

Winning an Oscar for best original song in 2020



Elton on Bernie

‘WITHOUT HIM, I WOULD BE WORKING IN WH SMITH’

Bernie on Elton

‘WE’RE AN OLD MARRIED COUPLE, BUT WITHOUT THE BICKERING’

Bernie Taupin has sold 300 million records with Elton John and written some of the best ever pop anthems: Your Song, Candle in the Wind, Tiny Dancer. Helena de Bertodano meets the 73-year-old at home in California to find out how the son of a Lincolnshire farmer became a rock’n’roll legend – and asks the Rocketman himself for the secret to their musical bromance

Bernie Taupin photographed by Leigh Keily, under one of his own artworks at his home in California last month



The name Bernie Taupin may not be familiar but his words are among the most beloved in the English language, at the very heart of pop culture. “I should have stayed on the farm/ I should have listened to my old man,” sang Sir Elton John in June, delivering an emotional rendition of *Goodbye*

Yellow Brick Road to more than 120,000 fans at his Glastonbury farewell concert, watched by millions more on television.

Taupin wrote every word of the song, as he did almost every other Elton John track. In this one, he is drawing on his own upbringing on a remote Lincolnshire farm and the toll that fame can take. “I was a country kid,” Taupin says. “I was writing about things that affected me on a rural level.” The pair formed the world’s most successful songwriting partnership and they still work closely together. Between them they have sold more than 300 million records worldwide and collaborated on more than 30 albums to date. But while John is known the world over, Taupin can walk down any street and not turn a head. He is often viewed as the unsung hero of the duo.

“I don’t think I’m an unsung hero at all,” Taupin scoffs. Now 73, he has just written an engaging memoir titled *Scattershot*. “I think I’ve got more credit than anybody who is in my line of profession. Everything we’ve done, Elton has said ‘we’: ‘We’ – never ‘I’ – ‘made an album.’ My picture was on all the album covers... I’m probably more oversung than I would like to be.”

We meet at his home “in cowboy country” near Solvang in southern California, an absurdly pretty area of rolling mountains and vineyards. Taupin lives with his wife, Heather, and two teenage daughters in a Spanish colonial-style three-bedroom house, relatively modest in rock’n’roll terms. He opens the front door, his two dogs barking at his ankles. “Otis Redding and Bessie Smith,” he says, introducing them. He waves a hand around the open-plan living area, juke box in the corner playing Billie Holiday. “This is it. I don’t live large.”

He may not live large but he has lived an extraordinary life, meeting almost every cultural icon of the 20th century, including Graham Greene, with whom he shared a martini; Salvador Dalí (“a fabulous conman”); Andy Warhol – “He bored me to tears”; and John Lennon, who was so nervous before an appearance at Madison Square Garden that he implored Taupin to come on stage with him. “And do what?” Taupin asked, refusing. As John once said, “Bernie always hated the limelight, and not even a desperate Beatle could convince him to change his mind.”

Of course none of this would have

Clockwise from top: being awarded gold discs in 1973; Taupin and his wife, Heather, and daughters; at Elton John’s Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction, 1994



‘I’M GOING TO GET THE CAR WASHED, ELTON IS OUT ON HIS YACHT’

happened if he had not met John, who continues to define his life. “After years of being together, we’re just interconnected mentally. The geographical distance doesn’t really matter.”

They speak every couple of days on FaceTime. “[Yesterday he asked me,] ‘What are you doing?’ I said, ‘Oh, I just went to get the car washed.’ And he said, ‘I just went out on the yacht.’ He’s on a very well-deserved vacation in the south of France with the family. I always let him call me; it’s easier that way because of his schedule. I mean, I’m just going to the gas station or the market and he’s...” He chuckles. “Well, he’s Elton John.”

We sit in the sunny garden, which is lush and green with pockets of shade from the towering oak and citrus trees. A US flag blows gently in the breeze outside his



front door. Taupin feels more American than English, having lived in the States for nearly 50 years and becoming an American citizen in 1990. “[Growing up,] I was obsessed with American music and history and Americana in general. Way before I met Elton. I always felt I belonged here, that I was born in the wrong place.”

