

# “Piano Man”--Billy Joel (1973)

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Essay by Hank Bordowitz (guest post)\*



45rpm sleeve



45 label



Billy Joel

The forces that started the meteoric rise of Billy Joel with his 1973 hit “Piano Man” really began in 1971. It was not a great year for Billy Joel. The bad year was an even bigger belly-drop because the previous year had gone so well. His manager had gotten him a recording contract with the new a new company with labels headed by Artie Ripp, founder of Kama Sutra Records, and Michael “Woodstock” Lang. For the first time in his life, Joel had some money. His relationship with Elizabeth Small, while complicated by the fact that she was still married to his former drummer and housemate Jon Small, had solidified to the point that she, her young son, Sean, and Billy could find a place of their own in Oyster Bay, a town with borders on both the North and South shores of Long Island. The record company had given Billy a piano and he started writing material for his solo debut (he had already done three previous albums with earlier groups).

In order to make the record, Billy had to move from his comfort zone in Long Island to Los Angeles. He recorded the album with some of LA’s top studio musicians playing, and Ripp calling the shots in the control room. It was the initial project in a contract with Ripp that called for Billy to record nine more. While Billy was in LA, Elizabeth’s divorce from Small was finalized. When he finished making the record, Billy returned to Oyster Bay, Elizabeth, and Sean. They waited for the album to come out and Billy’s star to rise.

Late in 1971 that album, “Cold Spring Harbor,” was released. It had songs like “She’s Got a Way” and “Everybody Loves You Now” that would become Billy Joel standards in later incarnations, but not with this recording. The problem was not the music, but how the music was mixed. Moving the music down from a 16-track recording (with each track featuring a different instrument, except for the drums, which took up several tracks), someone had not synchronized the speeds of the multi-track recorder with the mix-down recorder. This caused the whole project to sound faster and therefore higher pitched than the way it was recorded by Billy and the musicians he worked with. The 34 minutes of music that they had recorded had been sped up to 29 minutes on the album. This process had worked very well for some novelty records in the

'50s and '60s, like Shep Woodley's "Purple People Eater," and the recordings by Ross "Dave Seville" Bagdasarian's Chipmunks, like "The Christmas Song." It did not help a fledgling singer/songwriter like Billy. For some reason, no one in the process of mixing and mastering the project noticed.

When Billy got a copy of the album, he invited some friends over for a listening party. He ripped off the shrink wrap and put the album on his turntable. He later described what he heard as his songs being performed by Alvin of the Chipmunks. At the time, he was so infuriated that he took the record off the turntable and threw it against the wall--not as rewarding an experience as he hoped because vinyl records did not break so much as bounce.

Needless to say, the odd sounding vocals put off radio, and the album got very little airplay. Ripp risked throwing good money after bad and put Billy on the road in the hopes of generating some excitement about his new artist. The jaunt included a show at the Mar y Sol festival in Puerto Rico that put Billy in front of ten thousand music fans, most of whom at that point had no idea who Billy Joel was. Joel and his band also played colleges and opened shows for the likes of the J. Geils Band, Badfinger, and Yes. They spent six months on the road with no pay, to hear Billy tell the story.

One of the benefits of spending this much time on the road was that it distracted Billy from seeing just how badly the record was doing. "Cold Spring Harbor" had, to put it bluntly, tanked. However, there were benefits to all the touring. His Mar y Sol performance was noted very positively in the "New York Times." Additionally, people from Columbia Records were there, as well as at some of his earlier gigs. He had already pinged their radar when he played a show broadcast on Philadelphia's venerable album rock radio giant WMMR. Those who heard it came into the office the next day singing one of Billy's new songs, "Captain Jack." The prevalence of the song in the hallways at the Columbia offices at Black Rock on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street even had company president Clive Davis wondering what a "Captain Jack" was.

This was good, because the company that ultimately distributed "Cold Spring Harbor" was tanking as badly as the album. Part of this was due to the fact that the record division president, Tony Martell, had other things on his mind. His young son, T.J., had cancer and was fighting, but fading. This left the company virtually rudderless. One former employee called it surrealistic: "There were no meetings, no release dates, no nothing." This pretty much killed the businesses of the people who counted on the company to get their records where they needed to be--like promoted to radio and selling in stores. Suddenly, the money stopped coming to the dozens of sub-labels, like Ripp's and Lang's. With the companies not getting money, neither did the artists signed to the labels. Billy's monthly stipend was among the casualties. Billy wanted to collect the money, and knew he could not do it from Oyster Bay, not that it mattered much as he no longer had money to pay for his place in Oyster Bay. So he moved with his little family back to LA.

