

## Billy Bragg wages winning battle; Michelle Shocked addictive

By Michael Levans

For The Pittsburgh Press

English folk hero Billy Bragg, in the ideal setting of Carnegie Music Hall, stood alone in the spotlight and waged battle against the apathy held by the American voting public. His only weapon, a battered electric guitar.

Bragg neatly summed up his message deep into last night's show. "I come to this country as a foreigner who is concerned about the importance of this election year. So please, remember when you choose a president you're choosing someone for the world. Please be more careful this time."

To pound his point home, Bragg went into "Help Save the Youth of America," a song

title he claims is interchangeable, since its meaning digs deep into the apathy held by youths the world over. But last night, there was no doubt to whom the song was directed.

"It's sad to think that in the most powerful democracy in the world only about 50 percent partake in the democratic system. If you can't vote for someone, you'd better vote against someone," added Bragg through a strong round of applause.

Aside from his current musical mission, Bragg went into the hall of some 1,500 fans with a set chock-full of his non-conformist ideology. He peeled off each tune quickly, never once showing a lull in his vast supply of energy.

His beaten, fat-sounding electric guitar belted out favorites such as "Sherlie," a song he claims is about safe sex and socialism.

### REVIEW

Then, all Bragg needed to do was stop singing the chorus of the already classic "A New England" for the crowd to take over. Not a mouth was shut. Not a word was missed.

Pregnant pianist Cara Tivey joined Bragg in several new songs from his latest album, "Workers Playtime (Capitalism Is Killing Music)." On "Valentine's Day is Over," Bragg addressed what he claimed is economic and personal brutality in Margaret Thatcher's England.

And on "Great Leap Forward," Ms. Ti-

vey's piano work added a rich, full sound to this synopsis of where Bragg's work now stands, and where it may be heading.

Before the song, Bragg barked, "How am I to go about my work when I'm in the same industry as Belinda Carlisle?"

No matter who holds ground in the music industry, it appears Bragg will let no one stand in his way. He has a personal commitment to open eyes to the harsh realities of his world.

Bragg's reluctant social conscience was the perfect headliner for this well-rounded show that also featured East Texas' singing-songwriting sensation Michelle Shocked.

Ms. Shocked could have very well headlined the show herself. The guitar she toted onstage appeared to be twice as big as her,

yet she handled it as if the proportions were reversed.

Her well received set was loaded with down-home tales of East Texas as well as characters she's met while living out her almost vagabond lifestyle.

"Memories of East Texas" is a touching tale of learning to drive a stick-shift and other obstacles of adolescence, while "Making Trouble for the Volunteer Fire Department" is an amusing account of the time she and her friend Eddie were throwing matches into dry grass. What resulted is obvious.

Ms. Shocked is an accomplished songwriter who produces many innovative, addictive licks with just a few chords. She is a new acoustic force whose entertaining work demands attention.