

= Captain Jack ( Billy Joel song ) =

" Captain Jack " is a song by Billy Joel featured on his 1973 album Piano Man with a live version on his 1981 album Songs in the Attic .

It is considered by some to be the most important and pivotal of his early compositions because his performance of the song at an April 15 , 1972 live radio concert at Sigma Studios on WMMR in Philadelphia , and the subsequent airplay this live version received on the station , brought him to the attention of major record labels , including Columbia , with whom he would sign a recording contract in 1973 .

= = Composition = =

Joel wrote " Captain Jack " in late 1971 , while sitting in his apartment in Oyster Bay , Long Island , looking out the window , trying to find inspiration for a song . Across the street was a housing project , and he observed suburban teenagers going into the project and obtaining heroin from a dealer known as " Captain Jack " . " It 's about coming out of the New York suburbs , " Joel told John Kalodner in 1974 . " But in my travels I have seen a lot of the same suburb all over the country . The song is sort of brutal , but sometimes it is good to be brutal and offend people ? it keeps them on their toes . "

The song , according to Joel , is an anti @-@ drug song . He says , " What 's so horrible about an affluent young white teenager 's life that he 's got to shoot heroin ? It 's really a song about what I consider to be a pathetic loser kind of lifestyle . I 've been accused of , ' Oh , this song promotes drug use and masturbation . ' No , no , no . Listen to the song . This guy is a loser . " In writing about the song in the liner notes of his Songs in the Attic album , Joel once again emphasized the point : " ... so many friends shoveled under the Long Island dirt . The miracle of modern chemistry killed them if Vietnam didn 't . "

= = Pre @-@ release = =

To promote his debut album , Cold Spring Harbor , Joel undertook a tour that lasted through most of the spring and into the early summer of 1972 . One of the people who noticed and liked the LP was the music director of Philadelphia radio station WMMR @-@ FM , Dennis Wilen . He arranged to have Joel perform a concert for radio @-@ station listeners who won tickets . On Saturday night , April 15 , 1972 , Joel performed an hour @-@ long concert in front of these contest winners at Sigma Sound Studios in Philadelphia . Joel and his touring band from 1971 @-@ 1972 ( Larry Russell on bass guitar , Al Hertzberg on lead guitar , Rhys Clark on drums ) performed 12 songs , seven from Cold Spring Harbor and five songs he had not yet recorded . Some of the songs were later recorded for the Piano Man LP , including " The Ballad of Billy The Kid " , " Travelin ' Prayer " , and " Captain Jack " .

" Captain Jack " was immediately embraced by WMMR 's audience . For the next year and a half , the station kept its live version of the song in regular rotation . Listeners called in , wanting to know where they could find the song and on what album it appeared . The song was such a big hit in Philadelphia that several New York radio stations got their own tape copies and began to play it as well . Though Columbia Records ' then @-@ president , Clive Davis , first noticed Joel at the Mar y Sol festival in Puerto Rico on Easter Sunday , April 2 , 1972 , the constant airplay of Joel 's unreleased song kept the label 's attention . Columbia Records did their best to track Joel down . After turning down a record deal from Atlantic Records , Joel signed with Columbia in the spring of 1973 .

= = Release and reaction = =

" Captain Jack " was one of the 10 songs recorded in Los Angeles for Joel 's Columbia debut , Piano Man . It quickly became a staple of FM rock stations after the album 's release in November

1973 . This song , along with the songs " Piano Man " and " The Entertainer " , were the songs that Joel was best known for before the release of The Stranger in 1977 .

Reception for the song was mostly positive . Jack Breschard of Rolling Stone called it one of Joel 's " best efforts " . Ira Mayer called it Joel 's " signature piece , " and Stephen Holden said the song , a " centerpiece " of the album , " compelled attention for [ its ] despairing portraits of urban fringe life , despite [ the ] underlying shallowness . " Holden also believed that the song had a Bob Dylan feel to it . " As with so many rock stars , one of his most important early influences was Bob Dylan ? in fact , ' Piano Man ' and ' Captain Jack , ' two of his more ambitious early tunes , as well as the more recent and better ' She 's Always a Woman , ' are practically keyboard parodies of Dylan critiques , " Holden says . Author Hank Bordowitz called " Captain Jack " " as bleak a portrait of growing up in the affluent suburbs as anything before L.A. punk hit nearly a decade later " . Stuart Levine of Variety called the song " lyrically expansive " and " dark . " Ron Rosenbaum of Slate , in a very negative review of Joel 's work , criticized " Captain Jack , " summarizing the song as , " Loser dresses up in poseur clothes and masturbates and shoots up heroin and is an all @-@ around phony in the eyes of the songwriter who is so , so superior to him . "

Joel made his first television appearance in the wake of the release of Piano Man , on the syndicated Don Kirshner 's Rock Concert program , in a performance recorded live in Chicago in March 1974 . " Captain Jack " was one of the three songs that were broadcast . In keeping with U.S. broadcast television standards of the time , Joel was forced to alter the lyrics slightly . Instead of singing the line " You just sit at home and masturbate " , he sang , " You just sit at home and la la la " . Kirshner recalled , " I knew he was going to be a big star , and so did he . "

By 1980 , " Captain Jack " had mostly disappeared from Joel 's concert setlists . Nevertheless , he always played it in Philadelphia , because he never forgot the role the song and the city played in his early career . A version recorded at The Spectrum in July 1980 was used on his live album , Songs in the Attic . Joel wrote , " ' Captain Jack ' plays with much more power and conviction when a roaring Philadelphia audience sets off a kind of internal explosion and the adrenaline screams through our veins ... When we play ' Captain Jack ' , we are actually committing an act of pure brutality . " Timothy White of Rolling Stone did not like this version , calling it " grating " .

The song entered the news again in 2000 when it was mistakenly used during Hillary Clinton 's announcement that she would be campaigning for U.S. Senate . According to an NPR report on worst campaign songs , a staffer notes that the playing of " Captain Jack " was a mistake . It was played from the Billy Joel compilation CD Greatest Hits Volume 1 , and the song intended to be played was " New York State of Mind " , which was track five on the CD . The Clinton staffer inadvertently played track two , which was " Captain Jack " . Her presumed opponent , Rudolph Giuliani , who ended up not running for the Senate , criticized the song 's use because of its alleged glorification of drugs . Giuliani even read the lyrics to the song in a live press conference . Joel replied in a statement , " There are a lot of important issues facing the voters in this Senate race . Is a politician 's interpretation of a song I wrote nearly 30 years ago an issue to the voters of New York state ? I do not think so . "