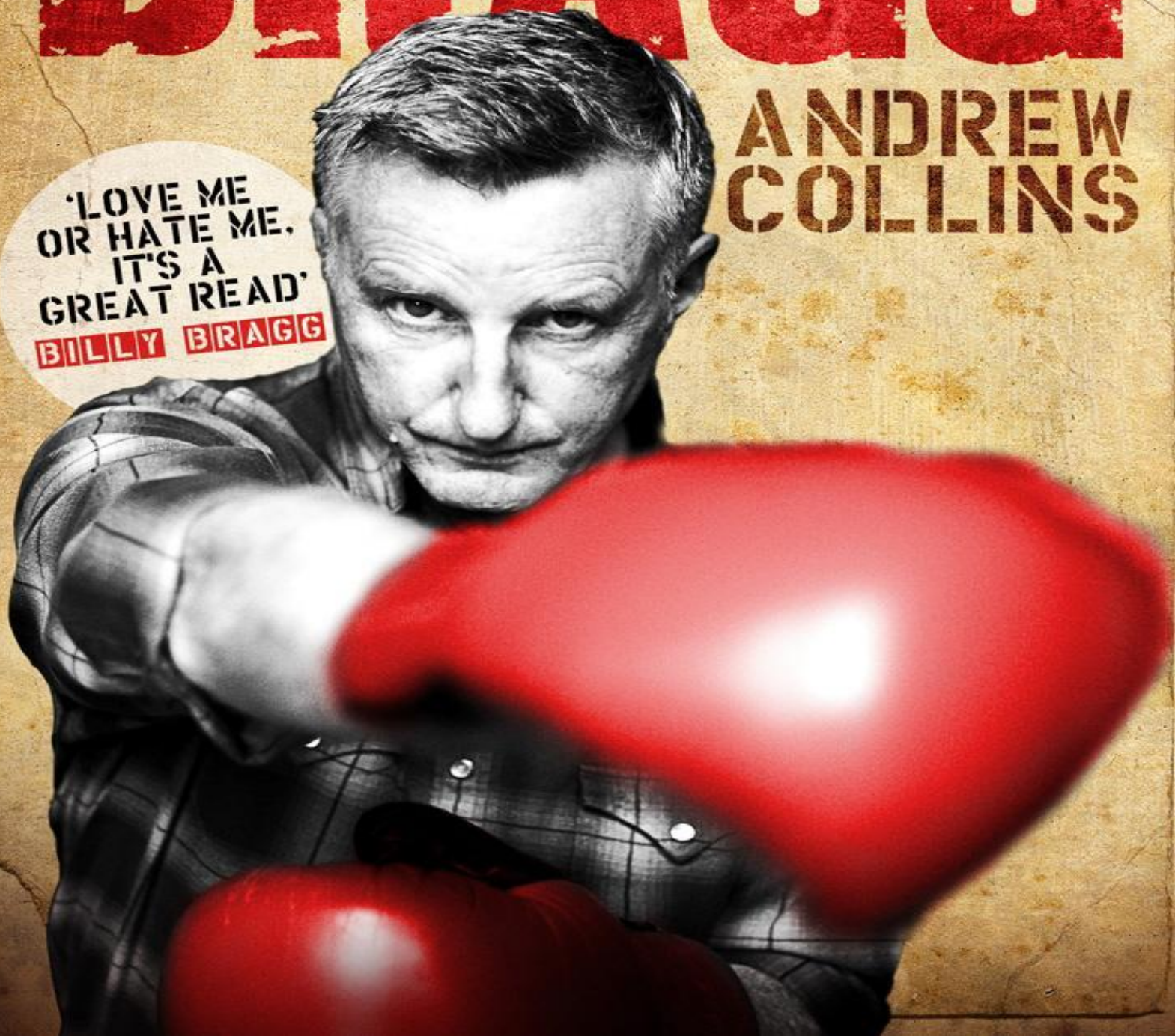


STILL SUITABLE FOR MINERS

BILLY BRAGG

ANDREW COLLINS

'LOVE ME
OR HATE ME,
IT'S A
GREAT READ'
BILLY BRAGG



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Bringing it all back home

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About the Book

He was a punk. He was a soldier. He was a flag-waver for both the Labour Party and the miners. He is Billy Bragg, best known as a passionate protest folk singer and a tireless promoter of political and humanitarian causes all across the world.

His life encapsulates so much about his generation: born in the late '50s, passions forged by punk, politics shaped by Thatcherism, hope provided by what he sees as a post-ideological twenty-first century. Serious about compassion and accountability, he likes a laugh too, and is enduringly popular.

Billy Bragg remains to this day a much-loved songwriter and performer whose campaigning has now spanned four decades and shows no sign of relenting. *Still Suitable For Miners* is his official story, updated for the 30th anniversary of his debut album, *Life's a Riot with Spy Vs Spy*, and including the recording of his tenth album as a solo artist, *Tooth and Nail*.

