



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

BingeListening To Billy Joel: "The Bridge"

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We're BingeListening to Billy Joel and today we're covering *The Bridge*, an album that proved a commercial disappointment, selling just two million copies in North America. Unlike the similarly low-selling album *The Nylon Curtain* — which garnered Joel some of the best reviews of his career — he couldn't even take comfort in the support of his peers. Four times in a row he'd seen his music nominated for the Album Of The Year Grammy. Not this time. Did the Grammys get it wrong?

Day 1: Cold Spring Harbor and Piano Man

Day 2: Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles

Day 3: The Stranger

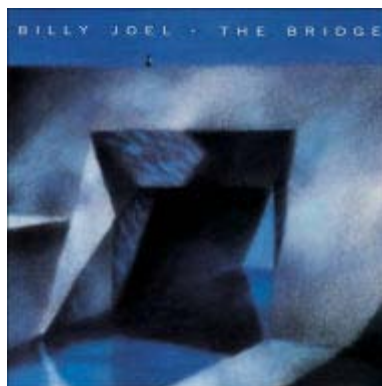
Day 4: 52nd Street

Day 5: Glass Houses

Day 6: Songs From The Attic and The Nylon Curtain

Day 7: An Innocent Man

Today: *The Bridge*



THE BRIDGE * 1/2 out of ****

Side One

“Running On Ice”

“This Is The Time”

“A Matter Of Trust”

“Modern Woman”

“Baby Grand” (w Ray Charles)

Side Two

“Big Man On Mulberry Street”

“Temptation”

“Code Of Silence” (w Cyndi Lauper on backing vocals)

“Getting Closer”

This is the last album Joel would record with producer Phil Ramone and some key members of his touring band. And no wonder. After six albums and about a decade it seems he, Ramone and the guys hit a wall creatively. Joel’s last three studio albums had a very specific purpose. *Glass Houses* wanted to rock. *The Nylon Curtain* was Joel’s successful attempt to cast a wider net socially and politically in his songs (while evoking the Beatles with his attention to the album’s soundscape). *An Innocent Man* was an ode to the great 45s he grew up on. Heck, even the live album *Songs From The Attic* had a focus: to show the band’s live chops and bring attention to the songs Joel had recorded before anyone was paying attention. (Imagine telling your record label you want to release a live album with not a single song most of your fans will recognize. A string of top 40 hits and you’re going to include exactly none of them on your first live album!) Go back further and *Turnstiles* also had a purpose of sorts as it charted Joel’s journey from LA back home to New York City.

The Bridge on the other hand seemingly had no purpose. It was just a collection of songs. That worked just fine commercially on the hit albums *The Stranger* and *52nd Street*. Now? Thanks to the poor quality of the songs, it felt like “product.” And Joel might have been a Tin Pan Alley craftsman for whom delivering a tune on demand was more of a challenge than an insult. But product? That’s an entirely different thing.

The problems start with the production. The Big Drum Sound arms race of the late 70s/early 80s (launched by a reckless Phil Collins) reached its peak in 1986. Ramone was fully on board here. Also, Joel had been an

early advocate of synths and other new instruments but the effect here feels baldly “relevant.” Let’s give more props for his often unobtrusive and effective use of the Moog and other sounds as far back as *Turnstiles*. Here the up-to-the-minute pounding drums and synth heavy vibe is as dated as a Members Only jacket. You listen to it and the music can hardly breathe.

[NOTE: A friend thought I was dissing Phil Collins above. Far from it! I’m not versed enough in drumming to recognize even the greatest by their drumming alone...except for Collins. He actually innovated a thunderous drum sound even I could pick out of a lineup, a god-like sound that had every other drummer (and producer) in the world scrambling to catch up. More power to him — especially since it worked perfectly on moody classics like “In The Air Tonight.” It’s not his fault everyone else used and abused his breakthrough so exhaustingly for years to come.]

Worst of all, this overly glossy production is gussying up songs that desperately need it, songs that often lack the one element Joel has always been able to depend on: good melodies. The opener “Running On Ice,” “Modern Woman” and “Temptation” all notably lack a decent melody. Joel sings in a clenched, tight, rushed manner that would reach its nadir on the #1 single “We Didn’t Start The Fire” one album later. On all three but especially “Temptation” Joel sounds almost as if he’s running out of breath, spitting out lyrics that rarely budge off an opening note and only then grudgingly.

The faux big band number that opens side two is little better. I’m sure that just as a crappy video ruined “She’s Right On Time” to me for years that the inclusion of “Big Man On Mulberry Street” on the TV show *Moonlighting* makes me dislike this song more than it deserves. I loved that bold, path-breaking series, but it was exceptionally hit or miss. The season three opener featuring an elaborate and dull dance number set to this song was very miss indeed.

The last two tracks sound like they arose from entirely different projects. “Code Of Silence” was co-written by Cyndi Lauper, who also sings some ghostly backing vocals on the song. She was apparently working in a studio nearby and slapped Joel out of his funk when he was stuck on this number. (“What’s the big fuss?” you can imagine her squawking at him.) The song begins with a harmonica and it’s a testament to how poorly the album is produced that it sounds jarring and out of place here after the hermetically sealed nature of the first seven tracks. I enjoy Lauper and it’s not her fault these minor vocal touches sound phoned in, as if they were planned for an entirely different song and just grabbed for this one at the last moment.

Similarly, the last song features Steve Winwood on organ. Happily, his mildly diverting solo doesn’t feel entirely alien. It can’t rescue a song that bitches about Joel’s record contracts and fails to transcend those concerns and universalize them. But at least Winwood offers a few pleasurable moments as the album quickly fades away.

That leaves three decent songs on side one. “This Is The Time” is a lovely mid-tempo number about savoring life and a relationship while it’s happening. This tune is undermined a bit by Ramone’s production. The song sounds gauzy somehow, like all those Cybil Shepherd scenes in *Moonlighting* shot jokingly with Vaseline on

the lens for that old Hollywood glamour effect. The guitar on it sounds particularly “tasteful,” as is Ramone’s wont, also doing the song no favors. But a lovely melody, strong lyrics and vocals from Joel that are notably more confident than most of the album make it work. This one surely is much better in concert.

That’s followed immediately by “A Matter Of Trust,” a rocking sort of pop song on which Joel handles electric guitar duties for some reason, doing a fine job. Like “This Is The Time,” the song cautions how love won’t last if you give in too easily to distrust and fear. It does it with a catchy, crunchy melody and an open, spacious “live” sound notably at odds with most of the album. With those two songs in a row, you start to believe “Running On Ice” was just a misstep...and then comes the bland “Modern Woman” and the unrelieved boredom of side two.

But Joel has one more good number up his sleeve. “Baby Grand” is an enjoyable duet with Ray Charles that pays tribute to the piano that has proven their best friend over the years. Like Paul McCartney’s “Ebony And Ivory,” it’s a dead simple conceit: the piano as your one true love. Hear it — “Late at night/ When it’s dark and cold/ I reach out/ For someone to hold” — and you think, “Damn, I should have written that!” Joel does his best Ray Charles imitation and the production — complete with strings a la “Georgia On My Mind” and other songs from Ray’s ABC period — is pitch perfect. Then Charles swoops in and shows Joel how it’s done vocally. (Heck, he would do that to most anyone, so no shame there Mr. Joel.) It won’t set the world on fire but it’s like an oasis in the desert on this all too modern album. *The Bridge* is the first one since *Streetlife Serenade* that felt like work rather than pleasure for Joel to create. Was it a sign of things to come?

Tomorrow: *Storm Front*

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