LIBRARY OF CONGRESS: You’ve said previously that “Piano Man” was inspired by true experiences and real-life people. Is the song 100% true and autobiographical?

Billy Joel: It’s pretty accurate. It’s what really went on when I was a piano man in this piano bar. All the characters have the same name: there was John at the bar, the bartender; Davy was in the Navy; a guy named Paul, who was a real estate agent and was trying to write the great American novel, and the waitress, who was my girlfriend at the time and then became my wife.

LOC: Were there, originally, other “characters” in the song that you didn’t include or which were left “on the cutting room floor,” so to speak?

BJ: I’m sure there were but I can’t remember any. Of course, that was a long time ago—we’re talking 1972, 1973.

LOC: As you said, at the time you wrote “Piano Man” you actually were a “piano man,” in a bar in L.A. Did the experience of playing so much material by other writers affect your own writing?

BJ: It probably did. I played some standards, songs that people knew--“Stardust,” “As Time Goes By.” I think it probably did. It made me want to write a standard. And that’s why I wrote “New York State of Mind” a few years later.

[At the bar.] I did a lot of the pop hits that were popular at that time, anything to fill in the 40 minutes of my shift. I never played any of my own songs.

LOC: None of your own songs?

BJ: No, I was “hiding out” at the time. I was trying to get out of a bad deal I had signed with another music company that was based in Los Angeles, actually. I just assumed if I started to play my own work, I might no longer be undercover.
LOC: How long did it take you to write “Piano Man”? Are you the type of writer that can create something start to finish in one sitting or is it more over a length of time?

BJ: I know it didn’t come all at once. I had the idea to write a song about that particular job. I was like, “I’ve got to get a song out of this!” So it took place over a period of time. I came up with a melody: “Sing us a song, Piano Man…,” and then, little by little, I filled in the characters, and the scenario. So, I guess, it took a couple of weeks.

LOC: Now the song is not only one of your best-known works, but it gets covered a lot by other singers. To what do you ascribe its endurance?

BJ: It’s a story song and those tend to have a longer life. [Originally,] a lot of people at the time thought that it was [by] Harry Chapin because he was such a story-song writer.

I was really flabbergasted that it was considered a “hit.” It was quite long; in its original form, it was over seven minutes long. They had to edit it down so they could play it on the radio.

It’s not your typical pop song—it’s in waltz time; it’s five minutes long even with the edit. It’s kind of a depressing song: a bunch of people drinking their troubles away, asking the piano man to make them feel better. I was surprised it became so well-known.

LOC: That was sort of my next question: How was “Piano Man” chosen to be the single from the album? From what you said, you didn’t seem to see it as “single” material.

BJ: That was the record company. The record company picked it as a single. I never pick a single. I write an album’s worth of music and then hand it over, [saying,] “Go ahead, it’s your turkey now. You figure it out.”

I was surprised by the radio appeal of it and the fact that it sold a million copies.

LOC: What song from that album would you have picked instead?

BJ: I don’t think I would have picked anything. I never sit down to write a “hit record.”

LOC: After “Piano Man” became a hit, did you ever hear again from any of the people you mentioned—either to tell you how they were doing or maybe even to claim some proceeds?

BJ: Well, the waitress, obviously. She got a piece of me [Laughs]. But that was it. I never heard from any of them….

The name of that bar was The Executive Room. It was in the Wilshire District in Los Angeles. It’s no longer there. I think it’s a bank or an insurance building now. So, it’s gone. But, then, it’s been 40 something years….

LOC: I know, over the years, you have changed the arrangement of the song and the key in which it is sung when you perform it, but do you sing it differently emotionally now than you did 40 years ago….

BJ: I’m sure I do, I’m not aware of it. It’s one of the oldest songs that I perform now in concert. And the audience sings along. It turns into a big sing-along. We’re in arenas or stadiums and it turns into karaoke! It’s kinda cool. When we get to the last verse, I don’t sing it. The whole band stops playing. We let the audience finish it.
LOC: Are there any newer “piano men” that you follow and like to listen to these days?

BJ: I like Harry Connick, Jr. Ben Folds is another good pianist, a great pianist, actually. I don’t really listen to pop music; I listen mainly to classical music.

But I become aware of some of the newer people, younger people. And then I make them the opening act on the road!