A Monologue With Billy Bragg

Must I Paint You A Picture?

Talent Borrows, Genius Steals

Like most kids I wrote poems at school but, unlike my classmates, I didn’t stop. When I was 12 or 13, I was asked to read out a poem I’d written on local radio. That recognition gave me a lot of confidence and I think I realised that I must have some sort of aptitude for this. I had failed all my O-Levels, apart from English Language - the 'Poets O-Level' - in which I got Grade A!

At the time, songs were the art form that emotionally moved me. I enjoy all sorts of music, but the music that appeals to me most is the music that offers a different perspective on life - whether that is a relationship or a socio-political situation. So I found myself in my early teens listening earnestly to a strange mixture of singer-songwriters, particularly Simon & Garfunkel, and black American pop music like Motown and Stax.

It was an interesting mixture, the folk narrative of singer-songwriters and the socially conscious attitude of the black music of the Civil Rights movement. They taught me that songwriting was the best means of expressing myself. So as a songwriter, I specifically began to write songs that were aimed to challenge people’s view of the world.

I didn’t come from a political background. My parents weren’t political at all; there was no politics in my life when I was growing up. Perhaps politics chose me. I sometimes wonder where it came from. The only thing I can think of is that my father brought the Daily Mirror home every day, which I read voraciously cover to cover in the late ‘60s when it was still quite a campaigning newspaper. That was what prepared me for Bob Dylan.

It was early Dylan that I was drawn to, particularly the album ‘The Times They Are A-
Changing’. This had come out 8 or 9 years before I got hold of a copy, so I was hearing it a little out of context, but the starkness of it and the immediacy of the lyrics spoke to me.

I was the only person I knew who’d heard Bob Dylan, and consequently I identified with him in a very personal way, and I took it upon myself to play him to other people and occasionally I’d find other people who were into him. That music that you discover yourself means so much more to you than something that’s rammed down your throat every day from tv adverts.

A school friend swapped me his father’s copy of ‘The Times They Are A-Changing’ (which was a massive piece of vinyl about an inch thick!) for my copy of The Jackson Five’s Greatest Hits. I hope his Dad didn’t mind. This exchange sums up what happened to me as a songwriter as eventually I found myself drawn more towards the political side of things, rather than the ‘ABC, 123’ route.

I could see how Dylan wrote his songs as a craftsman; I could see the form. It was an easily understandable form. I could never work out how to write a Jackson Five song like ‘I Want You Back’, that was such a complex song. Conversely, I could work out how to write something like The Miracles ‘The Tracks of My Tears’ because it was a very simple song. Holland Dozier and Holland and those other songwriters were coming out of jazz and, although they sounded simple songs, they were using very complicated techniques inside the song. It was more difficult for me as a songwriter to identify with that; whereas the straightforward form of what the singer-songwriter does, which is much more firmly rooted in folk music, was a lot more accessible to me – especially if you want to write your own songs.

I had been learning to write songs by analysing how my favourite songs were constructed and then trying to write songs like that. I was writing songs for about 5 years before I learnt to play the guitar. I was just keeping them in my head. From the age of about 12 to 16, I was filling up exercise books with songs. Then the kid next door taught me how to play the guitar. We learnt how to play the ‘Rod Stewart Songbook’ just when I left school in 1974.
Learning guitar allowed me to be able to sing my songs and bring the musical accompaniment into it too. Equally this allowed me to write more songs like Jackson Browne or Smokey Robinson, and then eventually on to people I really admired like Elvis Costello.

I finally came up with a song that wasn’t easily identifiable as a ‘Rolling Stones sound-a-like’ or ‘this sounds like a Rod Stewart or Elvis Costello’ type song again. It came together just about the time of punk, with what I would say was a ‘Billy Bragg’ song, in that they had taken all those influences and put something new into the equation, so that they weren’t 100 per cent original songs but there was enough originality in there to stand out from the other songs that I had been writing.

The idea in developing your own style is that you manifest your influences by re-synthesizing them into something that is new and touches people who perhaps haven’t heard those phrases before. As Morrissey later told me, “Talent borrows, genius steals.”

**Walk It Like You Talk It**

As a songwriter I’ve written more about relationships than I’ve written about politics. However, because so many people do write about relationships, the fact that I’ve written about politics and I continue to write about politics (which is not particularly fashionable) means that people do think of me as a political songwriter.

