

Billy Bragg

Billy Bragg was described by The Times newspaper as a 'national treasure'. In the two and a half decades of his career Bragg has certainly made an indelible mark on the conscience of British music, becoming perhaps the most stalwart guardian of the radical dissenting tradition that stretches back over centuries of the country's political, cultural and social history.

Bragg was born in December 1957. He was thus 19-years-old when punk made its indelible contribution to English popular culture, in 1977. Bragg's own particular contribution was to form a band called Riff Raff, who released a series of indie seven-inch singles including the wonderfully titled **I Wanna Be a Cosmonaut**.

True cultural significance, however, was to escape Riff Raff, who eventually split in 1981. Perhaps remarkably, given Bragg's punk antecedents, he briefly joined a tank regiment of the British Army before buying his way out with what he later described as the most wisely spent £175 of his life.

Between time working in a record store, and absorbing his new-found love of blues and politically-inspired folk music, Bragg launched himself on a solo musical career. Armed with a guitar, amplifier and voice, he undertook a maverick tour of the concert halls and clubs of Britain, ready at a moment's notice to fill in as support for almost any act.

His songs were full of passion, anger and wit, a 'one man Clash'. This was not, however, what the major record companies wanted at the time – the punk attitudes of the late-Seventies had long since given way to the escapist rise of the New Romantics.

Bragg, however, finally managed to grab some studio time, courtesy of the Charisma label's indie subsidiary, Utility. The result was **Life's a Riot with Spy Vs. Spy** which, when eventually reissued as the first album on the new Go! Discs label, hit the UK Top 30 in early 1984.

Bragg's stark musical backdrop – for the most part a roughly strummed electric guitar – and even starker vocals belied a keen sense of melody and passionate, deeply humane lyrics. The album's opening track, **The Milkman of Human Kindness**, for instance, was a love song of the most compassionate variety, illustrating the very real humanist approach which informs his music. It was an early indicator that Bragg's work would be infused with genuine insight and humour, as well as a sustained and personal commitment to political and humanitarian issues.

After seeing how the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher was changing the fabric of British society, particularly with the decimation of the mining communities, Bragg's songs became more overtly political. He became a fixture at political rallies and benefits, particularly during the 1984 Miners Strike. Indeed, his second album, **Brewing Up with Billy Bragg** (1984), opened with the fierce **It Says Here**, a strident song of political solidarity.

The album went Top 20 in the UK. Bragg was on something of a roll and even had a Top 20 hit with the **Between the Wars** EP, the title track of which he played live on BBC's Top of the Pops – something virtually unprecedented in those days of miming on television.

It took another two years before the release of his next album. Much of his time was occupied with Red Wedge – an initiative to persuade young people to vote for Labour in

the 1987 General Election - for which he toured with such luminaries as The Style Council, Madness, The Communards and The Smiths.

His credentials as a songwriter, however, were confirmed when Kirsty MacColl released her classic version of Bragg's **A New England**, a UK Top 10 hit in 1985.

Bragg's third album, **Talking with the Taxman About Poetry**, was released in September 1986. It was his most successful and accomplished release to date, spawning a hit single, **Levi Stubb's Tears**, as well as **Greetings to the New Brunette**, a collaboration with The Smiths' guitarist, Johnny Marr. The album was a Top 10 hit.

Two years later Bragg found himself with a surprise hit – albeit on a double a-side single with Wet Wet Wet. As part of a children's charity project, he recorded a version of The Beatles' **She's Leaving Home**, accompanied by Cara Tivey on piano. This was subsequently released with Wet Wet Wet's **With a Little Help From My Friends**, reaching number one in May 1988.

Later that year, in September 1988, Bragg released his fourth album, **Workers Playtime**. More focused on matters of the heart than political issues, the album also saw Bragg move away from the sparse arrangements that had characterised his earlier work. The public approved – the album was a Top 20 hit in the UK.

Bragg, however, entered the Nineties with his most political work to date. The **Internationale** mini-album, released in May 1990, included such tracks as **The Marching Song of the Covert Battalions**, **Nicaragua Nicaraguita** and Bragg's very personal rendition of the William Blake poem, **Jerusalem** as well as the Socialist anthems, **The Red Flag** and the title track, **The Internationale**.

The following year, 1991, Bragg issued the critically acclaimed **Don't Try This at Home**, which reached number eight in the UK chart. With musical contributions from such stellar talents as Johnny Marr and, from REM, Peter Buck and Michael Stipe, the album ranged in themes from personal tragedies to a strident condemnation of racists and football hooligans. Among the songs was the hit single, **Sexuality**.

A long time was to elapse before Billy Bragg made another album. One of the reasons for his absence was fatherhood – Bragg took time out to concentrate on his family. When he did return, in 1996, the resulting **William Bloke** album showed Bragg balancing his political and personal commitments, an unsentimental examination of his life and values.

The album also marked a return to the stripped-down Bragg, often no more than Billy and his guitar. **William Bloke**, a Top 20 hit, was to be the last album of Bragg's own songs in the Nineties. What followed next, however, was an extraordinary and unexpected project.