In fact, it was Taupin who encouraged John to make his first trip to the States in 1970, in which he delivered his career-launching performance at the Troubadour club in Los Angeles, hailed by the *Los Angeles Times* as “staggeringly original”.

Taupin and John had met three years earlier when they both answered a talent-seeking advertisement posted by Liberty Records in the *New Musical Express*. Taupin, aged 17, said he could write lyrics; 20-year-old John – then Reginald

Dwight – said he could write melodies. It was an unlikely pairing. John was raised in the London suburb of Pinner and won a junior scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. Taupin grew up in the countryside and left school at 15, a voracious reader with a passion for long narrative poetry but few prospects. Before answering the advertisement, he was working on a poultry farm that was fighting an outbreak of fowl pest – his job was to feed the dead birds into the incinerator. He captures the misery poetically in *Scattershot*. “As black, rancid smoke billowed from the metal extractors and maggots crawled in the burst cavities of putrid birds, I prayed for delivery from bondage.”

Delivery arrived in the form of John. They bonded immediately. “It was a musical handshake,” Taupin says. John, describing Taupin as the brother he’d never had, invited him to come and live at his mother’s tiny flat. “We were joined at the hip. It was me and him against the world,” Taupin says. “It was like town mouse/country mouse. We were both incredibly shy introverts: two separate pieces that, joined together, made a whole. We were both very intelligent and I don’t think people at the time gave us credit for that. A lot of people looked upon me as sort of a country hick.”

For three years they shared a rickety bunk bed at Frome Court in Pinner, Taupin in the top bunk, John in the bottom. “At the time he wore all these bells and beads and he used to have this unbelievably annoying habit of hanging them on the bed where they would rattle during the night. I would reach up and throw them off because they would drive me crazy.” The room was tiny, decorated with lava lamps and music posters, and had two flimsy cabinets stuffed with records and the weekly history magazines that John “obsessively” collected.

A typical day at Frome Court was “very mundane”. “We’d be up early; I don’t remember us ever sleeping in. Elton’s mother would go to work and we had the place to ourselves. I’d sit in the bedroom and write any old thing that I came up with. He would take the lyrics and go in the living room at the end of the corridor where he had the upright piano and work on them. It was very juvenile and sweet and fun.” It was at this time that Taupin wrote *Your Song*, one of their greatest hits, with its line: “It’s a little bit funny/ This feelin’ inside.” “Those words could only have been written by a 17-year-old virgin,” Taupin jokes. “I wrote it over eggs and bacon at the breakfast table.”

Taupin’s talent for the musical one-liner, the hook that lodges in the listener’s brain, is unsurpassed. His lyrics tell stories, often weird, sometimes dark, occasionally psychedelic – but always catchy. The material is often drawn from his life. “I

At Elton John’s home in Windsor in 1985



‘WE BLEW INTO THE STRATOSPHERE IN AMERICA, THEN WENT BACK TO OUR BUNK BEDS IN PINNER’

have always been uncomfortable with the term ‘songwriter’. I feel like I’m an observer. My mental tape recorder is always going and my eyes are just a camera.”

“It all starts with him,” John says when I speak to him by Zoom a few days after meeting Taupin. “He starts the song; I finish it. So without him, I wouldn’t be here anyway. It’s all down to him. Bless him.”

When they started out together they were known as Reg and Bernie. “We sounded like a plumber and an accountant,” Taupin says. Within months, Reg had changed his name. Bernie wishes he had followed suit. “I hated my name. But Elton never calls me Bernie. He always calls me Taupin. Or sometimes Topsy.”

They would go into central London to record demos and browse record stores, then go clubbing. “But we had to get the 11pm train home to Northwood Hills and then walk back to Frome Court... We weren’t living the Syd Barrett psychedelic ramshackle lifestyle. We were regular guys.”

John’s mother was very supportive. “She was great. She was a typical suburban blowy kind of [mother] who enjoyed a drink and a cigarette. Her sister, Auntie Win, was often there. And a fabulous neighbour called Mavis who looked like a character out of *Coronation Street*. They were great sounding boards, these ladies. We’d bring our demos home and play them and they’d go [he mimes waving a cigarette around in one hand, a cocktail in the other], ‘Ooooooh, we like that. That’s a hit. Pow.’ I’m not a nostalgic person but I do remember those years before we came to the States with the greatest fondness.”

