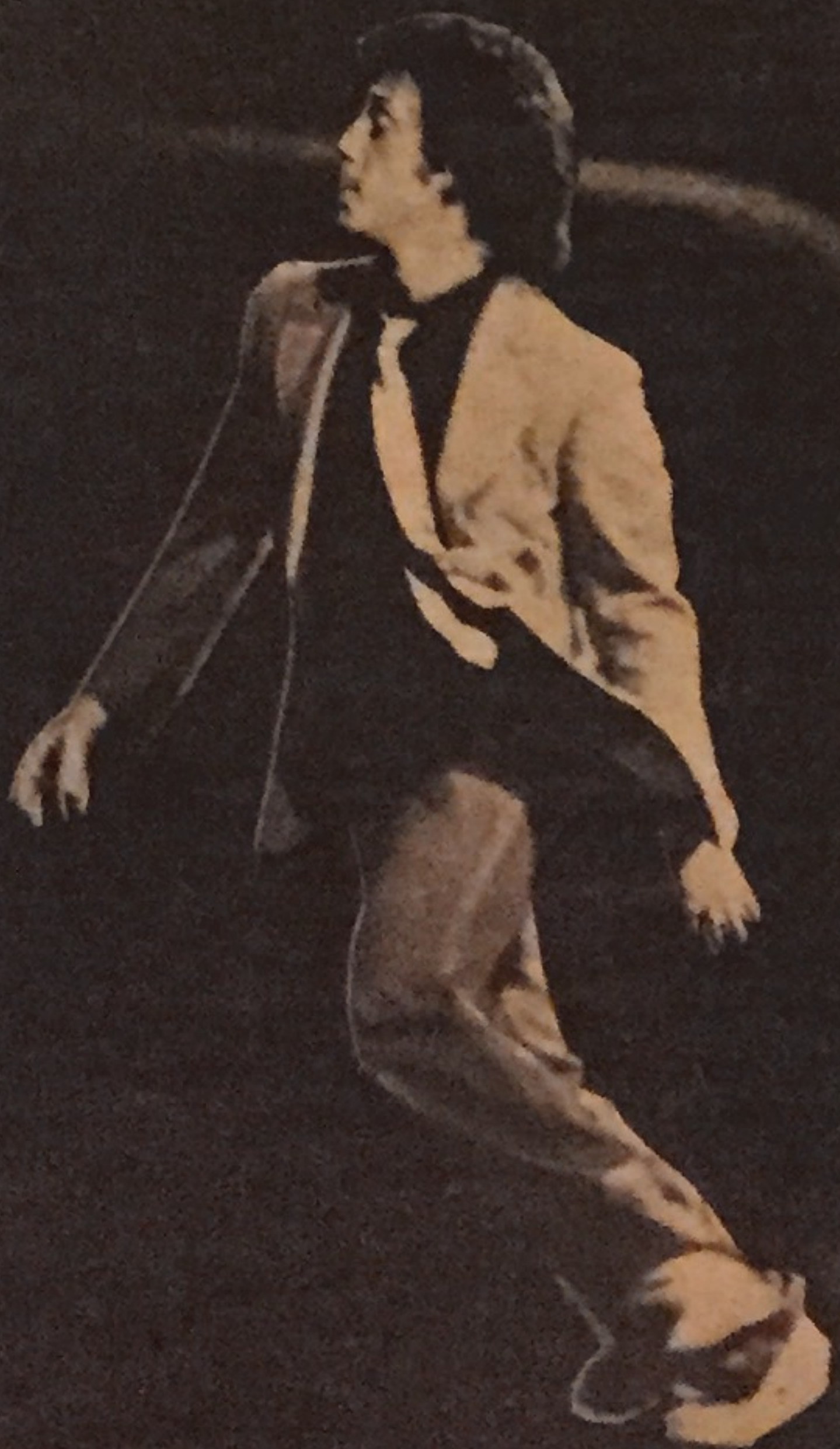
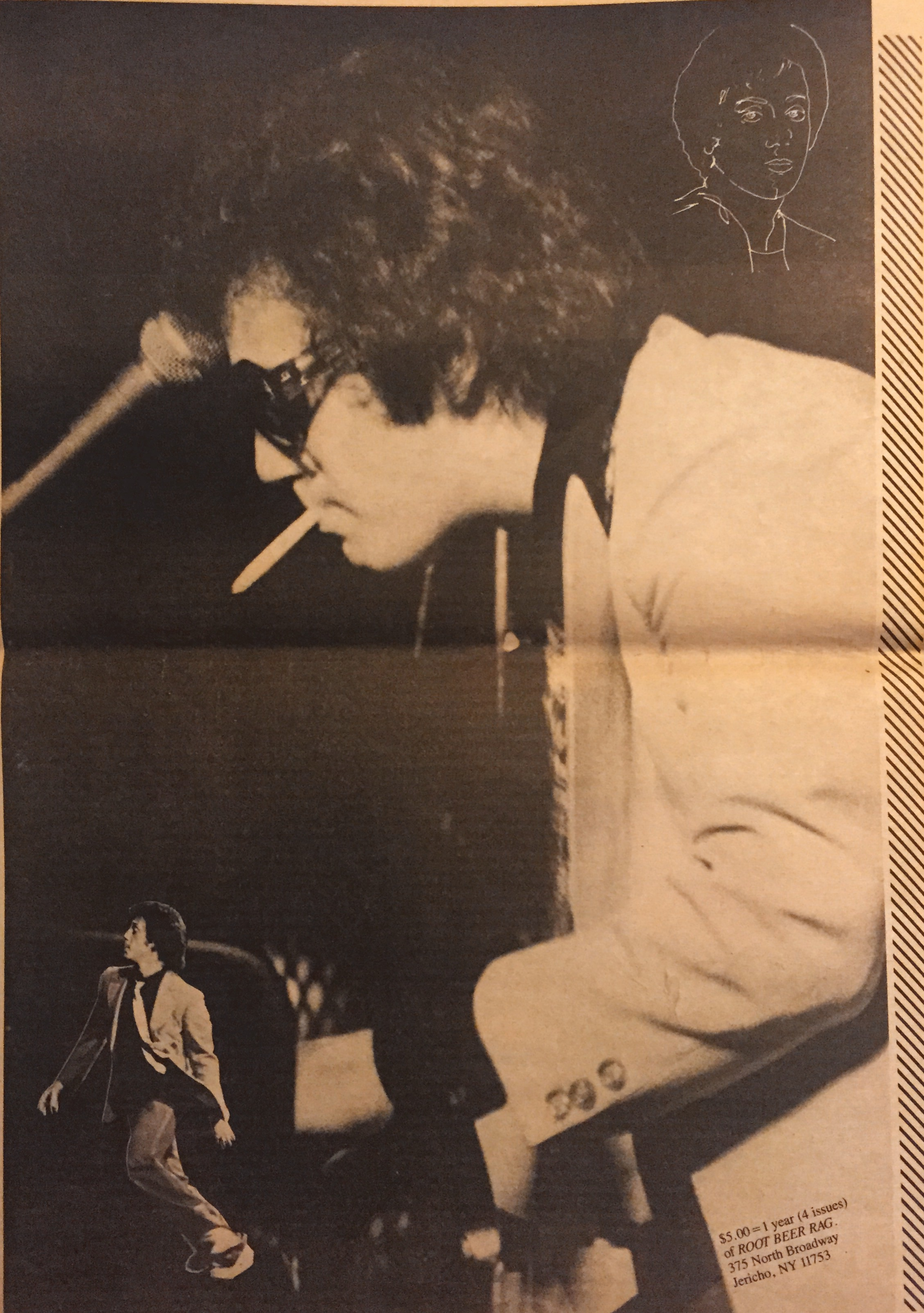
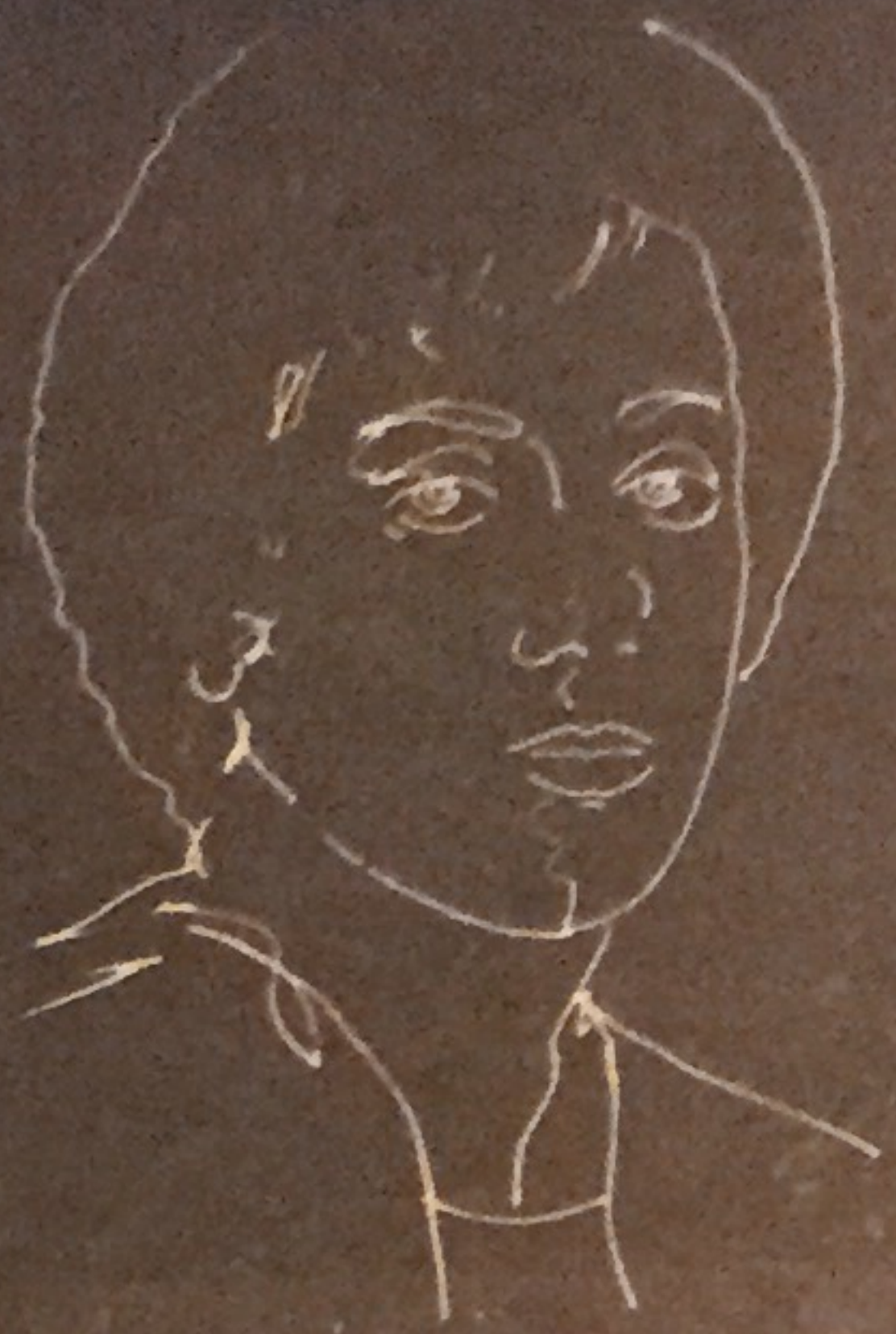




