

Q: We haven't gotten to talk to you the last couple of tours, so it's really just nice to hear from you. Start out by asking you about the new record for a bit. A lot of "River of Dreams" seems to say that we've given ourselves more and more material things but less and less of substance. Is that one of the messages that you wanted to get across?

Billy Joel: Well that's the conclusion I came to. I don't know if I had actually meant that to be a kind of end quoted message or anything. There is a crisis of faith in the character here, and there is a search for some kind of renewal of faith. A certain spirituality is involved, not in a religious sense. A philosophical sense. There's a few realizations on the journey in the song cycle, one of them being, you know, there is no justice, and I suppose one of them being that material things do not ultimately bring happiness.

Q: Is that a lesson that it took a while to learn, do you think, for you?

Billy Joel: Well, it's something I've always suspected anyway. I was not someone who was on, you know, the road of life to try to make gobs of money and buy things. That was, you know, that's not what I set out to do. However, I found that there are people who do think like that, and they don't care how they get it as long as they can get it. And those people frighten me.

Q: This is a particularly reflective record and was trying to relate it to my own life, and I think that the older I get, and I'm 35, the more I think that people aren't particularly interested in being reflective because it's too scary. What do you think about that? Do you--

Billy Joel: I think that's definitely a possibility, especially at this point in my life. I have been fortunate enough to know what I was going to do at a very early age. I think when was 14 I knew what I was going to do for my life. Gonna be a musician. That decision... I don't even know if it was a decision. I think it's understanding that that's what you are. It's not really a choice that you make. I always found myself in a situation where there was no choice to make. There was only one thing to do and that was be what I was. In a way, there are parallels, I think, to people who refer to their own sexuality, whether they're heterosexual or homosexual. It's not something you necessarily choose. You either are or you're not. I think there's a lot of similarities with being an artist. You either are or you're not. And I had this question posed to me many times at seminars that I've done by students who say, "Gee, I have a lot of doubts about whether I should really, you know, live this kind of life, or if I should commit myself to it." And I said, "Well, you know what, if you have too many doubts, then you shouldn't do it." I like to encourage artists because they're going to face a lot of discouragement. So I do everything I can to encourage them. But if someone doesn't feel in their soul that they're capable of living that kind of life. This is a long answer .

Q: That's okay.

Billy Joel: But I was fortunate enough to know when I was 14, and that's the road I followed and it ultimately was very, you know, lucrative for me, not that I set out to do that. What I wanted to

do was be able to make a living at it. That's the initial aspect of being a professional artist, you know. Once that realization came, everything else after that is just a matter of numbers and, you know, symbols and things.

Q: Did you ever say it out loud when you were 14? "I am gonna be an entertainer. I'm going to be a professional musician"?

Billy Joel: I said I wanna make a living as a musician.

Q: And how was that greeted?

Billy Joel: At home it was fine. Actually, my father had already divorced my mother and gone back to Europe quite a few years prior to that. My mother was very supportive. She was kind of the beatnik lady on the block. And we were different than everybody on the block anyway because we were the broken home. Everybody else was probably dysfunctional but not broken.

Q: Yeah. I'm thinking more in terms of like, because I grew up on Long Island also, and I'm thinking to myself, if I had said at 14 years old whatever I wanted to be at the time, that I wanted to be a musician or a ballplayer or whatever, I just have a feeling that my friends would have just ripped it apart, that I couldn't have, that you couldn't say something like that out loud.

Billy Joel: Yeah, well that happened with a lot of people that I knew who weren't necessarily my friends. They were acquaintances or they were school chums or people in the crowd that I was hanging out with. You know, there was supposed to be a particular circumscribed way of life that you're supposed to live in Levittown. I grew up in the prototypical housing development. And you know, it's not like I went around and said to people, I'm gonna be a musician. I just knew. I knew it then. I knew it when I started to meet girls. I met more girls by playing the piano and not trying to have a clever pickup line. And I realized the power of this stuff. That's how I met every girl I ever knew, from playing the piano, not from being a football star or having a great, you know, haircut.

