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# Night at the Roxy

**Billy Joel was a struggling artist. A legendary Lehigh Valley gig 50 years ago was the break he needed.**

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Billy Joel played his first headlining show at the tiny Roxy Theatre in Northampton, Pennsylvania, on Nov. 28, 1973, a few weeks after "Piano Man" was released. Theater owner Richard Wolfe had this poster made up for the show, the only one of its kind and one of the few remaining physical mementos of a turning point in the entertainer's career. Steve Novak | For lehighvalleylive.com



By [Steve Novak | For lehighvalleylive.com](https://lehighvalleylive.com)



*The musician's voice echoes through the theater and through time. The recording has captured him as he was. Youthful. Excited. Nervous? Perhaps. Surprised? Almost certainly.*

*"Where are we? Northampton?" he asks with a city accent, clearly not from around here. "I want to move here, man. S'alright, s'alright. Really is the nicest audience we've come across, I gotta tell ya."*

*He's a stranger to most, this entertainer. But not to this crowd. And soon, everyone will know his name.*



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Billy Joel at the Roxy Theatre | Northampton, Pa., Nov. ...

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lehighvalleylive.com · Billy Joel at the Roxy Theatre | Northampton, Pa., Nov. 28, 1973 | Courtesy of Denny Somach

Good concerts make good stories.

**Denny Somach** has one. It's his favorite to tell (or at least his most-told):

He gave Billy Joel a ride.

It was 50 years ago when the no-name musician hopped in Somach's car. They drove from the little WSAN AM radio station studio tucked away behind the Whitehall Mall to the **Roxy Theatre** in **Northampton**, also little and tucked away in a corner of eastern Pennsylvania north of Allentown.

For a 20-something guy from Long Island, it was Nowhere. Joel's road manager had to leave him at the studio while he handled something with that night's gig. Somach was tasked with chauffeuring after DJ duty that afternoon. He took the back roads, passing factories and mills that had fallen on hard times.

"Boy, this place looks depressed," Joel says in Somach's retelling.

"I said, well, you know, (the plants are) about to close, high unemployment. I said, this is actually Northampton, it's not Allentown. Allentown is actually doing OK. But Northampton is where they make steel and trucks. So, he's looking around — and if you listen to the song ('Allentown'), all the images from that ride in my car are in that song."

This was Nov. 28, 1973, the night of Billy Joel's first gig as a headliner.

This was nine years **before Joel would release the song "Allentown."** This was long, long before the sold-out **residency at Madison Square Garden**. Before he could **fill arenas and stadiums**. Before **"Movin' Out"** or **"Uptown Girl,"** before **starting the fire**, before **the good died young**. Before most people even knew his name.

This was when Billy Joel, the opener, would be introduced by the wrong name on stage, then get booed off it. This was when "Piano Man" was a brand new song not heard live. This was when Somach, the DJ, had to reassure the young, frustrated entertainer that he would do just fine.

They were going to the Roxy. It was Billy Joel's **big shot** to prove himself as a lead.

No **pressure**.

But it worked. A small theater undergoing a renaissance. A small radio station with a unique format. A small, enthusiastic audience of a few hundred. It all worked.

This gig at a theater in nowhere Northampton, Pa., **became a local legend**. It inspired many good stories, like a good concert should.

There's the couple from Phillipsburg who fondly remember being among the first to hear "Piano Man" live. There's the woman from Whitehall who shook a bewildered Joel's hand after winning tickets. It was a highlight of a golden age at the revitalized Roxy, which became known as a solid venue — not as randomly as it seems — for up-and-coming performers to launch successful, even superstar, careers.

