

BILLY DO BE A HERO

By Stephen Leon

Billy Bragg, Michelle Shocked,
Mambo-X

Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, April 13

NG APPLAUSE SUBSIDED
Mambo-X's Erin O'Hara stepped up to begin her band's last song, but the first note was struck, a Billy Bragg tune from the back of the hall—restless through both Mambo and Michelle Shocked—shouted. Erin looked a little peeved but made a show of restraint as she softly spoke to the heckler to "Be patient."

Billy Bragg would have known what to do then; he would have stepped forward and taken on the heckler in a battle of intellects (and probably would have won). He did just that a couple of times during his feisty two-hour set a week ago, challenging fans to elaborate on rather inane comments barked at the Londoner as he was launching into songs, forcing them to sink sheepishly back into their seats. Bragg loves challenges; backstage after the show, the unabashed socialist said he was looking forward to upcoming U.S. college dates at which, he surmised, he might be face-to-face with a sea of Young Republicanism. And he loves to confront audiences with politics, with history, with appeals to go and register to vote (this option was available in the lobby during the gig), and with the notion that Americans have a greater responsibility to themselves and to the world than to presume they have little to do with the dismal goings-on in the

White House.

Mixing pop and politics is old hat to Bragg, the 30-year-old, cockney-accented, uproariously witty solo performer who's been surprising U.S. audiences with his remarkable showmanship since he broke onto stateside college airwaves and began touring here four years ago. In Britain Bragg is a pillar of Red Wedge, a consortium of musicians who travel town-to-town to mix gigging with some education on the ins and outs of the Labour Party; fittingly, Bragg opened his U.S. tour in Troy with a pre-show press conference at which he discussed everything from Labour's recent election failure to the nature of his interest in the U.S. presidential race (Jesse Jackson is the candidate he finds most promising).

First-timers expecting an evening of solid rhetoric must have been a little surprised when Bragg came straight at them with music—three songs with nary a word in between—followed by a spell of chatter that was longer on wit than ideology. He joked about how people don't dance to his songs at clubs (remember, there's only Billy and an electric guitar at work here) simply because everybody's busy bootlegging, a tape recorder jammed into every crotch. And he initiated a series of send-ups of musicians running the gamut from Beethoven to Dylan to Talking Heads to Prefab Sprout (the Springsteen goof was particularly priceless: Bragg in hoarse, low, ominous voice intoning the first lines of "Racing in the Streets," then looking up and asking, "What the fuck's a 'Hurst on the floor?'"), here turning the Smiths' "Girlfriend in a Coma" into a safe-sex ditty: "Boyfriend in a condom, I know, I know, it's serious."

Most surprising about Bragg the performer is how much he gets out of his boyishly rough-edged vocals and his solitary electric guitar. That guitar, a study in folk simplicity informed by punk urgency, is played with a mix of dexterity and out-and-out bashing, the muted gurgling of verse lines giving way to sudden smoky bursts on transitional measures between lines, while his vocals swell passionately to command even a large hall. The sum is an amazingly fertile live show, from Bragg's ferocious cockney growl underscoring the chorus of "To Have and Have Not" ("Just because you're going forwards/doesn't mean I'm going backwards") to the bittersweet guitar arpeggios on the tender "St. Swithin's Day" to the stately chorus of "There Is Power in a Union," on which Bragg's declaration "The union forever/defending our rights" was delivered with such throaty gusto you could almost hear the chorus of proud, beer-hall background vocals from the album version.

Politically, Bragg covered some of his usual territory, reminding us that when Americans elect a president they essentially elect a president for the world. He admitted England's failure in not dealing with the troubles in Northern Ireland, sang "Days Like These" with substitute lyrics relating to the U.S. and threw a nod to Nicaraguan leader Daniel Ortega into his classic "Help Save the Youth of America." After "There Is Power" he expressed solidarity with the striking Hudson River tug and barge workers of Local 333. And he auditioned a new tune, "The Great Leap Forward," written as a kind of answer to the nagging question of what the hell he hopes to accomplish by mixing pop with politics ("It's the future and you can't run from it/if you've got a blacklist I want to be on it").

Always, the politics were leavened with wit. After admitting he's a hopeless romantic because he believes England will win the (soccer) World Cup, Bragg launched into an amusing tirade against our baseball World Series: "World Series, my ass . . . that pretty well sums it up. Everything between Maine and San Diego, that's the world. Anywhere you can shop in K-Mart."

Bragg always insists he isn't working toward the old two-guitars-bass-drums thing, but you couldn't help but admire the full-throttle spunk of his encore take on Bowie's "Rock and Roll Star," with his old mate Wiggy on second guitar and Cara Tivey (who already had played several tunes worth of nervous-but-nice ivories) on piano. With a band, who knows—but on the other hand, what would they do when Billy's busy taking on hecklers?

MAMBO-X SOUNDED MORE THAN A little nervous during this rare non-club effort, but O'Hara looked cool and self-assured, "Sister Catherine" sounded the best I've heard it and "Theater of the Absurd" took on new life as a brooding, guitars-and-voice-only set opener. The night's big surprise was Michelle Shocked, a country-blues-playing East Texan whose cynical world-view has been shaped both by the limits of her rural background and a lot of globe-hopping. Shocked (whose *Texas Campfire Tapes* LP is now out on PolyGram) sang about growing up in the sticks, young boys with military dreams, graffiti artists vs. cops, campus evangelists—all with a nimble touch on guitar and a voice ranging from Raitt-esque full-throatedness to her own soft, halting style that lent a good deal of honesty to her clever and touching song-stories. Dressed urchin-like in short hair, cap and black hightop sneakers, Shocked warmed the audience and hinted at great promise of things to come.