



John, Sir Elton (b.1947)

by Nathan G. Tipton

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Elton John has, over five decades, achieved an amazingly successful track record in the music industry. He was not only the biggest-selling pop superstar of the 1970s, but, more surprisingly, he continues to retain popularity among his fans and respect from music critics.

Elton John holds a music industry record for most consecutive singles placed in the Top 40, a string that began in 1970 and was broken only in 2000. Stephen Erlewine has noted that, although Elton John has endured temporary slumps in creativity and sales, he continues to craft contemporary pop standards that showcase his musical versatility.

John's combination of melodic skills, dynamic charisma, and raucous performance style has made him a remarkably popular musical artist.

Elton John was born Reginald Kenneth Dwight in Pinner, Middlesex, England on March 25, 1947. Dwight began playing piano at age four and, when he was eleven, won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music in London. After six years at school, he left in order to break into the music business.

In 1961 he joined his first band, Bluesology, but left in 1966 because of creative differences with bandleader Long John Baldry. During this time Dwight had answered a Liberty Records advertisement for songwriters; and, though he failed the vocal audition, he was given a stack of lyrics written by Bernie Taupin, a young songwriter from Lincolnshire who had also answered the ad.

Dwight wrote music for Taupin's lyrics, and the two young men soon began corresponding. Six months later, after Dwight had changed his name to Elton John (taking his stage name from the first names of Bluesology members Elton Dean and John Baldry), he and Taupin finally met.

The collaboration between John and Taupin proved to be lucrative for both men. According to Ed Decker, Taupin would write the lyrics first, then John would compose music to them with incredible speed, sometimes in less than an hour.

By 1969 John had his first hit album, an eponymous LP that contained the touching ballad "Your Song," which climbed both the American and English record charts. Although John had a retiring personality, he hid his shyness on stage by adopting an outrageous performance style, including wearing outlandish clothes and leaping around as he played the piano.

Throughout the 1970s, John's concert attire would become more and more campy. He pranced across the stage wearing everything from huge feather boas to astronaut suits, almost always highlighted by a selection from his endless collection of bizarre eyeglasses.

From 1972 to 1976 the writing team of John and Taupin scored sixteen Top 20 hits in a row. In 1976 John,



Sir Elton John on stage in 2008. Photograph by Richard Mushet. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license.

citing exhaustion, curtailed his rigorous concert and recording schedule. That year, as Colin Larkin has noted, he then entered an uncomfortable phase in his life. John not only acknowledged his bisexuality, but also confessed to personal insecurities about his weight and baldness.

These personal problems also affected his working relationship with Bernie Taupin, who broke with John and began working with other musicians. In 1980, however, the pair reunited, and their string of hits continued unabated. But John's personal life remained in turmoil. According to Erlewine, John had been addicted to cocaine and alcohol since the mid-1970s, and the situation only worsened during the 1980s.

John surprised the media and his fans by marrying Renate Blauel in 1984. The couple remained married for four years, although John later admitted that he had known he was homosexual long before his marriage.

John performed at Wham's farewell concert in 1985 and appeared at the historic Live Aid concert that same year. However, at an Australian concert in 1986, he collapsed on stage and subsequently underwent throat surgery.

During the mid-1980s, John developed a close friendship with Ryan White, a teenage hemophiliac who contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion. White attracted international attention when he was barred from his Kokomo, Indiana middle school in 1985. John not only befriended the courageous young man but also provided financial help and emotional support for White's family.

Ryan White died on April 8, 1990. John had dedicated "Candle in the Wind," the song he and Taupin had written as an elegy for Marilyn Monroe, to Ryan at the Farm Aid concert in Indianapolis the night before Ryan's death. In a touching performance, he reprised the song at White's funeral.

John, along with talk show host Phil Donahue, was also instrumental in helping Ryan's mother Jeanne White start up the Ryan White Foundation for the prevention of AIDS. In 1992, John also established his own non-profit group, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, which has contributed in excess of \$25 million to various AIDS causes worldwide. John also announced that all royalties from his singles sales would henceforth go to AIDS research.

Also in 1992, John and Taupin signed a record-breaking publishing deal with Warner/Chappell Music for an estimated \$39 million. In 1994 John collaborated with lyricist Tim Rice on songs for Disney's *The Lion King*, and one of their collaborations, "Can You Feel the Love Tonight?," won an Academy Award for Best Original Song and a Grammy for Best Male Pop Vocal Performance.

In the 1990s, John also made public his relationship with David Furnish, a former advertising executive who has become his longtime companion and life partner. In 1995, Furnish shot a film about John's life, *Tantrums and Tiaras* (1996), which unblinkingly shows the pop's star's most charming and most childish sides. In 1997, Furnish helped form Rocket Films, a film distribution company that shares the same name as John's own record label, Rocket Records.

John had his biggest selling hit in 1997, although the circumstances behind the song were tragic. Deeply affected by the untimely death of his friend, Britain's Princess Diana, John re-recorded "Candle in the Wind," with lyrics adapted by Bernie Taupin. "Candle in the Wind 1997," which John performed at Diana's funeral in Westminster Abbey, entered the British and American charts at Number One and spent fourteen weeks in the top spot, with all profits going to the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

In 1998 John was honored by the British monarchy when, on the recommendation of Prime Minister Tony Blair, Queen Elizabeth II, as part of the New Years Honours List, bestowed on him the title of Knight. Also in 1998 John again collaborated with Tim Rice on a successful Broadway musical adaptation of *Aida*; and, in late 2000, John starred in a television special on CBS in which he performed a selection of his greatest hits at Madison Square Garden.

In 2001, John found himself embroiled in controversy by agreeing to perform on stage with controversial rapper Eminem at the 2001 Grammy Awards. In the face of furious protests from gay and lesbian activists who objected to Eminem's homophobic lyrics, John went ahead with the performance.

As Christian Grantham has noted, Elton John is an entertainer who owes creative control to no one but himself, and John later explained that music, no matter how controversial, is expression that deserves protection.

Even after more than thirty years as a musical icon, Elton John has proved that he still has a firm claim on the spotlight, although he has increasingly been moving from musical arenas to the political arena.

In June 2003, John narrated the critically acclaimed HBO documentary series *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, while continuing to fund HIV/AIDS education causes through his foundation.

John also announced, in March 2004, that he would marry David Furnish, his partner of 11 years, because "I would like to commit myself to David," but also because of President Bush's proposed constitutional amendment outlawing gay marriage. As John stated to the New York Daily News, "Bush's anti-gay marriage stance gave me the final push down the aisle I needed."

On December 21, 2005, the first day in which same-sex couples were permitted to enter into civil partnerships in Great Britain, John and Furnish exchanged vows in Windsor's Guildhall in the same room where Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles were married earlier in the year. The union of John and Furnish brought enormous attention to Britain's new civil partnership law and provided John an opportunity to denounce the homophobia that prevents the recognition of same-sex couples in other countries.

At the end of 2010, John and Furnish, who had earlier unsuccessfully sought to adopt a child from the Ukraine, announced the birth of their son, Zachary Jackson Levon Furnish-John, who was born via surrogate on December 25, 2010 in California.

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About the Author

Nathan G. Tipton is a Ph.D. candidate in Textual Studies at the University of Memphis. He has published critical articles on Robert Penn Warren, Martha Stewart, and the Batman comics, and is a long-standing reviewer for *Lambda Book Report*. He is writing his dissertation on queer eccentricity and gay identity in 1950s Southern fiction.