

# Billy Bragg, Michelle Shocked set politics to music in Wiltern concert

By **STEVE APPLEFORD**  
Daily News Critic

It was as much politics as pop Saturday night as Cockney folk-rocker Billy Bragg joined forces with East Texas folkie Michelle Shocked for a message-packed night of alternately hopeful and disturbing imagery at the Wiltern Theatre.

## REVIEW

And if there was any doubt before, the seriousness of the artists' devotion to social and political justice was made clear to ticket holders as they entered the ornate theater, and had to pass through a lobby packed with tables and activists organizing support for causes of labor, peace and troubled Central America.

To a recording of a piano playing the melody that served as a theme to the Russian Revolution, headliner Bragg walked to the stage in a black polo shirt and blue jeans, rolled into cuffs at the ankles, carrying only his road-worn electric guitar as accompaniment.

Conscious of his incurable habit of spending nearly as much time talking of his political concerns as singing about them,



**Billy Bragg**  
Cockney folk-rocker

Bragg joked, "The bootleggers in Los Angeles begged me not to talk so much during the show because their cassettes run out before the end."

As on his new album, "Workers Playtime," pianist Cara Tivey joined Bragg for a few numbers, her keyboard work softening the hard edges of his bristling guitar chords. But the English rocker chose to continue the rest of the

set leaving his messages unadorned with musical niceties, as in his song "Days Like These," which criticizes recent American covert foreign actions.

He sang: "They'll trade with the Ayatollah if they can't convince Congress/ that the only type of patriot is an anti-communist/ ... Wearing buttons is not enough in days like these."

The surprise successes of the meaningful messages of singer Suzanne Vega and then, perhaps more significantly, of Tracy Chapman, may have opened the door for a wider acceptance of artists like Bragg and Shocked, though the blunt shrillness of Bragg's work could forever keep him out of the mainstream.

In contrast, Shocked's songs are padded with a charming Texan simplicity that keep her deepest concerns easier to swallow, as in the humorous introduction to "V.F.D." (for Volunteer Fire Department).

"All the men carry beepers in the back of their jeans, and that's how you know they're men," she said smiling. "It's also how you know there's a fire, when there is all this beeping going on all over town."