Even after the success of the America tour, they went back to Frome Court. “We

went to the States and the blue touch paper was lit. We blew into the stratosphere. And then we went back to our bunk beds.”

It was the beginning of their most prolific era – five years in which they had multiple hits including three No 1 albums – the apotheosis of which was *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*, their most autobiographical album. “[Bernie] became the brown dirt cowboy,” John says over Zoom. “I became – in inverted commas – Captain Fantastic. We were in two different worlds.”

By the mid-Seventies the rock-star lifestyle had begun to take a serious toll on both of them. “We were both worn out,” Taupin says. “We’d broken every record and filled every stadium in the country – where do you go from there?”

Probably drugs were involved in their height at that point.”

They amicably drifted apart and made records with other artists. But it didn’t last long. “We both had that sense of jealousy,” Taupin says. “It’s like the marriage thing: ‘My partner’s cheating on me.’” Taupin used the marriage analogy again when accepting a Golden Globe in 2020 for best original song for the *Rocketman* movie about their lives. “It’s a relationship that doesn’t happen very often in this town. It’s a 52-year-old marriage.”

In *Scattershot*, Taupin describes John as his “spiritual boyfriend”. Although John didn’t officially come out for many years, Taupin always knew his friend was gay. He writes about the time John placed a hand on his leg while they were living together. “I think it was almost perfunctory,” Taupin says. “He felt like he had to get it over with and I think he was quite relieved when I was like, ‘Come on, really? You know where I come from, dude.’”

Did it affect their relationship at all? “It was as if nothing happened,” Taupin says. “There was no residue from it whatsoever. Had it been a thing, it wouldn’t have worked out. Those songs wouldn’t have been written. It would have been a disaster.”

Over the years John became more prone to unreasonable tantrums fuelled by drugs. “He was really in a bad way. I remember travelling on the plane with him on tour and we’d land and the weather wasn’t right. So Elton would say, ‘I’m not going to do the gig.’ I knew he just wanted to create friction and get everybody on pins and needles. So while everybody is going, ‘Come on, Elton, you can do it,’ I would just sit there and shake my head and say, ‘Why don’t you just

leave him alone? He's going to do it.' Ultimately he would never let people down. He just wanted to let everybody know that he was the king of assholes and he could say whatever he wanted.

"It was a performance. Like the time he was staying at the Inn on the Park in London and rang [the record company] to ask them to do something about the weather because there was too much wind. Part of me found it incredibly funny. Part of it was sad. And part of it was dangerous.

"I say this," he hastens to add, "with no malicious intent. Through thick and thin I loved him dearly."

Taupin remembers a low point in Paris in the early Eighties. "[Elton] would be up all night and I would go over to his apartment and it was creepy and dark. There were strange people who clung to the shadows: drug dealers. He had a music room and would write these endless melody lines that were not particularly good and continually asked me if I could write something for them. I'd pretend I could, when I knew I couldn't. I would leave there completely exhausted." Did you try to shake him out of it? "No, because anyone who's been in close proximity to Elton would know it was an impossibility. The more you would shake him, the more angry he would get."

Although he never plummeted to the same level, Taupin was fighting his own demons. As John wrote in his autobiography, "The only time you saw [Taupin] without a beer in his hand was when he put it down to do a line of coke."

In *Scattershot*, Taupin paints a vivid picture of the tawdriness of his life. "Overflowing ashtrays, the paranoia of sirens, wastebaskets full of empty bottles and bloody tissues, your hands shaking as you picked through the carpet for the last remnants of the last gram." One morning he decided he was done. "Giving up was easy. I was lucky in that respect."

But drugs still dominated John's lifestyle. By 1989, life was intolerable. "Elton's mood swings had become increasingly erratic and his nocturnal post-show behaviour was desperately out of control... If he didn't get help, he was most assuredly going to die." In 1990, John checked into rehab in Chicago and for two weeks he was allowed no visitors. Taupin was the first person to see him. "He was sharp as a pin. His only fear was that he couldn't perform again."

