

Bragg and Shocked spread different versions of folk at Wiltern

By Karen Sundell
Staff Writer

It's another election year and like clockwork, Englishman / activist Billy Bragg has reappeared on this side of the Atlantic to spread his brand of electrified folkie idealism, humanitarian values and, ahem . . . to *Help Save the Youth of America*, as the title of his album goes.

It's time to dissolve "the greatest enemy of all," Bragg said, referring to political and voter apathy.

But yo . . . Billy, that's quite a task.

"The world is not just the world series, it is much bigger than that," he said during his show Saturday night at the Wiltern Theatre. "Whoever America elects for president becomes president for others; your vote affects everyone."

For those not familiar with Bragg, he's a staunch, outspoken socialist from Barking, Essex who maintains a considerable cult following and the respect of critics spanning

the ideological line. Whether you agree or disagree with Bragg, his presentation of pop and politics, has, like the milk commercial says, "something for every body."

True to form, Bragg spontaneously played off his audience, utilizing wit, charm and precision timing to create a loose and comfortable environment, as when he mocked himself when someone complimented his "nice butt."

"Nice, but . . . pity he's a socialist . . . Nice, but . . . shame

about his (large) nose," Bragg quipped without missing a beat.

Or, when introducing a song: "I'm going from (a song about) Jesus Christ to Mao Tse Tung. That's sooo unfashionable," he said dramatically shaking his head. "That's sooo unnn-chic."

How can Bragg call himself a socialist when he writes so many love songs? "Socialism is about loving people, mate. It's the Smoky Robinson of Marxism," he said.

Bragg's strength is in addressing serious themes within a humorous context non-offensive to most people. At past shows in England he got the safe sex message out by spoofing the Smith's song "Girlfriend in a Coma," to "Boyfriend in a Condom, I know; I know, it's serious."

His unique folk-rock blend sustains a sense of richness and vitality by integrating electric guitar with piano lines (on select songs) by Carla Tivey and usually trumpet, which was substituted by Bragg whistling this tour.

Bragg's sharp, inciteful lyrics, sung with a cockney accent loaded with passion and purpose, probe social and political themes with chorus' suitable for audience sing-alongs. Hard-core fans gifted Bragg with the T-shirts off their backs, including one rather wet Engineers local chapter 11, to which Bragg responded: "That's the sweat of a working man. Yeah, I like that, mate."

He was also besieged with song requests, the most popular being, "Levi Stubbs' Tears," "Ideology" and "I Help Save the

Youth." Other crowd pleasers included "Waiting for the Great Leap Forward," which is about social revolution, and "Power in a Union," which Bragg dedicated to the United Fruit Workers union for their refusal to buy grapes poisoned by pesticides.

Bragg's activism extends past his live set. He can often be found passing out political leaflets, autographing safe-sex booklets and collecting donations for AIDS' organizations after his shows, eliminating that barrier between performer and audience.

Bragg's guitar roadie and pal Wiggy (who co-produced "Workers Playtime") then joined him for the rockin' road song "A-13," a crowd favorite.

Mancotal, a Nicaraguan salsa combo who opened for Bragg, joined them for a second encore, "Banana," an uptempo kicker that had people dancing in the aisles.

Michelle Shocked, that sweet lil' thing from Gilmore, Texas also opened and charmed the audience with her fresh down-to-earth demeanor and tales about her hometown. The pixie-

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With the spotlight on her skateboard / punk / folk style, Michelle Shocked entertained her crowd.

With his current release, "Workers Playtime," Bragg is receiving considerable airplay on KROQ, who also promoted his show with ticket giveaways. The bootleggers were out in abundance Saturday night, benefiting from this new-found popularity, Bragg's lengthy set and the Wiltern's acoustics.

The show closed with Bragg's usual set standards: a cover of "Walk Away Rene," to which he humorously narrates a love scenario that ends because, "she became a young Republican," as he "stomped loving her."

haired folkie with the big, fiery voice was solely accompanied by her acoustic guitar. She excelled with her melodic establishment bashing songs, including "The Oldest Hippy," who sold his ideals to free enterprise; "Sister Sidney," about a corrupt evangelical couple; and a song about Vietnam, in which Shocked referred to the army as America's welfare system.

An overall excellent bill. A pity, though, that it takes an election year to lure Bragg and company out. We need more artists of their caliber to perform on a more consistent basis.