

Bragging rights earned

By ROB TANNENBAUM

ROCK review

IN England, Billy Bragg is already famous as the punky social activist songwriter who mixes the doctrines of Vladimir Lenin and John Lennon, Karl Marx and Groucho Marx. In America, where socialism is pretty much limited to freshman courses, Bragg's is forced to focus on more immediate issues.

Bragg, 31, came on stage at the Beacon Theatre Wednesday night wearing a T-shirt which read "Silence=Death," the motto of ACT UP, a gay activist group to whom a portion of the ticket proceeds were donated. But it could just as well serve as the personal motto: Bragg frequently stopped to lecture the crowd against apathy, encouraging them to vote for

Michael Dukakis.

If Bragg's goal was to bait his crowd of Manhattan Bohemians into considering the extent of their social engagement, the playful lyrics of "Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards" (which concludes "join the struggle while you may/the revolution is just a T-shirt away") may have done the job.

Michelle Shocked, who also appeared, is an expatriate Texan whose blend of acoustic talkin'-country-blues with hints of Irish balladry is far more engaging live than on her disappointingly thin new album, "Short Sharp Shocked," and, like Bragg, she tries to motivate the jaded young

generation that is her audience by tapping the ageless tradition of topical songwriting.