

Billy Bragg & Wilco, *Mermaid Avenue* (Warner Music: Elektra CD-62204, 1998).

**Come back Woody Guthrie  
Come back to us now.  
Tear your eyes from paradise  
And rise again somehow.**

—Steve Earle, 1997  
“Christmas In Washington”

Woody’s made this impossible wish come true, sort of. With the June 1998 release of *Mermaid Avenue*, fifteen previously unreleased Guthrie lyrics have been set to music by Britain’s Billy Bragg and members of American alt-country band Wilco, principally Jeff Tweedy. The album dropped off the Top 200 in August, but turned up on many critics’ and musicians’ annual top ten lists. The project was instigated and shepherded to completion by Guthrie’s daughter Nora, keeper of her father’s archives. There are said to be more than one thousand such lyrics in existence, penned mainly at the family’s residence on Mermaid Avenue in Coney Island, Brooklyn, from the late nineteen forties until he was incapacitated by Huntington’s Chorea. The collaborators finished forty tracks and fifteen are released here, greatly expanding Guthrie’s legacy.

Billy Bragg, purveyor of “socialism of the heart,” has been Britain’s primary exporter of political pop with punk roots for more than a decade. He and Nora Guthrie first met in 1992 when Bragg was in New York to play the Woody Guthrie 80th birthday concert along with Pete Seeger, Arlo Guthrie and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy. Andrew Collins’s recent “official” biography of Bragg, *Still Suitable For Miners*, notes she was drawn to his music in 1991 with the release of the *Don’t Try This At Home* disc (Elektra CD-61121) which included the track “You Woke Up My Neighborhood,” named after a Woody Guthrie drawing in the Smithsonian’s collection. She may or may not have known that Bragg had released Woody’s “Deportees” as a B-side in 1986. Billy and Nora met again in September of 1996 in Cleveland at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum’s American Music Masters week-long celebration of Woody Guthrie’s music, finalizing plans. In recent years Bragg’s life has settled down a bit. A stable marriage, child, fewer travel days each year, and more evident self-confidence have consolidated his status as a mature songwriter of conscience. He brings this strong inner core to his selection and treatment of the Guthrie material, making it accessible without compromising the messages. As

biographer Collins put it, “That’s the dichotomy of revolutionary art: it’s either too dangerous to be seen and heard by the masses, or else it’s sanitized to reach a wider audience. When Billy Bragg gets it right ... he is worth a thousand hectoring extremists urinating in the wind.” (254)

Nora urged Bragg to pursue an “original interpretation” of her father’s words, an inevitability actually, given Bragg’s typical near-Cockney delivery. Aware of the limitations of his usual spare guitar and vocal arrangements, Bragg brought Wilco into the project while lyrics were still being selected, with Nora’s blessing. Bragg was a fan of Wilco’s 1996 double disc release *Being There* (Reprise CD-46236) and had seen them play in London during that summer. The songwriting was split equally between them and each mixed their own tracks. This fleshed things out nicely, with Tweedy’s more American sounding vocals and the band providing echoes of influences from Hank Williams and Bill Monroe to Bob Dylan and the Band, The Byrds, Flying Burrito Brothers, Eagles, and even REM on the tracks they played on. This more firmly anchored the arrangements to the musical traditions from whence the lyrics came. While Woody is primarily perceived as a pioneer in the topical folksong tradition with European roots, American Country music descended from similar roots, absorbing more American influences like gospel and Hawaiian guitar along the way. Bringing these influences to bear on Woody’s lyrics is not an unnatural marriage. The success of the collaborators’ “original interpretation” is evident in the lack of easily recognizable traditional melodies carrying the lyrics.

Wilco’s music, categorized as Alt-country or Americana for radio formatting and marketing purposes, remains truer to the sounds of traditional Country than the mainstream, pop-ified product cranked out by Nashville’s major labels today. While only a handful of tracks on *Mermaid Avenue* sound like traditional Woody Guthrie recordings, and only a few are topical in the political sense, the solo and ensemble accompaniments supporting his lyrics here fit comfortably, while broadening the contexts in which they will be heard. The lyrics of “Christ For President” carry no date and are timeless. They urge voting for the carpenter to make him our king. Guthrie saw this as a sure way to “beat these crooked politician men” and move the USA toward equality and prosperity. The banjo led Tweedy/Jay Bennett melody sounds like a turn of the century campaign song and offers an elegant solution to the ongoing and vexing problems of American governance. The clarity and simplicity of this proposed solution puts the lie to contemporary officials’ claims of moral superiority or closeness to The Throne in making their judgments.