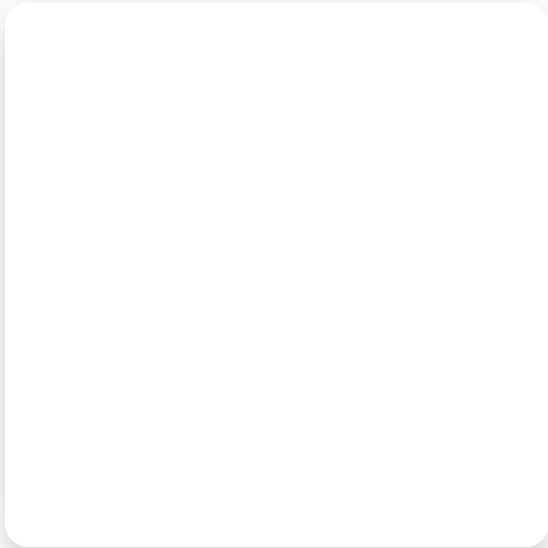
And, of course, it was a turning point for Joel. He returned here to the Lehigh Valley again and again until, after "Allentown," he was finally too big for the local venues. He had made it. Maybe it was inevitable. Maybe it could have happened anywhere. It happened here.

Somach was the catalyst. He was the DJ who brought Joel's early music to others at the station, who got it played on air and arranged the Roxy show. He gave him the ride. He placed his tape recorder on the stage to capture the show that would change the trajectory of Billy Joel's career.

It's quite a story, how everything came together.

"Everywhere I go, anywhere in the world," Somach says, "I tell people, hey, I'm from Allentown. They go, oh, of the famous song?"

"And I go, yeah. In fact, let me tell you a story ..."



## Allentown

PREVIEW Billy Joel

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## THE STRANGER

*The entertainer talks between songs.*

*“We’ve been all over, I guess, the last couple of weeks. Vancouver was OK. Richmond, Virginia — whew! They’re really mean down there, man.”*

*The audience laughs at this. They know his music. They know his name. The promoter at the Richmond Coliseum had not.*

*“Here he is, Bobby Jowls, (opening for the) Doobie Brothers.’ That guy introduced me one night and said Bobby Jowls. Bobby Jowls. Ah, I remember that one. I remember that guy, too. When I see him again, man ... ”*



The Roxy Theatre on Main Street in Northampton, Pa. Steve Novak | For lehighvalleylive.com

The kid from Long Island was classically trained on piano but learned with rock gigs at night. He was so tired in school that his teachers thought he was stoned. He said he wasn't.

When a piano-and-drum duo didn't work out in 1969, he tried some factory work (and immediately balked at the idea of retirement benefits after 30 years) then dabbled as a rock critic. In 1971, he went to Los Angeles to record an album. He toured for six months in 1972, then "retreated to sort things out again" with "a period of reflection" playing six nights a week for almost no money in a "forlorn downtown L.A. piano bar," during which he wrote one of his most enduring songs.

This is the story of Billy Joel as told in a Columbia Records biography provided to studios and media in October 1973 for the release of "Piano Man," one month before the Roxy show. A spokesperson for Joel did not return requests for his memories of this time, but the recollections of others fill some gaps.

Despite the bio sheet's promotional tone about "exceptional critical acclaim and outstanding audience response," Joel was frustrated. He didn't like his first album, "Cold Spring Harbor." He didn't like his rough reception as an opener for The Beach Boys and Doobie Brothers. His "retreat," some say, was because he was thinking about quitting. There was clearly a musical foundation. But without a breakthrough soon ...

Across the country, the Roxy Theatre was struggling.

The vaudeville venue opened in the northeast Pa. borough of Northampton in 1921 as the Lyric Theatre. It struggled during the Great Depression, closed and reopened as the art deco Roxy in 1933. Stage shows mostly went by the wayside through the '40s and '50s. Concerts failed to compete with television and bigger movie houses in the '60s. The owners had decided to close.

Richard Wolfe and Paul Angstadt stepped in to save the Roxy. The business partners acquired the theater in 1970. The movie business was still weak, so they limited showings to the weekends. Wolfe needed to find income to fill the 500 or so seats on darkened weeknights.

