

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Billy Joel: The Worldwide Career of an All-American Icon

Our Friends · Wednesday, May 13th, 2020

Billy Joel songs are able to reach people from all walks of life, and years later are some of the most memorable hits of the late 70s and 80s. Born in 1949, he has been nominated for 23 Grammys, winning five, and having three of his songs peak at number 1 on the Billboard Charts. Despite a rocky road to success and several earlier albums which didn't reach a commercial breakthrough, [Billy Joel has secured his place in music history with songs](#) such as *Piano Man*, *We Didn't Start the Fire*, and *Only the Good Die Young*.

Childhood

The child of Jewish immigrants on both sides, Billy Joel was raised in the Bronx in New York. A love for music ran in his family and his half brother became a classical conductor back in Germany. His father cultivated that same love in him by example, and Joel took piano lessons from the age of four at his mother's insistence, although he is quoted as saying "I didn't like the lessons very much, but I was enchanted by music."

Music Career

Unable to graduate high school, Joel had missed a crucial exam when he played a late-night shift at a piano bar where he often performed to earn extra money. This inspired his decision to be a musician full time, and Billy Joel [signed with the record company](#) Family Productions in 1971, where he released his first album *Cold Spring Harbour*. He went on tour with it later in the year and performed at Puerto Rican pop festival Mar Y Sol. Although he didn't make any commercial breakthroughs with the album or the tour, he had begun to gain positive attention and slowly built his career with the following releases *Piano Man* and *Streetlife Serenade* on the Columbia label. Single *Piano Man* was a somewhat commercially successful song but neither album charted.

It was Joel's fourth album, *The Stranger*, which fully saw him break into the mainstream, and this featured well known songs such as *Just the Way You Are* and *She's Always a Woman*. *The Stranger* beat *Bridge Over Troubled Water* by Simon and Garfunkel to become Columbia's bestselling album and Billy Joel was launched into the public eye. Nevertheless, his growing fame and the successes of songs like *The Stranger* gave him a reputation for piano ballads, which he tried to change with subsequent releases *Glass Houses* and *The Nylon Curtain*.

Collaborations, Awards, and Voice Acting

As a result of his fame, Billy Joel became the first rock artist to perform in the former Soviet

Union, an experience which exposed him to the strict regime there when he struggled to stay calm when faced with his audience's treatment at the hands of security guards. As his career grew, Joel also attempted to branch out with albums which paid homage to his love of fifties and sixties music such as doo-wop and rock and roll, as well as embarking on projects such as group tours with Elton John and a re-recording of some of his earlier songs for fans who had discovered him at his commercial breakthrough.

In addition to his music, Billy Joel was the voice actor for the character of Dodger in Disney's animated animal themed adaptation of Oliver Twist, *Oliver and Company*. His five Grammy awards include both Record of the Year and Song of the Year in 1979 for *Just the Way You Are*, as well as Album of the Year in 1980 for *52nd Street*. Although he hasn't released any new songs for 13 years, he still plays concerts sporadically, with the last one being in Camden Yard Stadium, Baltimore, in 2019.

Photo from Pixabay.

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