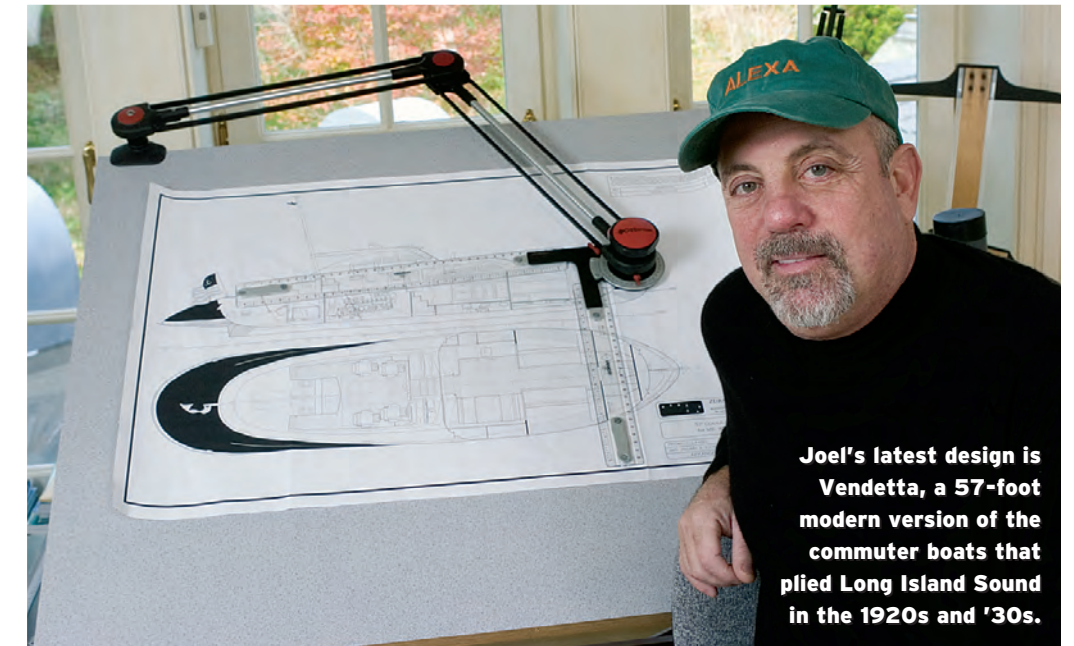


# Songwriting and salt water

BILLY JOEL HAS TURNED HIS ATTENTION FROM THE PIANO TO THE WATER  
THESE DAYS, AS THE LONG ISLANDER FOCUSES ON BOATS AND DESIGN



Alexa is Joel's 35-foot  
swordfishing/lobster boat hybrid.

B Y B I L L B L E Y E R

Billy Joel never attended college, but during his long musical career he's spent plenty of time on campuses — initially performing in concert, and more recently teaching master's classes for music students.

But when the 56-year-old singer-songwriter who's sold more than 100 million albums appeared late last year at Webb Institute in Glen Cove on New York's Long Island, it had nothing to do with performing or composition, at least in the musical sense. Joel and his entourage came to the naval architecture college to talk about a different type of creation: designing and building boats.

That's been one of Joel's biggest passions for more

than a decade, and it's moved even higher on the list in recent years as he's phased out touring and recording. So he didn't seem at all out of place as he faced a lecture hall full of students and faculty. With his backup band of yacht designer, boatbuilder and full-time captain, he talked about his connection to the sea, his boating history, his current fleet, and his foray into commercial yacht construction.

"In 1996, Billy found a way to turn his lifelong passion for boats into a money-making venture; at least he hoped it would be a money-making venture," said college president Ron Kiss in introducing him.

Joel then took center stage. His presentation — offered with self-deprecating humor and his own vocalized sound effects of high-performance boats and other nautical fixtures — focused on his latest maritime venture and preoccupation: construction of a 57-foot modern version of the commuter yachts that

carried Gold Coast magnates from their North Shore estates on Long Island to Manhattan before World War II. The new commuter was scheduled to be launched July 24.

"I always thought that it was a great tradition during the '20s and '30s that these guys would go into Wall Street via Long Island Sound and the East River," lectured Joel. "They used to race each other. And they built beautiful boats — Consolidated, Purdy — and they used aircraft engines to drive these things.

"Anybody who's ever been on the parkway or the expressway knows it's just awful. When I moved back to the North Shore Gold Coast area, I said 'Now it makes sense for me to have a real commuter.'"

