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Quality time with Billy Joel takes place of concert tour

By Mark S. Meritt
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Growing up, Billy Joel loved the Beatles and hated piano lessons. But now he's putting his rock star image on hold to play music teacher.

Joel has been holding question-and-answer sessions around the country ever since a friend invited him to a New York University music class 20 years ago. On Sunday at 2 p.m., he opens himself to the Hudson Valley's curiosity when he brings "An Afternoon of Questions & Answers ... and a Little Music!" to West Point's Eisenhower Hall Theatre. The show is sold out.

He admits that even he isn't sure exactly how to describe the format of the evening, but the title sums it up.

Joel spoke last month at the Storrs campus of the University of Connecticut, another of the 20 stops on this college tour. The stage was set only with a piano, a synthesizer and a guitar. Minutes after starting, he asked that the house lights be turned up to better see who wanted to ask questions.

Unlike a concert (which he insists this is not), where he has control, Joel puts himself at the mercy of the audience, allowing it to create the "playlist."

How it started

The origin of these Q&A's actually goes back to his teen years as a struggling musician. When Joel wrote an impassioned fan letter to the Beatles, the sole response was a leaflet offering merchandise.

He vowed that should he ever be in a position to help young musicians, he would find a way. He's keeping that promise with the Q&A's — and unusual venture for someone of his stature.

Aside from the novelty of the situation, Joel proves adept at playing off the audience — hardly a surprise after decades of sold-out venues around the world.

What was striking was how he injected the evening with the same energy and humor he puts into his concerts. Joel comes across like a veteran comedian, cracking up the audience better than most stand-up acts. Adding quantity to quality, the Storrs gig lasted almost three hours. For Joel, though, the night is a cakewalk compared to concert touring. He recently completed two years of shows, promoting his last album, "River of Dreams," then dueting with Elton John.

One of his revelations is that, burned out from the tour, he is not working on a new album. Joel spends time at his Long Island home, sometimes writing classical music. These days, he says, he listens to Beethoven. Roll over, Beatles.

Though the music is a treat, especially some selections rarely heard live, the real draw is watching Joel break down the walls of celebrity. For musicians, fans or the simply curious, the afternoon provides an unique opportunity to spend some quality time with one of the world's most successful rock stars.