

"One Man, A Band & A Grand Piano"



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“One Man, a Band and a Baby Grand”

Very few people can say they have had the honor of helping one of America’s most prominent singer-songwriters celebrate his 58th birthday. My husband Brian and I were two of those 19,000 fans who were invited to sing the birthday song to the “Piano Man” himself. Before Billy Joel could tickle the ivories and open the show, a sold-out crowd at the Xcel Energy Center started singing “Happy Birthday” to the 58-year-old timeless singer/songwriter. The audience had been invited during the pre-concert sound check by one of Joel’s band members to sing one of the few songs Joel hasn’t written to the man of the night. As the audience serenaded an embarrassed and emotional Joel, he threw his arms in the air thanking us, turned toward his band and with both hands raised with middle fingers extended flipped them the bird. From what I could gather from Joel’s spunky response, getting older is something he isn’t ready for, and retirement isn’t in his near future. Joel played with more energy than a twenty-something rock star that beautiful summer-like Wednesday evening in mid-May.

A 500 mile drive round-trip from Bemidji to St. Paul wasn’t going to keep me from seeing the man who was one of the biggest inspirations for my 15 years of piano lessons that started when I was in kindergarten. At one point in the show, Joel proclaimed that the first time he played in the Twin Cities was in 1971. It was a reminder to both young and old just how many generations of music fans he has touched with his songs. Ironically, Joel wasn’t the only one celebrating a birthday that night. My ticket to the concert was my birthday present from my

husband. Just like the MasterCard commercial, my evening with the “Piano Man” was priceless.

Billy Joel has always been known to make a statement through his music, and Wednesday night was no different. He got the show started with his powerful “Prelude/Angry Young Man.” From there he slowly walked us through his life story. Dressed in jeans and a sports coat, Joel remains the icon for the blue-collared worker. Unlike his flashy counter part, Elton John, who he toured with a couple years ago, Joel continues to keep it real for the average music fan off-the-street.

The talented songwriter invited the audience into his heart and soul during the two and a quarter hour performance through many self-penned ballads and “in-your-face” rock songs, many of which are reminders of the heartbreak and hard work he has endured throughout his lengthy career. It’s those songs proclaiming personal experiences that have allowed generations of fans to relate to the common man. Not surprisingly, the audience at the Xcel Energy Center in downtown St. Paul Wednesday night spanned many generations. In front of my husband and I sat a young couple with their ten-year-old daughter who bopped to the beat of “Only The Good Die Young.” I also noticed upon arriving to the show the vast array of age groups represented. There were teenagers wearing t-shirts in honor of the entertainer they were about to see and groups of giddy grey-haired women and thirty-something married couples who may have once slow-danced together to a Billy Joel ballad and the college age students who have sang “Piano Man” at the local pub during a drunken evening out with their

buddies. Joel didn't disappoint any of those fans the other night at the X and they gave him back in return when they sang at the top of their voices his most famous of all songs "Piano Man."

In a surprising turn of events, as Joel was about to take a break, he announced that his roadie "Chainsaw" was going to do a sort of "American Idol" tryout right there at the X. Joel went on to give us permission to "boo his ass off the stage if he was bad." Instead, "Chainsaw" brought the house down with the band playing backup to ACDC's "Highway to Hell." It turned out that this was a prelude to the ultra-charged up second half of the show which lead the audience from piano ballads into Joel's rock 'n' roll era of hits.

Although his voice has aged with many years of performing, Joel never once showed tire or boredom with performing the songs he wrote so many decades ago that he's performed so many times before. He belted out his hits "Only the Good Die Young" and "My Life" while dancing about his piano stool. Since 1971 Joel has been wooing audiences with his skilled piano playing and distinctive East Coast vocals.

We enjoyed the view from the 200 level of the arena which can claim bragging rights that there really isn't a bad seat in the house. Although we had a column of light cables in our view for part of the evening, the piano at center stage rotated 90 degrees to give the audience a different vantage point throughout the show. After going to my share of concerts, I've become partial to sitting behind the stage. The tickets are cheaper and are usually closer to the stage than the more expensive main floor seats where you have to look through

rows of heads to get a good view of the performer. The acoustics at the X are also impressive considering the main purpose of the arena is hockey. As we sat there admiring the aesthetics of the impressive building, Brian and I were hoping that the folks involved in the planning of the Bemidji Regional Event Center had taken notes on the Xcel Energy Center into account, that is, of course on a much smaller scale, when they finally build their hockey arena.

