

SOUNDS FROM ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND ALL OVER THE GLOBE



Dirty Liner

Folk & World Music

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A MIGHTY WIND

SONGWRITERS MICHAEL MCKEAN & ANNETTE O'TOOLE SING OUT

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Recordings

BILLY BRAGG

Must I Paint You a Picture?
The Essential Billy Bragg
Elektra/Rhino R2 73993 (2003), 2-CD

Just in case anyone out there doesn't have all of Bragg's seven solo albums, two collaborations with Wilco, and assorted singles and compilation cuts, here's his essence — two CDs of his "hits" with an extra CD of odds and sods. Things start with Bragg's emergence as a "fresh-faced annoying bastard" 20 years ago and zoom right to the present day, more or less, with cuts from 2002's *England, Half English*. The first CD opens with "A New England," a Bragg manifesto, from 1983, and, like a musical newspaper you can dance to it covers the events of the day in song — Reaganomics, the miners' strike, Nicaragua, and the poll tax. Bragg back then, seeing as he'd started out as a punk rocker, wielded an electric guitar like a post-apocalyptic Phil Ochs.

Then there was his romantic side, the inevitable heartbreak of "The Man in the Iron Mask" and the unrecognizable remake of "Walk Away Renee."

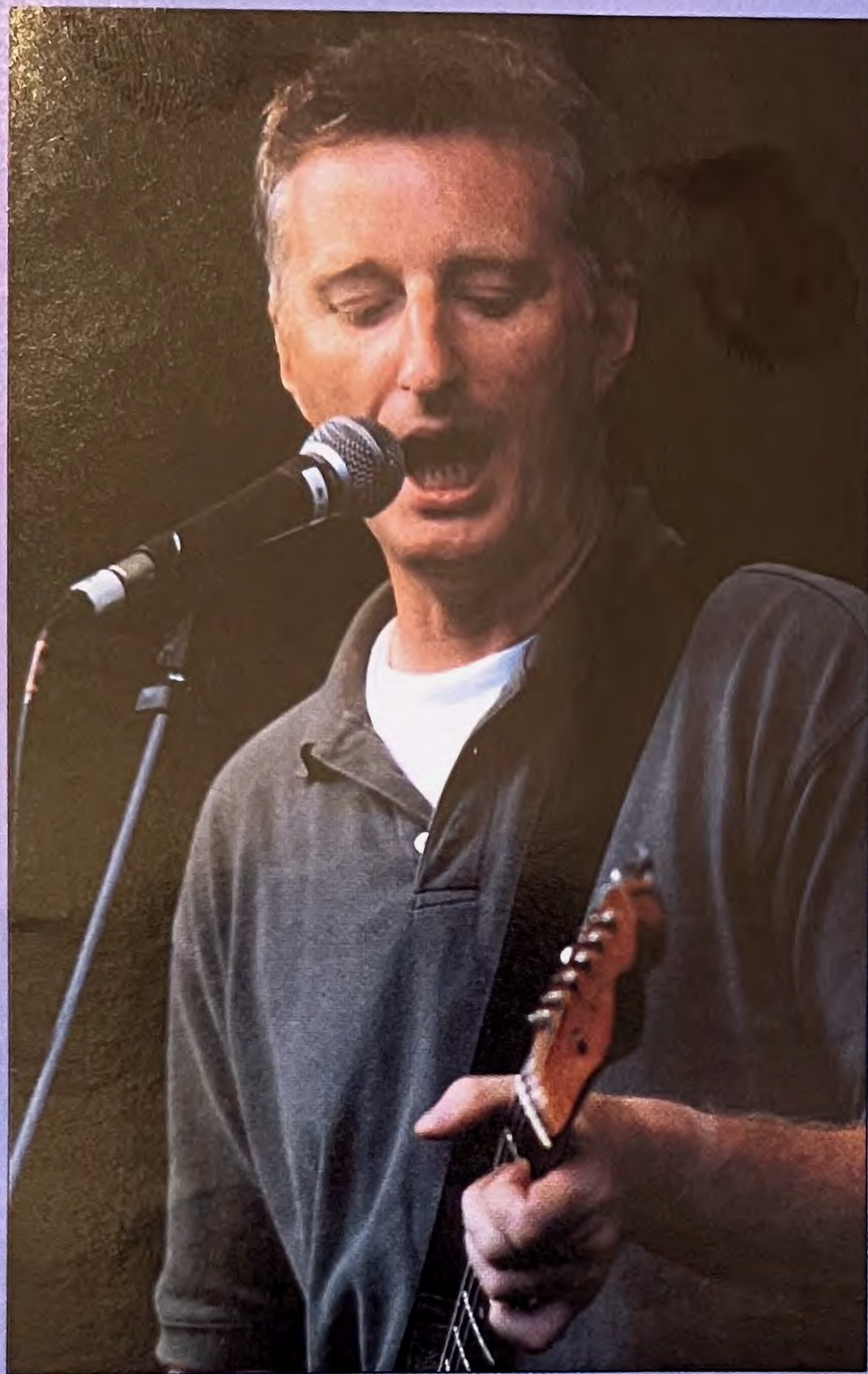
The second disc opens with Bragg's songwriting collaboration with the Smiths' guitarist Johnny Marr, "Sexuality." Four cuts from Bragg's groundbreaking collaborations with Wilco, in which they wrote music to Woody Guthrie's unfinished lyrics, are included. There are also cuts with his recent band, the Blokes, and a full-band version of "Take Down the Union Jack." On a bonus CD with 10 more tracks, he cuts loose on some great covers.

