Billy Joel (b. 1949), an American musician whose career spanned the 1970s through the 2000s, is perhaps most famous for his ballads and love songs. A closer look at his musical output, however, reveals a keen ability to translate more general aspects of American culture into compelling musical narratives. Several of his compositions address American working class life in the latter twentieth century. This talk examines three songs, “Ain’t No Crime” (1973), “Allentown” (1982), and “Downeaster ’Alexa’” (1989), in an effort to trace Joel’s perspectives on the issues they raise—boredom and frustration with quotidian blue-collar routines and the dismantling of American industries—and their musical expression through style markers that reference blues, gospel, rock, and folk. Although these songs vary stylistically, they also share certain compositional choices that position them, implicitly and explicitly, as the composer’s statements, a hallmark of the singer-songwriter milieu. Moreover, they demonstrate how Joel’s music reflects not only his personal views, but also his perceptive observations of broader American culture in the late twentieth century.

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Joshua S. Duchan is Assistant Professor of Music at Wayne State University. His research considers American popular music, including recent projects focusing on collegiate a cappella music and the music of Billy Joel. His book, Powerful Voices: The Musical and Social World of Collegiate A Cappella, was published by the University of Michigan Press in 2012. He teaches courses in Wayne State University’s Department of Music in music history, world music, and ethnomusicology.

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