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MOVIE REVIEW | THE LAST PLAY AT SHEA

Brenda, Eddie, Billy and Friends Bury a Ballpark

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

History isn't just a bunch of facts. For those who live through it, it is a collective experience — a shared mood, if you will — that is so personal, changeable and complex that it can't be fully conveyed to someone who wasn't around when the events took place.

The parallel stories of [Billy Joel](#), [Shea Stadium](#), the New York Mets and New York City itself over four and a half decades are woven into a common history in Paul Crowder's exhilarating concert documentary, "The Last Play at Shea." Guaranteed to put lumps in the throats of longtime New York residents and suburbanites, especially Long Islanders, this fist-pumping, backslapping [film](#) is, first and foremost, an up-close record of Mr. Joel's two Shea Stadium concerts, July 16 and 18, 2008. They were the last performances given in the stadium, which was torn down the following year.

Sweating profusely, with a mighty band behind him as he bellows his hits and pounds the keyboard, [Mr. Joel](#) is the quintessential smart, streetwise, hard-working guy from a suburban neighborhood in emotional lockstep with his audience over the long haul. For the thousands of Brendas and Eddies — high school sweethearts named in his song "Scenes From an Italian Restaurant" — the tunes are hearty, tough/tender little monuments to growing up in a certain time and place.

Rock 'n' roll was woven into Shea Stadium's identity from the moment the [Beatles](#) appeared there on Aug. 15, 1965. As [Paul McCartney](#) recalls in the film, the [Fab Four](#) couldn't hear themselves above the roar of the audience, and the remarkable excerpt from that concert shows the group happily shouting out of tune.

Between renditions of "Piano Man," "New York State of Mind" (a wonderful duet with [Tony Bennett](#), one of many famous guests), "Goodnight Saigon," "Scenes From an Italian Restaurant" and other pop touchstones, the film remembers the building of the 55,000-seat stadium, of which [Darryl Strawberry](#), the onetime Met, said, "It was a dump, but it was our dump." The home of the Mets beginning in 1964, the stadium was part of [Robert Moses](#)'s grand design to expand New York culture far beyond Manhattan.

Mr. Joel's songs, heard mostly in fragments, work as a continuing soundtrack that glues together the documentary's themes. The seesawing fortunes of the Mets, who after years in the cellar meteorically ascended to win the World Series in 1969, are recalled. [Keith Hernandez](#) recalls the euphoric moment in Game 6 of the 1986 World Series when the Mets came from behind in the 10th inning to beat the Boston Red Sox.

When the city plunged into a financial crisis in the 1970s that threatened its very existence, Mr. Joel, who was living in Los Angeles, recalls thinking, "If the city's going down the tubes, I'm going down with it," and he returned to the East Coast.

The personal history related by Mr. Joel, who was born in the Bronx and brought up in Hicksville, N.Y., is a tale of learning to roll with some heavy punches. His first LP was mastered at the wrong speed (a little too fast). Early in his career he signed an onerous management contract that cost him dearly, until Walter Yetnikoff, then president of CBS Records, bought back his publishing and gave it to him as a present. Later came more business imbroglis, three failed marriages and a drinking problem.

Today Mr. Joel, who largely abandoned songwriting in the mid-1990s, sounds more and more like the rock 'n' roll answer to [Irving Berlin](#) and George M. Cohan. His blunt, irresistibly tuneful songs, however autobiographical, are also nuggets of American cultural history.

"The Last Play at Shea" has a built-in happy ending that is almost too good to be true. For the July 18 concert, Mr. McCartney miraculously appeared, having been whisked through customs at [Kennedy International Airport](#) after a flight from London that had been allowed to land early. He was sped to the stadium by a motorcade in 11 minutes and driven onto the field in time to perform by Pete Flynn, the dedicated groundskeeper who had driven the Beatles to the same stage 43 years earlier.

"If it weren't for the Beatles," Mr. Joel declares, "I wouldn't do what I do." Call it perfect symmetry. The final number, "[Let It Be](#)," rings as a sweet valedictory to all the struggle, the teamwork and the glory captured in this wonderful film.

THE LAST PLAY AT SHEA

Opens on Friday in Manhattan.

Directed by Paul Crowder; written by Mark Monroe; narrated by [Alec Baldwin](#); edited by Mr. Crowder and Mike J. Nichols; produced by Steve Cohen and Nigel Sinclair; released by Newmarket Films and Wrekin Hill Entertainment. At the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 35 minutes. This film is not rated.