About the Author

Andrew Collins is a writer and broadcaster. Having worked for *NME*, *Empire* and *Q*, he regularly broadcasts on Radio 2, Radio 4 and 6 Music. He is Film Editor of *Radio Times* co-writer of BBC sitcoms *Grass* and *Not Going Out*, and author of *Where Did It All Go Right?* and *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now*.

STILL SUITABLE FOR MINERS

BILLY BRAGG

**ANDREW
COLLINS**



This book is dedicated to two people: Julie Quirke, for showing me heaven, and Reg Ward, my grandfather, for political inspiration.

FOREWORD

THE FIRST TIME that I ever got to sit alone with Paul Weller was at the Solid Bond Studios sometime in 1984. While we discussed life, the universe and everything, his hands were busily occupied with cutting articles about himself out of newspapers and magazines and filing them away for his scrapbook. It impressed me greatly that, although arguably one of Britain's premier pop stars, he still did his own chores. I also felt a sense of relief that someone whom I admired so much might feel the same way that I did about preserving material, to the extent that he felt it was not a job he could safely entrust to someone else.

When I began to get notices in the papers, I would buy two or three copies, not so much from self-obsession, more to check that they were actually saying something about me in *every* copy. That sense of disbelief wore off after a couple of years, but I still kept my cuttings and tour passes and itineraries. It would have been better to keep a diary you might think, but with a diary you need time for reflection and then even more time to get your thoughts down clearly. And I just didn't have that time, nor those clear thoughts. I was tearing round the world, returning to my flat in West London only to check my mail and empty my bags. The place filled up with what I can only characterise as *stuff*, junk that I hung on to for the sake of posterity. And one day posterity knocked on my door in the shape of Andrew Collins.

I had been approached by a few would-be biographers in the past but they were mostly earnest young men who I feared would portray me as some working-class hero whose life had been one long hard struggle. These were the same kind of people who described my friends as being 'a bit lumpen'. Andrew at least knew enough about me to realise that the personal was at least as important as the political, and that my life was a mess of contradictions rather than a shining path of political correctness. A feature he wrote in *Q* magazine convinced me he was the right person for the job. He had astutely taken a number of minor events in my career and threaded them together as a series of epiphanies. It was informative and insightful but, better than that, it was entertaining.

With an impeccable sense of timing, he began this project just as I started the long process of emptying my flat and fifteen years' worth of *stuff* started raining down on him (the rest was at my mum's. He helped me load it in to the back of my car). A nice young couple are now ensconced in my old place and a considerable amount of junk has been divided up between my attic, the local charity shops, the town dump and a lock-up in Acton Vale. But not before Andrew had had a chance to pore over it, just for the sake of posterity.

This leaves me with a lot of empty shelf space to stare at, but, as I write, Pete Jenner is concocting another tour itinerary for me, with, hopefully, that precious day off after Plymouth, and I feel that it can only be a matter of time before my living space attains once more the fabulous clutter to which I am accustomed.

Thanks to all my dear friends who took the time to contribute their thoughts and memories to this book and to Andrew Collins for matching my sense of history with his sense of humour.

Billy Bragg, 1998

PREFACE: HOW DID I GET HERE?

This bloke, 1957-2013

AS A CAT who was wiser than he looked once sang, you won't fool the children of the revolution. Tragically, the sloppy workmanship of a garage in Sheen killed the cat in 1977. As a result, he never lived to see how the children of Britain's newest revolution would turn out.

They turned out just fine.

Punk rock was, for those who lived through it and came out permanently scathed, far more than a musical movement or a collection of diminishing guitar bands. For certain art-schooled *agents provocateurs* in London it was a situationist joke, but a good one, and a long one. For kids in the provinces and faraway towns, it was a clarion call. For a group of journalists in the right place at the right time, it was day one of a job-for-life. For the huddled wannabe masses still in the dark after 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond', it was all the excuse they needed to stop miming with a racket and start making one.

For Stephen William Bragg, exiled in Essex, punk was the flame that lit his fireworks; it was all the excuse he needed to change his name to Billy Bonkers and take in those 'Lionels'. (Lionel Blairs: flares. An example of hand-me-down Cockney rhyming slang forged in those far-off days when the grinning Palladium hooper was the first Blair who came to mind. Funny.) On 9 May 1977, the nineteen-

year-old Billy and his gang, from the relative safety of the Finsbury Park Rainbow balcony, witnessed the sleeveless fury and airborne masonry of the White Riot tour. Realising that The Clash were just a tighter, younger, sexier Rolling Stones - using the same amps, throwing the same shapes - Billy never looked back.

The cleansing fires of punk. This poetic notion arises again and again when you talk to or read about Billy Bragg, almost as frequently as reference to Lionels. Now in his forties, just like Strummer and Weller and Rotten, Billy is a textbook child of the revolution, born just three years after rationing was finally phased out in Britain, a year after that business in Suez, and halfway through a thirteen-year Tory administration that would eventually end not with a landslide but a polite cough. Anything could happen, but not much did.

