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BingeListening to Billy Joel: "Storm Front"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we're covering *Storm Front*, an album that put him back on top commercially and found other artists suddenly waking up to the fact that Joel was still writing songs worth singing. He'd have a #1 hit with one of his worst songs, but Garth Brooks would have a #1 hit with "Shameless" and that was a hell of a lot more fun to sing in concert. (Who could remember all the words to "We Didn't Start A Fire" without the Cliff Notes — or at least a TelePrompter)? *Storm Front* showed Joel could ride out a commercial slump on two of his last three albums as deftly as any of the newcomers probing for weakness from the old man (he was hitting the big 4-0, after all). But how does it hold up today?

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

Day 3: The Stranger

Day 4: 52nd Street

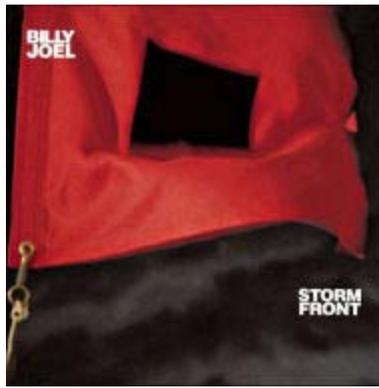
Day 5: Glass Houses

Day 6: Songs From The Attic and The Nylon Curtain

Day 7: An Innocent Man

Day 8: The Bridge

Today: *Storm Front*



STORM FRONT ** 1/2 out of ****

Side One

“That’s Not Her Style”

“We Didn’t Start The Fire”

“The Downeaster ‘Alexa’”

“I Go To Extremes”

“Shameless”

Side Two

“Storm Front”

“Leningrad”

“State of Grace”

“When In Rome”

“And So It Goes”

Billy Joel had nowhere to go but up after the poorly reviewed and poor-selling (by his standards) album *The Bridge*. Happily, that’s exactly what he accomplished with *Storm Front*. Rather than delivering some product, Joel was writing and singing with renewed vigor. A vaguely nautical theme doesn’t amount to much: a clever cover image, the title track, the relieved moment during the Cuban Missile Crisis when Soviet ships turned back and headed for home (“Leningrad”) and best of all the standout song “The Downeaster ‘Alexa.’”

Nonetheless, it gives a welcome frame to an album that feels purposeful, created by someone with something to prove.

Gone is producer Phil Ramone; Joel does the duties alongside Mick Jones of Foreigner. I'm not a huge fan of the AOR-friendly sound they came up with but clearly it worked. *Storm Front* sold 4 million copies in the US alone and spawned Joel's third and final #1 hit. But something bothered me beyond the overly aggressive mix they settled on and it took me a while to figure it out. They forgot the piano!

Hey, after ten albums, the piano doesn't need to be front and center. Besides, I suspect his facility for playing had lessened over the years. So song after song, the piano is buried in the mix or seems to make only a cameo appearance. The electric guitar is much more prominent — *Glass Houses* was Joel's claim to be a rocker but it's really *Storm Front* that delivers, for good and ill. Another problem to me are his vocals. Joel was singing better than ever on *An Innocent Man*. Here he repeatedly seems to be singing in a higher, strained register. As with "Goodnight Saigon," this can serve a song well. It does on "The Downeaster 'Alexa,'" where the narrator is feeling the stress of maintaining a fishing vessel when such a calling no longer pays. On "State Of Grace" and elsewhere, however, it feels awkward and unsatisfying. On the plus side, they've relied more heavily on backup singers and that's all to the good. I think the back and forth between Joel and his Jolettes (especially led by Crystal Taliefero) and even when it's the guys in the fore, including Richard Marx works wonders for his performances.

At least there are tracks worth talking about here. For years, I wondered why the songs of Billy Joel weren't covered more often by other artists. Frankly, I always assumed he'd be remembered more as a songwriter than a recording artist. Yet the only standards he could rightly claim have been "New York State Of Mind" and "She's Got A Way." With *Storm Front*, the floodgates opened: Garth Brooks took "Shameless" to #1 on the country charts while a number of artists (Jennifer Warnes, Betty Buckley, etc.) have delivered their own take on the closing song "And So It Goes."

All in all, Joel restored his dignity, showed he could still deliver commercially and wrote three more very good to great songs. If this had been his last gasp, he could hold his head high.

It begins with "That's Not Her Style," in which the singer defends his high-flying gal, clearly modeled on then-wife Christie Brinkley. Everyone talks trash about her, our hero says, but "that's not her style." Unfortunately it's not a very good defense. Hear it once and you don't remember his protestations; all you remember are the naughty, glamorous and scandalous things she's accused of doing, like plastic surgery, drinking margaritas on the White House lawn and chartering a jet (and then giving the pilot "somethin' extra" for a perfect ride).

