



AWARDS

A look behind the scenes at how the Billy Joel TV concert came together



"I need to be able to see my band," Billy Joel says of his stage design. "I have a turntable, which allows me to face any direction at any time." (Michele Crowe / CBS)

By Randee Dawn

June 17, 2024 2:10 PM PT

Few musicians can say they celebrated their 75th birthday blowing out candles on a cake just ahead of putting on a 140-minute show in front of a sold-out crowd at Madison Square Garden.

Billy Joel can, though, and did just that ahead of his May 9 show at the legendary venue. He's been setting records and milestones at MSG since he began the monthly residency in 2014 — a run broken only by the pandemic lockdown, and one that's set to wrap up in July after a total of 150 performances. Yes, Taylor Swift's Eras tour reset the bar for modern concertgoing spectacle, but as Joel proved again and again for 10 years (give or take), sometimes all you need is a guy at a piano on a motorized turntable and a roaring backup band to rock the house.

“No one anticipated this would go for 10 years,” says Steve Cohen, Joel's creative director, who wears many hats. Both Cohen and soundman Brian Ruggles have been with Joel for more than 50 years. “That's unheard of. It's kind of a unicorn — and I think with Billy it was a perfect storm.”

For those unable to make it to the Garden before the residency's end next month, the 100th show was captured for CBS as “The 100th: Billy Joel at Madison Square Garden — the Greatest Arena Run of All Time,” and featured guests including Sting and Jerry Seinfeld. It was Joel's first concert special on network TV — and despite a timing glitch that ended the broadcast mid-“Piano Man” (and prompted a reairing by CBS) — it's since become one of the most-watched specials of 2024, with nearly 10 million viewers.



MUSIC

‘We apologize’: CBS vows to air Billy Joel milestone concert again after ending is cut off

April 15, 2024

As the guy behind the guy, Cohen is one of the executive producers on “Greatest

Arena Run.” He knows intimately how big the army of crew backstage must be not just for making the concert happen but for turning it into a TV special for millions of viewers.

“You can’t shoot a [concert] the way it looks because the camera doesn’t see the way the naked eye does,” Cohen says. “You come in and hack away at this show that’s been played 99 times, look at every one of the songs and come up with a plan for how to modify them for television.”



“You can’t shoot a [concert] the way it looks because the camera doesn’t see the way the naked eye does,” says Steve Cohen, longtime creative director for Billy Joel. “You come in and hack away at this show that’s been played 99 times, look at every one of the songs and come up with a plan for how to modify them for television.” (Myrna Suarez / CBS Entertainment)

Cohen explains that they moved the show into a rehearsal space in Pennsylvania so it could be relit for the cameras, among other shifts. “We didn’t change the show so much as take that show and have 10 million people see that show that they couldn’t fly in to see,” Cohen adds. “I was a tough cookie about it. We really fought for this. I

think we even came [in] a little under budget.”

Joel had a few requirements of his own for any show, live or on TV. “I need to be able to see my band,” he writes in an email. “That’s paramount. We set up at the end of the arena and sell all the seats behind. A piano player sets up sideways, so those seats are all good seats. Plus, I have [a] turntable, which allows me to face any direction at any time. I control that too (which freaks the crew out sometimes!)”

That said, the show Joel traditionally plays at the residency (usually two to 2 1/2 hours) had to get a haircut — down to approximately 88 minutes in the two-hour special — so Cohen tried to pick moments that would be representative of all of Joel’s shows. “We had to take this big 2½-hour thing and reduce it to its essence, giving the audience a sense they were *in* the audience.”

Also critical to the show were the visuals. Attending Joel’s show in person means you’re watching a group of musicians at a distance, so to keep things flowing and engaging, multiple narrow screens flash photos, animations and graphics alongside shots of the musicians onstage.

“I aped a city skyline,” says Cohen about the collection of screens, “with ‘buildings’ of different heights, to ape New York. I used the visuals as impressionistic moments. They’re really a visual addendum.”



MUSIC

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March 8, 2023

But not a lot could be considered groundbreaking. “We’re kind of old-school in Billy World,” he says. “It’s analog, there’s no sampling, there’s no click tracks. As Billy says quite often, when they screw up — it’s an authentic rock ‘n’ roll screw-up. It keeps us

sharp, and in the game, and engaged.”

That said, cutting off the 100th special before the end was *not* very rock 'n' roll, Cohen says. “The initial reaction was fury — you gotta make it right — but then CBS did the most remarkable thing. I got a call from very high up and they were mortified. He said, ‘We’re reairing this on Friday and we’re going to promote it as if it’s never been seen before.’” And thanks to the reairing, says Cohen, “We got another 4 million eyes on it.”

It’s still rock 'n' roll then, after all. While the TV concert remains a permanent representation of a remarkable live show run — one unlikely to be duplicated in the near future, even by someone like Taylor Swift — Cohen and Joel both agreed that the 150-show mark was the appropriate time to call a halt.

“Billy likes to walk off the field a winner,” Cohen says.

“I never wanted to overstay my welcome,” Joel notes. “I thought, ‘Ten years is enough. For now....’”