THE
ROOT BEER RAG

Spring 1981



\$5.00 = 1 year (4 issues)
of ROOT BEER RAG.
375 North Broadway
Jericho, NY 11753



billy JOEL



From left: Dave Mason, Alvin Lee, My Low, and Billy Joel



Design: Brad Olsen-Ecker, Editorial: Merry Aronson



If you have a question for Billy, send it to:

RAG BAG

RAG BAG
% Root Beer Rags, Ltd.
375 No. Broadway
Jericho, New York 11753

Q. Would it be possible to release through ROOT BEER RAGS or Columbia Records a special collector's edition of COLD SPRING HARBOR? Even if it was mastered at the wrong speed, I'm sure there are plenty of fans like me who would love to own it. I hope you will consider this.—Andrew Walklin, Brunswick, ME

A. I don't have control of the masters to COLD SPRING HARBOR so I am unable to do anything about it.

Q. Which of your albums do you like best?—Molly Morrill, Lakeville, CT

A. The last album I did is always my favorite.

Q. Is the house on the cover of GLASS HOUSES your own?—Becky Crabtree, Lynden, WA

A. Yes.

Q. Was it real exciting to be in the studio for the very first time? Did it make you play worse or did it inspire you?—Charlie Lang, Monroe, NY

A. It was very exciting but I don't remember much else because I was fourteen years old at the time.

Q. I would like to know why you didn't write a title song for GLASS HOUSES the way you did for THE STRANGER, 52nd STREET, and PIANO MAN?—John C. Kissell, Old Bridge, NJ

A. I would like to know too.

Q. What is your favorite animal, and do you have any pets?—Wendy Daines, Severna Park, MD

A. Cats are my favorite animals, and I have one named Claws.



Billy with Floyd Patterson



Odyssey

OF A BILLY JOEL RECORD BY MARTIN TORGOFF

"If there has to be a dictatorial decision, I suppose I'll make it. But it's pretty much a collective experience in the studio. Everybody is as concerned as the other guy about the record."

