

# STRATOS

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1998

LIFESTYLES WITH ALTITUDE

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**RESTLESS FOR THE OPEN WATER**  
by Mark Masciarotte

*Private Miles*  
PROGRAM PARTNER

# RESTLESS

— for the —

# OPEN WATER

KNOWN THE WORLD OVER AS A FABULOUSLY SUCCESSFUL SINGER AND SONGWRITER, BILLY JOEL TALKS TO STRATOS ABOUT ANOTHER DIMENSION:

BILLY JOEL, BOATBUILDER

STORY BY MARK T MASCIAROTTE



**Billy Joel** pilots his boat Alexa out of the bay at Shelter Island.

**S**PRING IS IN FULL BLOOM IN SAG HARBOR. Out here in eastern Long Island, the leaves, freshly emerging, are light green and tender, easily rustled by the breeze that is ghosting in from the Sound. It's hot for late May, and the thought of a cold, sweet cone of butter pecan from the Ice Cream Club around the corner is almost too much to bear. But there's no time.

We're assembled at the town dock, photo gear and briefcases lined up on the bleached planks, hats shading us from an unseasonably intense sun. Tied stern-to before us is *Alexa*, a sexy little rig known to Long Islanders and New Englanders alike as a stick boat, a commercial fishing boat that is used offshore to hunt swordfish and giant tuna, that are then 'stuck,' or taken with a harpoon.

The guy in the cockpit is dressed in faded jeans, his tee shirt covered by a black jacket. A baseball cap, whose label extols some well-known designer, plays counterpoint to the scuffed workboots on his feet. In his hands he's holding a small piece of mail, thrown onto the sole by some nameless fan, hoping for a moment's attention.

I ask, "You get a lot of mail like this, just tossed into the boat?"

He looks up and nods. "Yeah," he replies, rolling his eyes, "but at least it's not another cassette."

"Better, yet," he adds, "at least it's not like Montauk."

I look puzzled. He explains.

"I left the boat at the dock there one night to go out to eat. When I got back, someone had taken the two life rings out of the boat. Never saw them again."

Another shake of the head. "Unbelievable."

He returns to his reading: an invitation to an upcoming fund-raiser. It seems every charity in town wants our host at their events. After all, he's a Long Island native, a home town boy made good. As far as the locals are concerned, he's the man. And that he is. The Piano Man.

In point of fact, Billy Joel wasn't born in Sag Harbor, this understated summer colony held dear by many of New York City's well to do. He was born in Levittown, a middle class workingman's community many miles west and many decimal points to the left.

Climbing out of the cockpit, he motions across the street to a compact restaurant with spotless white tables and chairs, shaded by equally clean white awnings. When we're seated, our soft drink glasses sweating profusely in the heat, we begin to delve into the events that led this balls-to-the-wall rock-and-roller to become involved with a quiet, conservative boatbuilding venture across the bay on picturesque Shelter Island.

Over there, at a bustling, beautifully maintained facility called Coeces Harbor Boatyard and Marina, the Needham brothers, John and Peter, build the Shelter Island Runabout (see sidebar) in partnership with Joel. It is symbiotic relationship: Joel owns the tooling and the rights to the design and receives a royalty for each unit built and delivered by the yard.

With Peter Needham sitting in to help out with some of the history and technical details, Joel begins by telling us about his colorful introduction to boating, his favorite pastime.

Pastime is an understatement. Billy Joel is wild about boats. So, when I inquire whether his family had a boat when he was young, I am surprised when he shakes his head and replies, "No. No, we didn't have boats in my family. We didn't have any money."

"The only guy I knew who actually had a boat [lived] down at the end of the street. He had a cabin cruiser, probably in the 28-foot range." He smiles, adding, "They were the money people in the neighborhood."

"But his boat got trashed in a hurricane sometime in the late 50s, early 60s. Anyway, they lost their boat. They used to keep it in Freeport, and they were the only people I knew with a boat."

"My experience with boating came from when my mom would drive us up to the north shore to places like Bayville or Cold Spring Harbor or Oys-

ter Bay. And there'd be a boat on a mooring clip. That would be the target: you'd swim for the boat. You'd haul yourself up—if it was far enough away, you'd be exhausted—and you'd lay in the boat, kinda lookin' around, goin' 'This is kinda cool. I wonder if I could take this little baby for a little row.'

"And that's how I really started boating. You'd unclip a boat, row it around, then put it back on the clip. You know, it wasn't thievery. It was borrowing, as far as we were concerned. And as we got older, we became more sophisticated [*chuckling*] as to which boats we'd pick."

