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BingeListening To Billy Joel: "River Of Dreams"

09/29/2017 05:02 pm ET

We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we're covering *River of Dreams*, the 12th and final pop album of his career. In a few months it will be 25 years since this came out! He certainly walked away at the top of his game: Joel delivered two more Top 40 hits (including the title track) and had three even bigger hits on the adult contemporary format that fit him better at this stage of his career. *River Of Dreams* sold five million copies in the U.S. alone and Joel was honored again by his peers with a Grammy nomination for Album Of The Year. (The best nominated album was R.E.M.'s *Automatic For The People*, but Joel's would have been a better choice than Donald Fagen's *Kamakiriad*, Sting's *Ten Summoner's Tales* or the winner, Whitney Houston's soundtrack to *The Bodyguard*.) Joel was just 44 when he ended his recording career and it's a rare, rare thing indeed to step away with grace and say simply, "I'm done." But did he end on a high note creatively?

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

Day 3: The Stranger

Day 4: 52nd Street

Day 5: Glass Houses

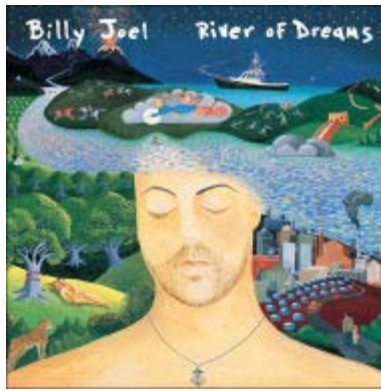
Day 6: Songs From The Attic and The Nylon Curtain

Day 7: An Innocent Man

Day 8: The Bridge

Day 9: Storm Front

Today: *River Of Dreams*



RIVER OF DREAMS *** out of ****

Side One

“No Man’s Land”

“The Great Wall Of China”

“Blonde Over Blue”

“A Minor Variation”

“Shades Of Grey”

Side Two

“All About Soul”

“Lullaby (Goodnight, My Angel)”

“River Of Dreams”

“Two Thousand Years”

“Famous Last Words”

It’s tempting to listen to this final album and hear a summation of a career, the sound of a man with one foot out the door a la David Bowie or Johnny Cash or Leonard Cohen. But Joel wasn’t dying, even if he was self-aware enough about the decision to end his recording career to make the closer “Famous Last Words.” On it he sings, “These are the last words I have to say/ That’s why they took so long to write.”

Yet after diving deep into his catalog for the past few weeks, this album doesn't sound like a swan song so much as a fresh start. Joel is working with a handful of producers now, but mostly Danny Kortchmar. They don't stray abandon the guitar-centric approach of *Storm Front*. But Kortchmar opens up the windows sonically — this album can breathe and you'll find a lot more colors in its sonic palette, including the world music/r&b vibe of "River Of Dreams" to hushed piano and strings on "Lullaby (Goodnight, My Angel)" and a more alternative rock vibe that dominates Side One.

Even better, Joel is playing and pushing his voice into fascinating new territory. On a lot of side one but especially "Blonde Over Blue" and "A Minor Variation," Joel sounds positively refreshed. And I swear Panic At The Disco!'s Brendon Urie and My Chemical Romance's Gerard Way were taking copious notes. On *Storm Front*, Joel seemed to get stuck in an uncomfortable zone at times vocally. Here on the title track he toys with an almost-falsetto and it's charming. He hits the mid-range sweet spot on "All About Soul" and "Lullaby (Goodnight, My Angel)" in particular. As a singer, Joel adjusts to what he can do at middle age; it would be a hint of how he'd remain a strong concert draw right up to the present.

Typically, artists load up Side One with their best songs but here the best is saved for last. That doesn't mean Side One is a drag, as such. From the raucous opener right to the more reflective closer "Shades Of Grey," the music never flags. "No Man's Land" has a pop-rock swagger. "The Great Wall Of China" has a left-field metaphor for success but it too works, thanks especially to an insinuating, you-can-trust-me-buddy vocal. You'll find strings on "Blonde Over Blue" and a slinky, southern soul vibe via horns on "A Minor Variation." But it's the out of nowhere vocals that kind of astonish. It's as if Joel were singing in the pose of a new character and you might actually double check that this is still Billy Joel you're listening to. Seriously.