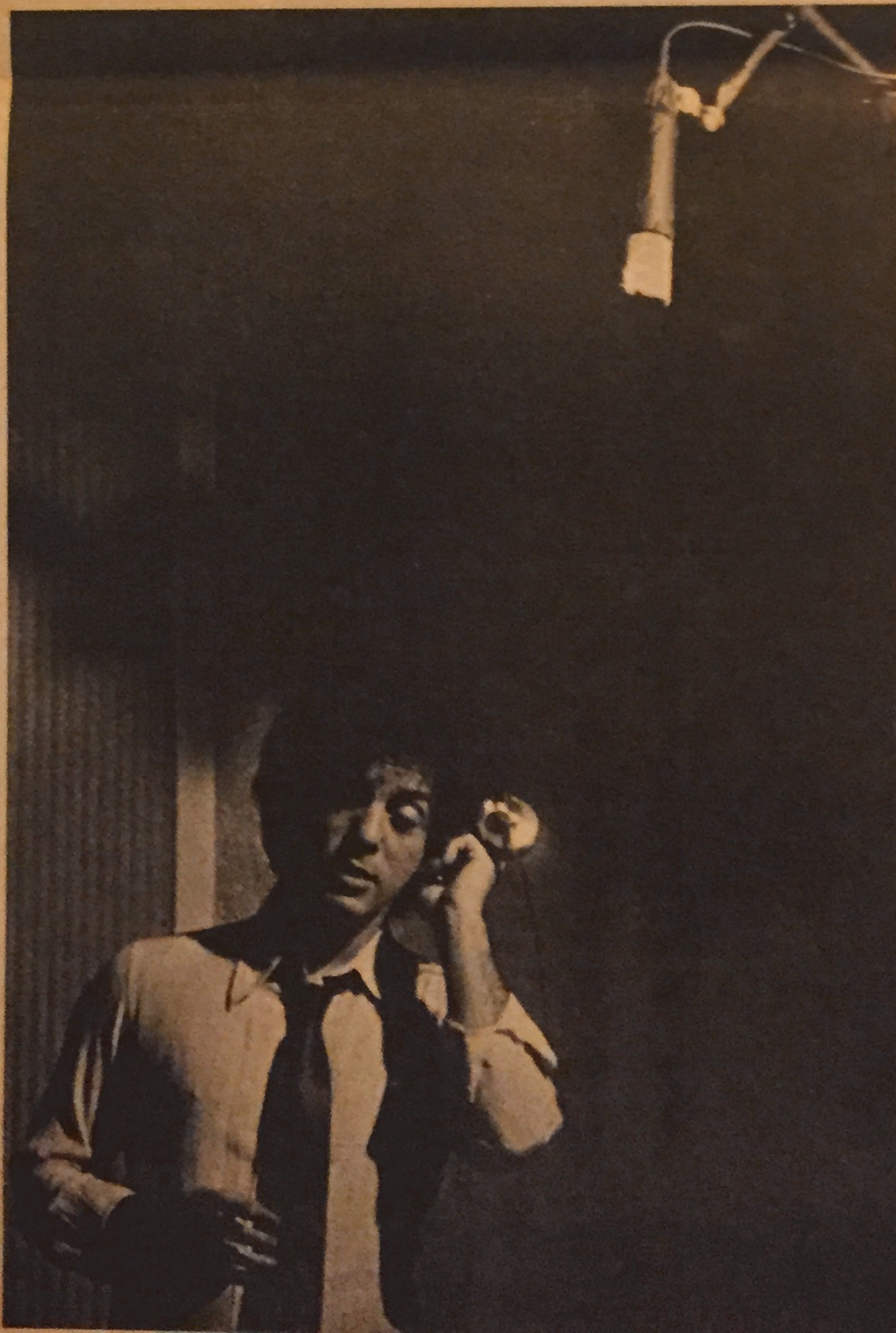
—Billy Joel, *ROOT BEER RAG* Fall, '80

Have you ever wondered how a record is made? How it is written, recorded, manufactured, and sold? To answer these questions and more, *ROOT BEER RAG* asked music journalist Martin Torgoff to trace the step-by-step history of Billy's recent number one hit, *It's Still Rock And Roll To Me*. Drawing from exclusive behind-the-scenes interviews, what appears here is the first installment of a series detailing the odyssey of a Billy Joel record.

PART I: THE STUDIO

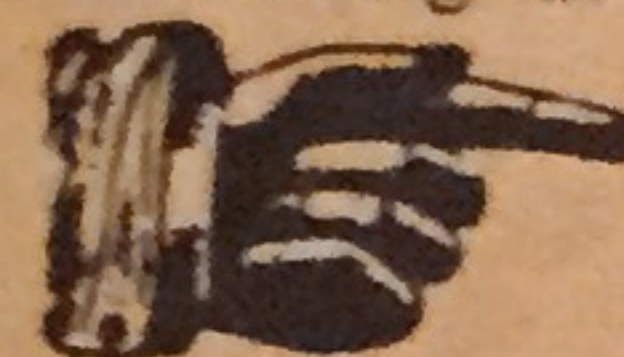
Arrangements to record *GLASS HOUSES* were worked out in the late summer of '79 by Columbia Records; Billy's management company; Phil Ramone, Billy's producer; Jim Boyer, his engineer; and the members of Billy's longtime band: Doug Stegmeyer (bass), Liberty DeVitto (drums), Richie Cannata (saxophone and keyboards), and Russell Javors and David Brown (guitars). With everything settled, studio time was booked, everyone was alerted at Columbia, and the wheels of the record company were set rolling.

"It's nice to have a lot of the components together and to know exactly how long things will take to complete," says Don DeVito of



Columbia's A&R staff, "but you don't always have that luxury. In the case of *GLASS HOUSES*, I think Billy had about four tunes completed; he had a couple more melodies and lyric ideas and one or two of what are called 'hooks'—the meat of the song—but had no complete lyric or composition. But knowing how fast Billy can work and how professional he and Phil Ramone are, I really felt confident that he would have the songs written quickly."

The A&R person (artist and repertoire) in a record company helps the artist produce the best possible record. Don often helps decide on material and personnel for albums. (Don knew Phil Ramone from his work on Dylan's *BLOOD ON THE TRACKS* album and was helpful in getting him to work with Billy on *THE STRANGER*). On *GLASS HOUSES*, however, Don's responsibility was making certain that all pieces of the recording process came together by deadlines since Columbia Records was geared to go into production with the record immediately, as soon as the recording and mixing were over and the master tape prepared. Thus, the drama began at A and R Recording studios in New York during the fall of '79.





