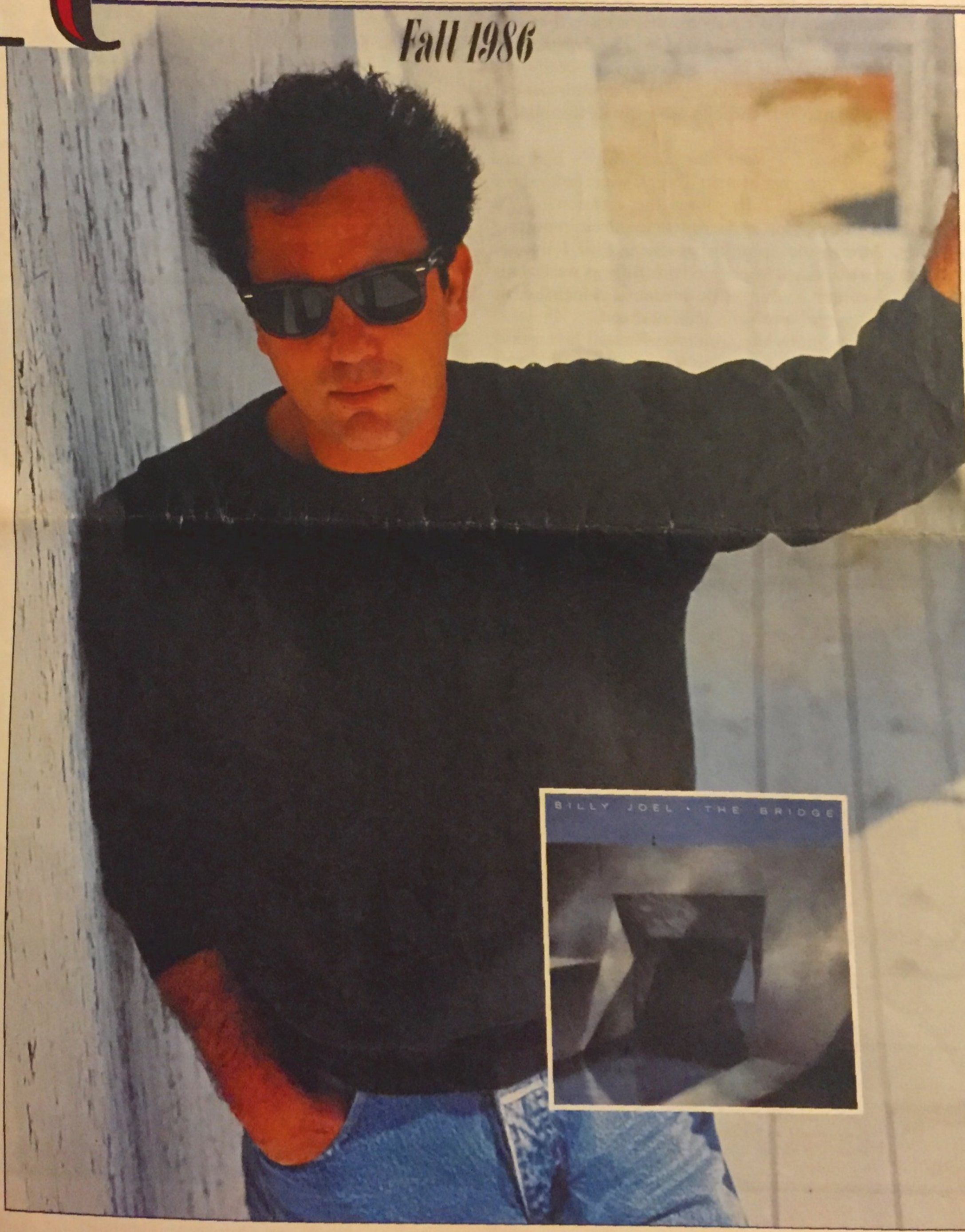
The R·O·O·T B·E·E·R R·A·G

Fall 1986



EDITOR'S · NOTE

As a longtime follower of Billy Joel's music, I admit that I greet any new release with excitement. However, his new album resonates more than ever with diversity and expansiveness. On *The Bridge*, Billy clearly challenges himself in new directions vocally and musically—and shows us once again his commitment to growth, experimentation, and change without disappointing any high expectations.

For this issue of *The Root Beer Rag*, Billy's biannual newsletter, music reporter Martin Torgoff went behind the scenes and spoke with Billy about the creation of *The Bridge* and the exhilaration and struggle involved in putting it together. Martin also profiles producer Phil Ramone, who reflects on his long association with Billy as well as his distinguished career in the music business, which began on a stoop in a tough New York neighborhood.

In our backstage interview, guitarists Russell Javors and David Brown discuss their many years performing and recording with Billy and how *The Bridge* compares to other recording adventures.

Additional information is offered on Billy's current and upcoming professional activities, including details of his fall concert tour. And, as always, Billy personally answers your questions in "Rag Bag."

—Merry Aronson
EDITOR

Guitarists Russell Javors and David Brown talk about their years with Billy on page 13.

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CONTENTS

Editor's Note 2
Album News 3
1986 Tour Schedule 3
Interview: Billy Joel 5
The Video Album 7
Spotlight on Phil Ramone 10
Backstage with Russell Javors and David Brown 13
Here & There 16
Rag Bag 16

ALBUM · NEWS

The Bridge, Billy Joel's new album of nine original songs released on July 24, marks his eleventh LP on Columbia Records. Produced by Phil Ramone, the album features special guest artists as well as contributions to movie and television soundtracks.

Highlights of the album include Ray Charles's soulful duet with Billy on "Baby Grand," a bittersweet ballad arranged by Patrick Williams; and Steve Winwood's keyboards duet with Billy on "Getting Closer."

The soundtrack to the hit film *Ruthless People*, starring Bette Midler and Danny DeVito, includes the LP's first single, "Modern Woman," which reached the Top Ten on the Billboard charts. The LP's second single release, "A Matter of Trust," is currently climbing to the top of the charts. In addition, ABC-TV's "Moonlighting" series starring Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis will broadcast an episode in the fall based on a track from *The Bridge* titled "Big Man on Mulberry Street."

All songs on *The Bridge* were written by Billy Joel, except for "Code of Silence," which was co-written with Cyndi Lauper. Billy's longtime band members Liberty DeVitto, Russell Javors, Doug Stegmeyer, David Brown, and Mark Rivera provide backup.

