



ME
★ ELTON
JOHN

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ELTON JOHN



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*This book is dedicated to my husband, David,
and to our beautiful sons Zachary and Elijah.
Special thanks to Alexis Petridis, without
whom this book would not have been possible.*

prologue

I was onstage at the Latino club in South Shields when I realized I couldn't take it anymore. It was one of those supper clubs that were all over Britain in the sixties and seventies, all virtually identical: people dressed in suits, seated at tables, eating chicken in a basket and drinking wine out of bottles covered in wicker; fringed lampshades and flock wallpaper; cabaret and a compère in a bow tie. It felt like a throwback to another era. Outside, it was the winter of 1967, and rock music was shifting and changing so fast that it made my head spin just thinking about it: The Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* and The Mothers of Invention, *The Who Sell Out* and *Axis: Bold As Love*, Dr John and *John Wesley Harding*. Inside the Latino, the only way you could tell the Swinging Sixties had happened at all was because I was wearing a kaftan and some bells on a chain around my neck. They didn't really suit me. I looked like a finalist in a competition to find Britain's least convincing flower child.

The kaftan and the bells were Long John Baldry's idea. I was the organ player in his backing band, Bluesology. John had spotted all the other r'n'b bands going psychedelic: one week you'd go and see Zoot Money's Big Roll Band playing James Brown songs, the next you'd find they were calling themselves Dantalian's Chariot, wearing white robes onstage and singing about how World War Three was going to kill all the flowers. He'd decided we should follow suit, sartorially at least. So we all got kaftans. Cheaper ones for the backing musicians, while John's were specially made at Take Six in Carnaby Street. Or at least, he thought they were specially made, until we played a gig and he saw someone in the audience wearing

exactly the same kaftan as him. He stopped in the middle of a song and started shouting angrily at him – ‘Where did you get that shirt? That’s *my* shirt!’ This, I felt, rather ran contrary to the kaftan’s associations with peace and love and universal brotherhood.

I adored Long John Baldry. He was absolutely hilarious, deeply eccentric, outrageously gay and a fabulous musician, maybe the greatest 12-string guitarist the UK has ever produced. He’d been one of the major figures in the British blues boom of the early sixties, playing with Alexis Korner and Cyril Davies and The Rolling Stones. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the blues. Just being around him was an education: he introduced me to so much music I’d never heard before.

But more than that, he was an incredibly kind, generous man. He had a knack of spotting something in musicians before anybody else could see it, then nurturing them, taking the time to build their confidence. He did it with me, and before that he’d done it with Rod Stewart, who’d been one of the singers in Steampacket, John’s previous band: Rod, John, Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger. They were incredible, but then they split up. The story I heard was that one night after a gig in St-Tropez, Rod and Julie had an argument, Julie threw red wine over Rod’s white suit—I’m sure you can imagine how well *that* went down – and that was the end of Steampacket. So Bluesology had got the gig as John’s backing band instead, playing hip soul clubs and blues cellars all over the country.

It was great fun, even if John had some peculiar ideas about music. We played the most bizarre sets. We’d start out doing really hard-driving blues: ‘Times Getting Tougher Than Tough’, ‘Hoochie Coochie Man’. The audience would be in the palm of our hand, but then John would insist we played ‘The Threshing Machine’, a sort of smutty West Country novelty song, the kind of thing rugby players sing when they’re pissed, like ‘’Twas On The Good Ship Venus’ or ‘Eskimo Nell’. John would even sing it in an ooh-arr accent. And after that, he’d want us to perform something from the Great American Songbook – ‘It Was A Very Good Year’ or ‘Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye’ – which enabled him to do his impersonation of Della Reese, the American jazz singer. I don’t know where he got the idea that people wanted to hear him playing ‘The Threshing Machine’ or doing an

impersonation of Della Reese, but, bless him, he remained absolutely convinced that they did, in the face of some pretty compelling evidence to the contrary. You'd look out at the front row, people who'd come to hear blues legend Long John Baldry, and just see a line of mods, all chewing gum and staring at us in complete horror: *What the fuck is this guy doing?* It was hilarious, even if I was asking myself the same question.

And then, catastrophe struck: Long John Baldry had a huge hit single. Obviously, this would usually have been the cause of great rejoicing, but 'Let The Heartaches Begin' was an appalling record, a syrupy, middle-of-the-road, *Housewives' Choice* ballad. It was a million miles from the kind of music John should have been making, and it was Number One for weeks, never off the radio. I'd say I didn't know what he was thinking, but I knew exactly what he was thinking, and I couldn't really blame him. He'd been slogging around for years and this was the first time he'd made any money. The blues cellars stopped booking us and we started playing the supper clubs, which paid better. Often we'd play two a night. They weren't interested in John's pivotal role in the British blues boom or his mastery of the 12-string guitar. They just wanted to see someone who'd been on television. Occasionally, I got the feeling they weren't that interested in music, full stop. In some clubs, if you played over your allotted time, they'd simply close the curtains on you, mid-song. On the plus side, at least the supper club audiences enjoyed 'The Threshing Machine' more than the mods did.

There was one other major problem with 'Let The Heartaches Begin': Bluesology couldn't play it live. I don't mean we refused to play it. I mean we literally *couldn't play it*. The single had an orchestra and a female chorus on it: it sounded like Mantovani. We were an eight-piece rhythm and blues band with a horn section. There was no way we could reproduce the sound. So John came up with the idea of putting the backing track on tape. When the big moment came, he'd drag a huge Revox tape machine onstage, press play and sing along to that. The rest of us would just have to stand there, doing nothing. In our kaftans and bells. While people ate chicken and chips. It was excruciating.