They'd never had it so good, in the immortal words of Harold Macmillan (Prime Minister as superhero, thanks to *Evening Standard* cartoonist Vicky). Sure, out there in the Arts, down at the newly concreted South Bank, the Young Men were a trifle Angry - but in the real world of the latter 1950s and early 1960s, Britain felt fine: three television channels, full employment, *Hancock's Half Hour* and a staggering range of soap powders that washed whiter than white.

The decade rapidly deemed 'swinging' was one of insular national pride, of Merseybeat, Twiggy and Bobby Moore. A knockback by de Gaulle when Britain first tried to join the Common Market in 1961 served only to heighten its island mentality. In 1964 Labour scraped in, under Harold Wilson, but little changed on the landscape.

This was Britain Rebuilt, where working-class people owned cars and Kenwood mixers and went on package holidays to the continent, where homegrown rock'n'roll shook and rattled America, and where tower blocks were the very height of modern architecture. But no one really

knew that Russians loved their children too. And it was to shape an entire generation born between the wars (Two and Vietnam); ten years too late for the idealism of the Baby Boom and just old enough to know that you must never trust a hippie. Here were the young men and women who would soon learn that they couldn't change the world, but would create a New England in the process.

Generation Bragg reached voting age in the mid-70s - not that the political parties took much notice. In 1974, Edward Heath's skin-of-its-teeth Tory government was undone by the miners, who refused to call off their industrial action during the brief run-up to a rushed February election. 'Who governs?' it asked the electorate. 'Not you,' the electorate replied. Labour seized only four more seats than the Conservatives (301 to 297), but the government stood down anyway, and Harold Wilson bumped it up to a narrow majority of 319 to 276 in the October rerun. Politically, the country was in the grip of don't-know.

Labour survived until 1979 only by backscratching the Liberals and the nationalist parties, but it couldn't go on, and, after nearly twenty years of self-defeating tug-of-war between left and right, budging an inch this way, then an inch that way, the first election in which Billy Bragg was actually eligible to vote, 1979, was to be a pre-packaged humdinger.

He didn't vote.

Why? Partly because the parties had yet to realise the power of mobilising the evasive youth vote, and partly because he fancied himself as an anarchist. So did a lot of young folks, anarchy being a pretty stubborn punk hangover (a capital A with a circle round it looked as good on the back of a jacket as it had done on pencil cases). While punk was undoubtedly empowering, energising and truculent, its ethos was one of no-future nihilism. Those untrustworthy hippies had done a lot of proactive sitting

down, and they started up some cool magazines. The punks, unimpressed, took over the magazines, and jumped up and down, but at no point in the countercultural handover did *party* politics really enter the equation.

Punks were, for the best part, passionate enough souls watching with distrust as the 70s turned into the 80s: many disagreed with the British presence in Northern Ireland; most fancied that the police were fascists-in-waiting, and the smartest ones recognised that homosexuality wasn't a communicable disease. Although punk had been a rock'n'roll phenomenon and peculiarly white, it was shot through with black influence, especially reggae, the embrace of which by Britain's musical youth reflected an unforced, widespread new belief in racial integration. The cool kids knew that Eric Clapton was a twat for agreeing with Enoch Powell. In short, this was not a generation of political regressives or inactivists, merely one disillusioned by and excluded from democratic two-party tennis.

However, they were about to enter the most political period of their lives: the Thatcher years. For the duration of the 1980s, the Tories turned every man into an island: they divided; they ruled. In their utopian free market, their nation of shopkeepers, the manager - rather than the customer - was always right. She was only a greengrocer's daughter, but Margaret Thatcher knew when she had the country's plums in the palm of her hand. This Iron Lady, this Tinpot Dictator, defied anyone to disagree with her, and who dared lost. The miners, the Argies, the print workers, the dissident Tory wets, the GLC, the old, the sick and the Scottish. 'Margaret Thatcher made me a socialist,' Billy will now firmly state. 'She was going to start changing all the things I'd grown up with and taken for granted.'

Thatcher was not all bad. Her seemingly unassailable reign gave us alternative comedy - which was, admittedly, not all good - but it also gave us *Spitting Image*, *Boys From The Black Stuff*, 'Shipbuilding' and Billy Bragg. In creating

a climate of self-help and shove-thy-neighbour, she nurtured oppression's illegitimate son: defiance. Her benign form of dictatorship even allowed for a 'safety valve' of anti-establishment satire, comment and heckling. So, being left wing may not have been supercool in the 1980s, but there were some great gigs.

The Falklands, the miners, Cruise, Tripoli, Wapping, poll tax ... the Thatcher government gave budding insurrectionists so much to get insurrectionary about; such a wide range of pricks to kick against and statues to upend. And Billy Bragg, who would turn 30 in the year of Thatcher's historic third election victory in 1987 ('A fantastic triumph,' she gloated), became arguably the most famous lefty in Britain - after perhaps Ben Elton and one or two of the shadow cabinet.