Q: Did you ever have any doubts?

Billy Joel: About my ultimate success?

Q: Yeah, that this was gonna happen.

Billy Joel: Yes, I did. I had doubts as to whether I was going to be able to, you know, pay the bills, sure. You know, I've been around for a long time as a successful recording artist. Lot of people forget, I started out at the bottom and I spent most of my life without money. Most of my life I was poor. And I had doubts that I would be able, because I had other jobs when I was a musician. I was a painter and a landscaper, and I worked in a gas station, short-order cook. I even wrote rock criticism. These were always like day gigs, which would augment the money I

was making in the night gig. Like I said, when I realized I could pay the rent and have money left over for food from being a musician, that was one of the highlights of my life. So up until that point, I did have doubts that I was going to be able to sustain myself. But the success, that came, that's a whole other ball of wax. That's something I never expected. The kind of success and the longevity I've had, I never expected that at all. I assumed I would be a musician in one form or another. I never assumed I would be a rock star at this point in my life.

Q: One more question about this. Did you know, always know, that you had the talent to do this? I think that generally kids come up these days and I don't think they realize how much talent it takes to sustain a career. Did you know that you were as good as you are?

Billy Joel: I don't know if it's a matter if I knew if I was good or not. I knew I was gonna give it everything I had. I knew that I wasn't going to go down without a fight.

Q: Yeah.

Billy Joel: But I thought that I had something in my heart that was not going to allow me to be anything other than a musician. So, it was almost like I had no choice. And it wasn't really a matter of thinking how good I was, because no matter how good I think I've done something, I'm still not satisfied with me. My heroes are Beethoven and Mozart and Chopin and Debussy. You know, those guys were good.

Q: Yeah.

Billy Joel: Yeah, they're still hanging around, you know, like The Beatles. Those guys were good.

Q: Yeah, I know. You have "Shades of Grey." Springsteen wrote the line, "God have mercy on the man who doubts what he's sure of." Is this what we have to look forward to?

Billy Joel: Well, it seems to be happening to a lot of people at this age.

Q: Yeah.

Billy Joel: And I think that's healthy because God forbid we should carry our youthful arrogance throughout our lives, you know, and never leave room for any kind of doubt about the positions we take. I mean, wouldn't it be a very walled and guarded world we live in.

Q: Yeah, and I just think of ignorance is bliss, you know?

Billy Joel: Well, I think there's, for me, anyway, there's the constant quest for knowledge and the more knowledge I get, the more I want, the more I realize I don't have. To me, that's healthy. All my idealism is intact with certain basic truth, but everything else has become somewhat blurry.

It's not a matter of, you know, my vision going in my forties. It's a matter of having been trounced somewhat by life. Even with all my success, I have had some tragedies happen to me. You know, things that people may find difficult to believe. They were just on a bigger scale. When I found out I was in debt, it was a huge debt. But I don't want, lest anyone think they're supposed to cry and shed any tears for me, don't worry about it. I'm fine. I'm financially sound. I've proven to me, which is the most important thing, that I can start from square one again if I have to. I've almost made up for 10 years of total larceny that was practiced on me by someone else. I've just about gone back to where I should be.

Q: This is sort of an appropriate, I guess you could ask this question of anybody, but it seems more appropriate of you. I mean, knowing what you've gone through and what you've achieved also, would you do this again? I mean, would you live your life exactly the same?

Billy Joel: No, I would not live my life exactly the same. I have regrets. I've learned from my mistakes. I would not change musically what I've done because that was a very natural, organic evolution, and I can only be the product of what I've been and I'm happy to be what I am as an artist right now. I couldn't go back and write the same stuff knowing what I know now. But then again, I couldn't have written back then what I can write now. So, I wouldn't change the artistic. I would change how my business was run. I would change my, you know, a certain amount of naivety. Naiv, nigh, nigh...

