The Beard Reviews

Episode #9 **Face to Face (The Billy Joel & Elton John Tribute**)

Coronado Theater, Rockford, IL

2-8-25

Greetings friends, fans, and followers. It is your wooly weaver of review magic, The Beard, and tonight we are going to cover “**Face to Face**” (an **Elton John** & **Billy Joel** duo tribute act.)

Generally, the Coronado Theater (in Rockford Illinois) is a good place to see smaller and/or more intimate acts as it has good acoustics and views from almost everywhere. So, after offering the extra ticket to Little Johnny who sneered and said, “When did you go soft Beard? What happened to Metal?” I explained that the “new” Beard reviews had no limit on what we covered and that having no limits should appeal to him. He thought about that for a few seconds and then said, “Fair point Beard, but sometimes limits are good. In fact, I am going to “limit” myself from going to this piano playing snoozefest.”

So instead, my other ticket went to Miss Kelly who absolutely loved **Billy Joel** & **Elton John** and was in fact quite pleased to take Johnnys place, especially when I revealed we had second row center.

Now a little about the act itself:

“**Face to Face**” takes their name from the 1994 concert tour where **Billy Joel** & **Elton John** toured the world at major arenas and sports fields playing upwards of three-hour sets. In this tribute, New York native *Mike Santoro*, (aka **Billy Joel**) (along with his band **The Stranger**), and partner *Ronnie Smith* (aka **Sir Elton John**), attempted to bring about a recreation of those famous shows.

Now, whether this is “*your”* type of music or not, emulating two Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and larger than life Icons is a pretty tall ask and before going the Beard wanted to make sure these guys had a pedigree and were not just a couple of Joe Schmoe’s that decided the local karaoke bar patrons liked their stuff so Hey, let’s form an act and hit the road.

It turns out the duo (and band) have been doing this for about fifteen years and playing all over the country, generally sticking to venues with between one and three thousand seats. If you can make it that long then you must not suck at it.

As such, the Coronado, with its 2300 capacity, was an appropriate sized venue however the Beard did note that less than half of it was full. My guess would be about 40% or just under a thousand paid tickets. That is still solid, but the emptiness WAS noticeable.

Ticket prices ranged from 39-89 dollars and that too really wasn’t bad once you played the proportions game. Example, for the average patron to have gone to see the real thing (**Elton & Billy Joel**), the last time they played Soldier Field, you were sitting in the sky (400 level) for 129 dollars a ticket and you could not touch any on the field tickets for less than about three hundred bucks apiece.

So, at 25% of the price, proportionately this act only needed to be 25% as good. Based on THAT math, I liked my chances of getting consummate value for my dollar.

The stage set up, (and yes there’s pictures for those of you who are already tired of reading,) were two grand pianos facing each other with the band all along the stage backline. Drums in the middle, bass stage left, guitar stage right, and sax player kind of mid stage right. There was also a stand-up keyboard for certain **Billy Joel** numbers (*so points for authenticity right away as that was what he was doing during the 1994 shows*.)

About 8:00pm the band shuffled on and then from opposite sides of the stage came *Santoro* and *Smith*. Each sat down at a piano and they launched right into “*My Life*” with each taking turns at the verses.

“*Philadelphia Freedom*,” & “*Bennie & the Jets*” would follow. Afterwards *Smith* made it clear he was from South Carolina and was not going to even try doing **Elton Johns** English accent. *Smith* did hit a couple high notes during “*Bennie & the Jets*” and afterwards joked “Elton hasn’t hit those in about forty years.”

*Smith* then gave the stage over to *Santoro* who regaled us with “*Moving Out*,” “*Angry Young Man*,” “*Scenes from an Italian Restaurant*” “*Vienna*” & “*I go to Extremes*.” Then it was *Santoro’s* turn to exit so *Smith* could roll out “*Funeral for a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding*,” “*I’m Still Standing*,” “*I guess that’s why they call it the Blues*,” “*Tiny Dancer*” “*Rocket Man*” and “*Pinball Wizard*.”

After that it was once again duet time as the two men traded songs covering “*The Bitch is Back*”, “*It’s Still Rock n Roll to Me*”, “*Can you Feel the Love*”, “*Keeping the Faith*”, “*Crocodile Rock*” “*You May be Right*”, “*Saturday Night’s all right for Fighting*” “*New York Frame of Mind*” and of course the closer “*Piano Man*.”

Surprisingly, there was no encore, but the show was approximately two and a half hours, so it was only a little shorter than the real thing was back in 1994 and included a night full of well-known and much-loved songs.

As my regular readers already know, when it comes to tribute acts, I am looking at four categories. One, your look. Two, your voices. Three the music. Four, the little things that help me suspend disbelief and get into the illusion you are trying to craft up there. So, let us review **Face to Face**.

**Look: (7.5/10)** **Billy Joel** has had several signature looks, and *Mike Santoro* represented his middle age look. Depending on how YOU remember **Billy Joel**, then or now, determined how accurate you found him. I am allotting him an 8/10.

*Ronnie Smith* does his best, but it is generally going to be difficult for a South Carolina boy or anyone else to look too much like **Sir Elton** **John**. Smith also chose the middle-aged 50–60-year-old Elton John look to emulate. I would grade him a 7/10.