This still left the problem of how to support himself, his girlfriend, and her son. Billy took a job playing piano at a bar called The Executive Lounge, under his first and middle name, Billy Martin (not to be confused with the eponymous Major League Baseball manager, who, at the time, was with the Detroit Tigers). Boomeranging from his 1970 high, by the end of 1972, Billy

Joel was living in a strange town, playing standards and requests at a bar for tips. Elizabeth waited tables at the bar as well.

Meanwhile, left at loose ends by the *Titanic*-like descent of the company that distributed his records, Ripp tried to get his artists on other labels to generate some income. Fortunately for him, the mainstream records business started to see what Ripp had seen when he signed Billy in the first place. Soon, there was a competition for his artist's services from A&M records, Atlantic Records, and all of Billy's fans at Columbia Records.

Jerry Wexler, Atlantic's head of Artist and Repertoire--the department that signs the artists--brought company owners Ahmet Ertegun and Jerry Greenberg to Billy's home in LA, an A-frame in Malibu that he rented from a friend of his (who now worked for Atlantic). Billy played them the new songs he had been writing, including "Captain Jack," and a musical memoir of his time in the Executive Lounge called "Piano Man." Like "Captain Jack," "Piano Man" was what Billy called "a look out the window" song. Characters in the lyrics were based on people from the bar, like John the bartender and Davey from the Navy and John the "real estate novelist"; they were actual people who hung out at the bar, often sitting at the piano. The waitress "practicing politics" was Elizabeth, his girlfriend and soon to be his first wife (and manager).

Latching on to the chord progression and waltz meter, Wexler teased Billy about how much the song sounded like Jerry Jeff Walker's "Mr. Bojangles," a hit about a year earlier for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Nonetheless, the three major *machers* from Atlantic decided that Billy Joel had to be an Atlantic recording artist.

Clive Davis from Columbia made the same decision. He rang up Billy's manager, and the two met at the Beverly Hills Hotel. Davis convinced the manager that Columbia was the place for Billy. Billy did not require much convincing. Atlantic was cool, but Columbia was class, and the trump card was that Columbia recorded Bob Dylan. That was legendary. He would later say, "I didn't go to Columbia University, but I went to Columbia Records."

So the principals in Billy's business life had handshake deals with two different record companies. Ultimately, both of them had to do business with Ripp, who had Billy contracted for nine more records, iron clad. What eventually happened was that Ripp made a deal with Columbia that both he and Lang would get 25 cents for each record sold. While risky at the time --if Billy did not sell records, Ripp and Lang didn't make money--in hindsight, it proved one of the shrewdest deals that Ripp ever made, as before the relationship between Ripp and Billy was finally severed, Billy had sold in the neighborhood of 80 million records.

So Columbia put Billy into the studio with relatively untested producer Michael Stewart, whose only previous project was his brother John Stewart's follow-up to John's hit album "California Bloodlines." Once again, Billy got to work with some of the West Coast's top session players, like banjo legend Eric Weisberg, who had his own hit with "Dueling Banjos" a year or so earlier. "Piano Man" was released on November 3, 1973.

While "Piano Man," the album, and "Piano Man," the single, have borne the test of time, it is interesting, even important, to note that neither were massive hits in their time. A poll of New

York City radio listeners in 2004, as to top moments in rock and roll, found the recording of the song to be the 75<sup>th</sup> most important event in the music's illustrious history. At the time of its release however, the single only reached #25 on the "Billboard" pop single chart. That is not bad, but not a chart topper by any means. It did, however, reach #4 on the Adult Contemporary charts. The album itself topped out at #27.

Fortunately, this was a time when record companies believed in artist development, as neither of Billy's subsequent albums did nearly as well until his fourth Columbia album, "The Stranger," came out. However "Piano Man" became Billy's staple encore, even through his record breaking run of monthly appearances at Madison Square Garden. When he received the Library of Congress's Gershwin Award in November of 2014 (41 years and a couple of weeks after "Piano Man" first came out), it was the last song of an evening that featured the likes of Paul McCartney, James Taylor and Barbra Streisand, and performance by Tony Bennett, the Twyla Tharp Dance Company, Leanne Rimes, Boyz II Men, Josh Groban, and John Mellencamp. Like the folks that "Billy Martin" played for at the Executive Lounge, "Piano Man" was what fans "were coming to see, to forget about life for a while."

*Hank Bordowitz is the author of 10 critically-acclaimed books, including "Billy Joel: Life and Times of an Angry Young Man," "Bad Moon Rising, The Unauthorized History of Creedence Clearwater Revival," and "Every Little Thing Gonna Be Alright: The Bob Marley Reader." His latest book is "The Green Day FAQ." He teaches music, the music business, and English Composition at Bergen Community College and is on the editorial board of "The Journal of Rock Music Studies."*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.