

STILLMAN

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He describes the Sweet Baby James tribute concert as “a cross between a recreation and an interpretation....His songs are so well known. There’s something about his songs, the way he creates melodies and the way he sings. There are lots of swoops and dips that are built into the melody. His songs have a lot of rhythmic complexity in their melodies that are built into it. You have to get that. You have to get the sound right, the rhythms.”

The landmark 1970 album, Taylor’s second release, is widely considered his breakthrough album and a forerunner of the mellow folk/rock sound. Along with the well-known title cut, it includes “Fire and Rain,” “Country Road” and “Steamroller.” It sold over 3 million copies, hit #3 in the Billboard Pop Album chart and got Taylor on the covers of Time magazine and Rolling Stone. In 2003, VH1 named “Sweet Baby James” the 77th greatest album of all time, and Rolling Stone magazine named it #103 of the 500 greatest albums of all time.

“I’m a huge James Taylor fan,” Stillman says. “For me, I’ve always loved ‘Shower the People.’ I’ve done that in my own concerts; sometimes I’ll include that as a cover. I also love ‘Long Ago and Far Away.’ It’s not one of his big radio hits, but it’s so gorgeous, it just kills me every time I sing it. And ‘The Secret of Life’ is another one. I remember him doing that in concert. It was a big concert, with a band, but he did it solo, with just his guitar. So magical.”

Taylor’s other hits include “Carolina In My Mind,” “Mexico,” “Don’t Let Me Be Lonely Tonight,” “Your Smiling Face,” “How Sweet It Is (To Be Loved By You),” “Up on the Roof” and “You’ve Got a Friend.” (The last three songs, ironically, are Taylor’s covers of others’ songs.)

Producer Peter Ligeti conceived the idea of Cover Stories – a series of concerts in which a classic rock album is presented from opening to closing cut. Although Stillman doesn’t play guitar –he’s a pianist– he hired him anyway, because of his vocal talent. (Stillman, at times, has a vocal timbre reminiscent of Taylor’s.)

Stillman, musical director of the show, requested that the concert begin with him singing the first song solo, accompanying himself on the piano.

“I wanted to let it be known at the outset that I have the kind of voice [that can do justice to James Taylor’s songs] and I play the piano. It’s different, but it sounds good. It opens with that kind of statement.”

“Sweet Baby James – A Tribute to James Taylor” opened at the Kravis Center in West Palm Beach in early February, with four shows.

“It was fantastic; people were really into it,” Stillman says. “What I heard a lot was that they got the feeling of James Taylor but yet it was different. That’s what we’re striving for: his music and his style, yet not be impersonators. Some of the arrangements are different, but a lot are the same.”

Stillman has an impressive musical background that makes these shows so much more than professional karaoke. He’s studied piano since the age of five, and at nine went to Juilliard. He studied classical music for a while, but ultimately became a composition major.

He’s received two Tony nominations: one for being an actor, composer and on-stage pianist in “Dirty Blonde” and one for being one



Bob Stillman performs the works of James Taylor in “Sweet Baby James – A Tribute to James Taylor” at the Phil in Naples on Saturday, June 14.



of the songwriters of “Urban Cowboy.”

Stillman also appeared on Broadway in “Kiss of the Spider Woman” as Molina, playing the lead against Vanessa Williams.

“It’s great, that role,” he says. “It’s the meatiest role I’ve ever done. I just grabbed it. Oh my God, it’s like musical theater ‘Hamlet!’”

On stage, he’s a triple threat: acting, singing, and playing piano.

He caused a stir last year on Broadway, doing all three in “Gray Gardens,” co-starring with Christine Ebersole. Stillman was also very popular in the Off-Broadway cult favorite “The Last Session.”

“My money job has often been on Broadway, and a lot of the roles I’ve had in the last 10 years included playing the piano,” he says.

He also performed in “Souvenir” in Portland, Maine — again, acting, singing, and playing piano — and hopes to bring the show to Florida. And some may know him from TV from his earlier stint on Nickelodeon’s “Allegra’s Window.”

The biggest pitfall of performing covers, he says, “Is to content yourself with imitation and try to be an impersonator. That’s a fine line to walk. There are certain boundaries past which you can’t push it stylistically in this context. You have to stay within a certain set of parameters, but within these parameters you can be totally free. If you try too hard to imitate the artist, it’s cheap. But if you try too hard to be different from the artist, it’s arrogance.”

“Sweet Baby James” is a tribute show that presents James Taylor’s music close to the way he’d do it without taking it too far out of his boundaries.

“It’s a celebration of his music,” he says. “I didn’t want an experiment to see how different we could do it.”

Stillman recently released an album of his own songs, “Come Down Angel.” It was co-produced with Tom Corwin, who’s worked with artists such as Bonnie Raitt and Stevie Wonder.

“I love the idea that somebody out there will hear a phrase or a song that I’ve written and it will channel something they felt,” he says. “I love that.”

He writes songs “just for the plain joy of making something out of nothing, making something when there wasn’t anything before,” he says. “Having the germ of an idea, having a thread of an idea and tugging on it, pulling the very end of a thread and seeing what comes out. There’s always the joy of discovery; you never have the whole song. You may have an idea for the melody, or know the kind of song you want to write or the feeling of a song. Or a phrase that’s meaningful to you. You know that’s something you want to write a song about, but turning that into a full song requires a lot of nuts and bolts, working with rhythms, chords. You have to know how to time things so they land right.

“There are no rules to it, but you know it when you hear it. There are guidelines, a set of questions you learn to ask yourself. But like anything else in life, you ask yourself a different question, you get a different answer, a great answer.”

For example, he says, you might usually ask yourself if you should put a bridge or a chorus in a certain section of a song.

“But what happens if I go to a whole new section, what happens if I change speed, or have an instrumental here? Sometimes asking a different question will get you the right answer. You’re looking for a song and you can’t find it. It turns out you’ve been asking the wrong question. You have a breakthrough!”

That’s the great thing about getting under the hood of someone else’s songs, he says: you get to see what questions they asked, the assumptions they make and don’t make.

“And often they’re different than the assumptions you make when you write a song. You build your vocabulary that way, seeing how other people write songs.

“Seeing how other people think is one of the great joys of life. We all think differently. We think there’s a certain set of rules for logic and perception. It can be a real education to enter somebody else’s world.” ■


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