

ROCKING THE CYNICAL WORLD¹

Madeline Ostrander[©]

In the mid-1990s, when Nora Guthrie, Woody Guthrie's daughter, was looking for someone to set some of her father's unpublished lyrics to music, she passed over the obvious choices—such as Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen, or Woody's old traveling companion, Pete Seeger. She turned instead to British icon Billy Bragg, who emerged from the London punk movement in the late 1970s and has since become synonymous with political songwriting. *Mermaid Avenue*, Bragg's Grammy-nominated collaboration with Nora Guthrie and the band Wilco, rocketed him into the American music scene.

It's not hard to see parallels between Bragg and Woody Guthrie—their poetry, politics, and irreverence. Bragg knows how to capture the zeitgeist, and his songwriting and activism are as relevant to today's predicaments—soaring economic inequality, Tea Parties, Glenn Beck, and racism—as Guthrie's were to the Great Depression.

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Now 52 years old, Bragg grew up in a community hit hard by economic crisis, the working-class borough of Barking and Dagenham, near London. He became a political activist after attending a rally in 1978 for Rock Against Racism, an antiracism movement led by pop and punk bands like The Clash. Bragg's background allows him to cut through the divisive politics of race and immigration and speak plainly to audiences about social issues. In the last several years, Bragg has used his influence and panache to campaign against anti-immigration politicians in his hometown.

On a damp Sunday in September, I watched Bragg perform to a crowd of young and old fans at Seattle's annual Bumbershoot arts festival. Earlier that weekend, a YES! photographer and I met him at a coffee shop. He was milder and more personable than I had expected, smiling at us as if we were old friends. I asked him to explain how a singer can help change an election, reach millions of young people, and use music to fight the fear and cynicism that is undermining the democratic process in both of our countries.

Madeline Ostrander: You're widely known as a political songwriter, but you write on your website, "The notion that you can change the world by singing songs can only serve to undermine activism."

Billy Bragg: I feel it's my job to remind the audience that only they can change the world. If people just come to my gigs, buy T-shirts, and think they've done their bit, that's the worst kind of hypocrisy on my part. My job is to bring them together in a space where they feel that they're not the only person who gives a sh*t about an issue. And they go away thinking, "Yeah! I had a sense of community!"

One of the first political things I ever did was Rock Against Racism. Before that, I felt my political views were in the minority. Where I was employed, there was a lot of casual racism. I was the youngest person and the only one who found it offensive. In that Clash crowd, I saw a

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hundred thousand kids just like me. I realized racism was the issue on which my generation was going to take a stand.

The Clash got me there, but it was the crowd that empowered me.

The song has a part to play—it gives you a different perspective of your position in the struggle and your view of the world. But it's what we do when we go back to our communities that makes a difference.

Ostrander: You recently campaigned against politicians in your hometown who were using race and immigration to inflame the public. Does it ever feel discouraging that these issues are so cyclical?

Bragg: No, as long as there's a new generation coming in to fight, you've got to pass the torch. When we marched for Rock Against Racism, we were part of a tradition that stretches back to the activists of the 1960s who were out on the streets, to our parents and grandparents who defended London against the Nazis in the 1940s, the people from our country who fought in the Spanish Civil War against fascism, all the way back to the abolition of slavery in the early 19th century. Our job is to pass that information on, to not be discouraged. We're not the first people to have fought the struggle, and usually we win. The other side has their high points but eventually, we get 'em, and we usually get 'em with our music and our culture.

Ostrander: What was so significant about the victory against the British National Party in your hometown this summer?

**I lost my job, my car, and my house
 When ten thousand miles away some guy clicked on a mouse
 He didn't know me, we never spoke,
 He didn't ask my opinion or
 canvass for my vote
 I guess it's true, nobody cares
 'Til those petrol bombs come spinning through the air
 Gotta find a way to hold them to account
 Before they find a way to snuff our voices out
 Can you hear us? Are you listening?
 No power without accountability!**

—from the song, "NPWA," on *England, Half English*, Cooking Vinyl, 2002

Bragg: My hometown [the borough of Barking and Dagenham] is probably the most industrial borough in southeast England. When I left school, the car plant employed about 40,000 people in a borough of 150,000. And over the last 15 years or so, employment at that plant has dropped to about 3,000 people. There's no work. But the housing prices in our borough are the lowest around London, so there's an influx of people and huge pressure on housing, schools, and doctors' waiting lists. Twenty years ago, the borough was 98 percent white. Now whites make up below 80 percent.

The British National Party is a proper fascist party; they're not just right-wing nut cases. Their leader, Nick Griffin, has cast doubt on the veracity of the Holocaust. They read the same census report that I did, probably, and targeted our borough. They started saying, "Can't get your roof

fixed? Can't see the doctor? It's these immigrants." In 2006, out of nowhere, Barking elected 12 councilors from the British National Party.

All of the sudden, my hometown was called the racist capital of Britain. But the only difference between my hometown and anywhere else is that Barking has these bastards knocking on doors, turning people's genuine concerns into racism.