"When I saw that scene [of Bernie's visit in *Rocketman*], I cried," John says emotionally. "I realised that without him, my life was miserable... He was the glue that held me together."

Their success continued in the Nineties. In 1992 they released *The One*, which became their biggest-selling album in the States since 1976. Other hit albums and singles followed. In 1997, Taupin rewrote the lyrics of their earlier hit



ELTON JOHN TELLS ME: 'WITHOUT BERNIE, MY LIFE WAS MISERABLE'

Candle in the Wind for John to sing at the funeral of Princess Diana, who had become a close friend of the singer, and the track became the highest-selling single since charts began in the Fifties.

Taupin's relationship with John has meant some involvement with the royal family, described entertainingly in *Scattershot*. "It's the one chapter that I thought might offend Elton, because he's quite a royalist. He's had such a great interaction with the royal family and he's still friends with them all. From an early age I had absolutely no interest in them; they were like something out of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. But I ended up having a grudging kind of [respect] for them."

During a reception at Kensington Palace, Taupin wears a tight white velvet suit. When he bows to Princess Margaret, it splits from crotch to shirt-tail. "I tried to bow out without her noticing but she was like a buzzard on a gut wagon." He adopts a strangled aristocratic voice to imitate her: "Did we have an accident?"

He had a less stressful meeting with the Queen Mother, who was a guest at a lunch at John's Windsor house. "After the meal she said, 'I'd like to stroll the grounds. Would you accompany me, Mr Taupin?' I said yes, of course... She took my arm and as we walked around the corner we could see Windsor Castle and the flag was up. And she said, 'Oh look, my daughter's in.'"

Taupin does not feel his life has been overshadowed by John. "You could view me as the consigliere: he's the Godfather and I'm Robert Duvall." He returns to the marriage analogy. "We're an old married couple. But without the bickering. And we've had our temporary separation too."

John, of course, has been in a relationship with David Furnish for the past 30 years and married to him since 2014. Taupin's first three marriages ended in divorce but he has just celebrated the

25th anniversary of the day he met Heather, his fourth wife, who is 20 years his junior. "I couldn't function without her," he says simply today. As for Heather, she says she was drawn to his humour. "I used to think it was a British sense of humour. Now I realise it's just Bernie."

The two couples get on well together. "Heather and David are really close," Taupin says, "because they both manage each of us. Everything's in-house now. We have nobody peripherally taking 50 per cent. We are basically an army of four."

Taupin has many other interests beyond music and he writes about them in *Scattershot*. He works as a visual artist, producing abstract works that sell for up to \$25,000. And for years he competed in rodeos. "It was extraordinary reading about that," John says. "I knew that he competed in rodeos but I didn't know the extent of the knowledge he had about horses... [His book] is truthful and humorous and honest... It's the real Bernie. [Reading it] made me realise how much I love him and how much he's meant to me more or less my whole life."

"We're closer than we've ever been," John says. "He's watched me struggle with my life and my addictions and success. And now I'm extremely happy. And I've watched him struggle with his addictions and his marriages. And now he's happy. So we've gone through this battlefield of fame and come out the other side. I think he's mellowed. I've mellowed too."

I ask John where he thinks he might be if he'd never met Taupin. "I'd probably be working in WHSmith or a record store. [Our meeting] was serendipity on the biggest scale."

Likewise, Taupin says he can barely imagine what his life would have been. "Probably one of two things: I would have ended up driving a tractor and spending every night in the same pub for the rest of my life and be dead by now. Or I would have maintained my obsession with Americana and emigrated. I would like to think [the latter], because it shows more moxie in my personality."

"There are several aphorisms for what we are," Taupin concludes, trying to define the intangible alchemy of their enduring relationship. "But alike we are not, and that is our magic." ■

Scattershot: Life, Music, Elton and Me by Bernie Taupin is published on Tuesday (Monoray, £25). To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount for Times+ members

HANGING OUT WITH JOHN LENNON
Read extracts from Bernie Taupin's memoir in *The Times* next week