— Jeff Lindholm (Charlottesville, VA)

OAK

Country Songs and Music
Musical Traditions MTCD 327-8 (2003)

The members of Oak played at most of the folk clubs in and around London in 1970 and 1971, recorded one LP for Topic records, then played 167 gigs together before calling it a day. Considering that the current Topic Records president Tony Engle was a member, you might think Topic would reissue their album. You'd be wrong. It



Ron Hill

Billy Bragg - half mask

fell to two of the band's other members, Rod and Danny Stradling, to reissue Oak's music on their label, the small-volume CD-R outlet Musical Traditions. In revisiting the LP, originally titled *Welcome to Our Fair*, they realized they also had several tapes of the band in concert, which could provide the basis of an expanded double-CD project. The result, consisting of 10 studio-recorded LP tracks, plus 22 live tracks recorded at three separate gigs, is a good fit for the label; unlike most folk-revival groups, Oak's repertoire and approach favored English rural music played in English rural styles. This means unaccompanied singing, sometimes in the distinctive and unusual vocal styles of traveling people. It also means that they take seriously all the materials found in oral tradition, including the Victorian and Edwardian (and even American) parlor songs often found in rural singers' repertoires. Finally, it

means they played fiddle, squeeze-boxes, tambourine, and bones, with no sign of anything strummed, plucked, keyed, or beaten with a stick, none of the modern revivalist trappings that traditional singer Harry Cox politely called "this here squit."

It's tempting, after describing their music in general terms, to rely on the old "this is the sort of thing you'll like, if you like this sort of thing" approach. But since the traditional music of England has only recently been coming to CD format, you may not even know if you like this sort of thing, so I'll describe some particulars. First, there are the tunes, strongly rhythmic and played at real

dance tempo. Having learned from and played with such rural masters as Scan Tester, Bob Cann, and Oscar Woods, Oak plays in a similar style: steady in tempo and rhythm, a bit rough, but gutsy and full of punch; or as Dan Quinn says in the notes, "cheap and cheerful." A set of polkas learned from Tester is a particularly fine piece; it's different from Tester's own version but not in the way revivalists usually fiddled with tunes. Then, there are the songs. All four members of Oak (Engle, the Stradlings, and Peta Webb) are strong singers, and each solos on one or two songs, while the group does Copper Family-style harmonies on most. Rod Stradling's solos on the songs "Australia" and "Rambling Royal" are particularly impressive, sung in a measured baritone that would be welcome in any folk club. His wife, Danny, does an uncanny job of capturing the strident but extremely fluid vocal quality of Scottish trav-

ellers (without mocking their accents), on a version of "False, False" that she learned from Sheila Stewart. Webb and Engle manage a beautiful vocal duet on "Cupid's Garden," and Webb captures the Irish style of ornamentation on her version of "Roving Round County Tyrone." As for the harmony singing, "Shepherds Arise," "Thousands or More," and "Rose of Allandale" stand out, but there are a good many very attractive pieces in this vein.

The packaging of the CD-Rs makes up for the lack of polish with lots of satisfying substance. In its DVD case, this double disc is well-protected, and with a large-format, 20-page booklet, there's background galore on the band and its music.