Twenty minutes down the road, WSAN was broadcasting at 1470 on the AM dial. While almost everyone else stuck to Top-40 hits, this was the rare, free-form, album-oriented AM station. DJs were given wide latitude to take deep dives into discographies, especially of new or little-known artists, making it popular among college-age listeners. They played the Billy Joels, the Rushes, the Fleetwood Macs of the day.

Denny Somach entered this scene around 1970, somewhat by chance as a Moravian College freshman from Allentown. First, he filled in on the evening airwaves. Then it became a full-time gig. And by 1971, as the station tested the idea of promotional events, he was learning on the fly how to book concerts.

WSAN needed a venue. The station looked to the Roxy, where it had held live talent shows in the '30s. It was "acoustically perfect," Somach said. The wide-open weeknights also were perfect, as was the location. Northampton, while a bit off the

beaten path and not exactly bustling, was a nice midpoint for bands traveling between Philadelphia and New York, attractive as a low-paying gig that would at least cover hotel expenses for the night.

WSAN's first booked act at the Roxy was Manfred Mann's Earth Band, between scheduled gigs in Philly and NYC. One night, two shows, 7 and 10 p.m., each an hour-and-a-half set. The \$1 tickets were printed and sold directly from the station's HQ, reducing overhead. The theater got all the concessions sales. The station played a lot of Manfred Mann in the leadup, and all 500 or so tickets were sold.

The formula was a success. They tried it again and again. It became a weekly thing. The WSAN concert series was born.

It wasn't a money-maker. It did enough to break even. But as a profile-raising showcase, it was huge. The free-form station could promote artists' upcoming local gigs more effectively and less expensively than most promoters. DJs would swap and share records from their personal collections and build up an audience for these newbies. Wolfe says that made all the difference.

"What they found was for some of these acts, they were selling more records here in the Lehigh Valley than they were anywhere else in the country," according to the Roxy's owner. "It was because the radio station was giving them exposure. They were playing their stuff that wasn't getting played anywhere else."

Agents began to call for Somach at WSAN. They represented bands that weren't making Top 40 hits (at least then) but still sold albums and toured. They were new bands cutting their teeth, or openers getting tested with top billing, or reunited or retooled groups trying something new. Either way, the Roxy, according to Somach, found itself comparable to the Electric Factory in Philly or the Bottom Line in New York. It was a destination for musicians and music fans.

"I started talking to other agencies. I would call them and they'd go, 'Oh, you're the guy that booked the Roxy, right? In Northampton, where nobody's ever heard of?' I said, 'Yeah, we're looking for who you have.'" Didn't matter if it was folk, jazz, blues,

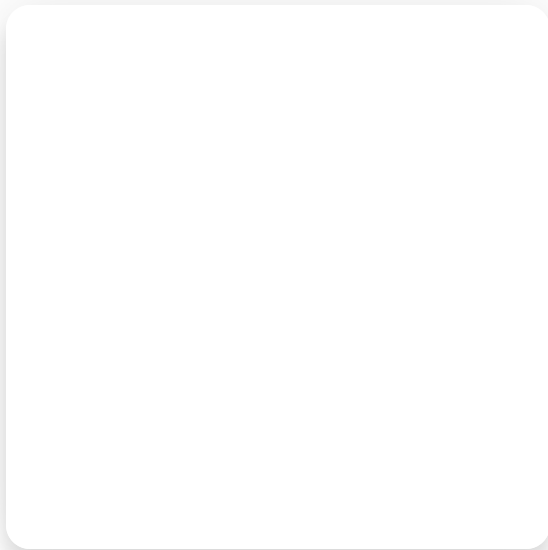


rock. Whatever. From wherever. WSAN would book it and play it, and the Roxy would rock it.

The theater's history boasts shows by Blood, Sweat & Tears, KISS, Alex Harvey, and so many more. Somach recalls the likes of Rush, Hall and Oates, Peter Frampton, Melissa Manchester, James Gang, Livingston Taylor, Kingfish, Weather Report, and Styx, among others. Comedians included pre-"Saturday Night Live" John Belushi and Gilda Radner. Photo mosaics now hanging in the theater lobby depict hundreds of faces, just a sampling of the theater's past entertainers. The crowds were courteous, enthusiastic, never booing anyone off the stage. Probably every band got an encore.