The following is a complete list of songs on *The Bridge:*

SIDE ONE

Running on Ice
This Is the Time
A Matter of Trust
Modern Woman
Baby Grand

SIDE TWO

Big Man on Mulberry Street
Temptation
Code of Silence
Getting Closer

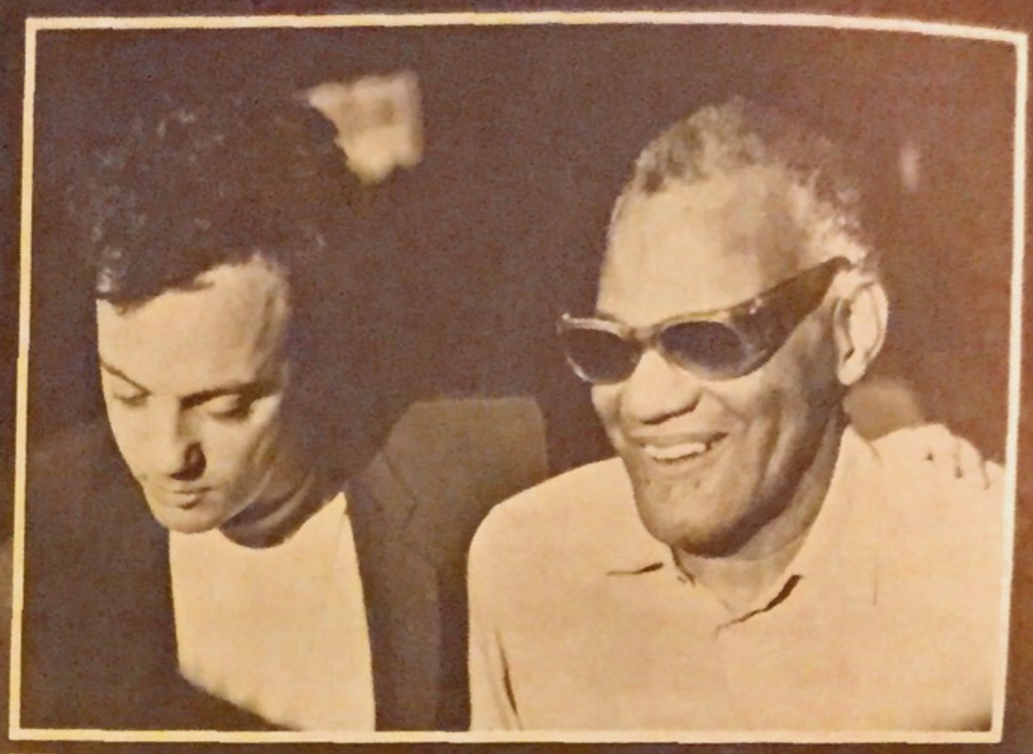
Steve Winwood (*left*) jams with David Brown during the recording session for "Getting Closer."

1986 TOUR · SCHEDULE

Billy Joel's North American concert tour in support of *The Bridge* kicks off September 29 in Glens Falls, New York, and will span at least 37 cities in the United States and Canada. The following is a partial list of tentative dates and cities where he will be appearing.

September 29	Glenns Falls, NY	November 14	Salt Lake City, UT
October 2	Rochester, NY	November 15	Denver, CO
October 4	Providence, RI	November 17	Tucson, AZ
October 7	Philadelphia, PA	November 18	Phoenix, AZ
October 8	Philadelphia, PA	November 21	San Diego, CA
October 10	Washington, DC	November 22	Los Angeles, CA
October 12	Allentown, PA	November 26	Oakland, CA
October 15	New York City	November 29	Vancouver, BC
October 17	New York City	December 1	Portland, OR
October 18	New York City	December 2	Tacoma, WA
October 21	Worcester, MA	December 5	Edmonton, BC
October 25	New Haven, CT	December 6	Calgary, ALTA
October 27	Pittsburgh, PA	December 8	Winnipeg, MAN
October 28	Cleveland, OH	December 12	Toronto, ON
November 1	Chicago, IL	December 14	Montreal, QUE
November 3	St. Paul, MN	December 19	Uniondale, NY
November 5	Omaha, NE	December 21	Uniondale, NY
November 7	Detroit, MI		

The partial cast and crew of *The Bridge*. From left to right: Doug Stegmeyer (bass), Russell Javors (guitar), Jim Boyer (engineer), Liberty DeVitto (drums), Phil Ramone (producer), Mark Rivera (saxophone), Steve Boyer (associate engineer), David Brown (guitar), Fred Tenny (associate engineer).



Billy teams up with Ray Charles for the vocals on "Baby Grand."

Interview

B·I·L·L·Y J·O·E·L

After four months of working on *The Bridge*, Billy Joel was eager to start his summer vacation. But before hitting the beach, Billy spoke with music journalist Martin Torgoff about the crafts of songwriting and recording, the evolution of the new album, and the new territory into which *The Bridge* has brought him. What follows are highlights of their conversation.

Where does the title for The Bridge *come from and what does it mean?*

BJ: I came up with the title *The Bridge* about two-thirds of the way through the album. I like to have a title, even if it's a working title. It was in the studio and I just popped out with it. I didn't really know why when I first said it. Then when I thought about it, I realized there's been a lot of connections made on this record. There's a duet with Ray Charles. And Ray Charles is somebody I admired for years and years. That was a connection made. So there's a bridge. There's a song that was done with Steve Winwood playing the Hammond organ. And I've always admired Steve—for years and years. So there's another bridge.

The album is probably more like an older Billy Joel album, harkening back to *52nd Street* and *The Stranger*, in that it's not a concept album. The songs are not necessarily related to one another, but they were written in the same time period. And for that reason, because there's a connection to the older stuff, there's another bridge. I also see it as a direction into a future type of writing. So there's another bridge. There were just a lot of connections made, and the title *The Bridge* stuck.

How does The Bridge *compare to your last album?*

BJ: The album previous to this was *An Innocent Man*. That was stylistically realized completely in the late fifties–early sixties feel and sound, which you can probably only do once. And that album went very quick. I think I wrote about ten songs in seven weeks. We didn't rush it; it just flew out. We almost didn't trust it. But when an artist is on a roll like that, you don't question it. You go, "Okay, that's it, it must be good, 'cause it felt so good." I knew that the next album I was going to do was going to be more complicated. It was going to be more difficult. I wasn't looking forward to it. I said to myself, it's going to have to go back to really finding out what I do, you know, what my music is. Because *An Innocent Man* was more of a singer's album, I think, than a writer's album. This album was kind of what I call a cold start. Every time I start writing an album, I like to start right before it's time for me to go into the studio. Because if I've written too long before I go into the studio, it's aged already. By the time we get in to record, I'm out of touch with myself. When I sit down to write, I have no preconception of what I'm going to write. Some people think that I might know what I'm going to do. But I don't have any idea what I'm going to do. It's as much of a shock to me as it is to anybody who hears it.

For this album, I think a lot of people thought I was going to write about Christie, getting married, having a baby. There is some life experience in the album, but I made a point of staying away from dwelling on it too much. It's incorporated into some of the emotional impact of the album. But again, I was kind of just flying as I went.

In a way, *The Bridge* is constructed like *52nd Street* and *The Stranger*. I think the first song I wrote for the album was "This Is the Time," which is on the first side. That's kind of a slow song. Then I wrote an up-tempo song after that. It's similar to the other albums in that one song is written in reaction to the song before. Then I get to about nine songs and that's about it. Everything else after that would be filler or fat, which I don't like in an album. And as I said, there is no concept to this album. It is a collection of songs. But they do connect; they were born during the same time period, so there is a connection.

How would you characterize the music on this album?

BJ: I would say it's a fairly eclectic album. The styles are all over the place. But that's par for the course with me. Once I've written one thing, I want to write something else.

How personal is the writing on this new album?

BJ: This album is somewhat reflective of me, but also of people my own age. We see the world a little differently now than we did a couple of years ago. There are some songs on the album which are about me and my experience. There are songs that have nothing to do with me at all. They are just fictionalized; I've invented a character. But I've obviously had a feeling for the character—sort of vicariously lived that character.