— Steve Winick (Philadelphia, PA)

KÁLMÁN MAGYAR

Exposed

Hungaria HRCD003 (2003)

ALEXANDER FEDORIOUK AND KÁLMÁN MAGYAR

Crossing Paths:

*Ethno-Jazz from Eastern
and Central Europe*

Folk Sounds FS0004 (2003)

Kálmán Magyar is an extremely gifted musician who grew up in a family that was active in the traditional Hungarian dance world. He began violin studies in childhood and his prodigious multi-instrumental abilities also seem to date from an early period. Already conversant with jazz and classical traditions as a teenager, his boundaries expanded greatly vis-a-vis other Balkan music when he became a member of the well-known folk dance and music group associated with Duquesne University, the Tamburitians. At present, Magyar is involved with various groups, but the liners to *Exposed* state that he wanted to make a record to reveal other musical ideas. No doubt the desire to showcase his multi-instrumental capacities was also involved, and it's very difficult to think of another recording where one musician overdubs all the parts that's quite as impressive as this. In addition to fiddles, he also plays viola, accordion,

guitar, bass, jew's harp, piano, hurdy-gurdy, percussion, and other odds and ends. He also sings reasonably well. Amazingly, he has kept the music sounding quite "live" through all the hours of overdubbing each tune must have required. In the end, the one-man-show aspect is secondary to the excellent musical results.

On *Crossing Paths* Magyar teams with cimbalom master Alexander Fedoriouk for another impressive outing. Again lavish use is made of multi-tracking, and the results are excellent, but one must say that it would be nice to hear these two outstanding players produce a CD devoted to straight fiddle-cimbalom duos. Here, they cover ground such an approach couldn't accommodate, with full-ensemble renditions of Balkan dance tunes. They also come up with some fun new wrinkles, notably on "All Jazzed Up," where the cimbalom plays an adapted boogie-woogie bass line under a Gypsy-jazz melody that leads to some delightful improvisation. Balkan fans should definitely check out both discs.

— Duck Baker (Richmond, VA)

WAYFARING STRANGERS *This Train*

Rounder 116610528 (2003)

Many years ago, the earthy mix of old-timey and jazz was called Western swing. Then, about a quarter of a century ago, a widely praised album organized by fiddler extraordinaire Vassar Clements, called *Hillbilly Jazz*, updated the concept for the hippie set. So the notion of fusing bluegrass and jazz certainly isn't new. But by throwing in gospel, blues, and country-rock, this playful group of musicians from New England has made one of the more imaginative albums in some time. The Strangers were organized by Matt Glaser, who heads the string department at

Boston's Berklee College of Music, and includes, among others, Tony Trischka on banjo, Laszlo Gardony on piano, and a trio of vocalists — Tracy Bonham, Aoife O'Donovan, and Ruth Ungar (daughter of former Fiddle Fever members Jay Ungar and Molly Mason, who also make an appearance). They do a wonderful version of the title track, an old gospel number; a stirring take on "Cluck Old Hen," a traditional bluegrass song; Bill Monroe's "Don't Put Off Til Tomorrow"; and "Columbus Stockade Blues," in which they shift back and forth between bluegrass and contemporary jazz, showing off their experimental chops smartly. All the while, the album has an easygoing, folksy appeal, thanks to the smart production and tasteful arrangements. This is a wonderful experiment and probably sounds even better live. In fact, there's a nice taste provided by an unlisted bonus track — a live version of "This Train." With any luck, this group won't be strangers very long.

— Ed Silverman (Millburn, NJ)

CHRIS DANIELS AND THE KINGS AND FRIENDS *The Spark*

Moon Voyage CD77626 (2003)

Chris Daniels and the Kings have been one of the few mainstays in the Denver music scene over the past two decades. Their ninth album towers as their most cohesive, best effort to date, while simultaneously doubling as all-star fare featuring today's best roots musicians. Daniels enlists the support of not only of Colorado's Clay Kirkland (harmonica) and vocalists Mollie O'Brien, Richie Furay, and Hazel Miller, but Louisiana guitar wizards Sonny Landreth and Sam Broussard, pianist Steve Conn, and accordionist Steve Riley. Additionally, there are contributions from other nationally prominent musicians, including Little Feat's Bill Payne (piano), Sam Bush

(mandolin/fiddle), and Tony Furtado (slide guitar).

