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**Analysing the Musical Style of
Sir Elton John:
An Interdisciplinary Approach**

Phillip James Allcock

July 2014

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the musical style of Elton John by taking an interdisciplinary approach to popular music analysis. In addition to analysing Elton John's musical style, the approach taken will itself be assessed to ascertain whether it can be beneficial for future research into popular music. The introductory chapter defines the key concepts and considers who or what Elton John is. With a career spanning over 45 years and in excess of 300 million albums sold, Elton John is a major popular music artist. However, the Elton John brand is not confined to popular music records. Elton John has been involved with films and stage shows, and he is a celebrity as well as a popular music star. Issues relating to gender have been relevant to Elton John throughout his career and provide appropriate contextualisation for an analysis of his musical style. These extramusical aspects are discussed in the two chapters following the introduction, and their impact upon Elton John's role as a popular music artist is considered. Four periods of Elton John's music career have been identified, and a case study from each period follows the chapters concerning gender and related issues and stardom and celebrity. Each case study draws upon established methods of music analysis, and evaluates elements of the music such as instrumentation, melody, and harmony, as well as instrumentation and how the listener interacts with the music. Both the recording and a sheet music score are used as the musical text. Their use is dependent upon which is most suitable for the specific analysis task. A range of computer software is used to produce quantitative data about Elton John's musical style, and this complements the analysis undertaken using more traditional methods. The interdisciplinary approach taken enables an Elton John formula for writing pop songs to be devised. The thesis concludes by examining how Elton John's musical style can be interpreted in light of the cultural issues highlighted, the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary approach, and how this research is situated within the wider popular music field.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of five people who have made a tremendous impact upon my life. Firstly, to my grandparents, Charles and Mary Allcock and Len and Joyce Jennings, who inspired me from an early age and taught me to value education for its own sake. Secondly, to my music teacher, Ed Korolyk, for supporting me in my music making and always challenging me to take it to the next level. Tante belle cose!

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Introduction

Singer and songwriter Elton John, born Reginald Dwight, has achieved commercial success across six decades. As a result of this, Elton John has become a major figure in popular music in the UK and abroad. His work includes over thirty albums, as well as stage shows, film soundtracks, and film producing. Whilst Elton John has been immensely successful in the music business, it is important to remember that he has also enjoyed success in other ventures. This demonstrates how Elton John has become more than a popular music icon; he is a cultural icon too.

His private life has been discussed through newspaper reports, interviews, and through his actions, in particular his charity work. His temper has been well documented, notably by his partner and film producer, David Furnish, in *Tantrums and Tiaras* (1997). Sexuality and gender are prominent issues in his life; Elton John is one of the most famous gay men in the UK, if not the world. However his life has not always been as stable as it is today. Likewise, Elton John's career has not been a story of constant success; there have been lows as well as highs.

The central aims of this research are to explore Elton John's musical style within the context of his career, and to create and use a multidisciplinary methodology, whilst assessing the effectiveness of a range of relevant methodologies. The need for a multidisciplinary approach to the study of popular music has been highlighted by many musicologists, notably by Philip Tagg (Tagg, 2011). The length and breadth of Elton John's career, alongside his association with issues such as gender, sexuality, and celebrity mean that traditional musical analysis tools alone are insufficient to explore his musical style in any depth; an approach which incorporates the many aspects of Elton John's career as a popular music artist is required. Additionally, the desire to produce quantitative data about Elton John's musical style across his career makes traditional tools limited in scope and very time consuming for limited gain. A synthesis between traditional tools and computer-aided analysis can be highly effective, as computer-aided analysis can provide a significant amount of data very quickly which can then be analysed using traditional musicological tools.

The music of Elton John will form the basis of the case studies analysis found in later chapters. With Elton John's career spanning such a large time frame and body of work, it is pertinent to be able to understand his career in smaller periods of time. Whilst the exact method for this division is detailed further on, it is worth noting here that a time-based division has been decided on for two key reasons. Dividing Elton John's career by time enables us to consider his music in relation to the cultural material associated with it; this is often understood through notions of time. Secondly, his development has been a linear process. As development within and across musical style, sexuality, gender, and identity are of great importance to this research, it is appropriate to apply a chronological approach.

Elton John's songs are usually created through a collaborative process, in particular between Elton John and Bernie Taupin. This partnership will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three. Elton John has spoken about how important the partnership is to him:

I just adored him, like a brother. I was in love with him, but not in a physical way. He was the soul mate I'd been looking for all my life (Elton John in Bego, 2009, p. 35).

This song writing partnership has been vital to the success of Elton John's career. This sense of stability can also be seen to be a major factor in his longevity, and a key influence on his musical style.

Elton John's success has led to him becoming part of a very select number of people, those who are instantly identified by their first name only. As well as Elton John, other people in this group include Madonna (Ciccone), Oprah (Winfrey), and (in the UK) William and Kate (Duke and Duchess of Cambridge). This further demonstrates how Elton John has gone beyond the music business and become a cultural icon. Further than that, Elton John has become a cultural, musical, and financial brand. For the purposes of this research and to ensure clarity, Elton John will be referred to by his first name rather than following the standard practice of using the person's surname.

Whilst Bernie Taupin is his most obvious music collaborator, there are others such as Davey Johnstone (Elton's guitarist and occasional songwriting partner), long-term members of the Elton John Band, and music producers and fellow artists (examples include Billy Joel, Lady Gaga, and Luciano Pavarotti). In other activities, collaborators include David Furnish (partner and film producer), the Elton John AIDS Foundation (a major AIDS charity), art galleries (Elton is an art collector, in particular of photography), and in some ways the media (TV programmes, TV interviews, newspaper/magazine interviews, radio shows). By extension, consumers are also collaborators as we purchase, watch, listen, and donate as part of these collaborations, thus reaffirming the Elton John brand.

Clearly, to explore Elton's music in isolation would be hugely inadequate and would ignore the cultural and social context in which it is created, distributed, and received. This issue also highlights the need to consider who or what Elton John is. Is Reg Dwight Elton John? Are Reg Dwight and Bernie Taupin Elton John? Do Reg and Bernie create the song and Elton performs? In reality, who or what Elton John is varies according to the situation, and this will need to be addressed clearly when analysing the music.

Even when the research focus is limited to Elton's music, the question of identification of the text can open up a plethora of options and alternatives. Is his music the composition, the performance, the reception of the composition, or the reception of the performance? Identifying the primary text is vital for this research. The sphere of Elton's work is so large that pinning-down this

core text for study can be difficult. Chapter one of this thesis reviews the literature on four key areas of popular music analysis, one of which being locating the primary text and the different approaches taken to do this within popular music studies.

The analytical method(s) used for this research is another of these four key areas for consideration. There is no existing methodology that is suitable for interdisciplinary research into the musical style of Elton John, and so a new tailored approach will need to be developed. An approach that provides quantitative data about Elton's musical style (the 'Elton John formula') has provided a useful first step in this research methodology by exploring the focus in an objective manner. This data has then been combined with appropriate contextualisation to form an interpretation of Elton's musical style in the light of a number of different perspectives including gender, sexuality, identity, age, stardom, and celebrity.

The primary analytical text for this research is the recording of Elton's songs, although aspects such as performance, costume, and persona will be touched upon as appropriate. Elton's body of work incorporates over 30 albums. For the purposes of this research it is necessary to limit the repertoire to be analysed. This will be done by focusing on Elton's *Greatest Hits 1970-2002* album. This covers all of his major hits and takes into account a shift towards live performance over recording in recent years (largely due to a residency at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas which began in 2004). Although he still writes new music, it is the songs on his *Greatest Hits 1970-2002* album that he is best known for. As the focus of this research is Elton's musical style, any songs found on his *Greatest Hits 1970-2002* album that aren't Elton compositions (such as 'Pinball Wizard', written by Pete Townshend) have been removed from the analysis. Musical style is divided into two major components, what Elton performs (song as composition) and how he performs it (song as performance). This approach bridges the gap between sonic and score-based analyses (harnessing the strengths of each), and enables the effectiveness of traditional musicological tools and computer-aided methods to be maximised. Musical style has been defined to include issues that aren't able to be included in a score but which do impact upon the creation (and subsequent transmission and reception) of a song, such as track length and concert tours. As will be discussed in later chapters (particularly chapter four), I have identified four distinct periods or eras within Elton's career. A case study from each era will be analysed and discussed in detail, with a broader exploration of the repertoire covered also being undertaken. Case studies will discuss a range of elements of his music including instrumentation, melody, harmony, lyrics, performance, and the listener's perspective. The time devoted to each will vary according to the most prominent features of each individual song.

An in-depth discussion of appropriate analytical methods will take place in chapter one, alongside a literature review and examination of the issues pertinent to research in this area. Greater focus is given to identifying the elements (relating to composition and performance in particular) of Elton's musical style that can be investigated using traditional musicological tools (such as methods of harmonic and melodic analysis), and which tools are best suited to the task in hand. Due consideration will be given to computer-aided methods later on in the thesis when determining what computer-aided analysis is capable of and what is of most use for this research.

Chapter one provides an overview of the many facets of Elton, in order to pin down exactly what is relevant for this work, and how Elton is constructed. As we will see, even his name is a construction. This chapter provides a frame of reference for everything that follows it. In particular, it establishes the parameters for two key strands of cultural issues applicable to this investigation: gender and related issues, and stardom and celebrity. A range of approaches to popular music analysis is also given, and their relevance to this research is discussed.

Chapter two deals with the first of these strands: gender and identity. The main body of this chapter focuses on reviewing relevant literature on popular music, gender, and identity, and how notions of gender, sexuality and identity can be relevant to Elton and an evaluation of his musical style. The aspects considered here will feed into four case studies as well as final conclusions about Elton's musical style.

Following this discussion of gender and sexuality, chapter three is devoted to examining stardom and celebrity and how these lines of inquiry can be of value to understanding Elton's musical style in greater detail. Existing research in this area is considered alongside its relevance to the focus of this thesis. Important distinctions are made between being a star and being a celebrity and how this impacts upon a reading of Elton's performance, both on and off stage.

In chapters four to seven, individual case studies then analyse in detail a song from each era moving chronologically through Elton's career. They cover aspects of performance and composition as outlined above, and draw upon material from the previous chapters in order to combine intramusical and extramusical data to form an interpretation of each song. They touch briefly upon computer-aided methods of analysis, and in particular the placing of each case study within a meta-analysis of Elton's *Greatest Hits 1970-2002* album, thereby preparing the next chapter of the thesis.

Chapter eight is devoted to the subject of computer-aided analysis. The chapter begins by outlining some of the software programs that can be used for music analysis. Some of this software is designed for music analysis, some for music notation and music more generally. Other software programs were designed and are used primarily for tasks and areas of computing entirely separate to music. This variety, and how programs can be applied to music analysis tasks, forms a major part

of the discussion. A range of computer-aided analysis tasks are undertaken and applied to the tracks found on *Greatest Hits 1970-2002*. This demonstrates some of the things that can be done by using computer software as part of the research process, and provides a clearer understanding of the elements that combine to form Elton's musical style, termed 'The Elton John Formula'.

In chapter nine, conclusions and opportunities for further research summarise and complete the thesis. The main observations are reviewed and reflected upon, and ways to expand the research are highlighted. Findings from the computer-aided analysis chapter are examined in conjunction with the case studies (which give greater weight to traditional analytical methods). A final discussion returns to issues raised in the chapters on Elton as a person and performer and salient cultural issues such as gender, sexuality, stardom and celebrity. The thesis closes with an evaluation of the methodology synthesised for this research and its application to Elton's musical style and repertoire.

This research project is not focused on one specific methodological framework. There are researchers working on automated computer based analysis of music, but such research requires computer programming skills beyond the reach of most musicians. This project will take an approach that is rooted in the subject area of music, rather than for example cultural studies or computer science, and intends to explore what different tools might be readily brought together to explore a body of popular music. By doing so it opens itself up to criticism from scholars focused on gender, sexuality, star studies or computer science that it fails to address these areas in adequate detail. It must be emphasised that this is neither a gender nor a computer science thesis, and that the key results and new contribution to knowledge lies in the way that the intersections of fields can offer new synthesis and understandings to the field of music, and can in particular explore the complex nature of the field and frame surrounding the music of Elton. In addition it aims to explore tools and methodological approaches that can be broadly adopted by musicians, rather than those that are only available to those with advanced skills in an entirely separate field.

