



BRAGG'S ALBUM DYNAMITE

By KEN BURKE

*As we poets see it,
a barrel the rhyme is,
a barrel of dynamite —
the fuse is each line.*
—Vladimir Mayakovsky,
1926.

A Soviet revolutionary poet hounded by Stalin's police and a young British pop star of the eighties don't seem to have much in common. But then again, Billy Bragg is not anybody's typical "star".

Bearing just an electric guitar, a loud amplifier, and an eye for compassionate detail in Thatcher's England, Billy Bragg believes in Mayakovsky's lit fuse. He's used it to take aim at the Tories — "The party that became so powerful by sinking foreign boats" — and complacent England, "the land of a thousand doses", and he's made his impact with a sound owing more to streetcorner busking than to arena rock. His latest album borrows the title of Mayakovsky's poem *Talking to the Taxman about Poetry* for its title, and brews up another collection of songs about the state of the British Nation and "states of undress".

From his first E.P., *Life's a Riot With Spy vs. Spy* in 1982, Bragg set himself apart from the platform of socialist-mouthing musical messiahs. His record was produced for the equivalent of three hundred dollars and featured just his heavily reverbed guitar, unaffected, ordinary-bloke singing, and a true gift with words.

From the very beginning, his songs have been of two kinds — from the romance of *The Milkman of Human Kindness* to

the impassioned politics of *To Have and Have Not*. Since then, in a number of E.P.'s and the album *Brewing Up With Billy Bragg*, he has continued to mix direct political songs with achingly real renderings of people in love and pain.

What makes Billy Bragg so appealing is his unpretentiousness, being able to sing, "I see no shame in putting my name to socialism's cause" and in the next song reminisce about "walking in the park/kissing in the dark/and your tights around your ankles." He comes across like an average guy from the council flat next door — if that average guy just happens to be a union organizer.

What comes back again and again are the images Bragg draw to give this characters life. He specializes in the small humanizing touch; the young man thinking of an ex-lover "until the bathwater went cold around me", or the young woman who "still goes dancing and she still cuts hair/they put the baby in council care."

Bragg's musical style only adds to his image as a spokesperson for the "common folk". His stripped-down presentations make for a more personal, almost one-to-one barking, and his voice carries its barking, England birth certificate on its drawl, making fear "fe-ah" and herself "heh-sewf".

"Talking With the Taxman..." continues this tradition, with songs as good as anything 1986 has seen. *Levi Stubbs' Tears* tells of a woman who mentally retreats from her abusive husband through American soul music, until "one dark night he came home from the sea/and put a hole in her body where no hole should be". In *The Passion*, a

marriage falls apart from a pregnant bride's eyes, as she prays "that the baby will love her much more than the big boy who stole her away."

What doesn't work so well on the record are many of the other songs. The lyrics aren't as sharp as they were on *Brewing Up*, and some songs like *Help Save the Youth of America* don't do more than make easy political points (though it does weigh in as the first musical mention of Chernobyl on record). The songs are far from being dull, but well below the best songs on the album.

Also worth noting is Bragg's decision to add extra instrumentation to most of the album's songs. He is rarely alone with his guitar on this album, although the accompaniment is most often a simple bass, organ, or even a backing vocal by itself. These do work because this is also Billy Bragg's most melodic and "pop" album so far.

Instead of slashing his words through rough guitar, Bragg gets to sing here, and his melodies justifiably take the front seat for songs like *Greetings to the New Brunette* and *The Warmest Room*. Smiths producer John Porter has made this the first Billy Bragg album with anything like elaborate production, or a smooth sound, and the approach does fit the songs on the album, though some of his early career's power is lost along the way.

Despite this, *Talking With the Taxman About Poetry* is probably Billy Bragg's most accessible record to date, and a good place to start if he hasn't crossed your path yet. For a British pop star, he rolls a powerful barrel of dynamite. Mayakovsky would be proud. stop

OUT OF THE FOG

By TREVOR CLASH

I'll begin this review by suggesting that you buy this compilation album not because you'll be doing your part to support Halifax's viable and dynamic alternative/underground scene, but because it's a great album able to stand on its own merits without qualifications. Flamingo records has assembled 13 Halifax area independent artists in order to, "expose their talents on a local, national and international basis." The result, *Out of the Fog*, represents a cross section of the varied Halifax music scene that lets you sample music ranging from the righteous rock'n roll of street musician **Mark Wellner** to **False Security's** thrash/hardcore as well as most points in between. *Out of the Fog* has some weak tracks, and a few artists haven't been able to recreate on vinyl the power and presence they have on stage. On the other hand, some artists have equalled or exceeded the quality of their live performances on this record. For example, **Killer Klamz** vocalist Steevo has a strength and clarity on wax that sometimes gets lost during the band's live gigs. It's also encouraging to see **the October Game** taking full advantage of the opportunities for creative experimentation that the studio offers.

The album is a professional looking package. It has cover artwork and design far superior to most 'underground' projects and that could help get it into mainstream record stores. As well, production on each track is excellent. The signal stays clean and clear even when you crank the volume way up. When I spun, "Vietnam," by **False Security**, I wished that my amp went up to 11.

Nothing on *Fog* suggests that Halifax is cultivating an identifi-

able underground scene which is unique to the city. One beef I have is that there aren't any Reggae/ska bands on this album. Reggae and ska are (were?) a big part of this city's underground. Sure, the **Hopping Peguins** are currently, "on the street in big T.O." but they did make a helluva impression on the local music scene and they are Halifax's best known export. Don't believe me? Then how come the **K.K.'z** billed themselves as the "Cousins to the Hopping Peguins" when they played at Toronto's Big Bop?

The creative standards are quite high on *Fog*. Most of the artists demonstrate songwriting ability and musicianship that should make record execs listen up. **Dogfood's** saxophonist G. Wally Beaver (come on, please) serves up a spooky wail on their cut, "Let it Go" that is so twisted, it takes a few listens before you can identify it as sax. Other great individual performances are turned in by **The October Game's** bassist Jeff Semple and guitarist Peter Arsenault from the **Jellyfish Babies**. Also Sean from the **Killer Klamz** shows that he knows all the licks and tricks. I'd like to hear a whole album of him wailing away on the wah-wah peddle. I don't like to make comparisons but **The October Game's** vocalist Sarah McLachlan strikes the same chord in me as the vocals on earlier Kate Bush stuff. She has such a beautiful and flexible voice that I rank her individual talent as the album's highlight.

All in all, *Out of the Fog* is an auspicious debut for Flamingo Records, and should help the featured artists, who, by the way, can now call themselves recording artists and get where they want to go. Hats off to all involved. Send the next one over as soon as it's out.