There's a song called "Big Man on Mulberry Street" which came from a picture I had of this guy. I had a writing studio down in Soho, in this place called the Puck Building, a big, gigantic old printing building. And I had ten thousand square feet where I had all this writing and recording equipment set up. I would go in there and work in one little corner. I could see this whole gigantic room. And what happened was, when I got stuck, I could pace the room—walk around the entire room. It had big windows, a nice view. But sometimes I would leave the building and walk down to Little Italy, get a little food, wine, a little espresso. And the walk I took was on Mulberry Street. And I just kind of invented this character who thought he was Mr. Cool. The character is really kind of a nebbish, but in his own mind he's king—the king of Mulberry Street. And when he walks by the old ladies sitting on the stoop, they kind of wave to him, and say, "Hey, hey, how you doing?" I just had fun writing that song. It was just one of those things I invented.

There are some songs—I still don't know why I wrote them. I don't think a lot about why I'm doing something. If you think too much, it doesn't get written. If you start analyzing your work, you say, "No, I can't say that, that's not the way I wanted to say it," so sometimes you just have to go with the flow.

The Bridge *is the sixth album you've made with Phil Ramone as producer. What is it about Phil that makes your collaboration so fruitful?*

BJ: Phil is not a dictatorial producer. He knows when to step aside and let things happen. He's very song-oriented, very musical. And he creates an atmosphere that allows and encourages good things to

happen. And he'll make suggestions that we respect because of his musicality. But he's not a guy who says, "We're going to produce it like this—we're going to make a record that's going in this direction." Phil is almost like another member of the band, except his instrument is the console and the recording booth. And he knows when to roll the tape—and most of the time the musicians are not aware of the tape going, because we're too subjective. Phil will know when something is great. But we don't know. He's got the ears.

What did you learn about yourself from this album?

BJ: You learn something on every album. If you haven't, then you haven't done a good album. It should be a learning experience. The main thing that was new for me—that I learned I could do on this album—was write with somebody else.

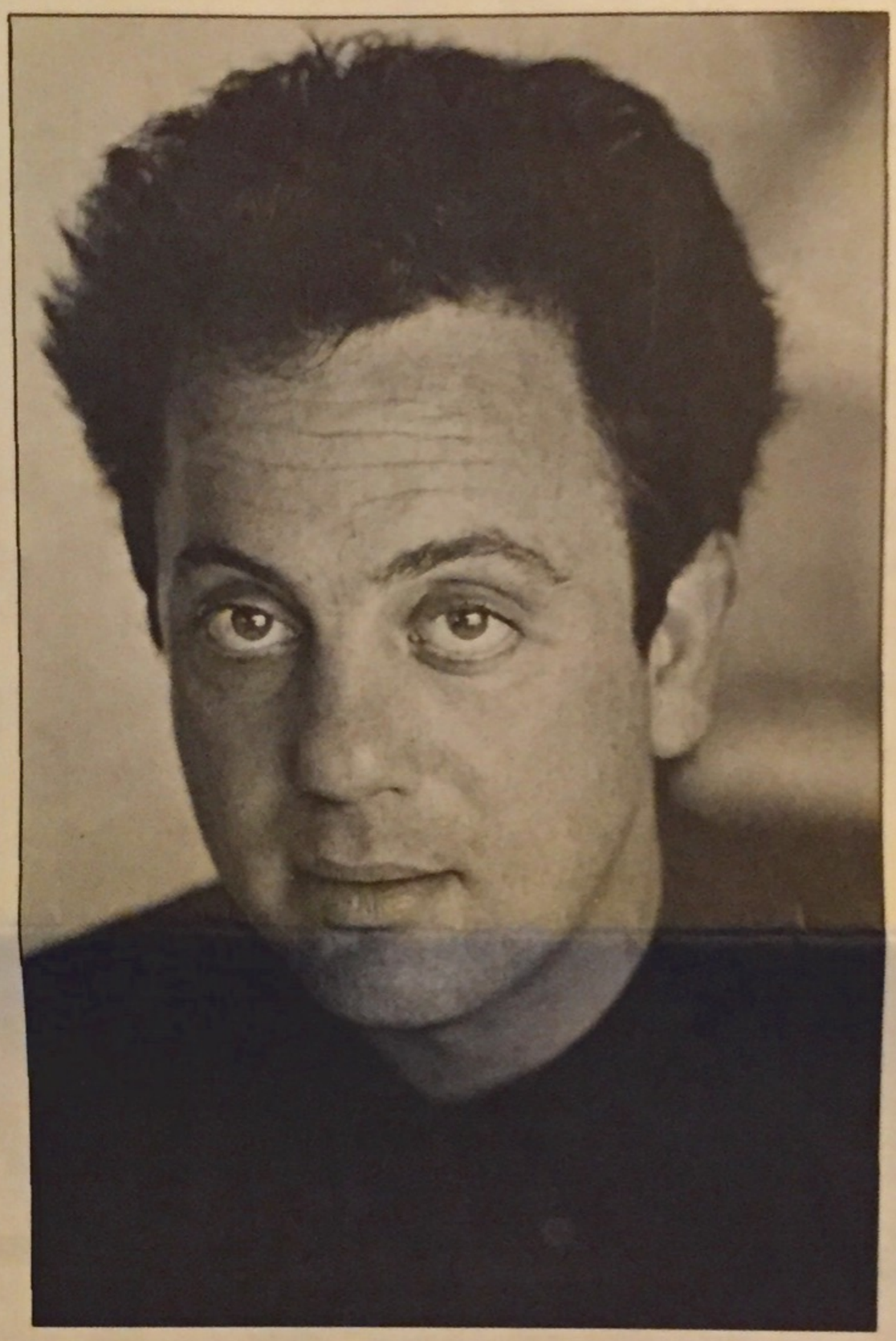
I had gotten to the last song and I had a terrible writer's block. It lasted about three weeks. I walked around the studio, I banged my head against the wall, I kicked things. I didn't shave. This was like my penance: I'm not going to shave until I write something! Remember, I have a new baby, and I couldn't pick her up and kiss her 'cause I would scratch her face up. I just was a mess! Cyndi Lauper was recording downstairs at the Power Station, and she comes up and she says, "Bill, what's the matter? You look like you're going out of your mind. You're climbing the walls." And I said, "I can't get this song I want to write." She was great. She got one of those yellow legal pads and said, "You sit down at the piano and play, and I'll write down the things, the words that you throw out." I said, "Okay, we'll see what happens." I sat there and I thought I was saying a lot of jibberish, and she ended up showing me on this legal pad all these different words I'd thrown out. And the title came out called "Code of Silence." So she asks, "Why are you calling it 'Code of Silence'? I said, "I don't know." She asked what I was being silent about. It really got me thinking. I never thought I could actually write with anybody else. I've tried before, and a lot of times people came up with these cosmic words. I'd say, "Nah, nah, nah, nah, it's not me." But she actually stimulated a lot of the writing and suggested a lot of things. She kind of pinpointed what should happen with the song. I had most of the music, but the lyrics really came from working with Cyndi. So that was something I learned—that I could actually write with someone else. The song "Code of Silence" came out of that. She sings on this record, too.