Billy Joel played, and I mean really played, to his Minnesota audience. Joel segued from the first couple lines of Hibbing native Bob Dylan's hit song "Lay Lady Lay" key-for-key remaining in a Dylanesque vocal straight into his own hit "It's Still Rock 'n' Roll to Me." He did this not once, but twice, later in the second of his last encores going from Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" into the song that became the epitome of Joel: "Piano Man." And both times the audience roared with approval.

Billy Joel is backed up by probably one of the most talented group of musicians. Three members of his band played multiple instruments. The saxophone, trumpet, percussion, drums, keyboards, guitar, and harmonica were all represented well. But it wasn't only Joel whose energy was electrifying, his band played to the crowd as well. One of the most memorable of Joel's band mates is Crystal Taliefero. She's been performing with Joel for many years and is incredibly talented. I don't believe there's anything she can't do. Other members of his band include: guitarists Doug Stegmeyer, Russell Javors and David Brown, Chuck Burgi on drums, Richie Cannata and Mark Rivera on saxophones, and

Carl Fischer who plays trumpet and trombone when needed, most notably in the classic song, "Zanzibar".

Some of the memorable moments from the show include when Billy Joel gave the audience a chance to pick which song they wanted to hear next. Out of the three choices he gave the audience, a nearly unanimous vote got the balladeer to take us back to days of old when the infamous gunslinger of Old West tales was creating his lore. It was Joel's beautifully orchestrated ode called "The Ballad of Billy the Kid" which captivated the sold out crowd. Another song that never made it big on the radio, but has seen its success when Joel performs it live is "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant." It's a seven minute song which relives the romance between two people separated by fate but hoping to meet once again. The lyrics attest to that as it ends with "I'll meet you anytime you want in our Italian restaurant" and the saxophone takes it to a close with a haunting note which also ends with Joel tickling the ivories to the standing applause of thousands of fans. Both times I've seen Joel perform this song, the audience sings along with him. It's amazing how a song that was never a Top 40 hit could affect so many people personally.

There were many wonderful moments in Joel's show, but the one that captivated everyone was when he segued from Ben E. King's "Stand By Me" into his very own emotionally charged ballad of "Innocent Man." There wasn't one person in the audience who couldn't feel how much that song meant to the haggard singer. It was an expression of everything Joel has been through in his

life. With every light in the house down except for a set of spotlights on center stage, Joel sang the heartfelt ballad from the 1983 album of the same title.

Radio broadcast people like Brian and I also notice the quality of equipment used at concerts; such as speakers and mixing boards. We are geeks when it comes to those things. But when you're Billy Joel and you tour as much as he does, you can afford the best. There must have been millions of dollars worth of equipment at his concert and it definitely showed in the sound quality and lighting. Billy Joel is a no-frills performer and always has been, even when we saw him perform with Elton John in their "Face to Face" tour a couple years ago in a dueling piano setting at the Fargo Dome. If you're into lots of backdrops, props, pyrotechnics and synthesized technology that allows a performer to lip-sync then don't go see Billy Joel in concert; however, if you want to see one of the most talented musicians of our time perform in an unhindered and energized environment then don't miss the "Piano Man" and his talented band of musicians. They will knock your socks off! The man and his music continue to remain timeless.

Location: Xcel Energy Center - St. Paul, MN

Date: May 9th, 2007

Type: Solo Concert

Set-List:

Happy Birthday (Audience)
Prelude/Angry Young Man
My Life
Everybody Loves You Now
Lay Lady Lay
The Entertainer
The Ballad of Billy The Kid
Allentown
Zanzibar
New York State of Mind
Root Beer Rag
Movin' Out (Anthony's Song)
Stand By Me
An Innocent Man
Don't Ask Me Why
She's Always A Women
Keeping The Faith
River of Dreams
Oh, Darling!
Highway To Hell
We Didn't Start The Fire
Big Shot
It's Still Rock and Roll To Me
You May Be Right
Scenes From An Italian Restaurant
Only The Good Die Young
Like A Rolling Stone
Piano Man