I don’t mind being thought of as a political songwriter but I do object to being dismissed as a political songwriter. Anyone who’s been to a Billy Bragg gig or bought one of my albums will know that it isn’t just a load of polemical hectoring. There’s a lot of humour and humanity as well in what I do. That is because I’m trying to reflect the world as I see it. Sometimes that is the world in my bedroom, sometimes that is the world in my life, and sometimes it is the world out there.
It’s like TV. When you switch the TV on, during an entire evening’s TV, there’ll be soaps, there’ll be documentaries, there’ll be the news, there’ll be a footy programme. Songwriting should be like that, you should not just write one particular song. I believe you should try to engage with people by using different forms of music and coming out with different ideas.

I like to think that the reason I write a song is because I’ve got something different to say which I don’t see reflected in the mainstream discussion or media, and that I have an interesting way of saying it. Now that interesting way of saying it may be:

‘How can you lie there and think of England
when you don’t even know who’s in the team?’

In this I’m trying to say something about relationships, on where the people in those two relationships connect. In the song ‘Take Down the Union Jack’ I’m talking about identity - what it means to be an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ in ‘england.co.uk’. To ask a question like that in a song, or ‘How can you lie there and think of England when you don’t even know who’s in the team?’ is to bring those kind of questions to bear in a more engaging way than perhaps writing an intellectual straightforward speech.

And why am I writing about those things? Because they are situations I have found myself in. I have found myself in that strange situation somewhere between sex and football, and I’ve found myself wondering, with all these England flags around without ideology any more, if I should be writing about Englishness. When I first started writing about Englishness it wasn’t very popular among my audience because people on the Left generally don’t want to talk about those issues. From my position where I am, I am trying to point to where I think the fire is. I am saying ‘look there’s something happening here about the English and British identity whether we like it or not.’

I could easily write songs about how horrible Margaret Thatcher was, I could keep writing those kind of songs but time has moved on and now this issue of contested identity is back
on the agenda and I find myself compelled write about that.

But can such songs make a difference? I wouldn’t do it if I felt they couldn’t make a difference. But it’s not a difference in the sense that they can change the world. That’s not the job of a singer-songwriter. That’s a much more complex situation to try and work in. But I know from my own personal experience that your perspective of the world can be changed by listening to music.

The first political thing I ever did was to go on a ‘Rock Against Racism’ concert to see the Clash in 1978 at Victoria Park in Hackney. I went on the march, and when we got to the park there were loads of bands, one of them was the Tom Robinson Band. Tom had a song called ‘Sing if you’re glad to be gay’ and when he sang, all these guys around us started snogging each other.

I was only 19 or 20, from Barking, a working class suburb of London and I’d never seen an ‘out’ gay man before... and my initial feeling was ‘why are they doing this at a anti-racist gig, this is about black people, not about gays?’ It didn’t take long for the penny to drop and to realise that the fascists were afraid of anybody who was in any way different. It wasn’t just about black people. It was about anybody who challenged their narrow worldview; and I promised myself to be as different as I could and always challenge them. So I came away from that gig with my world view changed, with a whole new perspective on politics opened up to me which I had got from reading the newspaper, watching the TV and going to school. So I know that from personal experience it is possible to bring about change.

I cannot promise such a ‘change’ for every gig, but I do know that it is possible in certain circumstances, particularly for young people in their early-teens to late-twenties who have got that enthusiasm for wanting to make the world a better place. They are choosing popular culture as a way of expressing their identity. By connecting with them early on, in the way that I connected with The Clash, it is possible to set someone out on a road that leads to certain world-changing conclusions. I’m currently involved in trying to reform the
House of Lords. If the House of Lords does eventually get reformed in the way that I would like, it will be partly due to the fact that I was a Clash fan in 1977. I know it sounds strange but it is true. I mean I’m not saying that if it wasn’t for The Clash there wouldn’t be a reform of the House of Lords but I’m just saying that if you want to trace back where I’m coming from, then it does trace back to there. That is as worthwhile as writing ‘The Tracks of My Tears’. I’m not saying it’s better or more important but I believe it is worthwhile.