In fact, the only entertaining thing about the live performance of ‘Let The Heartaches Begin’ was that, whenever John sang it, women started screaming. Apparently overwhelmed by desire, they’d temporarily abandon their chicken and chips and run to the front of the stage. Then they’d start grabbing at the cord of John’s microphone, trying to pull him towards them. I’m sure this kind of thing happened to Tom Jones every night and he took it in his stride, but Long John Baldry wasn’t Tom Jones. Rather than bask in the adulation, he’d get absolutely furious. He’d stop singing and bellow at them like a schoolmaster: ‘IF YOU BREAK MY MICROPHONE, YOU’LL PAY ME FIFTY POUNDS!’ One night, this dire warning went unheeded. As they kept pulling at the cord, I saw John raise his arm. Then a terrible thud shook the speakers. I realized, with a sinking feeling, that it was the sound of a lust-racked fan being smacked over her head with a microphone. In retrospect, it was a miracle he didn’t get arrested or sued for assault. So that was the main source of amusement for the rest of us during ‘Let The Heartaches Begin’: wondering if tonight would be the night John clobbered one of his screaming admirers again.

It was the song that was playing when I had my sudden moment of clarity in South Shields. Ever since I was a kid, I’d dreamed of being a musician. Those dreams had taken many forms: sometimes I was Little Richard, sometimes Jerry Lee Lewis, sometimes Ray Charles. But whatever form they had taken, none of them had involved standing onstage in a supper club outside of Newcastle, not playing a Vox Continental organ, while Long John Baldry alternately crooned to the accompaniment of a tape recorder and angrily threatened to fine members of the audience fifty pounds. And yet, here I was. Much as I loved John, I had to do something else.

The thing was, I wasn’t exactly swimming in other options. I didn’t have a clue what I wanted to do, or even what I could do. I knew I could sing and play piano, but I clearly wasn’t pop star material. For one thing, I didn’t look like a pop star, as evidenced by my inability to carry off a kaftan. For another, I was called Reg Dwight. That’s not a pop star’s name. ‘Tonight on *Top of the Pops*, the new single by ... Reg Dwight!’ It obviously wasn’t going to happen. The other members of Bluesology, they

had the kind of names you could imagine being announced on *Top of the Pops*. Stuart Brown. Pete Gavin. Elton Dean. Elton Dean! Even the sax player sounded more like a pop star than me, and he had absolutely no desire to be one: he was a serious jazz buff, killing time with Bluesology until he could start honking away in some free improvisational quintet.

Of course I could change my name, but what was the point? After all, not only did I think I wasn't pop star material, I'd literally been told I wasn't pop star material. A few months before, I'd auditioned for Liberty Records. They had put an advert in the *New Musical Express*: LIBERTY RECORDS WANTS TALENT. But, as it turned out, not my talent. I'd gone to see a guy there called Ray Williams, played for him, even recorded a couple of songs in a little studio. Ray thought I had potential, but no one else at the label did: thanks but no thanks. So that was that.

In fact, I had precisely one other option. When I'd auditioned for Liberty, I'd told Ray that I could write songs, or at least half write songs. I could write music and melodies, but not lyrics. I'd tried in Bluesology and the results could still cause me to wake up at night in a cold sweat: 'We could be such a happy pair, and I promise to do my share'. Almost as an afterthought, or a consolation prize after rejecting me, Ray had handed me an envelope. Someone responding to the same advert had sent in some lyrics. I had a feeling Ray hadn't actually read any of them before he passed them on to me.

The guy who wrote them came from Owmbly-by-Spital in Lincolnshire, hardly the pulsating rock and roll capital of the world. He apparently worked on a chicken farm, carting dead birds around in a wheelbarrow. But his lyrics were pretty good. Esoteric, a bit Tolkien-influenced, not unlike 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' by Procol Harum. Crucially, none of them made me want to rip my own head off with embarrassment, which meant they were a vast improvement on anything I'd come up with.

What's more, I found I could write music to them, and I could write it really fast. Something about them just seemed to click with me. And something about him just seemed to click with me, too. He came down to London, we went for a coffee and we hit it off straight away. It turned out that Bernie Taupin wasn't a country bumpkin at all. He was extremely

sophisticated for a seventeen-year-old: long-haired, very handsome, very well read, a huge Bob Dylan fan. So we'd started writing songs together, or rather, not together. He would send me the lyrics from Lincolnshire, I'd write the music at home, in my mum and stepdad's flat in Northwood Hills. We'd come up with dozens of songs that way. Admittedly, we hadn't actually managed to get any other artists to buy the bloody things yet, and if we committed to it full-time, we'd be broke. But other than money, what did we have to lose? A wheelbarrow full of dead chickens and 'Let The Heartaches Begin' twice a night, respectively.

I told John and Bluesology I was leaving after a gig in Scotland, in December. It was fine, no hard feelings: like I said, John was an incredibly generous man. On the flight home, I decided I should change my name after all. For some reason, I remember thinking I had to come up with something else really quickly. I suppose it was all symbolic of a clean break and a fresh start: no more Bluesology, no more Reg Dwight. As I was in a hurry, I settled for pinching other people's names. Elton from Elton Dean, John from Long John Baldry. Elton John. Elton John and Bernie Taupin. *Songwriting duo* Elton John and Bernie Taupin. I thought it sounded good. Unusual. Striking. I announced my decision to my now ex-bandmates on the bus back from Heathrow. They all fell about laughing, then wished me the best of luck.