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BingeListening Billy Joel: "The Stranger"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we hit the big time: *The Stranger*. It includes his first Top 10 hit ("Just The Way You Are" which hit #3), four Top 30 hits in all and was for a while not just the best-selling album of his career but the best-selling album Columbia ever released. It put Joel on top commercially and he maintained that success consistently right up to the day he walked away from recording pop songs for good seven albums and 16 years later. Our timing is perfect: *The Stranger* came out 40 years ago this month, on September 29, 1977. It peaked at #2 for six weeks and was held out of the top slot only by the disco inferno that was the soundtrack to *Saturday Night Fever*, an even *bigger* hit album. How does it hold up?

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

Today: *The Stranger*



THE STRANGER ** 1/2 out of ****

Side One

"Movin' Out (Anthony's Song)"

"The Stranger"

“Just The Way You Are”

“Scenes From An Italian Restaurant”

Side Two

“Vienna”

“Only The Good Die Young”

“She’s Always A Woman”

“Get It Right The First Time”

“Everybody Has A Dream”

[reprise of intro to “The Stranger”]

What a difference a producer makes! I thought Billy Joel did a terrific job his first time out on *Turnstiles*. It helped that he had maybe the best eight songs of his career to record. The arrangements, the drum sound, his vocals — it was a vast improvement over his first three albums.

But Phil Ramone. You can immediately hear the gloss, the sleek new car sound of a state-of-the-art record on the very first track. The sound of the album is almost palpable, from the sonic washes that breeze through “Just The Way You Are” to the aural “presence” of every track which must have popped out of the radio and right into listener’s ears. Most importantly, you’ve got the expressive, confident vocals Joel deployed better than ever before. Any other artist looking for a hit that heard this album must have immediately thought, “Where can I buy that?” No wonder Ramone was one of the most successful producers of all time, a household name when producers rarely were.

Unquestionably, *The Stranger* was created with world dominance in mind. (Albums like this and *Thriller* and *Bridge Over Troubled Waters* — the album Joel displaced as Columbia’s #1 of all time — don’t happen by accident.) That gleaming, polished surface wasn’t just a bonus, however. It was essential for success because while *The Stranger* boasts a lot of fan favorites, it also peters out and has several songs that go on too long. (And no, I don’t even mean “Scenes From An Italian Restaurant,” the longest studio track of Joel’s pop career).

It begins with “Movin’ Out (Anthony’s Song).” The confidence on display is infectious here. Joel is in good spirits and he’s focused again on the everyday hassles of real life, wondering if it’s worth hustling so much just to make an extra buck. The message is as earnest as the one he delivered on the song “James” from *Turnstiles*. But here the fun outweighs the finger-wagging. The lyrics spill out with almost undisguised glee,

such as when Joel almost draws laughs by sing-songing the hell out of “He works at Mr. Cacciatore’s down on Sullivan Street” or “Working too hard can give you a heart-attack-ack-ack-ack-ack.” It’s goofy enough to take the sting out of his judgement that people should stop killing themselves just to get more stuff, like a nicer car or a house out in Hackensack. (“Is that all you get for your money?”) It’s got punch and more so than ever, the feeling that Joel is backed by an honest to goodness band.

I could have done without the sound of a car peeling out at the end of that song. But the album immediately shifts gears (sorry!) with a lonely, late night of the soul melody Sinatra would have grabbed onto. It’s performed by a guy whistling mournfully to himself while walking down some darkened street. It’s the intro to the title track and is so good you can’t wait to what’s coming. Unfortunately, what comes is just a straightforward rocker when you were thinking maybe Joel had another standard a la “New York State Of Mind.”

The lyrics to the rather opaque, confusing song “The Stranger” don’t bear too much scrutiny. I do like the imagery of someone pulling out their secret face when no one else is around when Joel says, “Some are satin, some are steel/ Some are silk and some are leather.” But I’ve never been able to make sense of it. About the only thought I’ve had was, “Well, *somebody* just started going to therapy!” Ramone gussies it up nicely with a busy, detailed arrangement though as throughout the album, the electric guitars are...tasteful.