The 30 year history of popular music studies has been dominated by cultural studies approaches. As a result, reception or recording-led approaches, which often do not require an understanding of musical notation, have made studies that explore musical scores something of a rarity. This study intends to examine what can be learned from an approach that centres around musical scores, whether there is a place for this format within the study of popular music, and if so what form should such a study take. Such studies still form a significant part of the study of classical music, and it is anticipated that there is much that can be learned from such an approach, within the field of popular music studies.

Approaches to Popular Music Analysis

When considering who or what Elton is, it is useful to consider Elton as a brand rather than an individual. Whilst Reg Dwight may use the name Elton John, it is important to remember that the brand is more than simply a musician, Elton is associated with visual flare and flamboyance (both in terms of costume and performance), campaigning and fund-raising, and celebrity culture, as well as being a musician and hugely successful song-writing partnership. Simon Frith has explored meaning in popular music performance and has defined three separate roles that the performer takes on: person (a human being), performance persona (a social being), and character (song personality) (Frith, 1998, p.212). Defining Elton in these terms enables clear criteria for exploring meaning created through performance, and from where that meaning is generated. In terms of performance, the most likely view is that Elton is the pianist on stage, rather than Reg Dwight. Should this be the case, Frith's categories are a valuable way to investigate Elton's musical style as something more than simply the sound produced. After all, Elton is well known for his flamboyant stage costumes. Are these not part of the performance? Philip Auslander has proposed using the terms 'signified' and 'frames' as a way to interpret meaning in popular music (Auslander, 2009, pp.313-315). This approach is similar to Frith's categories, but places more emphasis on the situation in which the performer is performing. Both approaches have merits for this research. As Reg Dwight has strong ties to the Elton John brand, Frith's approach allows an analysis which explores Dwight's role, how his performance can impact upon what is considered to be Elton's musical style. Dwight's performance is not simply a musician (with or without a band) performing a song; his role as a performer is constantly changing.

Auslander's approach has special value when considering the chronological aspects of Elton John's career. As cultural attitudes and social norms change and develop, so can the audience's interpretation of music. With Elton's career spanning so many decades, it is interesting to understand how aspects of performance may have changed as a result of these changes in audience's attitudes. Auslander's approach also includes the norms of a specific musical genre. Does Elton conform to the norms of a song's musical genre, or does he deviate from those norms in some way? With the Elton John brand being highly recognisable and successful, has a completely new style of music unique to Elton John been created?

Chris Kennett has discussed the role of the listener within the interpretation of popular music. He emphasises the importance of the listening experience on how the music is analysed (Kennett, 2003, pp.196-197). Kennett divides the listening experience into three distinct types: personal listenings (time and demography specific), situational listenings (intensity and locus specific), and intentional listenings (producer-task and user-task specific). This is valuable when

discussing specific performances, as well as plotting how interpretations of Elton's music may have changed over time, such as by country or by cultural group. Kennett's research is relevant to Allan Moore's sound-box (Moore, 2001, p.121) concept as a way to explain and interpret music as sound within a three-dimensional space, by providing a 'cultural-acoustic' (Kennett, 2003, pp.196-197) approach to complement the musical approach. These two approaches can work together to build an understanding of how the cultural and musical 'worlds' interact. This blending of the cultural and the musical is the subject of John Covach's research into how stylistic references can create meaning (Covach, 2003, pp.173-195). In this research, Covach explores how new-wave music of the 1970s can contain references to earlier styles of the 1950s and 1960s, and how meaning can be drawn from this. Covach terms this type of analysis 'music worlding'. This is very similar to the combined approaches of Kennett and Moore, with a clear focus on the cultural interpretation of popular music. Whilst Covach's analytical methods can be seen as fairly traditional (harmonic and structural analysis, for example), bringing the research of Kennett and Moore together with that of Frith and Auslander, enables a much more tailored approach for the analysis of Elton's musical style and issues relating to gender.

The idea of 'music worlding' (Covach, 2003, p.180) is also useful given the story-like quality of many of Elton's songs, such as 'Crocodile Rock', 'Rocket Man (I Think It's Going to be a Long Long Time)', and 'Candle in the Wind'. Building upon Frith's three categories of person, persona, and character, I would argue that at times Elton detaches himself from the music in such a way as to create a new category which uses the song (its story and its characters) to separate the performer from the music. In doing so, each aspect of Elton's musical style is given its own space, strengthening its claim to being characteristically Elton John.

Clearly, the lyrics of the songs will be another useful avenue to explore to understand better his musical style. This can take the form of a standard lyrical analysis to identify the characters and plot of the story (the 'music worlding' of the lyrics), but there needs to be a bridge in the analysis between lyrical content and how the song works as a whole. Dai Griffiths offers one solution through his research into verbal space (2003, p.39-59; 2005). Griffiths' approach contextualises lyrics in relation to their rhythm and rhyme, and how these aspects can be used to emphasise certain words. An approach like this enables a detailed analysis of the lyricist's (often Bernie Taupin's) contribution to the song. This is especially useful to understand better how the John/Taupin partnership influences Elton's musical style.

Richard Middleton (1990), Sean Cubitt (1984), and Barbara Bradby (1990) have also discussed approaches towards lyric analysis in popular music. One of Cubitt's key approaches to lyric analysis is by understanding the narrative position of the listener to direct the interpretation. For

example, in Chuck Berry's 'Maybelline' Cubitt asserts that the listener has to understand Berry's stance/viewpoint/position in the story to explore properly the meanings within the song (Cubitt, 1984, pp.210-211). This is an interesting approach to take when analysing Elton's lyrics. With someone else (often Taupin) creating the lyrics, understanding John's character and his role in the performance is an important aspect of an analysis of his musical style, as Dwight is initially an audience for Taupin's lyrics, before setting them into song. Interpreting Elton's musical style in the light of issues relating to gender from a lyric analysis approach such as Cubitt's draws upon issues such as sexuality, age, and authenticity to determine how the lyrics work as part of the song and the larger Elton John brand. The interdependency of music, image, and sound is something that Robynn J. Stilwell has explored when analysing *The X-Files* (Stilwell, 2003, pp.60-79). This can be seen in Elton's musical style with the interdependency of music (albums), image (performance), and sound (both). Elton's sound is very distinctive and forms an integral part of the brand, although it is the extra-musical elements that frame and generate meanings, signification and music worlds.

Nicola Dibben has explored how the voice can serve to project emotional authenticity (Dibben, 2009). In terms of Elton, this is important in relation to his career overall, as well as in relation to the success of individual songs. Authenticity does not solely relate to whether the listener accepts Elton singing about his relationship with Suzy in 'Crocodile Rock'; it also develops into being a question about musical style, and whether a particular song is 'authentic Elton John'. This highlights the need for research into sources that can determine the success of songs in Elton's repertoire, in order to explore such issues of what is authentic. Combining this with a musical analysis of for example chord structures, keys, melodic shapes and patterns, should provide important information about what Elton's musical style actually is.

The voice is a subject for analysis that is especially relevant for research into Elton's music. Throughout Elton's career, the grain of his voice has been a particular trademark. Whether listening to an early 1970s rock number such as 'Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting' or a mid-nineties Disney soundtrack such as 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight', the audience inevitably tie-in Elton's vocal style, sound, and inflections with the other sounds that make up that song. And song is the correct word, as almost all of John's music features vocals. This is interesting in itself; the audience know that for something to be authentically Elton John, vocals are required.

There have been relatively few covers of Elton John songs (an exception being Ellie Goulding's cover of 'Your Song'), and over forty years since making his name Elton is still touring and performing live. This means that Elton has created a very strong 'vocal signature'; whenever someone hears an Elton John song, they are usually hearing him performing it. This has

repercussions for how the music, the lyrics, and the performance relate. Elton's performance of the song becomes part of the composition.

For the 40th anniversary of the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* album, modern artists performed covers of the album's songs using the 1967 recording techniques employed by Beatles sound engineer Geoff Emerick. What was of interest here was that which is sometimes termed 'the music'; people were interested in the compositional material rather than the Beatles' performance of that material. Elton's work has seldom had this kind of attention, and it poses questions regarding whether Elton's vocal performance has become part of the composition because of a lack of cover versions, or whether Elton's vocal performance is intrinsically part of the composition, which has resulted in little desire from other artists to cover John's songs. On listening to Ellie Goulding's version of 'Your Song', I found the changes to the vocal performance to be extremely prominent.

Anahid Kassabian comments that 'both composers and scholars – and producers of all kinds – know that music is a quick and effective shorthand to do the cultural work of communicating identity.' (Kassabian, 2009, p.51). Elton's communicating of this identity is bound up with the identity itself. Kassabian's observation certainly highlights the need to include the voice in any Elton John analysis. Vocal inflections can be identified using transcription (for notation-based analysis) or audio software (for sound frequency analysis). Certain inflections could be identified and occurrences throughout Elton's repertoire could be noted. Vocal sound would be more problematic, but could be explored in a similar way. However, this information needs to be put into context.

Jacqueline Warwick offers a contextualised analysis of the voice by considering it in gendered terms and exploring the way identity can be expressed through the voice. She notes that 'an emphasis on instrumental techniques overlooks the highly individual voices that, for many listeners, are the most important features of their favourite songs' (Warwick, 2009, p.350). Nicola Dibben goes further and suggests that 'the fascination with stars in general is at least partly attributable to the way in which they enact for us ways of making sense of the experience of being a person' (Dibben, 2009, p.317). The human link is clearly an important way for identity to be communicated. An approach to analysing the voice which recognises the human qualities of this 'instrument' is especially useful due to the changes Elton has experienced in his voice over his career. As other factors (such as personal life) may impact upon interpretation of the voice, so do changes to the voice over time.

Whilst, for the purposes of this research, the voice may be best explored through a contextualised analysis, there are other elements of the music which can be analysed using more traditional, notational techniques. Melodic and harmonic analysis can provide useful information

about the compositional make-up of a song, and can suggest possibilities when considering musical meaning. The data generated by harmonic analysis can also offer insights into musical style. Some elements of musical style are informed by what the artist is like away from the stage, and the next chapter discusses various aspects of Elton as a person and performer.

Chapter 1: Elton John

The Person

Childhood and Teen Years

Music was part of Reginald Dwight's life from an early age. His parents' record collection exposed him to a range of artists and musical styles. Britain was recovering from World War Two, and nothing was taken for granted. Indeed, food rationing only finished in 1954, when Reg was seven years old. Television was extremely primitive compared to modern standards. Reg's exposure to music through the record collection was vital for him to experience popular music, and allowed him to absorb a considerable range of music.

Dwight's parents were musical too; his mother sang and his father had played trumpet in a big band and his life was full of music. It is therefore not altogether surprising that he would take an interest in music as a career. At the age of three he began playing music as well as listening to it. Without any formal training, he instead played completely by ear. His talent, even at such a young age, was prodigious; he could listen to a piece of music and then immediately play it back note-perfect (Rosenthal, 2004, p.4).

He began piano lessons at the age of seven, and won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music at the age of eleven. These experiences focused on classical music, and he gained valuable training in technique. This classical influence can be found in many Elton John songs. As Elton later commented, 'I think my songs have more of a classical leaning to them than other artists who haven't had that classical background, and I am grateful for that' (Buckley, 2010, p.31). Song writing was also part of his training. It is at this point of his life that he switches; from the largely theoretical (listening to recordings and playing by ear) to the practical (refining his skills). His life so far had been immersed in music and he was now starting to make music his life.

