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WORCESTER, Mass. ---The scarlet and rust of fall foliage weave a protective quilt over central New England.

There is no such security blanket to cover the vivid colors of Billy Joel.

In an extensive interview before his soldout concert here Tuesday night, Joel confessed he cannot be confessional in his songwriting.

Quite an acknowledgment for a guy who connects with packed audiences at almost every stop on the tour, is married to Christie Brinkley and has just released the most personal album of his career.

"There seems to be a confessional school of songwriting where the artist is an image attached to the lyrics," Joel said while frantically smoking Marlboros before the show. "I don't like to do that - literally - because too many people know my wife, and they assume I have this rock-star existence.

"So for me to try and say I'm having a tough time with something, well, people aren't going to be able to empathize with that. Without naming names, I don't necessarily buy that a confessional school of songwriting makes for more integrity. It's always, 'We're seeing him progress as a person.' I think it's better to progress on a record as a musician. The better person you become away from the recording process, the better musician you will be."

While the 37-year-old Joel appears to be a happier person these days, riding a bicycle backstage while rehearsing the high notes for the swaggering "Big Man on Mulberry Street," he still views the introspective writing process as a grueling self-autopsy.

"For me to create songs and music, I have to sit down and tear my guts out," he said. "It's a gross analogy, but I pull my insides out and I sort through them on this table I write on. I kind of poke at them, and it hurts. You don't always want to think very deeply. But the force to write is stronger than that."

Therefore, it is easy to see how Joel has been perceived as a master of construction and melody at the expense of real emotion and genuine rhythm.

"I'm not satisfied with continuing a particular kind of writing I've just completed," Joel said. "I would probably be thought of as more of a stylist if I continued to sound just like me. I'm interested in what's next or what else I can try. I'm constantly trying to top myself - not chartwise or saleswise - but in terms of a challenge."

On "The Bridge" tour (named after his new album, now in Billboard's Top 10), Joel is offering an ambitious sampler of his assorted styles, going back to the purity of "Piano Man," through the concentrated textures of "Goodnight, Saigon" and on to the doo-wop pop of "Uptown Girl." When the music is heard as an aggregation, one realizes that Joel doesn't receive the credit he deserves for his exploratory songwriting.

"I was reading where Robert Christgau (critic of the Village Voice) dumped on 'The Bridge,' and the whole premise was that Billy Joel can't be a true rock 'n' roll artist because he has no allegiance to any style," Joel said. "To me, that smacks of fascism. Like this guy is a watchdog of purity, of his image of what rock 'n' roll should be, and his job is to guard against any mongrelization. American music is a mongrelization! It's based on Anglo-Saxon folk music, Appalachian country music, black gospel, blues, rhythm and blues, jazz, big band stuff. Actually, I'm kind of proud of my synthesis."

Joel realizes some typewriter snipers out there don't like him just the way he is.

"I have no problem being accused of not having any particular style," Joel said. "I'll be the first one to say I don't. I don't have a lot of faith in my own voice, and my own voice bores me. I like screwing around with my throat; it's something I'm capable of doing, and it lends itself to a better interpretation of a song. My imagination allows me to write in different styles, and to sing them, I feel I should sublimate the style to the composition."

So what is the difference between a pop artist and the pop craftsman?

"I think the artist is supposed to live a certain type of exemplary existence according to the powers-that-be," Joel said, "a particular clique of critics I'll call Mt. Olympus. And if the word comes down from Olympus this is acceptable, then the music this artist does is viewed in praiseworthy terms. Then you sometimes see critics trying to impress each other. Bruce (Springsteen) is very much loved by the critics, and I see the reviews where one (critic) is trying to top the other about how he's (Bruce is) Abraham Lincoln. I'm thinking, wait a minute, 'What about music?'

"I have no problem being called a craftsman," Joel said. "Because I work very hard at it. When you work hard enough at a craft, it becomes an art. I think time will tell, not what's a fad today. Popular music is popular at a certain time, and if it transcends its time, then it's art."

Once his current tour is completed, Joel may try his hand at writing a Broadway show. "I've been thinking about that a lot, because it's an American art form which is dying," he said.