As producer of the album, Phil Ramone had to take complete charge of the production; everything that happened, from rehearsal of songs to the completion of the album, was his responsibility. Over a period of four years and three albums, Phil and Billy have developed a deep trust in each other's talents and visions.

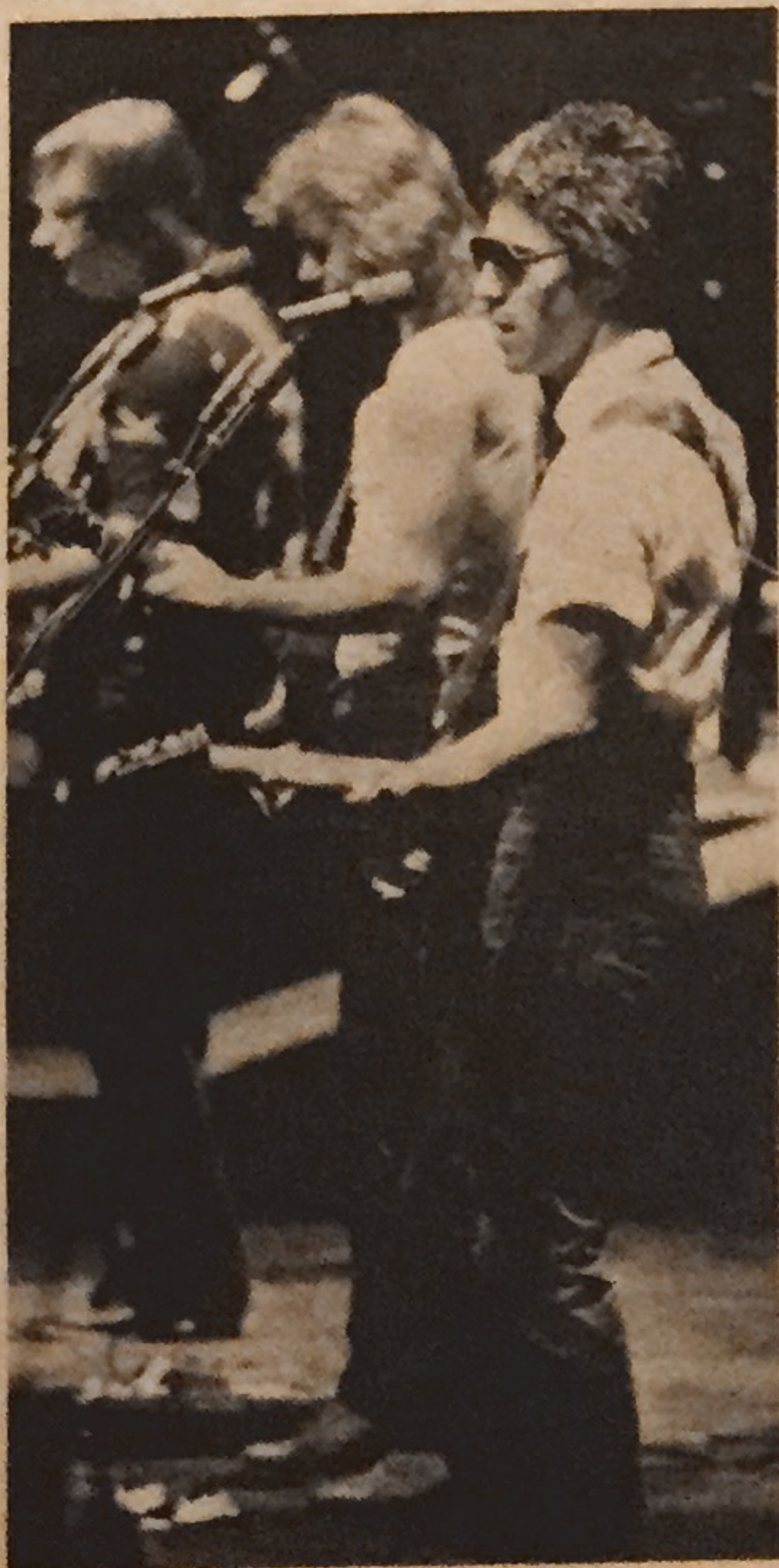
In the studio, Phil Ramone must wear many hats all at the same time. He must be a visionary who helps Billy work his ideas into memorable songs while being careful never to impose his own style or tastes on the music; he must be a critic who is quick to speak his mind when he thinks something is wrong or could be done more effectively; and, when something is wrong, he must serve as a doctor with a sure-fire cure. The producer must be sensitive to the needs and individuality of the musicians; he must inspire confidence in his people and direct the entire production. An understanding of the studio and the importance of play and creative experiment are also essential qualities of a good producer. Phil Ramone is a superb producer, familiar with all aspects of music and every part of the recording studio in the same way a highly skilled musician understands his instrument. Because he and Billy have become such close friends, Billy's recording sessions, despite pressures of deadlines, are informal, highly productive, and filled with laughter and the sense of adventure that comes from a willingness to experiment and take chances.

Steadily, song by song, the album was written and recorded over the fall and into early winter. Using Phil and the rest of his band as sounding boards for feedback, Billy writes extremely well under pressure because he has built enough confidence to be able to create top-notch material in the studio. That's no small task since the environment of the recording studio can seem cold, impersonal, and technical beyond imagination. At first glance, the studio seems a frightening electronic world of strange objects, big empty spaces, control panels, and glass partitions. Billy Joel is fortunate enough to love the people he works with. His team

of musicians and technicians have become like a big family and turn the studio into a hothouse of energy and creativity which is fueled by Billy's drive and guided by Phil's knowing touch. Each song is worked over until it holds together and then several "takes" are recorded on twenty-four tracks before it is "mixed" by Phil and Jim Boyer, with Billy listening in. Because of varying style and content, each song presents different problems and challenges.

Day after day, everybody worked long hours, taking breaks only when an impasse had been reached, when everybody was starving, or when the players were simply too tired to continue. Outside the studio, night becomes day and the seasons change; inside, everybody must focus clearly on the song. Until the album is finished and "in the can," nothing else matters. Finally, toward the end of February, the album was one song away from completion.

"It was a late night event," recalls Phil. "I was in the booth mixing the next-to-last song and Billy was out at the piano. Somehow, I knew that he had to put a P.S. on that album. You know, we always get asked the questions: What are we gonna do in



the eighties... new wave, new pave, whatever. He might have had one line and started with that, like 'Sleeping with the television on'—or—'It's still rock and roll to me.' The song moved into place so fast—it was probably the fastest thing we've ever done. From concept to finish, Billy had it rolling immediately; he was just out there at the piano, whacking away at it. I said, 'You've got to pursue that!' He never has a melodic problem with writing a song, but nobody knew what the words would be."

