

Welcome back to Beneath The Melody, where we dig beneath the lyrics of hit songs from our generation and generations before. On this episode, I will digging beneath the lyrics of “Piano Man” by Billy Joel. Billy Joel is an American singer-songwriter and pianist. He was born in the Bronx, New York, and raised on Long Island, New York, places which have a heavy influence on his songs. Piano man was inspired by Joel's experiences playing at The Executive Room, a piano bar in Los Angeles. He worked there for six months in 1972 after his first solo album, Cold Spring Harbor, tanked. The characters in the song are based on real people Joel encountered while working at The Executive Room.

Billy Joel sets the scene in the first verse, which happens to be a Saturday night at a local New York bar as the regular crowd sweeps in.

[IN: Verse 1]

He mentions that this was a bar that the losers would come to, for example, after losing their bets at the horse track that day or similar. Describing the way this old man drinks his drink as “making love” implies a certain level of care and leisure

The man turns to the piano player which happens to be the character Billy Joel is portraying in the song

[IN: Verse 1-2]

The man turns to the piano player and asks him to play a song. It’s a song from his past as a young boy and he’s forgotten most of it, but he does remember the emotions he felt when he was younger. He wants to feel those again, and hopes the piano man can hook him up.

The chorus opens up in the shoes of the drunks in the bar, asking the piano man to sing them a song as it raised their spirits during hard times to forget their troubles.

[IN: Chorus]

This chorus has become extremely well known as the his crowds have sung the chorus at sold out stadium shows without the help from Billy Joel himself.

[IN: Concert Footage]

The second verse opens up with the bartender named John, expressing his regret and loneliness pervade in the song.

[IN: Verse 2]

Besides being popular as the local bartender, John still has greater aspirations in life. This is shown in the lyrics “Well I’m sure I could be a movie star if I could get out this place”.

The third verse opens up with Billy talking about a real-estate broker that was a regular at the bar.

[IN: Verse 3]

The line “Paul is a real estate novelist” is about a real estate broker who was a regular at the bar who always claimed to be working on a book. Joel figured Paul would never finish because he was always in the bar. Just like the other characters in the song, the waitress has greater aspirations than her present lot. “Practicing politics” can refer to her flirting with patrons to garner greater tips, but also hints that she desires a career in public service. The "waitress practicing politics" is Elizabeth Weber, who ended up becoming his first wife when Joel married her in 1973 (they divorced in 1982).

Verse 4 finally opens up with the lyrics expressing that the manager smiled to the Piano man, which is the character Billy is in the song, because he knows Billy's talent grows people to the bar every weekend.

[IN: Verse 4]

The entire song shows the early life of Billy Joel as the piano man at the bar trying to make a name for himself. The bar's patrons appreciate the excitement his music brings to their monotonous lives, allowing them to feel as though they are part of something significant.

Joel's first major hit and his signature song, the song peaked at #25 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart in April 1974. In 2016, the Library of Congress selected "Piano Man" for preservation in the National Recording Registry for its "cultural, historic, or artistic significance."

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