

# BILLY ON THE BOIL

"Homicide."

Ha, ha, Inspector Bragg?

"Congratulations you're the only New Zealander to make it through tonight. I dunno what's happened to the *NZ Herald* or the *Auckland Express* or the *Christchurch Star*. So you Kiwis have let me down a bit. But at least you're on time."

We aim to please, as does socialist humanitarian William Bragg who's due to tour here next month, his third trip to deep Down Under.

"I owed you a visit last year, but we never made it. What happened?"

"I overslept. No, it was album year. I finished the album in the first six months and in the second I toured the UK, Europe and North America."

Bragg is sounding jocular for a man whose party has just lost its umpteenth consecutive election.

"It could've been a lot worse. At least the protest vote here is Scots Nationalist who are left wing or the Liberal Democrats. In Australia the protest vote is for an independent football coach and in Europe it's fascist."

"So it's not so bad, but after the elections I did think, 'what's the fucking point?' But there is a point and it's not just winning elections. That's the problem with the Labour Party — they think the point is just to win the fucking election. Their job is to deliver and defend a vision and keep that vision going and keep the idea of a humanitarian society alive at a time when it's not in power. And when it's in power they should try and deliver that kind of society and that's difficult."

## HOME TRUTHS

Billy Bragg, the bard from Woking, the geezer with the big nose and guitar who used to sing at miners' meetings, did a stint in the army and

grew up to be the Labour party's (only) eloquent spokesman and defender of altruism in the midst of Thatcher's greedy Britannia.

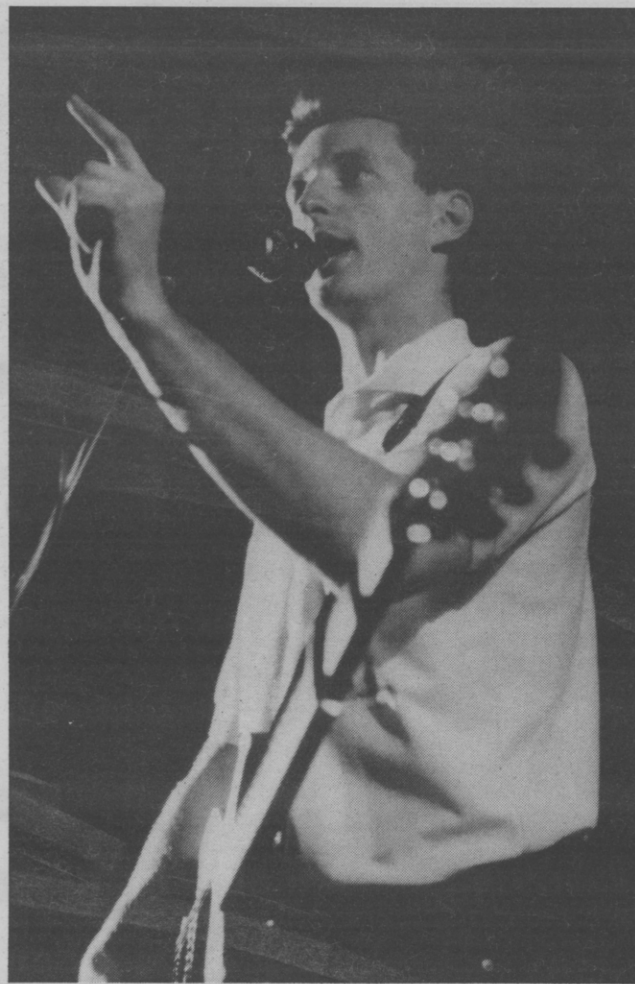
Successor to that crumbling Kingdom, John Major, has called socialism a thing of the past:

"You know the word football? It means a lot of different things — American football, Australian Rules, rugby football, association football. Socialism is a bit like football, you've got to qualify what kind he's talking about."

"We English when we say football we always mean soccer and the Tories when they talk of socialism they always mean Soviet Stalinism. If he's saying Stalinism's dead then I agree with him and I hope it's dead because any kind of totalitarianism that puts ideology before people is morally bankrupt. If he means the ideological manifestation of basic humanitarian ideas then he's wrong."

"And he of all people should realise that the reason he is Prime Minister is because of the conservatism of Margaret Thatcher, which denied the humanitarian urge, they knew would lose the election. It was only when they brought in Major, who admitted there was a humanitarian side to society, that they managed to squeak through."

