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# BingeListening Billy Joel: "Streetlife Serenade" and "Turnstiles"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel! Why? Because the classic album format deserves some love in this age of playlists and random videos. Sure, you can say, "Alexa, play Joni Mitchell" and get a perfectly fine random mishmash of Joni Mitchell songs. But that's nowhere near as satisfying as playing an actual Joni Mitchell album like *Blue* or *Court and Spark* or *Clouds* or a number of others. So start bingeing!

Day 1: "Cold Spring Harbor" and "Piano Man"

Today: "Streetlife Serenade" and "Turnstiles"



**STREETLIFE SERENADE** \* out of \*\*\*\*

Side One

"Streetlife Serenader"

"Los Angelenos"

"The Great Suburban Showdown"

“Root Beer Rag”

“Roberta”

Side Two

“The Entertainer”

“Last Of The Big Time Spenders”

“Weekend Song”

“Souvenir”

“The Mexican Connection”

Billy Joel saved the sophomore slump (and then some) for his third album. He must have been a puzzle to critics, assuming they actually heard *Cold Spring Harbor*. That album was weaker than it should have been because Joel’s then-label wanted a gentle, soft rock sort of artist and ignored some of his best songs. So *Piano Man* was a lot stronger than it might have been, which also benefitted from the fact that Joel was hiding out in LA and had nothing to do but play local bars and write material. An actual hit single sent him out on the road and suddenly Columbia wanted a third album but Joel hadn’t had a moment to himself. The result? The worst album of his career.

I remember buying this one as a kid, paying \$6 or \$8 or whatever for the cassette and feeling very disappointed. I never bought the CD so here I am more than 30 years later giving it another shot. Hey, maybe I just wasn’t ready for the album! Maybe it’s more adult or downbeat and maybe...nope. It’s just not good. After breaking through artistically on *Piano Man* with songs that drew on his own life and the people he observed, here Joel offers up eight songs and two instrumentals that don’t convince for a moment. Lyrically, *Cold Spring Harbor* often felt like peeking at the poetry of a teenager — but at least that teenager had the courage of his sentimental convictions.

The first track here is “Streetlife Serenader,” which has a lovely opening melodic line that goes up on the second and third syllables and then falls back down again. “Street-LIFE SER-enader....” he sings pretty evocatively. It’s an ode to street corner doo-wop harmonizers and the like, guys who would gather with friends and just sing. Unfortunately, it’s a modest idea that goes nowhere and takes more than five minutes to do it. In a bad choice, the opener is followed immediately by “Los Angelenos,” another song that ALSO has an evocative opening melodic line that rises and falls in a very similar way to the opener. (“Los AN-GE-lenos....”) They’re hardly identical but they are similar enough right at the start that putting them back to back makes the album feel repetitive after just two songs. “Los Angelenos” is a sketchy portrait of the denizens of the city, who all come from somewhere else. It too has very little to say and none of it original.

“The Great Suburban Showdown” has a promising title. But as with much of the album, Joel’s vocals are poorly recorded — he sounds a little constricted and pinched throughout. It’s about visiting the family after you’ve moved away and thus feeling out of place. Our hero begrudges the time spent sitting in the kitchen and hearing the same old stories. With nothing to bitch about except a dad who pays too much attention to the crabgrass on the lawn, the final vow that the singer will never ever visit his family again feels unearned and out of left field. You think, “What? Really? He’s *never* going to visit his family again? Did I miss something?”

And on it goes. “Roberta” is about falling hard for a prostitute but not being able to afford her time. You don’t buy it for a second. “Last Of The Big Time Spenders” says this guy may be broke but he spends all his time with his sweetheart so that has to count for *something*! It’s not a bad idea but it’s poorly developed.

“Weekend Song” should be in Joel’s sweet spot. But again he offers nothing remotely original to the idea of a working guy looking forward to a few days off. Tossed in are two instrumentals. The closing track “The Mexican Connection” feels awfully anonymous (it didn’t even deserve to be a B-side to the album’s single). And “Root Beer Rag” is a perfectly ok bit of faux ragtime (*The Sting* had been a big hit film and put Scott Joplin’s classic instrumental “The Entertainer” back on the charts the previous year.)

That leaves “Souvenir” and “The Entertainer” (Joel’s own tune, not Joplin’s). “Souvenir” is a brief, Simon & Garfunkel-ish plaintive number about the passing of the years. It would be a fine minor track on another album (time passes!) but feels almost like a gem here. Since Joel had a hit song about describing his life as a working musician, he clearly thought “Why not do it again?” “The Entertainer” is a pretty naked attempt to repeat his one commercial success of “Piano Man.” Last time Joel focused on the customers while this time he focuses on himself and some tiresome complaints about the music industry. Despite all of that, the song has a good melody and Joel sings with such bite (notably lacking elsewhere) that I kind of like it despite myself. Two not-bad songs out of ten and the sense that the well had run dry for Joel creatively was not encouraging news after three albums.