Q: Naiveté.

Billy Joel: Naiveté.

Q: Okay.

Billy Joel: You take French or something? You know how to say these things?

Q: Yeah, actually, I did. That's how good my five years of high school French was. I now know how to say naiveté and not much else.

Billy Joel: Well, that I would have liked to have changed only because I have responsibilities as a parent that, you know, I should have looked out for more. You know, as a partner in a marriage and as a parent, I allowed a certain amount of larceny to be practiced on me, which ultimately would have hurt my child and my wife.

Q: Mm hmm.

Billy Joel: And that, you know, I don't... I can't sit here and go, oh no, I would do the same thing again, because if anything happened to me in the last five years, actually, since 1980. Well, let's see. I had the kid in '85. If anything happened to me since then while I was being managed by this person, my kid would be in great trouble.

Q: Mm hmm.

Billy Joel: You know, awful, it would have been an awful scenario. My wife and my child would have found themselves in terrible difficulty. I'll never forgive that guy for that. It's not me, so much. It's what he almost... Where my family almost ended up. And other than that, yeah, sure, there's regrets. There's things I would do differently. If I've ever inadvertently hurt someone, and I realize that I probably have done that in my lifetime, I would have liked to have gone back and made amends.

Q: You have a quote that I really like--

Billy Joel: And I wouldn't have written that song in French because I don't know how to speak French, so who the hell was I?

Q: Yeah, well, you were busy learning how to be an entertainer and world famous, and I was sitting there in high school French, you know, so what can I say? You have this great quote about how you and Christie don't fly around the house on rockstar and supermodel wings. But you also live a life that most people both envy and can't relate to. Do you think that your live performances help humanize you, that it shows off your work ethic?

Billy Joel: I think, well, yep, the fact that I'm out there working is something that may demystify that I'm someone who is almost a cartoon, to an extent. I think even more than that. I do these seminars where I answer questions. Part of the reason I do these seminars is to help to demystify the whole rockstar as cartoon idea. There is a lot of technical aspects to my work. There's a lot of hands-on craft, which is given short shrift by a great deal of the intellectual community because everything that... I don't know whether it's assumed that all of this stuff is supposed to be so spontaneous that nobody actually works. And what I like to do is show and explain and define for people, especially people who are interested in going into this line of work, just how much work is involved and all the skills you'll need to know and how business is conducted and the tools you should have and how much effort is involved. So let no one have any delusions, because I would have liked the opportunity to have asked The Beatles or Bob Dylan or The Rolling Stones when I was starting out, "How do you do this stuff?" You know, "How do I do this? "How do I write that? "How do I record this? "How do I play that?" Bah bah bah bah bah. And I've got all that information up in my head. I can actually help somebody. I mean, a guy... I'm not saying a guy like Eddie Vedder wants to know how I write my music. But he may wanna know how he can still be a viable musician in 30 years. There's always that, the glamor of die young, leave a good-looking corpse. Burn out, die young, leave a good-looking corpse. You know, not drag on too long. That's why success breeds a certain resentment if it's gone on for too long. But an artist really has an entire life to live, not just a short burst of flame and then you're gone. Not if you're an artist of substance.

Q: But is there a simple answer to that? How you sustain a 30-year career?

Billy Joel: Well, I have my ways of explaining how, what I perceive to be the reason for my longevity. That is, it's a dedication to a certain amount of quality. And a lot of it's just hard work. And it's sometimes at the risk of personal life. You know, there's a balance you have to have. Some artists give 100% of every day of their lives to their art and suffer as human beings because of that, because they have no personal life. And in a sense, lose track of their own humanity by not having a personal life. So there's a balance you gotta have too. Otherwise, you know, you become an alcoholic or a drug addict or a work addict and, you know, you probably suffer from some kind of depression from lack of being a human being.

Q: Did this just come naturally to you? I mean, did you just know that, again, or was it something that you discovered over time?

