

**NINETEEN FIFTIES' NOSTALGIA IN THE NINETEEN EIGHTIES:  
AUTHENTICITY IN BILLY JOEL'S *AN INNOCENT MAN***

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**ABSTRACT**

The 1980s witnessed enormous shifts in music; yet, amidst the swell of synthesizers lurked an emulation of an earlier decade. The music of Billy Joel strongly evoked the televised culture of his 1950s childhood. Indeed, many facets of televised performance in the 1980s can be traced to artists such as Elvis Presley and shows such as the *Ed Sullivan Show*. Joel's representations of the past were strongly nostalgic, as he struggled for authenticity in a medium that frequently compromised it.

**SETTING THE STAGE: ROCK, ROLL, AND THE 1950s**

Music Television (MTV) may have been a child of the 1980s, but music on television established its roots almost 30 years earlier. On the heels of World War II, young married couples contributed to an unparalleled increase in birth rates. By the mid 1950s, the first baby boomers had developed young, impressionable minds. This generation, introduced to the hip new sounds of rock and roll, became a consumer force to be reckoned with. Dubbed "teenyboppers," they were prepubescent boys and girls who were regarded by adult society as not yet having developed proper musical taste (Beebe and Middleton 241). Television hosts and producers, providing a family experience in the 1950s, had to choose between shopping this new, questionably appropriate music to tomorrow's adults and forgoing the profits. Artists such as Elvis Presley invited controversy with stimulating gyrations and music with a heavy African American beat, neither particularly welcome. Ed Sullivan had trouble balancing "his moral mission to maintain an archaic conception of cultural propriety and his overwhelming need to win each week's ratings race" (Beebe and Middleton 232). Ratings increasingly depended on an ever growing youth fan-base. Cultural propriety, however archaic, insisted on a conservative adult perspective—one that did not favor the overly sexed and exhibitionist nature of rock and roll. Thus, performers such as Elvis Presley were carefully censored and contained. Elvis's early television appearances, especially those on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, were prudishly shot from the waist up. Censorship was directly proportionate to the presumed heteronormative nature of the 1950s. Elvis was not performing to, and therefore not sexually stimulating, the boys in the audience; it was the girl teenyboppers that composed his and many other artists' demographic. As Norma Coates has observed, "Men were responsible for the discursive gendering of rock and roll in the 1960s, but in the 1950s, girls and women drove it economically with their purchases as well as their influence as consumers" (Beebe and Middleton 246).

The duplicity of rock and roll with respect to gender offers an interesting tension. The selective portrayal of artists performing on television raised the question of authenticity. With television hosts calling the shots, could artists perform their material without censorship, or only an approved version of it? To be acceptable on TV, it had to appeal to the family; to be profitable, it had to appeal to young girls. Both added greatly to the incentive to dictate televised performances. As rock and roll went mainstream, the notion arose that "television watered down and thereby 'feminized' [it] in order to exploit and contain it" (Beebe and Middleton 229). Televised rock and roll, it was said, shifted towards the inauthentic and was coded as feminine. The ensuing preoccupation with determining authenticity called attention to the implied masculine aspects of rock and roll. The authentic was masculine; in the

patriarchal society of the 1950s, there was no disputing the fact. Thus, the credentials "real" or fabricated of a given rock and roll artist could be conceived as fodder for music critics and those who took rock and roll seriously. In the 1950s there was a "naturalization of the masculinity of rock and roll in the service of myths about the popular form's authenticity and exceptionalism" (Beebe and Middleton 247).

A common concern gave rise to two contradictory goals. First, in the marketing of rock and roll, music and sex had to be separated. The subservience of performers, however, was perceived as inherently feminine, and therefore inauthentic and emasculated. This feminization, paradoxically, led to imperatives to protect the masculinity of performers, and rock and roll--that is, *authentic* rock and roll--became the epitome of all things masculine.

### ***AN INNOCENT MAN OR A REMINISCENT MAN?***

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In August 1983, Billy Joel released his ninth album, *An Innocent Man*, featuring songs harkening back to the music of the '50s and '60s, the decades of his youth. But why did he invoke the 1950s? And, are his invocations faithful or hyperbolic? Joel later commented: "I'm never going to stop creating music, but am I going to continue writing pop songs? I saw the way the business was going, which pretty much started in the '80s with MTV, and it was visually oriented, image oriented, hit oriented. It was about narrow demographics. There weren't the same reasons for writing songs as there used to be" (DeCurtis 146). *An Innocent Man* was surely subjected to the new, narrow demographic and visual expectations. Indeed, Joel feared that the contemporary pop aesthetic lacked the authenticity of '50s rock and roll. In choosing to deliver a replicated sound, is Billy Joel in fact aligning himself with the music of the '50s, and, more importantly, is he critiquing the 1980s? Despite his motives, his representations of facets of the '50s create a pastiche neither entirely '50s, nor '80s.