He began to perform in public on a regular basis and big break came when he was fifteen. A local hotel and entertainments venue, the Northwood Hills Hotel, had been taken over by new owners who were keen to make the business a success. Dwight soon began playing once a week at the hotel. He wasn't an instant success, with various items thrown at him and people unplugging his PA system (Bego, 2009, p.13). A regular gig was important to further his dream of being a professional musician, and the experience was invaluable; he was learning his craft and honing his abilities as a performer, not just a musician. To avoid displeasing the crowd he could not just play music; he had to entertain. This early experience influenced his performance in later years, with

visual elements such as movement, costumes and talking to the audience, being as much a part of his overall performance as the music itself.

Dwight was growing up at a time when British popular music was changing. Artists such as the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and Dusty Springfield were achieving considerable success in both the UK and the US. Popular music in the UK was thriving, with increasing opportunities to perform being filled by an array of new acts. Reg Dwight wanted to be one of them. In he created a band called Bluesology. Bluesology were getting a number of bookings, including many in central London, although he carried on with solo performances. Bluesology began mixing with big acts of the mid-sixties, backing artists such as the Isley Brothers, Patti LaBelle and the Bluebelles, and most important of all, Long John Baldry. Baldry made a significant impression upon Dwight. He looked up to Baldry and learnt a lot from playing in his band (Bego, 2009, p.28). Whilst Reg enjoyed his time with Long John Baldry, he yearned to be more than a band member and become a star in his own right. With a wealth of performing experience, he was soon ready to take this next step, but his lack of self-confidence was holding him back. He decided to create a stage name, taking Elton from Bluesology saxophonist Elton Dean and John from Long John Baldry. Being Reg Dwight 'was kind of like a nightmare when I was young. I couldn't wait to be someone else' Elton later said (Rosenthal, 2004, p.11).

Throughout his childhood he had suffered a lack of self-confidence. As Rosenthal writes, when Stanley Dwight (his father) was at home 'he was demanding, disapproving, and difficult to please, exuding a frightening countenance' (Rosenthal, 2004, p.4). Stanley Dwight was in the RAF and was often away from home. His parents would argue, and they divorced in 1962 when he was fifteen. Stanley Dwight re-married sooner after, having four children. This made a real dent on Dwight's self-confidence: 'He was supposed to hate kids. I guess I was a mistake in the first place' (Buckley, 2010, p.28). Reg was lonely as a child, lacked confidence, and needed attention, something that Elton believes to be true of many artists (Buckley, 2010, p.24). This background helps to put into context Elton's flamboyance and extravagance on stage as being a symptom of this craving for attention combined with the need to please that Reg experienced whilst working at the Northwood Hills Hotel and other venues.

Self-image was something else that Reg struggled with. Elton later commented that he 'was very introverted and had a terrible inferiority complex. That's why I started wearing glasses – to hide behind. I didn't really need them, but when Buddy Holly came along, God, I wanted a pair like his!' (Bego, 2009, p.6). Weight was just as much a factor as looks. David Buckley comments that Reg was 'overweight and already showing the first signs of a receding hairline...by no means ugly but, in the age of the Beatles, the Stones, and the Kinks, he looks very plain indeed' (Buckley, 2010, pp.18-19).

Reg was acutely aware of how he compared to his idols and this, combined with the unfulfilled yearning for attention of his childhood, goes a long way to explain the glitter and flamboyance of his costumes on stage. One of Reg's schoolteachers commented that at school 'the last thing he [Elton John] could have been called is 'flash'. So I nearly died when I saw him perform at the Albert Hall, and this creature in a yellow satin tailcoat came rushing out and jumped on a piano!' (Bego, 2009, p.7). Clearly, Reg Dwight was beginning to enjoy the freedom that a change of name afforded.

Sexuality

Elton's sexuality has been a prominent issue for the majority of his career. When asked about whether he knew Long John Baldry was gay when they performed together in the mid-sixties Elton replied: 'I cannot believe I never realised that he was gay. I mean, I didn't realise I was gay at the time, but, looking back on it now, John couldn't have been any more gay if he tried' (Bego, 2009, p.28). Elton commenting that he didn't realise that he was gay, shows that at this time there were different influences emanating from Elton's sexuality to affect his gender performance than those that would emerge in later life. Whilst it may be suggested that Elton's choice of costume in the 1990s and his challenging of gender norms is somehow informed by his position as a gay icon, for example, this cannot be assumed for his entire career. Early costume choices may have been a rebellion against his plain childhood appearance coupled with his belief that the Elton persona allowed him a certain amount of escapism. In this way, Elton could be considered (certainly at the beginning of his career) to be creating an alternative persona, challenging established 1960s masculine/feminine norms. Elton's alternative persona in the mid-1970s reflected the rise of glam rock as a popular musical style, with many artists challenging gender stereotypes (Auslander, 2006, pp.6-7).

Reg Dwight had largely been brought up in a female environment due to the absence of his RAF father. Whilst it would be a fallacy to try and suggest a link between this environment and Reg's sexuality, it is worth considering this environment in the light of the above quotation from Elton. It is apparent that Reg Dwight had an unusual upbringing in many ways. The conventional binary opposition between male and female that would normally have been present in the home in the 1950s was not there during Reg's childhood. In terms of gender stereotypes, this provided him more freedom than most, at a time when single parent families were uncommon. He had an unusual experience of the delineation of masculine and feminine for the time, and a sense of conformity to social norms was diminished. The majority of schoolchildren attended school Monday to Friday and were free at weekends. In contrast, Reg attended the Royal College of Music on Saturdays which again set him apart from his peers. In addition, his attendance at the Royal College of Music was due

to a gift that Reg had for music. Reg Dwight's early life was therefore far from ordinary amongst his peers. When, at the age of twenty, Reg was working with Long John Baldry and was unaware that either of them were gay it is perfectly possible that he simply didn't have a context with which to differentiate Baldry. This point will later be seen to impact upon his personal life and music career.

Elton's own sexuality began to be questioned as he began to achieve wide-spread commercial success in the early 1970s. As Rosenthal writes, 'the honeymoon had ended by the fall of 1974. Suddenly *Rolling Stone* seemed bent on 'exposing' Elton's sexual leanings' (Rosenthal, 2004, p.109). Elton had met John Reid in 1970. This was Elton's first gay experience, and helped him to begin to explore who he was (Rosenthal, 2004, p.32). Whilst some magazine articles continued to try and drop hints about his sexuality, Elton was still largely able to focus in public on building his commercial reputation through making albums and touring. He was enjoying enormous success, selling out many venues in record time. The vast majority of the public were still transfixed on the Elton persona, and asked few questions about the man behind it.

This all changed in October 1976. During a *Rolling Stone* interview, Elton stated that he was bi-sexual. As Rosenthal observes, Elton 'referred to this interview as an acknowledgement of his homosexuality. And that is how the public took it, too' (Rosenthal, 2004, p.146). Music sales, particularly in the US, fell significantly in the wake of this article being published. The honeymoon that Rosenthal described was most definitely over by 1976.

Elton had maintained a gruelling schedule between 1970 and 1976. In 1977, showing signs of mental and physical fatigue, he announced his retirement from performing. The freedom that the stage gave Elton, to be himself and to be centre of attention, was coming to an end. His relationship with John Reid also came to an end at this time. In addition, Bernie Taupin was working on a new project with someone else. This was a new chapter in Elton's life and career.

Elton would return to performing in 1979, and gradually the musical success he had enjoyed in the early 1970s was showing signs of returning by the early 1980s. The next revelation about his private life would happen in 1984. Despite the events of the 1970s regarding his sexuality, in 1984 it was announced that Elton was to marry sound engineer Renate Blauel. It came as a surprise to many. At first, Bernie Taupin thought that it was a joke (Rosenthal, 2004, p.243).

The marriage lasted three years. David Buckley has commented that the 1980s were a time of great confusion for Elton, both personally and musically (Buckley, 2010, p.279). The press had printed a huge number of articles about Elton, his marriage to Renate, and how things already seemed unstable. On stage, Elton was suffering serious throat problems, which were resulting in coughing fits and even the cancellation of a significant number of his performances. Elton was falling

apart. As he later explained, 'I got married because I didn't confront the real problem in my life, that I was a drug addict' (Buckley, 2010, p.281).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s Elton began to turn his life around. In 1992 Elton met the advertising executive, David Furnish, at a dinner. They became close and by 1995 David had moved in with Elton. Elton's relationship with Furnish was the final step in Elton sorting himself out in terms of addictions, personal life, and to some extent his music career. As David Buckley observes, 'for the first time in maybe twenty years, Elton seemed to be on an even keel, both professionally and emotionally. Elton and David Furnish became civil partners in 2005 and have since had two sons born to a surrogate mother. The desire to settle down with someone and have children, something Elton often cited as a reason for him getting married in 1984, has been realised.

Alcohol and Substance Abuse

This is how bleak it was, I'd stay up, I'd smoke joints, I'd drink a bottle of Johnnie Walker and then I'd stay up for three days and then I'd go to sleep for a day and a half, get up, and because I was so hungry, because I hadn't eaten anything, I'd binge and have like three bacon sandwiches, a pot of ice cream and then I'd throw it up, because I became bulimic and then go and do the whole thing all over again. That is how tragic my life was (Elton John, Piers Meets Elton: A Life Stories Special, 2010).

By the time Elton checked in for alcohol and drug rehabilitation in 1990, he had struggled with alcohol and substance abuse for nearly two decades. It had taken over his life. His weight had increased to around 230 pounds. Elton looked to be heading in the same direction as Elvis Presley (Buckley, 2010, p.312).

Elton achieved huge success between 1970 and 1973. He then had to work to maintain that success. Elton had suffered mood swings for a while, perhaps due to his lack of self-confidence. This pressure to continue being successful made them even worse. Elton and then partner John Reid started taking drugs in 1974. Drugs seemed to a certain extent combat the energy-sapping moods he was experiencing. For Elton, maintaining his success was to do with his need to please other people. By 1974 drinking was a significant element of Elton's life. He had started his music career by performing in bars and working men's clubs. This environment, in which music and alcohol form an almost symbiotic relationship, contributed to Elton's drinking problem developing.

In 1975 the drinking, drugs, and mood swings came to a head. Following a long series of concerts, Elton and his family were enjoying a break at his home. Many were sat around the pool when Elton appeared in just a bathrobe and declared: 'I have taken eighty-five Valiums. I shall die within the hour' (Rosenthal, 2004, p.128). He jumped into the pool, had to be rescued and have his stomach pumped. This is the kind of incident that demonstrates how unhappy he had become.

Whilst on stage he wanted to please the audience, and during this period he did so through high-energy, extravagant performances. But the need to do so night after night, and always seeking to improve, took a heavy toll on his health.

The music industry has long been plagued by drink and drugs. So much so that is now an ingrained part of its culture. Countless musicians have died as a result of drink or drugs. Such dysfunctional relationships between music, alcohol and drugs are common in popular music culture, Shapiro (1999) suggesting that the roots of these issues can be traced for example to the linking of illegality, drugs, drinking and music in the prohibition era of the US. Drink and drug culture in the music industry only made things worse for Elton. It was acceptable, expected behaviour that musicians such as Elton would be drinking heavily and taking drugs. This culture meant that drugs, such as cocaine (to which Elton was addicted to for over a decade), were readily available for musicians.

Rod Stewart recalls an incident where Elton's drinking got out of control:

I mean, I can drink and do my drugs but he could go all night, twenty-four hours, and I'd be like, 'Fuck, Elton, I'm going to bed', and he's going, 'No you're not, you're coming to Watford with me, we're playing Liverpool'. He'd go and have a shower, change, and come out as Mr. Director. I had an early warning system and he didn't (Rosenthal, 2004, p.242).

Whilst Elton's drinking was becoming excessive, it was clear that he was becoming adept at hiding the effects. The persona of Elton was becoming a series of performances in both his music career and his personal life.

Elton would continue with his addictions until 1990. The life-changing event was the death of a boy in Indiana, USA. Ryan White contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion in 1984 and was told he had only months to live. As was the lack of information about AIDS at that time, White suffered a large amount of discrimination. Through media attention, a number of stars became involved in a campaign to end the discrimination that White faced. One of these stars was Elton. Elton grew close to Ryan White and his family, and as Ryan finally succumbed to the disease Elton helped support the family at the hospital by running errands and doing anything he could to help. During this time he didn't drink or take drugs. This experience made Elton realise that it was time to deal with his addictions.