"Part of the reason they won was that for a lot of people facing their



neighbours the next day knowing they had voted Thatcher was too much to contemplate. They wouldn't have voted Labour, but when Major came in he saved their consciences and made it possible for them to vote Tory and say Major's not as bad as Thatcher."

And what of poor old Neil Kinnock, the perennial election loser, a Welshman in direct contrast to the wily Lloyd George?

"Backbenches," continues Bragg from darkest London. "I don't think he'll want to go into the House of Lords, he's not that kind of fella. Somewhere along the line he made a tacit agreement that if he lost he could stand down and that's what kept everybody in check."

Despite Bragg's party allegiance he's never allowed his songs to slide into the rut of busking sloganeer. Last year's varied and masterful

*Don't Try This At Home* showed his development as one of rock 'n' roll's most astute, sensitive and honest writers. Like Guthrie and Dylan, his tunes carry the politics, not his voice. But prior to last year's 'Sexuality' it had been three years since Bragg had tried to infiltrate the hit parade.

"I've never felt myself to be a singles artist. The thing about 'Sexuality' is it marks an attempt by me to change the perception of people who've never bothered to listen to my music, but have just read that I'm a political singer-songwriter and have just dismissed me as such."

"This is to show that I can write good pop songs, but still do political content because the issue of safe sex is political. The right to express your personal sexual preference is very important. We should all be able to write about sexuality — we're all grown-ups."

Before last year's *Don't Try This At Home*, Bragg released the overtly political *The Internationale*. Very much the party line in its protest attire, it consequently captured the irony in 'Blake's Jerusalem' and the futility of slaughter in Bagle's 'My Youngest Son Come Home Today'. A wise or superfluous career move?

"It had to be done. Before I could point where I was going to go I had to declare where I was. I don't think *Worker's Playtime* did that sufficiently, but *The Internationale* stated clearly here I am, a political artist who's not shy about making a political album. *Don't Try This At Home* is a new starting point — it's almost like a debut album for me."

The album has been described as your Great Leap Forward!

"It's a natural progression. It re-set me for a lot of people. I've been playing for 10 years now, floating along ignoring the fact I was getting marginalised and writing with other people on the new album gave me a new urge and focus to write."

So *Don't Try This At Home* is the Billy Bragg break-out, another political manifesto would've left him as a banner in search of a song:

"Yeah, the political stuff is less ideological. I would argue that we're in a post-ideological period now. The important ideologies of Marxism-Leninism are now discredited. And in the UK the most important post-War ideology — Thatcherism — is also discredited. So there's no point in me hammering away at the things I did in the mid-80s."

"I now have to address more consensual issues — things like sexuality, nationalism, racism and the environment. I've tried to address these through songs on the album like 'The Few' and 'Everywhere'."

## CLEARING THE LINES

*Don't Try This At Home* is Bragg's most confident and personal album; his football analogies, the new less dogmatic flair in his politics is a subtle, more than a dramatic, change in his style, but it has shifted the emphasis of his songs even more into the realms of irony and pathos.

But talking about football, who or what is the very moving 'God's Footballer' about?

"It's really not biographical, but it's based on a guy Peter Knowles who played for Wolves in the 1960s. You can hear a brief reference to him at the end..."

In Brian Moore's commentary, "... it's someone like that, it might be Brian Moore — in fact you're right — well spotted from a distance. He says 'Twenty seconds to go and Knowles has equalised'. In a broad sense I wanted to say there's more to life than fame. Knowles was the Paul Gascoigne of his day, he was gonna be the next George Best, but he looks above that and finds a spiritual expression of himself instead of just a physical one. There is more to life than being famous for 90 minutes on a Saturday."

And it's the same with this job as well. I recognise there's more to life than just being Billy Bragg doing gigs, making records and doing interviews. Beyond the sport, the spiritual. I'm not saying we should all got out and become Jehovah's Witnesses, but we should come to terms with the fact that there's more to life than fame and materialism."

The song initially intrigued me with its reference to Molineaux — Wolves' home ground as Bragg, a Londoner, was unlikely to be a Wolves' supporter.

"I'm not, but I did a terrible thing. I spelt Molineaux with a 'y' which is the spelling of the firm that makes mixers and you know what bloody football fans are like, they're like bloody train-spotters. Three of the correct Wolves' team who are Bragg fans came along and commiserated with me for spelling it wrong and gave me a shirt. The song has been played at the ground, but I get more grief for that misspelling than I do for the political songs I've done. It's unreal."