But it's Side Two that really shines. It begins with "All About Soul," a righteous number offering praise for a woman who demonstrates a deep bond, an emotion even stronger than love. Joel doesn't mimic or try and out-soul the r&b greats he admires. He just draws upon that tradition with respect and joy, as he does here with a number that is effortless in its groove and one of the more soulful of his career.

That's immediately topped by one of his great ballads, the gorgeous "Lullaby (Goodnight, My Angel)." This lovely piece is so fragile because like a lot of fairy tales and lullabies it doesn't shy away from hard truths. A father promises his child he'll always be there for her...and in the same breath acknowledges that some day far in the future they'll both be dead. It sounds morbid put like that but in the song, it's stirring and sweet. He says, "Some day your child may cry/ And if you sing this lullaby/ Then in your heart there will always be/ A part of me/ Someday we'll all be gone/ But lullabies go on and on.../ They never die/ That's how you/ And I/ Will be." Paired with a McCartney-would-be-jealous melody on piano and some tasteful strings towards the end, this is a great ballad by someone who has delivered a lot of them. The only pity is that it isn't the final track.

"Lullaby" is a peak, period. But the title track "River Of Dreams" is a treat too. It draws on everything from world music to doo-wop but in an easy-going style that turns a song that might have been ponderous if you just read the heavy lyrics into something joyous. As I mentioned before, the way many lines begin here with

Joel in a high, high register and then find him slipping and sliding down to his “regular” voice in a playful manner (like someone half falling, half skipping down a steep hill) is a treat.

Those three songs — “All About Soul,” “Lullaby (Goodnight, My Angel)” and “River Of Dreams” — are the heart of this final album. “Two Thousand Years” is a bit too vague in its hopeful dream for the future (something “Lullaby” got across much more indirectly) while “Famous Last Words” is a fine farewell though God knows I’d swap places with it and “Lullaby” in a heartbeat. Still, all in all, *River Of Dreams* is a solid final bow, strong enough to make you think, “You’re not done!”

And yet. And yet, listening again and again to this album and especially focusing in on the lyrics, you do sense him running out of creative steam. All his career, Joel chronicled suburbia — high school classmates catching up on their lives, a lover who says “I don’t want to be alone anymore” (as opposed to some grand statement of passion), the daily struggle of just getting by and having no time for larger concerns — and that was his bread and butter.

How does this album begin? With “No Man’s Land,” a song decrying the commercialization of the suburbs, the endless parking lots so many other acts decried as they fled for the city or the “real” America found in small towns or a mythic, frontier past. “The Great Wall Of China” complains about a friend that didn’t have faith in him (a business issue turned somewhat universal). “Shades of Grey” and “Two Thousand Years” are even vaguer, musing on politics and life in a way utterly out of style for Joel, however well-intentioned their sentiments. (Joel was a lot more effective when mocking those who love endless debate and see everything in black and white on “Prelude/Angry Young Man.”) They’re devoid of the specific details, the life-as-it’s-really-lived reality that informs his best work and makes it fairly unique to him. Listen some more and many of these songs are not very good songs — but they are good recordings. That is, the musical arrangements, the versatility of Joel’s singing and the studio musician sheen of the (mostly) hired guns who play on it put over this collection with verve. When Joel really does deliver a good song — the three gems I mentioned and to a lesser degree “A Minor Variation” and “Blonde Over Blue” — the results remind you of how great he can be.

So when all is said and done, I can’t say I’m sorry this was the final at-bat for Joel. Clearly, he could have continued. If you can produce three excellent songs each time to go alongside your best, I’ll happily sift through another 8 albums to find them. But isn’t that the best time to stop, when you can still do it with passion and creativity, without feeling you’re repeating yourself or just turning out product? That’s what was happening with *The Bridge* and it took two albums for Joel to cleanse himself of that sad state.

If he should wake up in the middle of the night and a new pop song arose unbidden — “Scrambled Eggs” style — well, I certainly hope he writes it down or sings it into the phone by the side of his bed. A good song should never be spurned. Like the great Tin Pan Alley songsmiths, Joel has been comfortable in many styles. But he was never more rebellious and righteous than when he walked away from fame, fortune and the star-making machinery behind the popular song without a backward glance. And clearly, we still have the music.

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