



P E R F O R M E R S

BILLY JOEL

Billy Joel comes off as such a determinedly average guy that it's tempting to undervalue his extraordinary gifts. A straight-shooting product of suburban Long Island, he's studiously resisted cultivating a rock-star persona or anything that smacks of showbiz artifice. Instead, he's hewed to his calling as a songwriter, keyboardist and singer with as straightforward a disposition as someone who's sold nearly a hundred million records can muster. As an artist, Joel has exhibited stylistic daring and impeccable musicianship while assembling one of the great catalogs of popular songs in this century. His induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame confirms his expressed desire to make music that "meant something during the time in which I lived . . . and to be able to transcend that time." His is already a formidable legacy and yet one that remains a work in progress as he moves on to the next round of self-imposed challenges. Lately that has meant creating instrumental pieces in a classical style inspired by Nineteenth-Century Romantic composers like Schubert – not exactly Top Forty material, but then again we're talking about Billy Joel, so you never know. ⤵ Joel is an amalgam of seemingly opposing qualities that, in fact, betoken an artist of range and complexity: He is the bittersweet pop crooner of "Piano Man"; the jazz-tinged romantic of "Just the Way You Are"; and the composer of lacerating hard rock ("Big Shot"), ambitious pop miniatures in the vein of the later Beatles (*The Nylon Curtain*) and open-hearted homages to the golden age of Top Forty rock & soul (*An Innocent Man*). His style is a mosaic, an aggregate of the many different sounds he's adopted and interpreted over the years. ⤵ The complexities multiply when Joel's life is examined in closer detail. As a youth he was both a classically trained pianist and an amateur pugilist. He is a well-read autodidact who didn't finish high school

Singer, songwriter
and keyboardist
Billy Joel, on tour
in Minneapolis,
October 17, 1978

B Y P A R K E P U T E R B A U C H





because of his chronic truancy, a result of playing till dawn in working bands. For much of his professional life, Joel has attired himself in the unassuming, well-tailored threads of a blues-loving hipster, though there were those early years when he affected psychedelic vestments with his band the Hassles and donned the bulky armor of a marauding Hun with the short-lived group Attila. His influences include Beethoven, the Beatles, Broadway musicals, Dave Brubeck, George Gershwin, Phil Spector and Ray Charles — one no less significant to him than the other. Reviewers have found both sentimentality and arrogance in his work. He is as sharp as a tack but also has naively blundered into bad business arrangements. Joel has been branded a poet and a punk, the “bard of the ’burbs” and an international superstar.

William Martin Joel was born on May 9, 1949, in the Bronx. He was the son of a German Jew whose family immigrated to America by way of Cuba when the Nazi campaign of anti-Semitism in the late Thirties forced them to flee their homeland. The Joels moved from the Bronx to Hicksville, near Levittown, in what was a prototypical suburban neighborhood of nearly identical tract homes. The placid surface of the Joels’ suburban dream was broken when Howard Joel left the family, moving to Vienna. Eight-year-old Billy Joel found himself in the then unusual situation of inhabiting a one-parent household, which undoubtedly fueled his rebellious streak as well as triggered in him degrees of both hardness and sensitivity.

Joel evinced an early affinity for the piano and began taking lessons (against his will) at four. The training would continue until



This page: With the Hassles, ca. 1968; Opposite, top: Debut Columbia recording artist; with Jon Small in Attila

he was sixteen, by which time Joel was already a veteran of a name-changing rock & roll band: the Echoes, then the Emerald Lords and finally, the Lost Souls. In 1967 Joel was invited to join a popular Long Island bar band, the Hassles, which played blue-eyed psychedelic soul. After the Hassles recorded two albums for United Artists, *The Hassles* (1967) and *Hour of the Wolf* (1969), Joel and drummer Jon Small left to form Attila, an organ-and-drums duo that cut one hard ‘n’ heavy LP for Epic (sample lyric: “I spit



on those who call me names"). Thereupon, a bout of near-suicidal depression and a brief internment in a mental ward drove Joel to the saner pastures of the budding early-Seventies singer/songwriter movement. His debut, *Cold Spring Harbor*, was cut in California with an impressive cast of session players and released on the Family Productions label.