That’s certainly the case with “Just The Way You Are,” a ballad Joel almost dropped from the album because he feared it was *too* soft and doomed to be a wedding song. (Duh!) Linda Ronstadt and Phoebe Snow were recording nearby, heard it and told Joel he was an idiot if he dropped a surefire hit like that. The song almost floats into view with the soundscape created by Ramone, especially the haunting sort of vocal wash that drifts through the tune and caught my ear even as a kid. (“How’d they do that and what exactly *was* it?” I wondered.) It *is* a wedding song, rescued in part by the mellow saxophone solo of Phil Woods and the modest note of uncertainty created on the bridge when Joel sings, “What will it take till you believe in me/ The way that I believe in you?” The biggest problem is that at 4:50, the album version is too repetitive. It says everything it needs to say...and then it says it again. The single (which won both Song and Record of the Year Grammys) was an entire minute shorter and did you ever notice that or think something was missing when you heard it on the radio? Heck, no. You can fix this by simply swapping out the single version for the studio cut but we’re talking about the album as it is, not as it should be. I don’t reach to change the station when it comes on, necessarily, but I can both think a song is just fine and that I’ve heard it plenty of times for the moment, can’t I?

Then comes “Scenes From An Italian Restaurant.” A funny thing happens when you mention Billy Joel. I have quite a few friends who immediately say they are sick of the hits (or never liked them) but enjoy other songs by Joel. Maybe it’s living in New York City? (Indeed, I swear to you that Billy Joel is playing in the cafe where I’m writing this today, just as he was on the air yesterday.) His music is omnipresent and except for a precious few acts (Sinatra, Dylan, the Beatles) you need a break from most any artist when their music has been on heavy rotation in your life. Joel is no exception to this. So I get why some might groan at hearing the tinkling of “Piano Man” or the opening strains and the words, “A bottle of white, a bottle of red/ Perhaps a bottle of

rosé instead.”

But I also appreciate why this album track gets a roar in concert like few other songs; you’d swear it was the biggest hit of Joel’s hit-filled career. I’ve convinced myself Joel has a bond with fans that has endured because time and again he focuses in on life as it is actually lived, people who go to work and have kids and just get by. And here Joel captures a classic moment in almost anyone’s life, a familiar episode that everyone can identify with and yet which no one ever sang about. It’s two friends from high school (or college) catching up after drifting apart for years. They might even have dated, I think, since Joel adds a little zip to the line, “We lost touch long ago/ You lost weight/ I did not know/ You could ever look so nice/ After so much time!” It’s a simple idea, but so familiar that everyone smiles. One of the people is apparently on their second marriage, they share details of their lives...and then they dish the dirt on classmates. Here Joel indulges the cliched fantasy that the golden couple of high school will find hard times in the real world. It’s not mean-spirited, really. And the way Joel rushes forward the scene when Brenda and Eddie announce they’re getting married is perfect. “Everyone said they were crazy/ “Brenda you know you’re much too lazy/ And Eddie could never afford that kind of life”/ Oh but there we were waving Brenda and Eddie goodbye.” The song jumps forward into the future just as recklessly as the young couple do. Hey, we tried to tell ‘em! The song is sweet, really. A little touch of warmth (and perhaps a ember of previous attraction?), a catching up section, a fast burst of tongue wagging and then a generous but not quite believable promise to stay in touch. I pointed to “Prelude/Angry Young Man” as a key song to understand why a lot of critics can’t quite buy into Joel. And I’d point to a number of tunes that capture middle class life, “real” life without any context or judgement or distance. “Scenes From An Italian Restaurant” is the cornerstone of that bond.

Side two starts very well, with the two best songs on the album. “Vienna” has another terrific opening gambit with some arresting piano work as Joel digs into the vocals with such assurance. He counsels a friend to not barrel ahead so much — if you’re lucky, a long life, happiness or whatever it is exactly Vienna might be is available, if you just let it happen. Nothing fancy in the lyrics, really. “Dream on but don’t imagine they’ll all come true/ When will you realize Vienna waits for you?” A European touch with an accordion chiming in, a few choice piano licks and you’re done, as the song comes to its gentle, no hurry halt. Of all the songs where Joel offers advice, his elliptical image of Vienna as respite and reward makes this his most satisfying.