**TURNSTILES** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

Side One

“Say Goodbye To Hollywood”

“Summer, Highland Falls”

“All You Wanna Do Is Dance”

“New York State Of Mind”

Side Two

“James”

“Prelude/Angry Young Man”

“I’ve Loved These Days”

“Miami 2017 (Seen The Lights Go Out On Broadway)”

Working on his fourth album (and third for Columbia), you might imagine Joel’s back was up against the wall.

Yet clearly people in the industry still had faith in him. Read Fred Schruers' biography of Billy Joel and you'll discover he had a meeting with producer George Martin, who was ready to produce this album. George Martin! Of The Beatles! The sticking point? Martin insisted on using session musicians while Joel wanted to — finally — use the guys he toured with. They couldn't come to terms though the thought tantalizes. Joel did record the album with another producer...and members of Elton John's touring band. Then he dumped the results and started all over again, producing the album himself and — finally! — the guys he played with on tour night after night joined him in the studio.

NOTE: I saw Wikipedia repeated this George Martin story...but links it to the recording of *The Stranger*. That sent me back to the biography where the anecdote is used in the section talking about the making of *Turnstiles*. However, Joel was listing the many reasons Columbia Records might be getting annoyed by him at the time. He is quoted saying discussions with George Martin took place in 1973. That would mean Martin was considering coming on board for *Piano Man*, Joel's label debut. This actually makes more sense, as does Joel's loyalty to his band at the time. They'd done a live concert in Philly in 1972 that was aired on local radio station WMMR. The station pulled the performance of "Captain Jack" the concert and started playing it on the air. That song became the most requested tune in the station's history and the buzz surrounding the band was one of the key reasons Joel was signed by Columbia in the first place.

With Joel producing himself and the band finally in the studio with him, suddenly, Billy Joel's vocals sound more impassioned than ever, the drums of Liberty DeVitto are played with authority (something sorely lacking on the earlier records), the music covers a wide range stylistically without breaking a sweat and the lyrics are bursting with invention. The songs draw on Joel's own life and his move back to New York City. But they also venture into new territory, like the subtly ironic "I Loved These Days" and the un-categorizable finale "Miami 2017 (Seen The Lights Go Out On Broadway)." Is this Billy Joel's best album? Maybe. Later, they swapped out the "New York State Of Mind" sax solo for a new one on later editions of the album and on his greatest hits set. Plus, Joel and his band roar past the studio versions just five years later on their live album *Songs In The Attic*, which includes four songs from this album, more than any other.

Joel's faith in his band pays off right away with "Say Goodbye To Hollywood," Joel's kiss-off to LA. The thumping intro immediately demands attention, the reference to "a hot new rent-a-car" is clever and catchy and the sheer joy as he sings "Say goodbye to Hollywood" is infectious. That's followed by the flowing melody and gorgeous piano work on "Summer, Highland Falls." I tore apart some of the lyrically vague generalities on *Cold Spring Harbor* and honestly I could do the same here. The line "For all our mutual experience/ Our separate conclusions are the same" has never made a whit of sense to me. (Doesn't it seem reasonable that if you've had mutual experiences your conclusions would be the same?) But the damn thing just flows and there's a generosity of spirit here and a newfound maturity in lines like, "I've seen that sad surrender in my lover's eyes/ And I can only stand apart and sympathize" and so many other passages. It just works. Ask me for my favorite Billy Joel song and this is the one.

The good-natured "All You Wanna Do Is Dance" is another winner that's grown on me over the years. Joel deals with a girl who moans that the songs today aren't what they used to be. Who can't agree with "Why

don't the Beatles get back together?" especially when a quick "ooh-la-la" burst of background vocals tips the hat so deftly to the Fab Four? is it the nimble bass of Doug Stegmeyer, the vaguely Latin beat that puts it over the top? Joel's vocal has a warm reverb and it just *sounds* like New York City somehow. The clincher is in the details, like remembering the days when you couldn't even really hear all the words of your favorite song from a three inch speaker. Or how no one did hard drugs because "you were all getting sick on beer." And "You didn't get any/ Unless you went steady and made out for a year." Again, Joel hits pay-dirt by focusing on the quotidian details of suburban/real life. And that song is followed by "New York State Of Mind," a stone cold classic with one of Joel's greatest vocals and piano playing that shows he finally learned less can be more. He's not showing off; he's playing exactly what the song calls for.

