

Half English, All Internationalist

BY THAD WILLIAMSON

Billy Bragg and the Blokes, *England, Half English* (Elektra, 2002).

When England's national soccer team took on Sweden on June 2 to kick off its World Cup campaign, five English players of African descent were in the starting eleven and a sixth entered the match as a substitute. Sweden also had a black player in its lineup. And several other top European national teams, including those of France, the Netherlands, and even Poland, are marked by a degree of racial diversity that was unimaginable a generation ago.

The evolution of European nations into multicultural societies represents a remarkable and welcome change, but not one without tensions. Political scientists have long argued that racial and ethnic homogeneity is conducive to the formation of strong welfare states and generous, inclusive social policies. Racial diversity, they say, permits elites to exploit cultural differences and pit one part of the working class against another, thus undermining the social solidarity that sustains strong welfare states—because citizens may be less supportive of giving tax money to people they see as unlike themselves.

Can Europeans develop a “melting pot” conception of national identity—based (in theory at least) on loyalty to a single set of civic ideals, not on a sense of being one “people” with a common ancestry, culture, etc.—while still maintaining strong welfare states that support all citizens?

For a good example of a European leftist wrestling with that question, philosophically minded readers can consult the writings of German intellectual Jürgen Habermas on the idea of a “post-national constellation.” Those who prefer to ponder the issue while also stomping their feet

can instead listen to British guitarist/ unrepentant socialist Billy Bragg's latest album, *England, Half English*.

During the 1980s, Bragg made a name for himself with passionately political critiques of the Cold War and of capitalism itself, delivered in solo performances on electric guitar. Bragg's music has since evolved to include backup bands and sing-

albums based on previously unrecorded Woody Guthrie lyrics.

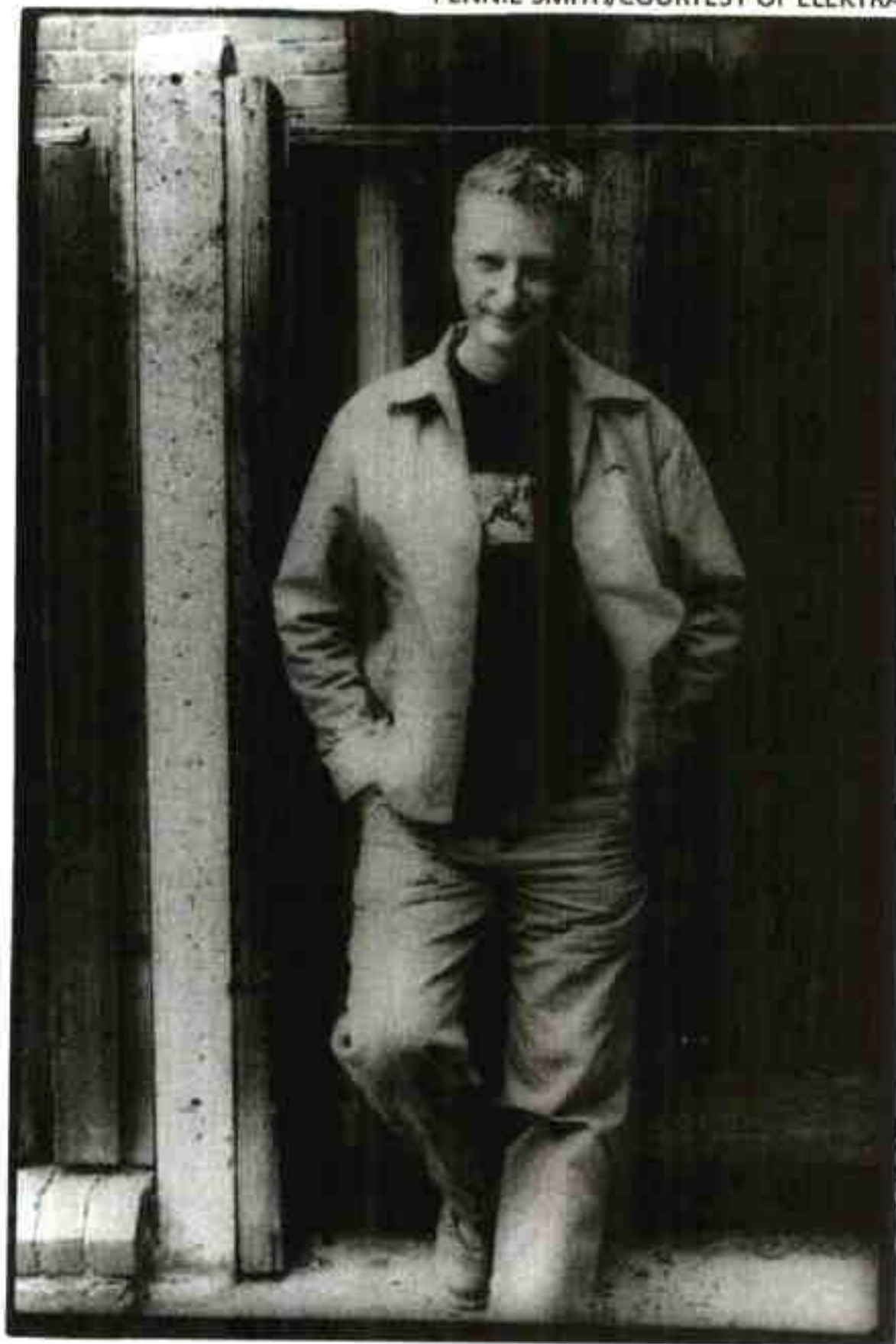
But this newest recording—Bragg's tenth—is fundamentally different from his last venture. Mixed in with the usual handful of songs about romantic encounters and run-ins with former lovers, Bragg is thinking out loud about how to steer between the dual dangers of ethnocentric nationalism and a form of globalization that sacrifices the peculiarity of place on the altar of international commerce, using England as his case study.