Another new experience on the album was working with greats like Ray Charles and Steve Winwood. With Ray, right up to the last minute, we weren't sure it was really going to happen. I had flown out to Los Angeles to do this session and walked into the studio. We had twenty-four string players booked, an arranger, a conductor, a whole rhythm section. And in walked Ray Charles. I almost went into a freeze-up. Even Phil [Ramone], who's been around for years and met all these people, was walking on eggshells. I had conceived the song to be a Ray Charles song, in his genre. When we played the piano on the basic track, that worked out fine. Then it was time to sing, and I went out and I said, "I don't know how much of this soul thing I can get into because now I'm staring at this guy I've been trying to sing like. There he is, Ray Charles. I can't, I can't do Ray Charles because *there's* Ray Charles!" So I started to sing like this little white kid from the suburbs! Ray heard me do it and then *he* started to sing like a little white kid from the suburbs. So we stopped the session. Phil called me in and said, "You got to go after him, kid. You know, get Ray to sing like Ray, because he's following your cue." I had never done a duet before on any album. So that was another thing I found out I could do: hold my own as a singer. I'm not a great believer in my own voice.

Cyndi Lauper collaborates with Billy on "Code of Silence."

Billy Joel

T·H·E V·I·D·E·O A·L·B·U·M



The images in Billy Joel's videos startle, provoke, and entertain, running the gamut from straight performance pieces and abstract "conceptual" videos to narrative stories. Whether it's the stylized performance of "My Life" or the wild surrealism of "Pressure," there is always something in each video which consistently provides an extra dimension to Billy's song—an individualized visual interpretation that adds to rather than detracts from the music. The quality and diversity of these videos are now on display with the release of *Billy Joel: The Video Album (Volume I)*, a 45-minute anthology of ten clips from the Joel archives. The collection represents Billy's second home video cassette since the release of the smash hit concert piece "Live from Long Island" and includes two clips produced especially for *The Video Album*.

Before the advent of MTV in the United States, music videos were in hot demand in Europe as a means of reaching beyond the confines of international radio. Working with CBS International, Billy Joel became one of the first American musicians to take music video seriously when he produced the songs "Honesty," "My Life," and "All for Leyna" for release abroad, as another way of getting his music heard and expanding his audience. Filmed during the late seventies, these clips are excellent examples of early performance videos that contain the elements of energy and passion found in a Billy Joel concert. Simple in technique and straightforward in format, they reveal an artist just coming into contact with the power and potential of this nascent medium in an atmosphere of experimentation. (It was characteristic, in fact, that "All for Leyna" would be directed by Steve Cohen, Billy's longtime friend and lighting designer, who had never before directed a video.)

After similar productions, Billy decided to expand his approach to

The video for "A Matter of Trust" is filmed on location at St. Marks Place in New York City.

BILLY JOEL: THE VIDEO ALBUM (VOLUME I)

Piano Man
All for Lenya
Tell Her About It
Honesty
Sometimes a Fantasy
The Night Is Still Young
Pressure
Stiletto / My Life
Keeping the Faith
A Matter of Trust

music video by developing a visual concept for the music and adding the dimension of a narrative storyline. Perhaps his first conceptual video was "Sometimes a Fantasy," from the *Glass Houses* LP, also included here. Developed by writer Jeff Schock, who would collaborate on many subsequent Joel videos, the entire piece consisted of a phone conversation with a gorgeous blonde and was performed by Billy in a seedy hotel room.

The video, at the time of its production, was considered controversial and risky, and it formed the bridge between Billy's early videos and the increasingly sophisticated productions to follow. It was also premiered on network television as a landmark event in the beginning of what would come to be known as the "video revolution."

The video for "Pressure," from the critically acclaimed *Nylon Curtain* LP, became a model for the abstract video form and one of the most highly stylized music videos in existence. Directed by a young British director named Russell Mulcahy, whose earlier work for Ultravox Billy had admired, the video featured Billy as a character in the video, lost in an overwhelming cascade of impressionistic images reflecting the anxieties of the lyrics. Completed in 1981 just as MTV was in its infancy, "Pressure" went on to become one of the longest-running "heavy rotation" pieces in that network's history. The video also helped launch Mulcahy as one of the more prolific and visually innovative directors of music videos.

The concert video *Live from Long Island*, directed by Brooklyn-born Jay Dubin, eclipsed the critical success of Billy's *Nylon Curtain* period. With the completion of *An Innocent Man*, Dubin was given his first opportunity to direct a music video with the LP's first single, "Tell Her About It." More than anything else, the video, which took five days to shoot, was an exercise in high camp and fun, designed to reflect the innocent joy and spontaneity of the music. Billy's stylized performance as the front man for a fictional sixties band, BJ and the Affordables, gives the video an unparalleled life of its own aside from the high production values of the piece, an uncannily accurate recreation of the CBS variety show hosted by Ed Sullivan, played to perfection by Will Jordan. And, at the close, comedian Rodney Dangerfield, waiting to come onstage next, is left standing in the wings in favor of "Patrochka the Dancing Bear." Poor Rodney . . .

"Keeping the Faith," the last video from *An Innocent Man*, offered a style reminiscent of early MGM musicals directed by the legendary Busby Berkeley. The elaborate production features Billy as a defendant on trial in a rock and roll court and contains comical bits and numerous energetically choreographed dance numbers, in addition to cameo appearances by Christie Brinkley and comedian Joe Piscopo. Directed by Howie Deutsch, who went on to direct the Molly Ringwald film *Pretty in Pink*, the video is a must for any rock and roll witness.

"The Night Is Still Young" is from *The Greatest Hits* album released last year. The video was directed by noted commercial director Neil Tardio and is unusual in that it features Billy in only a supporting role. But like "Pressure," it's more of an abstract piece, a tapestry of surreal and romantic images.

The first of the two new clips produced for the tape is "Piano Man," the 1973 classic hit single that launched Billy's career. Shot in a Long Island bar, the piece evokes the Los Angeles piano bar called the "Executive Lounge," made famous in the song. The poignant lyrics of the song, depicting the life and characters in the bar, come movingly and literally to life. As Billy sings the song at the piano, the characters materialize before your eyes . . . and there he is, "Davey, who's still in the Navy," his arms covered with tattoos.

The most recently produced video included in the package is "A Matter of Trust," the hard-driving hit single from the new album, *The Bridge*. Veering away from conceptual interpretation, Billy once again enlisted Russell Mulcahy for the director's role. Together, they decided on an "honest" approach that would leave the interpretation of the song open to the viewer's own imagination.

The piece finds Billy and band mid-rehearsal on a hot summer's day. There in the basement of the now defunct Electric Circus disco in Manhattan, Billy stops the action for a moment to ask that the windows be opened. Amid a breath of fresh air, Billy counts off the song again as the amplified sound of his voice blasts into the street catching the attention of local residents. A crowd of curious spectators assembles just outside enjoying the sights and sounds of a new song and the band's fervid performance. Unstaged, the rehearsal was shot in a candid documentary style. Viewers may be surprised to see which instrument Billy plays. (It's not the piano!)

The Video Album (Volume II) will be available later this year and will include other hit music videos like "Uptown Girl," "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me," "Big Shot," and "You May Be Right," among others. Until then, however, the mix of old and new hit music videos in Volume I promises to be the beginning of one of the more extensive collections of pop music videos available anywhere.

—HAL STRICKLAND

[Hal Strickland is a New York-based freelance writer who serves as correspondent for the Los Angeles-based *Optic Music* magazine.]