Yet as impressive as this roster is, it alone couldn't supply the finishing sheen if the underlying material paled in quality. Daniels' songcraft has ascended to yet another level, sophisticated stylings woven with sparkling, horn-fueled arrangements, intoxicating rhythms, and perky tempo changes. In some ways, it's also a return-to-roots endeavor, as Daniels plays only his acoustic and National steel guitars. There's also a prevailing theme of romance that's refreshingly nostalgic. In one way or another, practically every amorous angle is portrayed, whether it's the guy who happily toes the line ("She's the Reason") or the tingly realization that cupid's arrow has just struck ("The Spark"). The album's centerpiece is the 50s-musical-styled "Biggest Heartache on the Block," which features a magical encounter between Daniel's macho protagonist and O'Brien's unbudging sassy persona. On the groovin' "Tuesday Man," Daniels advises his lovestruck admirer to ring only on Tuesday when he's the most available. "I know your ring," he says in a moment of levity.

Many of the finer moments are also a result of the Kings' boundless horn section. They recall Glen Miller's big band romp on the horn-screaming "Jump" and New Orleans style on Professor Longhair's "In the Night," on a raucous rendition that includes Conn's bouncy ivories, Broussard's orbiting slide guitar, and Riley's zydeco zest. Guaranteed, this spark has no problem whatsoever in ignition. And when it does, just step back and feel the glow.

— Dan Willging (Denver, CO)

TARBOX RAMBLERS *A Fix Back East*

Rounder 11661-9061-2 (2004)

Finally, the release of the much-anticipated second album by the Boston-based roots rockers the Tarbox Ramblers. The band opens with the graveyard attack of "Already Gone" before delving deep into the country spiritual "Were You There?" showcasing the cyclone-inducing fiddle playing of Daniel Kellar. It's back to some down-and-dirty boogie on "Dock Boggs' Country Blues," with the shared drumming talents of guests Alan Sheinfeld, Howie Ferguson, and Robert Hulsman. String bassist Johnny Sciascia adds deep resonant moans to the album's title track, as well as on the traditional country blues of "No Night There."

The Ramblers' uniqueness is their ability to slowly cook like boot-



Michael Tarbox - cook the gold

legged moonshine whiskey con like "Honey Babe," then snare the syncopated jive of "Cluck Old Gold," or sting like a hive of bees on the rollicking "The Shining." "From the Algiers Station" is a tune that sounds like it jumped the time continuum from dusty Texas to modern Boston with no change of pace, the Ramblers' doo-wop sounding "Last Minute the Year" to an otherworldly Diddley beat. The album was recorded mostly in Memphis and features production by Jim Dickinson, Sean Slade, and Paul Katterbach.

— Lahri Bond (Amherst, MA)

BIRKIN TREE *3(three)*

Felmay FY 8059 (2003)

Birkin Tree has been called "the Italian-Irish musical group." It might be like billing yourself as the best blues band in Denmark. It might be good, but how do you live up to the real thing? In this case, judging from its latest recording, *3(three)*, the group holds up quite well.

It's been four years since its last recording and the group now consists of Daniele Caronna (fiddle, guitar), Devis Longo (piano, saxophone, keyboards), Fabio Ninaudo (mandolin, pipes, whistles), and Simone Sestini (flutes). When it comes to setting ahead traditional sets, they come really well. The fiddle, pipe, and playing is first-rate and the choice of material is from both original and traditional sources. But what makes Birkin Tree different from other Italian-Irish cover bands is its mix of original arrangements, like the saxophone in a decidedly Irish way.

"A Sad Night" is an original piece that opens with saxophone and electric guitar playing a slow, melodic

lude, joined a uilleann pipes. saxophone so "Morning Dew" electric guitar flute picks up joined by fiddle breathtaking a different is the on "Tribute to" plays a coun melody line of As no one in guest vocalists Cyril O'Donoghue of Joe Dolan's the noted Irish sings a contert traditional "Ca modern arran string quartet. Birkin Tree s it's not only Italy, it rates Irish band. pe

FIAMMA FUM *Home*

Omnium OMM20

Fiamma Fum from northern traditional music o ularly its trad singing, with grooves. Wh accordions ay could result in contrasting te in Fiamma Fu sounds. Loop uses her wizar electronics purpose of a and the same produced by ments, which instrumenta Lombardi and "A Voi Tor M with a choru guitar, but gra bass, and e



Wayfaring Strangers - a widely praised cluck