

52nd Street

By Amelie Bureau

Track list

1. Big Shot

Billy Joel.....4:03

2. Honesty

Billy Joel.....7:55

3. My Life

Billy Joel.....13:05

4. Zanzibar

Billy Joel.....18:18

5. Stiletto

Billy Joel.....23:02

6. Rosalinda's Eyes

Billy Joel.....27:44

7. Half a Mile Away

Billy Joel.....31:53

8. Until the Night

Billy Joel.....36:09

9. 52nd Street

Billy Joel.....39:05

Billy Joel



Billy Joels Parent's (Howard Joel and Nyman Joel)

Parents, and early childhood;

Billy Joel was born in the Bronx of New York. His family moved shortly after he was born to Hicksville in the town of Oyster Bay, Long Island. His parents were Jewish, and moved to the US right as WW2 started. Billy's father was an amateur pianist and business owner, but had to sell his mail order company for a fraction of its worth. At his mother's insistence Billy started playing the piano at age four. What truly inspired him was at first Elvis and the Elverly Brothers but when he watched the Ed Sullivan performance of the Beatles that what inspired him to take the plunge.

Early Music Career;

Billy over the course of his teenage years joined many bands. At 16 he joined his first band, the Echoes covering the British Invasion bands. He had small time success playing on a few demos that eventually got picked up and turned into hits. He later joined the Hassel's, which released a few singles but were all failures, he went on to try and start a duo with the drummer, which failed after he slept with the drummers girlfriend Elizabeth.



Billy Joel in The Hassel's (Far Left)

He finally ventured out on his solo career, releasing his first solo album with Family Productions "Cold Spring Harbor", it was not a success. He did tour with it though, he did open for many famous bands in this era, like the Beach Boys, BadFinger and the J. Geils Band. He then switched to Columbia and released Piano Man. Surprisingly this album had very modest sales at the time, considering the title track would later be his biggest hit and nickname.

His two next albums are Streetlife Serenade and Turnstiles. They both didn't receive any much fame, there was a few songs that were minor hits but nothing of note. His song "Goodbye to Hollywood" was covered by Ronnie Spector, which got him some press. It was during this time that his wife was his producer.

His next album was his first hit, The Stranger. This established him as a household name, but what was so different then than his previous albums. I believe this was partly to do with the change of producer. Elizabeth was tired of producing his albums, she tried to hire George Martin, he declined. But this became the start of Billy's longstanding partnership with Phil Ramone. It was also more of a rock oriented relationship. Four songs ended up on the billboard top 25, it became the 2nd album on the charts (beating Simon and Garfunkel) and won a Grammy.

This sudden fame shot Billy Joels to the top of the charts. He was pretty much an overnight success, even today many of the songs are hugely popular. So now what will he do with his new found fame, will he release an album similar to the Stranger, or as a true artist change it up.

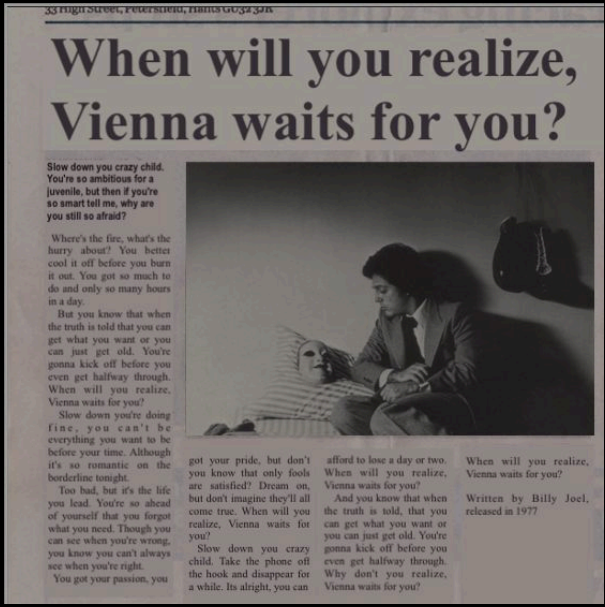
Middle Career;

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Ronnie Spector's cover of "Say Goodbye to Hollywood"

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Collage of Billy Joels famous song, Vienna

This sudden fame shot Billy Joels to the top of the charts. He was pretty much a overnight success, even today many of the songs are hugely popular. Vienna, in 2022, had a huge raise in popularity even decades after it camp out. So now that he was catapulted to fame, there was a question that many artist face, if they should stay with the style they got famous for or experiment with what they want to create.

52nd Street History/Album;

This was Billy's 6th solo studio album, it was released a year after his first mainstream success of The Stranger. Unlike his pervious album this one is written as an ode to Jazz. Now you see 52nd street was a famous street filled with jazz clubs after prohibition. It was called "Swing Street".



Pictured above is 52nd street, between 5th and 6th avenue, in 1948.

