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So you wanna be a rock'n'roll star...

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Lucy Davies advises would-be protest songwriters on a chance to get their voice heard at Glastonbury 2007

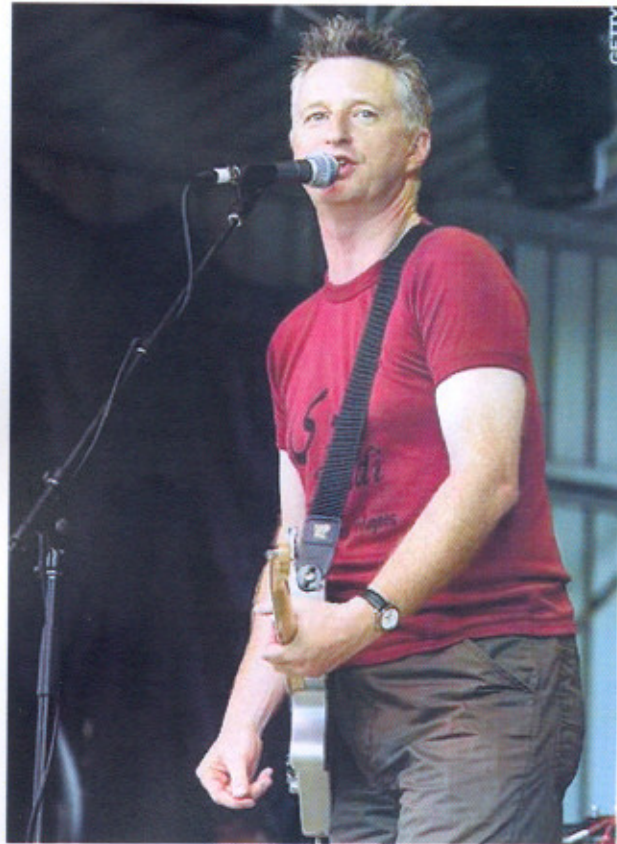
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Protest rock veteran Billy Bragg has teamed up with charity Youth Music to create a unique opportunity for teenagers to form a band at Glastonbury 2007. Winners have to write their own modern-day protest song, to be performed on the Left Field stage on the final day of the festival.

So does he think teenagers these days need spurring into action? "When we were doing Red Wedge in the '80s, all these people said, 'Young people today, they aren't political at all - look what we did in the '60s.' And more people went on the 2003 anti-war march than ever went marching against Thatcher or for the miners. I've never seen such numbers."

The winning entrants will meet for the first time on the Thursday of the festival, spending two hours a day rehearsing with Bragg, Get Cape Wear Cape Fly and Jerry Dammers (who wrote Free Nelson Mandela) until they perform before what could be a terrifying crowd. More than 175,000 people have registered for tickets: for any would-be musician, this could be a life-changing opportunity.

Bragg has spent the past few years mentoring school children in the art of songwriting in Dorset, where he lives. "They hum their tune, you play it, and at the end of it you have a concert. It's incredibly moving. We have parents in tears saying, 'How did you get my daughter to stand up there and sing like that?' And I'm like, I didn't do anything, she did it. And you can see the effect it has on someone's confidence, how they can suddenly express what they think."



Advice: Billy Bragg

And how will he and his fellow mentors be helping the winners? "The thing I've found about songwriting is, if you can get them to get stuff down on paper, it's a lot easier to help them to articulate their thoughts in a way that helps them feel confident about what they're saying.

advertisement "We want them to choose the topics, come up with imagery. Then we'll step in, because it's a big leap getting up on a stage and saying, 'This is what I believe in', whether you're in a comprehensive in a Bedminster or a prison, or at Glastonbury festival."

Bragg hopes the Left Field stage will also raise money for Jail Guitar Doors, the initiative he set up to raise money to buy guitars for prison inmates. He's particularly focused on Shepton Mallet, the lifers' prison near Glastonbury, whose inmates can, poignantly perhaps, hear the festival when it's in full swing.

"The great thing about playing a guitar," he says, "is that, whether you're in a prison cell or in the upstairs bedroom of your parents' house, playing it can take you out of your environment to somewhere else."

So what advice would he give to a would-be protest-penner? "A good political song needs to articulate something through the personal experience of a character. It allows the listener to identify."

He names Bruce Springsteen's post-Sept 11 album *The Rising* as an example: "He expressed a lot of sentiments in the first person, as a firefighter who didn't feel he was a hero, or as a family member whose loved one didn't come home.

"That's more powerful than making a slogan. There's a time and a place for sloganeering, but, if you want to get down and personal, up close to someone, that's what works."

- To enter this competition, you must be aged 14 to 18. Full information and entry forms can be found at www.thesoundstation.org.uk/jsp/buildaband/index1.html. Closing date is March 30.

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