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## BingeListening to Billy Joel: "Glass Houses"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we're at *Glass Houses*, the third in his "trilogy" of blockbuster albums. He would consistently sell albums for the rest of his recording career (Five million copies in the US alone for his finale, *River Of Dreams*.) But there's no question that *The Stranger*, Album Of The Year winner *52nd Street* and *Glass Houses* are Joel on top of the world. All three contain multiple hits but as albums I've found the first two unsatisfying to one degree or another after all these years. How will *Glass Houses* fare?

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

Day 3: The Stranger

Day 4: 52nd Street

Today: *Glass Houses*



**GLASS HOUSES** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Side One

"You May Be Right"

“Sometimes A Fantasy”

“Don’t Ask Me Why”

“It’s Still Rock And Roll To Me”

“All For Leyna”

Side Two

“I Don’t Want To Be Alone”

“Sleeping With The Television On”

“C’était Toi (You Were the One)”

“Close To The Borderline”

“Through The Long Night”

The album in Joel’s trilogy that gets the least respect is the one I like the most. All three were massive sellers but on *Glass Houses* Joel had the temerity to insist he could rock out. Critics weren’t buying it, any more than they bought anything else Joel was selling. (If you want to understand why Joel might have a chip on his shoulder even after delivering the biggest album in the history of Columbia Records and winning every award in sight, check out the Rolling Stone review of this album published on May 1, 1980. It’s positively disdainful.)

His fellow artists approved: Joel won a Grammy for “Best Male Rock Vocal Performance” for the album and indeed his singing continues to improve. Always a solid concert draw, Joel was a journeyman piano player and singer but he made the most of every ounce of talent that he possessed. (His real ace in the hole is his songwriting of course.) I hear three absolute gems: Top 20 hit “Don’t Ask Me Why,” the frustrated “All For Leyna” and the gorgeous album closer “Through The Long Night.” The latter two in particular are songs I always play for people who claim they don’t like Billy Joel. The rest are workmanlike fun (especially on side two), there’s just one weak track on the album and even that has a fine melody. (Joel almost ALWAYS has at least a fine melody.) Baseball-wise, it has a lot of singles rather than doubles or triples, but that’s how you win games!

It begins with “You May Be Right” and the drums are front and center, which must have pleased Liberty DeVitto to no end. This really does feel like a band, one that delivered these songs with precision and pleasure night after night in concert. (No wonder the second song is a live track.) Joel is on point again with the lyrics: here he is boasting about what a nut, what a wild man he is! Critics actually mocked him for thinking he’s a badass but clearly they weren’t paying attention. Joel’s character is mocking himself. His bravery includes walking through Bed Stuy alone and “I even drove my motorcycle in the rain!” Ooooh! So seriously, the guy is

just a goofball and knows it. That's the sort of craziness Joel's fans can appreciate, the "yeah, maybe I shouldn't have driven home last night" variety, not the "let's rob a bank" or "Let's ditch our families and leave for good!" sort. The characters in Dylan and Springsteen and the Stones songs can do some real damage on themselves and the world around them. Joel's songs are still focused on life in suburbia, the life most people are living.

"Sometimes A Fantasy" is I assume the first pop song about phone sex, but again it's goofy, not naughty, from the heavy breathing by Joel to the video that suggests the singer never even placed the phone call but just imagined the whole erotic adventure. The band is rocking out, as much as they ever would. Admittedly it's a pop radio friendly sort of noise but Joel's assertive singing carries the day. I don't like the "oh oh oh oh" background vocals, which always sounded slapped on to me. (Are they really live or were they an overdub?) And when David Brown starts to let loose on the electric guitar at the end you can almost hear producer Phil Ramone leaping for the volume buttons to tamp it down as the song fades out. Mr. Ramone is only willing to rock out so much.

If "Don't Ask Me Why" weren't one of Joel's many hits, I'd push it towards the top of the list of great Billy Joel songs for people who insist they don't like Billy Joel. It's about someone who has made it to the top of success, but the singer sees them for who they really are. "You're no stranger to the streets" says the song, even if the staff of a fancy hotel fall all over themselves to accommodate you. It's a revealing little ditty about feeling like a fake, I'd say. Yeah, I'm a Big Shot but I'm not fooling anyone, Joel is saying, a familiar attitude for movie and pop stars. However, it's delivered in a breezy style with a dash of Latin rhythm so that the song simply shimmers by and rock star unease ("I'm a fraud!") is so subsumed it disappears. The acoustic guitar, the Beatlesque background vocals, the clever piano break in the middle are a delight and he does it all under three minutes flat!

