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BingeListening Billy Joel: "Cold Spring Harbor" and "Piano Man"

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Do you love Billy Joel? Hate him? Is he overrated or under-appreciated? And no matter where you stand on this hugely popular artist, when was the last time you sat down and listened to his albums, rather than grabbing a greatest hits set or saying "Alexa, play Billy Joel" and letting an algorithm do your work for you? That's why we're BingeListening to Billy Joel: to use the latest technology of streaming so we can refocus on the classic format of the album. We'll see how Billy Joel holds up after all these years and work our way from his disastrous debut *Cold Spring Harbor* to his graceful bow with *River Of Dreams*.

And what better week to begin? This marks the anniversary of when Billy Joel was in the studio recording the song that would be his first taste of pop success and a signature tune he's sung ever since. Yes, Joel was in Los Angeles in 1973 recording the song "Piano Man" on Sept 17-20 and put the final touches on it Sept 26. So how does he sound today? Let's find out. Add your comments at the bottom and tell us what you think?



COLD SPRING HARBOR * 1/2 out of **** for recording but maybe ** out of **** for the songs

Side One

"She's Got A Way"

"You Can Make Me Free"

“Everybody Loves You Now”

“Why Judy Why”

Side Two

“Turn Around”

“You Look So Good To Me”

“Tomorrow Is Today”

“Nocturne”

“Got To Begin Again”

Billy Joel’s debut album was a fiasco, funded on a dime and locking Joel into an onerous contract it would take him ages and all sorts of skullduggery to escape. But the real tragedy is the recording itself. Due to technical incompetence and ultimately indifference, his vocals were mastered at a higher, speeded-up level that makes Joel sound like a chirpy little pre-teen, more Alvin and the Chipmunks than rock and roll. (When the problem was spotted, no one wanted to fork over the money to fix it.) Even friends gathered with Joel to celebrate his first album burst out laughing when they heard the trills of his embarrassing sounding voice. Joel himself smashed the album to pieces.

It’s hard to imagine how devastating that would be. But it’s possible having the album sink without a trace was a blessing in disguise, a dry run for an artist who would blossom on his second turn at bat. It came out in 1971 and everyone involved — everyone but Joel, obviously — decided he would be a soft rock troubadour. They ignored songs he’d already written, more propulsive tunes like “Travelin’ Prayer,” “The Ballad of Billy The Kid” and “Captain Jack” for Pete’s sake! In their place? Softer, gentler, sometimes wimpier tunes. Joel wanted to be Ray Charles or Jerry Lee Lewis (and everyone wanted to be Elvis). But the masterminds of this debut wanted someone in the mold of a poor man’s James Taylor. If things had gone a little differently and Joel had some initial success, he might have been forever handcuffed by that first impression on fans. Various attempts have been made over the years to improve or fix this album, including a 1983 remix that fiddled with the pitch and overdubbed musicians, as well as later CD and LP reissues of varying quality. Joel to my knowledge has not been involved in any of them.

While the vocals on *Cold Spring Harbor* are an insurmountable obstacle to actually enjoying this album (why oh why didn’t Joel record the entire album again in concert way back then?), there’s another problem. The lyrics. Time and again, the songwriting is vague and collegiate, the mark of someone who isn’t really writing about what they’ve lived but rather what they’ve read about. The word play is basic — “Tomorrow is today,” for example, which almost sounds meaningful. Or the not-so-puzzling realization that “I never asked for much

before, not before/ Things have changed, I need more/ Tell me why, Judy why.” And if there’s a young man in a song you can bet an old man will be coming up right behind. (Though that happens, unfortunately, on the next album.) I’m certain Joel would be more than happy to take back the opening lines of Side One closer “Falling Of The Rain,” which are “Once upon a time in the land of misty satin dreams....”

For all those youthful flaws, one thing saves *Cold Spring Harbor* and gives hope for the future. The melodies. Song after song may have lyrics that slip by unnoticed but the melodies lodge in your brain. “Everybody Loves You Now” is a nasty little stinger about a guy who mocks a girl (after she rejects him, of course) and it actually rocks out. “You Can Make Me Free” is way too long at more than six minutes but it too has energy to spare. The bridge on the gospel-ish “Tomorrow Is Today” was always a favorite moment, if only because his voice dips way down so for just a brief few seconds we hear a voice that actually sort of sounds like Billy Joel. And it too, has a rolling melody we latch onto, as does the lyrically feeble “Falling of the Rain.” The closer “Got To Begin Again” has a lovely tune. Joel is always good at ending his albums and this one sounds worthy of Barry Manilow at his catchiest.