BILLY JOEL: THE VIDEO ALBUM (VOLUME II)

Allentown
Baby Grand
Big Shot
Goodnight Saigon
It's Still Rock and Roll to Me
Root Beer Rag
The Longest Time
Uptown Girl
You May Be Right
You're Only Human (Second Wind)

Spotlight on

P·H·I·L R·A·M·O·N·E

The maestro settles into a chair on the second floor of the Power Station recording studio and exclaims, "I'm nervous just sitting here!" The cause of Phil Ramone's jitters is located one floor above, where he and Billy Joel are mixing "Temptation," the final song of *The Bridge*, their sixth studio LP together in a nine-year partnership that has been one of the most successful artist–producer relationships in pop music history. Two headlines clipped from the *New York Post* and posted for comic relief outside the studio door upstairs tell the story. The first reads, "BILLY CLOSING IN" (referring to baseball bad boy Billy Martin, the Yankee manager—*not* Yankee fan Joel); the second, "BUT NOT THERE YET."

Phil at the sound board with engineer Jim Boyer and associate engineer Steve Boyer.

"Temptation" is a love song that has gone through several incarnations, from an ensemble piece with a larger tableau, to a more simple setting with just Billy at the keyboards, but the mix hasn't yet "locked" to everyone's satisfaction. The night before, in the wee hours of the morning, with the delivery date approaching and the machinery for the LP's release already beginning to roll into place, Phil had had one of his brainstorms: a sensual, rhythmic crashing to pulse throughout the track. Billy had found the idea interesting, and as we speak, drummer Liberty DeVitto is upstairs playing on everything from ride cymbals to ashtrays, trying to create the desired effect. Phil is like a field marshal being kept away from the lines of the battle.

"It's what I call the finesse time for this album, and for this one song I'll know it's right when it feels like hitting a ball up the gap," he says. The bearded, bespectacled, and avuncular Phil Ramone is also a Yankee fanatic and loves baseball analogies. "There are hundreds of people at the studio today, Billy's already shooting pictures for the album, and here I am, waiting until the last possible moment, wondering what's going *on* up there. Did it come off? Did they erase it or what?"

Fussing and tinkering and worrying and pushing himself and those around him—all of these qualities are perfectly in keeping with Phil Ramone's character. His career as an engineer-turned-producer has been distinguished by seven Grammys. The hallmarks of his works have been nit-picking technical perfection, adventurousness, hard work, warmth, and a sensibility that never loses sight of that most organic appreciation of the joy of good music. His instincts as a producer combine the best qualities of a master chef whipping up a savory Bolognese sauce, a tough labor mediator conducting negotiations, a midwife delivering a baby, a therapist conducting group sessions, and a stand-up comic zinging off-the-wall one-liners from the control booth.

Since *The Stranger*, their 1977 breakthrough LP, Phil and Billy have made successive multi-platinum albums together, but never has Phil's excitement about a record been so infectious: "*The Bridge* is a wonderful step for both of us. I feel very strongly about it. Productionwise, it's rather simple and subtle. This is Billy Joel in 1986. He's had three years to fall in love, get married, have a kid, and reflect. These things are a part of his life and his music now. He's still a road hound—he hasn't lost that grit in him—but there's a maturity here that moves me. Whatever success Billy and I have achieved together is because of his honesty. *An Innocent Man* had high stylistic ideas and was a ton of fun. He was truthful with himself in that the styles came out of the fifties and sixties, yet the songs were still individualized in sound, statements that came from his experience, pieces of information that had gathered in his mind. Now, because of his own growth, he's come full circle. This album is about Billy Joel the songwriter. Every piece has been treated as its own vignette."

That Phil is prepared for any direction in which Billy may want to fly is a testament to the eclecticism of his own musical background. He grew up at the corner of Amsterdam and Eighty-second Street in Manhattan's Upper West Side—the Spanish Harlem where *West Side Story* was set—playing the classical violin in a very tough neighborhood. "If you walked around with a violin case, you could get your head knocked off," he recalls. "But if you sat in with the guys making music on the steps, the gang would protect you from getting hurt because you were okay. I was influenced by a lot of black and Puerto Rican music in the streets. I found out through my early years that I seemed to do much better helping others to perform; I could sit back and visualize things."

By the age of sixteen, he was already working at JAC Recording, a small demo studio on West Fifty-eighth Street. "You'd do a demo for a songwriter, something for Frankie Avalon, and the next guy needed fiddle and harmonies for a country demo. Crazy as I am, by the time I was twenty, I knew I had to have my own studio. I had no

money. My attitude was, whatever you did, you'd have to study it twenty-four hours a day to do it really well. I was determined to be the best engineer in the city—in the country."

Throughout the sixties, Phil honed his skills as an engineer at A&R, the studio facility he founded with Art Ward in 1960. He worked with a wide variety of artists, from jazz dates brought in by Quincy Jones and Nesuhi Ertegun from Atlantic Records, to Brill Building pop and rock and roll with songwriters like Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller, Ellie Greenwich, John Barry, Burt Bacharach, and Hal David. "You had to learn to capture whatever was happening. Sarah Vaughn would be in during the afternoon and Connie Francis at night; the next morning from two to five would be a jazz date, then a Pepsi commercial."

Although the core of Ramone's focus was always songwriters and musicians, the transition from engineer to producer was not an easy one. It was Quincy Jones who called him in to do the track to John Schlesinger's film *Midnight Cowboy*, which featured Toots Thielemans on harmonica (Phil would once again use Toots effectively many years later on Billy's "Leave a Tender Moment Alone"). By the time Phil met Billy in 1976, he had already produced hits like "Evergreen" for Barbra Streisand and won a Grammy in 1975 for Best Album for Paul Simon's *Still Crazy After All These Years*. The following year, the Joel/Ramone relationship resulted in what was then the most successful record in the history of Columbia Records, *The Stranger*. Billy and Phil won additional Grammys for the song "Just the Way You Are" in 1978, and for the albums *52nd Street* in 1979 and *Glass Houses* in 1980.

As a producer, Phil approaches each artist and album as if it's his first. "Your credentials are left at the door," he says. "All your Grammys and Top Ten records mean nothing at that moment. You clean the blackboard and say, 'Now what am I gonna do?' " He vehemently resists stock formulas: "The moment I become hack," he promises, "my spikes will go up on the wall."

The typical Ramone recording session has the atmosphere of a playpen in which ideas evolve in a give-and-take atmosphere of down-to-earth candor. "You've got to be both tough and nice. If you don't give musicians that, you almost force them to use formula riffs.

"I always try to look for something in the players that allows them to think clearer, to feel free about expressing themselves. They know I'm human and I make mistakes and sometimes I have to say, 'Sorry, this isn't it, I've led you down the wrong path.' If they *trust* you, it allows you to bring something out of somebody that may be one step beyond what they think their limit of performance is—*that's* what I look for."

Recording an album with Ramone can take months. "We become like kids in a clubhouse. Once you're here, you don't leave—you're here for the duration. You become part of a family—eating together, talking together, swearing at each other. It isn't easy. How do you say to a musician, when you know he's been up all night working on something, 'That's really terrible. We've reached the epitome of mediocrity here, guys'? When I see somebody struggling with a part and I know they're going to hit that wall and I don't want them to get hurt, I tell them to go home and take it easy."

"I always try to look for something in the players that allows them to think clearer, to feel free about expressing themselves. They know I'm human and I make mistakes and sometimes have to say, 'Sorry, this isn't it, I've led you down the wrong path.' If they *trust* you, it allows you to bring something out of somebody that may be one step beyond what they think their limit of performance is."

