

Billy Bragg in conversation with Jude Kelly "It Was 21 Years Since I Wrote This Song"

Sunday 9 December, 2007, Queen Elizabeth Hall, 7.30pm, Tickets: £10

Billy Bragg, the 'Bard of Barking' celebrates his 50th birthday and the 25th anniversary of his first solo gig. With the aid of a record player, guitar and a head full of stories, Billy Bragg reveals the music that inspired him to become one of Britain's leading songwriters: from the East End sing-along around his grandmother's piano; through his teenage love of Tamla-Motown; his emersion in the singer-songwriter tradition and subsequent encounters with English folk music; to his Clash-inspired epiphany and his emergence as post-punk troubadour.

Billy's 50th year, which coincides with the 25th anniversary of his first solo gig – in March 1982, opening for the Sensible Jerseys at North London Polytechnic Sociology Department annual disco - has been as busy as ever.

The beginning of 2007 saw Billy appear at a number of literary festivals promoting his book *The Progressive Patriot*, a polemic on the rise of racism in Britain driven by the election to Barking Council of 12 councillors from the whites-only British National Party. In February 2007, Billy set up *Jail Guitar Doors*, an initiative to provide instruments and musical equipment to eight UK prisons. In March, Billy was commissioned to write a new English lyric for the 'Ode to Joy' from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, which was sung by a 1,500 piece choir accompanied by the London Symphony Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall's re-opening concert in June 2007. Southbank Centre's re-opening weekend, the 'Overture' also saw Billy help re-establish the Royal Festival Hall as the People's Place by conducting the 'Big Busk', an event that saw over 500 people bring their acoustic guitars and perform mass versions of some of the nation's favourite songs.

Meanwhile, Billy has been cited as an influence by a new generation of singer-songwriters who have emerged in the past 12 months. In an interview for the NME in September, chart-topping singer-songwriter Kate Nash recalled sharing a stage with Billy at the Electric Ballroom as part of this year's *Camden Crawl*:

"Obviously it's good to have an image - it's nice to wear cool stuff, really, but people care a lot more now about words and music. When you look at people like Billy Bragg you realise what's important, it doesn't matter. He doesn't even have a cool-looking guitar; he just gets up and plays. When I watched him at the Electric Ballroom it was the best thing ever, to see him, one guy, one guitar and for him to have such an effect on such a huge amount of people. Everyone was smiling and singing along. It's about connecting with people. It doesn't matter about image - it's nice to look nice, but it doesn't matter that much."

On 8 October, 'Q' magazine recognised Billy's influence by presenting him with their Classic Songwriter Award. The following evening, Billy's new version of the 'Ode to Joy' was performed again at the royal gala attended by Her Majesty The Queen at the Royal Festival Hall. In between all this activity, Billy has found time to write and record a new album, entitled 'Mr Love & Justice', which will be released early next year.

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