

The last time Billy Bragg visited East Germany in February 1989 he was banned from the country. "I was told I would never be able to come back again," he remembers.

What did he do that was so terrible? "I said on TV in the context of a concert that Perestroika was wonderful, but it would only work if the Berlin Wall came down. So you can understand how pleased I was when it did come down."

Well now Bragg can add to his resume "prophet" along with British rock troubador. He was visiting the Iron Curtain before Glasnost made it vogue.

On a two-day promotional tour to push his latest and fifth American release, *The Internationale* (Elektra), the political rocker is pleased to be making records for a company that doesn't try to put a muzzle on his non-conformist, left-wing ideas or non-commercial music.

In fact, he was surprised that Elektra was interested in releasing the seven-song *Internationale*, which he planned to put out in England only on his own Utility label. "I told them it's a special project that really isn't the next 'Billy Bragg' album, and don't feel obliged. It's a very English, Eurocentric album. A week later they called and said 'we really like this and we want to put it out.'"

Bragg says he is proud to contribute to the label that spawned the careers of the late Phil Ochs (a kindred political/musical spirit), the Doors and the Stooges in the 1960s and now features a roster of non-conformists like Tracy Chapman, They Might Be Giants, Jackson Browne and The Sugarbushes.

"They're still supporting difficult artists who raise difficult questions. Elektra is a haven for artists who want to do something different. I haven't sold loads and loads of records. The company told me, 'keep on doing what you're doing, and don't worry about selling records,'" says the folkie socialist with an electric guitar.

Part of what he does is speak out about the evils of Reaganism/Thatcherism and militarism. Bragg credits Margaret Thatcher with politicizing him, specifically her attitude towards the British miners' strike in 1984. "Before that, I was in a broad sense, a humanitarian. The miners' strike gave me an ideological analysis," says Bragg, who learned about politics from "arguing with people."

His three-month British Army stint in 1981 also helped politicize him. "I joined the army when I was 23 because I had no job, no prospects and I wanted to get away from my parents' house. I didn't join the army to kill people."

During those three months, Bob Marley died, spurring his realization that he had to get out of the Army, which was possible since in Britain, unlike the U.S., the enlisted men can leave whenever they want. The experience also in-

BILLY BRAGG



LEFTIST IDEOLOGUE NOT WORRYING ABOUT SELLING RECORDS

by Larry Jaffee

spired him to write the songs that launched his recording career.

"I felt so isolated, and realized that these people had absolutely no appreciation of the contribution that the Afro-Caribbean community has made to our popular culture." The other soldiers' reaction to Marley's death was, "Who cares about this nigger music?" A corporal who Bragg thought he liked turned out to be a member of an extremist fascist group.

"It was like being surrounded by these guys you're having a laugh with, getting on with, and suddenly you find out they're racists."

Bragg's popularity grew in Britain during the mid-to-late 1980s, and he became more visible in the media. On the eve after the 1987 general election, in which Thatcher won a second term, he was invited to appear on a three-hour TV talk show.

"A conservative MP looked me in the eye and said, 'You and your kind are finished. We're the future and you better get used to it.'" The woman's arrogance further entrenched his already-Marxist foundation.

Bragg says he was disappointed that the Sandinista regime lost the Nicaraguan election last February, but it ended the war, and that is the most important thing.

During the June week that Bragg visited New York, Midnight Oil, the politically motivated Australian band, was taking the city by storm, including a live impromptu performance on Sixth Avenue in front of the Exxon building.

"Where was I? Right here (at Elektra's office in the Warner Communications building a block away) doing interviews," says Bragg, who would have much rather been on the street watching the gig. Bragg, despite his interest in politics, says he doesn't have any political ambitions like chief of Oil Peter Garrett, who almost won an election a few years ago.

"He's a lawyer. I was educated to work at the Ford Motor Company. But I would love to sit down with him for a long chat about what he thinks the definition is of humanitarian politics, what he thinks about left-wing politics, or ecological politics."

Bragg is a big music fan, with "a huge record collection." He's saddened by the death of vinyl records, which Elektra no longer manufactures, and points out that he's put out EPs, (a lost artform) for economical considerations. "They're affordable, especially in the time of the CD." But the self-proclaimed "vinyl junkie" admits that CD's sound much better than records. "What can you say about it really?"

The Faces were and still are his favorite band. "And the people at Warners still won't release the Faces stuff!" he screams out the door, in hopes of catching the ear of the right executive. ♦