The relationship that Phil shares with Billy is a special one. "We enjoy a wonderful friendship," Phil says, "and we also maintain the trust and respect of a professional relationship. Billy knows he can call me anytime about anything, but we also don't allow personal things to get in the way of the work. He's not a slick songwriter; he struggles and I enjoy it when he shares that struggle with me. Billy can look me in the eye and know when I'm stalling for something.

just like I always know when he's getting impatient. And the band can be absolutely brutal toward him. The fact that he's a star doesn't mean anything when he walks in here. The attitude toward him is, 'Yeah? Show us what you've got that's better than anything you've done before.' What may have been a little lightweight ditty that we just passed through to get us on to the next song can't wash as a Billy Joel song—it's just not acceptable.

"We trim the fat all the time. What doesn't work gets ripped up and thrown out. It's like a good book: God knows how many pages the author wrote before you get to read it. There's nothing left over when the album's over—no spare parts. It's quite amazing."

Success has neither jaded nor spoiled the working relationship, says Phil. "We're much stricter and tougher on ourselves. Yes, we're older and more experienced, but we're still like kids. Sitting there and hearing "Modern Woman" the other day on the radio for the first time, we were jumping around like a bunch of idiots, applauding!"

While Phil takes pride in all of the songs on *The Bridge*, he considers the Billy Joel/Ray Charles duet on "Baby Grand" to be one of the high points of his career. "I don't think we've ever done a better song—and that's not just because I love Ray Charles so much. Both of us had always talked about it, ever since Billy and I first met; we always said we would love to hear Ray Charles sing 'New York State of Mind.'

"The first piece of dialogue on the phone with Ray after he heard the demo tape was, 'That's clever,' and my heart sank. I looked at Billy. "What does he mean, 'that's *clever*'?" But that's how Ray is—he's been around so long, done so many things. Then he said, 'I'd like to do this song.' It really was like a dream—frightening but fun. When we were recording in Los Angeles, Billy would look up from his microphone with this expression like, 'Oh, God, that really *is* Ray Charles!' Jim Boyer, my engineer, is an experienced pro—and his hands were shaking on the board, and I'm telling him, 'Don't mess up—that's Ray!'

"What they created there could become the classic barroom piano player's goodnight song."

In addition to the quality of the songwriting, the singing on *The Bridge*, says Phil, is the best he's ever heard from Billy. "I think he allows himself to be heard as Billy Joel more than ever before," he explains. "Most of his vocals have always been cut live—it's what makes you buy the feeling of his songs. Most singers generally have something about their voice that they don't like, so they hide within certain structures of characteristics of their voice. He's more free—like he's saying, 'This is Billy Joel and I love what I'm singing and I want to be heard in the best possible way.' His songs require that kind of vocal honesty—they wouldn't be born without it."

—MARTIN TORGOFF

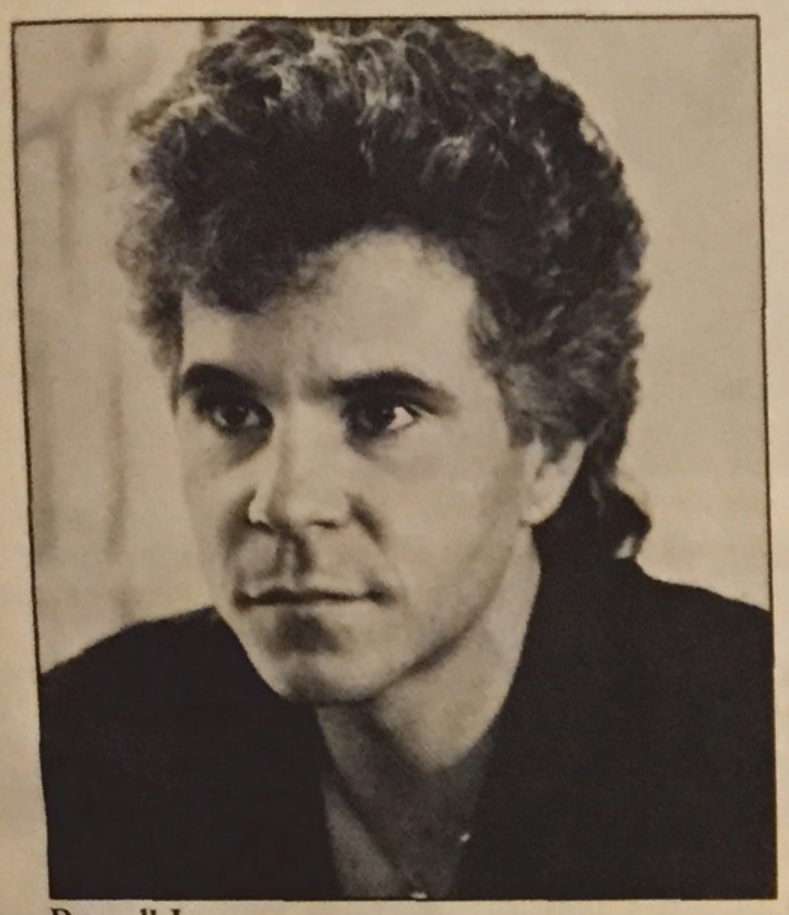
[Martin Torgoff is the author of *American Fool: The Life and Improbable Rise of John Cougar Mellencamp* (St. Martin's Press, 1986) and two previous books about Elvis Presley. He is a contributing editor of *Interview* magazine and has written and directed music documentaries and videos for Teddy Pendergrass and Stevie Wonder.]

Phil with (*from left*) Lenny Peitze (senior vice-president, Epic and Portrait A&R); Russ Titelman (A&R producer); and Nile Rodgers (producer) at The Power Station.

Phil with Ray Charles during the recor[ding of] "Baby Grand" at Evergreen Studio in Los An[geles]