By the time of the Tories' fall from disgrace in May 1997, celebrity Labour supporters were ten a penny, although very few of them were as active, questioning or informed as Billy Bragg. By then, he was, significantly, a lapsed party member, but still a pragmatic Labour voter. On the night of 1 May, on the very stage of London's Mean Fiddler where he'd seen Red Wedge's hopes turn to ashes, it all began to swing the other way, and Billy announced 'the end of the 80s'. This triumphant declaration was, in an odd way, tinged with irony - as the 80s had been a great decade for being in opposition. And a great decade for being Billy Bragg.

* * *

But it's not about politics. It's about this bloke.

Ex-punk, ex-soldier, ex-member of the Labour Party; one or two people and institutions have been left behind in 40 years, but it's the names and places that stayed with Billy Bragg that maketh the man. He failed his eleven-plus and never went to college. Punk failed him and he joined the

army. He passed basic training with flying colours and left after 90 days with a two-fingered salute. In 1982, he chose his weapon - the guitar - travelled the world, met interesting people and knocked them dead.

It's about this bloke whose mum still calls him Stephen, but who's known and loved as Braggy or Bill or the big-nosed bard from Barking in every corner of the globe (except maybe France). He's typical of his fortysomething generation in that he entered the twenty-first century as a caring parent, a homeowner and a careful carnivore who voted New Labour in at the 1997 election. He's unique in that he's a recording artiste who owns every last note of his own thirty-year back catalogue, and has become the chosen torch-bearer for the legendary folk singer Woody Guthrie's memory on earth. While a true internationalist with a passport held together by inks of the world, he also represents that corner of some foreign field that will be forever England. He is a protester and a politico, but he doesn't half write a good love song.

Billy Bragg has been striking chords since 1974. Let's hope his story strikes one, too. Up in his old Chiswick office in 1997, the Braggphone rings and switches automatically to the ansaphone. Beep.

'Hi. It's Lis Roberts from Radio Four, and I'd very much like to talk to you about the possibility of Billy presenting a programme for us about the history of unemployment ...'

That sounds like something for the book, I'm thinking.

Billy laughs, but not unkindly. 'If it's not fucking bad enough being unemployed, here's Braggy to give you his thoughts.'

1. LONDON A TO B

A bit of history

*Onward we went, the sun appearing
Painted with faint light the meadows nigh
When Barking's fair Monastic archway
And grey old Church we can descry*

Louisa Fry, from a poem written about the joy of travelling
east out of London in the early 1800s

*If you ever have to go to Shoeburyness
Take the A road, the OK road that's the best
Go motorin' on the A13
If you're looking for a thrill that's new
Take in Ford's, Dartford Tunnel and the river too
Go motorin' on the A13*

Billy Bragg, from a song written about the joy of travelling
east out of London in the late 1900s

A BOOK ABOUT Billy Bragg is a book about London and about Essex and the world beyond. But not just the clichés, the picture postcards and the tourist traps - rather, the story behind the signposts, the history beneath the cartography.

'History, as we know it, is a flyover over reality,' Billy says. 'You can find out the history of World War Two down our street if you ask the right people.'

Billy Bragg is a keen historian. His career as an urbane folk singer and mobile political animal has taken him all around the world, where, in contrast to the rock'n'roll norm, he hasn't spent most of his time sitting in hotel

rooms and loitering around lobbies. A bit of that has been unavoidable, but, for him, a Billy Bragg tour is a free geography lesson, with a bit of local history, sociology and politics thrown in.

He didn't know much about history at school, but that's a reflection of how they taught it. He didn't go to university, but his job has been a continual source of higher education.

A natural raconteur, Billy also possesses that rare, teacher's gift: the ability to make anything interesting. Even history and its pale little brother, local history.

With this in mind, it would be remiss to start the Billy Bragg story without some background.

In the Mike Leigh film *Career Girls*, two young women view a luxury apartment high up in Canary Wharf, for a laugh. The more cynical of the two, Hannah (Katrin Cartlidge), looks out of the window and says, 'On a clear day I suppose you can see the class struggle from here.'

There's London in a nutshell. A great view of a great mess. Just as you can pick out the Great Wall of China from the moon, if you're stuck in a holding pattern over London on the way into Heathrow you can see the Northern Outfall Sewer, built in the 1860s, cutting through the North Circular around Beckton and delivering all of North London's shit into the Thames at Barking Creek. 'It looks like a ley line,' observes Billy Bragg, ever the poet.

Billy was born Stephen William Bragg on 20 December 1957 in Upney Hospital, Barking, at the time part of Essex, but swallowed up in 1965 by Greater London; although you try telling the locals they don't live in Essex (you can take the town out of the county, but you can't take the county out of the town).

His father, Dennis Bragg, was of proud Essex stock. In 1870, a huge gaslight and coke plant was opened at Beckton, west of Barking, which supplied almost all the electric light for East London; the plant even had its own

docks on the Thames. As an employer, the gasworks drew many into the area, including Dennis's grandfather Frederick Bragg, who came from the ancestral home between the rivers Stour and Colne, east of Colchester, in Essex.

