



ROCK THE BOAT

# Billy Joel

Billy Joel is a boater's boater, a regular guy who worked on an oyster boat as a teenager. He's just cooler than most guys, a music legend with a collection of 24 motorcycles and six boats. He's made his way up from one boat to the next and recently bought his largest yet, a 95' Inace expedition yacht called *Audacious*. Billy Joel's experienced the gamut of true blue boater stories, but job loss is one story that really gives him the blues.

By Lisa Hoogenwerf Kepp Photos Billy Black

The Piano Man  
onboard one of his  
boats in New York

YACHTS



## THE MAN WHO WROTE THE INDEPENDENCE

anthem I don't care what you say anymore, this is My Life, is busy and fulfilled with career, family, friends, business associates and boats. "I can't try to figure out what the rest of the world thinks about me and think it is a waste of time to try," Billy Joel says, "but I do want people to just consider supporting the boating industry, especially the smaller companies. They need help...the people who have the craft and the skill and the labor in place." And that's why he is talking about his new boat and his long and storied relationship with boating. He's been caught in hellacious storms, had a fire onboard and was hassled horrendously for fishing with a commercial license. He even got kicked out of safe harbor by a dockmaster when his 46 Jarvis Newman was in distress during a bad gale. The harbormaster wouldn't let him stay. "He said we had to get out. And there was no anchorage, so we had to go right back out. That's how you learn how to handle a boat. You just gotta face some tough stuff sometimes."

Of course, on his Inco, he doesn't have to fret too much about stormy weather. Audacious is a solid, seaworthy aft-house explorer that he just had refit to haul his motorcycles, including two Royal Enfields and a Honda Valcary. Knight & Carver in San Diego did the work—top-to-bottom paint, relocation of the master to the skylounge, conversion of the former master into a cargo hatch—in a record 10 weeks, impressing Billy Joel's long-time captain Gene Pelland. "They did a great job," says the Rhode Island native who's managed the Piano Man's fleet for 11 years. The sturdy steel-hulled expedition is Billy Joel's kind of boat, perhaps just a little bigger than he's used to. "A boat should look like a boat and feel like a boat and function like a boat. I don't want to be on a floating motel room," he says. The cargo ship look brings him back to days when as a kid he daydreamed about cruising in a tramp steamer on the South Seas. He had an earlier boat with a similar configuration, a 65' Florida Bay Coastal Freighter called *Red Head*. "It wasn't the most seaworthy vessel in the world—built to be a bay boat. When you went out to sea, you didn't have much in the water, not much of a draft. She was kinda roly-poly. (But) there were great accommodations. I turned the interior into an Irish pub, complete with Guinness on tap. It was quite popular with my friends."

He doesn't have a piano on Audacious and no plans to turn the boat into a lounge, but he's planning another refit for the interior cabins and the salon now that he's taken care of the main priority—the cargo hold for the motorcycles. Comfort does matter to a traveling man who loathes hotels. Whenever the itinerary allows, he stays on the yacht and often travels with one of his dogs for a touch of home and family. At 95, Audacious is the largest of his six vessels and for now Billy has a little trepidation over that. "Capt. Gene can run her. She's too much boat for me to handle." Even so an LOA of 95 isn't downright audacious in megayacht circles, so how did the yacht get the name? "I was trying to name the boat while watching television and O'Reilly was on Fox talking about celebrities and different money situations and mentioned my name," says Billy who picked up the phone and dialed the TV host to set the record straight. "You don't have to worry about me financially. I made all my money back," he told O'Reilly. The conversation continued. "We got to talking about the stock market and he asked me what I did when Wall Street tanked. I hesitated for a second and I said, 'Well, I bought a yacht.' Then O'Reilly laughed and said, 'That's audacious.' Then he hung up. I thought, 'wait a minute. That's a good name for the boat.' So I named her Audacious."

