Becoming a Blue-Collar Musical Diplomat

Billy Joel and Bridging the US-Soviet Divide in 1987

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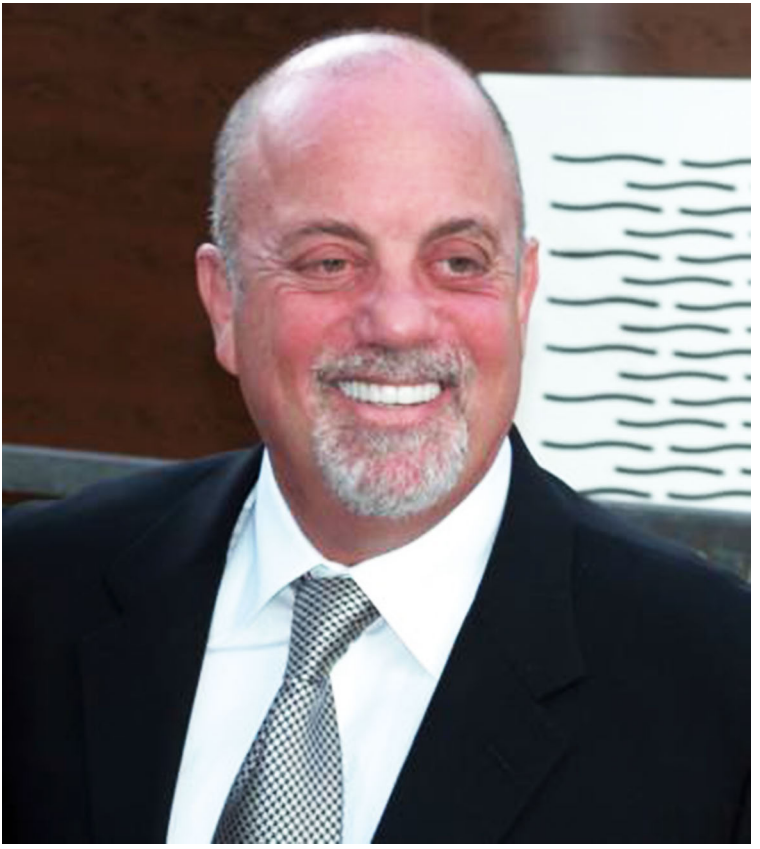
Songwriter and performer Billy Joel holds an exalted status in the upper echelon of popular artists in the United States. His accomplishments include over 150 million record sales, thirty-three "Top 40" singles, and six GRAMMY awards among twenty-three GRAMMY nominations. Joel is a Songwriters Hall of Fame inductee and has been awarded a Kennedy Center Honor and the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song (Joel, "Billy Joel Biography"). Beyond these major financial and musical successes, Joel's greatest achievement has been the popular appeal of his songs and lyrics, which are informed by his background as a child of the working class in the golden era of American prosperity. His desire to "play my music from my experience" (Schruers 242) created an oeuvre that pinpoints integral aspects of the human condition, from love and youthful rebellion to depression, addiction, and suicide. Joel created a platform via his music from which he has the power to influence political and cultural issues.

Joel's July and August 1987 tour of the Soviet Union, which included three concerts each in Moscow and Leningrad with an excursion to Georgia, is an example of his assuming the global stage with a fiery self-made and self-marketed brand of blue-collar diplomacy. Now, over thirty years since the tour, Joel acknowledges that he and his band "were literally offering a musical bridge to our cultures, and we knew that was important" (Gamboa). In establishing an image as a blue-collar or working-class musician, Joel successfully marketed himself as a cultural ambassador who could transcend the elitism of the political and diplomatic sphere by aligning himself with the general populace in both the United States and Soviet Union. This served to ease Cold War tensions on a citizen-to-citizen level and was driven by several motivations; Joel's genuine interest in grassroots political engagement, personal legacy building, his role as a

self-appointed celebrity diplomat, and prospective commercial benefits. Joel has a record of taking advantage of his status as a public figure to champion social, political, and cultural causes. He is pictured here attending a gala at the Metropolitan Opera in 2009, representing his support of classical music throughout his career (see fig. 8).

Fig. 8: Billy Joel at the Metropolitan Opera.



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JOEL'S POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT

Billy Joel's life story is filled with conditions that inform his political engagement. Joel's father Howard was of German-Jewish origin and his family

escaped Nazi persecution by emigrating to the United States via Cuba in 1942. Howard was drafted into service with the US Army shortly thereafter and participated in the liberation of Dachau. Rosalind, Joel's mother, was native to Brooklyn and the descendant of a Russian-Jewish and English family. Joel was born in the Bronx in 1949 and his parents quickly relocated to the working-class suburb of Hicksville on Long Island, where "the American work ethic was in full bloom" (McKenzie 4-5). Both of Joel's parents were amateur musicians and they encouraged their son to learn classical music, beginning with piano lessons at the age of four.