Billy's mother, Marie D'Urso, came from the East End in London. Her grandfather was an Italian immigrant who'd run a fruit and veg shop on Cable Street from the turn of the century through two world wars. He never learnt to speak English, and even sold ice cream from a bicycle in front of the Tower of London. Billy once visited the Italian church in Clerkenwell, where his mum's grandfather and grandmother were married, and looked up the happy event in the register. 'This church was *so* Italian,' he remembers. 'The Monsignor had a picture of the Italian football team up in his office.'

The D'Ursos had fourteen kids, of whom Marie's father was the eldest. Billy, however, never knew him, as the couple were divorced in 1950; very unfashionable, especially for Roman Catholics. 'I can't think what my grandpa must've been doing to my grandma,' he ponders, holding her in the sort of high esteem he routinely reserves for the women in his life. 'A great woman, she held the family together through the war.'

It is the potent combination of East End Cockney and the Essex suburbs that shaped Billy Bragg.

The East End is far and away the most mythologised corner of the capital, thanks to such crafty Cockneys as the Kray twins in the 60s, Alf Garnett in the 70s and the residents of Albert Square in the 80s and 90s. True Cocknitude is traditionally reserved for those born within the sound of Bow Bells, which means, given the hundreds of second-generation Asians, among others, who may legitimately claim the Bow-earshot birthright, even the source of the area's anachronistic Pearly pride has been dragged into the multicultural present. The East End's

truly cosmopolitan populace is ever at odds with the old-fashioned fascism that lives on there. It doesn't take a genius to spot why institutional racists get themselves organised in multiracial areas, but when the British National Party secured a council seat in Tower Hamlets in 1993 the East End became once again identified as some kind of tatty, Neanderthal outpost. The spectre of Sir Oswald Mosley, whose blackshirts marched there in the 1930s, reared its ugly head.

Not just a hotbed of racial and political imparity, all socioeconomic life can also be seen in the East, certainly post-Thatcher. Parts of it are conspicuously run down, both Jack the Ripper ancient and 1950s 'modern', and yet the Thatcher years saw Rotherhithe, Wapping, Limehouse and the Isle Of Dogs transformed into a London Docklands Development utopia. A yuppie overspill that was handy for both your job in the City and cheap body shops for getting your Golf GTi fixed up after some local urchin had scratched it with a 50p piece. As they say in the area, 'Sweet as'.

Wapping itself became a totem of Thatcherite progress (or betrayal, depending on which side of the security fence you were on). Rupert Murdoch's News International relocated there without print-union agreement over manning levels, and riot police were sent in to 'ask' 5,000 pickets to move on. On a clear day you could hear the dismantling of the trade-union movement.

The East End has it all: pride, joy, hope, glory, violence, class war and some *divine* little markets. It is entirely feasible to live in London all your life and avoid the place - unless, that is, you want to get out to Essex or the nearest bit of seaside (Leigh-On-Sea, Southend, Shoeburyness). In which case, to quote that famous Cockney song, 'Take the A road, the OK road that's the best/Go motorin' on the A13'.

The song, 'A13 Trunk Road To The Sea', is by Billy Bragg, who, unable at the time to get his kicks on Route 66,

immortalised his own rock'n'roll thoroughfare ('It starts down in Wapping/There ain't no stopping'). Although, at first, the lyric sounds like a colloquial, narrow-screen novelty, it actually reveals the historian in Billy as early as 1978 when he wrote it. (The song was never recorded, except for his first Peel session, but it remains a live treat for diehards.) In 1991, for the expanded songbook *Victim Of Geography*, he wrote a beautiful piece of 'me-history' about the A13's significance.

'Travelling eastwards,' he wrote, 'it's possible to read London's development as a city like the rings on a tree.' He recalls boyhood family holidays at Shoeburyness, his dad letting him drive the green Morris Oxford across the car park field behind the beach, 'a primal driving lesson that ended abruptly when I nervously stamped the clutch and the brake pedal down to the floor and he bumped his head on the windscreen. I must have been about twelve years old, yet I can still feel the leather of the driver's seat warm on my bare back and hear the bonk! as Father, sitting sideways and caught unawares, hit the Triplex very hard.

'What great days.'

Except for the first evacuation, the schools never closed. Every common requirement of everyday life continued - the dustman, the postman, the paper boy and the milkman never missed their customary rounds, although the night had been a holocaust of noise.

Danger Over Dagenham, May 1947

The gasworks, the sewage treatment works, the docks and the car plant - it's little wonder the area comprising East Ham, Barking and Dagenham grew up this century into a working-class heartland. And it's no surprise that they got stonked during the Second World War.

Although war was not declared between Britain and Germany until 1939, things had been looking dicey ever since Adolf Hitler was made Chancellor in 1933, and the Nazis had begun their reign of terror on 'imperfect Germans'. Without the benefit of CNN, it seemed a long way away to most Britons, as did the Spanish civil war. However, when the Nazis marched into Czechoslovakia and Poland in the name of '*Lebensraum*' (more 'living space'), there was nothing else for it, and five years of gas-mask training, increased defence spending and the theoretical construction of air-raid shelters came to horrifying fruition on 3 September. By this time, roughly 17,000 mothers and children had already been evacuated from Dagenham to Norfolk and Suffolk, Marie D'Urso and her sisters among them.