Billy Joel: It's something I discovered over time. It was all trial and error. I had no idea how to do what I'm doing. Nobody wrote the book on it. You know, you can read biographies about stars, film stars, television stars, and musical stars. It's all really written to sell books. None of it is really written for the student of the particular art that these people are following. You know, except you read a biography of Beethoven, you can get a little insight into what he was like by somebody who's done a lot of research on Beethoven explaining how he wrote a certain symphony, what he did a certain day, what kind of mood he was in. Those things are important, I think. Not so much, I don't know, his relationship with Queen Antoinette or whatever the hell it was. You know what I mean?

Q: Yeah. Tell me about your Grammy comment about valuable advertising time is ticking by. That must have obviously been about because of Sinatra, right?

Billy Joel: Well, the thought was there before the thing happened with Frank Sinatra. You know, at the rehearsals the day prior to the Grammys, we were asked to cut down the length of the song for TV time. I mean, they said, you know, "We'd like you to get rid of 30 seconds." I said, "Didn't you guys just give me like a Grammy nomination for the greatest song in the world ever written this year, and now you're telling me it's 30 seconds too long?" Said okay, now it's TV. So, anything you do on TV, you have to understand the TV mentality. Here's the difference between the TV business and the music business. In the music business, they lie to you, but they really don't expect you to believe them. In the television business, they lie to you, and they actually expect you to believe what they tell you. I don't know whether it's because they're all buttoned up and it's more corporate, whatever, but they're full of crap. And essentially, the nature of the Grammys is like any other TV show. It's cooked up by producers in order to sell advertising time to big-money advertisers so they can charge a lot of money for the advertising time and get big ratings. The complaint about the Grammys always is, "Well, why don't the lesser-known, more-deserving musicians get recognized? Why aren't they given a Grammy? Why?" Because the advertisers don't know their names. You know, they wanna hear Billy Joel, Whitney Houston, Sting, Eric Clapton. They want all those mainstream artists so they can sell their advertising, and that's what the Grammys are all about. It's essentially what it is.

Q: And so the timing was just perfect after they did that to Sinatra then, to make that comment.

Billy Joel: Well, after rehearsal, I had actually stopped you know, I usually do take a break in the middle of that song and just, I kinda let it hang for a little bit. Now, they got all nervous about that when I did it at rehearsal. They said, "Oh, it's adding more time to it." We already chopped time off the front, chopped time off the ending. So I thought it was very important that I hold on to that little hole in the middle of the song, just that breath, because it's a statement just to take a breath on TV. And I stretched it out after they did that to Sinatra as kind of a dare. Like, okay, now cut me off in the middle of my Grammy-nominated, song of the year, record of the year, album of the year, top vocal of the year. You know, if those things were worth anything, and I didn't win anything that night, you know, as I suspected I probably wouldn't, because I don't think anybody goes in there thinking they're gonna win. As I suspected, I said let me just take this moment and see if this Grammy really means anything, because if they cut the song off, I think they would have been kind of shooting themselves in the foot, because they already did it to Sinatra.

Q: And did they react to what you said?

Billy Joel: I didn't really talk to them after. I just went back to my seat. I talked a little bit to Sting and Garth Brooks and Tony Bennett, and it was fun to meet all the musicians. That's the most fun part of that is you get all these musicians who rarely ever get to get together like that, and we, you know, just trade stories and it's kind of a community.

Q: Did you think when they were telling you to cut 30 seconds of it about that line in The Entertainer, "It was a beautiful song, but it ran too long"?

Billy Joel: I always think about that.

Q: Okay.

Billy Joel: And it happens with every single that comes out. As a matter of fact, I've kind of given up resenting it because I understand, essentially, when they put a single out, what they're trying to do is advertise the album anyway.

Q: Mm hmm.

Billy Joel: Just essentially, I don't sell singles like somebody like Snoop Doggy Dogg does. That guy sells singles.

Q: Right.

