

Elton John: Connections And More

Tumbleweed Connection Elton John

A child prodigy is born at Pinner Middlesex, England in 1947. Enrolled in the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 11, he studies classical forms on piano for five years.

Enter rock and roll, the kidnaper of musical genius, via Bill Haley and Elvis Presley. Hours of dedicated practice turn from the intricacies of the masters to the styles of Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard.

Fate deals her hand as young Reg Dwight answers a music-weekly ad for songwriters. Turned down, he nevertheless gains a compatriot in lyricist Bernie Taupin. Despite mediocre initial efforts, the duo receive a crucial bat of the eye from Lady Luck and sign a songwriting contract with Dick James, the man who published music for another pair of English lads when no

one else would. Those two being John Lennon and Paul McCartney.

Reg, who by now has taken Elton John as his stage name, and Bernie continue to write songs, sinking deeper into the mire with each effort. But with some constructive criticism at the right time from James' organization, the two go away to re-evaluate, and try again.

They return with "Lady Samantha," and find acceptance when Three Dog Night, hot and on the way up, record the song. Elton John releases an album in England during 1969; reception to it is encouraging.

A second album is recorded in 1970, which Uni releases in America. FM airplay gets strong, and "Elton John" begins to sell rapidly. Prompted by U.S. reception to the album, and exposure of their music through recordings of artists ranging from Rod Stewart to Spooky Tooth, Elton and Bernie leave hastily for a six-week tour of the States.

Casting off the image depicted on the cover of his first U.S. LP, Elton whacks his hair short and shows up for his debut before a gallery of rock's most celebrated personalities. Word spreads

quickly, and almost overnight the ominous cry of "superstar" rises from the pages of those journals who supposedly make titles of that sort mean something.

Capacity crowds line the tour's itinerary as Elton is pitted grand to grand with the energetic new evangelist of rock and roll, Leon Russell. Adding his own romping sermon and Jerry Lee Lewis flashbacks to Russell's rollicking Church

on piano, at a time when record buyers are accustomed to songs based on guitars.

The increased melodic possibilities suggested by the piano are used to good advantage, particularly in the way Elton implements them for intensity. Although much of the music is influenced by his early classical training, as well as strong tendencies toward Gospel, Elton John has got some funk to his soul. A lot of it.



music, one sellout after another is conquered. More well-knowns, with names like Dylan, Crosby, and Nash pop up in dressing rooms to express good wishes. Meanwhile, the press continues to grind out oceans of superlatives which make Elton John the center of a forcefield of electrical energy and excitement.

Suddenly, quietly, a Cosmic Stagecoach rocks to a halt in 19th Century America, and out steps Elton John, stopping to make a Tumbleweed Connection.

Pain and Beauty

Elton John and Bernie Taupin write good songs. And their ability is amplified by the fact that they go through a number of different modes and still write good songs.

The maiden album brought that point to light well enough, and with the release of his second U.S. record, "Tumbleweed Connection," (Uni 73096) testimony is clinching. The songs have an initial simplicity and appeal that draws the listener in where he is pleasantly surprised to find a depth and scope hidden by the obvious.

Once lured into the music, the listener discovers that those things which seemed so simple were actually intricate pieces of a sound more complex than most of what is coming from the average rock star these days.

Blessed with a sensitive producer in Gus Dudgeon, Elton and Bernie achieve much the same status as Robbie Robertson of the Band. The songs are involving, forcing the listener to feel the pain, and beauty of their conception.

The warm fullness of nostalgia behind "Country Comforts;" the loneliness of old age cured into "Talking Old Soldiers;" and the desperate resolution of "Burn Down The Mission" are but a few of the feelings captured on "Tumbleweed Connection."

Consistent to the point of amazement, Elton interprets each song with an understanding destined to take hold of the listener, making him feel the reality of its imagery. The deceptive simplicity and actual complexity of Elton and Bernie's music can be partially explained by the fact that it is composed

The funkiness of the pages of history recorded on "Tumbleweed Connection" increase those songs' credibility. It is strange to think that a seemingly English industrial lad like Bernie Taupin could become psychedelized, (summer of 1967) yet come through it with an overview and understanding of the realism in life expressed throughout his lyrics.

