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BingeListening to Billy Joel: "An Innocent Man"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we're covering *An Innocent Man*, an album that spun off so many hit singles that "Uptown Girl" was released in September of 1983 and the song "Leave A Tender Moment Alone" came out one year later in September of 1984. Ah, the 1980s, when spinning off hit after hit after hit became the recipe for blockbuster albums. Why have ten artists sell two million copies each when you can have Michael Jackson sell 20 million copies all on his own? Joel had been delivering mammoth hit albums for years. When he dug deep and went for the big artistic statement with *The Nylon Curtain* (the recession! Vietnam!) Joel actually delivered artistically. It must have stung when that album was his lowest seller since breaking out in 1977 with *The Stranger*. A lesser man might have become bitter.

But what did Billy Joel care? He'd fallen in love with Christie Brinkley and what's more, she'd fallen in love with him right back! He felt like a giddy teenager again and new songs famously came pouring out in a matter of weeks. After consciously using the Beatles as a benchmark for the sonic delights of his most ambitious work, Joel looked back to the music of his youth now, even going so far as to beat critics to the punch by using the liner notes of his new album to detail which artists from the past had inspired which songs.

If an imitation is bad, it's a rip-off, but when it's good, it's an homage. So *An Innocent Man* is most definitely an homage. Joel went from an album that couldn't deliver a Top 10 hit to an album that couldn't *stop* delivering hits, six in all including three in the Top 10. How does it hold up? No suspense here: it ranks alongside *Turnstiles* as Joel's most satisfying album and time has been very kind to it.

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

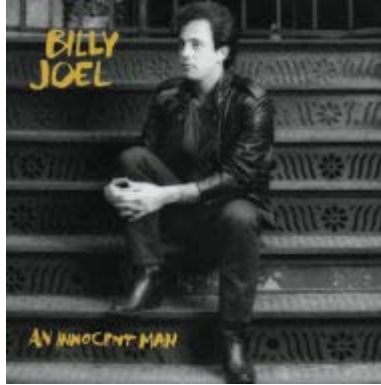
Day 3: The Stranger

Day 4: 52nd Street

Day 5: Glass Houses

Day 6: Songs From The Attic and The Nylon Curtain

Today: *An Innocent Man*



AN INNOCENT MAN *** 1/2 out of ****

Side One

“Easy Money”

“An Innocent Man”

“The Longest Time”

“This Night”

“Tell Her About It”

Side Two

“Uptown Girl”

“Careless Talk”

“Christie Lee”

“Leave A Tender Moment Alone”

“Keeping The Faith”

I’ve followed a similar pattern for tackling all these albums by Joel. I’ve listened to them again (of course). Then I found myself searching for suburban, middle class details and storylines once I decided via “Captain Jack” that Billy Joel was covering different territory than Springsteen and Dylan. They depicted the losers and mythic heroes, the denizens of Greenwich Village living on the edge or seeking fame and glory. Billy Joel wrote

about the bridge and tunnel crowd that might come into the city some weekend, gawk at the wildness, maybe enjoy a little reflected rebelliousness and then head back home because they had work on Monday. Finally, I focused on the album tracks that stand out to make a case for Billy Joel's craft to the many people who only know the hits.

None of that works with *An Innocent Man*. First, while I did replay the album, I didn't need to — I've never stopped listening to it over the years. Second, the retro nature of the songs mean they're not digging into suburban life of today but recapturing the innocent, complicated, torturous joys of first love and heartbreak. Finally, with six songs released as singles in the US (all but one a Top 20 hit), everyone already knows pretty much every song on the album.

So I can't wow you with hidden gems or add another layer to my argument that Joel is the songwriter of suburbia. You've already heard the best songs on the album and if you don't like them, well you're just being churlish and nothing I say will change your mind. Heck, even Robert Christgau gave this album a B+ and recognizes it as Joel's best. (He also grudgingly gives in to the razzmatazz of Joel's two volume greatest hits set.)

The opener "Easy Money" is a soulful rave up. Joel would never convince as an r&b artist (as his duet with Ray Charles would reveal once and for all) but it's a fun number and again, the supporting vocals including some women provide a great backdrop for his voice. It's a pity he didn't use this gambit more throughout his career. Usually when talking about music in a classic style, you might rush to say it's not "retro," it's just a great song done in a timeless style. That's precisely my point of view when covering the terrific albums of the late, great Sharon Jones for example. But by and large Joel's music here IS retro. Not in any fussy, meticulous recreation, mind you. Joel is just writing a new song that captures the spirit and joy of the best 45s from back in the day.