Billy Joel: Mariah Carey, she sells singles. I'm an album artist. I'm kind of an anachronism. So, if that's the way you're gonna sell my album, you know, take the single, chop it down. And in a way I understand it, that it's created an image which is, you know, maybe not favorable to me. I am not substance and substance of my singles. They don't really represent the bulk of my work. They're just one little piece of it. And taken out of the context of the album that it was written in... Maybe a song, you know, if there's many people that like it, there may be just as many or more people that don't like it and decide to judge Billy Joel on that, and I understand that. I understand the problems people may have with somebody who's had these successful singles but who have never, ever been motivated to go out and actually listen to an album, because that's really where all the work is.

Q: The first thing that I think about when I think of you is that you're a songwriter. I mean, even though your concerts are just pretty stunning as far as the energy levels, and I have my own list of songs that you've written that I think, "Man, this guy's really nailed it this time," and I'm wondering if my list is even close to yours. Do you have a list of like your five best songs you think you've written?

Billy Joel: The five best songs that I think I've written? Usually, I can't be objective. It's totally subjective, and it usually has to do with the newer work because I'm closer to it. It would always be, I'd say it was the last five songs I wrote. I mean, if you backed up five songs from the end of the River of Dreams, those would be my five favorite. I know that "Famous Last Words," I really like that a lot. Eh, "Two Thousand Years," I don't know how crazy I am about that one. That's a tad ambitious. I don't know if I succeeded on that one. It was a reach. You know, I'll sum up all of the history of mankind in three verses. That's a little bit of a reach. What else did I like? There's another song I like. "The Lullaby" I think is a beautiful song.

Q: That is a beautiful song. I have a two year old, so I really relate to that. A two-year-old girl, and I think that's a beautiful song.

Billy Joel: Yeah, I actually moved myself, and I like when that happens.

Q: Yeah, so are there other times that that happens?

Billy Joel: Yeah, there's a song called "And So It Goes," which for an album where the same thing kind of happened. Be a little Kurt Vile song like "Vienna" I like a lot. "Summer, Highland Falls," "Turnstiles" I like a lot. I guess those could be in the top five.

Q: Damn, that's a good list. None of them are on my list, but that's all right. The last time you were here, people say that you went out to the Slippery Noodle Inn and jammed for a couple of hours.

Billy Joel: Yeah.



Q: And I'm wondering how, after that performance, how do you do that?

Billy Joel: Well, sometimes you're in the mood. I didn't realize that there were still places where you could see a great blues band like that. I thought they disappeared, and in Indianapolis, there it was, this little place packed full of people, late at night, and this anonymous group of musicians, to me anyway, were playing these great blues. I said, "I gotta get in on this. This is what it's all about. This is where rock and roll began." So I got a Friday night and people who had worked all week had to go out and shake off the blues, and they did it by listening to the blues and rocking and rolling. I like to jump in with both feet and do that.

Q: I think there were guys who were just holed up in the hotel because they're afraid of dealing with the public. You're not like that at all.

Billy Joel: Oh, no, no, I went actually for a nice walk today in Milwaukee. First thing I did, I got up, walked around. Actually, I was surprised there weren't more people. This downtown Milwaukee's kind of dead.

Q: Yeah.

Billy Joel: Which is too bad. There's a lot of nice, old architecture in this city, and I hope that they preserve it. But, nah, I go out. I'm not Michael Jackson, somebody who's, you know, gotta hide away from the world or something. No, no, I go out and throw myself into it. The only time I really get in trouble is if I stand still for too long and a little crowd gathers, and then it gets silly.

Q: Yeah.

Billy Joel: But I find if I keep moving, it's okay.

Q: Do you find it interesting or unusual that Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson sing your songs?

Billy Joel: Not really. I think a lot of the new country-western artists have brought a lot of pop music into their work and a lot of rock and roll into their work. You can hear it. You can see it when they're performing. There's a whole new kind of energy that country music has because it's had an infusion of rock and roll. I think some of the best singers are actually in country music. And you know, at sound check, we'll mess around doing country songs. Although, obviously, we're from New York, so the hell are we kidding? . But it's fun to do. You know, I don't see why things can't hybrid like that.