I believe that if you are going to write political songs, the criteria for writing these kind of songs is that you have to come up with the actions to match the songs that you are singing about. For instance, as part of the album The Internationale, I went to Nicaragua and subsequently I recorded ‘Nicaraguita’. The gigs I did for the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign were part of my effort to match my actions with the lyrics that I was writing about, because if you are going to write these songs you can’t just write them in isolation, otherwise you are just exploiting these people’s misery. You’ve got to walk it like you talk it.

The songwriters I respect try very hard to do this - people like Phil Oaks, and bands like the Redskins - but it very difficult in popular music because you’ve always got not just the marketing aspect to it, but fashion. You’re always swimming against the tide of fashion. This was just as true in the 1980s at the height of all the activity that we took part in, and that all seems incredibly political compared with where we are now. All the older journalists were sitting around (in the 1980s) saying “Well this is nothing like 1968”, and that’s fair enough as it wasn’t as intense as that, but equally a very important aspect of political songwriting is that you can’t write political songs in a vacuum. There has to be an argument going on in society so you can reflect it - the Civil Rights movement in the USA didn’t happen because Bob Dylan wrote ‘The Times They Are A-Changing’. It was the other way round. Dylan was reflecting what he saw on the streets.

Now, when people say to me today that bands aren’t political anymore, I say ‘How could they be?’ It’s much more difficult now to see the ideological nuances that were so clear in the 1980s when there were two political parties that were diametrically opposed to each other. We don’t presently have such a situation.
Four And Twenty Ways

When I was a kid, my father had been in India during the war and he used to read me Rudyard Kipling poems, many of which were about being in the Indian army. There is one of them which contains this line “There are four and twenty ways of constructing tribal lays/ and every single one of them is right” and that notion stayed with me.

There is no one right way to create a song.

There are hundreds of ways to put a song together.

People ask me all the time “Do you write the music first? Or do you write the words first?” but it just doesn’t work like that. Sometimes it all goes “bang!” on a piece of paper and you’ve got it; another time you’re carrying around a tune or a lick in your head for a couple of years before you find a lyric that does justice to the lick; another time you’ve got two lines of a lyric that are really good and the rest of the song you wrote at that time doesn’t really fit.

With respect to lyrics, it is very true that words matter - so much so that when I was working on the Woody Guthrie project, working with Woody Guthrie’s lyrics and I was only having to come up with the tunes, I found it quite simple. I suddenly realised that for me, writing the music is all about ‘feel’, there is nothing technical there at all. I feel it, I pick up the guitar and I can do it whilst watching the footy. I have written tunes that I’ve used, semi-consciously playing chords whilst concentrating on football on TV and I’ve come up with lovely little runs on the guitar. I’m very fortunate like that. I don’t read music but I can play by ear. I can just pick up, recognise and follow tunes, which is a great skill to have. But the lyrics I sweat blood over.

I have 3 or 4 tunes at the moment for which I have the choruses and I know what the lyrics should be about and I know which way they should go but I cannot settle on them, and I’m
supposed to be playing them at the weekend for the 20th anniversary of the miners’ strike and I’m thinking “Oh shit... I’ve got to finish this”!

That writing situation is much more difficult, because when you’re writing a political song you really have to get the sense right. When you are writing a love song I think you are a little more poetic licence. I’ve never wanted to write those incredibly earnest love songs. I’ve always wanted to reflect the failures, the human failings in a relationship, the things that we never quite live up to.

I have a song called ‘Life of the Lions’ that begins:

‘I hate the arsehole I become every time I’m with you’

What you want the listener to do is think “oh yeah, I recognise that, I know that feeling although I’ve never articulated that to anybody” and the best way to do that is to articulate a feeling that touches a lot of people. Not by finding the lowest common denominator but to really hold a mirror up to yourself and be as honest as you can about yourself and your failing, and if you can express those failings in self-deprecating terms, then that makes the listener more conducive to accepting what you’ve got to say. That self-deprecating sensibility is also touched on in “Milkman of Human Kindness”.

Even some of my political songs are ironic, like ‘Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards’ - particularly the way I sing it now. The problem with a topical song is that sometimes you have to change the lyrics. In some ways ‘Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards’ was me trying to come to terms with writing political pop songs, mixing pop and politics. There were huge struggles going on in Britain and the world in the 1980s and I was writing songs to try and reflect that. So when I set out to do that I made sure that people realised that it’s a much more difficult thing to change the world. It’s the audience’s responsibility to change the world, not the music’s.