The Vanderbilts, J.P. Morgan, the Whitneys and Pratts all owned commuters, says the Piano Man, whom Soundings caught up with at his waterfront mansion on Centre Island. "I figured I had this big

house, why not have the boat to go with it?" he says. "I'm only about 28 miles from [New York City] as the crow flies, but it can take close to two hours if there's bad traffic."

With his new boat, to be christened Vendetta, Joel expects he'll be able to get to Manhattan within a half-hour at cruising speed. "I go into the city more and more these days because I live closer to the city," he says. "My daughter goes to school in the city, and I've gotten to the point in my life when I want to do more things in the city." He says he is going to have an apartment in the Big Apple, and his wife has her interests there, too.

While speed is important in the new boat, so is a sense of style and tradition, Joel told the Webb audience. "We know that there are Fountains, there are Formulas, there are Cigarettes, Scarabs and super-boats that go 70-plus," he says. "You can hear them

coming from Connecticut," a statement he followed with his impression of a high-performance powerboat engine. And these muscle boats, he added, look like "Clorox" bottles.

While he didn't want his new boat to be all engine, that didn't mean he wanted it to be plush, either. "I don't put a lot into the boat in terms of creature comforts and brightwork and trim — the things you would normally expect to be on a 57-foot yacht," Joel says. "I don't need deep-pile carpeting; I don't need TV sets. I want a boat."

Joel's previous boats have been designed for performance and day cruising. "They're not intended to cruise around the world on," says Doug Zurn of Marblehead, Mass, who designed both Vendetta and Joel's Shelter Island Runabout. "They don't carry a lot of fuel, and we built them fairly light. We keep them bright and airy down below. So we're not carrying as much weight around and the boats perform better."

Vendetta, like the two previous boats Joel has had built for himself, started out with his rough sketches — "Really like a little kid's drawing," he says too modestly — that he made on the drafting table in his home. Joel says he took mechanical drawing in high school, "but that was just so I didn't have to take math classes. I probably get more into the design and building aspect of the boat than I do in the use of the boat."

That came across clearly to his Webb audience.

"It's a tremendous experience to see the practical application between client and designer and builder all in one session," college president Kiss said after the presentation. That was especially true for the 15 to 20 percent of the student body — currently 76 — who go into small-boat design.

"This is fantastic. He's bringing back a forgotten era of beautiful boats that pretty much predominated in this area," says Ryan Eisenhower, a junior from Schenectady, N.Y., who was among that 15 to

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Joel has been drawn to boats for as long as he can remember.



Doug Zurn designed Vendetta, which has a rounded torpedo stern and air tunnels built into the bottom for her surface-piercing props.



# Gold records and sportfishermen

Although he grew up landlocked in Hicksville on New York's Long Island, Billy Joel has been drawn to the sea and boats for as long as he can remember.

First, he used to look at boats on family excursions to the North Shore. As he got older he took a bolder, more hands-on approach. "I used to 'borrow' boats," he confided to the Webb Institute audience he addressed last fall in a lecture on designing and building boats. "I would just unclip them from the moorings, motor them around, bring them back and clean them up. It's a good way to learn how to be a good boater because you don't

mess up with somebody else's boat."

In 1971, when he was living in Hampton Bays and his first solo album, "Cold Spring Harbor," had just been released, he joined the ranks of boat owners. "My first boat was a rowboat," he says. "I bought it in Hampton Bays. It was an 18-foot wood lapstrake whaling dory. It was a heart attack rowing this thing, so I got a little money and bought myself a kicker, a 10-hp Evinrude." Then he could fish, clam, and explore the bays and harbors of Long Island's South Fork.

Joel sold the dory after one summer and moved to

California, where he began playing in a piano bar under the name Bill Martin to escape an onerous recording contract. That experience resulted in his breakout album, "Piano Man," in 1973.

When he returned to Long Island he rented a place on Oyster Bay and bought a 17-foot Boston Whaler. By the early 1980s, his career soaring and with a house on the waterfront in Lloyd Harbor that he shared with then-wife Christie Brinkley, he owned a 20-foot Shamrock skiff.

As more gold records lined the walls in Lloyd Harbor and later in Amagansett, Joel's boats got bigger. There was a 33-foot cruiser named Sea Miner he used to fish offshore and a custom-built 38-foot sportfishing boat named Sea Major. He traded up to a 46-foot Jarvis Newman sportfisherman with a tower and flybridge that he named Alexa Ray after his daughter. Joel says it was a "battle wagon bristling with fishing rods" that he bought for tuna fishing to help pay for the boat.

