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# BingeListening to Billy Joel: "Songs From The Attic" and "The Nylon Curtain"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we're covering two releases, the live album *Songs From The Attic* and his "Beatles" album *The Nylon Curtain*. In January of 2014, Joel began an historic run of shows at Madison Square Garden. He's done one show a month, every month (45 and counting, I think) and it shows no sign of stopping. He's always been a big draw in concert so his first live album after so many studio hits was an obvious choice. And yet, despite seeing him in concert, despite owning every studio album by Joel (including *Cold Spring Harbor* way back when), until doing this BingeListening event I had NEVER listened to *Songs From The Attic* (or any of his other live albums, come to think of it). How did that happen?

What about the first "new" Billy Joel album I ever bought? I'd become a fan so when 1982 rolled around, I was a 16 year old kid with a stereo and a stack of Billy Joel cassettes (among many other artists) and I showed up at Peaches Records & Tapes on Day One to pick up *The Nylon Curtain*. (Tapes, please!) Back then I liked Side One a lot more than Side Two. And back then was a September because both of these albums came out this month, with the concert album hitting stores on Sept. 14, 1981 and the latter coming out Sept. 23, 1982. How do they sound today?

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

Today: *Songs From The Attic* and *The Nylon Curtain*



## **SONGS FROM THE ATTIC \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\***

### Side One

“Miami 2017 (Seen The Lights Go Out On Broadway)”

“Summer, Highland Falls”

“Streetlife Serenader”

“Los Angelenos”

“She’s Got A Way”

“Everybody Loves You Now”

### Side Two

“Say Goodbye To Hollywood”

“Captain Jack”

“You’re My Home”

“The Ballad Of Billy The Kid”

“I’ve Loved These Days”

I think Billy Joel’s concerts are one more reason critics have resisted him. Unlike other major artists, you rarely (if ever) find Joel dramatically reimagining his songs — he doesn’t often speed up slow songs or slow down fast songs, turn a rocker into an acoustic gem or take a ballad and make it punk-ish or country or whatever. You liked the song you heard on the album? Here it is! Nonetheless, despite his conservatism in concert, Joel’s first live album was a radical roll of the dice.

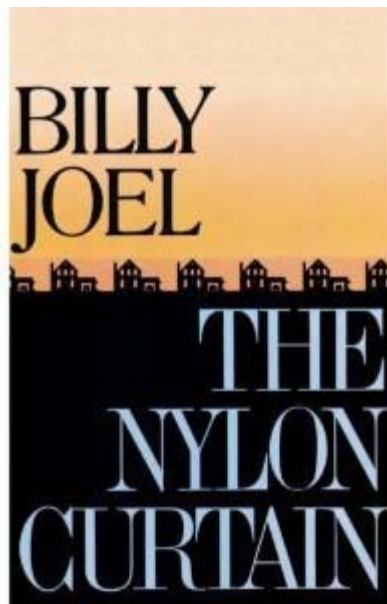
Simon & Garfunkel planned something just as bold for their first greatest hits album. They were going to deliver a live album including the best concert performances of some of their hits, versions of album tracks they felt they “got right” after performing them on the road and leaving off some of the hits because they felt those hadn’t stood the test of time or just didn’t fit where they were at. The actual album they delivered was a quirky mishmash of this initial idea, combining live versions and studio cuts (some made to *sound* as if they were done in concert) and ignoring a remarkable FOUR Top 30 hits. (At the time, they only had 13 Top 40 hits in all.) People usually just slapped the hits onto an album and were done with it, but S&G turned their *Greatest Hits* album into an artistic statement, influencing every act to come.

Joel does something almost as bold here. Of course, any live album will establish how good you are in concert, a drawing card for your shows in years to come. But Billy Joel had four albums of music most people had never heard. He had also been frustrated by producers and labels that wouldn’t let him use his touring band in the studio. Finally, he felt his shows were delivering much better versions of a lot of those songs than the ones people heard if they actually went back and bought one of those albums.

