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Dr. Simon Mills. This book is in your hands because Dr. Mills insisted. I spent sixty years creating the stories and writing them down, and he relentlessly crafted it into this book. Watching him do this is what I imagine it feels like when I play on his songs in the studio. I help mold those songs with my drum. He “Millsed” this book with his fingers.

Nice work, Millsy
-Lib

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Foreword

Liberty DeVitto provided the power that drove our song arrangements and live performances for thirty years. While I was writing the songs for eight of my twelve original song albums (*Turnstiles* to *River of Dreams*), I relied on his particular enthusiasm for those songs to motivate the energy that brought them to life and made them stand out as recordings. I will always be indebted to the musicians I worked with over all those years, but Liberty's drumming, along with Doug Stegmeyer's stalwart bass guitar, propelled my music into another dimension, far beyond the acoustic limitations of my piano-based songwriting.

In this book, Liberty has detailed not only the history of how those songs were arranged and performed, but also how we brought that music around the world with us, along with all the craziness that accompanies musicians with a dedicated mission to "leave it all on the stage." We were a merry band of brothers for many years and over many miles, and despite whatever personal or financial catastrophes eventually befell all of us, we were as much a family unit as any other relationships we had formed during our lives. And, like our other families, we inflicted hurts and wounds on each other—never intending to cause lasting scars.

Reading this book has brought a flood of warm memories that I had long since forgotten, and which I now regret having allowed to lapse into shrouded history, along with other timeworn milestones of my past.

I relied mightily on Liberty's approval of the material I brought to the band, since his rhythmic foundation emphasized the rock 'n' roll ethos I was striving for beyond the melodic parameters that came so naturally to me as a student of classical piano.

Liberty and I have reconciled and reclaimed the friendship that we felt for each other all those years ago. And I am a better man because of that.

But this is not my story—it's his. And it's a marvelous insight into the trials and tribulations that many drummers have had to deal with throughout the rock 'n' roll era. Keep this in mind when you hear the songs and recordings again that you first heard when you were very young—and remember that we were so very young then too.

Billy Joel

March, 2020

Prologue

When you are involved in a phenomenon like Billy Joel, you really don't think about what you're doing. It's like being in the eye of a storm. You're not aware of what is going on around you. We were just a bunch of guys having the time of our lives. Writing has reintroduced me to the music I helped create. A doctor who operates on a patient is just doing his job, but when he comes face to face with that now-well person, he sees them in a different light. My musical past is like that. Through my writing, I have met the music in a new venue.

I met Ringo Starr during his first All-Starr Band tour. When I was introduced to him, I said, "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now." He replied, "At least you're not blaming me for it."

Why would anyone want to become a professional musician? I am successful because I worked my ass off to get where I am. I wanted it so bad, I couldn't conceive of doing anything else. I guess I really can't do anything else; it's a spiritual calling for me—as it is with most musicians. I just don't have a choice. At one time I surrendered to the reality that I might be playing weddings for the rest of my life. I came to terms with that and accepted it; as long as I could play, I'd deal with it. I gave up all after-school "activities" to rehearse. I gave up girlfriends and fiancées, gave up buying expensive things, and sacrificed job security and health benefits. I never had a steady schedule; my hours went from when someone wanted me until they were done with me. I never had stock options, sick days, or vacation time. I had work or no work.

As a drummer, I cannot play solo gigs. Most musicians are freelance artists, really. I am self-employed, but still dependent on someone else to hire me. I met my wives through my music and I lost them partially because of it. I missed out on my middle daughter's birth; I missed out on my kids' first steps, recitals, and graduations. I'd listen to my daughter playing violin via speakerphone on the road. I made friends through my work, only to find that they disappeared when the gig was over, or when I quit partying. I have no choice but to constantly watch what I say and be careful of who is around when I decide to talk about business. I have heard my words repeated many times behind my back after confiding in a "good friend." Despite all of this, I still have the greatest job—and life—in the world.

I get to do what I love: create music and perform in front of some of the largest crowds ever assembled. I am blessed with a talent and a love for something I consider to be spiritual. I have a connection with millions of people I have never met nor will ever meet, but we all have something in common: the music. I went from sleeping in a dresser drawer in a one-bedroom apartment in Brooklyn, New York when I was born to sleeping in suites at Four Seasons all over the world, from Australia to the Soviet Union to Japan. I have played in countries where people do not even know the language in which the song is sung, but the music moves them. I have performed in places that American artists wouldn't entertain

the thought of traveling, like Cuba and Russia. I have shaken hands with an American President, a future King of England, sports superstars, the most high-profile actors ever, musicians I idolize, and the sick children who are part of Make-A-Wish—and organizations like it—who let me to be a part of their short lives. These are my greatest experiences.

But there also is a dark side that runs parallel with and sometimes intertwines with the light side; a side that often challenges me and my drum. Erica Jong said, “Everyone has talent. What is rare is the courage to follow the talent to the dark places where it leads.” I like to walk into a dark room and see how far I get without running into something. I like the way my skin tingles and my energy is lifted. In my darkest hour, my drum and my love for music were there to light the way, and I have had the courage to follow.

We are all moved by music. We cherish something that cannot be seen or held. You can see the music notes on the paper, and you can hold an instrument, but there is no life until you hear the final masterpiece. The notes have always existed, but it takes the musician to convince the listener that these are the notes you want to hear in the order that they are being played. Each musician plays their part, each writer scripts the songs, but each experience is totally emotionally different. Every person hears the same song, but pulls something different from it. I live for that pull, for that emotional exchange between the audience and the artist. There is truly nothing to compare it to. This paradox has been the most positive and negative aspect of my life, since as far back as I can remember.

This is my life, the life of a musician.



My life has been a good life. My grandparents were Italian immigrants who traveled by boat for months to find more opportunity and a better life in America. My parents grew up poor, but with my dad working two jobs, they were able to give me and my siblings a blue-collar, middle-class life on Long Island, New York. I grew up doing what I love: playing music. I have toured the world more than a dozen times and the records I’ve played on have sold over 150 million copies. I found that sometimes the “right” decisions can be so wrong in the long run. This is my story: the life of a musician, a drummer, a sideman who maybe gave too much passion to his art, and not enough to the people around him. It’s also about the battle between “Liberty DeVitto” and “Billy Joel’s drummer.” This story is about the American Dream—how I had it and how people benefited from it.

Believe me, I love my life. I wouldn’t change a thing.

Well, I might have changed one thing: I might have been in the Beatles instead.



Our first tour of England, 1977. L to R: Doug, Russell, Billy, me, Richie.