In 1956 Howard and Rosalind divorced, leaving Rosalind in Hicksville with Joel and his sister Judy. Howard relocated to Vienna, Austria and eventually started a new family. Joel was impacted by the separation of his parents and recounts the hostile treatment he received from neighbors and classmates who did not view him as their equal: The Joel family was the only single-parent and culturally Jewish household in a majority Catholic neighborhood. Joel was baptized Protestant and enjoyed going to various Christian church services with friends in childhood (Bielen 5). On top of these social conditions, Joel's mother struggled to make ends meet and worked multiple jobs. The experience of growing up in this family environment was formative in developing Joel's personality and thick skin. He recounts this period by commenting: "We were blue-collar poor people…not poor poor people. You don't go to the welfare line when you're blue-collar poor, you find work, somehow. You never ask for a handout—you would die first!" (Bielen 5-6). Joel began working as a musician during his youth and developed a strong work ethic that was rooted in his working class upbringing, which has served him throughout his career, no matter the professional or personal difficulties. He climbed his way from the bottom of the music industry, as a local nightclub musician, to the very top echelon, as the longest running resident act in the history of Madison Square Garden (Buehrer).

In the early 1970s Joel struggled to find his niche in the commercial music industry in the United States. The turning point came when he gave up "trying to make it as a rock star" and pursued autobiographical narratives in his songwriting; Joel describes this shift as an attempt to "do what I always wanted to do—write my own experiences and chuck the commercial influences" (McKenzie 27). Joel states that his "[s]ongs mean something. They mark different periods of my life, whether I was happy or sad. It's the same for everyone" (DeCurtis 143). He champions the voice of the working class in his lyrics, offering a glimpse of the life experiences and challenges that many Americans face in everyday life. Joel's portrayal of the American experience contradicts the fabricated utopian

vision of the lifestyle modeled by the Cleaver family in the 1950s television show *Leave it to Beaver*.

The story of the working class emerges in Joel's lyrics, which combine with a distinct musical idiom that is influenced by a wide cross-section of popular artists and styles, including classical music, Elvis, the Beatles, R&B, James Brown, and Ray Charles. His lyrics resonate with a wide range of people across generations in the United States, because they address issues that pervade society. Listeners can relate personally to the topics and emotions contained in his songs, therefore making relatability a key ingredient in understanding the popular appeal of his music. Joel himself has struggled with depression, alcoholism, suicide, failed relationships, and disastrous financial dealings. In a song like "Captain Jack," for example, Joel describes witnessing suburb dwellers buying drugs from the inner-city public housing projects across from his one-time apartment. Bill DeMain refers to this type of narrative as a "look out the window" song, representing someone watching what takes place in the world immediately around them (117).

Beyond his music, Joel has a long track record of being engaged in political advocacy. His ideology can be described as liberal nationalism, and is captured in his own words: "I'm very chauvinistic. Not in a political sense, but in a national sense. I love my country. I don't think any government really represents the people, but I do know that there are a lot of nice people in this country and that's about as chauvinistic as I can get" (qtd. in Myers 88). In the 1970s Joel was vocal about global events, separately from his music. He particularly took issue with vitriolic and anti-American international responses to the Iranian hostage crisis that were insensitive to the differences between the American political apparatus and the average citizens who have little or no say in foreign policy. Later on, Joel took a stance in opposition to President Carter's request that the US Olympic Committee boycott the 1980 Olympics in Moscow, which was a protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He felt that American athletes should have the opportunity to compete, regardless of the political conditions of the Cold War (Myers 86-88). This opposition to President Carter indicates that Joel's politics are not consistently aligned with the values of the Democratic Party. Joel's public political positions are most representative of the moderate independent political ideology in the US, in which individuals are known to support positions or politicians of both major political parties and are not devout party loyalists.

Joel's attentiveness to American foreign policy continues to the present. His 2007 song, "Christmas in Fallujah," criticizes the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, while simultaneously shedding light on the plight of the American soldier, who

follows orders, is "tired" and "cold," and realizes that "no one gives a damn." Troops are stuck in war-torn Iraq where there is "a sea of blood" (Schruers 293-94). This type of vivid imagery in Joel's lyrics conveys his interpretation of the human experience via an artistic form that aims to resonate with people of diverse cultural backgrounds. Joel can always be found on the side of the everyman or everywoman, a representation of his own humble upbringing and empathy for citizens who are taken advantage of by their political leaders.