Hell, that's just side one. Side two begins with "James," a song I always wanted more from. It feels a little soft to me, in every way. Still, his empathy for a friend who has always done what's expected of him is winning. Most rockers can't wait to escape and look back on the 9 to 5 with dread; Joel gently suggests maybe James should do more but knows the guy who has always been well-behaved isn't going to change, especially now that he has a family. Still Joel sings, "Do what's good for you/ Or you're not good for anybody" It's fine advice but good advice doesn't always make for a good song. Here's a classic example of telling rather than showing and the only weak song on the album.

For a key to why Joel has irked some critics for many years, I point to "Prelude/Angry Young Man." I think it's always stuck in their craw, even more than the bellyaching about the music industry, which to be fair is a perennial gripe for even the best artists. Unlike "New York State Of Mind," Joel really does show off on this song, starting with a thunderous piano solo that's showboating in the best sense. It relentlessly mocks the idea of the "angry young man" protestor of social injustice. "Give a moment or two to the angry young man/ With his foot in his mouth and his heart in his hand/ He's been stabbed in the back; he's been misunderstood/ It's a comfort to know his intentions are good."

Keep in mind, it's 1976. Nixon has been impeached, the Vietnam War has barely ended, women are fighting for equal rights and countless other issues of import have rocked the country and divided families and friends for years. In that context, Joel sings, "I believe I've passed the age of consciousness and righteous rage/ I found that just surviving was a noble fight/ I once believed in causes too/ I had my pointless point of view/ But life went on no matter who was wrong or right."

In essence, Joel is saying to some people, "Grow up!" But pointless point of view? Life goes on no matter who is wrong or right? Easy for you to say, Mr. Straight White Man! Here's the thing. The song isn't about any of those very important issues. It's about an angry young man. It's not about righteous causes. It's about *self-righteousness*, about people who love to argue and bicker and fight and can't be happy without someone to oppose. Joel sings, "There's always a place for the angry young man/ With his fist in the air and his head in the sand/ And he's never been able to learn from mistakes/ So he can't understand why his heart always breaks/ But his honor is pure and his courage as well/ And he's fair and he's true and boring as hell/ And he'll go to his grave as an angry old man."

Think of a college student for that certain sort of righteous indignation that only the young can muster. (God knows I did.) And those that can't outgrow that pose are what Joel has in mind. His audience can certainly identify with this song, whether they're kidding themselves as to why they've abandoned their ideals a la *The Big Chill* or have indeed found that just surviving is a noble fight — paying the bills doesn't allow them much time to stay on top of the latest issues, even if they'd prefer to do so. It's a somewhat subtler dig than most realize but I think in some way it has haunted Joel's reputation ever since among some critics.

Subtler still is the elegiac "I've Loved These Days." At least, it is *ironically* elegiac, if there is such a thing. Joel takes on the persona of those indulging in the high life (literally) but instead of glorying in it or mocking it he allows them to have their own wistful appreciation for how the good times never last. Let the song glide by and it generates a wave of nostalgia; pay more attention to the lyrics and you'll be put off kilter in a nice way by who is singing and what they're saying. With a melody that sweeps you up in its Gatsby allure — like one long look backwards even though it's all still happening — the song works.

Greater still is the finale "Miami 2017" in which Joel imagines New York City fallen into ruins from a perch down south in Miami. (Note to Joel: you might want to rethink your refuge for the coming collapse.) Joel's love affair with the Moog synthesizer works wonders here, giving the song a futuristic aura without seeming cheesy (don't ask me how). I could quote the whole damn song for its hilarious and perfect details (like how the government sent a carrier out from Norfolk and "picked the Yankees up for free." Not the Mets, mind you; just the Yankees.) Every neighborhood gets a shout out, as in "They burned the churches up in Harlem/ Like in that Spanish civil war/ The flames were everywhere/ But no one really cared/ It always burned up there before." The sense of history he evokes and the telling social detail ("no one" cares about Harlem...except of course for the people who live there.) — well, it's just a terrific, funny, stirring, well-produced number that is elaborate in its arrangement, makes use of new technology and his trusty piano to create a great tribute to a city that felt like it might well go belly-up in 1976. Any artist would be lucky to write even one great song about New York City. On this album, Joel delivers two.

From the personal to the political, from the romantic to the out-there finale, this might be the most wide-ranging album of his career. Finally recording with his band and producing himself, Joel delivers the goods creatively. It's almost surprising he agreed to work with producer Phil Ramone on his next album. But he did and that changed everything.

Any defenders of *Streetlife Serenade*? Any detractors of *Turnstiles*? Tell us what you think in the comments.

Tomorrow: *The Stranger*.

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*Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter. Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to*

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