
July 17, 2008
Music Review

Billy Joel Gives Shea Its Own Last Waltz

By [JON PARELES](#)

Maybe it takes a strayed New Yorker to truly cherish New York City. [Billy Joel](#), who was born in the Bronx and became the quintessential Long Island songwriter, was flanked by New York cityscapes and video backdrops on the Shea Stadium stage Wednesday night. It was the first of Mr. Joel's two "Last Play at Shea" shows, which are to be the final concerts there before it is demolished.

Mr. Joel played to two kinds of local pride. "This is where New York meets Long Island," he said with a smile. "Queens — politically, that's New York City. But geographically, we are on Long Island." In a three-hour concert dotted with guest stars, Mr. Joel hinted that a long pop career — like his — can parallel the life of a city, full of pleasures and disappointments, triumphs and mistakes, changes and tenacity.

Mr. Joel hasn't released an album of new pop songs since 1993, but he charged into his catalog like a trouper, with two-fisted piano playing and a voice that turned the grain of an older singer into stadium-sized vehemence — usually a decent tradeoff.

Mr. Joel, 59, doesn't pretend to be anything but grown up. Fans in distant stadium seats got the first video close-up of his grizzled face and balding head as he sang "Angry Young Man," the skeptical song about youthful self-righteousness that he wrote back in the 1970s. Late in the show, he played rock star for a little while, knocking around a microphone stand in "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me," and putting some [Jerry Lee Lewis](#) growls and whoops into "You May Be Right."

Mr. Joel's music spans the styles of New York City before hip-hop, from classical Tin Pan Alley to doo-wop to Irish-American waltzes to big-band jazz to soul to rock. At Shea, his band was expanded with strings and horns. Amid the hefty chords, classical arpeggios and splashes of honky-tonk, his hits send melodies climbing toward well-turned choruses that, countless radio plays later, just sound inevitable. The tunes work so neatly as pop that they can make Mr. Joel's songs seem less hard-nosed than they often are.

Mr. Joel sang cynically about a musician's life in songs like "The Entertainer" and "Zanzibar," and he sang about crushed hopes in songs like "Allentown," "The Downeaster 'Alexa,'" "Scenes From an Italian Restaurant" and "Goodnight, Saigon," a power ballad about Vietnam for which he was joined by a chorus of soldiers in uniform.

But New York itself was often the concert's muse. Mr. Joel brought [Tony Bennett](#) out to join him in "New York State of Mind," and they pushed each other toward flamboyantly jazzy vocal turns. Other songs were filled with New York City memories and locales. There were baseball references, too; he added a line about the Mets and Shea to the borough-hopping song "Miami 2017."

Mr. Joel's concert presented his New York City as a place full of romantic possibilities that, like ballparks, won't last forever. He recalled that Shea was built while he was a teenager. "Now they're going to tear it down," he mused, "and I'm still playing."

Shea Stadium is no CBGB. Its musical cachet has nothing to do with atmosphere, aesthetics or acoustics (although Mr. Joel's sound system was first-rate; the concert was being filmed for a documentary). Shea gained its musical reputation directly from the [Beatles](#), whose concert there in August 1965 showed the world that rock's audience had grown by an order of magnitude. No wonder Mr. Joel sang "A Hard Day's Night" with [John Lennon](#) inflections in his voice — though he inserted it between verses of his own "River of Dreams." He returned to the Beatles to finish his two-and-a-half hour main set with "Please Please Me."

Shea never became part of a regular stadium rock circuit, partly because its summer season is filled with baseball games. (Giants Stadium holds most of the stadium shows in the New York City area.) So the relatively few concerts at the stadium still bask in a Beatles afterglow. When the Police played their farewell concert at Shea Stadium in 1983, they thanked the Beatles. On Wednesday night, Mr. Joel became the only musician ever to headline all three area stadiums: Yankee, Giants and Shea.

Mr. Joel apologized to audience members who had bought tickets for Wednesday's show expecting it to be Shea's very last; after some boos he said the second show, on Friday, was added after the first sold out, and was the date offered by the Mets organization.

Guest stars seized their last chance to perform at Shea. John Mayer squeezed off bluesy guitar solos for "This Is the Time." [Don Henley](#) picked up the night's baseball theme with his own "Boys of Summer." [John Mellencamp](#) added some lines about the current price of gasoline to his song "Pink Houses." But it was a night for New York, a place where a pop hook can outlast a stadium of concrete and steel.

"I want to thank the Beatles for letting us use their room. Best band that ever was, best band that ever will be!" Mr. Joel shouted near the end, before belting one more Beatles song: "She Loves You." But Mr. Joel seized his own last word: "Piano Man," with a new introduction: "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." The stadium crowd sang along on both. But his finale was quiet: "Every year's a souvenir," he sang, "that slowly fades away."