

MUSIC FROM A SPOKESMAN—

A glimpse of Billy Bragg

He's been dubbed "spokesman for a generation" by the music press, but British born Billy Bragg is uncomfortable with such a weighty title.

Although his music is on campus radio station playlists across Canada, Bragg does not presume to speak for Canadian youth when he performs staunchly political tunes like "There is Power in a Union," "Which Side Are You On," or "Between the Wars". But his politics are very much a part of his message.

"I'm not a political songwriter. I write some political songs but I mean, I live in a country at that moment that's very political, and part of my job is to reflect the society that I come from. And I can't divorce politics from my life. I'm afraid. I think politics is too important to be left just to politicians," says Bragg.

But Bragg acknowledges that he can potentially influence many people through his music, so he takes that responsibility seriously.

His recent Canadian tour was scheduled around a trip to Nicaragua, where he performed at a

book festival aimed at improving the literacy of the Nicaraguan people. When Bragg returned to Canada, he was anxious to share his experiences with his audiences, comprised mostly of university and college students.

"I guess I learned about what's happening in Nicaragua from the Clash album *Sandinistas*, and I'm not ashamed to admit that, Bragg said, illustrating that musicians can actually inform their listeners.

The last lines of Bragg's song "It Says Here" became very clear to him when he went to Nicaragua. "When you wake up to the fact that your paper is Tory, just remember... there's two sides to every story."

"Our newspapers and our governments aren't telling us the truth about what is going on in Nicaragua. They've misrepresented the Sandinista government and the people of

Nicaragua, calling them Marxists and totalitarianists, when that's just not the case," Bragg said.

Bragg asked a Cuban journalist for his perception of the political situation in Nicaragua, in light of his experience with South and Central American politics. The journalist called the Sandinista government "an interesting experiment in social democracy," which is far from what the North American press was calling it.

Bragg witnessed many discrepancies between what the press was telling the rest of the world about Nicaragua and what he actually saw there. He rejects comparisons between life under the Sandinista government and life in places like the Soviet Union or East Germany.

"All over the place, there are posters promoting the five opposition parties in Nicaragua. And when people from the United

States embassy came to Nicaragua, they distributed anti-Sandinista propaganda, but the Sandinistas didn't stop them. Now I ask you, would that happen in the U.S.S.R. or East Germany?"

Bragg also dismisses American assertions that the Sandinistas have no public support in Nicaragua.

"In Nicaragua, there are one million arms for three million people. If the Sandinistas were not popular, they wouldn't be there very long," Bragg commented wryly.

Bragg speaks highly of the thousands of American volunteers working to improve living conditions for the Nicaraguan people and "implores young people to go there" to help. He notes that these volunteers must look at the "Contragate" hearings and President Ronald Reagan's continued support of the Contras in disgust.

The United States shouldn't repeat the mistake of sending armies into a jungle war (as they did in Vietnam). If they want to demonstrate their great influence on the world, why don't they sit down with the Soviet Union and get rid of all nuclear weapons? Bragg asked his audience in Ottawa, who responded with cheers.

Bragg calls U.S. and Soviet interference in Nicaragua "an issue of global importance for the Third World." He fears that "if a tiny country like Nicaragua can't be self-determined, what hope is there for anyone?"

Bragg noted that while most Americans feel very strongly about what to do about Nicaragua, they really know little about what is happening there.

Bragg joked with his audience: "In a recent poll, 51 per cent of Americans polled were against giving aid to the Contras, 32 per cent were in favour, and 30 per cent couldn't even locate Nicaragua on a map! At least they wouldn't get far if they tried to invade!"

But Nicaragua is not a "trendy political issue" for Bragg. He looks at most political situations with a critical eye and comments on them with a scathing tongue. Bragg is particularly negative about Margaret Thatcher's Tory government in Britain, denouncing the "economic brutality" that she is inflicting on the British with her hard-nosed economic policies. The victims of those policies, Bragg said, are "those who can't take part in the glory of capitalism," the working class and poor of Britain.

Bragg places his support behind Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party in Britain, acting as a link between the Labour Party leaders and the youth of Britain. Playing benefit gigs with British performers Paul Weller and Jimi Somerville has earned Bragg much of his reputation as a political spokesperson for the youth of Britain. Bragg's support for the Labour Party has not wavered despite their recent election loss—

perhaps it has increased his respect.

"Two weeks before the election, Labour was doing well in the polls. Then Kinnock was asked for the Labour stand on nuclear arms. He could have dropped the disarmament question from the platform and possibly have won the election. But he said, 'Within twenty-four hours of our election, we will close down the military bases.' He may have lost the election but he kept the principles of the Labour Party and the ordinary people," asserts Bragg.

"If you haven't really loved someone, really cared and hurt over them, then you can't be a socialist."

When Bragg arrived in Canada in July, the opinion polls gave over 35 per cent of the popular vote to the New Democratic Party and the NDP won three seats in Parliament during by-elections that month. While

piece for left-wing political parties. He has another distinct side to his music and his personality which is often ignored by the media, but never by his fans. In fact, many of his fans probably don't know or care where his political loyalties lie. For them, Billy Bragg is the man who writes gut-wrenching love songs that send them sobbing off to sleep at night.