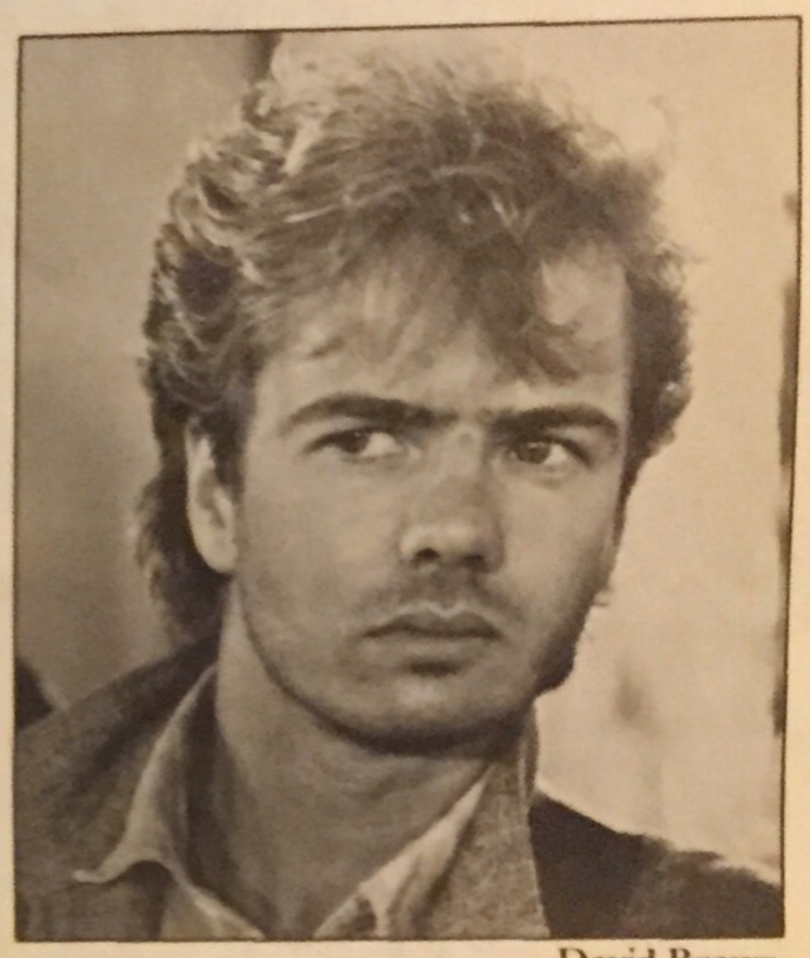
Backstage with

R·U·S·S·E·L·L J·A·V·O·R·S A·N·D D·A·V·I·D B·R·O·W·N



Russell Javors

Two guitarists playing in the same band must learn how to complement one another's performances and remain sensitive to each other's strengths, weaknesses, and musical idiosyncrasies. When the combination works, the results can be memorable—sometimes legendary. Topping the list are John Lennon and George Harrison of the Beatles, Brian Jones and Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones, and Dicky Betts and Duane Allman of the Allman Brothers Band.



David Brown

In a band like Billy Joel's which is based around Billy's keyboards and encompasses such a wide variety of styles, the guitars become part of an ensemble cast of musicians requiring a special subtlety and finesse. Russell Javors, thirty-four, grew up on Long Island, New York, and joined Billy's band as rhythm guitarist at the time of the *Turnstiles* album. David Brown, thirty, grew up in Gloucester, Massachussetts, and came aboard as lead guitarist at the time of *52nd Street*.

At David's New York City loft, both musicians recently talked about their approaches to music and their long association performing and recording with Billy.

How do you make your different guitar styles work together?

RJ: We're complete opposites in technique. Unlike a lot of combinations of guitar players, we never step on each other's toes, and we're pretty helpful to each other in the studio. There's a chemistry in our group with a lot of checks and balances. As far as playing is concerned, David is like the virtuoso in the group, more of a musician, whereas I started off as a songwriter. I never had any ambition to be a lead guitar player. I always thought John Lennon was a great guitar player because [with him] it was all *songs;* his whole idea of making a record was to bring a *song* to life.

When I was a teenager and just getting into playing, I found myself getting into many different styles just to stay alive. And what helps me with this band is that Billy runs that gamut. He always wants to stretch and try something else, so, as a guitarist, I can pick up an acoustic and play a semi-classical sort of thing, then go to a hard electric or keyboard electric or acoustic electric. They all represent tools that can create specific moods within the sound of one of Billy's songs.

As musicians we're supportive of each other. I'll cheer David on to get a part the same way that he helps me when I have an idea.

DB: That's not to say it goes real smooth all the time. We battle out ideas and challenge each other—there's an edge that helps us kick each other to achieve more. It's not just us; we all—Liberty on drums and Doug on bass and Bill on piano—respond as a community to an idea. Russell and I interchange lead and rhythm parts all the time. For example, on "You May Be Right" from *Glass Houses*, we went through the song and we knew we needed a guitar signature line. We were just plucking around, and Russell came up with that line almost instantly. It really helps the song fly. I take more of the solos when there are solos.

What are some of the songs on the new LP that were particularly enjoyable for you as guitarists to record?

RJ: "A Matter of Trust." It's a real turn-it-up, hard rock kind of song. There's also a song on this record that sounds kind of Hendrixesque, called "This Is the Time." David can pick up anybody's style, and I've never heard anybody's influence so clearly drawn as on that cut. It's real spooky, slow, and sexy now, but it started as a real banger when we were working it out at the Puck Building in Little Italy, where we were rehearsing some of the songs. David pulled it back a little with his guitar, and now it's real sensual.

How did your rehearsals at the Puck Building affect The Bridge*?*

DB: That's where Billy had a loft, where he had a couple of songs on demo tapes, and we spent a couple of days bouncing them around before we went into the studio. We hadn't done that since *Glass Houses*. I think it led to an even more "band" type of sound on the new album. We weren't writing charts or anything, we just kind of had the right idea of Billy's song on tape and then we had a chance to develop our own ideas as we listened to it. *Then* we came into the

The venerable Les Paul visits Russell and David in the studio during the recording of *The Bridge*. Here he engraves his name in their guitars.

studio, as opposed to other albums, where we'd come into the studio cold and make it up there.

What was Billy like in the studio while recording The Bridge*?*

RJ: He's always a very disciplined worker and writer, he really puts in his time, and he's very meticulous in the way he structures his ideas. We're always amazed because he begins with such a rough idea, writes music first, and then gets an idea of what the song feels like before focusing on the lyric idea. Then he develops a couple of scenarios in his head and comes out with these incredible word games that just fit perfectly in place. He works very hard, but he's very easy-going in the studio. Everybody is given elbow room to do what they have to do.

One good thing about our group is that everybody's hip enough to know that you don't say anything if you have nothing to say; there's no game-playing. If it's just bass and drums with Billy on a song, we're cool about that. The idea is that Billy wrote this song and we're all there to make the best record we can. If it includes us, great; if it doesn't, that's fine, too.

DB: I think everybody in the band has that attitude from the start: It's not a matter of how many licks you can get in there or how flashy you can play, but whatever's right for the song. Billy is so open-minded that we can have an influence on a song even when we don't play on it.

How so?

RJ: The song "Temptation" was one that we particularly loved. We made a demo of it at the Puck Building and it sounded great when we were feeling each other out and saying hello again; everybody went away singing that song. We went into the studio and tried it a million different ways and missed it by a mile every time. The song was going to die—Billy was getting frustrated. Sometimes if you miss a home run with a foul ball that goes foul by an inch, it's a lot more frustrating than a foul that goes out of the park. We'd call each other up at night and say, "We can't let this song die! We've got to try something else." It finally came down to Billy cutting it himself. I'm happy that the song is on the album, whether we played on it or not, and I feel that in our own way we made a contribution in helping to keep it there.

Looking back to past albums, what are some of the moments that typify the role of the guitar in Billy's music?

RJ: "Goodnight Saigon" from *The Nylon Curtain*. Billy wanted me to play that strummed intro, and he sat down and said to me, "You're sitting on a barracks and you're playing to the guys and the story is going to unfold in front of you but it's gotta sound real cheesy." I grew up with the story of Vietnam too, and we cut it real fast. So we started and I have this picture of me sitting in the barracks in my head; we started playing and all of a sudden I'm caught up in the song and I wasn't even looking at my chart. I just got completely lost because I got so moved by the lyrics that I started flubbing. I was lost there for a second before I got my composure back. There's a mistake there in my playing, but everybody said, "Oh, that didn't sound like a mistake, that sounded perfect."

Are you looking forward to playing live and cutting loose this fall when you tour?