This summer, there was an election for the local council, and the British National Party expected to win 12 seats, which would have given them control of schools, the allocation of housing, and a £750 million budget. I was out there with groups such as Unite Against Fascism and Hope Not Hate, knocking on doors, singing a few songs when people broke for lunch at work, and stuff like that. The incredible thing was the number of young people involved, because in the last ten years, a lot of the anti-racism activists have been old Clash fans like me—gray-haired geezers with tattoos.

When results were announced, not only did the BNP fail to win any more seats, they lost every seat they had. They were wiped out of the local council. That's a real tribute to the young people who came out in such great numbers—proof that your actions have meaning. But you can't just sing about it; you have to actually go and do it until it happens.

Ostrander: How do you talk to—or sing to—someone who doesn't share your political views?

Bragg: Well, you have to talk to them about the implications of electing a party that is such a pariah. It's not a protest vote anymore. And I think the cynicism that the BNP relied on failed them this time. It turns out that the white, working-class people of Barking and Dagenham are not racist. This year, when they looked into the face of the British National Party and realized who they were, they threw them out. I'm quite encouraged by that, because if they can't pick up votes in a place like Barking and Dagenham, they've had it as an electoral force.

Ostrander: In the U.K., you've been a spokesperson and an icon for working-class interests for years. Is that ever a burden? Does anyone ever suggest that you're not representing them?

Bragg: Yeah, I get bashed for it all the time. The British National Party threw three things at me during the election campaign: They said I'm not working class, I'm not heterosexual, and I'm not a good songwriter. But that ain't going to stop me.

We're not the first people to have fought the struggle ... Eventually, we get 'em, and we usually get 'em with our music and culture.

The thing about me and Barking is actually about belonging, which is deeper than class. My son and my missus take the piss out of me mercilessly about being some sort of Cockney geezer. But it's okay. In the end, it's about being who you are. My brother and my mum still live in the borough. He's a bricklayer. She lives in the house we grew up in. When the sh*t went down in the local council, it would have been easy for me to say that people in my hometown are all racists. But that would have been a complete betrayal of the people I went to school with.

One problem is that the white working class has been dismissed in the last 20 years in the U.K. In the U.S., I think that's also why the Tea Party exists. Who does represent us any more when the Democratic Party has become an old, white-collar party within the Beltway? When the Labor Party has been hollowed out, and they're not standing up for you?

Because consumerist individualism is fine when you've got money in your pocket, but when you've got no money, then you can feel very, very lonely.

Ostrander: You said in an interview in the *Guardian*, “Our real enemy is cynicism.” What did you mean?

Bragg: Well, what do you think Glenn Beck is in the business of doing? He’s spreading cynicism. He wants you to think, as a listener, that there’s no point in trying to do anything positive. Tear down the government.

But it's not Glenn Beck's cynicism that stops the world from changing. It's our own cynicism—those of us who believe in a better world. Cynicism is our great enemy.

I’m not saying what the government does is always good, but the government is only as good as the people who elect it. When you’re encouraged to believe that anybody who puts forward an idea of collective responsibility like free health care is a socialist-Nazi, whatever that means, it undermines your belief in community.

The free market can’t solve everyone’s problems. How are we going to solve climate change? Recycling your plastic and your bottles ain’t going to do it. It can’t just be individual action. It’s got to be collective action at a global scale.

Ostrander: Which of your songs do you feel have had a particularly powerful impact?

Bragg: Well, you can’t really measure it like that. You can’t say, “I wrote this song, and these things happened,” except that a song’s success might let me buy more socks and underpants. I could show you a graph, “I wrote these songs, and the number of socks and underpants in my drawer at home went up.”

When people tell me that they took action as they listened to my song, I’m always happy to receive their thanks. But I don’t take credit because I didn’t do all those things. They did. I just provided the soundtrack.

Ostrander: It sounds a little like you’re downplaying the impact of your music.



[Video: Billy Bragg Live](#)

(Highlight ‘Video: Billy Bragg Live, press CTRL key, click on highlight)

Bragg: I’m not downplaying my music. But I don’t set out thinking, I’ve got to write a political song or a love song. I just write what turns up. Open the guitar case, play a couple of chords. The key song in my current set is a track from my most recent album called, “I Keep Faith.” It can either be a love song or a call to arms. When I perform, I say it’s about my faith in the audience’s ability to change the world. But when my son heard me say that, he said to his mum, “Why

didn't Dad tell the audience this song is about you?" And my missus said, "Well, it is about me, Jack, but it's also about what Daddy's saying it's about." That, to me, is the best kind of song.

Ostrander: Is that song also about your own struggle with cynicism? Particularly these lyrics: "I know it takes a mess of courage to go against the grain ... let me rekindle all your hopes."

Bragg: Yeah, of course. We're all prone to cynicism. But it's not Glenn Beck's cynicism that stops the world from changing. It's our own cynicism—those of us who believe in a better world. Cynicism is our great enemy. It's Glenn Beck's bread-and-f**king-butter. That's the heartbreak. If we, coming together, can't overcome our cynicism, then there really is no hope. We just might as well pack up and go home. And I can't absolve myself from that. Hell, I helped get Tony Blair elected! But I'm fortunate: I get to stand with a thousand people every couple of weeks, and when I talk about my anger or my politics, everyone cheers. And I come away thinking, "Yeah! I'm not the only one who feels this."