As the strains of the chords filled the studio, nobody was able to sit still. Soon, everybody's gathered around the piano, banging the tambourines, egging Billy on as he hammered out the song on the keys. One by one, they picked up instruments and fell into the groove. Liberty, at his drums, followed along, accenting certain lines. "From the moment Billy had it at the piano, the band had it," Phil says. The band



then worked on the song for awhile as Billy, without the lyrics, sang doubletalk—"lah-lah, blah-blah"—where "hot funk, cool punk" will fall in, stopping now and then to jot down notes. Sitting in the control booth, Phil saw the song materialize before his eyes with the passing of minutes as the band explored the refrains and jammed on several instrumental breaks. *Good* rock and roll song, he thought. "It's up to me to be open, logical, and not too intellectual about the feeling," Phil recalls thinking. "Just straight ahead, simple."

At this point, the services of Jim Boyer, a talented engineer, became essential. Recording is a partnership among many people, all making important contributions, all balancing each other's skills. Within the limits of the studio, the engineer must somehow manage to fit the music to the available technology. He sets up the microphones, tests the sound, mixes the sound for recording, records the music, plays it back, and helps execute the final mix. In order to truly appreciate what Jim Boyer does, it is necessary to remind the

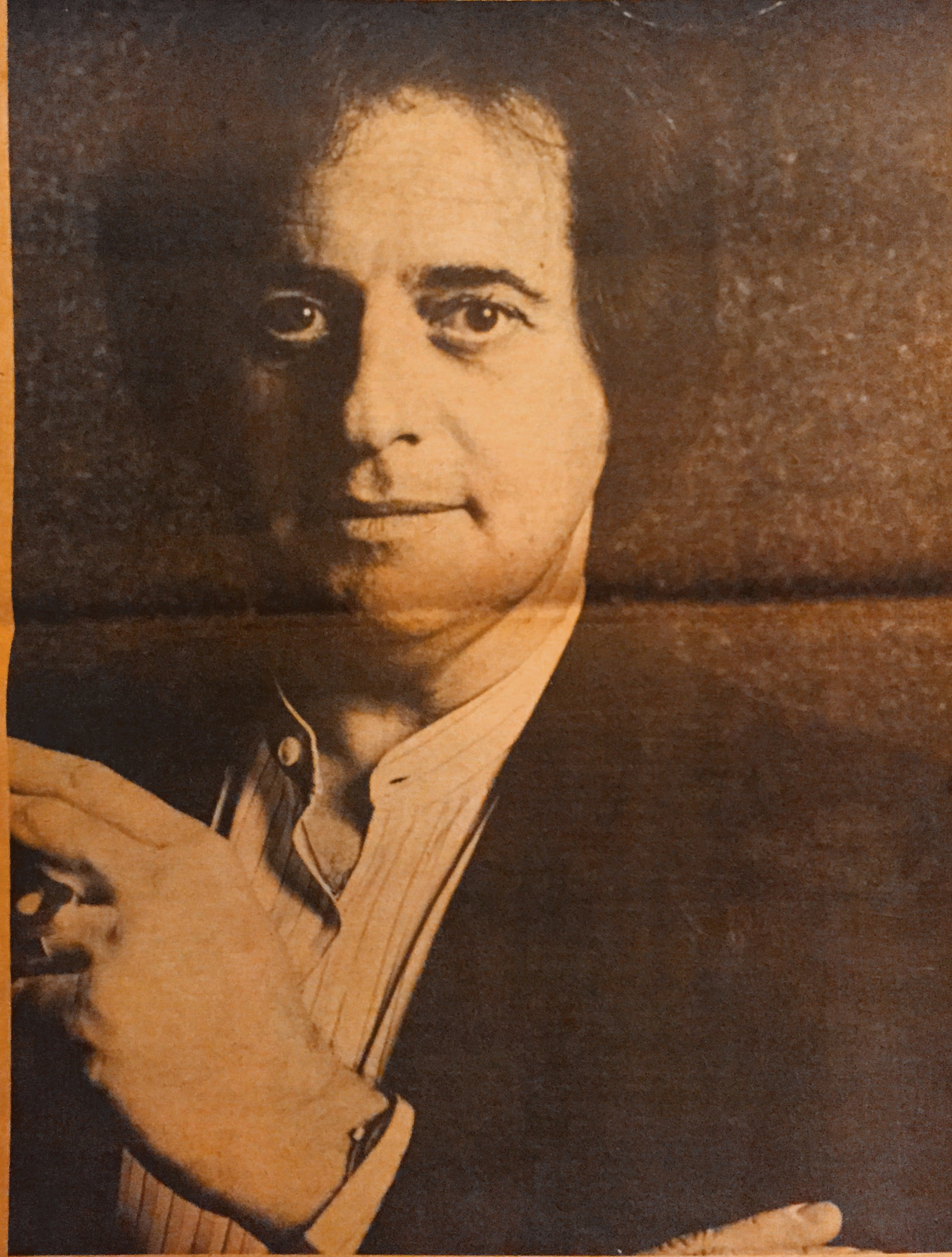
listener that music, in the confines of the recording studio, is ultimately a matter of sounds on tape. The sounds going into the microphones, whether they be vocals or an entire orchestra, are converted into electrical impulses that are fed onto the tape. Tape is plastic coated with metallic particles that react to the sound. Modern multi-track recording equipment allows the recording of twenty-four or more synchronized signals on a single piece of tape to be mixed down to a stereo master tape. Engineers become like sorcerers of sound. Any channel on the tape can be recorded, played back, and re-recorded at different times without affecting the others. Sound can be added and synchronized onto the tape later, which is called overdubbing. The possibilities are endless.



Coming in the next issue of *ROOT BEER RAG*, Part II of the odyssey of making a record.

Martin Torgoff is author of a recently published book on Elvis Presley called, *Elvis, We Love You Tender*.







INTERVIEW

WITH PHIL RAMONE

PHIL RAMONE is one of the most prominent and versatile figures on the popular music scene today. His list of hitmaking credits as producer/engineer reads like a "Who's Who" of rock superstardom, and he recently received his fifteenth Grammy nomination for producing *GLASS HOUSES*.

Phil's achievements include the production of several Broadway cast albums, among them *THE WIZ* and *PIPPIN*, as well as soundtracks to the films *MIDNIGHT COWBOY*, *A STAR IS BORN*, and *ONE TRICK PONY*. He was awarded the Grammy, the music industry's highest honor, for the albums *GETZ/GILBERTO*, *PROMISES*, *PROMISES*, *THE STRANGER* (two awards), and *52nd STREET*. Other producing credits include Barbra Streisand, Paul Simon, Kenny Loggins, Paul McCartney, Chicago, and Phoebe Snow.

