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BingeListening to Billy Joel: "52nd Street"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we arrive at his Grammy winner for Album Of The Year: *52nd Street*. Joel was coming off the biggest album of his career — and the best-selling album in the history of Columbia Records. Their commitment would pay off as *Piano Man*, his debut for the label, would over the years become a blockbuster as well, selling more than 5 million copies in the US alone. But *The Stranger* was no fluke. *52nd Street* and *Glass Houses* each sold 7 million copies in the US and with some minor ups and downs he would deliver huge best-sellers for many years to come. He's still a commanding concert draw but clearly you've hit a peak when you are selling out arenas and holding the industry's top award. But the Grammys often bow to popular success. Rolling Stone named it one of the 500 Best Albums of All Time. Is it? Does *52nd Street* hold up creatively?

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

Day 3: The Stranger

Today: *52nd Street*



52nd STREET ** 1/2 out of ****

Side One

“Big Shot”

“Honesty”

“My Life”

“Zanzibar”

Side Two

“Stiletto”

“Rosalinda’s Eyes”

“Half A Mile Away”

“Until The Night”

“52nd Street”

So how is Billy Joel handling massive success? Will he start writing about the burdens of fame and success? Well, sure the first track on the album was inspired by a dinner with Mick Jagger and his wife Bianca. But instead of bemoaning his fate, Joel offers himself a cautionary tale about not indulging yourself too much, wrapped up in a song his fans can identify with — waking up to the realization you drank too much and made a fool of yourself the night before. (Is it the single version or perhaps when I saw him in concert that the song ends with Joel gleefully saying, “One more kamikaze! One more kamikaze!”) The self-pity comes soon enough but Joel stays close to what he knows: folks who tell others to mind their own business, hanging out in a sports bar and a better spin on being a struggling artist than “Piano Man.”

It begins with “Big Shot,” one of those omnipresent hit songs that rub some the wrong way. Joel’s becoming a better and better singer and here he has fun with how he sort of mashes up “Oh you had to be a big shot!” making it sound like he’s saying, “Oh you fool!” Again, the name-dropping of fashionable places like Elaine’s gives the song a rock star glamour but it’s rooted in human foibles.

The self-pity arrives with his second song, the ballad “Honesty,” the third and final hit from the album. I remember being at a party in eighth or ninth grade. It was just getting going (not that parties of Catholic school middle graders ever really got going) and this album was playing on the stereo. Unthinkingly, like I would in the car or my own home, I was singing along (not loud) and when “Honesty” was playing I looked up and realized a guy in my class was just...staring at me. Not quite making fun of me, but definitely with a certain, WTF are you doing? If the song had been “Only The Good Die Young” I might not have felt so foolish.

But this is such a wimpy number — “Honesty is such a lonely word!” — that I felt a little foolish, even though I really didn’t care what that guy ever thought about anything. But “Honesty.” Why did he have to watch me singing along to “Honesty?” I mean, honestly! I have to say, Joel’s vocals have a confiding, intimate presence that’s pretty amazing so full credit to producer Phil Ramone. And Joel brings the sincerity as the song continues. But there’s a very good reason why despite hitting #24 Joel has never included this in any greatest hits set. Ever.

“My Life” is a puzzle, another one of those hits that drives some people bonkers. I’ve heard it a thousand times and probably never paid that much attention to it. It just...breezes by. But it doesn’t make much sense, with each section seeming to come and go with no relationship to anything else. It begins by saying a friend has dumped everything because they can’t go on “with the American way.” Now they live in LA and are pursuing a career in stand up comedy? Sure sounds like the American dream to me — fame and fortune! The chorus tells an unnamed loved one — wife? maybe mother? — to stop bothering him! He’ll do what he wants. (And maybe if you keep bothering him he’ll take off too.) The bridge is even more confusing, with the singer saying, “I never said you had to offer me a second chance/ I never said I was a victim of circumstance/ I still belong/ Don’t get me wrong.” So yeah, we’re still together but don’t give me any grief? It’s delivered in a tune so breezy you’d think the singer was out for a drive with the top down rather than complaining about a relationship. But I love the second verse: “They will tell you you can’t sleep alone in a strange place/ Then they tell you you can’t sleep with somebody else/ Ah but sooner or later you sleep in your own space/ Either way, it’s okay, you wake up with yourself.” You can hang your hat on that verse. No, the song as a whole is kind of a vague mess but a song doesn’t always have to make sense to work — especially if you don’t pay too much attention. I do like the Beatlesque background vocals on the bridge but I’m getting mighty sick of the faux handclaps or percussion or whatever that rhythmic trick is that Ramone keeps using.

“Zanzibar” happens to be the name of the oldest gay bar in Cannes, France — what used to be a dive for sailors in that port city is now filled with junketeers visiting the Cannes Film Festival or the conference for TV commercials or any of the countless other events held there. So that Joel song has always worked for me, especially with the very welcome solo by jazz musician Freddie Hubbard. And again, setting a song in a sports bar is pure Billy Joel, chronicling something people have done a million times but never heard reflected in a song. Just as teenagers thrilled to hear songs that described them cruising or at the sock hop, the suburb-living people heard about catching up with friends from high school or watching a boxing match at the local sports bar and thought, “That’s me!”

“Stiletto” is a tougher, more pointed reworking of the song “She’s Always a Woman.” This time, instead of a gentle tone that undercuts the danger of the woman he’s singing about, here Joel gives this lady her due...not to mention the masochism of the man who keeps coming back for more.

That’s followed by the best song on the album and one of the best of his career. Joel plays off his mom’s name in “Rosalinda’s Eyes” to tell the story of yet another struggling musician. Yeah, this guy knows he’s good, just like the guy in “Piano Man.” But instead of boasting about himself, our hero draws strength from the support and belief of his love Rosalinda. The only thing that bothers him about taking his shot is that

Rosalinda has to wait behind. It's got a lovely Latin lilt, Joel even gives a good pronunciation of "se orita" and as with "Vienna," he makes good use of Havana as a stand-in for his sweetheart.

"Half A Mile Away" feels trapped behind the life of a teenager and an adult, much like its protagonist, who just needs a break from his responsibility. Of course, that's a lot different than avoiding responsibility altogether and keeps the escape strictly temporary. The little hook of repeating one word three times ("There has to be more to life than try, try, try") sticks.

That's a little generic but it's followed by the album's other highlight. "Until The Night" is a slow burner melodrama, so good an example of blue-eyed soul in the Phil Spector vein that Bill Medley of the Righteous Brothers did his own version. This tune about a man who only gets to see his love late at night and can barely handle the wait has the album's biggest production and it works a charm. Think of it as a dry run for the *An Innocent Man*, where Joel would deliver an entire album of songs written in homage to the music of his youth.

After that peak, we're offered a closing palate cleanser, the title track "52nd Street." It's harmless if forgettable. Once again, the album is more uneven than you might remember though Joel has added four or five more songs he can add to his permanent set list — and the best ones aren't even the hits. This was his "jazz" album of sorts, according to Phil Ramone, though despite some flourishes it's about as jazzy as my maiden aunt. Worse, a lot of people thought even Elton John rocked out more than Joel. First he won Record and Song of the Year with the "wedding song" called "Just The Way You Are." And now he's had a hit with "Honesty," a song that's even wimpier. Joel's idols are Ray Charles and Jerry Lee Lewis and countless other rockers, not Mantovani. He's gonna have to do something about this.

Tomorrow: *Glass Houses*

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.