The Musician/Composer

Overview of Career

Elton's career has included a large number of chart successes, and his music continues to achieve large sales figures. Being in his early 60s, Elton is older than most of the people in the music charts and recording a number one record may be less likely than it was forty years ago. But, as David Buckley explains, Elton is in no danger of losing his appeal:

Up until quite recently (...) Elton would have been dismissed by all but his most loyal fans as someone who had made some good records a few centuries ago, but had since become an ageing pop star who has run out of ideas, a peddler of trite sentimentality and ever more painful and predictable tunes. This is no longer the case. His music is back on form and it is now time to start seeing Elton John for what he is. For a start, he is an excellent and underrated pianist. He is also a very gifted composer, as well as being technically still a fine singer. That time from 1970 to 1975, when everything he touched turned to musical gold, will never return. But there is no denying that a new Elton John album is still never less than a treat, and, on occasion, it can form part of the soundtrack of people's lives (Buckley, 2010, p.378).

In this excerpt, David Buckley raises a range of interesting issues surrounding Elton, his musical career, and notions of gender and identity. The key theme to the above passage is the audience's changing image of Elton as his career has progressed. By describing Elton as 'an ageing pop star', Buckley is raising the (at least perceived) connection between age and success, and by extension age and masculinity. In this description, Buckley appears to equate youthfulness with commercial success in pop music and in doing so positions Elton within the music industry. There may, therefore, also be links between Elton's age in the early 1970s and this period being his most successful to date.

Buckley then contrasts these initial criteria for commercial success with new parameters for Elton's current musical output. This time, the criteria focus not on age but rather technical skill: his piano playing, composing, and singing. Whilst the implications for gender and identity related to the changing audience image of Elton will be discussed more fully in the next chapter, it is clear that the different criteria that the audience use to describe and relate to an artist have broad significance to any analysis or interpretation of that artist. As Buckley has highlighted, gender and identity are lenses by which audiences can make sense of an artist.

There is one final phrase in the above quote worthy of discussion. Elton's music is described as providing 'part of the soundtrack of people's lives'. This clearly demonstrates the role that music can play in people's lives, how music accomplishes this is less certain. Is music background noise to a person's life or is it an intrinsic part of the fabric of their life? More specifically for this research, how can Elton's music provide a soundtrack for a person's life? Interpreting his music in light of gender and related issues can help to answer this question. For Elton's music to provide a soundtrack, it

needs to be relevant to people. What follows is a summary of Elton's musical career including specific highlights and qualities of Elton's music to demonstrate how it may gain relevance for the audience.

1970 saw the start of Elton's most prolific period in his career. His first UK top ten record, 'Your Song', was followed by a string of successes including 'Rocket Man', 'Crocodile Rock', and 'Daniel'. In fact, by the end of 1976, Elton had released nine UK top ten records. In the US, Elton managed twelve top ten records over the same period. But top ten records do not tell the whole story. During the period 1970-1976 Elton released seventeen of the songs that would feature on the hugely successful compilation album *Elton John: Greatest Hits 1970 – 2002*. Clearly, the public were surrounded by Elton's music during this period. With so many hit songs produced over such a short span, there would have been continuous radio play of his music.

Between 1977 and 1983 the chart success that Elton had enjoyed could not be continued. During this period Elton achieved four UK top ten records, and only three in the US Billboard Hot 100. In contrast to the seventeen songs featured on *Elton John: Greatest Hits 1970 – 2002* from 1970-1976, there are just three from 1977-1983. This lack of musical success coincides with a difficult period in Elton's personal life regarding his sexuality and his substance abuse. When considering Elton's music as a soundtrack for people's lives, it is the period 1977-1983 which could be considered less relevant to people's lives based upon popularity of his music (radio play and record sales). Indeed, Elton himself has suggested that events regarding his sexuality at this time may have impacted upon his commercial success during this period, particularly in the US (Rosenthal, 2004, p.146).

If questions about Elton's sexuality impacted on his commercial success between 1977 and 1983, it is possible that these were quelled by his marriage to Renate Blauel in 1984. The period 1984-1993 was certainly more commercially successful. Between 1984 and 1993 Elton recorded eight UK top ten hits, including two number ones. This upturn in commercial fortunes was replicated in the US with six top ten Billboard Hot 100 songs. This period contributes five songs to *Elton John: Greatest Hits 1970 – 2002*.

Since 1994 Elton has achieved eight UK top ten hits and two US Billboard Top 100 records, contributing nine songs to *Elton John: Greatest Hits 1970 – 2002*. This period also saw the start of a major diversification of Elton's output with original film soundtracks (such as Disney's *Lion King*), stage show scores (including *Billy Elliot*), and collaborations involving Luciano Pavarotti, Alessandro Safina, LeAnn Rimes, and Leon Russell. This diversification means that over the last two decades audiences have experienced Elton's work through a range of new settings in addition to albums and singles.

Musicianship and Output

As already discussed, Elton possessed a gift for music from an early age and this was built upon by years of performing in a variety of venues to a variety of audiences. Even today, Elton can perform for over three hours at a concert, and this is even more impressive considering how many one-man shows Elton now performs. To entertain the audience for this amount of time demonstrates Elton's high level of musicianship and how he has become more than simply a performer, becoming a curator or auteur. This approach is uncommon, with many artists performing with a backing group or headlining a concert with other acts. Elton (or rather Reg Dwight) started his career performing on his own, and so there is a kind of authenticity to Elton's solo performances as being realistic portrayals of a local musician performing on their own at a small function as well as a musical superstar demonstrating his extraordinary musicianship.

Elton has also shared the stage with a number of famous artists. In 1994 Elton and Billy Joel began the 'Face-to-Face' tour. This tour was hugely successful, and has been resurrected a number of times since. Elton has had a long friendship with Stevie Wonder, with each of them making surprise appearances at each other's concerts. Wonder played harmonica on Elton's 'I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues', and together with Gladys Knight they performed on Dionne Warwick's charity cover of 'That's What Friends Are For'. Elton is good friends with Rod Stewart, with Elton nicknaming Stewart 'Phyllis' and Stewart referring to Elton as 'Sharon'. The association of Elton with other artists has helped to support Elton's status as a popular music icon, and in addition elevate his skills as a musician. Whilst the members of the Elton John Band are all accomplished professional musicians, Elton's collaborations with other famous artists can be seen as confirmation that he has reached the very top of his profession.

Partnership with Bernie Taupin

Reg's trite lyrics were pure cod romance, and an early indication that, whatever talents he might have, they weren't as a lyricist (Buckley, 2010, p.43).

Even though Reg Dwight's musical career was building momentum in the late sixties, he realised that his ability to write lyrics was holding him back. Reg answered an advert placed in *New Musical Express* by Liberty Records looking for new talent. Reg was asked to audition, which he failed. He was, however, given some lyrics to compose with. The lyrics were by a young man who could write lyrics but struggled to write music to go with them. Liberty Records were sufficiently impressed with the result of this collaboration to give both writers a job. The partnership between Reg Dwight and Bernie Taupin had begun.

Dwight and Taupin had an unusual song writing arrangement at this time. Taupin would write lyrics (without any verse/chorus structure) and post them to Dwight. Throughout their career they would often write their respective parts of a song in separate rooms. This proved to be the inspiration for the title of the 1991 tribute album *Two Rooms*. The 1975 album *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* also referred to the Dwight/Taupin song writing partnership, with Dwight as 'Captain Fantastic' and Taupin as the 'Brown Dirt Cowboy'. This unusual compositional style is significant when considering the authorship of songs and how meaning can be interpreted through elements of a musical work. While lyric writing and musical composition are carried out separately, the musical artist is presented as a unified whole under the banner of Elton John, an arrangement that is confused by only the composer taking part in performances, personifying the musical artist.

During the late sixties Reg Dwight also worked as a session musician, performing on hits such as the Hollies' 'He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother' and Tom Jones' 'Delilah'. Dwight used a number of Taupin's lyrics for compositions in the late sixties. Many were intended for established artists to perform, but people didn't seem too interested in using Dwight/Taupin songs. It is at this point that Dwight's ambitions switched from supplying songs for other people to perform to performing the Dwight/Taupin songs himself. Reg Dwight subsequently created the stage name 'Elton John'.

Since meeting in 1967, Elton and Bernie Taupin have collaborated on over thirty studio albums, as well as other projects such as the 2011 film *Gnomeo and Juliet*. During the DVD special features for *Gnomeo and Juliet*, guitarist Davey Johnstone describes 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight' as a 'chicken sandwich song'. According to Johnstone, Elton wrote the song in less time than it took Johnstone to make a chicken sandwich. In fact, Elton often composes a song within twenty minutes (Bego, 2009, p. 36). This highlights how focused and solitary the composition process can be for Elton, as well as how skilled he is as a composer. as well as the separation between the writing of the lyrics and the composing of the song that exists when Elton John songs are created. This relationship is unusual and has implications for the interpretation of an Elton John song. The highly autobiographical style of Taupin's lyrics adds another dimension to their songs' authorship and possible interpretations. Although Taupin's lyricism establishes a sense of ownership, it is consumed by Elton's musical performance and performance of the songs.

The Performer

Album/Tour Balance

The balance between Elton recording and touring has varied considerably over the course of his forty-year career. In the early 1970s Elton was releasing at least one album a year, and often two a year. During this period Elton was touring heavily to promote a new album and to promote himself as a new popular music artist. In 1970 Elton embarked on the '1970 World Tour' to promote his second album *Elton John*. This tour wasn't actually a world tour, given that he only performed in the UK and the US. As a result of this tour Elton developed his following in the UK and gained popularity in the US.

The tour in 1971 was much larger, and included concerts in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Elton performed between six and twenty shows a month. His first performance of the year was on 2nd January in Birmingham and his last was in Sheffield on 24th December. In total, he performed one hundred and thirteen concerts in 1971. Some months included a gruelling run of concerts. In April 1971, for example, Elton performed seventeen concerts in twenty-three days. The flamboyant costumes had started to appear, and Elton was as much about live performance as producing records. Elton was aided by another aspect of the Elton John 'brand' for many of these concerts, the Elton John Band which, by 1972, had a regular line-up.

By the end of 1976 Elton had performed four hundred and thirty-eight concerts as part of various tours in countries across the world. Elton had released twelve albums in this time, selling over twenty-two million copies in the US alone. He had put a lot into this six-year period, but it had paid off. This busy schedule, and the pressure it created, could not continue. He was at the height of his stardom, but he was also at the height of his alcohol and drug abuse.

Between 1977 and 1979 Elton stopped touring, performing only twelve concerts in two years. Elton had been suffering from depression for a while, and 1977-1979 was an especially difficult period for him. He also had to deal with the fall-out from the infamous interview with *Rolling Stone* about his sexuality. Elton performed only nine times in 1977, and didn't release any albums. This inactivity continued into 1978 with Elton only performing three times that year. But he did release *A Single Man* in 1978, which meant that 1979 was likely to be another busy touring year.

Elton bounced back in 1979 with one hundred and eighteen performances to promote both *A Single Man* and his new album *Victim of Love*, released in October 1979. Part of the workload in the mid-1970s had been to produce the remaining albums included in his *Dick James Music* (DJM) contract. Having set up *Rocket Records* in 1972, Elton was now releasing records under his own record company. The freedom that this afforded is perhaps part of the reason for taking a break during 1977 and 1978.

The eighties saw Elton release virtually an album a year, with only 1987 being album-free. Elton was still touring, although the number of concert dates varied considerably between one hundred and fifteen in 1982 and one in 1983. Although Elton was releasing albums on a regular basis the albums were not achieving huge sales, with less than six million copies sold in the US. Due to alcohol and drug abuse in particular, Elton's private life was becoming as sporadic as his concert performances at this time. The personal ups and downs of the 1980s for Elton may well relate to the ups and downs in performing. In his personal life he was clearing out his belongings to make a fresh start, whilst suffering from massive weight gain and the excesses of his alcohol and drug abuse. In his musical career he was performing to sell-out crowds and having a constant run of decent singles, but also collapsing on stage and struggling to stay sober during recording sessions (Rosenthal, 2004, p.318).