Phil, a native New Yorker, has been involved with music since childhood, when he was classically trained on the violin. As a teenager, he fooled around with various electric instruments. He studied at the Juilliard School and later taught at the Eastman School of Music. In the early '60s, Phil co-founded A & R Recording studios and became one of the first to cross over from sound engineer to record producer.

Billy has often described Phil as the "sixth member" of his band. In '77, they teamed up to record *THE STRANGER*, which became the largest selling album in the history of Columbia Records. He and Billy have been working together ever since.

RBR: What is a producer and what does a record producer do?

PHIL: I generally feel that producer is almost a wrong term. I'm more like a director of a movie. It's the same kind of concept. You're the objective viewer. Through time and working with people, you gain trust. You can have a larger vision of the artist's own understanding of the material. A lot of it is hard to put your finger on. What a producer/director should be doing is encouraging—even taking people into the wrong areas sometime so they can see the right. Years after an album is made, I never want an artist to regret something they did on it. To me, you don't impose your personal style, but you do keep your eye on the concept of that song—not the album—but the song.

RBR: Your first collaboration with Billy was on *THE STRANGER* album, which set new precedents in record sales and helped establish Billy as an international superstar. And Billy often credits you with turning his career around. How do you react to such praise?

PHIL: I appreciate being thanked and then keep on looking ahead.

RBR: Why do you think the chemistry is so good between you?

PHIL: There was a definite immediate trust that came about early in our relationship. It caused no pain by being critical. We laugh a lot—there's a tremendous looseness and yet Billy is a very disciplined guy: being on time, showing up ahead, practicing the piano. Billy's so up when he's making a record that it gives me a feeling that he's not afraid to try anything. In the beginning of the relationship he was more like a chameleon in the studio—he enjoyed testing where he would stop and where I would stop. And we found common ground. We disagree about a lot of things, amazingly enough, but not for the wrong reasons. You may like something one day, and then not the next... you have to admit you're wrong. My dedication is to the artist. The first thing I said to Billy was "you're the guy who has to live with this." We're dealing with musical taste and sensitivity—it's a very inside thing—there is no right and wrong. I only serve people well if I'm fulfilling their need. The minute I'm not, I don't want to be around.

RBR: Were you surprised by *THE STRANGER*'s gigantic success?

PHIL: Sure. Absolutely. Billy had a tremendous following before that, but he just didn't have that big monster hit. We didn't know we were going to make it. Between what the band did with Billy and whatever contribution I made—I had implicit faith in that unit to play together. What I saw in concert was not on his earlier records. I had simply said that if I can duplicate any of that spirit that I feel every time I see Billy work—which makes me a fan—then I've got to cut through all the technical garbage that can hold up a performance. *THE STRANGER* is a performance album.

RBR: Where did you first see Billy in concert?

PHIL: I had seen him in Toronto at a CBS convention around '76, a year before meeting him. Then we got together at a lunch where the chemistry was so easy-

going. A couple of weeks later we talked about working together and made a deal. We felt if it didn't work, we wouldn't push it. There's no way you can work if the contract's right and you're wrong. I always feel that way.

RBR: How would you describe your style of production?

PHIL: The technical things have to come second. I have to throw away my classical training in both engineering and music—and Billy has had to forget a lot of his classical discipline too—and be free of those fences that destroy the very essence of what we're trying to do. I don't believe in filling every hole. I think the more space you have on a record, the better it is. You can always add, but subtracting and fixing I don't like to do.

RBR: You started out as a child prodigy on violin. How did that lead you to the first part of your career as an engineer?

PHIL: Yes, I was first a musician and got into engineering because of a lack of contact between technical people and artists. As a child I worked in a lot of musical areas but it wasn't until I got friendly with the people in the control room did I understand the reasons for everything. The musician wasn't invited into the control room back then. I fought a lot of the rules of not stepping outside your box. I was determined to rebel against tired rules.

RBR: How did you make the transition from engineer to producer?

PHIL: That happened because of the relationship I had with the artists and record people and the musicians in the studio—the rock and rollers who were not recognized at the time.

RBR: For instance...?

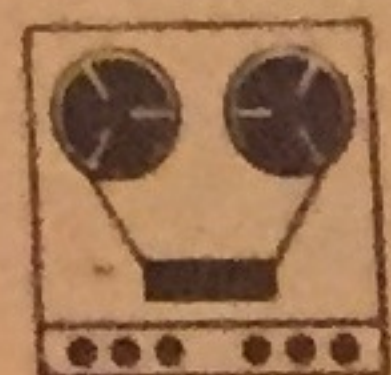
PHIL: Oh, people who became part of bands—the Steve Gadd's and the Richard Tee's. I met Chuck Mangione when I was at Eastman teaching a course on "How to Make a Record." We'd make records at night. As an engineer, I was left alone so many times by producers who had to run off to some other place and they'd say "finish this." I had to leave the country at one point and go to England so I could get a record deal. The feeling was, "he's an engineer, what does he know about music?" And as part owner of a studio then, I had to be careful that I wasn't competing against clients.

RBR: What advice would you offer musicians and songwriters trying to break into the business today?

PHIL: You have to be dedicated to work, and not say, "if I only had a bigger amp—and if I only had this"—you will eventually. But in the meantime, play a wedding for two dates so you can afford to play your own music at four o'clock in the morning in a dumpy club. It's hard to be a waiter and a performer, but sometimes you may have to. My experience started in a demo studio. There's no better place to learn songs and ways to do them and experiment than in a tiny studio, even if you have to volunteer your time. Play for



nothing, if necessary, so you can have an hour of studio time to learn the profession of what the recording instrument does. You need the experience and knowledge of what it's like standing in front of a glass booth with a microphone. You don't need seventy-seven tracks. It doesn't matter. The concentration should be on the content of the song. If you spill out one-hundred songs, maybe only four of them might be reasonable. But keep spilling them out or you'll never know. Your testing ground is to perform. You can't start at the Bottom Line or the Garden as a beginning, so go to a small town and play. Drive a hundred miles, walk fifty. If you love your profession, it'll show. And remember that nobody owes you anything—the business doesn't owe you anything. It's not going to be the *Wizard of Oz*. It's many, many hours of devoted work and the rewards are so satisfying internally.



DOUG STEGMAYER

Doug Stegmeyer, Billy Joel's long-time bass player, joined Billy on tour in '74, and recorded *TURNSTILES* shortly thereafter. Between recording and touring with Billy, Doug does session work with other artists like Bob James, Karen Carpenter, and Phoebe Snow. Recently, Doug offered *ROOT BEER RAG* an insider's view of the history and workings of Billy's band.

RBR: Let's start at the beginning with your early family life. You come from a very musical background.

DOUG: That's true. My dad played in a lot of the dixieland bands, with people like Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. Then he moved from Detroit to New York, and started arranging music for a lot of TV shows, like the Hit Parade and the Jackie Gleason Show.