Many of these songs are just that and that's pretty great. The doo-wop of "The Longest Time," the soaring ballad "This Time" (it wasn't a single, but it could have been), the damn-I-wish-the-Supremes-had-sung-this pleasure of "Tell Her About It" and the spot-on Four Seasons treat of "Uptown Girl" all nail it. Listen closely and you'll understand they're not just breezy tunes of joy. The giddy song "The Longest Time" actually begins by saying, "If you said goodbye to me tonight/ There would still be music left to write" and later adding, "Maybe this won't last very long." Two people falling in love on the romantic "This Night?" Actually, they're both on the rebound and the singer cautions, "Didn't I say/ I needed time to forget her?/ Aren't you running from someone/ Who's not over you?" And of course "Tell Her About It" is all about not taking love for granted. Joel isn't reinventing the wheel here. These songs have nuance and uncertainty woven into them because a lot of the classic singles he was inspired by offer exactly the same sophistication.

But two songs transcend this high standard of sounding like throwbacks just as good as the songs they emulate. These two feel timeless to the nth degree, the sort of songs that live outside any era and might have been written any time, like Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) The Dock Of The Bay." Those are the title track "An Innocent Man" and "Leave A Tender Moment Alone." The first is an homage to Ben E. King, of course, and

producer Phil Ramone's production is so terrific you want to climb inside this tune and stay there. The meticulous but spare arrangement, the warm echo on the voice, the presence of the recording — which stops you in your tracks every time you hear it — is sensational. It harkens back to "Spanish Harlem," one of King's greatest and on my short list of the greatest singles of all time. Throughout the album, the production is marvelous, from the horn section to the strings to the "live" feel of every track. And Joel's singing would never be better. He had been improving from album to album and here he's literally doing it all at some points, creating his own doo-wop group and doing it in high style. But "An Innocent Man" is grand, emotional, open-hearted and again, you can't help wishing Ben E. King had taken a stab at it. I don't think he could have done it better.

The bass line opens it up, accompanied by the lightest of percussion and Joel's confiding, gentle vocals. Nothing against silly love songs, but this is a particularly mature, thoughtful number, with the singer comforting a love that has been bruised in the past, promising that they aren't going anywhere. In essence, it's saying, "Don't blame me because your last boyfriend was a jerk!" But his dramatic plea — "I AM an innocent man!" — isn't as confrontational as it might be, more a cry saying "Trust me" rather than saying, "Why don't you trust me?" And the lines are filled with empathy for someone who finds it a lot easier to check out than risk life again: "Some people stay far away from the door/ If there's a chance of it opening up/ They hear a voice in the hall outside/ And hope that it just passes by." That's just...beautiful. Lyrically, vocally and production-wise, this is the album and Joel at his peak. And if he was losing his upper register (Joel has joked this was the last high note he'd ever reach), well he saved the best for last.

"Leave A Tender Moment Alone" feels similarly timeless; Joel describes it as being in the spirit of Smokey Robinson. The harmonica solo by Toots Thielemans is the perfect accompaniment on an album filled with exactly the right arrangements, knowing when to go all out and when to pull back and keep it simple. The lyrics here are dead simple — a fact Steve Allen once made hay of to comic effect. ("She loves you/ Yeah yeah yeah.") But the right lyrics with the right melody and the right arrangement transcends anything you might get from reading them on the page. Our hero typically runs in the other direction when things get serious in romance, making a joke, putting his foot in his mouth or just heading for the door. He's getting that nervous feeling again but this time he realizes he actually wants to get serious. If he can fight off his instincts, for once he'll leave a tender moment alone. That's a few notches more complicated than a simple, "I'm in love!" Better still, it's delivered in a comforting melody that let's you believe this time he'll get it right, which makes the uncertainty he describes sweet instead of nerve-wracking.

That leaves three songs, including the relatively minor "Christie Lee" and "Careless Talk," two songs that work just fine but aren't peak material. Similarly, the unnecessary closing track "Keeping The Faith" explains the purpose of the album. But why bother defending an album whose music is its own best argument? Having said all that, it too glides by harmlessly enough. These few solid but not great tracks may keep *An Innocent Man* from a perfect four stars but they don't keep it from being terrifically enjoyable.

I'm assuming this is the last great Billy Joel album, but it's been a long time since I've paid much attention to his last three studio releases. And I've been surprised before, so who knows?

Tomorrow: *The Bridge*

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