"I think a pop or rock 'n' roll sensibility in that particular art form would give it vitality.

There seems to be this Tin Pan Alley school that's still writing for Broadway, and hey, that day has passed.

"On the other hand, it's a long-term project where you give up a lot of control," Joel said. "You're dealing with actors, directors, producers, and you're not singing in it, interpreting it. And when you get to New York, if the three critics hate it, you're dead. At least if critics in a particular town hate your record, it will still get played on the radio."

There's Billy's bugaboo again - critics. "I used to answer back," Joel said with a sigh. "I made myself available as a big mouth. I ripped up reviews and I fought back. To this day, I still argue the fact that when someone questions my integrity - 'He churns out pop hits to sell records' - I never sat down to write a pop hit in my life. They've been grand accidents, as far as I'm concerned.

"I'm supposed to have this multimillionaire, jet-set life and I'm very shallow," Joel said with a shrug. "These people don't know me from a hole in the wall. What bothered me about it more than anything was not so much about me, but I read newspapers and if I couldn't believe something I read about me, how could I believe anything else?"

Yet the current issue of Rolling Stone magazine features a cover story on Billy Joel titled "The Good Life with Christie Brinkley, a new baby and a hit album." A greater portion of the interview is devoted to Brinkley and Joel's relationship than to his eclectic music.

"I was asked questions about music, but I think it might have been Jann (Wenner, editor and publisher of Rolling Stone) who decided the impetus of the piece would be Billy and Christie," Joel said. "Jann runs Us magazine and they wanted me and Christie, so I guess he figured this was the way to get the Billy and Christie story. I was disappointed because I read it and I thought, 'Is this People magazine? What about all the music things we talked about?' As for future interviews, you can't have any control over the interview. Then there's no point in doing the interview."

The Christie factor will loom over Joel for a while. The economically beautiful ballad "Temptation," which is destined to become another "Just the Way You Are," already has been interpreted as Joel's love song to his wife: And I know what all of my friends say/They're afraid that I'm losing my touch, but she's such a temptation.

"I wanted to write something with depth about having a child," Joel explained. "I saw a parallel between a father's relationship to a baby and a man's relationship to a woman. Now that may sound a little perverted at first, but my reasoning was there is a seduction that a baby does, emotionally and spiritually. It pulls you, and I've never had that kind of emotion before. It truly was a temptation: 'Why should I go and write? Why should I go record? I just love this kid so much.' It is the strongest emotion I have ever had in my life. And I've read how it's him talking about Christie,

how nauseating," Joel said while gagging and sticking his index finger in his mouth.

Tour stops like Worcester, some 40 miles west of Boston, enable Joel to recall his suburban youth in Hicksville, N.Y. Worcester ranges from Clarke College preppies (many of whom attended Joel's show) to the gritty roots of the American diner (the first patent for a diner was registered here in 1891). Hicksville ranges from the somewhat spacious if not always pretty Parkway Green to a post-war housing development named Levittown, where Joel grew up.

"Hicksville is not a Steven Spielberg suburb," Joel said. "All the people who lived there settled in this row housing in Levittown. Ex-GIs coming home got these houses for \$40 down. It ended up that you lived next door to the same people you moved away from in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx (where Joel was born). It was all these city neighborhood people living in what they thought was the suburbs."

He did have the growing pains of every suburban kid. When Joel was 21, he broke up with a girlfriend, and he tried to finish himself off by drinking a bottle of furniture polish.

"It went right through me," Joel said with a grin. "It tasted terrible. It was a stupid thing to do. I checked into an observation ward in a hospital, where I had to stay for a couple of days. Now these people had problems. Kicking junk and alcohol, criminally insane guys. I knew then my problems were nothing compared to these people. I'd tap on the nurse's window and say I was OK, and she'd say, 'Sure you are.' When they let me out, it was the last time I was going to say I had problems I couldn't resolve. I can solve problems."

Rising for a Cognac to soothe a sore throat, Joel paused as he looked out his dressing room door.

"You know, to this day, the funniest thing of all is that I'm a rock star because it's something I never set out to do," Joel said, looking back. "And if I never get any bigger than I am now, it's probably because I don't care to be."