

Bernie Taupin,
ca. 1974



BERNIE TAUPIN

FOR NEARLY FIFTY YEARS,
THE PROLIFIC LYRICIST HAS CO-CREATED
A BOUNTY OF POP-ROCK MASTERPIECES.

BY PARKE PUTERBAUGH

If ever two things were fated to come together, they are the words of Bernie Taupin and the music of Elton John. Over the course of a partnership that dates back to 1967, Taupin the lyricist and John the artist established themselves as one of popular music's most successful and long-lived songwriting duos. Their numbers are astonishing: ASCAP's database credits 276 compositions to the John-Taupin tandem. The vast majority of Elton John's stratospheric six-decade run of hits – fifty-seven singles on *Billboard's* Top Forty, second only to Elvis Presley – were cowritten with Taupin. John is credited with selling more than three hundred million records worldwide, with thirty-one albums reaching platinum status: Again, all but a few songs and albums are John-Taupin copyrights.

Taupin and John describe their unconventional working relationship as telepathic and their friendship as that of brothers. Their collaborations are nothing like the storied songwriting teams of the Brill Building era, who spent their days banging out words and music together around pianos in their assigned workspace. Aside from an incipient teaming in 1968 when Taupin and John shared a room with bunk beds in Elton's mother's apartment, the duo has largely worked apart from one another. Taupin characterized their bond as a “nonsexual love affair,” and John said, “Outside of my husband and children, it's the most important relationship in my life.”

It all started with a simple twist of fate. Taupin and John independently replied to an advertisement placed in Britain's *New Musical Express* by Liberty Records seeking talent. Though nothing came of either audition, an envelope full of Taupin's poems was passed on to John by A&R man Ray Williams. The pair met at the publisher Dick James Music to see if there might be any chemistry, and as they say, the rest is history. “We bond on music: a connection that will never be broken,” Taupin wrote of their first meeting in his autobiography, *Scattershot: Life, Music, Elton and Me*. “I like him tremendously . . . and I'm willing to play along, Sancho Panza to his Don Quixote.”

They came from different worlds. John was outgoing and raised in London, while the retiring and bookish Taupin (born May 22, 1950) hailed from the agricultural wilds of Lincolnshire, working on his father's farm while nurturing his poetic sensibility with influence from his more literarily inclined mother and grandfather. “I was always interested in reading English literature, writing essays, and dabbling in poetry,” Taupin told *Goldmine* magazine. “I absolutely loved reading stories and long, narrative poetry. I thought to write a story and put it to music was wonderful.”

In terms of music, Taupin's head was turned by the British king of skiffle, Lonnie Donegan, and the wave of U.K. bands that precipitated a worldwide invasion, including the Beatles, the Animals, and Small Faces. He was drawn

With Elton John in
New York City, 1970



The mind-meld duo,
ca. 1974



On tour via
John's private
jet, 1974



Kicking
back
in 1975



The hits keep on coming, 1974.



Celebrating their Oscar for Best Original Song for "(I'm Gonna) Love Me Again" from the film *Rocketman*, 2020



Donning their CBE medals, Los Angeles, 2020



The veteran collaborators in 1985



Enjoying the cafe life in Paris, ca. 1980

to America's rootsy forms – everything from country music (Marty Robbins' story song "El Paso" being a favorite) to the folk classics of the Carter Family. Ultimately, the first two albums by the Band, whose songs depict a "sepia-toned America," proved the greatest influence on Taupin's writing. This is especially evident on such early-1970s touchstones from the John-Taupin songbag as *Tumbleweed Connection* and *Madman Across the Water*. Taupin calls *Music From Big Pink*, the Band's 1968 debut, "still to this day my favorite rock record ever."

Taupin elaborated on his lyric-writing process in *Scattershot*: "I think what happens is you fly with a loose idea, a phrase, a title, a few random spot points, which eventually gives away to a sense of direction." His main inspirations were "fantasy and poetry, mythology, the American West, and a cornucopia of music, music, and more music."

Virtually every Elton John song begins with a set of lyrics from Taupin, so he's providing the text – which to some degree suggests tone and tempo as well – for John's brilliant musical settings. No one else but Elton John and Bernie Taupin could write something like "Bennie and the Jets," an eccentric but accessible creation sprung from "this wacky science fiction idea about a futuristic rock & roll band of androids fronted by some androgynous kind of Helmut Newton-style beauty," according to Taupin. The slow glam-rock strut of Elton's music fleshed out the outré tableau.