"We caught like a half a dozen over a few years," he says. "I couldn't get my friends to play hooky and go fishing for a few days."

After that, Joel decided to simplify his nautical life, as his musical career got more complicated. Seeking a boat he could take out by himself, Joel and Peter Needham of C.H. Marine came up with the design for Alexa, a 36-foot fiberglass hybrid of a swordfishing boat and a lobster boat.

"No frills, with no muss, no fuss, no bells, no whistles," Joel says. "I wanted to have a pulpit so I could maybe find a tuna basking and stick it. I've always admired commercial fishermen. These guys have to go out day in, day out no matter what the weather conditions, no matter what the sea conditions are, to bring home the bacon. It occurred to me that there was something admirable about the lines of these boats, something that made sense to me with the sheer line and the height of the bow, the camber on the transom."

He still has Alexa after 13 years.

While all of his 16 albums have been inspired by the sea and make reference to it — and his personal management company is called Maritime Music Inc. — Alexa and his help for East End baymen gave rise to his most seaworthy song: "The Downeaster Alexa."

Joel has said that salt water is so important to him that he can't compose out of sight of it. "Everywhere I've ever lived that I've written music, I've had a view of salt water — it has to be salt water," he says. "It has some kind of primeval impact on me. I think I use the sea and aspects of the sea — harbors, bays, waves, beaches — as metaphors in a lot of the lyrics that I write. 'Storm Front' is kind of a metaphorical song about water. 'River of Dreams' is about water. There's a song called 'Lullaby' in which there's a verse devoted to the similarity with rocking a baby and the rocking of a boat out on the ocean."

Seated at the table in his two-story kitchen, Joel continues his discussion about boats and fishing. "Alexa I'll probably never sell because that's my good all-around, all-purpose boat," he says. "I probably won't continue to go deep-sea fishing now that I'm back here. From the East End it was an easy jump to get out to the canyons."

Alexa cruises between 23 and 25 knots under optimal conditions, pretty good for a lobster boat, Joel says. "I've got a 600-hp MAN diesel in that thing," he says.

After he built Alexa, Joel added a 28-foot Ellis named Half Shell to his fleet and then Catsass. "I didn't name that boat," he's quick to point out. She was a 27-foot workboat that was owned by a lobsterman friend, Dave

Joel has an extensive model ship collection in his Centre Island, N.Y., home.



The Shelter Island Runabout also was a Joel/Zurn collaboration.

Neilsen, who lived near Joel's vacation house in Menemsha, Mass., on Martha's Vineyard and kept his boat at Joel's dock. After Neilsen died fishing in a storm, he says he didn't want Catsass going to strangers. "So I bought the boat from the family," he says. He sold it several years later.

Next in the batting order was Joel's most unusual vessel: Red Head, which he describes as a "65-foot mini-cargo ship or pocket freighter." When he saw her, then named Who Cares and for sale in Florida, his reaction was, "Now, that is cute as a button." It was built of steel and looked like a small cargo ship, with the house aft (which Joel extended), a well deck and a fo'c'sle.

The work was done under the supervision of Gene Pelland, who was hired to deliver the boat from Florida to Long Island, and eventually became Joel's full-time skipper and jack of all trades.

After six years he sold Red Head to a non-profit nautical organization in Florida. As for the name, Joel says, "I always had a thing for redheads. I dated redheads when I was young; the first woman who ever broke my heart was a redhead."

He was dating a woman with red hair when he bought the boat. He changed the color scheme from green, going for a Celtic pub look, with the top of the pilothouse painted red.

"Of course after that, I went out with a blonde who asked me to change the name," he says. "Changing the name of a boat is unlucky." But he did it anyway. He changed it to Islander and then back to Red Head, then Coaster — because she was a Florida coaster — and then back to Red Head.

Joel also has a landing craft. The custom 28-foot aluminum hull is powered by twin Honda 130-hp outboards. With its non-skid ramp, it is used for carrying small vehicles, Pelland says. It can be held in place on the beach with a steel spud that drops from the stern like a work barge.

"Where I live in Centre Island, you can't have a dock," Joel says. (His property abuts a national wildlife refuge.) "You can't put a piling in the water because it will disturb the ecosystem. But you can ram this thing onto the beach and crush every living thing, and that's OK," he quips.

