

Section 4

Billy Joel

Young Billy Joel wasted no time. Music, especially *Mozart*, captivated him even as a toddler. By age two, he was banging on the family piano. By age four, he was taking classical piano lessons. And by age six, he was already branching off on his own.

"I practiced piano an hour a day, unless my mom wasn't home," Billy remembers. "Then, I wouldn't necessarily practice what my teacher gave me. Sometimes, I would make up my own music—which is really when I started writing. If I could play a piece that sounded like Mozart to my mom and get away with it, I was writing a Mozart piece."

The fact that Billy could pull this off is a testament to his natural talent. He was born into a musical family. His father, a General Electric engineer, was also a classically-trained pianist. His mother had sung in the chorus for *Gilbert and Sullivan* operettas. "There was always music playing in my house," he fondly recalls.

The music of *Schumann*, *Rachmaninov*, *Chopin*, *Brahms* and *Beethoven* was among Billy's many influences. Life in middle-class suburban Hicksville, New York afforded the youngster ample freedom to practice and play. He took advantage of every opportunity. "I had so much fun. Playing the piano was always a way to amuse myself. Even on a rainy day, I'd play when there was nothing to do. I could be transported and I could be enchanted, just mesmerized by this stuff."

In junior high school Billy's life changed radically, both musically and personally, when his parents divorced. His father, a German immigrant, returned to Europe, while his mother worked hard to support Billy and his sister. Billy wanted to do his part, too, so he began taking professional music jobs at night after school.

By this time Billy had been taking classical piano lessons for more than a decade.

While that training opened the door for him, the music he now performed was very different. "I started playing in a rock 'n' roll band when I was 14. Rock allows people in at the entry level at that age. It's just not as demanding as classical in terms of musical virtuosity. I'd already had 11 years of lessons, so I was always the best musician in the band."

Billy had by no means lost his love or appreciation of the classics, but he was taken by the energy and rhythms of rock. "It was this fiery seductress who came along and swept me off my feet. I fell in love. . ."

Otis Redding, *Sam Cooke*, *Elvis*, *The Rolling Stones* and, most of all, *The Beatles* were early inspirations.

In his first band, *The Echoes* (later known as *The Lost Souls*), Billy sang and played the organ. "Because of the technology in those days, they only had cheesy little electric pianos. The reeds broke all the time. And you really couldn't play a real piano on the stage because it wasn't audible. We'd take a vocal microphone and stick it inside or, if it was an upright, dangle it in, but it would sound awful. You couldn't repair the feedback. So piano playing really went the way of the dinosaurs for me for a couple of years."

Around this time Billy also began taking his first serious swings at writing. The tunes were simple but, again, his classical training provided a great foundation. "I didn't use a lot of it, but it was there. Before you develop your own style, you've got to learn the fundamentals. You've got to learn how to play the game, how to hit, run and throw before you get to the major leagues. Then you can do what you want."

And what Billy Joel knew he wanted, beyond any shadow of doubt, was to be a professional musician for life. Seeing *The Beatles* on *The Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964 had sold him on that. He threw himself into the task. Although his grades in high school didn't suffer, the all-night gigging did exact a