Since the early 2000s, Joel has frequently participated in liberal presidential campaigns, headlining fundraisers like "Change Rocks" in 2008 to support then-Senator Barack Obama's campaign. This fundraiser generated approximately $8 million in campaign contributions (Schruers 291). During the tumultuous 2016 presidential campaign in the United States Joel garnered Twitter and popular press coverage for a quip made during his May 27 concert at Madison Square Garden. Joel facetiously dedicated his song "The Entertainer" to Donald Trump (Polus), mocking Trump and minimizing the legitimacy of his standing as a presidential candidate. When asked in an interview with Boston's public radio station WGBH if he would be willing to perform at Trump's inauguration in January 2017, Joel stated "No. I won't be anywhere near the place" (Boston Public Radio Staff). While Joel attended Trump's 2005 wedding to Melania Knauss, his recent comments indicate disdain for the forty-fifth president's politics (Firozi).[1]

MARKETING BILLY JOEL AS A MUSICAL AMBASSADOR

Joel's tour to the Soviet Union was the greatest example of his self-driven insertion into political affairs, but it was not the first instance in which he performed in communist nations. Prior to the Soviet tour, Joel performed in Fidel Castro's Cuba in March of 1979 at the Karl Marx Theater (of all places). The appearance was part of Havana Jam, a major three-day music festival that featured American and Cuban artists. The American contingent was the first

1 In the first two years of the Trump presidency Joel has been very vocal about his disdain for the administration's policies towards refugees and immigrants. In the days following the 11-12 August 2017 white supremacy riots in Charlottesville, VA, Joel wore a "Star of David" patch on his suit during his monthly Madison Square Garden concert in protest of the rise of neo-Nazism and the administration's weak response (Respers France).

sanctioned delegation of US musical acts to perform in Cuba in over twenty years (Bego 147-50). As always with Joel, this appearance had a personal motivation beyond the desire to make a political statement on US-Cuba relations. "My father had lived in Cuba, so I was interested for that reason," stated Joel in a biography by Hank Bordowitz (107). Howard Joel spent time in Cuba while in transit to the United States as a refugee from Germany (Bego 148). The Cuba performance afforded Joel the opportunity to symbolically connect with a period of his estranged father's life by experiencing Havana and the Cuban people.

John Rockwell of the *New York Times* came away from the festival impressed with Joel's role, commenting: "in the right context rock-and-roll still has the power to be subversive" (Rockwell). Given that Joel's songs and lyrics come from a place of acknowledging and empowering the underappreciated working class, he uses his art to take a stand on the world stage by ideologically unshackling the body politic through his music. Other international appearances, like Joel's shows in Israel, drew fire from elements of the American political establishment, particularly during the period of the Camp David Accords. This 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt (brokered by American President Jimmy Carter, Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, and Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel) called for Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula and the development of Palestine's independent government. To Joel, there was no fathomable reason to avoid preaching his musical gospel in nations filled with strife. He eloquently summarizes his approach as follows: "I played in Israel for the same reason I played in Cuba—to play for the people. We wanted to see what the people in Israel were like instead of listening to the propaganda we get in [the United States]" (Bego 151-152). But even his historic appearances in Cuba and Israel were not enough to satisfy Joel's zeal for stepping into the middle of contentious diplomatic situations. Despite Joel's stated motivations for bridging cultural divides, it is entirely plausible that his pursuit of a performance in Cuba could have been a strategic move to expand his commercial viability and appeal among audiences in communist countries. He positioned himself as a self-made musical ambassador whose popular appeal could transcend negative attitudes towards American foreign policy or politicians, evidenced by a warm reception from the concert audience in Havana. In retrospect, the Havana Jam appearance proved to be an early step in a series of efforts by Joel to deliver his music—through live performances—to international markets. An undercurrent to Joel's own commercial ambitions was the capacity of his performances—as a form of soft diplomacy—to ease the tensions of the Cold War.

In 1985 the US and the Soviet Union advanced a new agreement for cultural exchange immediately following a period of icy relations. The easing of cultural relations on the Soviet side stemmed from their promotion of the *glasnost* policy that stood for greater openness and publicity (Cameron and Lebor). This caused a noticeable shift in how flexible Soviet citizens could be with relative freedom of speech. As a result, it was possible for an artist like Billy Joel to realistically conceive the first full-fledged tour of the Soviet Union by an American rock musician. According to author Mark Bego, "The very idea of being able to be the first Western rock star to play a full-out series of rock concerts in the Soviet Union became a quest of Billy Joel's" (231-232).

