

# Progressive rocker Bragg raises important issues

By Gary Brinn

Picture a little cafe in Managua. I'm there with friends downing the local brew and dancing to the club band between sets by the evening's special guest, Carlos Mejia Godoy. Now, Mejia Godoy is way cool (I mean, cross Che Guevara with Sting and you're getting close.) A Sandanista, his job in the revolution was writing songs. And one of his best is a little tune called "Nicaragua Nicaragua."

A few months later, home in the good ol' USA, I see an ad for an album by a Brit that includes Mejia Godoy's song. Moved by the spirit of Sandino, I buy *The Internationale* by Billy Bragg. A fan is born.

Billy Bragg is the thinking person's progressive rocker. With his 1991 release, *Don't Try This At Home*, Bragg has found a balance between the personal and the political, providing us with tunes that should become alternative classics.

You haven't heard of Billy Bragg? That's no surprise. His liberal/socialist message, combined with lyrics that point out the horrors of war, have not been hip during the 80's. But now that America is shaking off the Reagan-Bush years like a bad night of drinking, Bragg may find an audience.

Now, I hate to sound like an apologist for Bragg—but you might wonder if a singer so firmly grounded in folk is really progressive. Bragg cites the Clash as an inspiration, did a US tour as the opening act for Echo and the Bunny Men and has help from Johnny Marr, Michael Stripe and Peter Buck on the new disc. You remember Johnny Marr don't you? He used to be with a little fringe group called the Smiths. And Buck's mandolin on R.E.M.'s latest seems to have inspired a resurgence in the use of that instrument. Besides—the folk/progressive crossover thing has been done before.

The new disc's first single was a collaboration between Bragg and Marr. "Sexuality" is an accessible and danceable tune that celebrates sexuality in all its forms. But this celebration of sexuality does not call for irresponsible hedonism. "Safe sex doesn't mean no sex, it just means use your imagination," sings Bragg. Sex comes up again in "Trust," a tune about the "A" word. Dave Woodhead's flugelhorn adds a brassy melancholy to this show and dirge-like tune. The songs come from the viewpoint of someone who's had unsafe sex and now fears they may have contracted AIDS. "He's already been inside me/And he really didn't say/And I really didn't ask/I just hoped and prayed." This is really a song about trust misplaced—should I say trust mis-used—to the point of idiocy.

## ∞ PROGRESSIVE BEAT ∞

Bragg has done a number of songs addressing the issue of war. This disc contains no exception. "Everywhere" features Peter Buck on the mandolin, and is about the US's involvement in WWII. This song includes references to the internment of Japanese and Japanese-American citizens in the US—but make no mistake—this song is not anti-US. It states the realities of war much as Whitman did in his poetry. "Over here, over there/It's the same everywhere/A boy cries out for his mama before he dies for his home."

Bragg's greatest strength is the emotional impact of his songs. What "Trust" does for the issue of AIDS, "Tank Park Salute" does for war. Don't, I repeat Don't, listen to this tune while drowning your sorrows in a few too many brewskis. It is a crushing song about a boy whose father goes away to war and is killed: "Some photographs of a summer's day/A little boy's lifetime away/Is all I've left of everything we've done." Cara Tivey's piano punctuates the lilting vocals, and Bragg yanks the tears right out of your eyes.

"Dolphins," "North Sea Bubble" and "Rumours of War" all add to this theme. "North Sea Bubble" is up-beat and bouncy, while "Rumours of War" returns to WWII and the days before Britain entered it. This song is an excellent example of Bragg's fine use of strings in his compositions.

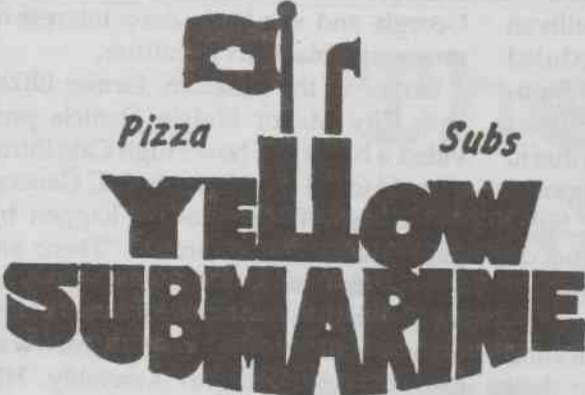
David Lynch fans will like "Cindy of a Thousand Lives" with its references to *Blue Velvet*, *The Stepford Wives* and the unseen America, full of grotesqueries. Johnny Marr and Kristy MacColl show up on this track. "You Woke Up My Neighborhood," with Buck and Stripe, is a cool tune, as is "Mother of the Bride." The latter opens with a rousing electric guitar, but soon finds wafting strains of the violin. This tune is way too hip. "Wish You Were Her" is a little pop ditty that bears shades of *Squeeze*.


Bragg takes up his nation's pastime, soccer, in two numbers. He strongly indicts the conduct of British football fans in "The Few" and alludes to their connections with nationalists and neo-nazis, calling these fans "the wasted seed of the bulldog breed."

Rounding out the disc are the opening track, "Accident Waiting To Happen," which rocks; a haunting mellow tune called "Moving The Goalposts," and the closing track, the up-beat "Body of Water." Bragg has produced an even work that dances on a sinking ship. The songsmith has been around for nine years. Isn't it about time you checked him out?



Billy Bragg, "the thinking person's progressive rocker," strikes a balance between the personal and political with his new album *Don't Try This At Home*. Bragg delivers his songs with intense emotional impact.





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