(One of the few shows that didn't sell out? Some guy from New Jersey named Bruce Springsteen.)

It was into this environment that the struggling no-name piano man ventured and found his breakthrough.



## Piano Man

PREVIEW Billy Joel

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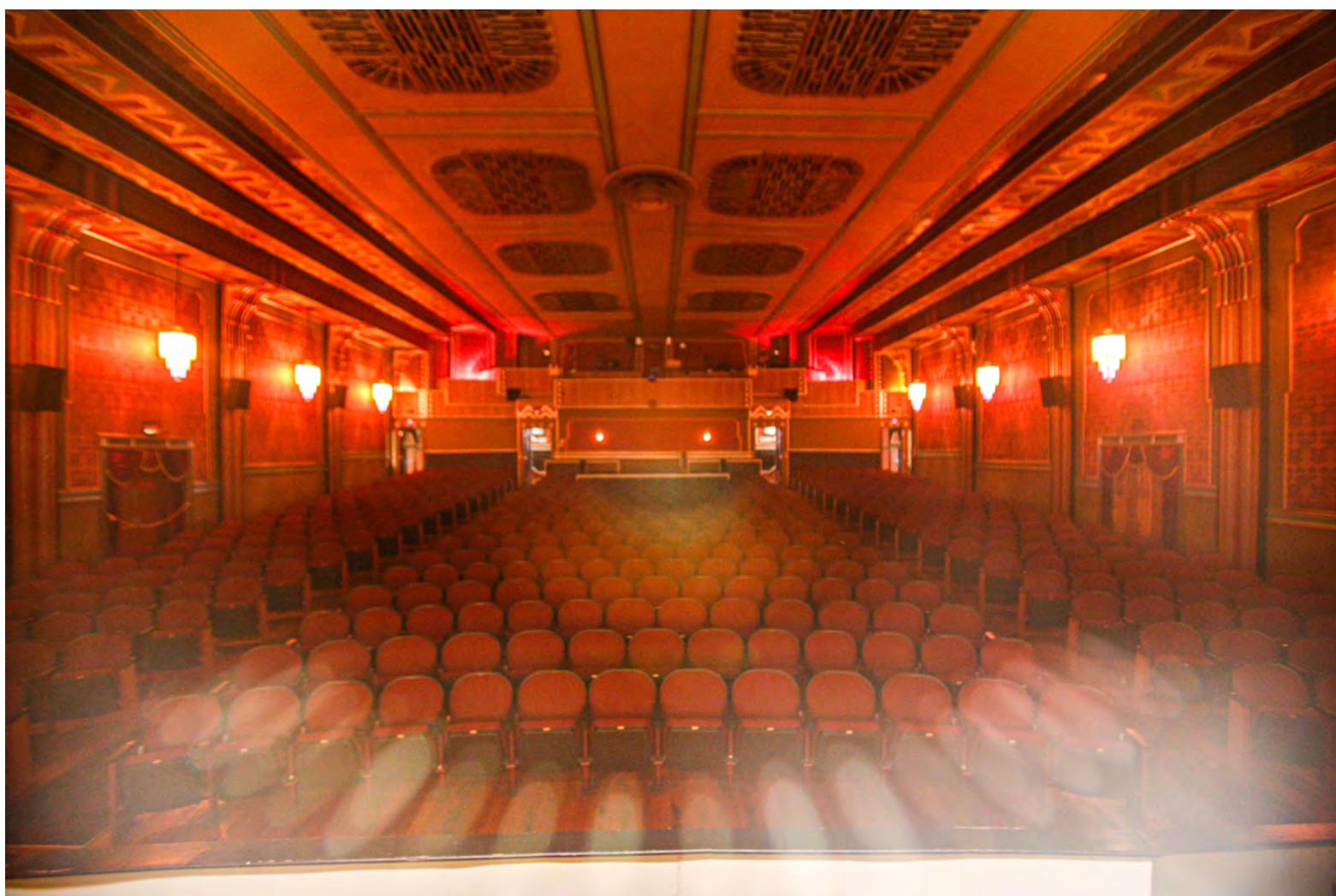
## THE PIANO MAN