The US had a history of major cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union between the 1950s and 1970s. Many of the early exchanges were restricted to high art forms like orchestral music, jazz, ballet, and musical theater, including a landmark 1955-1956 tour to Leningrad and Moscow of *Porgy and Bess* by George and Ira Gershwin that featured an African American cast (Bego 231). The overall intention of these exchanges from the American perspective, as outlined by Theodore Cuyler Streibert, director of the US Information Agency in 1955, and summarized by Lisa Davenport, was to increase international recognition for American "cultural achievements," "refute communist propaganda," and use culture to ease political and diplomatic tensions (39). Davenport describes the gradual decline in cultural exchanges between the US and USSR in the 1970s as a result from American involvement in Vietnam (145), as the USSR and China were involved in supporting the North Vietnamese communist regime in opposition to the US (Suri). Additionally, American jazz tours to the USSR were halted in 1979 upon the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan (Davenport 148).

Joel's 1987 tour reflects a shift in emphasis of the cultural exchanges towards popular culture. Shortly before Joel's tour launched in late July of 1987 there was a major series of concerts in the USSR called the July Fourth Disarmament Festival. Soviet and American artists performed, most notably James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt, the Doobie Brothers, and Carlos Santana (Bego 232). While press accounts of Joel's tour position his appearances as unique forays into the Soviet Union by an American artist, the fact is that others had come before him. Where Joel's tour stands apart from the July Fourth Disarmament Festival is that his shows featured him and his band, and not a lineup of multiple headliners performing short sets. Despite the earlier appearances by American artists in 1987, the narrative Joel provides about his tour suggests he leverages the experience to benefit his legacy. He has

effectively curated extensive promotion of his tour's impact on cultural affairs for almost three decades.

In the mid-1980s Joel was engaged in bitter legal and financial disputes with Frank Weber (his longtime manager and former brother-in-law), which put a great strain on Joel's finances and ultimately cost him millions in income, due to poor investments and other deceptive business practices (Schruers 206). In 1989 Joel filed a lawsuit against Weber, accusing him of unauthorized expenditures in the range of $30 million (Dougherty). This ongoing turmoil may have contributed to Joel's desire to launch the 1987 tour, which he viewed in part as a commercial opportunity that could lead to the stabilization of his finances. The tour required an extensive financial investment on Joel's part, of $2 million for the basic expenses of running the trip (Bego 233), which could only be effectively recouped through the sale of tour-related recordings, merchandise, and broadcasts. Beyond his personal financial motivations, the tour was officially made possible when a formal invitation was extended by the USSR's Ministry of Culture (*Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust Deluxe Edition*). In order to get to this point, it is likely that both US and Soviet diplomats were engaged in off-the-record negotiations.[2]

THE PEOPLE'S MUSICIAN

The primary platform from which Joel was able to establish a bond with the Soviet people was the concert stage. The tour schedule, which featured six concerts (see table 2), indicates that Joel had high expectations for ticket sales; 100,000 people were projected to attend performances during the tour (Peasley G3). Communist officials reported that 22,000 tickets were sold for the first Leningrad show (Barringer C15) and the *New York Times* reported that the Moscow shows were sold out (Associated Press). If those reports are accurate, Joel's advance audience estimate was on target and likely even surpassed. Joel

2 The author's Freedom of Information Act request to the US Department of State for any records related to Joel's Soviet Tour yielded no declassified pertinent information. The documents do prove that the US Embassy in the USSR was at minimum aware of the tour. If any documentation exists outlining a formal US government role in planning the tour it remains in classified files. The National Archives and Records Administration and the affiliated Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California report that their collections do not contain any accessible records about the tour (Langbart; Ross).

also performed an "unscheduled concert" during his visit to Tbilisi in the week before his public shows in Moscow, though the exact date of this appearance is not recorded in the existing accounts of the tour (Bego 232).

Table 2: Billy Joel 1987 Soviet tour concert dates.

Venue	Date
Olympic Sports Complex, Moscow	26 July 1987 27 July 1987 29 July 1987
Lenin Sports & Concert Complex, Leningrad	2 August 1987 3 August 1987 5 August 1987

Source: "Jumpy in Moscow."

Joel's carefully chosen set list maximized the opportunities for the Soviet audiences to connect with the American working class experience, as represented by Joel. The concerts opened with "Prelude/Angry Young Man" from Joel's 1976 album *Turnstiles*. His brash lyrics capture the universal plight of the young working class man, who is in a constant struggle to survive in a world that seems to be against him:

There's a place in the world for the angry young man
With his working class ties and his radical plans
He refuses to bend he refuses to crawl
And he's always at home with his back to the wall
And he's proud of his scars and the battles he's lost
And struggles and bleeds as he hangs on his cross
And likes to be known as the angry young man ("Prelude/Angry Young Man")

The representation of the working class in these lyrics was relatable to many in the general USSR populace, as the Central Committee of the Communist Party began to publicly recognize citizens' need to express their frustration with "civic and employment-related problems" (Buchanan 9). Joel's lyrics in "Prelude/Angry Young Man" can be interpreted as empowering the voices of the disenfranchised youth, especially men who have made symbolic sacrifices and received "scars" from fighting in "battles." While Joel is not addressing specific movements of resistance or dissent among the USSR's citizenry in these lyrics,

he makes a case for the value of struggle and sacrifice for improving individuals' socio-economic or personal status. He even references Christian theology in the song, by stating how the narrator "bleeds as he hangs on his cross," implying that sacrifices listeners make of their own well-being can serve the greater good.