The best song on the album is obviously Bragg's most personal — 'Tank Park Salute', an unbearably aching and soul searching coming-to-terms with the memory of his dead father.

"Thank you, that's the one I'm most proud of. I'm trying to get across the straightforward relationship I had with my dad and how in a blink it all seemed to have gone and I was left on my own."

A difficult song to write? "Yeah, but my theory is that if you want to write a song that appeals to the most people you don't do that by writing to the lowest common denominator. You do it by writing the most personal song you can bear because although your experiences and mine are different, the way we feel about them are very similar."

"If I can get past your experiences with just a few references — you obviously see something in 'Tank Park Salute' that makes it strike that chord with you — if I can draw you in with a few of those references that we have in common then I can hit the target I'm aiming for."

"Tank Part Salute" was in me for 14 years trying to come out and it took me about an hour to write. It's been a great catalyst for me talking about what happened with regard to me and my father. Before, I never spoke about it to anybody but now, because I wrote that song, I have to talk to you, no disrespect, an absolute stranger on the telephone about how I felt at that time and consequently it's forced me to face up to these feelings I've fought against and been afraid of."

"When people come and talk to me at gigs and talk about that song they often tell me about someone they've lost — it really works as a catalyst for them as well."

On a lighter note, how did you get involved with R.E.M. for their input

on the should've-been-a-hit 'You Woke Up My Neighbourhood'?

"I met Stipe at Molineaux when Wolves were playing Bolton. They were buying a couple of steak-and-kidney pies and I said 'eh-up Michael, I didn't know you were a Bolton fan'."

Gerroff. Okay, it was a dumb question.

"If you do the same gigs for causes you meet the same people — that's how we formed Red Wedge and that's how I know I know 10,000 Maniacs, KRS-1, Jackson Browne."

You said last year that pop is a trivial medium, but what other medium is open to you?

"None really, save that which I can cleave open with the songs I write, but there are songs that are so important they can change my mood, so I meant that quote as a paradox. I didn't just dismiss it as a trivial medium. You must think sometimes what's the point of writing this about these dickhead bands. You must have days like that, I'm sure we all do."

How has your philosophy changed towards the entertainment industry in your 10 years of involvement?

"I felt a bit of a luddite to start with — I didn't want anything to do with the music industry. In the end if the most political thing you ever do is make outrageous remarks in *Melody Maker* — that's not much. If the most critical thing I ever do is talk politics with *Rip It Up* there has to be more than that. We have to get to grips with the Wogans — not on their terms, we can't dilute things. Go there and make the obvious compromise, but on my terms."

"It's not a challenge to sit on the edge and be pure — it's a challenge to get stuck in. You may be swept away, but you may actually make a contribution to a debate that's going on."

"Imagine 'Sexuality' — 'Just because you're gay I won't turn you away' being heard in factories and schools — surely that's more political than doing one little Labour party gig for 600 people. Although I still do those gigs."

With such a determined political and moral stand, you must've made some enemies in showbiz?

"No more than anybody else. There's a certain Mr Gary Bushell who writes for the Tory shit press who used to work for *Sounds* who I argue with all the time. I did a debate with him the other day on the TV about Europe and I think he has a racist view about it whereas I think we should be part of Europe. We were talking about cricket off-air after the programme and I said I thought it would be good if Pakistan won the World Cup because if England had won all the political parties would've exploited it. He then printed a really small article in the newspaper and I've got it here, somewhere. The headline is: 'You Silly Boy Billy' and it reads: *I had a blitzing election row with Labour's Billy Bragg on Central Choice, but it could've been worse, he could've sung. Afterwards Billy let slip that he backed Pakistan in the cricket final — there's Labour patriotism for you.* This was printed the day before the election."

"It was so trivial it didn't deserve a reply. And yet when Bushell was with *Sounds* he helped get Two Tone going, now he's completely changed."

Do you get much reaction from young Tories?

"I get letters from people who say 'Love your songs, but hate your politics'. I'd hate it if everybody who came to the gigs was ideologically sound as those people have very little sense of irony or very little sense of humour."

So Billy Bragg and band are here in June and their mission?

"I try to create a community among people who come to the gigs. I like to give them a focus of solidarity and a feeling that they're not alone."

GEORGE KAY

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