On the one hand, in the album's title song Bragg sings, “I'm a fine example of your Essex man and I'm well familiar with the Hindustan,” then makes the point that England has been importing food, dancing styles, and innumerable other cultural products for generations—including the lions found on its soccer team shirts. Bragg's point is simple: Enough with this myth of a pure “Englishness,” English culture has borrowed or stolen from other cultures for centuries.

On the other hand, for Bragg, rejecting outdated concepts of “Englishness” does not mean turning one's back on English people—or in particular, the English working class. In “NPWA,” Bragg uses the plight of the laid-off English worker, who has lost a job due to globalization, to illustrate the need to revive a time-honored democratic principle: “No Power Without Accountability.” “They gave my job to another man/On half my wages in some foreign land,” sings Bragg's worker. The song goes on to lambast World Bank policies and unelected IMF and WTO officials.

The critical question that neoliberals (and others) would ask Bragg is: How can

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ers, and more emphasis on melodic development—some of Bragg's catchier tunes would be at home on any rock radio station. *England, Half English*, recorded with Bragg's touring band, “The Blokes,” is being marketed as the follow-up to the singer's recent collaboration with the American band Wilco, which produced two superb

you oppose ethnocentric conceptions of nationhood, yet also defend an English worker's right to keep a job—just because he or she happens to have it—even if some worker in a “foreign land” would benefit even more from having that job?

Bragg does not answer this question directly, but he does provide some clues. First, as “NPWA” makes clear, Bragg stresses that decisions about who gets jobs are not made democratically anywhere—whether in England or (to use his example) Mexico. Ever the internationalist, Bragg implies that democratic governance of the global economy could create the preconditions for accommodating the legitimate interests of working classes in both “rich” and “poor” countries.

Second, in “Take Down the Union Jack,” Bragg makes clear that he does not want the old England of the British Empire with its arrogant talk of the sun never setting—nor can he warm to the notion that Britain is just “an economic union.” What positive vision of nationhood (if any) could

avoid those twin perils is left unstated, although Bragg does give the cause of Scottish independence (and recent moves to enhance Scotland's autonomy) a hearty pat on the back.

In the end, one senses that while Bragg may not be quite sure about “what it really means to be an Anglo hyphen Saxon in England.co.uk,” he is very clear about the values with which the answer should be pursued: respect for working people and

their jobs, democratic accountability, rejection of ethnocentrism, solidarity with the disenfranchised not just in England but elsewhere too, and above all, a refusal to give up hope that these values can be brought to life. ■

To hear some selections from *England, Half English*, visit <www.billybragg.com>.

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THE ABCS OF THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

(According to Billy Bragg)

“IMF, WTO,
I hear these words just every place I go
Who are these people? Who elected them?
And how do I replace them with some of my friends?”

—Billy Bragg, “NPWA,” *England, Half English*

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