So Joel delivered a live album with NONE of his popular hits. None. He offered up songs most people had never heard of and said, Check this out. It’s essentially a new album for most fans, a great ad for his tour coming to a town near you soon — if you like THESE songs, imagine how great the songs you actually know will sound! — and a way to lure fans to the music Joel created before he became a star. It’s really nuts: a guy with 13 Top 40 hits delivered a live album that contained absolutely NONE of them. None. From sheer momentum (his three previous albums sold 7-10 million copies each), *Songs From The Attic* sold three million copies. It also showcased his strengths as an entertainer. And it turned two of those long-lost songs (“Say Goodbye To Hollywood” and “She’s Got A Way”) into the hits they always deserved to be.

I believe *Turnstiles* is — at this stage — his best album and Joel clearly agrees: four of its eight tracks are performed on here, very well. I still don’t really care for “Streetlife Serenader” or “Los Angelenos” (and it’s nuts to program them back to back!) but he certainly delivers them with more sharpness and immediacy than on the studio album they came from. As for songs from *Piano Man*, I’ve never been a fan of “Captain Jack,” I give a slight edge to the studio version of “The Ballad of Billy The Kid” and I’d rather have heard live versions of “Ain’t No Crime,” “Travelin’ Prayer,” “Stop In Nevada,” “Worse Comes To Worst” or “If I Only Had The Words (To Tell You)” ahead of “You’re My Home.”

Otherwise, it’s a great argument for some of his best early songs, a solid showcase for the band and a pretty nifty move on his part that I think is unappreciated. Has anyone ever done its like before or since? I know people have recorded new albums live in front of an audience but this is an almost unique concert album and by any standard it paid off.



**THE NYLON CURTAIN** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

Side One

“Allentown”

“Laura”

“Pressure”

“Goodnight Saigon”

Side Two

“She’s Right On Time”

“A Room Of Our Own”

“Surprises”

“Scandinavian Skies”

“Where’s The Orchestra?”

Billy Joel does his best work when his back is up against the wall. After his disastrous treatment on his debut, Joel had to hide out in LA and then finally scored a deal with Columbia Records. And unlike many a sophomore album, he delivered a far stronger batch of songs with *Piano Man*.

Despite scoring a modest Top 40 hit, Joel had his back against the wall again on his fourth album and his fortunes seemed to be ebbing. Dissatisfied with the album he'd recorded, Joel dumped all the work, produced the album himself all over again, brought in his touring band to record alongside him and created perhaps the best album of his career with *Turnstiles*. Then the hits started coming, Joel conquered the world commercially and even won Album of the Year for *52nd Street*. If Joel wanted to feel like his back was against the wall, it would have to come from within. He'd have to challenge himself because frankly at this stage he could do whatever he wanted for quite a long time.

That's when Joel decided to draw inspiration from the Beatles, the greatest band of all time. He also consciously wanted to explore the world around him like never before. A chronicler of the suburbs, Joel planned to tackle the issues of the day in a sound inspired by the Fab Four. He was going to be John AND Paul wrapped up in one. *The Nylon Curtain* would turn out to be one of the lowest selling albums of his career and the only one since his breakthrough with *The Stranger* to not produce a Top 10 hit. His song about Vietnam would give critics like Dave Marsh another reason to hate him. And a little to my surprise (believing Side Two wouldn't hold up), it's right up there with his best. Listening with open ears after all these years, there isn't a really weak track and one of them may be my favorite Billy Joel song of all.

The opener "Allentown" can stand proudly alongside anything by Bruce Springsteen or John Mellencamp or anyone else as a chronicle of the decline of the middle class and the collapse of manufacturing in the 1980s. Is it his fault it's also so damn catchy? It's subtly sad as Joel simply shows life as it is, singing towards the end, "And it's hard to keep a good man down/ But I won't be getting up today." Yet it's the bridge late in the song that nails it for me: "Every child had a pretty good shot/ To get at least as far as their old man got/ But something happened on the way to that place/ They threw an American flag in our face."

That's as good a description of the American dream (work hard and your kids will have a chance to grow up better and safer than you) and how it has gone awry. The only thing I'd add is that idea of how life is supposed to work only really happened for about 30 years in our history (heck, in world history). It was a fluke and it only took place because of massive unrest and protests roiling the country for decades at the turn of the century, two world wars and the collapse of the world economy. In other words, it ain't the natural order of things. But that's not very catchy is it? Further, his deft description of having an American flag thrown in your face is a great way to capture the abuse of patriotism by some politicians and big business.