*An Innocent Man* occupies a serendipitous, spontaneous moment in Billy Joel's career: "The whole idea came about because of the joy of finding myself to be an innocent man all over again. . . . [It] was written so quickly, really, without a lot of laborious effort going into it" (*Rolling Stone Interviews* 224, 227). In making the album, Joel called upon many musicians and styles to depict what he regarded as a robust musical period. Billy Joel, who first recorded in the late 1960s, was not of the age of Music Television and, as a result, the nascence of a visually based music culture posed a problem. For Joel, "Rock 'n' Roll was . . . music that the teenagers were able to play themselves. Little Richard's or Jerry Lee Lewis' piano style--taking your thumb and scraping all the way up the keyboard--had a flare and a sound that the kids loved" (*The Pop, Rock, and Soul Reader* 70). Being a pianist, Billy Joel created a style that drew on his youth *and* catered to the ears of contemporary young people. By avoiding the "electricity" of contemporary music, he anchored himself in an older, more established sound.

"Tell Her About It," the first single off the album, launched *An Innocent Man*. Particularly interesting is the music video--practically mandatory by 1983--in which Joel provides an interpretation of the longstanding program the *Ed Sullivan Show*. As discussed earlier, the program was a vehicle for music performance in the 1950s and '60s, as well as an inhibitor of musical agency. In "Tell Her About It," Billy Joel and his band perform as "B. J. and the Affordables" in a take set in 1963 on Elvis Presley and other contemporary artists. "Live" footage of his performance showcases not only a typical stage and audience setup, but also portrays the racial mixing that Ed Sullivan facilitated. Indeed, Norma Coates suggests that "[p]erhaps the biggest threat of rock and roll was its overt recognition of the plausibility of racial miscegenation. . . . Rock and roll thus challenged and put into crisis the prevailing racial and sexual mores of the day" (Beebe and Middleton 235). Such mixing was not only true to the musical style, but indicative of the changing times. Unfortunately, it applies only to the band and its style; the audience and studio patrons are all white. Moreover, the band is all male. Despite the growing popularity of female groups in the 1960s--Joel claims "Tell Her About It" was inspired by The Supremes (DeCurtis 146)--the feminine presence on stage is restricted to dancers. Other women in the video play somebody's "girl" or engage in traditionally feminine activities such as slumber parties and pillow fights. Billy Joel reinforces the notion that programming such as Sullivan's catered to families. Thus, while the children watch wide-eyed, swaying along with B. J. on the television, the parents occupy themselves by reading

the paper and eating supper. "Tell Her About It" is nostalgic, offering a clichéd representation of life in the early 1960s.

Nineteen eighty-four saw the release of Joel's fourth single from *An Innocent Man*, "The Longest Time." The video for the song takes place at a high school reunion, as Billy Joel and his band mates encounter their former high school selves. Here Joel creates a pastiche of 1950s music using 1980s technology. In fact, most of the songs on the album rely on this anachronistic combination. On the studio version of "The Longest Time," Joel takes advantage of tracking technology to sing his own backing vocals. By contrast, the live performance of the song at Wembley Arena (1984) requires the harmonies be performed by his group. As he introduces the live version, Joel recalls how, as a youngster, he and his friends, sitting on a street corner, harmonized doo-wop style. The singers' proficiency leaves no doubt that they could have provided backing vocals on the studio recording. So why didn't they? The explanation lies in the implications of nostalgia itself, which is deeply personal. Although it can be shared by many, its execution is highly individual. Backed by his own multi-tracked vocals, Billy Joel creates a stylized representation that reflects his ideal of 1950s sound.