The early 1990s were a turning point in both Elton's personal life and musical career. Gone were the flamboyant costumes that had been a common sight during the 1970s and 1980s, being replaced by relatively normal suits. Elton wasn't following the busy schedule that he had set himself in the early 1970s, but neither was he retiring from performance. Consistency and balance were now important. When touring was the priority Elton would perform between forty and one hundred times a year. When recording was the priority (whether for a new album or, increasingly, other projects such as the *Lion King*) Elton would reduce the concert performances accordingly.

The new millennium saw albums being split more equally between new songs, film soundtracks, and live recordings. In this way Elton has begun to bridge the gap between studio recordings and live performances, with less sense of the recording being the memento of the stage performance. Elton still performs live on a regular basis. In fact, in 2008 he achieved his record of 139 concert performances in a year.

Costumes

Elton's extravagant costumes began appearing in the early 1970s. As has already been discussed, his costume choices illustrate his desire to be a successful performer as well as a musician, and his costume became an important part of that performance. His costumes are more extreme than many of those worn by other artists at the time, for example performing in a Donald Duck costume in 1983. It is clear that Elton enjoyed wearing the costumes, and felt that it added to his performativity. For the audience, it was highly unusual to see such a major music star dressed in what on occasions was little more than fancy dress. Elton's costumes created a sense of originality within his performance by breaking from the norms of concert dress for performers. Rather than for example wearing something expensive from a Milan fashion designer, he was wearing something that looked like it came from a fancy dress shop.



Figure 1.

As unusual as Elton's costumes were, they did often share ideas with the outfits of glam rock artists such as David Bowie, Marc Bolan, and The Sweet. This suggests why the issue of costume never overtook Elton's performance and did not define him as a performing artist. Elton's costumes would often reference themes of androgyny, fantasy, and glitter that many glam rock artists also used.



Figure 2.

As Philip Auslander comments, 'glam rock's central social innovation was to open up a safe cultural space in which to experiment with versions of masculinity that clearly flouted social norms' (Auslander, 2006, p.228). Between Elton's flamboyant costumes, his impressive technical skill as a musician, and the often story-like quality of Bernie Taupin's lyrics, Elton appeared to be more than a glam rock artist, he was creating an Elton John 'world' which simultaneously allowed the audience to escape reality and see that Elton, underneath the glitter, wigs, and sparkly glasses, was no different to them. The audience was allowed to share in his sense of escapism.

Although glam rock had faded away by the mid-1970s, Elton continued wearing costumes that fit in with a glam rock style. His costumes began to tone down by the end of the eighties. The costumes never had one underlying theme, which suggests that they were just for fun as far as Elton was concerned. Perhaps the extravagance of his outfits was more to do with Elton's need to please. As Nina Myskow asserts, 'It doesn't take a psychologist to realise that his flamboyant costumes have been, in some part, his camouflage and his armour. His costumes have always cheered him up' (Myskow, 2008). There seems to be a link between Elton's concert dress becoming more orthodox and his rehabilitation during the late 1980s and early 1990s, after which he appears to be happier and more self-confident.

A cursory glance at Elton's costumes over the years, combined with his current status as a gay icon, might conclude that the extravagant, androgynous, sometimes plainly feminine outfits are a confident expression of gender by an individual for whom gender and sexuality have been prominent issues for the majority of his career. In fact, the costumes were a result of the complete lack of confidence Elton experienced at this time. The costumes were a way for Elton to once again play the part of someone else. Elizabeth J. Rosenthal explains that 'the hottest musician in the United States [Elton] was using unearthly garb to deflect attention from what he believed were his physical shortcomings, but succeeded only in drawing attention to his willingness to thwart all pre-conceived notions of fashion' (Rosenthal, 2004, p.105).

Although the concert design often tied-in with Elton's costume, the stage was usually less extravagant than his outfit. For example, for his October 1975 performances at the Dodgers Stadium, Los Angeles, the stage is covered in carpet (including the top of Elton's piano) in the shade of blue used by the baseball team. The band members are mainly wearing suits, and the backing singers are wearing LA Dodgers baseball tops. The stage is bold and colourful, but not wildly extravagant. Elton, wanting to please his fans and perhaps look better than he feels, is wearing a blue baseball cap and full LA Dodgers baseball kit, covered completely in blue and silver sequins.



Figure 3.

Campaigner and Fund Raiser

Elton has been a vocal campaigner for the majority of his career, raising hundreds of millions of pounds for an array of charities and good causes. A major part of Elton's charity work has been HIV/AIDS charities. Since 1990, all profits from Elton's UK singles have gone to AIDS charities. His first single to have all of its profits going to charity was 'Sacrifice'/'Healing Hands', raising £328,000 alone (Buckley, 2010, p.310). In the wake of a number of high-profile deaths from AIDS in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Elton set up the Elton John AIDS Foundation in 1992.

The Elton John AIDS Foundation is one of the most prominent AIDS charities in the world, with the UK organisation alone raising nearly £100 million since its creation. Together with the US organisation, over \$220 million has been raised to support projects in fifty-five countries. Projects include supporting people with HIV/AIDS, preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS, and challenging discrimination related to HIV/AIDS. The Elton John AIDS Foundation is an extremely financially-efficient charity. The majority of the Foundations' events are sponsored and office costs are kept to a minimum, enabling over 96% of donated funds to go directly to projects.

Elton is also a campaigner for the LGBT community, taking part in a number of initiatives. In 2010 Elton took part in the launch of Cyndi Lauper's *Give a Damn* campaign to highlight issues of discrimination experienced by the LGBT community. In interviews Elton has commented on various

LGBT issues, including proposals by various countries and states to introduce laws allowing same-sex marriages (BBC News Website, 2006, and Preston, 2011).

In December 2005 the Civil Partnership Act was enacted in the UK, legalising same-sex partnerships for the first time. Elton and David Furnish were one of over six hundred gay couples to enter into a civil partnership on the first day of the new legislation, 21st December. As a result, they became the first high-profile couple to enter into a civil partnership in the world (Buckley, 2010, p.374). Whilst Elton John not explicitly sing about LGBT issues, Elton's prominence as an LGBT campaigner is an aspect of his public image that will influence how his music and musical style are received.

For a number of years Elton has held auctions and sales of his belongings and clothes. Members of the public have been able to buy artwork, stage costumes, and even sports cars, as well as items of regular clothing. Elton's 2002 UK 'Out of the Closet' sale raised over £400,000, with a similar sale in New York in 2005 raised over £700,000. All of the money went to the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

In September 1988 Elton held an auction at Sotheby's with all proceeds going to AIDS charities. The auction included gold records, jewellery, paintings, and the boots that Elton wore for the film *Tommy*. The auction raised nearly \$8.5 million, which was almost twice as much as had been predicted (Rosenthal, 2004, p.308).

June and July 1993 included a number of charity events. Charity tennis matches and a charity concert raised almost half a million dollars. Former tennis stars Martina Navratilova, John McEnroe, and Billie Jean King, who co-organised the event, all took part in the matches. Some of the celebrities to attend the charity concert included Pierce Brosnan, Sylvester Stallone, and George Foreman. Elton has been able to use his status as a famous musician to make a real difference to a variety of good causes. But as these charity events show, Elton is also able to unlock the potential of his status as a celebrity to encourage other famous people to support his charitable efforts. The auctions, and in particular Elton's 'Out of the Closet' sales, enable fans and the general public to participate as well. In addition to maximising donations, these actions confer upon Elton a sense of authenticity which goes beyond his work as a campaigner and fundraiser. He always gets involved by donating belongings, his skills as a performer, his money (he is one of the UK's leading charity donors). He even takes part in the charity tennis matches, often teaming up with his close friend, Billie Jean King. Elton's actions are similar to those of many ordinary people who raise money for charities, even if the amount raised can be considerably larger as a result of his connections and status. Whatever a person's chosen charity or good cause, they can relate to the charitable efforts of Elton.

For many of his performances, a significant percentage of the ticket sales are donated to charity. This illuminates another aspect of music performance and audience reception. The audience experience of an Elton John concert is not limited to what happens inside the concert hall, it is also influenced at the ticket gate through the knowledge that buying a ticket benefits a good cause. This is yet another example of how much Elton's musical performance style has changed over his career. What was once an extravagant, frenetic display of flamboyance (and possibly a hint of self-indulgence) has now become a more mature, technical showcase with a strong underlying philanthropic theme.

Of course, Elton does not limit his fundraising activities available to ordinary people and ordinary budgets. The main example of his wealthy-orientated fundraising activities is his annual *White Tie and Tiara Ball* event held at Elton and David's Windsor residence. Tickets cost £3,000 each and attract celebrities from all industries. Such a concentration of celebrities in one place attracts sponsorship from magazines interested in fuelling the celebrity culture which they help to generate. All fundraising events during the ball are geared towards the celebrity bank balances. Since the first *White Tie and Tiara Ball* in 1999, the event has raised over £40 million for the Elton John Aids Foundation.

Elton John Literature

Interviews

Arguably, the interviews with Elton that have gained the most attention have been those discussing his sexuality, particularly in the mid-1970s. The first of these prominent interviews took place in the 7th October 1976 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine. The gender ambiguity of glam rock was beginning to fade and questions were starting to be asked about Elton's sexuality. In this interview, when asked about his sexuality Elton replied:

There's nothing wrong with going to bed with somebody of your own sex. I think everybody's bisexual to a certain degree. I don't think it's just me. It's not a bad thing to be. I think you're bisexual. I think everybody is...But I mean, who cares! I just think people should be very free with sex – they should draw the line at goats (Jahr, 1976).

This was the first time that Elton had properly discussed his sexuality during an interview, and so the attention that this drew was substantial. The backlash began immediately. In the November 1976 issue of *Rolling Stone*, a reader sent in a letter stating that:

As a highly devoted Elton John fan, I regret being needlessly informed that my 'hero' is bisexual. The effect is shattering. He needn't have revealed his moral-midgetness. I regret facing the fact that he is a gross perverter of the sacred (ignorance was bliss). Luckily, his decrepit morality hasn't affected his musical abilities, although it may take an exercise in 'separating the man from the music' to enjoy him again. My disgust is matched only by my disappointment, while both are overshadowed by pity; I pity him for his sexual illusions and perversions (Crane, 1976).

Perhaps Elton's sales fell because of peoples' reactions to this article. Or maybe this article affected Elton's subsequent work, which led to fewer records sold. Either way, this interview marked the end of the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed period of his career. Questions about Elton's sexuality did also signify a development in his public image. He was making the transition from a musician, a performer, to being a person who composes and performs music. Public interest was starting to explore Elton as an entity away from the concert hall, and the audience wanted to know more about who Elton was in order to be able to relate to him better. As a result, the audience's relationship with Elton's music, and the way it was interpreted/received, would also change.

If the 1976 *Rolling Stone* interview was the introduction to a period of depression, addiction, suggestions of retirement, and general struggles in Elton's personal life then the conclusion came in 1992 with another *Rolling Stone* interview. In this interview, Elton himself explained why this was a significant moment in his life, commenting 'I'm quite comfortable about being gay. I've finally resolved every one of the problems that I had. I'm really happy and optimistic, for the first time ever' (Norman, 1992). From the audience's perspective, although there had been rumours about Elton's various problems (bulimia, alcohol, drugs, etc.), this 1992 interview was the first to openly discuss

Elton's personal struggles and in so much detail too. This interview represented Elton wiping the slate clean and, for the audience, clarifying a number of aspects to the Elton John persona.

A recent addition to these Rolling Stone interviews is the one Elton gave the magazine in February 2011. In this interview Elton looks back at the past and talks about the future:

In the last third of my life I want to make records that I really want to make (...) I have an unconditional love for what I do. And since I got sober, each show is a completely joyous occasion for me. Not that it wasn't joyous in the past, but I can come offstage to my wonderful life, with David in my life, and balance (Scaggs, 2011).