Then come the chords of one of his signature hits, vaguely lofty notes from the piano that are almost “churchy” in the way they reside towards the high end of the keyboard. Liberty DeVitto brings in some percussion, a chiming acoustic guitar begins strumming and Joel pleads for a girl to offer up her virginity in one of the funniest come-ons in rock history. “Come out Virginia, don’t let me wait/ You Catholic girls start much too late/ Aww but sooner or later it comes down to fate/ I might as well be the one.” That’s pretty hilarious — you’re going to do it eventually, so why not with me? And the clever lyrics keep coming: “The stained-glass curtain you’re hiding behind/ Never lets in the sun/ Darling only the good die young.” Even better, it’s married to a buoyant melody, almost as if to convince Virginia this is about fun, don’t take this so *seriously*, come on baby, just a kiss.... It’s married to a typically meticulous production by Ramone and an arrangement that cleverly brings in more instruments as the song goes on, almost as if the entire band is joining in one by one to make Joel’s case for him. You’ve got hand claps and that bright, friendly acoustic

guitar at the start and then an organ kicks in on the chorus. The bridge brings in Joel's most impassioned vocal and some more fun imagery. (How did a nice Jewish boy come up with the great line that on her confirmation Virginia "got a brand new soul," almost as if to suggest, why not take it out for a spin?) Horns kick in, a sax solo and the inevitable piano for the closing argument. This is pop craftsmanship indeed. We were once so innocent that this amusing sing-along was considered scandalous (by a very few) and that makes it all the sweeter. These days, Virginia would be posting nude selfies on the internet and suggesting a three-some to the poor, bewildered boy.

The album's other ballad is "She's Always A Woman," one of those love songs that on close inspection doesn't sound quite so loving. (Think "Every Breath You Take.") The woman in the song may be dangerous, may toy with your affections, but he still won't hear you run her down. The gentle piano melody and the quiet acoustic guitar that accompanies it (not to mention the flute!) have you lowering your defenses even as the actual words tell you to watch your back. She's not deceitful or cruel, as such. She's just...complicated. "She's frequently kind and she's suddenly cruel/ She can do as she pleases, she's nobody's fool." Anyone who thinks this is a wimpy little ballad isn't paying attention. Like the woman in the song, this is a wolf in sheep's clothing. Wolves aren't evil; but don't turn your back on them either.

Unfortunately, Joel ran out of steam and the last two songs are the weakest. "Get It Right The First Time" has an ungainly, flat melody and the "la-la-la-la-la-la-la" vocal riff feels almost embarrassing, more like a place holder until he finishes writing the lyrics. (Paul McCartney can get away with "Ob-la-di Ob-la-da" but no one else can and John still rolled his eyes.) They pull out the stops musically, desperately tossing in a lot of percussion, some electric guitar (way way back in the background, of course) and Joel musters up some snap in his voice.

Gospel chords on the piano can't elevate closer "Everybody Has A Dream" beyond an overblown attempt at a hymn that doesn't earn its big chorus (including Phoebe Snow!) or drawn out finale. Like "Just The Way You Are," this goes on way too long, though at least that song had a decent core. Eventually it winds down and the album reprises the opening instrumental passage from "The Stranger"...with some additional strings tossed in which unfortunately move the piece from lonely and noir-ish to more like easy listening. It didn't need gilding. And if you're going to reprise it at the end of the album, wouldn't it make more sense to have "The Stranger" be the opening track to make the whole thing feel more organic?

The impenetrability of the song "The Stranger," the dragged out album version of "Just The Way You Are" and the two weak closing tracks (not to mention a reprise that spoils a nice melody just a bit) mean *The Stranger* is an unsatisfying album for me. Neither side wholly works, with the two best songs starting the second side while the two anchors on side one are songs that don't benefit from overplaying. Still, the parade of deserved hits and the glossy perfection of Phil Ramone make it easy to see why this album became the biggest seller of Joel's career.

Tomorrow: *52nd Street*

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 BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide — but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and his daily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.