Although Joel has eschewed concert tours for the past two years, he says he still doesn't get to spend as much time as he'd like on the water.

"Definitely not enough," he says.

— Bill Bleyer

20 percent. "It's part of this culture that needs to be preserved."

After his initial research, Joel approached Zurn in 2000 with the idea for a commuter yacht, and they began kicking around ideas before Zurn undertook serious design work the following year.

Zurn, who is 42, has had many clients since he set up shop a dozen years ago ([www.zurnyachts.com](http://www.zurnyachts.com)). But he insists Joel has been one of the best. "He has great ideas, and he listens well," Zurn says. That also means he can be convinced to drop ideas that won't work.

And while Zurn says his high-profile customer has asked for more changes in the design than other prospective owners, there have been no arguments. "A lot of my clients have egos," Zurn says, "but Billy's pretty cool."

## The "boat business"

Construction of Vendetta began last year on Shelter Island at C.H. Marine, which handles construction of the previous Joel/Zurn collaboration, the Shelter Island Runabout, a 38-foot picnic cruiser based on Joel's initial order. Thirty-nine have been ordered so far. The number of orders for the runabout has surprised both Joel and Peter Needham, who oversees construction of the boats.

"Billy and I figured maybe there was a life of two boats a year, tops 10 total," Needham says. "As soon as people saw the boat, they went bananas over it, and we started getting phone calls."

Most of the orders came from people who saw the runabout at boat shows, Needham says. There was almost no paid advertising, although the Joel connection generated a lot of free trade and general-interest press coverage.

"These boats were flying out the door," says Joel. "We had a hiccup when the economy took a dump. Of course, the first thing to go are the toys, and boats are looked at as toys."

When the economy did improve, a spate of new orders arrived for the Shelter Island Runabout. "I own the mold for the hull and the deck," Joel says. "Every time Peter builds a boat, I get a commission."

But those new orders began diverting workers from his personal project, so Joel in March had the commuter moved to Derecktor Shipyard in Mamaronck, N.Y., for completion. The main components of the commuter came from North End Composites in Rockland, Maine, which shipped the modified-vee

hull, deck and hardtop to Shelter Island.

Joel was in the market for the commuter because he had sold his prototype Shelter Island Runabout to a buyer who refused to wait for another boat to be built. "He pointed at my boat and said, 'Whose is that?'" Joel recalls. "I said 'Well, that's mine.' And he goes, 'Are you in the boat business or not?' ... And I sold the boat."

## A \$2M one-off

Even without Awlgrip on the hull and with the hardtop, seats and other final details missing, Vendetta was an impressive vessel that looked like it was moving fast even while at rest. The 21-ton vessel has a plumb bow with a good amount of flare, and a rounded torpedo stern. Finished, she will have a black hull, white bootstripe and white cabin top. Looking down on her from above, she looks like an egg with a lot of beam forward, tapering toward the stern.

The boat is powered by twin 1,300-hp MAN diesels mounted under the cockpit sole and linked to Power-Vent surface drives that will propel her to a projected top speed of 60 mph and cruising speed of about 45, with acceleration like a speedboat. Zurn calculates a range of about 490 nautical miles at a cruising speed of 40 knots, burning roughly 54 gallons of her 660-gallon fuel supply an hour.

The boat is equipped with surface-piercing props, the upper half of which remain out of the water when it's running at speed. With the shaft and strut out of the water while under way, there's a big reduction in drag. This also allows the boat to operate in much shallower water. The drives are housed in air tunnels built into the bottom of the hull that force air from the stern into the space occupied by the propellers to replace the air they push out. The boat has a two-stage rudder, with only the lower, smaller section in the water when the boat is running at speed. A bow thruster will aid maneuvering.

In the cabin there's a private head compartment forward, and the rest of the space is open, with a settee that also serves as a bunk on each side just abaft the head. Aft the bunks are a small galley with Corian countertops and a dinette. The interior is finished in off-white, with rust-colored trim.

The interior is built of balsa wood with a thin fiberglass skin. It's the same strength as a piece of 3/4-inch plywood but weighs almost nothing.

Vendetta cost more than \$2 million, and anyone who wanted a copy would pay that much even for a similar, stripped-down model. She is a one-off with no mold, and each new boat would be a one-off, as well — unless there was enough demand to justify making molds, which Joel would then own.

