, 2002's "NPWA" ("No Power Without Accountability"), which sounds downright eerie in light of recent economic events.

So does he ever tire of being "the political guy"?

"I don't, because it's so interesting," he says. "Look at all that's happening at the moment. I'm excited to come over and be a part of the debate around the election and the credit crunch. It's a very engaging time. I don't mind the 'political singer' tag, because that's what I am and so few people are. But I hate when I get dismissed as just that. Every now and then, I'll hear from a bouncer after the gig, 'That was quite entertaining. I thought it was going to be all politics.' No, mate, just some.

"If it was all politics and nothing but, people would get fed up," he concludes. "It's a mixture because life is a mixture. So there's humor, opinion, relationships and the way they overlap -- because they do. Relationships are going to be severely tested with the economic situation we find ourselves in. That's a reality we forget in the good times."

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