Chances are the name will stick. Billy Joel would never change the name of his own boat...again. "When I had *Red Head* I was dating a Red Head," Billy says. "Then we split up and I started dating a blonde. She didn't like the name of the boat, so I changed the name. Sure enough, bad luck started and that relationship went south. So I changed the name back to *Red Head*, and later on we got back together. Then I changed the name again and



Audacious was converted to ferry Billy's motorcycles.



there was more bad luck. So when that relationship was completely over I brought the name back to *Red Head*." The next woman in Billy's life turned out to be a brunette and he got rid of the boat. "If you purchase the vessel from another owner and change the name, that's fair game," he says. "However, if you make a decision to name the boat one thing and change the name, that's where the bad luck comes in."

Billy Joel has real boater's angst and even occasional buyer's remorse. He experienced it with his first boat, a heavy 18' wooden "lap-strake whaling dory" that he bought in Hampton Bay. "It was a real heart attack to row the thing. I'll never forget this guy on Smith's Creek who sold it to me. He said, 'If you don't like the boat I'll buy the boat back from ya.' He sounded like Nelson Rockefeller. There was a lot of work, a lot of stripping and caulking, painting and sanding, and it was just so difficult to row. At the end of the season I wanted to trade it in. So I said, 'Here's that boat you wanted to take back.' And 'Rockefeller' says, 'Who are you?'...So I ended up giving the boat to a friend." Billy's next boat was a Boston Whaler. Then he bought a 17' Montauk and from there he went up to a tough 20' Shamrock, then a 33' Egg Harbor, a Wilbur 34, then downsized to a 28' Ellis, after which Billy sojourned to Maine looking at different builders to design and build his own line.

He designed a few boats on cocktail napkins: a boat that became the Jarvis 46 and then a 36' BHM lobster named *Alexa*, a very Yankee-Maine looking salmon-colored boat with a dark green hull docked in Sag Harbor. Billy has a love affair with lobster boats. He designed a 38' lobster, go-fast boat called the Shelter Island Runabout. "It's all about what's below the waterline, the hydrodynamics and the hull shape. We figured out a way to give a boat a lobster shear with a plum bow and made her go 55 mph. We designed our own hull. She just looks like a lobster boat above the water line. Below the water line, it's a deep V." He had no training in naval architecture or hydrodynamics but picked up mechanical drawing in high school, which enhanced his skills enough for Doug Zurn to be able to use his idea as the basis for the hull design. After he built the first one, he went to Coecles Harbor Marina & Boatyard on Shelter Island, which produced 50 Shelter Island Runabouts.

He has real appreciation for craftsmen who work with their hands and his main motivation when he ordered a commuter boat in the 1990s was to employ boat builders who needed jobs. "I actually enjoyed the idea of reconstituting a mom and pop boat building business. There used to be a lot of small ones on Long Island. It was fun." Captain Gene confirms that's how he operates and says the singer songwriter went back on tour last year primarily to employ his road crew during the most unstable economy in decades. He knows the boating industry is hurting too. "The first thing that goes is recreational items and toys," Billy Joel says. "It's very grim. Our Runabout orders have dried up. Guys up in Maine are hurting."

Over the years, he's done his best to keep the industry going. "Billy has a boat for every purpose," says Capt. Gene. "Fishing, cruising, commuting, etc." His 57' *Vendetta*, which he designed and Zurn built, goes 50 mph at the top end and zips him from his house in Oyster Bay into Manhattan. It's a commuter boat with nice curves, which resembles a 1930s vintage. *Argos*, an Ellis 36, is his offshore fishing boat, which he keeps in Miami. She does 30 knots. "She looks like an old Palm Beach boat, a very retro look," Billy says. "We were inspired by Huckins and Rybovich. Rybos are wonderful boats and done in that cold molding technique." Billy also has a little *Pegiva*, a runabout made in Queensland, Australia, that's reminiscent of an old *Riva*. His 28' landing craft serves as a tender for *Audacious*.

Next on the agenda is a bit of traveling to the Keys, Bahamas and Caribbean, which he plans to explore on *Audacious*. But before he takes to the water again he has one more message: "Support the commercial fishermen who are disappearing. They have a tough time trying to find fish, then being regulated out of business, trying to compete with sport fishermen who don't want them to catch the fish. It's a horrible thing to watch what's happening to working people, especially those who risk their lives in their jobs. After all, you learn what you're made of on a boat." ■

Billy Joel loves boats and keeps a changing fleet, but has a particular fondness for lobster-style boats

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