In this interview it is quite clear that the foundations that Elton laid for himself in the early 1990s, by turning his life around, have been built upon since then. Prior to the 1976 interview, any articles about Elton might have suggested continued success, settling down, and having children. Looking at Elton in 2014, those suggestions have been realised. In some ways Elton's life has followed a three-movement musical structure beginning with a period of energy and great success, which has been succeeded by personal and (to a certain extent) professional struggle, creating a juxtaposition. This has then been resolved, with flashes of success reminiscent of the first period.

Biographies

There are currently three biographies of Elton that are widely available. David Buckley's 2007 biography (reprinted in 2010) approaches Elton from a life story perspective. Whilst a fair amount is known about Elton the person, it is still dwarfed by the information regarding Elton the performer. This biography aims to address this imbalance by connecting Elton's music through his personal life. Buckley's work provides a wealth of information about Elton's (or rather Reg's) early life, which is incredibly valuable when contrasting it with later years. Buckley's account shows how completely different Reg Dwight performing at a family occasion in 1955 was compared to Elton performing to 55,000 people at the Dodger's Stadium in 1975. This detailed information about where Reg Dwight came from adds real credibility to the belief that Elton struggled to cope with fame due a lack of self-confidence, and how this manifested itself.

Another excellent element of Buckley's biography is the description of the years 1988 to 1991. With Elton making such big changes in his life at this point it would be easy to assume that everything happened at once, as if everything had just clicked into place. This biography details how events unfolded at different times during these years, and enables the reader to see how Elton's rehabilitation developed over time (albeit only three or four years).

Mark Bego's 2009 biography, *The Elton John Story*, also features a life story perspective but instead makes Elton's sexuality a key theme. A significant strength of Bego's biography is the amount of time devoted to interviews with famous friends of Elton. In doing so, Bego creates a useful group

of people on the periphery to establish a detailed view of who Elton really is. This detail then complements the information gained from Elton and more immediate sources to give a more rounded picture of Elton, his personal life, and his career.

The prominence of Elton's sexuality in Mark Bego's biography provides a useful insight into how so many contradictions existed in Elton's life. Here was a person who struggled with who he was and yet created such a strong, clear persona which has served his career so well. At times, he made steps towards understanding himself and his music career simultaneously deteriorated. By the early 1990s Elton was an international music star and yet was only starting to learn how to live and how to love (Norman, 1992). By positioning sexuality in the centre, Bego describes how Elton struggled to address certain aspects of his life. It was like a juggling act, one that was only resolved once the central issue of sexuality had been dealt with. Bego's focus on this internal struggle sheds new light on aspects of Elton's public image, and subsequently how Elton's music can be interpreted.

Performance and audience reception are the driving forces behind Elizabeth J. Rosenthal's biography, *His Song: The Musical Journey of Elton John*. Rosenthal goes into incredible detail about Elton's performances, recording sessions, and his albums and singles. This approach allows one of the top ten best-selling artists of all time to be explored through what he does best – making music. By showing how successful Elton has been as a performer, and over a considerable length of time, the struggles he has had with other aspects of his life are put into context. Rosenthal's discussion of the audience's side of the story provides a mirror image of Elton's approach towards his music career, demonstrating how the same event can be interpreted in multiple ways.

Elizabeth J Rosenthal's emphasis on Elton's music also offers interpretation on an aspect of Elton's music that is often understated, namely Bernie Taupin's lyrics. Rosenthal manages to assess Elton's songs as both musical wholes and as a partnership between lyricist and composer. It is in this way that Rosenthal offers up another possibility for the identity of Elton John as being composer Reg Dwight and lyricist Bernie Taupin which is then combined to form a stage persona.

Reviews

Elton's 1973 *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* album is often hailed as the best of his career. Indeed, it has accounted for 31 million of Elton's estimated 250 million record sales. However, it is important to note that the reception in 1973 was positively lukewarm:

Goodbye Yellow Brick Road is a massive double-record exposition of unabashed fantasy, myth, wet dreams and cornball acts, an overproduced array of musical portraits and hard rock and roll that always threatens to founder, too fat to float, artistically doomed by pretension but redeemed commercially by the presence of a couple of brilliant tracks out of a possible 18 (...) 'Candle in the Wind' is the first heavy lyrical fantasy; the tune is prettily solemn and unbelievably corny, a necrophiliac erection for Marilyn Monroe (Davis, 1973).

Responses from readers about the above review were mixed. Some defended *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* by stating that the review was 'insulting to not only Elton fans, but to anyone who has ever read a music review' (Condon, 1973). Others agreed with the reviewer, commenting that 'Stephen Davis couldn't have been more right about Elton's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. I think the thing is a real bummer' (Burban, 1973). Whatever side listeners positioned themselves, clearly *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* wasn't considered to be a masterpiece from the very start. This emphasises how albums, and reputations, can alter over time. This has knock-on effects for interpretation, in terms of gauging the audience's response and considering *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* as a blueprint for Elton's musical style.

Following Elton's decision to perform live again after an 18 month retirement in the late 1970s, the pressure was really on for him to return to his previous form. This was make or break for Elton. Had the return to live performing been received poorly, his career could have taken a nosedive that would have been difficult to recover from. A review of his first live performance in the US since his retirement from performing was mainly positive, especially about Elton's ability as an entertainer. In discussing Elton's performance as looking back at his career so far, the reviewer acknowledged that 'this solo segment, like the beginning of his set with Cooper, was a convincing reminder that John has been responsible for a lot of outstanding pop music (...) with a lot of experience entertaining people, and despite the lapses, that's just what he did' (Pond, 1979). Clearly, there is another side to Elton feeling the need to wear flamboyant costumes on stage. At live performances, the audience wanted one thing more than any other: that is, to be entertained. The lack of self-confidence that Elton struggled with was not a simple struggle that Elton had endured in isolation; the audience's expectations meant that this problem became a vicious circle. Elton wouldn't want to disappoint, and so he dressed up. But the audience came to expect it, together with the energy he displayed on stage. This performance, at the Universal Amphitheatre in Los Angeles in September 1979, marks a change in audience expectations towards Elton. He was no longer the teen idol who could do little wrong. The audience had become more mature and wanted to see an entertaining, musical performance.

By the time of Elton's residency at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas in 2004, a lot had changed. Elton had dealt with problems that had affected him for most of his career. He had re-invented himself as a performer, and more recently a composer as he turned his talents to stage and film, as well as albums. The apparent void that was left by the energetic stage presence and unusual costumes, that seemed evident at his comeback performance in 1979, had been filled by a new confidence and enjoyment for what he was doing. One reviewer noted that 'John, a full-figured fifty-six, has a richer, deeper voice these days, and a masterful keyboard dexterity (...) He hadn't sounded

this good in years' (Handelman, 2004). As this review suggests, the technical aspects of Elton's performance were now in the spotlight. This technical skill had always been there, but it was almost as if it had been hidden by Elton's costumes or the song, which were viewed as a packaged whole. The focus was now on the talent behind the output rather than the output itself. This may be partly due to changes in the music industry. The internet has enabled the listener to access so much more music, so much more quickly. Websites such as YouTube and Spotify have allowed budding musicians to gain a following. In the 1970s Elton was wearing outrageous costumes, something which few others did (and arguably not to the same degree). Today, it is unlikely that dressing up would stand out so much. By the end of the 1970s the performance had been toned down, and the quality of the songs was much more the issue. In the crowded marketplace of today, it is unlikely that the quality of songs would be enough. But what cannot be brought to the masses by the internet and globalisation is talent; talent as a musician, talent as a composer, talent as a performer. And with a career that has taken him from a London hotel, performing to a handful of uninterested people, to huge open-air concerts for 800,000 fans, Elton has had plenty of time to hone his skills and maximise his talents. By 1994 the layers of artifice and obfuscation, created by costumes, addiction, and a lack of self-confidence, had been stripped back to reveal the real Elton John. The idea that Elton had created a performance (on and off stage) is a central theme to the next chapter, which explores how popular music and gender (including related issues) can interact.

Chapter 2 - Popular Music, Gender and Identity

The theoretical basis for interpreting Elton's musical style in light of issues relating to gender will be primarily Judith Butler's work on gender as a performative act.

If it is possible to speak of a 'man' with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a 'man' with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of gender (Butler, 2006, p.33).

Butler asserts that people 'perform' gender rather than people 'being' a gender. The fluid state of gender, comprising many masculine and/or feminine elements which combine, is of great value when exploring Elton's musical style. The name 'Elton John' is itself a creation; Reg Dwight has chosen to absorb his on stage persona by changing his name by deed poll. In this way, everything about Elton, as a performer and as a person, can to some degree be seen as a performance. He uses this persona as a frame that provides the foundations upon which to build a personal narrative (see Hawkins and Richardson (2007)).

Judith Butler's work enables key factors about Elton's musical style to be explored in detail. The length of his career, and apparent changes to Elton's gender performance, supports Butler's assertion that gender requires constant re-negotiation. Issues relating to gender are prominent throughout his career, and so analysing his musical style from a gender perspective seems like a logical approach. Elton's private life has been well documented through the media and this, combined with his status as a major popular music artist, means that the listener never hears his music in isolation.

There is a range of sources which impact upon the understanding of Elton's gender, and more importantly, how the listener may interpret Elton's gender as a cultural construction. The listener may attend an Elton John concert, in which case a number of factors contribute to the overall picture, including the musical content, costumes, persona, etc. It is also important to note that where Elton's music is heard and in what context can also affect the interpretation. Hearing his music at a concert will generate a very different response to his music being used as background music for a TV advert, for example. Elton's role as a celebrity brings with it a lot of background information about him that the audience is aware of when listening to his music.

Interpretation is not defined solely by where the music is heard, when the music is heard is just as important. Elton singing about Suzy in 'Crocodile Rock' will be interpreted differently by an audience in 2003 to that of 1973, in part due to subsequent information about Elton's sexuality, also by aspects of the lyrical content dating the song, but in particular due to the ages of performer and listeners. In 1973 Elton was 26 and was a believable age to be the narrator of the song. The masculine connotations surrounding the narrator's character inevitably carry different meanings by

2003, and these impact upon the listener's interpretation of Elton's gender performance. However, age enables a new layer to his gender performance through the evocation of memories. From this perspective, Elton could be recounting an event in the past. Indeed, the song begins 'I remember...'. In this way, Elton has future-proofed the song. Through the evocation of the past, Elton has removed age as an attribute of the character he is playing in the song. By singing 'I remember' Elton is able to continue performing 'Crocodile Rock' without the tense and context of lyrics conflicting with his advancing age.

Another major aspect of Elton's music, which Butler's work assists in interpreting, is defining exactly who or what Elton John is. As a person, Elton can be considered to be Reg Dwight. But different layers of information produce a number of possibilities when considering Elton as an artist or celebrity figure. For example, when defining Elton in artistic terms is Reg Dwight the person on stage? Possibly. Or does Elton's long-term songwriting partner, Bernie Taupin, help to construct who or what Elton John is? What about Elton's costume designer or record company?

Although many artists use stage names, Elton is unusual in terms of how the persona or 'Elton John brand' is constructed, especially in terms of the absorption of elements of both Reg Dwight's and Bernie Taupin's personalities. This can have implications for interpretation by the listener. When listening to a song such as 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', how does the listener balance Reg Dwight's performance of the song as the source of meaning with the clearly biographical nature of Bernie Taupin's lyrics? In Butler's terms, the blank canvas onto which gender is projected is started anew for each song, as well as being a constant evolution of the overarching gender performance. As highlighted above, Butler's work can also make sense of changes to gender performance due to age and details about personal life as well.