Main target was the Ford Motor Works at Dagenham, or, as it's known locally, 'Ford's'. Built between 1929 and 1930 on Hornchurch Marshes near (aptly enough) America Farm, the car manufacturing giant quickly became the area's number-one employer. 'If Ford's packed up the whole borough would fall into the Thames,' Billy says. 'It's the buckle on the belt that keeps Barking and Dagenham from sliding into the marshes.'

This self-contained production-line shanty town seems to stretch as far as the eye can see. It's like a *Doctor Who* set made of steel, or the ugliest university ever built. Its gigantic, Stalinist warehouse blocks are untroubled by windows. Like many a school-year of Essex boys before them, Billy and his friends, aged thirteen or fourteen, were sent to Ford's for careers lessons, to be seduced or otherwise by the opportunity of riveting Ford Cortina after Ford Cortina after Ford Cortina - or the 'Dagenham Dustbin' as it was known. ('We hated it,' he confirms.) For those who failed their eleven-plus when Billy did, it was just about the only higher education available and, as such, looms large over the story of anybody from the area.

But let us not overlook the glamour of the place - there is more to its Mecca-like magnetism than sheer necessity. As a boy Billy recalls being dazzled by his peers whose dads worked here not on the production line, but as engineers and skilled labourers. Their families would disappear for six months to fictional-sounding American places called Dearborn and Ypsilanti in Michigan on company-funded retraining courses. They'd come back with *Boys' Own* exotica like baseball cards, Marvel comics, Superman toys, and home-movie footage of being driven around Detroit in big-finned cars. (As a general rule, the Irish kids in Billy's street, whose unskilled dads banged out doors for Zephyrs, never got to go.)

As part of the war effort, Ford's were turning out endless V8 engines and 'tracked vehicles' at the plant. Billy's Grandad D'Urso was a Ford's spot welder and was required to stick around while his contemporaries went to Europe and Africa - quite a social stigma, especially over the back fence among war wives. Grandpa Bragg, born in 1893 and old enough to fight in the First World War, failed his army medical because he had one leg longer than the other, and was too old to fight in the Second. So he 'did his bit' as an ARP warden, wielding a stirrup pump and bucket, and putting out incendiary bombs that landed on the roofs. Dennis Bragg left school aged fifteen in the summer of 1939, to work for McQueen's, a milliner's, but was transferred from there after just a month, to relay messages between Barking's ARP units during lulls in the bombing.

In September 1940, the borough's very first casualty, a Mr H. Onslow, received at a makeshift mortuary in a school at Beacontree Heath, was a Ford worker killed by an oil bomb as he rode his bike along the factory approach road. As the nightly bombing rained on, Ford's provided emergency food vans and even cooked meals-on-wheels in the factory canteens. At the end of the war, it was

calculated that the embattled car plant had produced over 260,000 engines and over 300,000 vehicles.

Henry Ford. So much to answer for. Dagenham may well be the Detroit of England, the Motown of Essex, but Billy Bragg was a rare son indeed to have found musical inspiration here among the metal.

Barking: from the original *Berecingum* ('Berica's people'). A 'Beacon for England' in Saxon times. A fisher port in the 1300s. A fresh-aired country retreat for Londoners in the early 1800s, and noted producer of potatoes and flour. A bustling, ever improving town by the 1900s. It was granted borough status in 1931, marked by a visit from HRH Prince George and an historical pageant. In 1965, thanks to widespread boundary-jiggling, Barking stopped being in Essex.

If Ford's has characterised and dominated the area throughout the twentieth century, Barking Abbey had a millennium before that. Built in the rather inappropriate year of Our Lord 666, it was one of the most powerful institutions in the country, from late Saxon times into Norman - hence the Christian tag, Beacon for England. In 1066, after his coronation at Westminster Abbey, William the Conqueror kipped over in Barking while he had the builders in at the Tower of London.

In 1540, the Abbey was dissolved and demolished and its 30 nuns were paid off. Today, only the Curfew Tower remains. However, in 1910 Barking Urban District Council bought the land and excavated it, leaving remains of some walls exposed to view, and turned the site into the well-tended Abbey Playing Field. As the late local-historian James Howson optimistically noted at the end of his article on the Abbey, 'demolition of old and unsightly buildings in the vicinity is opening up a pleasant prospect in the centre of town'.

Modern-day Barking could be anywhere in red-brick Britain: with a one-way system, a shopping arcade, a food court, a 'hoppa'-style one-decker bus service and a pedestrianised precinct. It's pay-and-display, homogeneous, interchangeable with a Chester or a Corby or a Merthyr or a Taunton. It would be easy to come here for a cup of coffee and a spin round Vicarage Field Shopping Centre and not have your life changed by the experience. There's nothing about it that says 'London', Greater or otherwise, except the underground symbol at Barking Station.