That song and its sound of a factory at work (appropriately fading away as the tune ends) is followed by "Laura," yet another of Joel's songs about dangerous, mercurial, magnetic women. In this case, it's not a lover — strictly — but a woman who keeps the singer on the hook, drawing him into all her battles and exhausting him with her needs of friendship. It's a more nuanced, fascinating character than the usual femme fatale Joel has depicted and his anguished vocals are simmering with frustration. (The background vocals are the first moment where you nod and think, "Beatlesque!") This moody mid-tempo number is topped by the album's most visceral song, "Pressure." The first single, it makes excellent, undated use of synths to depict the strains of modern life. Interestingly, it's not about being down and out, as such. Sometimes the character is facing opportunity, as when he sings, "Now here you are in the ninth/ Two men out and three men on/

Nowhere to look but inside/ Where we all respond to pressure.” I mean, that’s a pressure-filled moment but it’s also one of tremendous opportunity. In an oblique way, Joel continues to mine the pressure of fame without being tiresome about it.

Side One ends with “Goodnight Saigon,” a song about Vietnam. Having never served, Joel avoided writing about it for years, but friends kept telling him stories and urging him to tackle it. Finally, on this outward looking album — the most political of his career — Joel does just that in epic fashion. As with “Prelude/Angry Young Man,” critics pounced on a line. Joel sings, “And who was wrong? And who was right?/ It didn’t matter in the thick of the fight.” Marsh and many others couldn’t believe their ears. Vietnam? How could it *not* matter that these soldiers were fighting in a pointless, unnecessary war? It only added to their belief that Joel was clueless about politics or worse, indifferent. (Never mind that it came just a few songs after “Allentown.”)

Of course, if they’re saying war is harder when the conflict at hand is questionable, then war must be easier when it’s noble. But Joel’s point is that war is brutal and vicious and ugly — whether it’s Vietnam or the Revolutionary War, a Korean police action or World War II. Again and again, soldiers say in memoirs and interviews that the great meaning of a war drifts away and ultimately they fight because of the person standing next to them, not some noble (or ignoble) cause. Joel’s song isn’t a dismissal of complaints about Vietnam; it’s a recognition that ALL war entails a terrible cost on the men and women who fight them.

It’s an epic song some seven minutes in length, with the sounds of crickets and a helicopter in the distance coming closer and closer until the mournful piano chords begin. Joel sings in a high, wavering voice, all youthful innocence, but never eager. The details pile up and feel spot-on and precise, almost Hemingwayesque and journalistic. (“We had no home front/ We had no soft soap/ They sent us Playboy/ They gave us Bob Hope” is just a line. But the lack of a home front, the feeling that the enemy is all around you is one of the many telling insights that shows Joel did his homework.) It’s all the more impressive since he wasn’t there.

His voice slips a little lower with each verse, but this transition isn’t overplayed. It’s subtle. When Joel digs into the terror of night by singing, “And it was *dark*, so dark at night!” the slowly building fear is natural and earned. Further, the sense of camaraderie the entire song embraces, the sense of brotherhood, gives dignity to the soldiers without blindly embracing the cause for which they’re fighting. It’s not an anti-war song in the banal sense of the term, though you’d have to be a fool to hear it and rush to sign up. But it is cautionary: this is war and war enacts a price. The anthemic chorus — “And we would all go down together” is very moving, but it also sounds like the theme song to the sinking of the Titanic. This is a doomed venture and you never doubt it for a second. Writing a song about the events of the day is tremendously difficult — even getting a song that can be effective just for the moment is hard, much less writing one that can endure. This isn’t Joel’s wheelhouse but he delivers.

And then comes Side Two. I was always thrown off by the video for opener “She’s Right On Time” for some reason. An offhand line (“Turn on all the Christmas lights/ Cause baby’s coming home tonight”) has always made me feel this song was forced to be linked with the holidays. I don’t know why that would bother me —

after all, loved ones coming home for the holidays is a staple of the season — but bother me it did. The video has faded from memory (it was pretty badly shot too, as I recall) and I'm left with a pretty joyous little number. And of course later in the song our hero is setting up his Christmas tree so my long-ago bridling that they were shoe-horning the tune into the season is completely unjustified. For a guy who owns hundreds — yes, *hundreds* — of holiday music albums, I've finally realized I can add one more song to the mix. Hey, no one said fandom or resistance to a song/album/artist was always reasonable or intelligent.