And then there’s “She’s Got A Way,” the opening track to the album which has a graceful melody for the ages (it’s one of only two Joel tunes we can call a standard) and that intriguing coda of a word. “I know that I can’t live without her...anyway.” That “anyway” adds a note of uncertainty and diffidence or perhaps just resignation to the fact that it doesn’t matter if he can’t explain what he loves about her. He’s caught but good. Joel hated the strings on the album and other touches. But actually the strings on this song are restrained and quite effective. Here at least you get a glimpse of what’s to come.

Cold Spring Harbor has a clutch of pretty good melodies and one song that’s a sure fire hit. (It took a live album and a new recording a decade later to make it a hit, but so what?) You wouldn’t quite bet the house on Joel based on these ten tracks. Maybe he got lucky with “She’s Got A Way” and maybe the lyrics would never get better. But it’s not every day you hear a standard from an unknown artist so you’d be a fool to bet against him.

NOTE: Ok, now I’m not even sure what I listened to all those years ago. I bought this album on cassette, shook my head at the squeaky vocals and moved on. I never bought it on CD (why would I?) and so the news of the album’s mishap and later official and unofficial “fixes” passed me by. When I dug into Spotify, the music sounded as I remembered it all those years ago so I assumed it was the original mix. Nope apparently it’s the 1983 butchering by the producer that’s included there. So apparently I’ve been listening to that version for all these years. Joel disavows pretty much all of them anyway. But it sure would be nice to give a listen to a version that was based on the original master tapes and done with Joel’s approval, rather than the bootlegs out there that fiddle with the playback speed of virgin vinyl copies to approximate Joel’s real voice at the top or — worse — the slapping on of overdubs by the producer who messed things up in the first place.



PIANO MAN *** 1/2 out of ****

Side One

“Travelin’ Prayer”

“Piano Man”

“Ain’t No Crime”

“You’re My Home”

“The Ballad Of Billy The Kid”

Side Two

“Worse Comes To Worst”

“Stop In Nevada”

“If I Only Had The Words (To Tell You)”

“Somewhere Along The Line”

“Captain Jack”

What the heck happened? Few acts make a leap in songwriting the way Billy Joel did from his debut album to *Piano Man*. He transformed from a fairly anonymous lyricist offering up generic ideas of love to a sharp observer of real life. Suddenly Joel was drawing upon his own experience and the experience of those around him, progressing from moon-spoon-June rhymes that could be about anyone to songs filled with telling details and arresting imagery. “I need you in my house cause you’re my home” is a subtler play on words (and more meaningful) than anything on *Cold Spring Harbor*. On “Ain’t No Crime” he is done with fanciful pure love and stating bluntly, “Well, now you tell me you love somebody/ And you’ll love ‘em forever/ You may love ‘em

forever/ but you won't like 'em all of the time." My god, he even mentions masturbating in "Captain Jack!" This is far away from the moonlit glades and true romance of yore.

This leap in ability is capped by the lyrics of "Piano Man," a song that folks who aren't ardent fans of Billy Joel apparently feel they've heard more than enough, thank you very much. It's filled with good lines, like the old man "making love to his tonic and gin" or the bartender who starts to bemoan life "as a smile ran away from his face." Oh, you know the lines even if you don't want to, don't you? It's observant, pungent, lived-in and understandably gave Joel his first Top 40 hit.

The album begins with "Travelin' Prayer," a terrific road song powered by a banjo of all things. The country influence is partly due to the session musicians playing on the album. But if you're confused as to why Joel is singing "The Ballad Of Billy The Kid" (not to mention Steely Dan also drawing upon imagery of the Old West and even Elton John going country and imagining himself fixing up a barn!), keep in mind that acts of the 1970s grew up surrounded by Westerns on TV and at the movies. I mean *literally* surrounded, with sometimes most of the Top 10 shows in the late 1950s and early 1960s being in that genre. The Western was part of the landscape, even for a kid born in the Bronx. "Travelin' Prayer" kicks things off very well; gone is the balladeer of the first, mostly unheard album and here is Billy Joel pounding out a tune on the piano. It's so good that Dolly Parton covered it on her excellent bluegrass album *The Grass Is Blue*. And when one of the best songwriters of all time covers your tune, you're doing something right.