Poor distribution and a bad mastering job that resulted in sped-up vocals ensured the LP's obscurity, while an oppressive managerial contract and dwindling revenues drove the frustrated Joel to vanish. For six months, he labored as a lounge pianist in L.A. under the pseudonym Bill Martin, pecking out standards for a gallery of lost souls drink-

ing their troubles away. Joel emerged from the experience with a slice-of-life song about his suffocating gig as a piano man that, ironically, vaulted him to the kind of stardom that guaranteed he'd never have to play such places again. At this point, Joel's solo career gained focus and momentum as he signed with Columbia and recorded *Piano Man*. The title track peaked at Number 25; the album reached Number 27.

With the ascent of "Piano Man" Joel inaugurated a run of hit singles that, for its time, is almost without equal in extent and duration. From 1974 to 1993, Joel had at least one single hovering somewhere in the Top Forty in each of those twenty years but three. Joel has racked up almost enough hits — thirty-three, to date — to fill his own

Top Forty treasure chest. Thirteen have made the Top Ten, and three climbed to Number One: "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me" (1980), "Tell Her About It" (1983) and "We Didn't Start the Fire" (1989). Joel recently tied the Beatles for the most multiplatinum albums in the United States.

This is a remarkable accomplishment for several reasons. First, Joel has maintained all along that he is, by his own estimation, an album artist who doesn't write with an audience in mind. Given that logic, it may seem surprising that so many of his extracted nuggets have hit the Top Forty target over the years. But Joel's track record owes much to his unflinching knack as a pop craftsman, regardless of context. Second, Joel (like Elton John) connected with a mass audience as a pianist. The uncharismatic piano, an immobile eighty-eight-keyed leviathan, lacks the visceral impact of the electric guitar,





Left: Joel answering questions from Russian reporters before performing the first of three concerts in Moscow, 1987; Bottom: At Madison Square Garden, 1998

which was the currency of the realm during rock's Seventies reign. Third, Joel has survived tumultuous shifts in musical trends that have engulfed popular music, from the zebra-striped, garage-pop affectations of the early-Eighties new wave (lampooned, to the consternation of critics, in "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me") to the sea change that has elevated alternative rock, gangsta rap and teenybop pop like Hanson and 'N Sync to youth culture's center stage in this decade. Finally, Joel succeeded for many years without the support of critics; in fact, the gulf between artist and rock-crit intelligentsia erupted into open, acrimonious feuding. Peacetime came with the near-unanimous praise accorded such works as *The Nylon Curtain* and *An Innocent Man*.

With Joel's induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, perhaps his ongoing critical reappraisal will be retroactively extended to some of his underappreciated albums of the Seventies. In par-

ticular, his third Columbia LP, *Turnstiles*, merits a closer listen. Released in 1976, the year of the Bicentennial, it is one of the more insightful mirrors to have been held up to American society by a rock & roller at that historic juncture. With the benefit of hindsight, it now looks to be one of the quintessential albums of the Seventies.

Even 1977's *The Stranger*, though it sold extravagantly — enough to make it the biggest-selling long player in Columbia's history for a time, outdistancing Simon and Garfunkel's *Bridge Over Troubled Water* — has never been properly accorded its due as a polished and innovative piece of music. With its fluid, jazzy, melodic pop sheen and compositional cunning, it mined a well-manicured mother lode similar to that of Steely Dan's *Aja*, minus the irony. From that point forward, one can skip down the years along the milestones of a hit-



studded career, nodding with pleasure at the nuanced, pure-pop gait of "Allentown," the irresistible sing-along whimsicality of "Uptown Girl," the affectionate street-corner harmonies of "The Longest Time," the heads-up message of "You're Only Human (Second Wind)," the rapid-patter history lesson of "We Didn't Start the Fire," the hard-rocking self-examination of "I Go to Extremes" and the exotic swirl of voices coursing

through "River of Dreams."

Where his river flows next is anyone's guess, but it will be fascinating to chart the further progress of this willing prisoner of the muse. "Music is more than enough for me," Joel promised in 1993, "and I will spend the rest of my life exploring it and being enchanted by it." *



