

In 'Glass Houses'

Billy Joel tampers with success—successfully

By DAVID POOLE

Billy Joel

Glass Houses

The only major criticism directed toward Billy Joel in recent years has come from reviewers who called his 52nd Street a clone of *The Stranger*. The cardinal sin, say those who get paid to compare the relative merits of rock 'n' roll musicians, is allowing a new album to sound a lot like the previous one.

Joel's newest album, *Glass Houses*, should get these critics off his back. *Glass Houses* is different from his last two LPs. In fact, most of the material is different from anything the street-smart New Yorker has ever released.

Don't listen to this album if you're one who feels that an artist shouldn't tamper with success. The soulful ballads on which Joel's strong and faithful following is built take a back seat here to some experimentation.

The results are, generally, quite good. The album is not without weak spots, but

for the most part Billy Joel's journey into the fringes of New Wave and other areas of music is a pleasant one for the listener.

Records

In one way, the first side of the record is a lot like the successful Joel LPs of the past. There isn't a really bad song on it. The first single from the album, "You May Be Right," is an upbeat song which tells the listener right away that Joel has heard drone-like vocals prevalent in New Wave music and has decided to try them for himself. "Sometimes a Fantasy" is similar, with Joel's lead vocal sounding much more like Elvis Costello than the "piano man."

The theme song of the album has to be "It's Still Rock and Roll to Me." This lyric is Joel's statement on the practice of categorizing music: "Hot funk, cool punk, even if it's old junk.../Next phase, new wave, dance craze anyways/It's still rock and roll to me."

The other two songs on Side 1 are more in the old Billy Joel style. "Don't Ask Me Why," a flowing, soft-hearted ballad, would be at home on any Joel album. The best song on the side is the last one, "All For Leyna," an uptempo number that successfully mixes the styles and forms Joel explores on this album.

The best song on Side 2 is "Close to the Borderline." Joel's vocal is different here from the one his fans know, but the bite with which he sings the song is necessary if the listener is to believe the lyrics: "I got remote control and a color T.V./I don't change the channels so they must change me/I got real close friends that will get me high/They don't know how to talk and they ain't gonna try/I shouldn't bitch, I shouldn't cry/I'd start a revolution but I don't have time/I don't know why I'm still a nice guy/But I'm getting close to the borderline."

Three of the other four cuts on Side 2 are mediocre and the fourth is only noteworthy because Joel sounds very much like Paul McCartney with his vocals on "Through the Long Night."

Joel is one of the few artists who have managed to attain both widespread critical acclaim and strong nationwide record sales. It is still in to like Billy Joel, even though his last two albums have won Grammy Awards. Such awards usually cause critics to accuse an artist of putting popular acceptance ahead of artistic principle.

People who don't listen to Billy Joel much and who like the directions in which popular music seems to be going today will like this album. Many hard-core New Wave fans will count this as a conversion and they too will like it.

I'm a Billy Joel fan, and the first time I listened to *Glass Houses* I found myself asking why he had to ruin a perfectly successful career. But the album grows on you and once you listen closely, the difference between *Glass Houses* and other Joel LPs is not large enough to overshadow the good points. **W**

David Poole is assistant sports editor for *The Daily Tar Heel*.

Bruford misses on third effort

By JOE VANDERFORD

Bill Bruford

Gradually Going Tornado

In the short history of jazz-rock fusion, most of these performers have crossed over from jazz. Few rock 'n' rollers felt confident playing music where every lick must be executed precisely, often at breathtaking speed. For those who dared (Santana, David Sancious, Jeff Beck, et al), record sales often proved disappointing when compared to prior success playing exclusively rock.

Records

But there is one exception, Bill Bruford. Bruford, who is perhaps Britain's most respected rock drummer, is a man who dares to play with a jazz sensibility—and emerges smiling. His first two solo recordings are more rock than jazz and have more in common with his former groups, Yes and King Crimson, than with jazz musicians Miles Davis or Herbie Hancock. *Downbeat*, America's jazz journal, has praised his initial efforts. At long last, an adventurous rock 'n' roller playing and writing some original tunes.