It's followed by "Piano Man." Everyone can identify with longing for something more, which may explain the song's enduring appeal. But this isn't a dive bar and the cast of characters aren't lovable losers a la Tom Waits. They're not the lowlifes just this side of the law you'll find in Bruce Springsteen or the literary archetypes peopled in Bob Dylan's world. They're folks stopping for a drink on the way home to their families or businessmen looking for a little company. As Joel sings, "Yes they're sharing a drink they call loneliness/ But it's better than drinking alone." But that businessman has a job, as does the guy who sells real estate and pretty much everyone else. (Of course, a "real estate novelist" turns out to be a guy who works in real estate but dreams of writing the Great American Novel. I always imagined it was a guy who made up fanciful descriptions of his dodgy properties, like swamp land in Florida or maybe a "cozy" one bedroom which means it has just enough room for you to stretch out your arms and touch the walls.) They're not barflies, just people getting by.

I think this is key to recognizing Joel's unique territory for his songs: suburbia, regular folk who work 9 to 5 and pay the mortgage and raise their kids. It ain't romantic or larger than life; they're not born to run though they might jog every once in a while, god help 'em. People love to imagine overpowering romance or grand escapes and a lot of pop songs offer that. Joel just offers them a glimpse of themselves. Artists will always celebrate the gritty excitement of the big city or the wholesome appeal of the small town. And sure, plenty of folk from Merle Haggard on down will speak up for the common man. But suburbia? The folks who live in Queens and the Bronx or in suburbs all over the country? If it's mentioned at all, suburbia is a symbol of conformity and boredom — a straitjacket you should struggle against. "Piano Man" is the first glimmer that regular people with everyday lives would be his turf. And sure, the song borders on a little self-pitying or self-

aggrandizing. ("Man, what are *you* doing here?") But most of the characters are right where they belong and Joel backs up his boast with a tune and chorus that had everyone singing along by the end. You may be tired of "Piano Man," but it's a great song.

The album has plenty more. Listen to *Piano Man* with fresh ears and what's interesting is how little he repeats himself stylistically. Country, rock, soft rock, singer-songwriter, a little soul — it's all here. The female backup singers on "Ain't No Crime" and other tracks add a very welcome color to the sound, one he didn't use much in the years to come. "Worse Comes To Worst" also benefits from the slinky arrangement of vocals and instruments as well as its intriguing drawn-from-real-life line "I know a woman in New Mexico." It's the perfect detail. On *Cold Spring Harbor*, we knew what every line meant but it wasn't very interesting. Here, we can only guess who that woman is (lover? friend?), but it's a lot more fun to wonder about and we buy the idea — this guy has options of some sort.

The ballad "She's Got A Way" wasn't a fluke either. Joel was eager to rock out and show what he could do, but that didn't mean he'd throw away a good slow number. The first album became soggy by the end. But surrounded by rockers and upbeat tunes, the quiet songs sound all the better here. "You're My Home" is a lovely one inspired by Joel's trek across country to hide out in LA until he could get out of his first record deal. It's also inspired by the fact that he couldn't afford a gift for his girlfriend, so a song would have to do. And "If I Only Had The Words (To Tell You)" manages the nice trick of declaring his love by sheepishly pretending he'd never find the right lines to express what he feels.

You can hear the bigger budget Columbia offered thanks to the Copland-esque orchestral scoring on "The Ballad Of Billy The Kid." It's a satisfying if atypical song for him, a portrait of the famous outlaw undercutting his fame by pointing out that Billy the Kid died alone. Then Joel undercuts the grand sweep of the song entirely by cheekily referencing his own life, swapping out the six-guns of an outlaw for a six-pack.

The un-lived, I-read-it-in-a-book nature of the first album's lyrics only pop up here and there, mainly the fleeting (and forced) reference to Coleridge in the otherwise straightforward "You're More Home" and the unconvincing scene-setting of "Somewhere Along The Line," where he sings "Well, it's a rainy night in Paris/ And I'm sitting by the Seine."