Only about seventeen tube stops from Central London, Barking is *connected*. When London's calling to the faraway towns, Barking can be there in 40 minutes. This proximity, we shall see, was key to Billy Bragg's musical and cultural education, and convenient as he found his first professional footholds in the music biz of the West End. But Barking made the man. Its one-step-away satellite self-sufficiency. Its proud Essex history. Its everybody-went-to-the-same-school community spirit. And its telltale working-class heart: from market trader to fisherman to builder to gas-worker to Cortina-basher, Barking's always been good with its hands.

At the turn of the century, the railway revolution completely refocused the town and turned it on its arse. Barking Station was built as far back as 1854, but was rebuilt in 1889 and again in 1905, as the London-Tilbury-Southend Railway became a fast-track to Southend; an apex for low-cost holiday-hungry Londoners. A large chunk of bricks-and-mortar Barking went up in the 1890s - the schools, the law courts, the swimming baths, Barking Park - and gradually the town's natural centre moved away from the quay to the station. As a result, the former municipal spine, Barking Broadway, is 'miles away from anywhere', down near the quayside and the Abbey. Trams arrived in 1905.

In 1932, you could hop on a number 67 tram at Barking Broadway and travel in to Aldgate for 5½d one way, 9d return, via Barking Road, East India Dock Road and Commercial Road East. The timetable promised a 48-minute journey time.

It's easy to forget that the A13 goes back the other way as well. Billy says he finds it easy to relate to London's heavily mythologised Westway, that section of the A40 that rises high above The Clash's West London and off towards Oxford. Why? Because 'it's like the A13 going in the opposite direction'. It's funny how you imagine familiar roads to be one-way.

For now, the A13 goes east from the City of London to the suburbs, from A to B, Aldgate East to Bragg. And just round that corner is Park Avenue, the street where freckle-faced Stephen William was raised and where his mother still lives (if her car's outside, she's in). The street where 'you could find out the history of World War Two if you ask the right people'.

Well, it's December 1957. Happy Christmas; war is over. And Billy Bragg is preparing to enter the world. One-two, one-two ...

2. ALICE IS BENT

Childhood, 1957-1973

Got 'I'd Like To Teach The World To Sing' by The New Seekers - good riddance to 'Ernie'! I have been banned from receiving any pocket money until I get a haircut!

Diary of Stephen Bragg, aged fourteen

STEPHEN BRAGG WAS born in Upney Hospital (nowadays Barking Hospital). In the same year, Bill Haley and his Comets came to Britain; 'Supermac' became Prime Minister; Humphrey Bogart died of throat cancer and the Russians sent a dog into space.

Five years later, Stephen's brother David was born. They grew up in a very matriarchal family with 'an infinitesimal number of aunties' and, as a result, cousins galore. Though Dennis Bragg, from Protestant stock, was an only child, marrying Marie gained him five sisters-in-law and a brother-in-law. Dennis worked as a chargehand in a warehouse; Marie was a cookery technician at night classes at the polytechnic. She later delivered leaflets and samples around the East End for 'a bit of extra money', and then worked at the Nat West sorting house in Aldgate.

In the spirit of clarity, I will refer to Billy as Billy from day one, even though he was Stephen or Steve throughout his school years, and adopted Billy only for the purposes of punk. Bizarrely, he was known by some as 'Doog', short for Dougal, after he changed schools in 1969, a nickname he cleverly gave *himself* to prevent the old epithet of 'Big

Nose' plaguing him there. His name was Stephen, and he shall be called Billy.

Despite the East End Catholic background on his mother's side, there was little religion in Billy's early life outside Cub Scout church parade (which was a strictly Methodist affair, i.e. very few laughs). Marie never went to mass, due to the stigma of having married a Protestant ('a bit like becoming a Satanist'); although when Dennis died of cancer in October 1976, she drew a lot of strength from her faith and it helped her through a supremely difficult patch.

Marie's sister Pat and her husband Don had a farm in Warwickshire, and this is where the Braggs would regularly spend their holidays. Dennis helped with the harvest, driving the tractor, while the kids pitched in by trailing the combine harvester, stacking hay bales. A ride on top of the bales aboard the cart was their reward, before hopping off and unstacking them again. As a real treat, they were given a can of petrol and allowed to 'burn off' the stubble. Brilliant! 'All my best holiday memories as a kid are from up there.'

Back home, in the stained glass above the front door of the Bragg house, it said 'Stanley'. (It still does, actually.) Next door it said 'Livingstone', and further down 'Park' - the houses were all named after great explorers. Mungo Park followed the River Niger and wrote *Travels In The Interior Of Africa* in 1799. Sir Henry Morton Stanley traced the Congo to the sea almost a century later, and was famously sent by the *New York Herald* to find missionary David Livingstone up the Nile in 1871. Exotic gentlemen indeed, but they all started somewhere like Park Avenue.

