



***Tooth & Nail* proves more personal than political** By Marya Errin Jones for The Weekly Alibi

-- Struggle and revolution don't always happen in the streets. Sometimes, undertaking the inner campaign is the more difficult and worthier battle. Singer/songwriter Billy Bragg returns to Albuquerque—specifically the KiMo—on Sunday, just a few days after the release of his 10th album. Don't expect a fist-pumping/protesting/the-revolution-will-be-live-streamed sort of record. *Tooth & Nail*, produced by Joe Henry in his brick and mortar

basement studio in Pasadena, Calif., is the most intimate Bragg album to date. The motor that drives it isn't the promise of a new world paradigm achieved through political upheaval. Here, Bragg delivers songs of emotional endurance and persistence. Within these tunes lies a compass for righting and guiding one's boat ... after floating oar-less and unmoored.

In 2010, Bragg prepared to embark on the follow-up to 2008's *Mr. Love and Justice* with a pluckiness to his guitar stroke, his trademark lyrical juxtaposition of irony and honesty and a gentle but firm demand for justice for the little guy. Then, his mother passed away, and the world stopped spinning. I know what that's like. My father passed away—suddenly—a few years ago. It happened right after my return from a tiny island in the Inner Hebrides, on the west coast of Scotland. I hadn't even unpacked yet. I only got to see my father in death. I didn't get the chance to say goodbye. For weeks, my left arm surged intermittently with electricity—like I had a short or something—and I couldn't tell if I was merely receiving these impulses or sending them out. My grief flared within me; I was a human Tesla coil, sparking invisible arcs. I carried on, but it was a long while before I stopped feeling like a part of me had died. I suppose that's what happens when someone sharing your DNA stops transmitting the code that connects you.

After talking to Bragg for a few minutes, I realized we'd jumped the interviewer-and-subject track. We were suddenly chatting like regular people, like friends catching up. And my recording device didn't capture a word of it. Toward the conversation's end, he shared something personal—something that might someday become trivia thrown into a press release or a board game—but it will never be trivial to him. So, I'll keep that in confidence. That's what a good friend would do. We mostly talked about our parents, our processes and how we carry on.

Created in the aftermath of Bragg's loss is *Tooth & Nail*, and it's a powerful process that leads to work this brilliant. This record isn't about this universal and inevitable heartbreak, but it asks questions like: "How do I go on?" "How will I persist?" and "What really matters?" Such inquiries aren't answered with an orchestral anthem; they're navigated delicately in a small boat—around the visible jagged edges of icebergs—knowing the rugged shank below cuts leagues deep into dark water. Sail on or sink.

As ominous as all this sounds, *Tooth & Nail* isn't a bleak record. It's just a true one. "Goodbye, Goodbye" is as close to the vest and heartbreaking as its title suggests. Meanwhile, "No One Knows Nothing Anymore" lands on solid ground; it unfurls and unfolds like the deserted, two-lane, panoramic highways of a dwindling American West—as only a steel guitar's whine can properly underscore. Henry's full-bodied, lyrical recording and producing style urged Bragg in a vocally expansive direction. At times, it pushes him beyond his comfort zone, and his voice cracks—reaching—trying to fulfill a promise. Bragg's a man of his word and his follow-through delivers an unexpected rawness that's pure and rough-hewn, like barn wood.

"Your Name On My Tongue" acknowledges the past—"Grief was my companion, it pushed me like a sea"—while its waltz time expresses a loving resolve to move forward without forgetting. Expect songs addressing life's big questions. These compositions are epic, without requiring a full orchestra or the structure of an aural crinoline to shore them up.

The arrangements give you space to think and time to rest your head against the passenger-side window and watch the prairie roll on. This is an old growth record made from smoky, soulful oak. Think of it as an ancient cask of rich sonic whiskey; every time you take a drink, there's more in your cup to savor ... if you just wait a minute. *Tooth & Nail* is a collection of crossroads songs that call on you to choose a path—even if you thought you were already on it.