As Joel performed "Prelude/Angry Young Man" on the first formal show of the tour in Leningrad he was met with the proverbial sound of crickets in the audience. The front rows of the arena were filled with Soviet party officials, which was to be expected given that government officials (regardless of the country) frequently attend cultural diplomacy events that they are sponsoring, hosting, or monitoring. Their icy response to Joel's act led the singer to think that he was "going right down the tubes" (Bielen 109). Realizing that his actual fans—referred to as "young true bloods" in Richard Scott's biography on Joel (59)—were seated behind the officials, Joel had his staff move young people from the back to the front to liven-up the crowd once the regime's senior representatives departed mid-show. The fans were understandably timid about reacting positively towards Joel, given the presence of the ominous Soviet regime, but his encouragement and moving them forward had a profound effect on altering the audience dynamic (Bielen 110). Prior to Joel's live performances in the USSR, some music fans there would have become familiar with his recordings through the bootleg market, as American rock albums were banned from sale for much of the communist era. State television stations managed to broadcast several of Joel's music videos in the lead up to his concerts (Scott 58). The reality was that many in the audiences had not heard Joel's music prior to his appearances in Leningrad and Moscow, but they responded favorably to what one Soviet audience member perceived as the "forbidden" quality of his songs and performance, given that rock music had been previously officially banned by the communist party (*Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust Deluxe Edition*).

"Prelude/Angry Young Man," and effectively the entire tour set list, served to give voice to common struggles faced by young people of the working class in both the Soviet Union and the United States, highlighting the frequent disconnect between the political classes and the body politic. The Soviet shows included "The Ballad of Billy the Kid," "Allentown," "Goodnight Saigon," "The Longest Time," "Only the Good Die Young," "Sometimes a Fantasy," and "Uptown Girl." Two of these songs were particularly poignant for the blue-collar outreach: "Allentown" and "Goodnight Saigon" touched upon two of the most contentious issues in the American working class during the 1980s, economic collapse and processing the lingering effect of the Vietnam War. Both songs appeared on the 1982 album for Columbia Records, *The Nylon Curtain*, which Walter Everett describes as a representation of "the plastic (i.e., forced artificial)

and tranquilizing quality of American, chiefly suburban, life…an American counterpart to the Soviet Union iron curtain" (Everett 116). "Allentown" tells of the difficulties of economic hardships and unemployment faced by the children of the baby-boomers. The collapse of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation specifically provided material for Joel's creative depiction of the disappearing opportunities in working-class America, as "they're closing all the factories down" (Schruers 153). Joel tells of "waiting here in Allentown / For the Pennsylvania we never found / For the promises our teachers gave / If we worked hard / If we behaved." The working-class dream seems to be beyond the grasp of the average blue-collar worker, a depressing realization that conflicts with the traditional American expectation of vertical class mobility through hard work. Joel's audiences in Leningrad and Moscow would have recognized a parallel with the narrative in "Allentown" and the economic situation under their political leaders, whose policies failed to deliver the common prosperity promised by communist ideologies (Ball and Dagger). Instead, by 1985 the regime was in search of viable remedies to address economic stagnation, production failures, and "shortages of goods" (Buchanan 9). Americans were reacting to similar financial crises and Joel managed to channel those sentiments into his lyrics. During the tour, Joel introduced "Allentown" with the help of his translator, recounting the plight of Americans living in the city and asking the audience, "Maybe that sounds familiar?" (*Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust Deluxe Edition*).

"Goodnight Saigon," Joel's commentary on the Vietnam War, outlines the radical shift towards a dark pessimism in American society after President John F. Kennedy's 1963 assassination, colored by the economic struggles of the working class. This song describes the transformation of men from basic training in the Marine Corps, of being "so gung ho / To lay down our lives," to the horrors of combat, when "we would all go down together." In the recent Schruers biography on Joel, the songwriter cites having been motivated to compose "Goodnight Saigon" by the experiences of his Vietnam veteran friends. Joel had long questioned the American interventionist policy of attempting to shape the internal affairs of foreign nations. One poignant saying he recalls from the period is "Vietnam is sending the black man to kill the yellow man for the white man who stole the land from the red man" (qtd. in Schruers 154). This comment is a harsh summation and condemnation of American foreign policy and race relations. Similar debates raged in the USSR as to the burden of the Soviet participation in the Afghan War of 1979-1992, which was met with high levels of dissatisfaction among the Soviet people due to high financial and human resource drains (Office of Soviet Analysis iii).