*The musician continues his monologue between songs.*

*“We played in this big thing, the (Richmond) Coliseum, right? And it just went on forever. Just, you look up and it was like — whew! The ceiling looked like it was higher than the sky. It just went, kept going and going. I get up and I play — hello-hello-hello-hello-hello, fourth down-down-down-down-down. Didn’t make it at all, really. Those big places really kill you. ...  
.”*

*He tinkers on the piano. The audience applauds.*

*“So, this kind of place, this is a good place. I’m telling you, it’s a real good place. I like it. I like it. How much is it? I wanna buy it. Really.”*



The interior of the Roxy Theatre in Northampton, Pa., is seen in 2023. Steve Novak | For [lehighvalleylive.com](http://lehighvalleylive.com)

Pat Marth knew the answer, though she now forgets the question.

It was Nov. 28, 1973. The college student had first heard Billy Joel on the radio a year earlier, bought the album, became a fan. Now she had won tickets through a WSAN trivia contest and she was going to see him that night at the Roxy.

She remembers that afternoon walking into the “little shed” of a station behind the mall. Inside was a reception area where she picked up her tickets. The DJ was visible at work behind glass. Billy Joel was seated right there, outside the booth, probably waiting to be interviewed. She approached him.

“Hey,” she said, “I won tickets to see you tonight.”

He laughed. “Oh?”

“I look forward to seeing you.” A handshake, and she left.

A simple, innocent interaction at the time. One that seems far less likely and far more noteworthy today. Most people at the time gave her a nod and a “cool” as she bragged.

“Of course, I was very excited to tell everybody, guess what, not only did I win tickets, but I saw Billy Joel there,” the retired hospital administrator from Whitehall recalls.

Based on others’ stories, Joel did not realize just what kind of reception was in store for him at the Roxy, which probably made his interaction with Marth even more puzzling for him. It had been a hassle just to get him there in the first place.



**“Billy Joel? Are you kidding me? Nobody’s ever called for this guy.”**

Denny Somach saw Joel play live for the first time in 1971 or ‘72 at a college broadcasting convention in New York. These were the kinds of low-profile gigs needed to gain a foothold. Somach already had “Cold Spring Harbor” but seeing Joel

play convinced him: We've got to book this guy.

The musician's agent was less enthusiastic.

"Billy Joel? Are you kidding me?" the incredulous agent said in a phone call with Somach two weeks later. "Nobody's ever called for this guy. Are you sure you don't mean Billy Joe Royal?"

Joel, apparently upset with the album and the industry, had picked up and headed for Los Angeles to play at a piano bar. "I'll call you if he ever comes back," the agent said. "But, you know, I wouldn't count on it."

Joel did come back, and the agent did call Somach in late August 1973. Somach was told Joel's "wimpy songs" were flopping as an opener. The kid had been promised a lead someplace, if only to settle an internal debate at the studio.

So, unknown, young Billy Joel, so far a bust, got to headline the Roxy.

This was his chance.

When Somach told Joel he'd be playing the Allentown area, the response was something like, *Where the (expletive) is Allentown?* But he would come to know the Lehigh Valley quite well.

The day of the show, Joel and his road manager pulled up to the radio station office in a white station wagon. Somach had him sit down in the studio for an interview. He recalled how it went:

"Look," Somach said, "people here are going to love you."

Billy wasn't so sure. "Well, nobody's ever really heard of me. I've been getting booted everywhere. But I'll take your word for it."

Somach reassured him. The station had been playing the album. People would know his songs. The night had sold out — one thousand tickets over both shows — in three hours. Joel was amazed.

Outside the studio, the musician met Marth, his fan. Then Somach gave him the ride up to Northampton, where more fans awaited.

