

We May Be Right

BY CASEY RYAN VOCK



Photos by Corbin Payne

AS AN ASPIRING PIANIST, Karl Dietel was awed decades ago by Billy Joel. Now, as the leader of the New Jersey-based outfit We May Be Right, he relishes in the impact of the Piano Man each night out as he and his bandmates offer a stunning tribute to the Bronx-born living legend.

Since forming about six years ago, We May Be Right has grown and refined its Billy Joel repertoire, and it has built a reputation for colorful celebrations that draw music listeners from far and wide. The evening of Nov. 9, the group will look to host an all-out celebration at the Strand Center Theatre in Plattsburgh that should remind local concert goers of the emotional force and lasting delight in Billy Joel's songs.

"I do use that word. I say, 'You know, we're gonna celebrate the music of Billy Joel,'" says Dietel, whose appreciation for the 1977 album *The Stranger* manifested in the late 2010s when he asked a group of fellow longtime musicians to learn the record in its entirety.

The newly formed band laid its foundation over the course of several nonchalant jam sessions and what was expected to be a onetime show featuring a front-to-back presentation of *The Stranger*.

"We kind of knew everybody there, and gosh, they were like, 'Alright, we want you to do it again; we want you to come back in two weeks and do it again,'" Dietel says. "So,

we did it again, and it was even more crowded. It was crazy."

Members of the crowd invited the band to play ensuing gigs, and what began as an experiment between close pals had become a legitimate chance to grow a following.

"This kind of all snowballed," says Dietel, who at the time didn't see any other act performing entire sets of Billy Joel tunes but sensed an opportunity.

"I said, 'Let's see how it goes over.' So, that's kind of what happened; it was all word of mouth, and we've backed up into it. And then little by little, we got bigger audiences. We're playing in New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York City. [...] It was just kind of a labor of love in the beginning, and it still is actually."

We May Be Right has packed venues in big cities. But visiting regions like the Champlain Valley and performing to new crowds is part of the payback for Dietel and his crew, each of whom has a charted a unique course as a career musician.

Dietel handles lead vocals and the piano, too; it's an instrument he's been playing since he was 6 years old. But like some of his bandmates, he's a multi-instrumentalist, and he picks up the electric guitar, as well, during We May Be Right sets. His resume includes contributions to more than 20 independent records and years on the road with

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Sean Kelly and The Samples, in addition to performing with late Parliament-Funkadelic keyboardist Bernie Worrell.

Brass and woodwinds player Perry Andrews, who adds harmonies and percussion, has an educational background focused on jazz. Guitarist Derek Davodowich is a Berklee College of Music graduate who's lived in Nashville, taught and written about music. Bassist and vocalist Luke Kessel is a touring and session player who's been all over the world. Drummer Andy Janowiak is also a Berklee grad who operates his own studio and, like Dietel, has performed on stage with Worrell.

"Everyone in the band has a ton of experience," Dietel describes We May Be Right. "Everyone can play different styles, and everyone's had a bit of experience out there crossing state lines."

From its beginnings, the band's dynamism lent itself to recreating *The Stranger*, a wide-ranging collection of compositions considered to be Billy Joel's breakthrough. From the assertive pop rock opener "Movin' Out (Anthony's Song)" to the funky title track and other classics, like the jazz rock epic "Scenes from an Italian Restaurant," *The Stranger* struck Dietel then and now as a truly complete recording.

"His records are always very melodic and interesting, musically speaking, [...] but it gave me a start-to-finish feel, like you would sit there and listen to a sonata and all the movements," Dietel says. "It almost had parts to me, even before I knew what a sonata was. The songs kind of spoke to me, like this needs to be played in order. If you could catch side two after side one, I think it's even better, to listen to the whole thing at once. [...] I just thought that

record, from A to Z, if I had to pick one to do, I thought that would be the one."

The Stranger indeed proved to be the ideal framework for the band to find its sync and to demonstrate its versatility with its own jams and improvisations.

"We kind of did it a little differently, where we started out at the bars because it was sort of taking a shape of its own. So, we kind of honed our skills with these live practices when we'd have to play three or four hours some nights and just bang through all the songs."

But as the band's name suggests, We May Be Right performs tracks from all phases of Billy Joel's career, building sets that span his acclaimed songbook, including recent singles, and the order changes from night to night.

"His music's more popular now than ever," is Dietel's conclusion, and his perspective is an informed one. No matter where We May Be Right goes, the band leader observes lifelong Billy Joel devotees belting out the lyrics to every song, word by word, in what customarily transforms into an all-out bash.

"It's just great to see and so much fun to talk to people afterwards," Dietel says. "Everybody has a story. People say, 'Oh, well this song reminds me of this; this song reminds you of that.' It's just great to hear all the stories, and people sometimes are wearing their (Billy Joel) concert T-shirts. It's just so rewarding to see how much this music means to people."

We May Be Right: Billy Joel Tribute will perform on Nov. 9 at 7:30 p.m. at the Strand Center Theatre in Plattsburgh. Ticket costs range between \$35 and \$55. For more information or to purchase tickets, visit strandcenter.org.

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