

## An evening with Bragg

**Billy Bragg**  
MacEwan Hall Ballroom  
University of Calgary  
September 18

by Mike Spindloe

Once in a while, it's nice to do something completely, totally irresponsible. So, on Friday at the end of a long week, when the voice on the phone from Polygram records said that Billy Bragg was playing in Calgary Sunday night, it was all too easy to convince my colleague Dragos Ruiu to join me in throwing caution, not to mention sleep, to the winds. Thus we drove to the U of C for a concert that became an event partly because of the circumstances and partly because it was simply great.

We left Edmonton in the early afternoon, consumed by the bad craziness that was about to happen. Not having much money for gas, we hijacked a Chevette which was conveniently parked outside the Administration building, loaded up on Wild Turkey, grapefruit and amphetamines and hit the open road.

Actually, the euphoria of successfully procrastinating in the completion of our respective course homework assignments was quite enough to create a festive atmosphere. And so we arrived just in time to discover that someone had forgotten to put our name on the guest list for the gig, which was already sold-out. After waiting for the lineup to dispel, a few gentle words of persuasion got us into the hall in time to catch the last few numbers of San Francisco-based The Beatniks warmup set.

The Beatniks play a kind of stripped-down funk with strong revolutionary overtones. The five-member group includes a bass guitarist, three percussionists, and a keyboard player, who also manipulated a

seemingly endless array of pre-recorded tape sources. The Beatniks laid down an almost oppressively bottom-heavy and repetitive ground beat pattern with only a few simple keyboard stylings added to provide melodic interest. Their message, however, is all in their simple yet effective lyrical pleas for freedom, equality and justice. Group members took turns exhorting the audience to stand up and be counted, culminating in the observation that "a nigger is not a colour — it's a state of mind."

After a thankfully short break, Billy Bragg took the stage, and for over two hours proceeded to hold the audience spellbound with a potent mixture of songs illustrating his uncompromising democratic socialist political stance, his real and imagined love affairs and, between songs, a hilarious mixture of jokes.

Despite having bused in from Saskatoon that very afternoon (with a stop at the dinosaur museum in Drumheller), Bragg seemed to exude boundless energy on stage. Given the difficult task of facing an audience completely alone, he displayed the form that has made him a genuine working class hero in old England and something more of a cult figure in places like Canada where his topical lyrics have less direct impact than at home.

Actually, Bragg and his variety of electric guitars were not quite alone. He was joined for a few numbers by a pianist whose name I didn't quite catch, and for the encores by members of The Beatniks. The third song of the encore was perhaps the highlight of the entire show. Bragg retitled "Purple Rain" as "Acid Rain" and proceeded to present a full-band rave-up version, complete with screaming Prince imitations, both vocal and physical.

Interspersed between Bragg's short, simple and lyrically sagacious songs was



Billy Bragg on stage in Calgary.

Dragos Ruiu

not only a wide-ranging mix of mini-lectures on political and social issues, but an equally wide-ranging selection of humorous anecdotes and imitations of famous rock stars (Dylan, Springsteen) that had the audience in stitches between (and sometimes during) songs.

For instance, Bragg took an early jab at Morrissey (formerly the leader of The Smiths), and then teased the crowd, saying "nobody suffers like a Smiths fan." He later introduced Bob Dylan as "an icon of the last generation" and urged the "over-30's" in the audience to explain the Dylan jokes to the under-30's and vice versa for the Smiths jokes.

Bragg's stand-up routine, spontaneous as it seemed, was, as he admitted off-handedly, the sugar which made the pills of his political commentary go down a little easier. And the politics are an integral part of the Bragg experience; virtually every space between songs was filled with a message of some kind. These messages included universals like safe sex and human rights, as well as issues endemic to Canada like free trade, the buying of nuclear submarines and the upcoming federal

elections.

In fact, Bragg's apparent knowledge of Canada was impressive. He displayed a genuine affinity for the Great White North, where, as he says, it is not necessary to explain the basics of socialism, unlike the USA, where the "S word" is "equated with the worst excesses of Stalinism, and when you mention the word, you hear a sharp intake of breath."

It could be said that Bragg's musical vision suffers somewhat from a lack of diversity. There is a sameness to his songs, with the limited range of guitar stylings he employs, and for every poignant love song like "Levi Stubbs Tears", there is at least another that flounders in the bluster of its rhetoric. But there are also many songs that have or will become genuine anthems of the people: "Help Save The Youth of America", "I Don't Need This Pressure," "There is Power in a Union". It is in these topical songs that Bragg's strength as a songwriter is most fully realized.

Bragg also proved willing to engage members of the audience in debate on ideological issues. When someone shouted "bollocks" in response to Bragg's observations on the situation in Northern Ireland, a five minute discussion ensued. This was after only the first number of the show; thereafter Bragg wisely saved the opportunity for members of the audience to debate with him until after the concert, when he dutifully emerged, bottle of ale in hand, to chat with anyone who cared to stick around.

The show featured a good representative selection of songs from Bragg's previous three albums and several EP's, as well as several numbers from his first released LP, *Worker's Playtime*. Bragg's overt mission is to change the world, yet he will readily admit that the model of democratic socialism he is working for has never been achieved. Although he was preaching to a largely complacent and definitely unrevolutionary audience Sunday night, he probably succeeded in at least jogging a few minds into real thought. He definitely succeeded in presenting a powerful and memorable concert.

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