The positive reception Joel received for his original songs throughout the Soviet Union served as proof that these themes resonate from Moscow to Long Island. Joel was ultimately met with "cheering enthusiasm," but not without making his tour staff anxious about being chastised or even punished for his riling up the crowds (Bego 232). The tour manager purportedly hid in a bathroom after one of the Moscow shows, in fear of reprisal from angry representatives of the Soviet Central Committee who were in attendance (Bordowitz 161). Columbia Records president Walter Yetnikoff, who was part of the tour entourage, commented that Joel "rocked harder than the Soviets wanted him to rock" and that "American rock 'n' roll ripped up the Iron Curtain" (Bego 233). Felicity Barringer reported in the *New York Times* that Billy Joel "won the souls of those in a stony Soviet audience, leaving them cheering, dancing on chairs and looking around in fearful wonder as they followed the music and not the rules" (C15). During these synergistic moments in the concerts, music successfully created a bond between Joel, his band, and the local audiences that helped Joel see past the political differences between the US and USSR. He described this change in his perception of the Soviet Union in a *Rolling Stone* interview by stating, "The Cold War ended at a lot sooner for me than it has for everyone else" (Wild), suggesting that the warm reception his music received during the 1987 tour had a major impact on Joel's personal beliefs.

The shows also included a cover of the Beatles' "Back in the USSR," which hinted at Joel's respect for the revered British band, but more importantly served to show honest appreciation for the citizens of the country. In a video documentary of the tour, American flags can be seen being waved enthusiastically by Soviet men and women throughout the audience. Joel, with help from his translator, concluded the night by saying "Don't take any shit from anybody" (*Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust Deluxe Edition*), a rallying cry that had enormous appeal to the generally repressed Soviets. The second cover that Joel included in the shows was Bob Dylan's "The Times Are A-Changin'," a powerful protest song that directly calls out American government officials as needing to "Please heed the call / Don't stand in the doorway / Don't block up the hall," for a social and political revolution was emerging that would change the course of history. Beyond the themes of global unrest, war and economic disillusionment, the songs on Joel's tour sought to bridge cultural boundaries by touching upon such common themes as love, unemployment, family, war, and death.

In addition to sharing the rabble-rouser spirit of his protest songs, some of Joel's onstage behavior showed his bucking of establishment expectations and

thinking, at least symbolically. Joel electrified the audiences by delivering a genuine rock show. He climbed on his piano, crowd surfed, and danced around with his microphone stand. One of the band members, Mark Rivera, recently recounted how the general concert attendees completely overran the front VIP section at the arena in Moscow after the Soviet officials departed in the middle of the show. He remarked, "It wasn't a protest. It was just the guys jumping up and down on the chairs because they were having so much fun" (Gamboa). Joel's music and performance moved them to unleash their inner excitement and feelings.

During the second show in Moscow, Joel had a famous explosion against the video crew that was capturing the show for the future cable television and video specials. The most shocking aspect of this was that public outbursts were not generally tolerated in Soviet society. Joel, who believed the video crew was interfering with the live audience's enjoyment of the performance by shining bright lights on them (and tapping into their inhibitions about being seen to enjoy American rock music by authorities), had a violent outburst that involved flipping over an electric piano and swinging a music stand over his head (Bego 233). The international press quickly picked up on this moment and headlines read "Billy Joel Has a Tantrum," though the Associated Press reported that "the audience seemed unsure if the temper tantrum was part of the show" (Associated Press). In video footage of the incident, the audience immediately surrounding stage did not skip a beat of rocking out to the music. Joel recounts that young audience members came up to him after the concert and told him "they really liked it" (*Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust Deluxe Edition*). For better or worse, these antics increased the Western press attention for the tour and implied that Joel was a man of the people for adamantly protecting the audiences' best interests, even to the detriment of his own documentary production.