Needham grins and adds, "Boats with motors."

"Yeah," says Joel. "We'd figure out how to kick over an outboard. But you had to be careful. You had to be damn good at picking your way through mooring fields and not getting caught."

"I hate to admit to it, but that's how I started boating. I'm not proud of it, but it's sort of like my experience with driving. I was taking my mother's car out before I was licensed, and I had to be pretty damn good so I didn't get stopped."

#### Good ship Alexa:

*Named after his cherished daughter, the vessel Billy Joel says is the perfect boat for him (right and below) is a fast 1200-horsepower, 36-footer used for cruising and for his ever more infrequent fishing trips with friends.*



ter Bay. And there'd be a boat on a mooring clip. That would be the target: you'd swim for the boat. You'd haul yourself up—if it was far enough away, you'd be exhausted—and you'd lay in the boat, kinda lookin' around, goin' 'This is kinda cool. I wonder if I could take this little baby for a little row.'

"Well, I paint the boat and put some money in the boat. Actually had to go out and buy an outboard, because it was a heartache to row an 18-foot wooden whaling dory [*more chuckling*]. So, I got a little 10 horse kicker on it. At the end of the season I had to move to California for business reasons, so I take the boat back to Frank, who says, 'Who the hell are you? I've never seen you before in my life.'"

He laughs. "So, that was a great education as far as boat dealers go—used boat dealers. But I really enjoyed using that boat."



**A**FTER SELLING THE DORY, Joel moved through a series of boats, first a 17-foot Boston Whaler Montauk, then a 20-foot Shamrock that was used mostly in the bays and harbors along Long Island Sound.

He recalls his first trip in open water, a cruise to Martha's Vineyard in the Shamrock with three friends, equipped only with a chart and a compass. The run over was fun, he explains, the water as smooth as glass.

"However, heading back—you know, Rhode Island Sound can be pretty nasty—we hit a storm. Ten to fifteen-foot seas. We were getting green water over the bow, and there was only room for two people behind the windshield. [My friend and his wife] had to sit back at the transom and got soaked every time a wave came over. A lot of the time we were in the trough, and we couldn't see nothing...

"It was my first really long voyage on this 20-foot boat. It took six hours to get from Gay Head to Block Island. It scared the crap out of me, and I learned a lot on that trip." He pauses, then remarks, "I think I learned most of what I needed to know on small boats when I got into big trouble."

The next boat, a 33-foot Egg Harbor, was owned in a partnership with a friend. It was used for fishing for striped bass and bluefish, and during its

time in Joel's possession, he knew he wanted a bigger boat and got what he calls "the disease of wanting to build."

An advertisement in a boating magazine led him to Maine and to Lee Wilbur, whose flagship at the time was a 34-footer.

"I was beginning to understand the whole concept of a lobster yacht—workboat as yacht—so, I went up to talk to Lee, but I wanted to get a better turn of speed than they were getting out of their traditional hull, which I believe was an Ellis."

On Wilbur's recommendation, the decision was made to use a Ray Hunt hull. The result was a nice, quick 38-footer with a pair of Caterpillar 3208 engines. But a new lesson was forthcoming.

"I learned about the upside and the downside of a modified-V hull. When you're sitting, deep-sea fishing, you're going to snap roll, where soft-chine boats don't do that."

But the sportfishing bug had bitten him, and Wilbur soon received an order for a 46-footer based on a Jarvis Newman hull.

"It was a real battlewagon. We had a big tower, and the house was all teak, solid teak—there was brightwork everywhere on this boat—and we

had all the gear, really rigged for fishing. But it was more boat than I could actually use, because it was a canyon boat, a boat made for a bunch of guys to go sit in the canyon for the weekend and pull in big tuna, mako, whatever, and it was just hard to get people to play hooky.

"Little by little, the boat just ended up staying there, and you pay for it. I learned a lot about maintenance [*laughing*] from that boat. I kept trying to modify the boat, simplify the boat, [*nodding to Needham*] sometimes he must of thought I was crazy."

Needham explains how Joel wanted to paint out all of the teak, including the cockpit and remove the bulkhead and a pair of beautiful doors from the after part of the superstructure, replacing them with canvas.

"They must have thought I was out of my mind," Joel remarks. "I kept cutting things out." Needham smiles, shaking his head. "[Peter] said, 'Come on, man, somebody's going to want the boat with the valuable teak on it, and you're just getting too far into the hole.'"

"Meanwhile, their yard had built a 28-foot lobster boat, which I saw at the Shinnecock show. A real pretty lobster boat, and I [*thought*] 'That's what I should get.'"