Next up is Bragg’s treatment of “I Guess I Planted,” another undated lyric, this one celebrating all union accomplishments, however small, because they

add up to big gains for the working class. This is comfortable ground for Bragg who has long sung of his working class origins and concern for workers of many types. His commitment to labour was also proved off-disc during Britain's 1984 miner's strike, playing fund raisers and rallies in cities and towns throughout Britain benefitting miners and their families. On this number, Bragg's plaintive lead vocal is bolstered by an all-hands-on-deck unison chorus, demonstrating that many little voices also add up to more than the sum of their parts. The most overtly political song in the set is "Eisler On The Go" scored by Bragg, which expresses Guthrie's solidarity with and sympathy for Hans Eisler. An avowedly anti-fascist composer who fled the Nazis to the United States, Eisler was soon hounded by the McCarthyites as a probable "red." Guthrie's words vividly express his understanding of Eisler's plight and inability to effectively do anything to assist him. These three songs fit comfortably within the Guthrie canon, but the balance of the set challenges and stretches the limits folk-purist hagiographies of Woody impose on him.

The disc opens and is peppered with several "trouser snake songs" as Billy Bragg impishly calls them. The opener, "Walt Whitman's Niece," written in 1946 uses sly evasions and a call and response vocal to celebrate a successful carouse. "Way Over Yonder In A Minor Key" (1946) is a reminiscence of getting caught in a youthful tryst. "Ingrid Bergman," written in 1950, uses rock, lava and volcanic images to express a desire to go off to an island with the actress. "California Stars" is a more universal expression of desire for physical comfort shared by a trusted consort, something Guthrie's health allowed precious little of in his waning years. "She Came Along To Me," dated 1942, allows that "I'm sure the women are equal and they may be ahead of the men." The lyric goes on to assert of the genders that "one organizes the other," and that after ten thousand years of blending creeds, colors and gender balancing, "maybe we'll have all the fascists out of the way." These lyrics manage to carry cultural messages, while energetically demonstrating the spark in the eye of their creator. While some might choose to deny such impulses to one of modern folk music's founding fathers, our first singer-songwriter, Bragg and Co. honor his full humanity, unabashedly viewing Woody Guthrie as a lyrical poet, the first punk, and that he *was* America. The lesson here is that not all good Americans are Puritans, and that even The Folk have libidos.

Several of the other tracks are love songs sans overt lust. "Birds and Ships," sung by Natalie Merchant is a simple ode to a loved one absent at sea. "At My Window Sad And Lonely" (1939) recalls the tone of Civil War era tune "Weeping, Sad And Lonely," and further explores the theme of lovers parted by water. "One By One" (1939) opens each line with those words and unfolds a

more hopeful reading on the parted lovers theme, closing with “One by one to one by one forever be.” One of the most upbeat spots on *Mermaid Avenue* is a rambunctious romp, “Hoodoo Voodoo.” It’s a stream-of-consciousness, beat poetry rave-up driven by Mitch Ryder-y organ (à la “Devil In A Blue Dress”) which is really a kid’s song. Who can resist being asked to “kissle me some more?” This tune demonstrates yet another facet of Woody’s humanity. With more than one thousand lyrics written and the vast majority of them unrecorded, it will take quite a few more releases to do full justice to his range. He wrote not just of struggle, but of love, sex, family and honest relationships in equally insightful ways. *Mermaid Avenue* is successful in that it selects songs that Woody or those who recorded him might not have foregrounded, and treated them in musical modes beyond the pale of traditional folksong. Bragg expands perception of Guthrie’s interests, somewhat in his own mold, while earning himself broader exposure in the States. Rather than a formal tribute album, this one works as a collaboration which has caused Guthrie’s work to be heard in new places and ways, realizing his daughter’s vision. Here, Woody’s passions and compassion are aired in generous measure alongside messages of social concern, providing a more complete sense of him as a feeling human being.

The last two tracks on the disc are easily recognizable as the work of Woody Guthrie. “Another Man Done Gone” is clearly autobiographical, a rumination on mortality of which he may have done too much. He says, modestly, “I don’t know, I may go down or up or anywhere, But I feel like this scribbling might stay.” Equally addressing the love and hard feelings he’d seen and felt in his life and how it shaped his outlook, he asks only that after he dies we say, “another man’s done gone.” Fortunately, his scribblings *have* stayed. The closer, “The Unwelcome Guest” (1940) is a cowboy blues, eloquently announced by Bob Egan’s mournful pedal steel. Here, Guthrie casts himself as a frontier Robin Hood talking to his horse. This outlaw treats horses good and is friendly to strangers, but thinks nothing of robbing potbellied thieves. He puts himself in the shoes of this nineteenth century Pretty Boy Floyd, who “never took food from the widows and orphans, And never a hard working man I oppressed.” He knows some day he’ll be caught and killed, but others will take his place and continue to keep the robber barons in check. Musically, Billy Bragg has been one of those, and hopefully not the last. Thanks to him and Wilco, we have a richer sense of this songwriter than before. Woody Guthrie rides again.

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