“A Room Of Our Own” is a tomato/to-mah-toe song about lovers with contrasting personalities. (“You’ve got diamonds, I’ve got spades/ You’ve got pills and I’ve got razor blades.”) It’s a little routine lyrically but Joel puts it across with a good melody that feels retro without calling attention to itself. (Another dry run for *An Innocent Man*, like “Until The Night?”) The title, drawn from the chorus, makes me think of Virginia Woolf and that has always thrown me off too. Again, a meaningless detail but these are the things that can trip one up, even unwittingly.

It’s followed by “Surprises,” one of two very happy surprises for me. It’s a wonderfully oblique number that could be about damn near anything but to me feels like the singer is saying, “Really, you’re surprised at the cruel/terrible/stupid thing you did? Why?” He sings, “What has it cost you?/ What have you won?/ The sins of the father/ Are the sins of the son.” Of course, the singer is most likely singing to himself. Joel announced this album was his intentional homage to the Beatles. But it’s more about aspiring to an album of songs that hang together and crafting a sonic palette with subtle, rich details, of taking care of every single element without ever letting them see you sweat. This song is a perfect example, with its wandering, downward spiraling melody, sophisticated arrangement and teasingly universal lyrics.

Right after it comes “Scandinavian Skies,” the song I once dismissed as too obviously a Beatles rip-off. It’s as if I thought the Beatles had copyrighted a certain vibe, a certain sound. You’d think if I loved Creedence Clearwater Revival and some new act came along that delivered their own fresh, originals in that vein I’d be happy. But instead, we bitch. “Scandinavian Skies” has the Beatles down so cold I wouldn’t blink twice if you said it was a George Harrison (or John or Paul) track recorded for *Magical Mystery Tour*. The mysterious orchestral arrangement (strings recorded and then played backwards, apparently), the actual boarding announcement in a Dutch airport, the spooky vocals, the clever travelogue lyrics that work in Sweden and Norway and Germany and so on (“We had the Midas touch/ Until we met the Dutch/ And they exhausted our supplies”) — really, this is a terrific track and probably the biggest reappraisal of any one tune I’ve had so far. What the heck is wrong with delivering a song in the vein of the Beatles? Absolutely nothing. (Perhaps these two songs would play better if “A Room Of Our Own” came in the middle, rather than having them back to back.)

So Side Two was sidetracked for me by a music video and my bizarre reluctance to accept a song took place during the holidays, another song’s title that brought to mind Virginia Woolf and two excellent tunes that simply needed to get out from under my dismissive “oh that’s just the Beatles” attitude. Heard again (and again and again, since I’ve been playing side two a lot), they bring side two much closer to the across the board strength of side one.

And I haven't even mentioned "Where's The Orchestra?" yet. Earlier, I mentioned "Summer, Highland Falls" as my favorite Billy Joel song. But right there with it is this album closer. It's in my key, so you'll hear it echoing out of my shower stall every once in a while. Its lyrics are precise and universal and gently sad, showing a guy who heads to a Broadway show expecting a musical but only to discover it's just a play. That morphs into a lovely metaphor for life, where we'd all like to experience the rush and joy and humor of a romantic musical but more often than not find ourselves trapped in a kitchen sink drama or — worse — Strindberg. This song is so deceptively simple, straightforward and lovely that it takes your breath away. Perfectly conceived and executed, it ends *The Nylon Curtain* in graceful, classic fashion. Why this tune in particular hasn't become a standard is beyond me. But maybe folks close their cabaret act with it all over America and news just hasn't filtered out yet. Billy Joel has often been described (and dismissed) as a Tin Pan Alley throwback. If he'd penned this in the 1940s, surely Sinatra and Fitzgerald and Crosby and a host of others would have rushed to put their stamp on it by now.

On *The Nylon Curtain* (great title, by the way), Joel said, I'm going to get political, I'm going to set my standards as high as possible (the Beatles) and I'm going to deliver a standard to boot. Damned if he didn't deliver. Watching the singles fall short and album sales disappoint especially in an era of blockbusters delivering three or four or five (or six!) hits clearly took the wind out of his sails.

Tomorrow: *An Innocent Man*

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