It hosted many famous jazz musicians of their time, everyone from Charlie Parker to Marian McPartland. Even though there was many different clubs musicians would bop between them and get inspiration for music and new styles. Due to this crockpot of inspiration, this is how a new section of jazz was born; Bebop. Sadly by the later 1940s the jazz scene started to disperse to different areas of the city.

Now the CBS/Columbia record company had its headquarters on that street, it was also the location of A&R recording studio, where Billy Joel did a lot of this recording. So he decided to name it after this historic music street. This also gave him inspiration to hire Jazz musicians to help in the recording of this album, creating a jazz inspired album. It was also the first album to be released on CDs!



Billy Joel concert, with saxophone and trumpet players

Songs;

Big Shot; 9/10

As the opening track to this album, Big Shot opens the stage as a dramatic fast paced song with a prominent electric guitar riff as well as strong drum hits. We also hear some of Billy's signature piano playing mixed in creating an air of suspense. It also, as per his style, incredibly descriptive lyrics and a surprising story behind the song. You see this song is making fun of a woman with a hangover the day after her drunken escapades. This was written as a negative commentary on the disco scene of the 1970s. For one it was written based of Billy Joel's own embarrassment after a night of black out drinking, as well as inspiration from a certain A-List celebrity couple.

One night Billy was out with Mick Jagger and Bianca, he all of a sudden had inspiration for a new song. You see Bianca was headline fodder for the tabloids at the time. So he decided to write a song from Mick Jagger perspective about his annoyance, it was basically him singing to Bianca we can see examples in *"You had the Dom Pérignon in your hand, And the spoon up your nose"*. Even around 2:36 where all of a sudden the accents of the vocals change almost to mimic Jagger.

Big shot is easily one of my favorite songs on the album. It's an amazing opening pieces because it comes out of the gate with so much energy, the dramatic percussion really brings the song together. I also really enjoy the lyrics and they are super entertaining, it's like listening to a story.

🌐 Billy Joel - Big Shot (Audio)



Honesty; 8/10

A quick switch up from Big Shot, Honesty is a slower ballad with a relaxing piano opening, slow melodic vocals and a more acoustic sound. We still see hints of the powerful musician Billy is. For one he brought in synths to accent the piano. Bringing in the drums a bit later in the song, we see a bit of the strong jazz influence this album is known for, the way Liberty DeVitto (the drummer) uses cymbal crashes is a predecessor for the power ballads of the 1980s and 1990s.

The story behind Honesty tells a story about how the character singing wants honesty over any sweet lies or empty promises, *“I don't want some pretty face/to tell me pretty lies”*. It also seems the main character is singing to a partner, that she is the one that will tell him the truth.

🌐 Billy Joel - Honesty (Audio)

Songs;

My Life; 7/10

In this song we see more of Joels incredible musicality, in this song both with the vocals and as well with the instruments. In this piece Billy plays both the keyboard and piano with different hands. With the right hand he plays a keyboard, and on the left hand he plays the piano. Another part of note is the backing vocals, in which Chicago members Peter Cetera and Donnie Darcus perform. These vocals are reminiscent of the Beatles and leave a hint of nostalgia.

The story of this song is about a man who quits his 9-5 to move to Los Angeles and become a standup comedian. In the bridge of the song there is a darker tone, one where the character has doubts about if they made the right choice, and judgments of other. The song slowly fades out seemingly creating a message that the story isn't over and there is still life to be lived.

Although not my favourite song on the album, I really love the piano flourishes in this song. It also has a message that I really enjoy, the fact that we can forge our own life.

🌐 Billy Joel - My Life (Official Audio)

Zanzibar; 10/10

Picking it up after the slower songs, Zanzibar is a strong high paced song similar too Big Shot. This song holds the most recognizable jazz influence out of the whole album. You can see this in the two incredible trumpet solos by the famous trumpet player, Freddie Hubbard. Of course we can't forget the amazing dreamy piano featured in the beginning and in the bridge. A bit more about Freddie, he was a trumpet player that played for all his life, he played in many bands and wrote music jazz bands still play to this day (in fact the senior jazz band played one of his pieces at the last concert) he was also awarded the highest honors in jazz.

In this song especially we really see Joel's incredible talent as a lyricist. This song is simply about a man and his local sports bar. The main themes are his love of alcohol, sports and the local waitress. The lyrics masterfully tie in sexual

innuendos based off of sports tying in the theme it is a sports bar “*Me, I'm trying just to get to second base, And I'd steal it if she only gave the sign, whoa*”.

This is my all time favourite Billy Joel song. It brings together the elements to quintessential Billy Joel piano mixed with a fantastic trumpet performance, it's just so good. Also the vocals are so so amazing. I love the fact that the song isn't supposed to be super serious, there is little sexual innuendos everywhere.

🌐 Billy Joel - Zanzibar (Audio)



Freddie Hubbard

Songs;

Stiletto; 10/10

Bringing up the energy of Zanzibar, Stiletto opens with a soft saxophone opening, then eventually the drums and bass slowly bring up the energy. The vocals also start echoing the build of the song, the vocals come in fast making it extremely frantic. This song takes a lot of inspiration from Dixieland Jazz (1920-30s era).

