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Bridgewater beckons for revitalised Bragg

By Lawrence Poole



THE flight back from any Stateside sojourn can be weary and tiresome to say the least.

But when you've traversed more than 3,000 miles in a tour bus to play 14 dates in 17 days, the old adage 'there's no place like your own bed' is extremely timely.

Yet for fierce campaigner Billy Bragg the thought of retiring to bed seconds after the key had turned the lock of his front door was simply not an option, as while he was winging his way across the Atlantic dreaming of tog-2 duvets and plump pillows, the American public were preparing to go to the polls in bigger numbers than ever before.

Still a little jet-lagged, the man lovingly tagged the Bard and Barking was glad he stayed the distance to watch the monumental moment a black man was put in the White House though.

"I got back Tuesday morning and of course had to stay up until 5am to watch the results come in – so I'm not quite sure where I am to be honest!"

It was the erudite Democrat candidate Barack Obama's victory speech in particular, which struck a chord with the 50-year-old folk singer: "When Obama quoted from Sam Cooke's great song 'A Change is Gonna Come', I was like 'Ok that's it – where's the Kleenex!"

"It was very powerful stuff, one of those historical moments you wanted to be part of."

A long standing veteran on the American touring circuit, Bragg felt privileged to visit while the election run-in was playing out.

"We went to some really interesting places I've never been before; Norfolk, Charlottesville, Ithaca, Lebanon – all little towns, but with loads of political activity going on in real swing states.

"To be with people so excited about the prospect of electing a black president was just so invigorating, you couldn't help but pick up on it."

A fervent campaigner who has spent the last 25 years building a name as a protest singer and penning songs such as Bush War Blues, I wondered if he felt it was a case of job done now the African-American family were preparing to complete a remarkable turn around and take up residency at the Pennsylvania Avenue mansion built by black slaves.

"Getting elected was just for starters, now it really begins. I had to warn the crowds over there about expectations being too high, what they've given themselves by electing him is possibilities – they have to take advantage of those now."

Red Wedge

Famed for his work in the 1980s with the Red Wedge campaign – a group of musicians' attempt to engage the British youth in politics with the aim of ousting Margaret Thatcher – Bragg's current cause of choice is Jail Guitar Doors.

"I'm up to my eye balls in it to be honest, although I haven't been able to get to as many prisons as I would like.

"I hit four prisons in the north last month though and next year when I've got a little more time I aim to reach out more as there's so much potential to be realised."

Christened after a Clash B-side (frontman Joe Strummer was both a great hero and friend of Bragg's), the aim of Jail Guitar Doors is to provide musical instruments to inmates as a way of rehabilitating prisoners.

A wholly admirable project, The Enemy's firebrand singer Tom Clarke and Jail Guitar Doors supporter is just one artist who was quick to point out how discovering music has saved him from

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a life of crime.

Bragg was thrilled to welcome a kindred spirit on board.

"I love The Enemy! The existence of Tom Clarke enables people like me to stop banging on about how great The Clash were.

"You want people like him to be out doing those things that inspire with their music and political lyrics - I'm very excited by those kinds of bands."

Following the fragmentation of music though, fellow Red Wedger Paul Weller was recently quoted as saying music doesn't have the power it used to have for some, because there are too many distractions and alternatives these days.

And while the Essex activist understands the former Jam man's standpoint, he still begs to differ.

Centre of your life

"Well I'm not sure. If you were a 19-year-old who wanted to write songs and play gigs then that would be the centre of your life.

"I know what he's talking about with distractions, video games etc, but with the upsurge in things like Guitar Hero 3 you can actually learn how to play guitar – my 14-year-old can now play Baba O'Reilly by The Who because of it!

"So there's potentially a whole new generation of guitar players coming along, who could have the same catalytic effect as Weller and Strummer."

Aside from the raft of political campaigns to support, Bragg is first and foremost a musician, his passion for music undimmed as his response to the enquiry about whether critically canonised American folk outfit Fleet Foxes had sparked his interest as well.

"I love that record, Christ I love that record!" he exclaims. "In fact I was driving back from Ithaca past all the white picket fences with the McCain or Obama signs on the lawns and I couldn't think of anything better to listen to than Fleet Foxes."

Chatham County Line

And despite name-checking other acts like the Carolina Chocolate Drops and Chatham County Line, it's heartening to hear one of our own bands can hold its own on the Bragg bus playlist too.

"When we get fed of that lot we put the new Elbow one (The Seldom Seen Kid) on really loud! What a great record, I'm down to my third or fourth copy because people keep nicking it – such a love bloke Guy Garvey (Elbow's singer), I'm so pleased the way things have gone for them."

On the home front, he will return to the road later this month – arriving at the Bridgewater Hall on November 25 – to further promote his most acclaimed (not to mention romantic) record in years, Love & Justice.

The salubrious surroundings of the Hallé Orchestra's home are long way from his first ever port of call in the city though – Bragg gets misty-eyed at the memory.

"I think it was at the (long forgotten) Loft in 1983. I was actually talking to Liverpool DJ Roger Eagle about it the other day, as I crashed on his floor that night if I remember rightly.

"I used to travel around by train in those days - me, a guitar and a little amp."

The amps may have got bigger and the songwriting more assured – New England, Levi Stubbs Tears and of course, Sexuality, are now considered English folk standards - but it's pleasing to know Bragg's philosophy hasn't changed.

And with eons of sleep to be caught up on, before hanging up and ever the crowd-pleaser, Bragg assures us - "don't worry, I'll be OK for Manchester!".

Billy Bragg plays the Bridgewater Hall on Tuesday, November 25. £16. Call 0161 907 9000.

Published: Sat, 25 October, 2008

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