Richard Wolfe counted himself among them. The Roxy owner had listened on the radio, had bought “Cold Spring Harbor.” And when he found out Joel was playing his theater, he did something he didn’t usually do at the time: He had a poster drawn up for the show.

It’s still in the theater, even now, 50 years later. Wolfe knows exactly where. During our interview, he gets up from the desk in his charmingly cluttered office, steps down into the lobby, passes through the theater doors and on down the aisle, through row after row of empty, maroon cushioned seats. He enters the stage door at the front of the auditorium and steps up into the stage wings. Then up the wooden stairs. Through one storage room. Then another, overlooking the seating. He rustles through some equipment, reaching behind toward the wall. Out it comes:

*“On the Roxy Stage. Wed. Nov. 28th. Billy Joel in concert. Featuring ‘Piano Man.’ Popular Lyricist & Entertainer. Plus Henry Gross. Shows at 7 & 10 p.m.”*



Roxy Theatre owner Richard Wolfe poses on stage in 2023 with the poster he had drawn up for Billy Joel's first headline gig 50 years earlier. Steve Novak | For lehighvalleylive.com

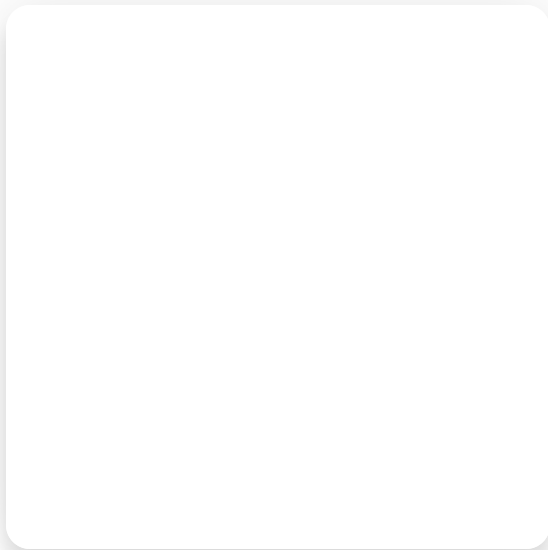
Is the poster manilla, or just yellowed with age? A now-torn studio photo of the young Joel is attached. This is the poster that greeted the bewildered musician when he and Somach arrived. This dusty relic is the only one of its kind, one of few physical, tangible memories from Billy Joel's first headlining gig. If any photos exist, the theater hasn't seen them.

Back in 1973, showtime was drawing near. On concert days, setup began at 11. Sound check was at 3. "Billy was out on this stage," Wolfe recalls in his theater. "He did his number and I'm over in the wings watching and listening. He gets done and he comes walking towards me. And I said, 'Bill, it's a shame you'll never play here again.'

“And his face drooped down. Right away I realized, he thought I meant he wasn’t good enough to play here yet. I said, ‘No, Bill. What I mean is you are going to be a superstar. You’re never going to play small venues like this in the future.’”

Whether or not he believed it that night, the gig left its mark. On the poster, in thin pen under the accumulated dust, is a handwritten note added after the show:

“Thank you for the best concert we’ve had. Love, Billy Joel.”



## She's Got a Way

PREVIEW Billy Joel

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## THE ENTERTAINER

*There's some confusion on stage. He's talking through with his band. Someone says there's 15 minutes left. The audience sounds disappointed. He explains to them, and the band, what's happening.*

*“I think — see, this band is only about three weeks old. Let's see how much material we got, man? I'm trying to think of things. Fifteen minutes worth left?”*

*Someone shouts out what they want to hear: “Captain Jack!”*

"Oh, we'll get to that," the musician responds. "That's our big punch 'em-get 'em at the end, you know. (A) sock 'em thing." Cheers go up. "You know that song, huh? Yeah, OK. Anybody know the old album, the 'Cold Spring Harbor' album?" More cheers. "OK. Good. Wow. That's weird."

More shouts, more song requests.