Woody Guthrie was the dean of American folk artists, the author of such classics as **This Land is Your Land**, **Pastures of Plenty**, **Deportees**, **I Ain't Got No Home In This World Any More** and **Rueben James**. His giant influence on the entire course of American popular music, not least Bob Dylan's acknowledgement of his debt to Guthrie, made him one of the seminal artists of the 20th Century. At the time of his death, in 1967, however, Guthrie left behind some 2500 unfinished songs, the lyrics to which were belatedly discovered many years later in the archives.

Guthrie's daughter, Nora, first became aware of Billy Bragg in 1992, when he performed at New York City's Summerstage birthday celebration for Woody. "Although he had come out of a punk rock background, he could sing along with the country and western singers, the folkies and just about everyone else who appeared in the show," says Nora Guthrie.

“When he accompanied the rappers Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy on **Vigilante Man**, we were blown away. He seemed open to anything and everything. His wry sense of humour, reminiscent of Woody’s, also caught our attention immediately”.

Nora Guthrie decided that Bragg was the perfect candidate to set new music to the unrecorded Woody Guthrie lyrics. There was no record of any music being written, thus Bragg was given the task of ‘reinventing’ original Woody Guthrie songs. The lyrics – about New York City streets, film star idols, drinking, loving, dying and even spaceships – were specifically chosen because they presented a completely different aspect to Woody Guthrie’s public persona. Bragg’s role was to provide the musical platform for a previously ‘unexplored’ Guthrie.

The result was **Mermaid Avenue**, released in 1998. Bragg’s collaborators on the project were American alt-country rockers, Wilco. Recordings began in Wilco’s hometown of Chicago and then in Dublin, where English fiddler Eliza Carthy and bluesman Corey Harris made their contributions. Natalie Merchant also added her talents when Bragg was finishing the recordings in Boston.

So much material was recorded during those sessions that **Mermaid Avenue Volume II** was issued two years later, in 2000. Both albums were nominated for Grammy Awards.

Before the release of that second album, however, Bragg had returned to the road, playing a 1999 UK tour fronting Billy Bragg & The Blokes. Among the band members was the legendary Ian McLagan, the keyboards player with the Small Faces and its later Rod Stewart incarnation, The Faces. The other musicians in The Blokes were Ben Mandelson (lap steel guitar); Lu Edmonds (electric guitar and vocals); Martyn Barker (drums); and Simon Edwards (bass).

The tour worked so well it was inevitable that The Blokes would be a permanent band, playing with Bragg in the U.S. and the rest of Europe.

Following the release of **Mermaid Avenue Volume II**, Bragg moved home from London to Dorset, in the south-west of England. It didn’t, however, take him long to involve himself in the politics of the area – just before the UK General Election in June 2001 Bragg launched a tactical voting campaign to unseat the Conservative MP in Bragg’s Dorset constituency.

Bragg also turned his attention to campaigning for reform of the House of Lords – the UK’s second chamber – by writing and publishing **A Genuine Expression of the Will of the People**, a political pamphlet on the subject. It is available in electronic form from the votedorset website.

Running concurrently with all this political activity, however, Bragg was also working with The Blokes on a new album **England, Half English**. The album, which explored Bragg’s notions about identity and Englishness, was released on Monday 4th March, 2002 – by sheer coincidence the precise 20th anniversary of Bragg’s first-ever solo gig, the Sociology Disco at North London Polytechnic on 4th March 1982.

A year later, in 2003, Billy Bragg celebrated his long career with a double-CD retrospective called **Must I Paint You A Picture?**, released on Monday 6th October 2003. The album featured 40 of the tracks that have defined his music and approach through the years. Initial copies of **Must I Paint You A Picture?** also feature a third, bonus, CD chock full of Billy Bragg collectibles and rarities.

A bigger retrospective, however, came with the release of **Billy Bragg Volume 1** - a boxed set featuring seven CDs and two DVDs with a wealth of rare and previously unreleased tracks - in March 2006.

It is now followed by **Billy Bragg Volume 2**, released on Monday 9 October. The new box set comprises:

1. **Workers Playtime** - Billy's fourth album originally released in 1988, together with a bonus CD featuring 12 extra tracks. **Workers Playtime** is also separately released as a two-CD set
2. **Don't Try This at Home** - the original 1991 album and a bonus CD with 14 additional tracks. The album is also separately available as a two-CD set
3. **William Bloke** - Bragg's 1996 album plus 11 extra tracks on a bonus CD. **William Bloke** is also separately released as a two-CD set
4. **England, Half English** - Billy's 2002 release and a bonus CD containing 13 extra tracks. The album is also separately available as a two-disc set
5. **If You've Got a Guestlist ...** - an in-concert DVD featuring Billy Bragg & The Red Stars at London's Town & Country Club in 1991 plus Billy Bragg at the Broadway Barking, the singer's hometown show on his **Hope Not Hate** anti-fascist tour in May 2006

The themes that pervade **England, Half English** have been further amplified in **The Progressive Patriot: A Search For Belonging**, Bragg's first book, published by Bantam Press on Monday 9 October, the same day **Billy Bragg Volume 2** is released. **The Progressive Patriot** is part autobiography and part polemic on the meaning of national identity in modern Britain.

Official web site

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For full list of Billy Bragg management, record label, booking agency, and PR contacts, please visit

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