RBR: What was his instrument?

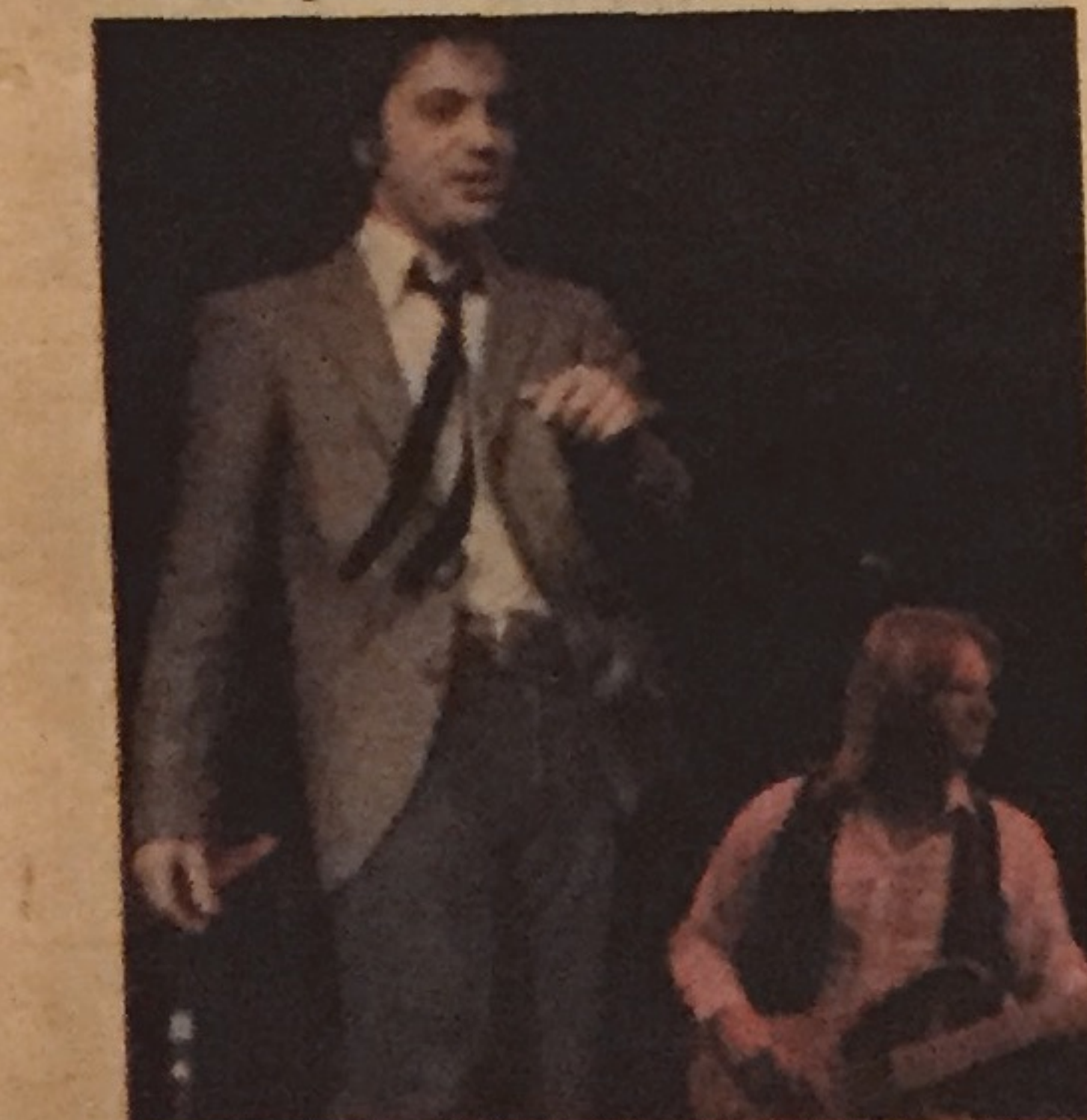
DOUG: He played the clarinet mainly and arranged on the piano.

RBR: Was your father responsible for your career in music?

DOUG: Well, he probably got me started. And then there were the Beatles. They were the ones who probably motivated me to be a musician. Their melodies were so great—I knew the bass part to every Beatles song.

RBR: When did you make the decision to become a professional player?

DOUG: I started playing guitar around fourteen. At sixteen, I auditioned for a high school band and got right in with all these eighteen-year-old seniors. After graduation, I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York City for a while. I proved I was



good at that, but knew I didn't want to do graphic art for advertising forever. But at that time, there wasn't a great demand for electric bass players either.

RBR: Did you ever play an instrument other than the bass?

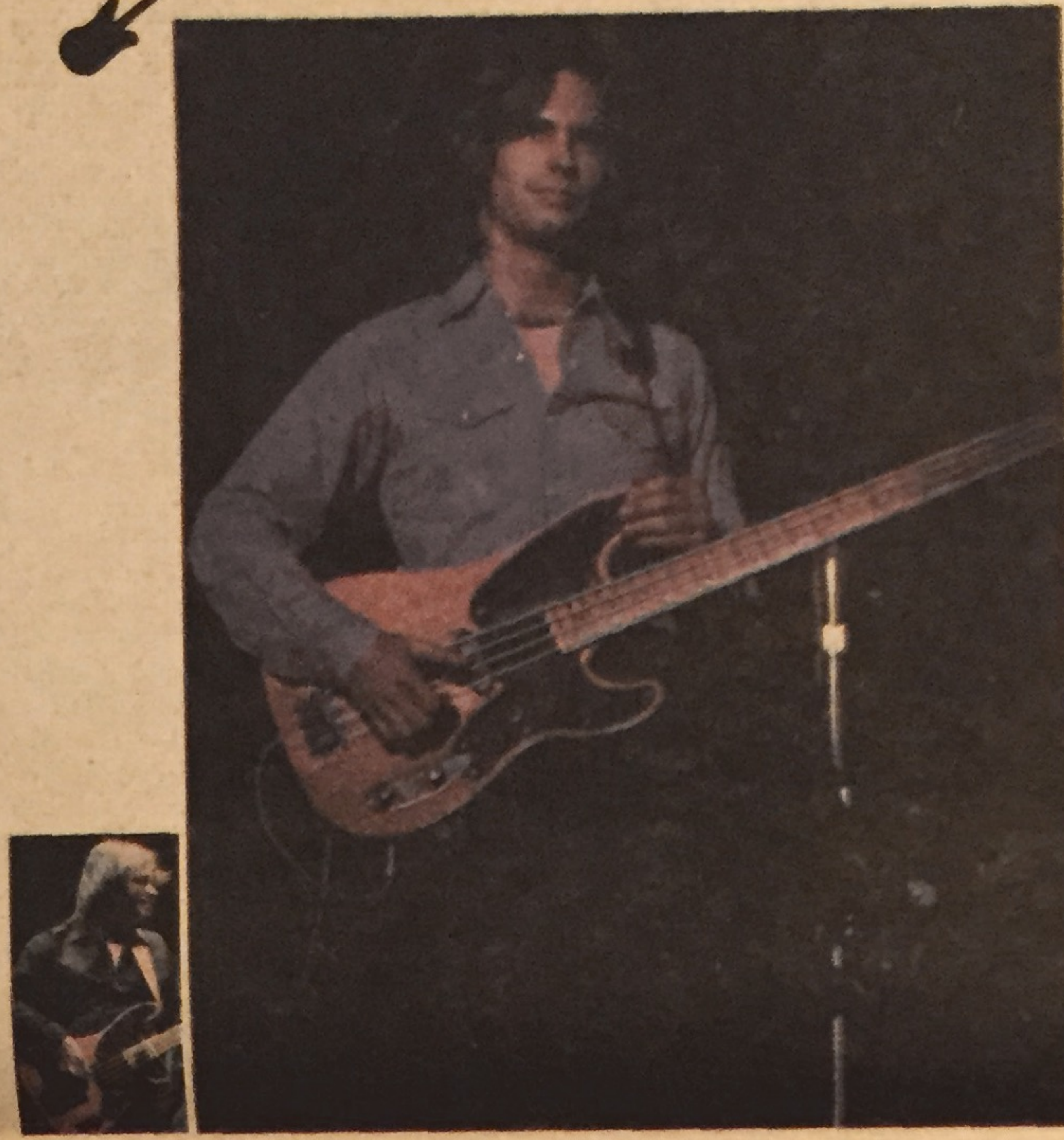
DOUG: The first thing I played was regular six string guitar. Then I started getting into the bass guitar because I think bass a lot easier. It's a different way to think about music.

