

# Passion reigns as the key factor on Bragg's album

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How often does an album come along that not only entertains us with its pointed looks at love and human relationships, but also challenges our individual political beliefs, or lack thereof? That's right, music lovers, ALMOST NEVER. Well, thank goodness for Billy Bragg, whose new LP *Workers' Playtime* accomplishes both these feats and does so with originality and passion, two increasingly rare commodities in today's rock market. Bragg is a master of mixing love songs with political songs, and on this record, his observational skills have never made for a better musical stew. It would be exhausting to critique every worthy aspect of this rich LP, and to pick at its few flaws, so I'll stick to what I consider to be the highlights.

"Must I Paint You a Picture" comes close to 1985's "St. Swithin's Day" for sheer pulling-at-the-heartstrings beauty. Billy has never sounded so humbly regretful than on this track. What's so poignant about this, like all of Bragg's best love songs, is that the benefit of hindsight makes everything seem painfully clear to the rejected singer. This number also features one of the prettiest arrangements on any Bragg album, with some lovely backing vocals by pianist Cara Tivey.

"Tender Comrade," like the subject it addresses, is a brave effort. An a capella track sung with perfect clarity and honest compassion, it discusses the unique love bond that forms between soldiers together at war. Few modern male singers could sing the following lines and make them sound so sincere and unashamed: "Brothers in arms in each other's arms/Was the only time I was not afraid/ What will you say of the bond we had, tender comrade." I could've heard a pin drop when I saw him do this song in a good-sized hall last May; the recorded version is equally affecting.

Side two opens with another brilliant lost-love ballad, (yeah, he does always seem to lose in love), "Valentine's Day is Over." This song is unique in that Bragg sings it from the woman's perspective, a clever and effective approach. "If you take me for granted then you must expect to find/Surprise — Valentine's Day is over."

The next tune, a romping country stomp with full band arrangement, is worth it simply for the opening line. "I hate the arsehole I become/Everytime I'm with you." Billy doesn't mince words when it comes to self-criticism.

The record ends with Bragg's most direct, aware battle cry to date. Titled "Waiting For the Great Leap Forwards," this number, in a nutshell, sums up his socialist ideology and the manner in which it conflicts with the very business of which he's a part. His lyrics here

approach Elvis Costello godhead status, with such classic lines as these: "It may have been Camelot for Jack and Jacqueline/ But on the Che Guevara highway filling up with gasoline/Fidel Castro's brother spies a rich lady who's crying/Over luxury's disappointment/ So he walks over and he's trying/To sympathize with her

but he thinks that he should warn her/That the Third World is just around the corner." How can a reviewer resist quoting passages like this? This song isn't just important for what it says but rather for how it says it. Bragg manages to challenge his listeners to "be active with the activists" while at the same time question-

ing his own ability to preach from the rock 'n' roll pulpit. Within this single song, Bragg confronts his own limitations and attempts to rise above them, his passion unflagging and his vision intact.

I could wax rhapsodic for pages about this crucial slab of vinyl, but a far better way for you to find out about it is to buy it. Read the

lyric sheet, listen to the expressiveness of voice and music, begin to have a religious experience.

But be forewarned — it says right on the front cover: Capitalism is Killing Music. Do you begin to see the inherent conflict at hand? Gosh, Billy, next time you could just give them away. Surprise, surprise.

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