Although he still owned the 46, Joel ordered one of Needham's 28-footers. Eventually, it was used more than the larger boat, and, over time, he decided that he finally knew exactly what he wanted.

"So that's when Peter started building *Alexa*, the 36-footer, which, for me, is a perfect boat...for fishing and for cruising. Ends up I don't fish as much as used to. I don't even have a commercial license anymore—part of the pleasure for me of fishing was selling fish—and I don't want to catch a fish unless I eat it or sell it."

I ask Joel whether he has ever gone stick fishing aboard *Alexa*. "That's my dream," he replies, adding, "the chances of seeing a swordfish around here are slim to none. But you can stick a tuna. We've seen them; I've gotten close. I got real close to one and missed; almost had Peter modify the pulpit...I don't know, there's some primordial urge in me that wants to do that."

**D**ESIGNED BY SPENCER LINCOLN, the 1200-horsepower *Alexa* is now used primarily for local cruising. Joel's kept the fishing gear aboard, for the times when he manages to get some friends to cut out from work. More important, he says, is the time spent going out with his daughter, after whom the boat is named.

"She likes getting out on the water, and she's starting to drive pretty good now. [*smiling*] Yeah, she stands on the folding footrest, so that she can look out over the bow."

"I think she knows that Daddy's always in a good mood on a boat. It's my great escape. You know, you get a couple of hundred yards offshore, you might as well be in outer space. It's an easy way for somebody who's well-known to make an escape."

When he decided to move into something faster, Joel realized that he did not like the design of most of the high speed sportboats on the market.

"All the fast boats—the muscle boats—have a look, at least for the last twenty years, that's, ah, computer designed...there's not an aesthetic. I

asked Peter why, and he said that it's because the designers think that that's the way the guys who want to go fast want their boats to look."

Wanting a boat with a more traditional sheerline and a more New England workboat look while still going fast, Joel and Needham began to contact naval architects, finally settling on Doug Zurn.

"He understood the concept: go fast, but look good; basically it's a day boat, but you can lie down if you want to...I want to be outside, I want to feel like I'm on a boat. The whole romance of boating is that [*what I have*] looks like a boat and doesn't look like a Florida hotel room."

"I realized I had to build the hull from scratch, and it's an expensive project...a lot of planning, a lot of money. So, I'm thinking 'How the hell am I going to get my money out of this boat? I'm never going to be able to sell it for anywhere near what I paid for it.'"

"But it turns out a number of other people were interested in just this kind of boat, and Peter said that we should consider going into some kind of semi-production. His yard can build 'em; I'll own the molds. That's how we can make my money back. And that's how the whole thing started."

The Runabout was introduced in September of 1996. To date, ten boats have been sold, including Hull #1, Joel's *Nomad*. Having sold three boats in the month of April alone, Needham's crew is hustling, trying to gear up to build six boats a year.

As Needham explains the construction process to me, Joel looks across the table and says to him, "I gotta get one of those shirts," referring to Needham's Coecles Harbor polo shirt with a Runabout embroidered over the logo. I suggest that a Coecles Harbor hat might round out the uniform and ask Joel whether he has ever sold any of the boats himself.

He shrugs. "Sure, I talk the boat up. I'm not sure how many people end up calling Peter, but I get a lot of comments wherever I pull the boat in... and I tell them all about it."

Needham confirms that he does, indeed, get calls as a result of Joel's encounters. Some have become signed deals. There is little doubt that the tie-



**Creative partners:**

Peter Needham, left, director of Coecles Harbor Boatyard and Billy Joel discuss the finer points of boat-building, a creative exercise which Joel claims is much like writing music.

in with the musician's name does wonders for the marketing.

There have been discussions about building smaller and larger versions of the boat, the former to be used as a tender for large yachts, the latter to satisfy customer demand. Needham acknowledges that there has been a definite interest in both. Joel agrees.

"Yeah," he says. "Buffett kept nudgin' at me—Jimmy Buffett—'Why don't you build a bigger one? You know, something more than a dayboat.'"

"Meanwhile, Peter's lookin' at me like I'm crazy and wants to know why I'm interested in doing something bigger. I guess he's right: it's probably because I'm crazy."

In his album *Storm Front*, Joel addresses the subject of commercial fishing and the difficult lives fishermen lead. I ask whether he has ever worked offshore.

"Not offshore," he answers. "I worked on a oyster dredge back in the 60s in Oyster Bay, when they actually had oysters. I did that for a winter. We weren't at sea, but that's hard work, dangerous work, uncomfortable work, and the pay wasn't that good, but it was a job, and I used to cut school to do this."