Joel says it would be great if the boat did sell commercially. "But it's going to be a very expensive boat," he says. "There's not a whole lot of people willing to shell out that much money for this boat. The interior's not going to be finished for living aboard, even though she's 57 feet and \$2.5 million."

In addition to commuting to Manhattan, Joel says he might sleep aboard Vendetta, "if my wife is interested in doing that. I might zip up the Hudson or go down the Intracoastal. But I'm really using it as a taxi to go from Point A to Point B in style."

## On the home front

Joel's estate is awash in nautical touches. Outside the front door, in the center of the circular driveway, he has installed a large pair of surplus binoculars that once were mounted on the bridge of a Russian battleship. They are pointed at the house he used to own across the harbor on Lloyd Neck.



# The best job on — and off — the water

Gene Pelland says his fellow professional yacht captains live by a simple credo: "Don't mow the owner's lawn."

What that means is most captains who work for a private owner want to limit their work to the boats they were hired to run, and avoid doing unrelated chores.

"There is a fine line that you walk," says Pelland, who has worked for a number of yacht owners and became Joel's captain in 1998. "But I never walked it

"I had done other powerboat deliveries, but this one was kind of unusual," Pelland says. "When I saw [the boat] in Jupiter Inlet, I said, 'You've got to be kidding.'

Heading up the East Coast in November, Pelland says he began to like the boat more and more. "It was a great boat," he says. "I kept a little log where I noted things about the boat that were good and things that could be better, and made some suggestions and gave the book to Billy. He read it and the suggestions, and he called me up and said 'Would you like to do these things that you mentioned to better the boat?' It was winter in Rhode Island, so an indoor project sounded pretty good."

They took the boat to a boatyard and took care of the projects Pelland had suggested, then kept going. "The projects probably snowballed fourfold," says Pelland. "We basically refitted the whole boat, from rewiring it and replumbing it to a lot of steel work, all the interior."

As the refit progressed, Joel saw how complicated the boat was and realized he was going to need somebody full time to help run and care for it.

"I have a six-pack captain's license, but it was obviously way too much boat for me to handle," says Joel. "I really wouldn't know how to maintain

the engines and systems on the boat. And I really didn't want to be cleaning it and painting it all the time."

Pelland says he didn't take the job right away. He was persuaded when he went out to dinner with Joel and some people who worked for him on tour, and learned they had been with him for years and were devoted to him. He also figured that after working primarily on wooden sailboats that Joel's fleet of steel and fiberglass powerboats would be an interesting change of pace.

Pelland first ran and maintained the mini-freighter, named Red Head, while Joel continued to operate his fishing boat, Alexa. But Pelland kept coming up with projects for Alexa and gradually took over maintenance of that boat, too. Then Joel bought Half Shell, a 26-foot Wasque cuddy cabin "picnic cruiser" that also needed a refit. They gutted the entire boat and rebuilt it. When Joel decided to build a 57-foot commuter yacht, Pelland became project manager to supervise the boatyard.

Pelland ended up overseeing the renovations at Joel's Centre Island house and other chores there. "It was a natural progression from the boats," he says.

One day Joel suggested Pelland come along on a concert tour. "I said, 'What am I going to do on tour?'" says Pelland. "He said, 'Things always break and need to be fixed.' So I did."

He became tour carpenter, taking care of stage construction and running the stage air-conditioning system. At every arena, Pelland would post the most recent architectural drawings of the commuter, Vendetta, in the dressing room so Joel could tinker with the details.

As for those captains who warned Pelland about working for a rock star, they've changed their tunes.

"People tell me, 'Let me know when you want to retire,'" Pelland says. But he's in no hurry. "I think there's a lot of other projects Billy and I can do together."

— Bill Bleyer



Pelland is Joel's jack-of-all-trades, taking care of the Piano Man's boats as well as various chores around his home.

with Billy. I mow his grass and clean his car. It just doesn't really matter."

Pelland was hired by Billy Joel seven years ago to run the biggest boat Joel has owned, a tramp steamer Joel named Red Head. But his responsibilities have expanded to include overseeing home renovations, yacht construction, motorcycle repair — and even going on tour, where he serves as a carpenter and runs the air-conditioning system for the stage.

"It evolved," says Pelland, a 42-year-old Rhode Islander who describes serving as Joel's captain and utility center fielder as the ideal job a captain could have. And colleagues who warned him not to cut the grass are now jealous.

"They think it's great," Pelland says. "They say 'You've got the best job in the business.'"

