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(Photo circa 1977-78. Soul Train)

ELTON JOHN

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"Who knows, when I'm 45 years old there might be an Elton John renaissance and I can come around doing the Hoagy Carmichael bit." —*Rolling Stone*, 6/10/71

Contrary to the artist's own prediction, issued at an early point in his career, there has never been an Elton John renaissance. There hasn't had to be, because he's remained consistently popular and productive for all the intervening years since he made that statement. As of 1992, in fact, he broke Elvis Presley's old record for the most consecutive years of Top 40 hits on *Billboard's* singles chart, having been a continual presence in every annum since the late-1970 entry of "Your Song." Today, at 46, he is among the most successful acts of the rock era, arguably in a class with Presley and the Beatles. Moreover, his longevity as an ongoing, active recording artist surpasses that of either of them. No one can boast a longer uninterrupted ride at the top.

In all respects it has been a remarkable career. John emerged from the obscurity of a British song publisher's office in a meteoric rise during the seventies that earned him the then-new sobriquet "superstar." Toting a wardrobe of outrageous costumes and glasses from coast to coast and continent to continent, he was the

consummate live entertainer, providing a splashy, larger-than-life visual spectacle to complement his music. Elton John ushered rock into the arenas during the decade when that conquest became unequivocal. In a way in which few have been driven before or since, John recorded constantly and toured ceaselessly. As writers, John and longtime lyri-

to people living with HIV/AIDS and for educational programs targeting AIDS prevention. Meanwhile, the hits just keep on coming, including John's Number One re-recording of his 1974 classic "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me" as a duet with George Michael. His latest album, *Duets*, is his thirty-fifth (counting box sets and best-ofs), as his creative energy and prodigious output remain undiminished in the Nineties. He is, and promises to remain, one of the brightest stars in the rock firmament.



TERRY O'NEILL

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cist and partner Bernie Taupin helped identify and shape the mood of the decade from its inception. A multifaceted talent, he excelled as both a sensitive singer/songwriter and a flamboyant rock & roll star. In short, Elton Hercules John — the stage name he officially adopted as his legal moniker — had a lock on the seventies.

At the same time, lurking behind the superstar facade was the shy, circumspect individual christened Reginald Dwight. Elton John spent much of the ensuing decade engaged in public and private soul searching, attempting to reconcile his public and private selves. In so doing, he tempered the hysteria surrounding his celebrity persona and located a tenable balance whereby Elton John and Reg Dwight could not merely share an uneasy alliance but actually become one and the same person. A turning point for the singer/pianist, in terms of his recorded catalog, was the 1988 album *Reg Strikes Back*, on whose fold-out jacket he'd arrayed much of the outlandish stage frippery worn at the height of his Seventies superstardom. "All those costumes are on the cover because that's the last time you are ever going to see me near those," John said. "It was a cutting-off period in my life."

Not only was he composing songs of lasting quality at a still-considerable clip, but he was also composing his life to the point where, in 1992, he could tell biographer Philip Norman that "I'm really happy and optimistic, for the first time ever." Subsequently, he has tirelessly devoted himself to AIDS-related issues, establishing the Elton John AIDS foundation with the goals of providing funds for services

prestigious Royal Academy of Music, where he enrolled in a program for musically gifted children.

While he was being tutored in the classics, however, his heart belonged to more contemporary music. Early exposure to everyone from George Shearing, Nat King Cole and Ray Charles to Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry and Jerry Lee Lewis ensured that Chopin and Mozart would take a back seat to rock & roll. Nevertheless, his youthful training provided him with an appreciation for and formal mastery of technique, structure and composition. The experience, though chafing to a young man with his eyes set on Top of the Pops, served him well. Elton John would be recognized not only as a superior pop tunesmith but, within the strictures of the format, a bona fide composer who elevated the role of keyboards (especially piano) in a medium theretofore dominated by guitars.

Early on, he joined a band called Bluesology, a blue-eyed soul group led by singer Long John Baldry that also included sax player Elton Dean. (The combination of those two men's first names eventually provided Reg Dwight with a suitable stage handle.) John met lyricist Bernie

Reginald Kenneth Dwight was born on March 25, 1947, in Pinner, a suburb of London. His father was a lieutenant in the Royal Air Force and an amateur trumpet player, and his mother was an avid music fan and record collector. Reg displayed early promise on the piano, striking his first notes at age three and taking private lessons at six. By the age of ten his talent was obvious to all, and he was awarded a scholarship to the



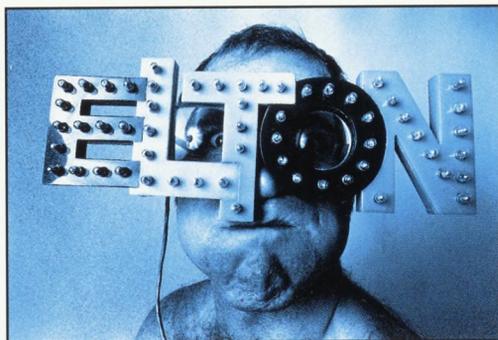
Songwriting team extraordinaire, Bernie Taupin and John.