This song has a very interesting composition of lyrics, it talks about extremely toxic love. It talks about a lady who is a master of causing pain, cutting her partner with her Stiletto, *"She cuts you once, she cuts you twice\But still you believe"* She is an irresistible and dangerous woman who wields emotional manipulation like a sharp blade. Interestingly a stiletto can either be the high heel shoe or a deadly slim dagger. Another theme of the song is the man's addiction to the pain the woman inflicts. It is actually theorized that this song is about his ex-wife Elizabeth. It is called a more mature version of "She's always a Woman" in an earlier album.

Right after Zanzibar this is my second favorite song on the album. The groove is so good, it also has an amazing percussion section, also the piano and bass soli!! But I also love the story behind the song. You don't often hear a song about an abusive woman so I think it's just very interesting. Also because I play the saxophone I can really appreciate the solo towards the end of the song.

🌐 Billy Joel - Stiletto (Audio)



Billy Joel with his now ex-wife Elizabeth Webber

Rosalinda's Eyes; 9/10

In this song you can see an very evident influence of more of a Latin style jazz. Its almost like a jazz fusion and Latin mix. There is a Penny Whistle solo in this song, a penny whistle is like a wooden flute. It also opens with only a organ and bass, it also sounds like the opening song about a comedy featuring a vacation to the tropics.

This song is written for his mom, more specifically his hypothetical idea of a message from a love letter from his dad to his mom. The actually theme of this song is about a Cuban musician struggling to make money. He is homesick to see his lover, Rosalinda. It makes references to many places such as Herald (Spanish part of town in East Harlem). There is also many Latino terms such as Havana, Senorita and Cuban skies further tying into the idea of the theme.

I enjoy this song for a far different reason than the rest of the album. Because it's inspired by the Latin style of jazz it sounds a lot different from the rest of the songs. It, for me, is on my beach playlist. I also really appreciate him for not just doing the typical trumpet jazz music.



Billy Joels Mother (Nyman Joel)

Half a mile away; 7/10

This song is extremely inspired by the band Chicago, who's singers were featured earlier in the album. There is a big band entrance in the beginning of the piece. It is very much written to replicate the nostalgic 50s and 60s R&B. The horn section just really makes it incredible.

This song is inspired by normal life, the character works a boring 9-5 day job. In Billy Joels style though it cant be so simple. The character goes to another world at night. There is even characters that he ties in like little Geo and Angelina. It is rephrased many times that tis dream land is only half a mile away from the city.

I really like this song because it is a big band inspired piece. You have everything from a horn section to strings. I really loved that he included so many instruments. For me the way this song stands up it's pretty much purely in the instrumental section.

🌐 Billy Joel - My Life (Official Audio)

Until the Night; 8/10

This song is written in the tribute to the Righteous Brothers, but in a more jazz still. Because of this inspiration, the tracks has harmonies very similar to the ones they created. Its double tracked with lower and higher parts, the lower one sounds very similar to and Elvis still. This song also has more of a string centric section. Of course it also includes horns, saxophone and castanets.

The story in the lyrics written in this song was a romance between a couple. Its a very simple idea, the main theme is their instability of their relationship when they are apart at work. Then when they finally get together after a long day of work Billy then sings how everything is okay now.

This song is special on the album because it has far more of a dark tone. His voice in this song has been compared to Elvis, which I enjoy. I also enjoy the

pure vocal strength in this song. He really pushes his voice for the “until the night part”.

🌐 Billy Joel - Until the Night (Audio)



Righteous Brothers Album cover

52nd Street; 6*/10

This is one of the most jazz inspired songs in the whole album, although it is extremely short. It's a true ode to jazz in every way, between the jazz piano and the prominent clarinet solo in the end. In present day clarinet is not very popular in jazz but in early jazz it was extremely present. Even in his vocals it has a jazz style, with "Yeahs!" and "Whoos!" sprinkled throughout.

This song is the most true to style in the album. It has very few lyrics, it basically just sets the scene of the jazz scene and a few sexual innuendoes. I believe it is written as a quiet send off, not one the general public would like but musicians would understand the message.

*This is my least favorite song on the album, but I also couldn't imagine any other way to close the album. I believe it is truly an ode to traditional jazz of the area (52nd street).

🌐 Billy Joel - 52nd Street (Audio)



Conclusion;

I believe this album is a beautiful labor of love meant to honor the significance that jazz has played in music. You can tell from an outside perspective he had much inspiration, from Dixieland inspired jazz to Latin. I also believe that this album paved the way for more piano centric artists, him and Elton John. 52nd

street might not be his breakout album but it seems it is his most inspired and and creative album through out his career.

For me it really got me inspire to go out and find more musicians, older and more modern that experiment and create music outside of their normal genre. This has mainly been artists/bands adding horn sections into their music or incorporating different drumming styles.