This is the side of Billy Bragg that sings, "I don't want to change the world, I'm not looking for a new England, I'm just looking for another girl." He con-

siders his love ballads to be as important as his political songs because he realizes that love, particularly the unrequited sort, has universal appeal that specific political issues do not.

But Bragg does not consider politics and love to be mutually exclusive, a belief he tries to explain by paraphrasing Antonio Gramsci, a former president of the Italian Social Democratic Party.

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"The Saturday Boy" is a song that could be called the quintessential Billy Bragg love song, but Bragg calls it simply "the truest song I ever wrote." It's a funny, achingly accurate tale of an adolescent boy's love for the girl who doesn't know he's alive. Bragg traces the tales of heartbreak from when "she became a magic mystery to me and we'd sit together in double history, twice a week and some days we'd walk the same day home... to 'in the end it took me a dictionary to find out the meaning of unrequited, while she was giving her-

self for free at a party to which I was never invited."

Bragg personally favours classic laments of the broken-hearted done in the great country music tradition by people like Patsy Cline and Hank Williams, or Motown-style, by Smokey Robinson or the Four Tops.

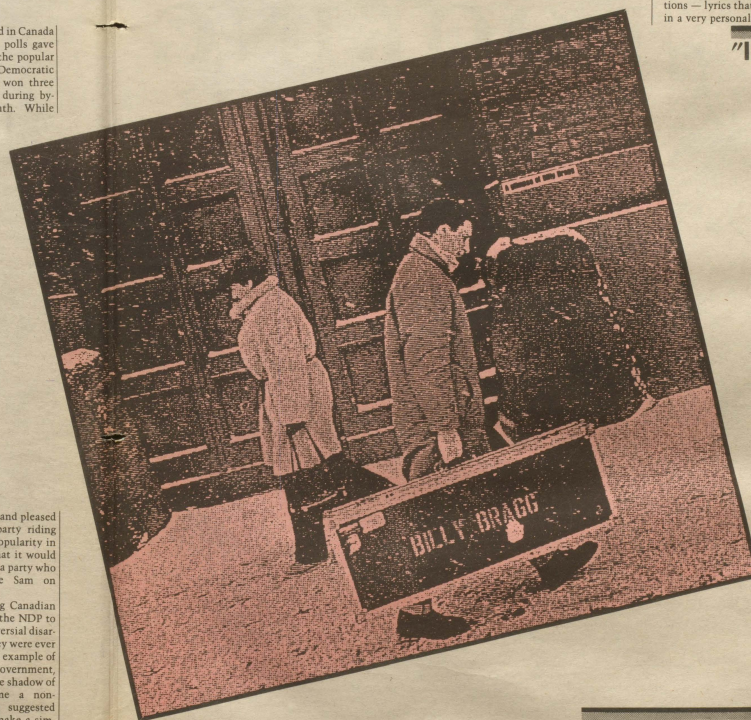
"Bob Dylan called country singer Hank Williams 'America's greatest living poet.' To me, he's the guy who sings the love songs that meant the most. The ones that made your stomach go like jelly when you hear him playing in the supermarket or the gas station," said Bragg of the man famous for such heart-breakers as "I Can't Help It If I'm Still in Love With You" and "Your Cheatin' Heart".

That's what Bragg hopes to achieve with his own compositions — lyrics that touch people in a very personal way.

"I think that it's those powerful songs that make you sit down and think, or even more powerful, sit down and cry, that are just as important as the ones that make you want to jump up and be happy. And when I set out to make music I must admit that that's the sort of music I set out to make, music that really touches you."

When he writes love songs, Bragg tries to remember that everyone has the same "hang-ups, worries, confusions" about love and then "maybe you can write something that everyone can feel." In his version of "Walk Away Renee", Bragg says, "I couldn't stop thinking about her, and everytime I switched on the radio, there was someone else singing a song about the two of us." And that's what he hopes to achieve with his songs; the feeling that someone else knows how you feel.

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"This is just a job... the best job I've ever had... but it's still a job."

"I have a letter at home from a girl who told me about her life, which was not particularly going well — like any adolescent life, it's had its problems — but she finished off by saying, 'Thank you for being in my empty room when nobody else was there.' Now Smokey Robinson did that to me, and if I met him today I would have to say exactly that to him. If my songs are moving people the way that Smokey and the Four Tops and Elvis Costello moved me, then, you know, that's much more job satisfaction than filling out the Maple Leaf Gardens," said Bragg.

Since Bragg eschews commercial success for personal satisfaction, he works in the music industry on his own terms. His albums and EPs usually bear the label "pay no more than..." to avoid overpricing, and he refuses to cut singles that only give fans two songs. Bragg does not forget his days as a working-class kid from Barking, East London, and he has not changed his lifestyle much to accommodate his new-found celebrity.

In his spare time, I watch the telly, catch up on my letters, hang out with my chums, visit my mum. Same as most folks, I suppose."

And although he's been called "the new messiah of British folk" and "the British Bob Dylan", Bragg sees his chosen career in very realistic terms.

According to the former bank messenger, store clerk, and house painter, "This is just a job... the best job I've ever had... but it's still a job."