"We'd be getting up at three-thirty, four o'clock in the morning, going out there in the pitch black and working this oyster dredge. My hands

"I want to be outside,  
I want to feel like I'm  
on a boat...not in a  
Florida hotel room."



**Captain Billy:**

*Billy Joel stands on the foredeck of the Shelter Island Runabout he helped create.*

would be ripped to shreds. The old guys were doin' it like it was nothin'. I [gained] a tremendous amount of respect for them."

That's a respect that stays with him to this day. When asked whether he stays involved with commercial fishing issues or with marine conservation,

Joel answers, "You have to, I think" and tells me that he works on behalf of local commercial fisherman by meeting with regulatory agencies. In addition, he worked successfully on the inclusion of the Peconics into the National Estuary Program and also volunteers with a group that is dedicated to preserving the wetlands and upland of the South Fork, which is the part of Long Island where he resides.

"People forget there's a correlation between [the sea and the land]," he explains. "You have to watch both."

We discuss writing, something the entertainer greatly enjoys. Lately, he has moved away from pop music and has been composing classical pieces. I ask what his plans are once the material has been published.

"I wouldn't be recording it. I'd be surprised if I ever [did], because I'm



not really a good enough pianist. I can write the stuff, but I can't really play it the way a concert pianist should play it. So, hopefully, we'll let the other guys do the playing. I just want to compose."

In some ways Joel equates the process to being involved in a boatbuilding project.

"I think it probably goes back to the enjoyment of coming up with an idea. Designing a boat is somewhat like composing."

A blank sheet of paper, I suggest.

"Yeah, all of a sudden, boom, there's a thing."

Needham confirms that Joel's decisiveness helps him move through the design and building processes quickly and efficiently.

"He'll come over as soon as he can," says Needham. "Then, we give him a chair by the boat, and he'll study the problem, working it through with us. He doesn't say 'Let me think about it' and go away. He makes a decision, and that's that."

So, what about his favorite pastime? Does he get a chance to enjoy it?

"I haven't had much of a chance recently. Things got real busy. I had a two week break and only had the boat out once. It drives me crazy. But, I got too many things to take care of."

He pauses, and shakes his head slowly from side to side. Finally, he looks up and says, "It's funny. You try to build your life, so you can have all this fun time, and then you end up doing all the building and not enough of the fun."

The Piano Man shrugs. "Life goes on." ■

MARK MASCAROTTE is a marine consultant who also writes for *Yachting* and *Showboats International*.



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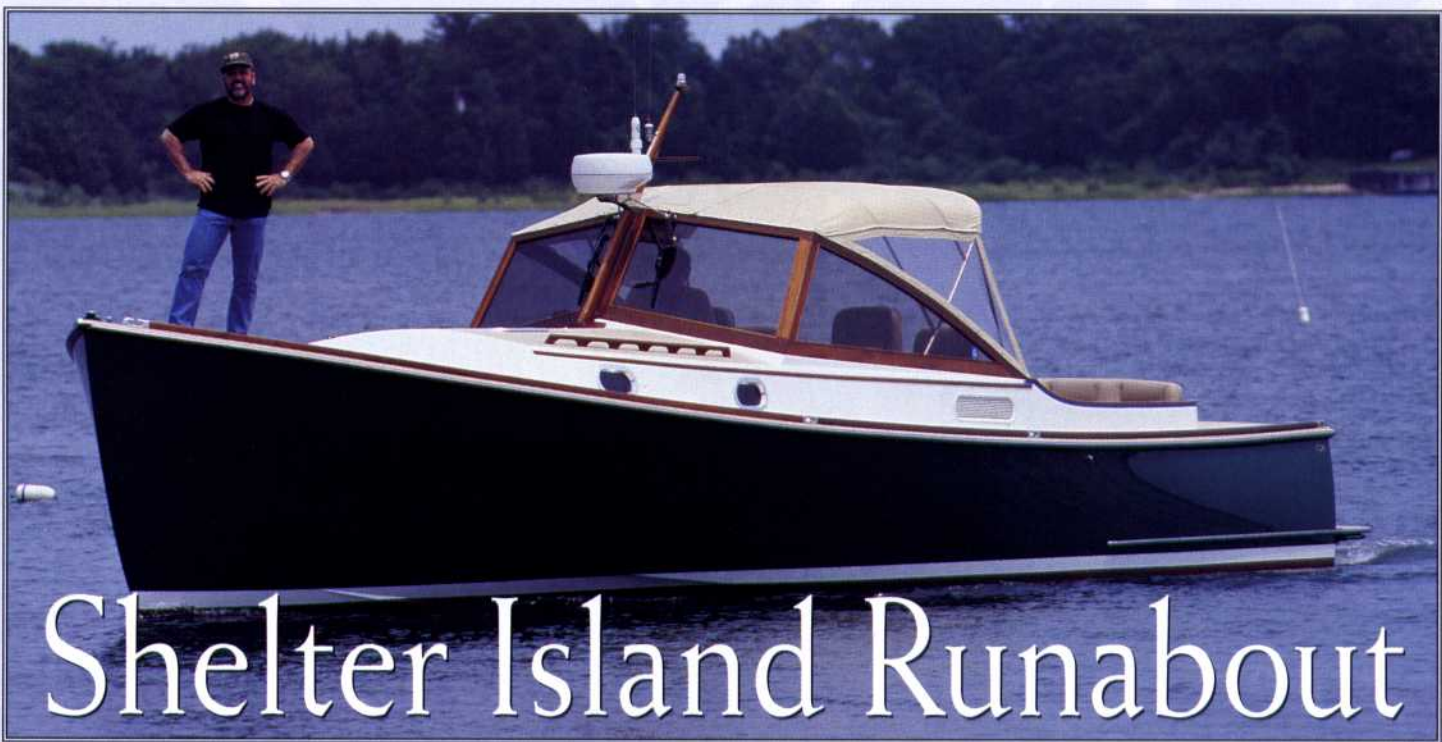