"Wait, wait, wait. We didn't work out all them old songs, man. I put out a new album and we went —" Still more songs are called out. "Well, let me do 'She's Got A Way' 'cause I can do that on my own. Ah, phew. OK, John, we can make the 15 minutes. We're cool."

And he plays on.





Tickets, flyers and a press release all provided by Media Five Entertainment are mementos of some of Billy Joel's Lehigh Valley shows. After his first headlining gig in November 1973 at the Roxy Theatre in Northampton, the entertainer played Muhlenberg College, Northampton Community College, Allentown's Ag Hall and more local spots over nine years, through the release of his song "Allentown." Steve Novak | For lehighvalleylive.com

Everybody knows "Piano Man" now. The song written during a rough phase for Billy Joel is perfect for belting loudly at bars, weddings, in cars and showers.

Dan and Nancy Roth didn't know it on Nov. 28, 1973, which is a little surprising. Dan, a passionate music fan, over his lifetime has accumulated more than 1,000 albums at the couple's home in Phillipsburg. At the time, he knew Billy Joel through "Cold Spring Harbor" but had missed the new release. They both knew it after the show. They were among the first to hear "Piano Man" live, here at the Roxy.

"I still remember the piano he was performing on (at) the right-hand side of the stage," reminisces Nancy, who went to that concert (and many others) at her new husband's urging. "And I can still picture him in my mind playing. And when he played 'Piano Man,' that to me was great. It was just great."

Shows at the Roxy were generally tame. Audiences were appreciative but mostly remained seated. Occasionally they would get up for a certain song, but it often depended on the band. Richard Wolfe, the theater owner, worried about crowds raising their lighters — a significant risk in a theater with old seats and wooden floors — though, thankfully, it didn't happen often, and not at all during Joel's sets that night.

"Those people were enthusiastic and really into it, but they were a really nice crowd," Wolfe recalled. There was "applause and a lot of comments. People would yell out, hey, play this, play that! He'd react to it. He said, 'I can't believe you people are even familiar with these songs.'"



**“You don’t know if you’re seeing a star in the making,**

## as Billy Joel was.”

Denny Somach, the DJ who arranged the concert, introduced Billy Joel on stage, then ran to his car to get a tape recorder. He placed it on stage knowing he'd want to hear the shows again, or at least as much as he could get on a 55-minute tape. Somach rediscovered the tapes a few years ago and discussed them on his podcast, "[The Rock Podcast with Denny Somach](#)." He provided snippets of audio for this story.

Somach recalls from the recording and his own memory Joel playing "Piano Man" early in the evening, getting a standing ovation 30 minutes into the set, people calling for the song "Captain Jack," and Joel tooling around with a piano riff between songs that would become "Root Beer Rag." His band had recently formed for the "Piano Man" album and didn't know his earlier work — when they ran out of material (because as an opener he was only used to short sets), he floated the idea of a couple of solo songs from his first album, played a couple of repeats and a few covers, and was floored at the response. At least two separate people told [lehighvalleylive.com](#) that they remember Joel flailing his arms in an imitation of Joe Cocker.

For Dan Roth, it was a thrill to see relative unknowns on the cheap at the Roxy. "At the time you probably didn't think much of it because you don't know. ... You don't know if you're seeing a star in the making, as Billy Joel was."

With the benefit of 50 years of hindsight, it's a story that can be told again and again. People "can't believe we saw them like that," in such an intimate venue, Dan said, wishing they had kept the ticket. "(But) they believe us. Because we're old!"

For Joel, things began to turn around after the Roxy show.

Somach recalls a follow-up call with Joel's stunned agent, the same guy who didn't believe anyone was asking for the piano man. "What is it with you people?" the agent said. "Now we're getting screamed at by Billy's manager (who's saying) 'I told you! Billy should be headlining theaters, he shouldn't be an opening act!'"

And so, Billy Joel started headlining small theaters, colleges and the like. It would have happened sooner or later, it just happened to happen here, says David Sestak, owner of Media Five Entertainment and principal of Extension of Man Concerts. The production company got Joel back for a gig at Northampton Community College just four months after the Roxy, building on the buzz while it was still hot.