Several of the powerful instances of cultural exchange on Joel's tour took place away from the concert stage. He gained mass attention through publicity stunts like being the first American to appear on the Soviet music television program *Muzykalnyj Ring*, or *The Music Ring*. Additionally, the final concert on the tour was the first live rock concert to be broadcast simultaneously to the US and Soviet Union. The truly special moments were always based on interactions with common everyday Soviet citizens, for whom Joel felt a kindred spirit. He fondly recalls giving his leather jacket to "the hippie guy," Oleg Smirnoff, Joel's translator; Smirnoff never wore the jacket and displayed it on his wall. Joel retrospectively acknowledged that "the importance of the relationship we had with the people there is still hanging on people's walls" (Scott 61-62). Joel clearly had a profound impact on individual citizens, irrespective of whether or

not his tour enhanced overall US-USSR cultural relations. Many of the personal interactions between Joel and locals are captured in *A Matter of Trust*, showing his gifting a personal St. Christopher medal to an aspiring musician (O'Connor, "Review/Television" C30). He is also depicted wandering through traditional markets and being physically embraced by locals, which prompted many beaming smiles on Joel's part (*Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust Deluxe Edition*).

After attending a performance by local musicians in Tbilisi, Georgia, Joel was inspired to include the traditional Georgian folk song "Odoya" on his live tour recording *Kohuept*. In the context of US music diplomacy during the twentieth century, Joel's inclusion of local artists performing a folk work functioned as a form of "musical flattery," a principle outlined by Danielle Fosler-Lussier (78) that observes American musicians paying homage to local cultures during international exchanges by performing and recording native music. Mario Dunkel (149-50) emphasizes the prevalence of this practice during tours to the Eastern Bloc by American jazz artists in the 1950s.

Joel had a moving experience at the grave of musician and poet Vladimir Vysotsky, who died in 1980 while publication of his poems and songs was restricted by the communist regime. Vysotsky's work conveyed the spirit of the Soviet people, much to the chagrin of the political elites, and commented on the struggles of life under communist rule in the same way that Joel's songs represent the American working class experience. Joel, his then-wife Christie Brinkley, and their daughter Alexa went on to visit Vysotsky's mother. All of this memorialization of Vysotsky served as a gesture of respect for the artist and the people who saw him as their voice against the deprivation forced upon them by their government (Bielen 110).

DUAL PROPAGANDA ROLES

A *Quid pro quo* scenario is at the root of most diplomatic negotiations or exchanges, including in music diplomacy. Exploring Joel's Soviet tour inherently requires a consideration of what may have motivated the US and Soviet governments to allow the tour to occur. Putting aside Joel's personal intellectual, musical, and commercial motivations, there were tangible diplomatic benefits to this tour for both governments. The Soviets, with their tolerance of Joel's riling up of their young citizens, could point to the freedom to get wild at the concerts and the leeway Joel had to interact with the populace as proof of their seriousness about the *glasnost* policy. The regime's acceptance of

visible and public dissension, albeit in a contained concert setting, was undoubtedly a meaningful and surprising gesture to many Soviets.

Writing in *The Washington Post*, Alex Heard explains that one of the communist regime's motivations for authorizing Joel's tour was to learn more about American rock 'n' roll and to copy it as a means for matching the global dominance of American pop and rock music. Oleg Smoliensky, director of the USSR cultural enterprise Goskonzert (госконцерт) during the time of Joel's tour, is quoted as saying "Soviet officials are pleased…We did not make a mistake in choosing [Joel]. You have achieved a lot in this field. Our cultural exchange will help us catch you" (Heard W7). This sense of gamesmanship is also seen in the competition to win the medal count at Olympic games. Whether this endorsement of Joel's tour was intended to drive perception of the communist party's promotion of rock music or not, it is indicative of complex political aims being at the core of why the officials did not block Joel's tour. They manipulated it to their own ends, while revealing how they were uncomfortably making strides towards greater openness in Soviet society.

The American government side of the exchange was equally nuanced. On the surface, the tour served as an example of global American dominance of popular music and culture. Here was Joel, a blue-collar American guy, filling arenas in the Soviet Union with catchy pop music that was decidedly connected to the American working class experience, which has always been a point of similarity in cultural exchanges. Allowing Joel to adopt the role of unsanctioned musical ambassador can be interpreted as having several benefits to American propaganda efforts during the Cold War. Joel, in speaking his mind in his lyrics—including against policies of the US government, such as the Vietnam War—was a symbol of American freedom of expression. By sanctioning this, the Regan administration projected a model of democratic open society that would have a positive influence on Soviet citizens who might intensify their demands for the same type of freedoms, especially given the parallels between the contemporary Soviet engagement in Afghanistan and the Vietnam conflict.