PHOTO: JIMMY BLACK

# Shelter Island Runabout

IF YOU'RE "TALKING TO DAVY, WHO'S STILL IN THE NAVY," CHANCES ARE THIS IS THE BOAT THAT HE'D WANT TO BE SAILING FOR LIFE. — **BY MARK MASCIAROTTE**

**I**N JUST 18 MONTHS, buyers on both coasts and in the Midwest have helped the Shelter Island Runabout make her mark in a highly competitive market. There's a reason: she has the refined look of a classic New England bass boat and the heart-stopping performance of a classic American street rod.

Designed by Zurn Yacht Design, the hull form is a moderate V with a fine entry that runs out to a 15° deadrise at the transom. With the stock 300-horsepower Mercruiser Magnum MPI engines, the Runabout is able to cruise around 34 knots. However, every boat built to date has been equipped with the optional Mercruiser 502s that produce 415 horsepower, increasing cruise speed to 40 knots and top speed to just over 48 knots. Three other engine packages, gas and diesel, are available as options. All powerplant configurations are coupled to Mercruiser Bravo Three stern drives, each turning a pair of highly efficient contra-rotating propellers.

Arranged primarily as a dayboat, the Runabout is available with or without a hardtop. Both configurations are equally handsome, and each has a spacious cockpit, made all the more uncluttered by the aft engine installation. An athwartship settee and a pair of comfortable Stidd helm chairs comprise the fixed seating, but there is plenty of room for folding chairs and a table to form a grouping forward of the settee. All trim, including the toerails, handrails, brows and console, is teak and is beautifully detailed and varnished.

Because of the Runabout's extra length (38' 4½"), the cabin is equally spacious as well as being nicely appointed. The arrangement is typical of this type of boat. There is a compact galley to port, opposite which is a roomy head. Forward are two settees that serve as berths. A hanging locker is accessed through the forward bulkhead. Ceilings, soles and cabinetry are executed in varnished teak (other woods are optional). Other surfaces, including cabinet faces and the overhead, are white, giving the cabin a bright, clean look.

#### Stylish day boat:

*The Shelter Island Runabout is available with or without a hardtop. Each boat features beautifully detailed and varnished teak trim, and high-quality fittings polished to a mirror finish.*



PHOTO: JIMMY BLACK



The hulls for the Runabout are fabricated by North End Composites using a sandwich lay-up of Kevlar/E-glass fabric, balsa core and vinylester resin; Kevlar is not used in the decks. The patented SCRIMP resin-infusion process optimizes laminate integrity and strength. The parts are

then sent to the Coecles Harbor facility for assembly and outfitting.

Coecles Harbor Boatyard is a 25-year-old business that, at present, employs just under 40 persons. In addition to their boatbuilding activities, they are known throughout New England for their high-end refit and restoration work on wood and fiberglass boats.

Quick, agile and sexy, the Shelter Island Runabout is a niche boat designed to please the most critical aficionado. The Piano Man says it's a cool boat. He's right. ■

COECLES HARBOR BOATYARD, tel 516 749 0700.