Billy had a happy, family-oriented childhood, with noisy, overpopulated Christmases (as well as his four 'farm cousins', there were a further eight on Marie's side), sing-songs, and many a tale from Dad about his time in India at the end of the Second World War. Billy's first point of

purchase as a young explorer was Barking Park, a 76-acre, tree-filled wonderland conveniently situated 'over the back'. The crowbar-shaped Park Avenue can be seen on local maps made as far back as 1807, when the park didn't even exist in name, just as a recreation ground with a lake. It opened its park gates officially in April 1898, and was a typically well-groomed municipal showcase throughout the early 1900s.

A river runs through it - or at least, a tributary of the Roding does, called Loxford Water - in which Billy and pals would fish with nets for tiddlers, and over which they would throw stones at the Ilford kids during border skirmishes. The boating lake was another pivotal landmark in the happy wanderers' world, four feet deep, and drained for two months every winter. It was, and presumably still is, traditional for every child to fall in - although the water these days is full of horrible green gunk. Billy managed to fall in twice as a boy: the first time, he was simply running and didn't stop in time; the second, he was 'doing something nefarious with bangers' (fireworks, not prostitutes or sausages) in the boathouse with his mate John Murphy, and fell off the fence into the lake. Painfully enough, it was drained at the time, and he split his head open, which required three stitches courtesy of King George's Hospital (and a couple in his elbow for luck). He paid the waters a sentimental third visit aged 21, when, out walking the family Labrador Lucky during a freeze, he stepped on to the ice and went straight through. You can take the boating lake out of the boy, but ...

More adventurous childhood manoeuvres took Billy as far as the marshland around Barking Creek, the link between the Thames and the Roding, where it's said King Alfred once sailed in longboats. This tributary of the Thames was vital to early Saxon settlement in Barking when it became a busy fishing port, but today it is conspicuously free of traffic, aside from the odd car wreck

dumped in the adjoining swamp. It was all marshland round here when Billy was a lad. (In fact, the area's still marshy enough to give the residents of new housing in Beckton a problem with subsidence and malaria.) This was as far as young Billy ever ventured: he remembers chancing upon 'a suitcase full of nudey books, all warped from the rain. You had to be careful round here, though, it wasn't your neck of the woods.'

At the mouth of Barking Creek stands Barking's own flood barrier, a blue guillotine that is designed to come down after the Thames Barrier at Woolwich has successfully diverted rising flood waters and sent an almighty splashback up towards Essex. In the 70s, flood-warning practice around here was common, as it's below sea level. The dread sound of the siren meant buses to Ilford, which is higher up, in more ways than one. Billy's nan reckoned that's why the good folk of Ilford always voted Tory. 'All kippers and curtains,' she would say.

Other less savoury aspects of the Barking wetlands in history include a nearby guano factory, which basically made explosives out of bird shit, and teething trouble with the Victorian-built Northern Outfall Sewer, whose macabre effluent was repeatedly delivered up Barking Creek by the tide. In the late 1800s, a pleasure boat sank in these waters and its occupants died not from drowning but from ingesting raw sewage.

Billy would wait for the Woolwich ferry here on a Sunday afternoon with his dad. Looking out over the Thames towards Shooters Hill in Kent, Dad used to tell him, 'That's where Julius Caesar stood and looked across, and didn't like what he saw. He saw us.'

Marshlands included, Billy's childhood stomping ground hasn't altered a great deal since the 1960s. Certainly, Park Avenue is frozen in time, and Barking Park is as it ever was. A local artist has written 'FUCK' on the side of the boathouse; the Ilford Lane end of Billy's street has been

blocked off to form a cul-de-sac; and what used to be the newsagents from where he did his paper round is now a mosque.

To supplement his weekly paper money, the enterprising Billy fetched shopping for an old geezer called Will Vernon at 152, Park Avenue. A former scoutmaster, he was badly gassed at the Somme and couldn't get out of the house like he used to. (Number 152 is locally famous for copping a direct hit in the Second World War, when the poor lodger who lived in the attic was catapulted right across the street.) Helping out old Mr Vernon was worth a shilling a week. Subsequent local errands bumped it up to half a crown.

In 1971, aged thirteen, Billy enjoyed an early whiff of fame, plucked from the universal routine of conkers and V-necks and offered a brief glimpse of what it feels like to be special. He wrote a poem for school called 'This Child', about Jesus saving the world. Written by candlelight during a power cut, when he handed it in his teacher asked him where he'd copied it from. Nowhere, he assured them. The school got in touch with Mr and Mrs Bragg, who confirmed their son's authorship, and the next thing anybody knew young Stephen Bragg was reading it out on Radio Essex.

'That was the first thing that stood me out from everybody else in the class,' he says. 'I'd done something that was *different*. I can't tell you how impressive that was, in the sense that it suggested I might be able to do this job that I do now.' The freckly thirteen-year-old had been granted a glance at the future.

Back on terra firma, newspapers delivered, the young poet would get on with less Bohemian pleasures: ritualistically dribbling a football up and down Park Avenue while he waited for his dad to come home from work, using his left foot up and right foot back, systematically tapping it off the front wall of every house in the street ('I was useless'). A West Ham supporter since the crib, he was