Western English-language press coverage of Joel's tour conveyed a striking narrative of his overwhelming effect on young people in his audiences, one of reaching the hearts and minds of youth in a rabble-rousing American way, complete with instances of bucking authority. Reports of 200 chairs being broken at one of the Leningrad concerts, a result of fans rushing to the foot of the stage ("Jumpy in Moscow"), give a visual symbol of breaking down what was perceived as the forced neutral decorum expected by the Soviets. Among the headlines were "Pop Weekend: From Moscow to LA: Soviets Warm Up to Billy Joel" (*Los Angeles Times*), "In Moscow, a New Era? Protest and Rock Fete are

Tests of Glasnost" (*New York Times*), and "Billy Joel parts the Iron Curtain" (*Globe and Mail*). The North American press largely portrayed Joel's tour as having the effect of unnerving the Soviet regime: "Considering his effect on seats, can you wonder the Kremlin is nervous?" ("Jumpy in Moscow"). In reality, the local audience benefitted from Joel's engagement with concert-goers in this fashion. Communist goals of promoting *glasnost* via the tour were met concurrently with the American perception of the tour as a penetration of Soviet society with American values and freedom of expression. As such, Joel and his tour functioned as propaganda for both the USSR and the United States, a careful balancing act that fulfills the expectation of music diplomacy satisfying aims for all parties engaged.

The successes of Joel's Soviet tour enabled him to partner with Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union from 1985 to 1991 and the official ultimately responsible for *glasnost*, for a charity concert entitled "Together for Our Children—Musicians Unite with Stars to Immunize Children." The event took place after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1993 in Los Angeles and was broadcast globally (Harring 19). This symbolic partnership would not have been possible if Joel's previous tour of the USSR had compromised his ability to work with Moscow's political leaders.

CONCLUSION: COMMERCIAL LEGACY BUILDING

Since 1987, Joel's engagement with the memory of his Soviet tour has exceeded what was accomplished personally or for international relations over the course of the trip to Leningrad, Moscow, and Tbilisi. Several initiatives that directly relate to the tour indicate Joel's long-term vision for developing the legacy of the tour commercially. In the almost thirty years since the actual tour, Joel has been involved in the release of several audio and video recordings that intend to sell the success of the Soviet trip to the history books, bolstering Joel's place in the pantheon of civically engaged popular and rock musicians from the United States.

An immediate and visible product of the tour was the release of a documentary in 1987 called *Billy Joel from Leningrad, USSR* as part of the *HBO World Stage* series, which gives a curated visual and musical snapshot of Joel's energetic engagement with his audiences throughout the tour. The one-hour film was conceived by Robert Dalrymple and Rick London, and commemorates the tour as ". . . a nonstop celebration—of togetherness, of rock music, and, of course,

Billy Joel" (O'Connor, "TV Reviews" C22). Columbia Records released the album *Kohuept* in late 1987, which included live and studio recordings from the Soviet tour. Curiously, this recording was Joel's first in ten years not to reach gold level sales of 500,000 albums sold, and as such it was not perceived as a clear commercial success (Bego 237). A second film, *Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust: The Bridge to Russia* Dalrymple in 1987 and aired on ABC in 1988 under the title *A Matter of Trust: Billy Joel in the USSR.* In 2014, Joel was involved in releasing a "deluxe edition" of *Billy Joel – A Matter of Trust: The Bridge to Russia*, which includes the first DVD/Blu-ray versions of the 1987 Soviet concerts to be released, a two-CD recording of Soviet tour performances, and a new documentary film produced by Showtime and directed by Jim Brown.[3]

These various recordings, television documentaries, and video releases have served three purposes: to generate additional revenue from the tour, to promote the perceived impact of Joel's tour in the history of US-Soviet relations during the waning years of the Cold War, and to raise Joel's visibility as an artist of purpose on the commercial marketplace. By marketing the story and music through films and sound recordings, the 1987 tour is revisited by longstanding Joel fans and is used to reach new audiences that may not be otherwise drawn to the singer's brand of music. While the continued commercial potential of the Soviet appearances continues to receive attention from Joel in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the cultural exchange nonetheless proved to be a meaningful experience for him personally while drawing attention to the capacity of an American artist to make public relations splash behind the Iron Curtain.

As Russia and the United States are again in a period of icy relations, albeit under different circumstances, both countries would be wise to engage in music diplomacy as they did through Billy Joel's tour. Music diplomacy offers opportunities for societies to engage informally, connect through similar social tropes, and work towards a better understanding of cultural and political differences. Joel saw an opportunity to advance his political activism by engaging in Cold War music diplomacy. He marketed himself as an "Ambassador of Rock" (Kent A38) with his 1979 appearance in Cuba, the 1987 tour to the USSR, and in the decades since. Joel's foray into the musical scenes of communist countries was launched in part to positively influence US-USSR relations at a grassroots level and cement Joel's legacy as an American celebrity who could connect with the working class based on his personal background.

3 Sales figures for the various commercially released documentaries of the 1987 tour are not available at the time of publication.

Joel's bottom-up initiative and courage in guiding the direction of the Soviet exchange at all levels revitalized the potential to bridge differences, no matter how intense the divisions, by sharing the story of working-class America with the populace of the USSR.

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