Pelland grew up around the water but never got seriously into boating until 1981, when he began to spend his college summers on Nantucket. "The water always drew me there because I could live on a boat and get a job on the water. I was a mate on a day-charter sailboat during the day, and at night I was a waiter in restaurants."

With a close friend who was a delivery captain, he began working full-time during school breaks, moving boats around for owners, including offshore trips to Florida and the Caribbean. After graduating from college, he decided to remain in the Caribbean after one delivery. He earned his Coast Guard captain's license in 1986 and picked up work where he could, taking cruise ship passengers on snorkel trips, running a launch in St. Thomas, working on a salvage boat.

When Joel bought a 65-foot pocket freighter, he needed someone to bring it north from Florida. Through yacht designer Doug Zurn, who had worked with Joel, Pelland got the job, even though most of his previous work had been on sailboats.

On the second floor of the small building between the house and garage is what Joel calls The Chart Room. It's a large space with a view of the harbor and the oyster dredges Joel once worked on before his music career took off. "It was really hard work," he says. And it really tore up his hands — not a great idea for a pianist. Nautical prints and photographs of East End baymen cover the walls. Marine electronics and fishing gear are scattered about.

This is Joel's boat-design space. At one end of the room is a drafting table, where he sketches out designs that might ultimately be fleshed out by Zurn. The drafting table held Zurn's plans for Vendetta, which were labeled "57-foot commuter yacht for Mr. William Joel."

Cabinets with large, flat drawers hold lines drawings and sketches, as well as nautical charts. The top of the cabinets is the anchorage for a fleet of ship models, including replicas of two of his boats, Half Shell, a 28-foot Ellis, and Alexa, a 36-foot fishing boat.

The nautical motif continues in the main house, a 1994 replica of a Georgian Revival brick structure built in 1910 that was torn down by the previous owner because it had deteriorated. Joel has lived there since fall 2002 but has never counted the rooms. "It just goes on and on and on," he says.

The only room devoid of nautical trappings — and the place Joel spends most of his waking hours — is the kitchen. "It's Kate's command post," he says of his new wife, Katie Lee. But he adds that she, too, enjoys the water. "She loves it. She's from West Virginia, so it's a new thrill for her."

There's a model of the ocean liner Queen Mary over the mantel in the library. "At night, you can light it up from the inside," Joel notes. There's also an ivory scrimshaw model of a catboat. There's a cocked admiral's hat on a stand and a brass ship's running light.

Outside the library there is an entire corridor of original nautical paintings and a model of the Baltimore clipper schooner Pride of Baltimore.

In his office there's an original painting (done in 1992) by Joel's daughter of the two of them on her namesake boat, an Edward Hopper watercolor of a sailboat and paintings of Alexa (the boat), rigging blocks, and an exhibit of maritime knots and a wooden binnacle from an old Japanese ship.

In the basement the walls of the after-dinner smoking room are decorated with antique posters of ocean liners, and two old binnacles. The downstairs pub is filled with Titanic posters and other memorabilia. Also in the basement is the "Piano Room," a large space that once housed an in-ground pool until Joel covered it with a hardwood floor so he could install a grand piano and take advantage of the incredible acoustics from the domed ceiling.

These days Joel uses the piano to write what he calls musical sketches that might turn into songs — instrumental pieces, a Broadway show or a movie score. "There's a lot of nautical themes," he says. "I have a series of pieces that I call scrimshaw pieces.

They're reminiscent of 19th-century chanteys that sailors would sing on whaling expeditions. I was dying to do the music for 'The Perfect Storm.' The instrumental themes, even without lyrics, are reminiscent of sea life."

Along one wall of the Piano Room a cedar-on-oak 14-foot gaff-rigged Whitehall sailing/rowing boat with a Sitka spruce mast sits in a cradle. He had it built four years ago by the International Yacht Restoration School in Newport, R.I. The Whitehall initially was mounted on Red Head, a 65-foot mini-freighter, but when Joel sold that boat, he kept the rowboat.

"I built it for my daughter, but she only used it once or twice," he says, adding that he's gone sailing a few times and enjoyed the quiet. "Once we get the sailing rig up, I'm going to take it out, and I have a suspicion I'm going to like it. Then I'm in trouble. I'll have to get a big sailboat. More money thrown into the water." ■

## Along one wall of the Piano Room a cedar-on-oak 14-foot gaff-rigged Whitehall sailing/rowing boat with a Sitka spruce mast sits in a cradle.

