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The Executive Room: a Rhetorical

Analysis of Billy Joel's Piano Man

Billy Joel's hit song Piano Man was inspired by his time playing at The Executive Room, a piano lounge in Los Angeles, California, while recovering from the failure of his first album Cold Spring Harbor. His album, produced under the record company Family Records, tanked and Joel was looking to be released from his contract in order to sign with Columbia Records, whom he would later go on to stay with for most of his career. In the early 1970's, while Joel was struggling to break free of his contract, he disappeared in L.A. playing under the pseudonym The Piano Stylings of Bill Martin. Later, recalling his time at The Executive Room to Metro newspaper, Joel said, "It was a gig I did for about six months just to pay the rent while I tried to get out of a bad record deal," (Song Facts). During his time at the piano lounge, Joel wrote a song entitled Piano Man that was based directly on his experiences at the bar. Citing specific patrons and friends in the song, Joel's Piano Man tells the story of men and women at the bar and their lost dreams, maintaining a bittersweet tone throughout the piece (Piano Man). Billy Joel's song relies on logos, pathos, and ethos to deliver its message and convey its melancholy mood to the audience.

Piano Man relies heavily on the use of logos, or logic, to effectively reach its listeners. Because Piano Man is a story of depression, broken dreams, and pain, Joel uses reasoning to maintain the internal consistency of the theme. Supporting the argument that these patrons are regularly trying to escape their feelings, Piano Man starts out singing:

Its nine o'clock on a Saturday,  
 The Regular crowd shuffles in.  
 Theres an old man sitting next to me,  
 Making love to his tonic and gin. (Piano Man)

Piano Man continues goes on to continue with:

[The Old Man] says, "Son, can you play me a melody?  
 I'm not really sure how it it goes,  
 But its sad and its sweet, and I knew it complete,  
 When I wore a younger man's clothes." (Piano Man)

The logic fits with our theme that these people are trying to escape their present situation. The old man at the bar wants the piano man to play him a melody that reminds him of his younger days and, according to the piano man, the old man at the bar is a regular. Our piano man then goes on to later talk about a man named Paul and Davy who, by his testimony, have never had time for a wife:

Now Paul is a real estate novelist,  
 Who never had time for a wife.  
 And he's talking to Davy, who's still in the Navy

And probably will be for life. (Piano Man)

When Billy Joel, who at the time was performing under the name Bill Martin, wrote this song, he used specific examples of guests at the bar and intended the song to be read literally. Paul, according to Joel, was a real estate agent who always claimed to be writing a book. Bill didn't think that Paul would ever finish the book though because he spent all his time in the bar (Song Facts). David Heintz, a Navy sailor who later passed away in 2003 of ALS (Song Facts), inspired the lyrics about Davy after he met Joel in a pub in 1972. Paul and Davy were so consumed by their careers that they never had time for a wife or family, playing into the songs theme of lost dreams. It is also important to note that our piano man mentions Davy, who is in the Navy, "probably will be for life." The logic and reasoning behind this plays again into the theme of the song as Davy knows nothing beside his work in the Navy. He will probably spend the rest of his life consumed by his career, missing out on his other dreams.

Additionally, pathos, the art of emotion, plays a big role in Billy Joel's song. Speaking directly to our piano man Bill, a regular says:

"Bill, I believe this is killing me."

As the smile ran away from his face.

"Well, I'm sure that I could be a movie star,

If I could get out of this place." (Piano Man)

Appealing to the audience's sympathy as the piano man sings "the smile ran away from his face," the use of pathos here drives the message home and allows the

audience to connect better with the theme. Every one sympathizes for the man's lost dreams as he claims "I'm sure I could be a movie star, if I could get our of this place." Joel's use of emotion here lets the listener respond emotionally and identify with the writer's point of view as a man confesses his feelings of sadness and suffering. The piano man continues to go on and sing:

And the waitress is practicing politics,  
As the businessman slowly gets stoned.  
Yes, they're sharing a drink called loneliness,  
But it's better than drinking alone. (Piano Man)

Here the audience is able to identify with how truly lonely these people at the bar feel. Assuming the waitress is a middle-age woman who missed out her chance to make it in the political world and the businessman is unhappy with his job, they both spend their time at the bar listening to Bill play to "forget about life for a while," (Piano Man).

In conjunction with pathos and logos, ethos also plays an equally large role in the story told by the piano man. During the same time that Billy Joel was trying to survive at The Executive Room, John Ritter was struggling to become a comedian:

Now, John at the bar is a friend of mine,  
He gets me my drinks for free.  
And he's quick with a joke or to light up your smoke  
But there's someplace that he'd rather be. (Piano Man)

The ethos here plays to the credibility of John Ritter as he struggled to fulfill his dreams of becoming a comedian. Although he was was “quick with a joke,” he would’ve rather been performing professionally rather than living in the small piano lounge. The credibility of Ritter appeals to the theme of struggling to live your dream as he had to fight to become a recognized actor and comedian. Joel continues using ethos to appeal to the credibility of himself as the piano man singing, saying:

It’s a pretty good crowd for a Saturday  
 And the manager gives me a smile.  
 ‘Cause he knows that it’s me they’ve been coming to see,  
 To forget about life for a while. (Piano Man)

Here the piano man is playing into his own credibility as the manager acknowledges the fact that everyone is coming to see him to forget about their problems, playing into the songs theme of lost dreams and trying to forget about life. He continues to talk about himself as he sings:

And the piano, it sounds like a carnival,  
 And the microphone smells like a beer.  
 And they sit at the bar, and put bread in my jar,  
 And say, “Man, what are you doing here?” (Piano Man)

In the first line with “[the piano] sounds like a carnival,” Joel is giving himself credit for how well his music is. While at first this may seem a little outspoken, we must continue to look at the third and fourth line which read, “And they sit at the bar, and put bread in my jar, and say “Man, what are you doing here?” These lines are directly

based on Joel's experience with a man at the bar who worked with people at Columbia Music Records and saw how talented Billy Joel (Bill Martin) was. After a performance one night, the man asked Bill why he was playing little gigs at the piano lounge instead of playing in concerts. Later, the man would call record producers who found out Bill Martin was actually the Billy Joel they were searching for and helped him out of his contract with Family Records. In the song, however, these lines directly support the piano man's reputation and credibility, making his story of the bar believable and realistic.

In conclusion, Billy Joel's Piano Man is a story of lost dreams that is supported with reason, emotion, and the credibility of men and woman from the 1970's. During a time when people challenged the status quo, Billy Joel's song talked about the shattered dreams of his generations childhood. The song was successful enough to top number four in the charts and proved to be his all-time best seller over the last thirty years. Its ironic how one man's song of broken dreams launched his career and put him on the big stage, with him realizing his own dreams, with the help of logos, pathos, and ethos.

Works Cited

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