Q: And you were on the first Letterman show on CBS. What was the atmosphere like that night?

Billy Joel: Oh, it was tense. Number one, take TV and multiply that by, you know, an X amount of factors. It was very, very tense. Where there was a battle royale about who was gonna play the song, my band or the Paul Shaffer band. At one point, I said, "Well, why don't we do it with

my band?" They said, "No, we wanted the Paul Shaffer band." Well I said, "Forget it, that wasn't the agreement." And then they said, "Oh, the song's too long." The same thing all over again.

-Q: Ah, it's TV, it's fun.

Billy Joel: Yeah, you got it.

Q: Just two other quick things, I'll let you go. You said you do these seminars. Where do you do them?

Billy Joel: I do them at colleges, mostly. Sometimes we've done them at public venues, but for the most part, we try to build in a core audience of students, students of composition, students of music, students of music business, students of piano. I've done them at UCLA. I did one at Princeton about a week ago.

Q: Are they impromptu or are they scheduled way in advance?

Billy Joel: No, they're scheduled.

Q: Oh, okay.

Billy Joel: It's called Words on Music, and it's an evening of questions and answers, and once in a while I'll throw in a song if someone requests it or if there's an answer that I can illustrate specifically by playing the piano and singing something. I've done it at King's College in London. I've done them in Italy, done it in Germany, I've done it in Australia, I did one at Dartmouth, School for the Performing Arts at NYU, Berkeley School of Music. So, in a lot of places.

Q: Finally, the last thing I have. For another story I'm working on, I'm asking everybody I interview that if rock and roll were like a stock market and you could invest in some up and coming young group, who have you heard that you like that you think we'll be hearing of in the near future?

Billy Joel: Oh, you know, there's so many bands out now that I like that I don't know the name of. I don't know what to tell ya. If it was my job to sign up the bands, I'd know who they were. But I'm mostly getting what I hear from radio, and a lot of times they don't say the name. I'll just catch a piece of something. I'm very hopeful about a lot of the new music. I think it's great that these bands are coming out of grassroots situations. They're not manufactured by MTV. You know, they may not have the big, super record company push behind them that a lot of it is independent labels that they're actually coming from a club atmosphere where they play and they gather a following who likes the stuff, and they get good because they play together for so many. This is what I come out of, band. People are rediscovering bands. They want their own bands too. They want things that they've discovered, not that have been shoved down their throat by a huge marketing campaign. Although ultimately, that's gonna happen with any band

as soon as the record company signs 'em that's big enough. I like that. I relate to the band thing. I always play as a band guy. I was always in bands. People think of me as this piano man, but I only did that for six months, but all the other time I was in bands.

Q: So have you heard a song lately or something that knocked you out that you don't know who it was?

Billy Joel: I like "I'm a Creep" (by Radiohead). I like that a lot. I thought that was a good idea. What else have I heard lately that I like? There's a lot of good stuff. I don't even know the name of it. I'm not somebody who's gonna run right out and try to pinpoint the record anymore. I just think that the whole movement that's going on right now is good. Although, alternative, no. It's not alternative anymore.

Q: No.

Billy Joel: And the whole idea of alternative or these bands as outlaws is kind of silly to me because let's face it, you got a better shot right now at making money being in a hit, you know, a hot band than you do with a college diploma. So like, what's with the James Dean pose? Come on, guys. Rock and roll is over 30 years old now. Let's kind of give up on the outlaw bit.

Q: Is there anything else you want me to tell people about you or anything about the show or the album that we haven't talked about?

Billy Joel: I'm pretty Billy Joel-ed out. I can't think of anything else to say about the guy.

Q: Well, you've been really generous with your time. I appreciate it, and I'm looking forward to seeing the show, as always.

Billy Joel: Okay, Marc.

Q: All right, thanks, take care.