The final single from *An Innocent Man*, "Keeping the Faith," provides an epilogue to Billy Joel's musical memoir. Visually, the video captures a host of archetypal signs of the '50s and '60s--albeit with a flare of sequins, glitter, and pastel colors unique to the 1980s. Joel, the defendant, finds himself on trial in "Music Court" for reviving the 1950s. The song, his defense, rises from the jukebox in the center of the court--emphasizing his allegiance to the era of such devices. Stacks of 45 rpm records, popularized in the 1950s and still current in the early '80s, provide one of the few links between the eras. Early in the song, Joel explains the title: "And I'm not ashamed to say the wild boys were my friends / Oh, 'cause I never felt the desire 'til their music set me on fire / And then I was saved, yeah / That's why I'm keeping the faith." Billy Joel seems determined to defend the creative values of the 1950s, that is, the authenticity of early rock and roll, against the artifice of 1980s music. But after musing on fashion trends and other 1950s staples, Joel qualifies his position: "You can get just so much from a good thing / You can linger too long in your dreams / Say goodbye to the 'Oldies But Goodies' / 'Cause the good ole days weren't always good / And tomorrow ain't as bad as it seems." Although the era of his youth was fun and left us great music, Joel is also hopeful about today and tomorrow. As the song closes, Billy Joel insists that he has stayed true to his rock and roll roots: "Now I told you my reasons for the whole revival . . . / When the rock 'n' roll plays, yeah / When the memory stays, yeah / I'm keeping the faith."

### **INNOCENCE LOST: MOTIVE AND MOTIF OF THE 1950s REVIVAL**

In an August 1983, *New York Times* article, Stephen Holden comments on Billy Joel's and Neil Young's shared interest in the '50s. Of Joel's work he notes, "The songs retain a contemporary perspective as Mr. Joel contemplates what it means to fall in love in 1983." By contrast, Holden claims that "Mr. Young has managed to suggest, if not to encapsulate, the elusive quality in the American [zeitgeist] that gave birth to rock and roll in the first place. The burning desire to lose one's bucolic innocence in big city pleasures had a lot to do with it" (Holden H19). Joel emphasizes the innocence that helped him foster a '50s revival album whereas Young stresses the *loss* of innocence that, according to Holden, contributed to the birth of rock and roll. If rock and roll demands a loss of innocence, in what way does Billy Joel's profession of innocence enable him to reproduce the music of the 1950s and '60s?

Billy Joel's musical credentials--despite ten years of popular success--were challenged by the changing tides of the early 1980s. Is the Billy Joel of the early 1980s an authentic musician or a dated and recycled act? Perhaps the "Keeping the Faith" music video offers answers. What is Billy Joel really on trial for? Rock and pop artists constantly worry about authenticity. Billy Joel is not just pleading his innocence; he is defending his authenticity, as musicians had since the early days of televised rock and roll. Questioning the artifice of the music of the '80s, Billy Joel turns instead to the more authentic music of his youth. Whereas artists such as Bruce Springsteen relay authenticity through their attire or songs about blue-collar hardship, Joel targets that most authentic subject--the celebrated canons of some of music's most established early artists. By celebrating the music of the 50s, Joel not only admits to a

nostalgic, sometimes clichéd interpretation of style, but also the inherent subjectivity of gender and authenticity. While authenticity is foregrounded in court, the contrast of gendered performance from the 1950s and 1980s assumes that '50s style is masculine. Informed by heteronormativity and preoccupied with patriarchy and conservatism, the 1950s style reinforces the gender barrier. As a man and as a musician, Joel faces a musical imperative, constructed in the 1950s, to prove his authenticity. By maintaining authorship in a performative environment and displaying a convincing sense of authenticity, Billy Joel protects his masculinity and his image as a male entertainer.

Although Billy Joel has a personal stake in authenticity, the concern reaches beyond the individual artist. According to Lawrence Grossberg, authenticity plays a strong part in the yearnings of 1980s' young people: "despite their lack of faith in a future, youths continue[d] to act, often in ways that signal[ed] a return to more stable, even traditional values and practices" (138). Grossberg perceived political apathy and alienation in the young; perhaps disenchanting by their parent's generation's mistakes, or fearful of an indeterminate future, their withdrawal from responsibility masked a longing for sociocultural integrity. Whether intentionally or coincidentally, Billy Joel expresses this yearning musically, along with messages of hope for the (musical) future. By returning to the 1950s, Joel bypasses the unstable and idiosyncratic 1960s and 1970s and rediscovers the last era of tradition and cultural propriety. In fact, Billy Joel is facing a predicament similar to Ed Sullivan's thirty years earlier. Sullivan attempted to maintain a sense of cultural propriety--that is, the conservative, yet nostalgic, social code that protected young people and their morals--and this cultural propriety is desired by the youth of the 1980s. With little to no protection inherited from the wild years preceding them, young people embraced what they perceived as the most recent period of social predictability: the 1950s. Billy Joel creates a discord with the musical integrity laid down by his musical predecessors. In the hopes of regaining such integrity, and importing it into contemporary music culture, Joel produces a modern pop album with the bones of an established 1950s sound.

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