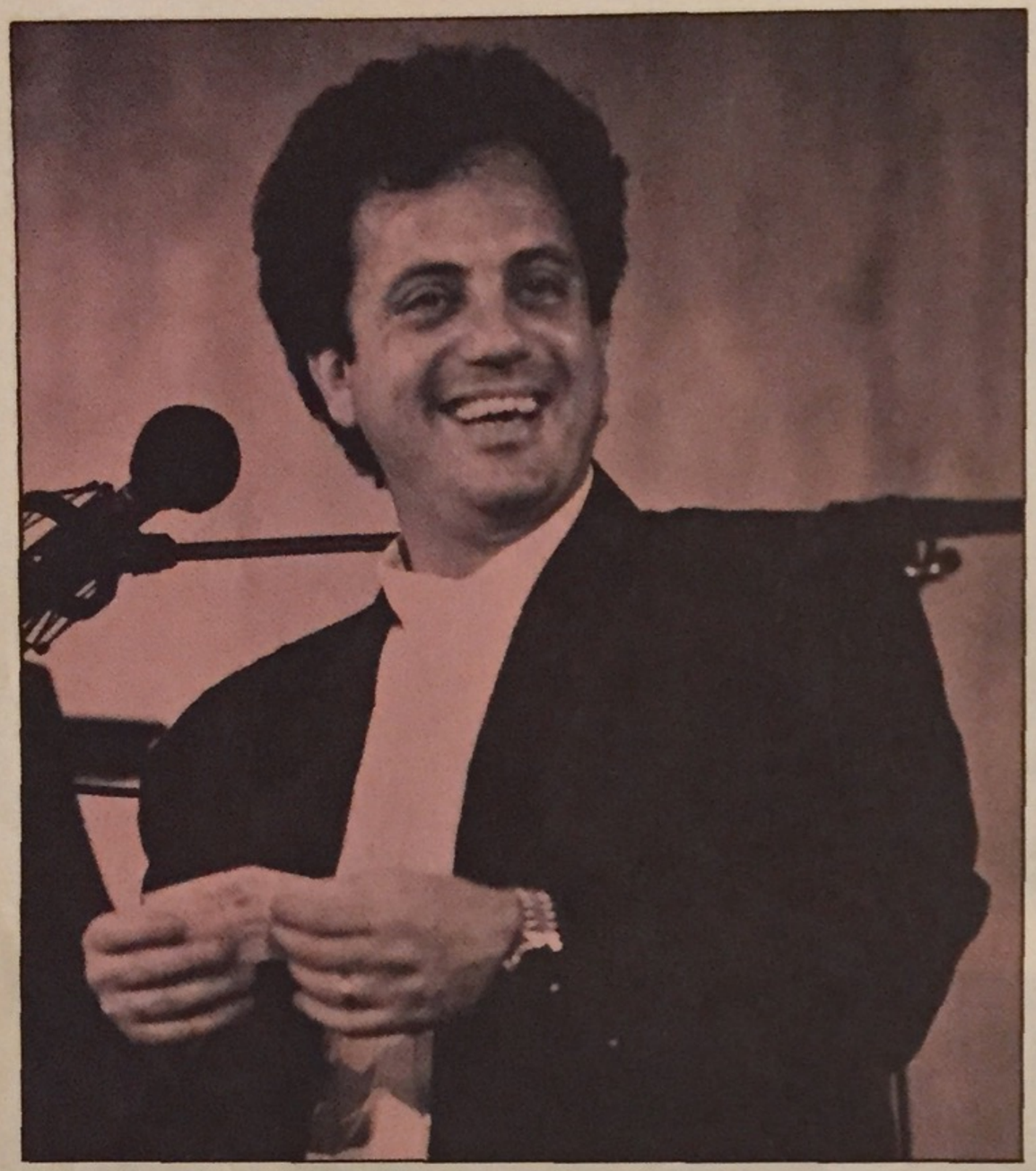
DB: What I think about is that every song is a challenge live because you're switching from one whole different track to another, from one vibe to another vibe. Going from "Pressure" to "Just the Way You Are" is a big switch on stage, right from the lighting down to changing levels, acoustics, changing pianos. In those big arenas it's really hard to get the sound good so that the drummer is hearing you and you're hearing the drummer and the monitor is right. When it clicks together, it's pretty exciting for me, especially the up-tempo stuff.

"We battle out ideas and challenge each other—there's an edge that helps us kick each other to achieve more. It's not just us; we all—Liberty on drums and Doug on bass and Bill on piano—respond as a community to an idea."

RJ: The point of our group is presenting the songs, making the songs as big as possible. Billy's songs relate to people in personal ways. They take what he says to heart, and we try to concentrate on bringing the message of the song across. There are a lot of subtleties in the arrangements, and it's a credit to this band that nobody overplays. Everybody in the band can really play, but it's funny,

Liberty DeVitto (*left*) with Steve Cohen and David Brown.

From left: David Brown, Mark Rivera, Liberty DeVitto



Billy at the New School's Guitar Study Center

HERE · AND · THERE

"New York State of Mind," Billy's song from *Turnstiles*, has been adapted by the New York State Department of Commerce for promotional use. Billy rerecorded the song for the television commercials, which were directed by Bob Giraldi and began airing in June . . . Walt Disney's animated version of *Oliver* tapped Billy's vocal talent in a new way: He is the voice of the Artful Dodger. The film features Billy singing. . . . Aspiring musicians at the New School's Guitar Study Center in New York City were treated to a guest lecture by Billy Joel on May 19. Billy debuted several cuts from *The Bridge*, fielded questions from the audience, and introduced baby Alexa Rae, who attended with her mom, Christie Brinkley.

RAG · BAG

If you have questions for Billy, send them to Rag Bag, 375 North Broadway, Jericho, N.Y. 11753.

If you have a hobby, what is it?—Zeb Holt, Fairview, NC

Fishing, boating, and reading.

Are there any singles of yours that were not released on an album?—Scott Huddleston, Urbana, IL

No.

Do you ever think about breaking into acting, or are you strictly a music man?—David Berto, San Francisco, CA

I'm strictly a music man. I am often asked to take on acting roles in movies and musicals, but I spent all my life studying to be a musician. I am not qualified to act, and anyway, it doesn't appeal to me.

The following are a few questions that Billy has received and which he asked Steve Cohen, his longtime production designer, to answer.

What will The Bridge *stage look like and what was your inspiration?*—Carolyn Wright, Brooklyn, NY

What we're attempting to do, both musically and visually, is design a stage show that is modern, interesting to look at, and, most of all, efficient. What you will see is a show without the clutter of equipment and monitors where the focus is the performers. The artistic inspiration has come from the painting on the album cover. The same textures and colors will be repeated live in various forms. What we have designed this time is a show with no distractions, a clean, neutral surface on which to perform, lit in pure colors to highlight Billy and his band.

What makes this show different from previous Billy Joel shows?—Jodi Heimler, Philadelphia, PA

The difference between this show and previous ones is subtle. The only concept is the music. Sound engineer Brian Ruggles and I have worked closer than ever to integrate the sound and the lights as effectively as possible with today's technology. We have a new support staff that we have pulled in from many successful tours such as those for Heart, Jackson Browne, Laurie Anderson, and Bruce Springsteen. What we have attempted by bringing in these veterans is to add the best technicians in the business to an already super-professional line-up. In my estimation, this tour should be the finest showcase of talent, sound, lights, and staging that Billy and the band have ever had!