As a person, Elton has a number of roles outside of music, including philanthropist, charity fundraiser, gay icon, gay rights campaigner, art collector, and film producer. How these roles interlink can have a significant impact upon how the listener interprets Elton's gender performance. Take 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' from *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* as an example. The listener may have seen Elton perform this song live in 1973. The listener may have then seen Elton perform it again 30 years later. The listener's interpretation of Elton's gender performance will have changed due to the different context (Elton's age, new role as an 'establishment figure' including becoming a Knight of the Realm, etc.). When the listener hears this song as part of the 2011 film *Gnomeo and Juliet*, their interpretation will change again, but previous interpretations will still remain. In this instance, it is not just Elton's age which can affect interpretation; it is also the age of the listener, especially given the length of Elton's career (see van Dijck (2006)).

Why is Butler's Approach Useful for Elton John?

Issues relating to gender are prominent in Elton's music. This is in part due to the high profile Elton affords his sexuality. It is also important to remember that Elton John's career has spanned over 40 years; in that time, society has changed considerably. Therefore, when considering Elton's music from a perspective of gender and related issues, it is important not to generalise across a 40 year career. Moreover, the music industry is not renowned for being egalitarian, modern-thinking, or liberal, and so modern distinctions between concepts such as gender and sexuality are not universally shared.

I therefore argue that despite the best efforts of numerous movements over the period of Elton's career to promote equality and gender diversity, the notion that gender and sexuality are separate things, whilst theoretically convincing, is in reality (especially as long ago as the late 1960s and early 1970s) not always the case.

As Elizabeth J. Rosenthal asserts, specific peaks and troughs in Elton's commercial success seem more to do with 'revelations' about his private life, and in particular his sexuality, than other factors such as the quality of the musical material (Rosenthal, 2004, p.146). This intertwining of music and issues related to gender in the listener's mind is vital when examining Elton's music.

There appears to be a number of links between Elton's music and issues relating to gender, the most noticeable of which can be seen in the lyrics. Although the vast majority of Elton's lyrics are written by his songwriting partner, Bernie Taupin, they are written with Elton in mind. Between 1969 and 1976, Elton portrayed a very stereotypical rock star image, a white, working class, heterosexual male who would sing about going drinking with his (male) friends at the weekend ('Saturday Night's Alright For Fighting'); serenade a love interest ('Your Song'); or lament the loss of a lover ('Crocodile Rock'). Songs during this period often portrayed a heterosexual relationship, sometimes through clear lyrical references and sometimes through implication. Elton would often strut around the stage with his chest hair on show, and the prominence of the distorted electric guitar and drum kit in the music left no one in any doubt about the overtly masculine persona of Elton John, within the accepted norms of glam rock at least.

A 1976 interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine resulted in Elton stating that he was bisexual. Elton's public image had changed; he was no longer the eligible bachelor rock star. Due to popular music's cultural production and consumption, listeners negotiate their own identity through music and the artists performing/creating it (Stokes, 1994). It seems, therefore, that news about Elton's sexuality acted as a barrier for many listeners who couldn't interpret his music without being overwhelmed by the extramusical information.

From 1977, Elton's music displayed a number of changes. The use of the third person increased in the lyrics, creating the role of narrator for Elton. The subject of his songs also showed

more variety. In 'Big Dipper' from the 1978 album *A Single Man*, Elton sings about a relationship between the male subject of the song and a sailor. 'Big Dipper' is used as a slang term for penis. Through his role as narrator, Elton is able to deflect attention from himself onto the subjects of the song. The musical sound has changed too. Whilst piano is present on the track it is not as prominent in the mix as previous songs and has a honky-tonk sound. Elton's personal background is removed from the song; this is no longer the white, working class piano player from Pinner. Instead, the audience is transported to New Orleans through the use of a Ragtime-inspired instrument line-up and sound. Musical elements of this song point more towards Scott Joplin than Elton John. It is as if Elton is no longer centre-stage, but rather observing the stage from a distance and reporting to the audience what he sees. The musical style and its attributes developed by Elton John between 1970 and 1976 is replaced with an incoherent narrative and an unclear artistic identity on his part.

The underlying issue here is authenticity. Between 1969 and 1976, Elton was perceived as authentic because he appeared to mirror the average (stereotypical) listener through his white, heterosexual male, working class attributes. Although this type of authenticity is challenged in 1976, by 1978 he has been reconfigured in a way which allowed him to retain authenticity. Elton is now like a reporter, bringing news about something unfamiliar to the listener. In 'Big Dipper' Elton describes a gay sexual relationship (and thanks to the use of slang, in quite a crude way). In 'Part-Time Love' (also from *A Single Man*) Elton describes an adulterous relationship, still with 'you' being prevalent in the lyrics. Elton appears to be observing controversial topics for the educational benefit of his (largely late teen and early 20s by now) audience.

In 1984 Elton announced that he was to marry Renate Blauel. Listeners, and especially keen fans, were very interested in finding out more about an artist, especially information about their private life. Through this announcement, Elton was repositioning himself closer to his original male/masculine persona of 1969-1976. But whilst this news may have clarified things for his fans and how they related to Elton, things were growing more and more complex for Elton himself. The shock and disbelief displayed by his close friends about his intention to marry must have made Elton think seriously about himself as a person and in particular about his sexuality. For example, Bernie Taupin was so surprised by the news that he thought it was a joke. Rather than staying up to celebrate, he went to bed and woke the following morning to find the news to be true (Rosenthal, 2004, p.243).

There were other issues for Elton at this time. In 1969, Elton was a 22-year-old rising star. By 1984 it seemed that his career was winding down (the period 1970-1976 remains to this day his most successful), and he was now approaching 40. The relationship between gender, masculinity, and age is a strong one (see Whiteley, 2005b). For his audience (who of course were also getting

older) this will have caused issues for how they related to Elton. However, many fans will have been a similar age to Elton, and so looking to Elton to see how he was dealing with things would have helped his listeners relate to him.

Songs released between 1984 and 1994 often feel restless, confused, or artificial, as if Elton is unsure or kidding himself. In common with much other pop music of the 1980s and 1990s, the music itself has a very artificial, inhuman sound, making use of drum machines, synthesisers, and vocal processing (see Shuker, 2013, pp.45-48). This is in stark contrast to the 'authentic' and 'natural' Elton sound of the piano and vocals of early hits such as 'Your Song', 'Levon', and 'Rocket Man (I Think It's Going to be a Long, Long Time)'. Many of the characteristics of Elton's musical style (such as melodic decorations and the prominence of the piano) have been removed, thereby removing some of his musical identity.

Chord structures during this period have, in general, become simplified compared to previous material. In 'Nikita' from the 1985 album *Ice on Fire*, the chords I, iii, IV, and V are used almost exclusively throughout the song. It is almost as if there is a sense of disconnection between Elton and the song, as if he isn't engaging with the music. His technical competencies as a composer and performer, key elements of his identity as a popular music artist thus far, have been removed and replaced by simplistic, generic musical properties and chord progressions. It is as if the Elton John from 1970-1976 no longer exists.

Lyrical content also supports this notion of uncertainty or confusion. In 'Restless' from the 1984 album *Breaking Hearts*, Elton sings about 'searching for something that just ain't there'. In 'Nikita' Elton is again searching and questioning. 'I Fall Apart' from *Leather Jackets* (1986) is another example of something missing, with lyrics such as 'I fall apart, with this threat of indecision'.

By the late 1980s things were coming to a head for Elton. His marriage had disintegrated, and Elton came out as being gay. In addition, he began to seek help for addictions to drugs, alcohol, and sex. All of these things can be seen as giving power back to Elton. He was now in charge of his life. He had a greater sense of who he was as a person, and through conquering his addictions he was no longer subservient to them. For Elton's fans these changes afforded Elton a greater sense of authenticity now that he was being honest with himself as well as them.

The way in which Elton took command of his life gave him a sense of power – something which is often linked to gender (Walser, 1993). This is an example of why gender and sexuality are two related, but separate concepts. Although Elton did not conform to the heterosexual norms of early 1990s society, the sense of power he gained at this time does fit with the masculine notions of a patriarchal society. At this point of Elton's career his masculinity is fairly stable and less reliant upon the façade of an artificial performance persona. Returning to the idea that society still operated on

the basis that male and masculine were connected, it can be seen that Elton portrays a number of masculine traits associated with rock stars.

The beginning of 1994 marked a new chapter for Elton. His career was diversifying, with stage shows and film soundtracks competing with conventional albums for his attention. It is during this period that Elton's role as auteur begins. In these new ventures people wanted Elton's musical style, rather than Elton as performer. In this way, Elton became disembodied; he may not be seen, he may even not be heard but Elton is still present. This ascension to a new level of creative authorship grants Elton a significant amount of power. I do not believe that this power equates specifically to gender, as Elton's role has moved above that. But the equation of power to masculinity in society, for example, is still strong. We still live in a heteronormative world. He has been able to subvert certain social constraints to still reach a position of power and status. As Elton's album with Leon Russell, *The Union*, demonstrates, Elton is no longer subservient to anyone. He can produce and create what he likes without being concerned about commercial success. Three of his most recent artistic endeavours – *Billy Elliot*, *The Union*, and *Gnomeo and Juliet* – demonstrate this freedom. Aspects of Elton's private life also evidence this break from repression, notably his civil partnership with David Furnish and the birth of their sons, Zachary and Elijah. If the heteronormative world in which we live places emphasis on the male/masculine that society still clings to (albeit in a diminished way) then Elton has achieved a great deal of things that heterosexuality strives for in order to repress homosexuality. When thinking about a stereotypical 1950s image of the 'successful man' standing outside his house with his family, Elton has achieved this. He has the wealth, the partner, the children. The only difference is that his partner is also male. In this way, the necessary existence yet repression of homosexuality by heterosexuality that Butler describes has, in the case of Elton John, been overcome (Butler, 2006, pp.87-89).

Elton's musical style also began to change around 1994. He often returns to the first person, even if the identity of characters in the song's lyrics is more ambiguous. The confusion in the sound that was present in the 1980s has been replaced by a return to 'authentic Elton John', inspired by rock 'n' roll and gospel music. Elton's vocals are much more foregrounded, giving a sense of greater confidence. His virtuosity as both pianist and composer are often demonstrated through the musical arrangement. Finally, the lyrical content presents a far more self-confident tone. In 'Made in England' from the 1995 album of the same name, there is a clearly defiant tone: 'You had a scent for scandal, well here's my middle finger', 'If you're made in England, you're built to last', 'But the jokes on you, you never read the song'. The album covers from 1994 onwards usually comprise a fairly plain and ordinary photography of Elton, perhaps suggesting a renewed confidence in who he is and being comfortable with himself.

Issues Relating to Gender and Age

Age, and its implications and connotations, is important for both identity and gender:

Age is critical to the identity of both performers and musical genres. For teen-directed pop, the dividing line between youthful attraction and being 'over the hill' occurs around the age of 25 (...) The question thus raised of what happens to popular music's 'old boys and old girls' when they exit from the fast lane of superstardom and, more specifically, is there any way back? (Whiteley, 2005b, p.175).

When considering the length of Elton's career, it is clear that age has had a significant impact upon the music he has produced. If the early years of his career can be characterised by songs such as 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' and 'Crocodile Rock', and the 1980s by songs such as 'Nikita' and 'Sacrifice', then it becomes apparent that age is an influence upon the music in a number of ways. A 40-year-old male (with weight and hairline issues) singing about masculine-coded activities such as drinking, fighting, and strength, will not have the same effect as the song being performed by a man in his early 20s. Conversely, it would be unusual for a 20-something rock star in the 1970s to sing about the breakup of a marriage (as far as the fans were concerned, they shouldn't have married in the first place). This example demonstrates the two genders on show: Elton's and his fans' impression of his gender. In addition to these genders there are also a range of identities at work, including Elton's, his fans' interpretation and internalisation of that identity, and the fan's individual identity. This range of emitters and receivers for gender and related issues demonstrates the kaleidoscopic nature of gender and identity, and how there are different angles from which to interpret gender coded events or gestures.