RBR: What about the piano?

DOUG: I doodle on piano. I got all these piano players around me—so I steal like crazy!

RBR: Did you study music formally?

DOUG: I almost went to the Berklee School of Music, but decided that it would be better to concentrate on private lessons. So I found one of the best bass teachers in New York City,



Ed Lord. He had a long waiting list, and I went through auditions. It was Lord who taught me how to read music. I worked really hard with him, probably never studied harder in all my other years in school combined. I remember, in the beginning, if I hadn't studied the lesson I would try to fake it, and he would say, "Just get out of here. You didn't do your lesson; I'm not taking your money, don't embarrass yourself or me." Boy, was that awful! So I never did that again, and I really learned a lot—about chord structures... I got a solid musical background.

RBR: Did Lord influence you stylistically one way or another?

DOUG: Not really. He didn't work that way. He asked what kind of music I liked. Lots of times the chart he gave me to read with a tape was classical, which I'm fond of. I'd end up reading Brandenburg concertos on the bass, and I would go crazy for that stuff.

RBR: Billy has often said that he formed the band around you. How did that come about?

DOUG: Well, I first joined him in '74, and at that time I was in a band with Russell Javors and Liberty DeVitto playing Long Island clubs. I heard that Billy had fired his bass player, but he was out in California and I really had no way to get in touch with him. So I forgot about it, and then Brian Ruggles, who was starting to do sound for Billy then, came to a club where I was playing and told me I sounded good, and that Billy would get in touch the next day. And Billy did call the next day, and said "You're comin' out next week," and then he flew me out to California. I thought I would have to audition, but it turned out I didn't have to. I wanted the gig so bad, I knew *everything* cold—better than the guys already in his band! He was in the middle of

recording the *STREETLIFE* album and I did a few tours with him after it was finished. Then Billy moved back to New York and fired all the old band members 'cause they just weren't getting into the material and I guess he needed some new blood. I was really into it, I liked what Billy was doing. Then I told him about Liberty, and said "check him out, and if you don't hire this guy in ten minutes you can fire me." Billy warned me not to put myself on the line... when it came time to audition drummers, he heard a few guys and then Liberty. Instead of ten minutes, it only took five! Billy said to Lib, "you're perfect for the job," and bought him a new set of drums the next day! At that time Billy was getting ready to make the *TURNSTILES* album and it was just the three of us for a while, 'cause there was no touring at that point. Since Billy's music covers so many different areas, it was hard to get good players who were diverse enough to handle it. I used to audition players who could rock out fine, but when it came to doing *You're*



My Home, they'd fall apart. Then I told Billy about Richie and Russell, and without hearing them, he told me to bring them around since my credibility had proved so good. Now we have Russell and David who are very well-rounded, which is extremely hard to find.

RBR: Do you have a favorite Billy Joel album?

DOUG: I think it changes. Every time we do one, it's my favorite album. I think they're all great. They're all our best efforts. But after you play it and live it in the studio, it becomes your favorite. I remember when we got our first copies of *THE STRANGER* before it was released, and Bill called me up and asked me what I thought. I told him that it was the best I could do, and I knew it was the best he could do—and as long as you always know that, you can never feel bad about a recording, no matter what happens with it. Even if it doesn't work.

RBR: It was shocking to learn that after you guys cut *Just The Way You Are*, you left the studio depressed, having no idea how great it really was.

DOUG: Yeah, that's true. That's where Phil comes in. He just yelled us out of the studio that night and told us we didn't know what we were talking about and to come back tomorrow. He knew better at that point. We've all learned a lot of lessons from him. The next day we listened to it and said "Yeah, it's not too bad!" Even the people at CBS thought it might be a good cover tune. But it was radio stations that kept playing *Just The Way You Are* and then it was released as a single.

RBR: You've worked with Billy before Phil Ramone was producer, and certainly ever since. How would you explain Phil and Billy and the band being such a good match?

DOUG: Phil knows everything about making records and has a different way of doing things. He believes in getting the feel right even if it's not letter perfect. Some producers rehearse the band so well that it's perfect—with no groove left. You can always repair a note that's off, but you can never repair the feel. His attitude is you should have fun in the studio or you shouldn't be there. You should enjoy your work. He respects everybody and we can say anything we feel at any time. Nobody gets uptight or threatened.

RBR: You've been around the world several times with Billy on tour. How do you feel about life on the road?

DOUG: We're all good friends and we have a lot of fun. The best part is playing. There's nothing like it.

RBR: Is there any one tour that particularly stands out for you?

DOUG: I think the first time we played Australia was a lot of fun—and the big American tours are usually the best.

RBR: Which do you prefer, the recording or the touring side?

DOUG: I can't say. There's nothing like being on the stage and putting on a show... when you feel the stage shake at Madison Square Garden and the lights come up, there's nothing like it. And then when we're in the studio and listen to something back and you know it's real good, you get the chills. They're both real exciting.