Still "That's Not Her Style" is one of many "pretty good" numbers on the album. That's a relief frankly and while "That's Not Her Style," "Storm Front," "State Of Grace" and "When In Rome" don't stick in the mind even after repeated plays, they're perfectly listenable. Joel and Jones give them all a punchy, rock-oriented presentation, complete with full-on guitar solos (Ramone must have shook his head!) and wall to wall sound (if

not the ideal of a Spectorian Wall of Sound, where every detail matters).

That kitchen sink approach for most every song works well enough, though it buries “Leningrad.” This Sting-like tune charts the similar childhoods of a kid in the Soviet Union and Joel himself in Cold War America. Their lives cross when Joel tours Russia and that kid (now grown up and performing as a clown) makes Joel’s daughter laugh. It’s a fine number but is presented with all the pomp and circumstance of a Major Statement, complete with strings by Arif Mardin, a high school chorus and much more layering on top of one another until the modest empathy of the lyrics is practically buried. It would have been much better served with Joel at the piano and a gentle touch here and there of accordion or perhaps a bed of strings toward the end.

Similarly, “Shameless” is a little overwrought. Garth Brooks brought a sexy vibe to a song that in its original version sounds more defiant than anything else. Joel and Jones again pile on the drama and indeed Joel’s vocals here are pretty righteous. “I’m SHAMELESS!” he sings at a peak moment. But Brooks does a better job and it wasn’t until his cover became a hit that I truly appreciated the song Joel wrote. (A country tribute album to Joel is long overdue, by the way. His songs make a perfect fit for many country acts and indeed Brooks has often acknowledged his debt to Joel both in the songs he writes, the production of his albums and the concerts he performs. And how the hell is it possible that Garth Brooks has done a concert in Central Park but Billy Joel hasn’t? That’s just wrong.) Returning to “Shameless” again after many years, this song works better for me now, though I keep comparing it to the Brooks version as the gold standard.

I suppose fireworks were called for on the album’s big hit, “We Didn’t Start the Fire,” a gimmick of a tune that Joel has all but disavowed. He’s right in this case, though happy anniversary anyway to his last chart-topper, which was released on Sept 27, 1989. Though it’s hardly a crime against humanity, the string of historical incidents set to a tuneless melody is best heard once and forgot. Still, it’s the only out and out bad song on the album and is followed by two winners.

“The Downeaster ‘Alexa’” is a more personal spin on “Allentown.” This time he zeroes in on the struggles of New England fishermen, people whose families made a living off of the hard work of deep sea fishing. But now the economics simply don’t pay off (not to mention onerous government regulation). Yet they’re too stubborn and too in love with their way of life to quit. After all, this isn’t just what they do — it’s who they are. Joel nails the details and for once the big canvas he and Jones favor throughout the album is an asset — Joel’s gorgeous, slow-rolling melody (like a boat bobbing on the sea) deserves the epic treatment they give it, complete with a sea shanty violin solo and the doomed sense that the ship is going to sink and there’s not a damn thing they can do about it.

That’s followed by another winner, “I Go To Extremes.” Whether you think it’s simply about a guy apologizing for the usual foibles of being moody or more specifically about manic depression, it’s an excellent pop song. They avoid the obvious ploy of actually going to extremes musically. Instead the song is pretty intense throughout, offering up a rushed, almost frantic explanation/excuse, as if the narrator can’t really help himself even when offering up an apology. Here he goes again, in other words.

So this album has one stinker, a lot of pretty good songs, two that grow on you and which can be heard better in concert ("Leningrad") or sung by others ("Shameless") and two excellent ones added to his impressive list of winners.

Oh, and a stone cold classic. Yet again, Joel ends the album with a gem, just as he often has from the start with "Got To Begin Again" (*Cold Spring Harbor*) and did again with ballads like "Where's The Orchestra?" and "Through The Long Night." Here it's "And So It Goes," a song that cribs an ironic, humorous refrain from Kurt Vonnegut but transforms those bitter words into gentle resignation. Really, it's the combination of the lyrics and a perfect melody that make this so memorable — as with some of the greatest pop songs, simply reading the lyrics won't do it justice. Still, his recognition that a new relationship probably won't last but is worth it anyway is sweetly captured: "So I would choose to be with you/ That's if the choice were mine to make/ But you can make decisions too/ And you can have this heart to break/ And so it goes/ And so it goes/ And you're the only one who knows."

So Joel had another big hit album to his credit, enjoyed touring on and off with Elton John (starting in 1994), was surely delighted to see his songs being covered by other artists more quickly than any time since *Turnstiles* and knew in his bones he'd written yet another classic with "And So It Goes." And he was only 40 years old. Who would imagine he'd deliver just one more pop album?

Tomorrow: *River Of Dreams*

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