That charmer is followed by Joel's first #1 hit "It's Still Rock and Roll To Me." For most songs celebrating rock and roll, the typical gambit is to say, "They don't make 'em like they used to!" Bob Seger's cover of "Old Time Rock And Roll" is a classic example. Maybe you're tired of it but I still enjoy that Seger song, especially when Tom Cruise is lip-syncing along. Joel himself let a character voice a similar complaint on an earlier track, "All You Wanna Do Is Dance." He certainly felt punk and New Wave breathing down his neck and didn't really feel at home anywhere he turned musically. Heck, even rap music had begun its ascent to swallowing up pop entirely, circa "Rapper's Delight" from Sugarhill Gang, the first Top hit for that genre which appeared in 1979. Some purists would complain, hey, disco and rap don't belong in the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame! Me, I give props to Joel for opening wide the door and saying you can call it what want but "It's still rock and roll to me."

Side one ends with "All For Lenya," which has tense piano chords setting up a nervous, unhappy vibe. Joel also sings tightly in a slightly uncomfortable upper register...and then goes even higher on the chorus. This is a *very* unhappy guy who can't shake his obsession with the dangerous Lenya after a one-night stand. The bridge is where the song really captures his turmoil perfectly, with the drums creating an inevitable, marital beat as Joel sings, "I'm failing at school/ Losing my friends/ Making my family lose their minds/ I don't want to eat/ I don't want to sleep/ I only want Lenya one more time." Heck, even his *dad* knows the kid is wasting his

time pining for the girl. For a change, I even like the synthesizers here, which add a frantic spin on top of the relentless piano melody of jagged chords. It's just a terrific rocker. Yes, rocker.

Side two is good clean fun (no wonder critics turned up their noses!) but until the finale it's just good and no more. "I Don't Want To Be Alone Anymore" is a sweet story of a woman making her guy dress up in a suit so they can go out to dinner and she can tell him she's giving him another chance. "I don't want to be alone anymore" is a pretty mature way of singing about love, especially when she tells him, "I want you tonight although you hurt me before." The pop songs of his youth sing of eternal love; Joel's suburban reality takes it down a notch (or five).

The same is true for "Sleeping With The Television On," which sees a guy and girl out at a bar or party. They're both hoping for romance (or at least a date) but they're also too shy or awkward or wary of getting burned again to give anyone else a chance. The title tells you exactly how the night is going to end for each of them, yet another perfect detail that reflects real life back to his audience.

That leads into the one iffy track on a solid album, the song that Joel hyperbolically calls the worst song he ever wrote. It does notch the album down half a star for me, but "C'était Toi (You Were the One)" isn't THAT bad. Ok, the opening line "Here I am again in this smoky place/ With my brandy eyes" has these brandy eyes rolling a bit. (Actually my eyes are more cabernet-ish.) But it moves nicely and if we can forgive Dick Van Dyke for his Cockney accent in *Mary Poppins*, we can forgive Joel for his French.

"Close To The Borderline" is another perfectly decent number, not one I rush to hear but acceptable on an album with many better ones. It's kind of tough-minded and sharp-edged, actually. And it makes a nice rough sort of set-up for the loveliness that is "Through The Long Night." This early hours of the morning ballad finds the singer comforting someone — a wife, a lover, maybe even a child — through a difficult, sad sleep. When I was a kid, I thought this was about a parent keeping watch by a child. But the person they're standing watch by isn't fighting off the flu. They are deeply troubled by something that haunts them (guilt? depression?) and you have the strong understanding this isn't the first and won't be the last time they hold vigil. The gently falling melody, the dusky aura, the quiet voice of Joel all create a hushed, sad beauty. At key moments, more voices join in, to provide comfort. The lyrical details slowly accumulate nicely: "The warm tears, the bad dreams/ The soft trembling shoulders..." It's even possible the tragedy at hand is another miscarriage for someone struggling to get pregnant: "Oh, what has it cost you/ I almost lost you /A long, long time ago/ Oh you should have told me/ But you had to bleed to know." In any case, the song — like many songs — may have been inspired by some specific incident Joel experienced or observed but it's become universal, a sighing, sad end to the noisiest, would-be rocking-est album of his career. Joel can rough up his vocals and deliver a little swagger. But he's a showman at heart and has one foot in Tin Pan Alley and always will. When you can deliver a ballad like "Through The Long Night," you've got nothing to apologize for.

Monday: *Songs In The Attic* and *The Nylon Curtain*.

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