“You never know what’s going to happen,” Sestak said. “You know, dreams do come true.”



Dave Sestak, owner of Media Five Entertainment, holds a signed photo of Billy Joel in November 2023. Sestak's Extension of Man concerts brought Billy Joel back to the Lehigh Valley for several shows over nine years before the release of the song "Allentown" in 1982. Steve Novak | For [lehighvalleylive.com](http://lehighvalleylive.com)

For the next nine years, Sestak and Extension of Man kept bringing Joel back to Lehigh Valley venues like Muhlenberg College and Allentown’s Ag Hall. His last local show was in 1982 at Stabler Arena in Bethlehem, just after the release of “The Nylon

Curtain” and one of its singles, “Allentown.” Joel played the song twice for the local crowd. “You guys were my bread and butter for a long time,” he told them.

This from a kid who, just a month before that Roxy show, could seemingly do nothing but cling to the dream. “I hope that what I do earns some prominence in music,” Joel said in his 1973 Columbia Records bio sheet.

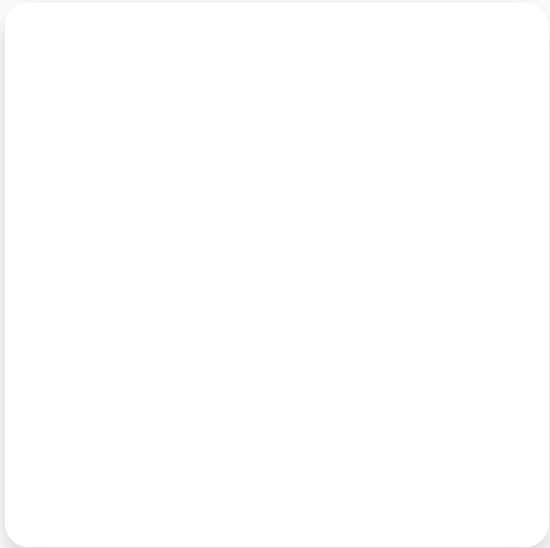
Wolfe maintains that the WSAN concert series brought life back to his small theater. It continues to operate as a mix of movies and live shows. Joel was just one performer in an era full of them for the theater, but to call him a highlight doesn’t capture the scope. One of the dressing rooms under the stage is known to this day as the Billy Joel room, maintained as it was from that night in November 1973.

“We consider him our favorite son,” Wolfe said. He’s never seen another Billy Joel concert. He doesn’t really need to.

Billy Joel doesn’t play the Lehigh Valley anymore. That doesn’t stop Sestak or Wolfe from trying. Wolfe recently sent Joel a letter inquiring about possibly making a 50th anniversary tour stop at the Roxy. He got no response. It’s logistically impossible, anyway. But Wolfe still holds out hope for perhaps a surprise guest appearance somewhere down the line.

Meanwhile, Somach, the former DJ and producer now living in Florida as a podcaster and “rock historian,” still enjoys regaling whoever will listen about his own role in rock history. He helped get a Long Island kid his big break and watched him become a superstar. And the result, he says, is immortalized in song, to boot.

“So that’s my Allentown Billy Joel story,” Somach says. “Every few years (someone) will call me and ask me about it. And I suppose the rest of my life, I’ll be known as the guy who brought Billy Joel to Allentown.”



## Captain Jack

PREVIEW Billy Joel

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## About the Authors



### Steve Novak

Steve Novak is a Toner Prize-winning reporter for lehighvalleylive.com. A 15-year resident of the Lehigh Valley, he covers many topics, delving into the region's history with the "Lehigh Valley Then" series, its politics with the nationally recognized "Swing County, Swing State" project, and its weather every time there's a winter storm.



## About the Reporting

This story is a special of Lehigh Valley Then, a regular feature that recalls historical headlines from lehighvalleylive.com, The Express-Times and their predecessors.