*Smith* did change costumes three times during the set, but he stuck with mostly just flamboyant jackets and pants along with flashy glasses. It was not bad, but it was never over the top either. *Santoro* just stuck with the classic New York style dressy look, (which worked better than trying anything else.) *Santoro* looked classy, which played well off the *Smith* **Elton** flamboyance.

**Voices: (7.75/10)** *Santoro* was closer vocally. It helped tremendously that he was from New York and had that natural accent anyway. Although I am not intimately familiar with specifics in **Billy Joels** music, I had to trust Miss Kelly since **Joel** was one of her favorite artists. She said, “If you close your eyes, you can hear **Billy Joel** up there.” *Santoro* 8.5/10

*Smith* had an **Elton John** sounding voice (or else he would not be doing this.) Occasionally he messed up the verses or a particular line, but he also did versions recognizable to hardcore fans such as the live MSG version of “*That’s why they call it the Blues*” which for me was his best song of the evening. However, his rendition of *Funeral for a friend/Love Lies Bleeding* (my personal favorite Elton song) lacked passion and he missed on that one a few times. *Smith* 6.75/10.

**Music: 8/10** *Santoro* was also the more accomplished piano player. Whether he was doing something difficult like “*Vienna*” or just doing the lounge sound like “*Scenes from an Italian Restaurant”* or “*New York Frame of Mind*” he one “could” easily imagine it was **Billy Joel** up there playing and singing. *Santoro* 9.25/10

*Smith* again did try to emulate many little quirks of **Elton John’s** piano playing. Looking at the audience while playing with his elbows was one of the better ones. *Smith* never fully seemed to capture the larger than life “character” that was **Elton John**, but admittedly that is a BIG ask. Although I both knew and preferred his songs, (or perhaps I should say **Elton Johns** songs), I never felt he was as good as *Santoro. Smith* 7/10.

The backing band was more hit than miss. *Evan Bloom* (guitars) was expressive and always on the money with the leads and fills. *Gabriel Bello* did a solid job all evening with the saxophone, and when he used the bridge of “*New York Frame of Mind*” to turn the solo into the *Star-Spangled Banner* that GOT the audience. Big big cheer for that addition. Therefore, I am adding another point for overall music production.

However, I am also detracting .75 because whoever was running the room mix needs to have a hearing exam scheduled. The two Piano’s were the signature instruments on that stage. Why oh why for the love of God were they so often buried in the mix? Those two instruments should have thundered when they were being played. For me that was a big miss. The second big miss, the drums were tinny particularly the crash cymbal. That thing was a constant distraction all evening.

And speaking of constant distractions, WHAT THE HOLY HELL was up with the couple behind us in row three? Now, the Beard IS aware this is a “show.” People want to sing along and dance. I can understand that. Yes, I would prefer you not do it directly in front of me, but I get it. You paid your money, the same as me and to a certain extent you can do what you want in your seat.

But this pair of screeching tomcats could NOT sing. I know whereof I speak because “I” cannot sing either and therefore I do not subject those around me to horrible off-key caterwauling while at the same time FAR TOO OFTEN NOT KNOWING THE $#%@#ING WORDS TO THE GODDMAN SONGS! I paid to hear THEM sing. I did NOT pay to hear you sing badly. That is why they have karaoke bars and alcohol.

And as if that weren’t enough, when this couple didn’t sing, they talked, and talked, and talked, and talked, and then talked some $#%^ing more. ALL of it loudly, and amazingly annoyingly.

Then, as a topper to it all, around the time I wanted to pull the arm off my seat and commit a capital crime in front of 800 witnesses in the Coronado Theater, *Smith* jokingly started the refrain from “*Great Balls of Fire*” and these mouth-breathing lunkwads start yelling out, “Play It!! I love **Elvis**.! **Elvis** the Pelvis!”

At this point good readers, the Beard began to softly cry a bit as I realized in this country “THEIR VOTE COUNTS AS MUCH AS MINE.”

So, anyway, back to the review. Section four is “the little things” As I noted above, *Smith* dressed, like **Elton**, mugged like **Elton**, and bounced on his piano bench often turning to face the audience while he played. All these items plus the stage banter added to my ability to suspend disbelief and I appreciated the efforts.

*Santoro* allowed me to imagine either a young and hungry 1970’s **Billy Joel** or a calm and reflective 2000+ era **Billy Joel**. These were nice because my era was more the coked up 1980’s era **Billy Joel** and although he wrote a LOT of good music during that period, I enjoyed seeing the calm class act **Billy Joel** up there and *Santoro* gave THAT **Billy Joel**. 8.5/10

This gives us an overall grade of about 8/10, therefore I would say thumbs slightly up for **Face to Face**. My guess is that if you demand unwavering realism, this duo will fall short, but if you just enjoy the music of those two legends then this act will get you there. Once again, you can see these guys for under a hundred bucks for two tickets. You will not see **Elton John** or **Billy Joel** for less than double that price. So, if they come your way, and you want a night little night of escapism the beard recommends checking out this act, just do me a favor and be respectful of your seatmates. There is no need to sing if you do not know the words, and if you do not know the difference between Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis then perhaps just keep the lips zipped huh.

As always, thanks for reading along with the Beard here on Review #9. Check out the pictures and videos for yourself. Check out even more on TikTok at **thebeard0728**, and remember to keep checking right here on Facebook, as well as **themightydecibel.com** for all the latest Beard and Little Johnny shenanigans. Until next time, this is the Beard saying, Live Life. Stay heavy, & Horns Up.