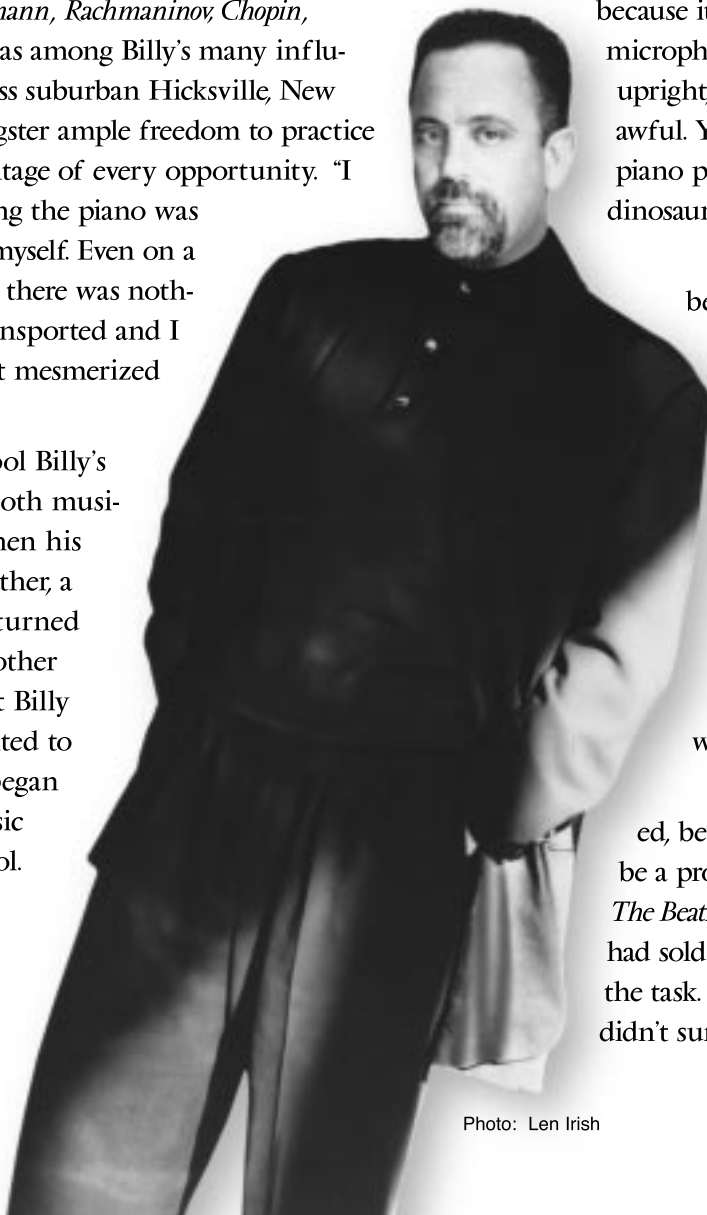


Photo: Len Irish

On his own personal style . . .

"I don't think of myself as a stylist, but I'm sure people would disagree. I know there is a great deal of classical influence and a lot of percussive drumming attack."—B.J.

Licks in the Style of Billy Joel

To play Billy Joel's chordal style faster, be sure your RH chord movement comes from the wrist and not from the elbow.

 Track 28.1

3a.

C(add9)

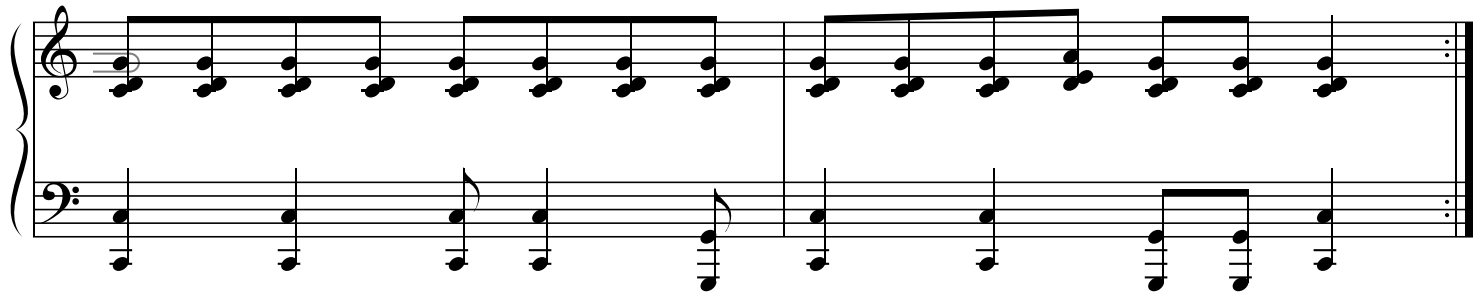
$\text{♩} = 138$ $\begin{matrix} 5 \\ 2 \\ 1 \end{matrix}$

F(add2)/C

These fingerings will make the jumps easier: 5 to 2 pivot on G 2 to 5 pivot on G



C(add9)


 Track 28.2

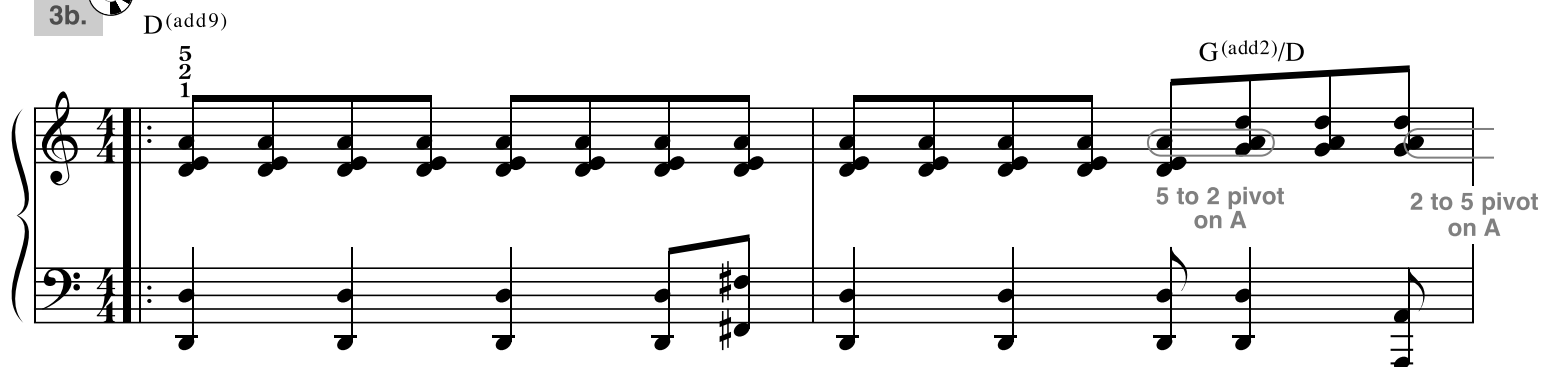
3b.

D(add9)

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G(add2)/D

5 to 2 pivot on A 2 to 5 pivot on A



D(add9)