Bernie Taupin

Although Bernie plays no instruments, gets no star billing, and is often overshadowed by Elton's image in the press, he is nevertheless a vital part of the chemistry which is making Elton John fans out of so many record buyers. Also important are the backing musicians who obviously have a keen sense of what the songs are supposed to say. They must, to provide such a tight context for them to be said in.

Then of course, there is producer Gus Dudgeon who has risen outstandingly to his calling; that being to take all the elements present: Elton's melodies, Bernie's lyrics, the musicians' abilities, and mold them into presentations of musical statements.

The ability to express emotions which go beyond the actual words and music of a song is what makes Elton John and Bernie Taupin so welcome in the 1970's world of rock. If there were such a thing as a superstar, he would be one. Yet, I have a feeling that the increased acceptance he and Bernie are finding will have little effect on the kind of music they write.

Make a Tumbleweed Connection. The Cosmic Stagecoach is only just boarding, and it's going to be a long, beautiful trip.

Steven D. Smith

Editor's note

The editors of Review of the Arts are accepting poetry, works of short fiction, drama and graphics for possible inclusion in forthcoming issues. Deliver manuscripts to the Emerald Office in Allen Hall accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope to insure their return.



Weekend Preview

The planet Uranus will align briefly with good old Earth some time this afternoon, or so we are informed by two or three reliable sources out on the street. Fortunately, the distant planet will immediately pick up on the vibes emanating from our vicinity, and reports have it that it will DUCK, thereby eliminating any possibility of a bad-vibes epidemic on a cosmic scale. We have much for which to be thankful. Even locally. Read on.

First, little need be said respecting the concerts, Grateful Dead and Supremes concerts so much publicized of late. There's a fairly detailed news writeup on the Dead gig elsewhere in this section, and we need only append one note to that story, viz. the affair is virtually sold out, and if there are any late-comers who wish to get in at this juncture, they'd be well-advised to get to the dance early. A limited number of tickets are available at the door, but they'll be doled out on a first-come, first-serve basis. Very democratic, really.

The Supremes concert (Sunday at 8 p.m., remember) offered a somewhat more congenial ticket picture at last word, but the threesome is making a surprising comeback in the absence of superstar Diana Ross, and the possibility of a sellout can't be discounted in an age in which everybody is selling out, right? Get your tickets while they last, in short.

Best film bet of the weekend—discounting Jack Nicholson's compelling "Five Easy Pieces," which opened Wednesday at the McDonald—is Sergei Eisenstein's "Ten Days That Shook the World," a monumental silent picture which re-creates the 1917 Russian Revolution. This movie, together with a film documentary on

Eisenstein's life and art, constitutes the Slavic Film Festival offering for this week. It will be shown tonight at 7:30 in 180 PLC; admission is \$1.

Another good film feature—perhaps the most provocative offering in recent months—is New Line Cinema's "Coming Apart," which will be screened in the EMU ballroom at 7 and 9 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday of next week. Described by Saturday Review as "a vivid document of our erotically troubled time," this picture is a kind of exploitation venture which, ironically, has something to say. It's about a shrink (played by Rip Torn) who, in an effort to document a reality with which he finds it increasingly difficult to cope, sets up a 16mm. camera in his apartment with the intention of recording a succession of encounters. There's a lot of nudity, strong language, and trenchant social commentary, together with a raunch-rock soundtrack by the Jefferson Airplane.

This is the first in a series of first-release flicks which New Line Cinema will be visiting upon us, and it bears looking into. Admission to each of the four showings is \$1.

That number about "Coming Apart" was, incidentally, a digression. To return to the final item of our weekend agenda, we find a cinematic offering by the estimable Akira Kurosawa slated by Film Society for this Sunday. It's "High and Low," which traces the actions of a wealthy Japanese executive who is forced to pay a ransom to a gang which has mistakenly kidnapped his chauffeur's son instead of his first-born. In tracking down the kidnappers, he loses his position with his company, but learns much about himself.

"High and Low" was acclaimed as one of the best detective thrillers ever filmed, and the curious may see for themselves. Two showings are scheduled at 7 and 9:30 p.m., and season tickets are on sale at the door.

CHRIS HOUGLUM

