

Ode to Billy Joe

“Billie Joe McAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge”

In 1967, Billie Joe jumping off the Tallahatchie Bridge was one of the hottest topics of that summer, all over the world. The fact that it all had to do with a surprise number one hit song shows the power of great storytelling. Everyone was conjecturing what it was that was thrown off the Tallahatchie Bridge and why Billie Joe had killed himself. It became part of popular culture almost instantly. Bobbie Gentry, the song’s writer and singer, who’d been signed to Capitol Records, had recorded what was going to be her first single, the planned “A” side of which was called “Mississippi Delta.” The “B” side was a song called “Ode to Billie Joe.” The original recording was just Gentry, guitar, and eleven verses of the song, lasting seven minutes. At some point, the folks at Capitol brilliantly decided that the song had more potential than “Mississippi Delta” and cut it by half and brought in Jimmie Haskell, a wonderful arranger, to add strings. It turned an interesting song done interestingly, into something wholly other, and the record was an instant smash, spending four weeks as the number one pop song in the nation on the *Billboard* chart. When the dust settled, it was the third most popular record of 1967 (behind “The Letter” by the Box Tops and “To Sir, With Love” by Lulu). It garnered eight Grammy nominations, winning three for Gentry and one for arranger Haskell.

Nine years later, Warner Bros. decided to turn the song into a feature film and hired author Herman Raucher (*Summer of '42*) to do so. He met with Gentry, who told him that while the song was inspired by a real life event, she didn’t really know why the person on whom she’d based Billie Joe committed suicide. She gave Raucher permission to take the story in whatever direction he felt was right. Max Baer, Jr. directed and produced the film – he was, at the time, best known for playing Jethro Bodine on the hit TV series *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Young actors Robby Benson and Glynnis O’Connor were cast in the leads, along with Joan Hotchkiss, James Best (giving a sensitive and wonderful performance), and others. Raucher changed the spelling of Billie to Billy and his screenplay fleshed out the events of the song, and gave the audience the reason for Billy Joe’s jumping off the Tallahatchie Bridge.

The film was a box-office hit. *Variety* led off its review with “*Ode to Billy Joe* is a superbly sensitive period romantic tragedy based on Bobbie Gentry’s 1967 hit song lyric. Robby Benson is excellent as Billy Joe, and Glynnis O’Connor is outstanding as his Juliet.” Roger Ebert, in talking about the film having to explain what is not explained in the song, said, “The film explains. It had to, I suppose, because a movie based on a song like ‘Ode to Billy Joe’ had to come up with something or be accused of copping out.” He continued, “What’s good about the film is that it doesn’t just exploit the materials of the Gentry song. It goes to

some lengths to give us a touching, convincing portrait of its people.” Much of that sensitive, touching romantic tragedy can be attributed to the wonderful score by Michel Legrand.

Legrand had already scored another hit Warner Bros. film written by Herman Raucher, *Summer of '42*, providing that film with an incandescent score and getting an Oscar for it. For *Ode to Billy Joe*, he wrote a score of great beauty, basically variations on a theme, and one of his most beautiful themes at that. Legrand was and is one of the great film melodists of all time and his music is instantly identifiable and unique to him. While it’s a short score, it does exactly what it needs to do in the film.

Ode to Billy Joe was released on LP by Warner Bros. Records. This is its first CD release. In addition to Legrand’s score cues, the album also contained the classic Gentry song as well as some country-flavored source cues. It has been mastered from the original album masters.

— Bruce Kimmel