Unfortunately, Bruford's brand-new effort finds him less daring, seemingly satisfied to rework territory he's already mastered. The album, *Gradually Going Tornado*, contains winds that blow with authority, but in which no direction is sure.

In *Tornado*, Bruford calls upon two friends from earlier albums. British keyboardist Dave Stewart (ex-National Health) plays with tasty reserve on piano or synthesizer. Bassist Jeff Berlin is almost without peer on electric fretless bass. His lines are meaty, often bent and twisted, sounding ever so similar to the bass of Weather Report's Jaco Pastorius. But his technique is not stolen, Berlin having discovered his style in Boston while Jaco was in Florida.

Regrettably, Bruford, Stewart and Berlin are handicapped by convoluted compositions and arrangements that leave no room for stretching out. All of the tunes are painstakingly arranged to the point where the listener can hear these three able players being strangled. Solo space is kept at a premium where statements by each player end before they actually begin.

Drummer Bruford writes six of the album's eight compositions. Both the instrumentals and vocal tunes

were scripted carefully and demonstrate how difficult it must be for a percussionist to write such complex little suites (Bruford uses the piano to write, and must slowly consider each note.) The entire album is over-written and over-rehearsed. With all their technical polish, even the solos sound composed, not improvised.

However, the album is not without its bright moments. Bassist Berlin debuts as a vocalist, and on two songs appears completely self-assured. "Sliding Floor" concerns a lady who visits her lover late at night, and chooses only to philosophize. Berlin's voice slides effortlessly into the upper register owing much to former Cream vocalist (and bassist) Jack Bruce. An all-out rocker in odd meter, "Sliding Floor" features phase-shifting synthesizer breaks by Dave Stewart, and the angular guitar of John Clark (the group's newcomer).

"Plans for J.D.," another short rave-up, casts Berlin in a woman's role, singing of lost love. Bruford scores successfully as a lyricist (how many times do men write from a woman's point of view?), relating how a man forsakes a woman for career. Again, John Clark soars, picking short phrases that snap and pop against Berlin's throbbing bass blur.

Even with intermittent successes, the album leaves the listener wanting more, especially from Bruford the player. Bill's drumming was a major factor in the early success of Yes, a rock band priding itself on technical precision, and he anchored the group with constant references to the offbeat and concentrated attention to detail. After leaving Yes at the height of its commercial success (this may say something about his priorities), Bruford joined King Crimson, guitarist Robert Fripp's dream/nightmare. There, the drummer would learn the beauty of experimentation and of playing feelings.

Bruford expanded his drum set to include bells, gongs, and a wider variety of cymbals. Throughout the sometimes harsh, always expanding repertoire of King Crimson, he gained a reputation for playing the unexpected. He is always recognizable, which is one of the highest compliments one might pay to a percussionist.

In *Gradually Going Tornado*, Bruford employs a no-frills rock-'n'-roll attack, abandoning the tasteful little embellishments that have always characterized his playing. Although disappointing to those who listen closely for Bruford's subtle time tricks, one can't help but admire a drummer who has enough humility to refuse even a drum solo on his own album. But this LP needed some extra ingredient, something to raise it from the muck of other fusion releases that flood the market.

This and other recent fusion efforts (by Steve Khan, Pat Metheny, Gato Barbieri, et al) may signal that most jazz-rockers have run out of things to say. Let's hope not.



Bill Bruford

Proud veterans like Weather Report and fresh newcomers like guitarist Michael Gregory Jackson continue to be original. At its best, fusion combines the raw excitement of rock 'n' roll with the subtle beauty of jazz. Live performances by many of these artists remain loose and lively affairs with extended solos that leave audiences breathless.

If bands like Bruford's can transfer this inspired energy to disc, the future of electric fusion may be bright. But it's time for these musicians to stop and reflect. They must decide whether to rest upon past performance, duplicating it with minor alterations, or to gamble and treat each new project as something completely different. Until *Gradually Going Tornado*, Bruford preferred the latter approach, playing with musicians as diverse as Kenny Wheeler, Roy Harper, and Rick Wakeman.

Bill Bruford does not risk alienating his past audience; it is too devoted to forget his finest moments with Yes, King Crimson, U.K. and now as a solo artist. By shifting his musical environment, he will gain new listeners and inspire more young players. **W**

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