In terms of subject matter, Taupin's lyrics are far-ranging, with some being transparent and straightforward ("I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues," "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting"), while others are open to interpretation. For example, "Daniel" and "Levon" offer scenarios upon which a listener can paint their own impressions of the characters and their motivations. Taupin and John worked together with an awe-inspiring combination of mechanical efficiency and organic artistry, two minds telepathically melded in songwriting union, whether in the same room or on different continents.

It's hard to nail down a signature song from this prolific



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Hanging with Alice Cooper, 1975;
with Heart's Nancy (left) and Ann
Wilson, ca. 1985; checking out new
tunes in his Los Angeles home,
1980; at the 21st Annual Elton John
AIDS Foundation Academy Awards
Viewing Party with Bono, Quincy
Jones, and Steven Tyler (from left),
2013; at the "Bernie Taupin's 8" art
exhibition, 2016; with wife Heather
Kidd, West Hollywood, 2023.



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pair across their many decades of work. Certainly, a case can be made for “Your Song,” an artlessly affecting profession of love uttered in earnest, halting phrases that represented an early songwriting breakthrough. Taupin claimed to have scribbled the words over breakfast one morning at Elton’s mum’s flat, with Elton setting it to music in the time it took Bernie to shave. “Your Song” became John’s first Top Ten hit and remains his most performed song.

One can’t overlook “Candle in the Wind,” either. Originally, it was a stunning tribute to Marilyn Monroe and a somber study of celebrity’s toll on fragile psyches. Appearing on the double album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, a classic-rock milestone of the 1970s, its lyrics were reworked by Taupin two decades later as a eulogy for Princess Diana. Performed by John at her funeral and released as “Candle in the Wind 1997,” it topped the U.S. charts for fourteen weeks and the U.K. charts for five. Offering a way for the world to mourn a beloved icon (and John’s close friend), it sold thirty-three million copies worldwide, making it the best-selling single of all time.

And what about “Rocket Man”? Drawing inspiration from a short story by sci-fi author Ray Bradbury, Taupin’s widescreen libretto and John’s evocative music captured an astronaut’s sense of wonder and isolation at a time when the world was pondering man’s place in the cosmos through space exploration.

A highlight of Taupin and John’s amazing nine-album run during the peak years of 1970–1975 is *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*. This autobiographical work recounted their entwined lives from the earnest naivete of their first songwriting efforts through the pressures, tangles, and rewards of global success on an unimaginable scale. It was the first album to enter *Billboard*’s album chart at Number One.

The duo did hit a bump. There was a period of several years, following the relative failure of *Blue Moves* in 1976, when their writing partnership – but not their friendship – went on hiatus. It was tentatively rebooted with three Taupin cowrites on *21 at 33* in 1980 and resumed full throttle with *Too Low for Zero* in 1983,

for which Taupin wrote every lyric.

Subsequently, the duo composed such exceptional albums as *Reg Strikes Back*, *Sleeping With the Past*, *Made in England*, *Songs From the West Coast*, and *Peachtree Road*. In 2006 they released a sequel to *Captain Fantastic* titled *The Captain & the Kid*, which brought their story up to date. That same year they scored their first Broadway musical, *Lestat*, based on Anne Rice’s *The Vampire Chronicles*.

Beyond his voluminous work with Elton John, Taupin has made records on his own – three solo albums and two with his rootsy group Farm Dogs – and written for and with other artists. Taupin and Alice Cooper co-composed the lyrics of Cooper’s *From the Inside* (1978). Taupin also cowrote hits for Heart (“These Dreams”) and Starship (“We Built This City”). By himself he wrote “A Love That Will Never Grow Old,” sung by Emmylou Harris on the *Brokeback Mountain* soundtrack; it won a Golden Globe Award for Best Original Song. Taupin even cowrote a Christmas song with Brian Wilson.

The list of Taupin’s collaborators goes on, but his work with Elton John is the bedrock on which his career was built. In one of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame’s most memorable moments, John said at his 1994 induction: “I feel like cheating by standing up here because without Bernie, there wouldn’t have been any Elton John at all. And I would like him to come up, and I would like to give this to him.” It was a remarkable gesture that testified to their lifetime bond as collaborators and friends. Tonight, Bernie Taupin becomes a member of the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and his songwriting receives the acclamation it deserves.

Taupin’s lyrics from “Writing,” a song on *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*, nicely summarize Bernie Taupin’s and Elton John’s enduring union: “I know you and you know me/It’s always been half and half . . . / Will the things we wrote today/Sound as good tomorrow?/Will we still be writing/In approaching years?”

Nearly fifty years on from that song, the answer to both questions is a resounding *yes*.