Taupin when both answered an ad soliciting songwriters that had been placed by Liberty Records in the British music paper *New Musical Express*. The two encamped in John's mother's house, Taupin scribbling down lyrics while perched on the edge of a bunk bed and John setting them to music on a piano in another room. Thus began a prolific partnership that endures to this day. The particulars of their collaborative strategy remain substantially unaltered from their initial meeting in 1967.

In a reverse upon the standard practice of songwriting teams, the lyrics generally come first and then the melody. John demonstrated an uncanny ability to put a set of lyrics — even lines of uneven length that disobeyed typical verse-chorus logic, such as the charmingly ramshackle love note "Your Song" — to music in a speedy and efficient way. If a piece took too long to come together, it was discarded. Their earliest albums — *Empty Sky*, *Elton John* and *Tumbleweed Connection* — displayed a wide variety of influences that reflected their deep and intensive tracking of the pop-music scene. One could detect the halo of mentors as far-flung as the Band, the Rolling Stones and Van Morrison, not to mention more obscure sources such as Leonard Cohen and David Ackles. At the same time, their own distinctive signature was emerging in John's crisp, precise diction on the piano and the unique songwriting chemistry between John and Taupin.

If his records established Elton John as a solid arrival on the rock scene, his concert performances sent his career into orbit. The Elton John Band — the prototypical Seventies core of which included guitarist Davey Johnstone, bassist Dee Murray and drummer Nigel Olsson — was an onstage powerhouse. Changing personas, John would transform himself into a wild cockatoo of a performer. He'd bound onstage garbed in outlandish attire that ran the gamut from gigantic platform shoes and a \$5,000 pair of spectacles that spelled "Elton" in tiny lights to garish couture that trespassed beyond good taste into realms of gleefully self-effacing send-up. His stage wardrobe included ostrich feathers, mauve tights, a Statue of Liberty get-up and a preposterous creation that made him appear to be a chocolate box. He'd take the stage in the guise of characters from Donald Duck to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In the game of sartorial one-upmanship during the over-the-top Seventies, John was without peer.

All the while, he was working up a formidable head of steam on the recording front, casting out instant classics such as *Honky Chateau* and *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* at a daunting clip. During 1971 alone, four new Elton John albums made their appearance on *Billboard's* album chart:



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Tumbleweed Connection, "Friends," 11-17-70, and *Madman Across the Water*. The charmed year of 1975 began with his first volume of *Greatest Hits* firmly lodged at Number One.

Before the year was out two more albums of new material — *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* and *Rock of the Westies* — entered the chart in the top position, a previously unprecedented feat. The latter release, an autobiographical concept album about John's

and Taupin's pre-fame lives as music-biz hopefuls in the mid-to-late Sixties, was premiered to a sold-out crowd of 75,000 at London's Wembley Stadium.

Individual songs such as "Rocket Man" and "Candle in the Wind" assumed immediate and almost mythical significance within the rock community, while upbeat, escapist romps like "Crocodile Rock" and "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" helped lighten the national mood during the glum days of Watergate. In 1973, John had the clout to start up his own custom label, Rocket Records, and the next year he became director of a professional soccer team, the Watford Football Club. On Thanksgiving Day, 1974, he made what turned out to be rock & roll history by coaxing a reclusive John Lennon onstage for three songs during a Madison Square Garden concert. It would, sadly, turn out to be Lennon's final public performance.

John's exhausting pace tapered off as the seventies wound down. He'd later look back on the period and reflect, "I was aware that we had been at the peak of our careers, and that that was going to level off. We were all weary, feeling the pressure, and needed a break." John and Taupin took a two-year hiatus from each other, during which time they worked with other writers. They resumed their partnership in due time, however — first, with several co-written songs on *21 at 33* (1981), and fully, with *Too Low for Zero* (1983). The Eighties found John working less furiously, though no less successfully, charting almost exactly as many Top 40 singles during that decade as he had in the previous one. Among them was "Sacrifice," taken from 1990's *Sleeping With the Past*, which became his first-ever Number One hit in his British homeland.

Another of his singles released during that decade of resolve and recovery found him contending, proudly and a little defiantly, "I'm still standing better than I ever did/Looking like a true survivor/Feeling like a little kid." Those words ring true today as Elton John celebrates both the 25th anniversary of the release of his first album (*Empty Sky*, issued in the U.K. in February 1969) and his induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

—Parke Puterbaugh