Most of it is much better than that. I especially like "Stop In Nevada," a song about a woman escaping an unhappy marriage. That stop in Nevada is for a divorce of course, but beyond that who knows what the future holds? As the song says, "And she doesn't know what's comin' / But she sure knows what she's leavin' behind."

And think about the people in his songs. (I won't call them *characters* because they're not larger than life the way characters in songs can become.) In "Ain't No Crime," our hero is a guy who drank too much and fell asleep on the floor. "And then your lady comes and finds you a sleepin' / Starts into weeping 'bout the hours you been keeping / And you better get your ass out the door." They've fought before and they'll fight again, you're certain. "Worse Comes To Worst" is about a guy with few obligations and fewer worries, though even

he knows he better have a backup plan.

The raucous album closer is “Captain Jack,” not a song I’ve ever been a fan of. Now back in the days of cassettes and eight tracks and eventually compact discs (never vinyl, my loss) I was not one for skipping tracks. My sister Libet might demand I fast forward through a song if it was too slow — and that meant anything less than fast. But she was the driver and so fast forward I would...yet it seemed rude. Even today, I would no more skip over a track on an album than I’d skip a chapter in a novel. She probably had me skip “Captain Jack” a fair amount of times (“Put on *Glass Houses!*”) and if honest I’d admit I didn’t mind so much. For a long time I thought the phrase “Captain Jack” meant masturbation (which he mentions in the song) rather than heroin and that amused/scandalized my Catholic boy self. But the comedown of the would be hipsters (“But still your finger’s gonna pick your nose”) felt a little crude, a little obvious to me. And the music sounded too grandiose for my tastes. I couldn’t have said why but now that I listen to it again and think about who Billy Joel is singing about (and to whom he’s singing), it’s clearer to me. This isn’t a song about outcasts and punks; it’s about the suburban wannabes who do a little sightseeing on the wild side and then catch the last train home. So why all the angst?

Springsteen would have been right at ease among the losers and dreamers and punks of Greenwich Village observed in this track. But Billy Joel’s bridge and tunnel characters gawk at the spectacle, get a little reflected rebellious glory...and then head right back home again. Yeah, they’re doing some hard drugs (the heroin referenced in the title), but you get the sense it’s just a taste of someone else’s life. Even the vicarious fun of taking a peek at the nuttiness on display will end soon for most and be replaced by marriage and work and family. Other artists celebrate the lure of the open highway. But Joel knows that isn’t real life for most. He writes, “So you decide to take a holiday/ You got your tape deck and your brand new Chevrolet/ Ah, but there’s no place to go anyway/ And what for....”

In other words, run away? Are you nuts? They’ve got rent to pay and a girlfriend and they might get a promotion in a couple of months (or years). It’s not a thrilling life for the folks who stop by the bar on their way home in “Piano Man.” But it’s life. They’re not trapped in suburbia; they choose it because there’s more room for the kids and maybe a dog. Escape? To what? Anywhere you go, the rent is going to be due. It’s not a glamorous world filled with spectacle and daring and big dreams. But it’s their life, the life most people lead. Joel celebrates it like few others, without condescension or irony and I think that’s why his fanbase is so passionate and enduring.

The album *Piano Man* wasn’t a big seller. It would take five albums, a lot of touring and some good luck before he finally broke through for good. But this album gave him a clutch of songs that provided the backbone for his concerts for decades to come. Anyone intrigued by the even lower-charting *Streetlife Serenade* or the blink and you missed it *Turnstiles*, anyone who heard good things and saw him in concert eventually bought *Piano Man* and was happily surprised.

Without that remarkable leap in songwriting and a much more muscular sound, Joel might have faded into obscurity before he even began. It almost happened anyway but *Piano Man* was a life preserver, the source of

six or seven very good songs and one or two great ones. Joel marked out his territory — middle class people, working folk without the halo of nobility. They were getting by and that was enough and Billy Joel sang about it.

So tell us what you think? Did you ever listen to *Cold Spring Harbor* before? *Piano Man*? If so, did you like it more or less today? What song or songs would you skip and did you find any new favorites? Did you stream Cold Spring Harbor on Apple or Amazon? What version do you think they're sharing?

Here's Dolly Parton with a spirited live version of "Travelin' Prayer."

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