The final question in the quotation above is highly relevant for research into Elton John and gender. What happened to Elton when he turned 25 and left the 'fast lane of superstardom'? To begin with, I would argue that Elton manages to extend his success to the age of 29 (until 1976). After that, there are such clear changes to his gender performance (as well as physical appearance) that Elton in effect has four separate careers. When Elton first becomes a rock star he trades on his age-related gender performance, portraying the stereotypical rich bachelor which appeals to so many fans (whether through desire or aspiration). Elton's gender performance after 1976 may alter quite drastically on a personal level, but from the perspective of the fans his gender performance is easy to relate to. As his teen fans grew older they began naturally to question the world around them and who they were as individuals. The ambiguous, blank canvas that Elton puts forward between 1977 and 1983 mirrors this questioning stance which makes anything seem possible. By 1984 Elton is settling down, and so are his fans. Having settled down, Elton's fans have a broad experience of life and what is most important to them. By 1994 Elton also knew what was most important and, since then, has been more confident both in his personal life and his musical ventures.

This interpretation is fine for fans that experienced Elton from the beginning, but what about other fans since; how has he kept their interest? Whilst albums sales have shown highs and lows for Elton over the years, audience numbers at concerts have always been strong whether it was the sell-out performances of the mid-1970s, the huge stadium concerts of the 1980s or the Las Vegas residencies of recent years. Clearly, Elton appeals to different people through different forms of interaction, and live performance is a major part of that. In her published work on the Rolling Stones, Sheila Whiteley highlights live performance as key to their on-going popularity and success. In this extract, it is interesting that exactly the same could be said of Elton, suggesting that there is a template (or certainly a common path) for older artists to continue their careers when they are 'over the hill':

For their fans, the Stones have acquired the status of veterans and it is apparent that success continues to rely on the confirmation of audience expectations (...) [It is] the band's live performances that are so significant to their continuing success in that they provide access, for old and new fans alike, to the Stones' 40-year repertoire and the exceptional talents of the Jagger/Richards songwriting team. It is also evident that they have always placed great emphasis on being 'entertaining', with elaborate set designs, lighting and provocative screened graphics matched only by Jagger's centre-stage presence as the omnipresent 'Jumpin' Jack Flash' (Whiteley, 2005b, pp.192-193).

Indeed it appears that age, and in particular the evocation of memory, is central to the success of older, more-established artists. In addition, it is perhaps a symptom of the changing nature of the music industry. At the time artists such as Elton and the Rolling Stones emerged, the opportunity for disseminating their music to fans was limited. Other than radio, the only way to get their music heard was through live performance, whether in a concert hall, stadium, or on TV (this is where radio and TV differ in their approach, with radio focusing on recorded pop music and TV on live pop music). Elton's appearance on *The Morecambe and Wise Show* is an example of this. Artists of this generation still use live performance in this way; Elton, for example, has performed live every year since 1970 with as many as 139 performances a year.

Age and masculinity can be closely linked, and Freya Jarman-Ivens offers this reading of Elvis Presley's gender performance, particularly early on in his career:

From his threateningly virile youth to his comparatively impotent crooning middle-age, Elvis Presley has come to represent a wide spectrum of masculinities. Although it is the Presley of early years that most obviously toyed with constructions of gender identity – his long, carefully tended hair and eye makeup juxtaposed with an infectious bodily expression – the same incarnation is also that which has come to symbolize the epitome of unbridled masculinity. The young Presley functions as a site of both desire and identification, with each of these processes operating along stereotypically gendered lines (Jarman-Ivens, 2007, p.161).

Jarman-Ivens demonstrates how prominent issues relating to gender can be for a popular music artist, and how their on-stage persona can be constructed upon gender. I would argue that Elton gives gender an equal prominence compared to Elvis, but does so in a very different way. Elvis

traded on the persona of a stereotypically masculine character, which was especially strong when coupled with the youth of his early career. In contrast Elton, through various means, has generated gender-coded elements for his fans to interpret in ways that may remain unfixed. For example, do Elton's costumes of the 1970s weaken his masculinity (because he is not following the gender stereotypes supported by artists such as Elvis) or strengthen his masculinity through the subversion of gender stereotypes? In contrast to Elvis's very fixed gender performance, Elton provides a large degree of interchangeability regarding his gender performance for his fans to interpret. Besides information about his personal life and sexuality and his virtuosic skills as a performer (often coded as masculine), there is little material which can clearly be interpreted as masculine or feminine. In this way, Elton is very androgynous. It is perhaps virtuosic skill which differentiates between the 'middle-age impotence' of Elvis and the continuing success of the Rolling Stones for nearly 50 years.

With live performance being so important to Elton's career, it is crucial to understand gender and persona can be enacted through this outlet of creativity. It is striking how artists such as Elton and the Rolling Stones take the notion of performance to include all possibilities such as stage design, lighting, costumes, etc. Their performance is not just the act of making music, they are almost actors in a theatre. Philip Auslander has researched into how glam rock artists' performances were informed by the notion of theatricality:

If Marc Bolan brought an implicitly theatrical sensibility to bear on the performance of rock music, David Bowie sought explicitly to perform rock as theatre (...) Rather than developing a consistent persona, Bowie sang in many voices and from many subject positions without identifying clearly with any of them. By asserting the performativity of gender and sexuality through the queer Ziggy Stardust persona, Bowie challenged both the conventional sexuality of rock culture and the concept of a foundational sexual identity (Auslander, 2006, p.106).

Elton rose to fame at a similar time to Marc Bolan and David Bowie (and his Ziggy Stardust persona). It is interesting to see how Elton compares to glam rock artists when considering gender. Auslander's idea that Bowie took on many different characters in his career at this time has similarities within Elton's music. In contrast to Bowie's use of personae, Elton's use of a lyricist (particularly Bernie Taupin) afforded him similar scope to tell stories from different subject positions. Elton did also challenge conventions regarding the sexuality of rock culture through the use of unusual and often ambiguous or androgynous costumes, and latterly through information about his own sexuality as publicised in the media. In the interconnected world in which we now live, it is impossible for the audience to separate information about gender and sexuality received in the outside world from that received in the concert hall. However, I would argue that because Elton does not hide behind a persona then he always has a relationship with the material he is singing about. As Reg Dwight has become Elton John, he has collapsed the space between person and persona so that the audience

can easily assume that they are the same thing. Auslander has emphasised the importance of the persona for the audience, and how they interact with an artist:

The persona is of key importance because it is the signified to which the audience has the most direct and sustained access not only through audio recordings, videos and live performances, but also through the various other circumstances and media in which popular musicians present themselves publicly. The persona is therefore the signified that mediates between the other two: the audience gains access to both the performer as a real person and the characters the performer portrays through his or her elaboration of a persona (Auslander, 2009, p.314).

Whilst artists such as David Bowie have been successful through the separation of the person and the persona (Ziggy Stardust, Thin White Duke, David Bowie), Elton has succeeded by bringing the two together. Earlier in his career, Elton gained authenticity through the sense that the song was *his* song, it was very natural and organic. In recent years this sense of creative control has continued, allowing his role as auteur to develop and the creation of a wide range of artistic endeavours other than pop albums. As he himself has commented, he no longer needs to make pop records anymore (Sutherland, 2010). Since the 1970s Reg Dwight has been consumed by Elton John. In some ways the persona has taken over the person and aspects such as gender are now a constant performance. However, Reg Dwight may still exist but Elton is too skilled at controlling information released through the media. Whatever the truth, it is quite clear that gender is a highly important aspect of Elton's musical style and his existence as a popular music artist. Another key aspect to Elton's existence as a popular music artist is his role as a star and celebrity, as the next chapter will discuss.

Chapter 3 - Stardom and Celebrity

Elton John: Star and Celebrity

The star phenomenon consists of everything that is publicly available about stars. A film star's image is not just his or her film, but the promotion of those films and of the star through pin-ups, public appearances, studio hand-outs and so on, as well as interviews, biographies, and coverage in the press of the star's doings and 'private' life. Further, a star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, as critics or commentators. The way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech (Dyer, 2007, p.85).

Stars are made for profit. In terms of the market, stars are part of the way films are sold. The star's presence in a film is a promise of a certain kind of thing that you would see if you went to see the film. Equally, stars sell newspapers and magazines, and are used to sell toiletries, fashions, cars and almost anything else (Dyer, 2007,p.86).

As these extracts show, Elton is a star. Clearly issues such as gender, sexuality, and identity are highly significant to Elton's stardom, as a means to generate this publicly available material. Therefore, these issues are not artist-specific, but serve as a template for information beyond the musical work. Through this wealth of material, it is clear that identification by the audience of a popular music artist is not limited to the music. Furthermore, Elton is not creating his music in a vacuum – identification between audience and artist is bi-directional. Richard Dyer explains the audience's need for stars:

The notion of stars compensating people for qualities lacking in their lives is obviously close to the concept of stars embodying values that are under threat. The latter are presumably qualities which people have an idea of, but which they do not experience in their day-to-day lives. However, compensation implies not that an image makes one believe all over again in the threatened value, but that it shifts your attention from that value to some other, lesser, 'compensatory' one (Dyer, 2007, p.81).

When considering age as a modifier of audience/artist identification, it becomes apparent that whilst Elton's songs seem to be 'static' sources of identification (i.e. 'classic' songs that remain unaltered), the supporting materials (concerts, interviews, current work, etc.) become the main agent for identity development and change. An audience's need for compensation of a quality lacking in their lives can vary according to their age, gender, or any number of factors.

When an artist has a career as long as Elton's, it is important to remember that his continued stardom is more dependent on contemporary supporting material (interviews, news articles, performances, etc.) than his rendition of 40 year old songs. How an established artist negotiates and combines the past and the present is highly significant when considering stardom, as well as gender and identity. As Shepherd and Wicke note, 'people are brought together by music and language to 'reproduce themselves materially'' (Shepherd and Wicke, 1997, p.199). This is why analysing the music, almost as a frozen artefact, is so important. The bold, aggressive guitar sound

found on 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is a strong symbol of masculinity in any decade of popular music, but the stardom material can configure differently its wider cultural meaning.

Stars are brands, umbrella terms for a set of values and expectations. In the quote above, Richard Dyer discusses film stars rather than popular music stars, and there are some clear distinctions between the two. In a film, even a major star has to share the limelight with other actors, the director, the plot. In popular music the artist is telling the story, and as far as the audience are concerned the artist is directing the performance, with the other musicians supporting the artist – they are not equals.

When an actor plays a role in a film they are separate to the role. In contrast, this distinction does not exist for popular music artists. The popular music artist is the person, performer, and director (who controls the performance) all rolled into one.

Moya Luckett offers this definition to distinguish between stardom and celebrity:

At some level stardom depends on the work – it is exhibited through performances, produces commodities, and evokes a narrative of struggle, talent, determination, and upward mobility. The star's work defines an on- and off-screen (or record, or video) self, clearing his or her image into public and private (...) Unlike stardom, celebrity feeds on exposure without work, highlights the desire for fame without effort, and focuses on private lives lived in public (Luckett, 2010, p.40).

When Elton performs a song he may narrate and use the third person, but it is still Elton performing. At times, Elton makes this clear through extravagant costumes, set designs bearing his name, or musical virtuosity (piano and/or voice). The focus is clearly on him. Elton is a curator, or an auteur. Within the grey area between stardom and celebrity, it can be argued that Elton curates more than just music performances - controlling his appearance, interviews, and (to a certain extent) media stories about him.

The balance between stardom and celebrity has certainly varied for Elton. In 1970, Elton was a 'rising star'. The emphasis was on his musical ability, and his celebrity status followed on from that. However, in contemporary society Elton is more than a popular music artist – he is a gay rights campaigner, art collector, father, etc. It would be wrong to say that his stardom has diminished, but rather his celebrity status has increased. The rise of Elton as a celebrity is also the result of changes in society regarding famous people. The increase in magazines and websites reporting news about celebrities suggests that the public are more interested in the lives of the rich and famous, for whatever reason.

The quote above highlights an appetite for fame without a reason for the fame itself. This may be the case for the public reading about Elton's private life, but Elton himself has a justification for being famous, and so his celebrity status is more about providing extra information about him (as a star) rather than the material working on its own. This is an important distinction to make because

of the longevity of Elton's career, but also to understand properly the changes that have taken place since he became a star in the late 1960s.

Over the 1990s, the celebrity turned into such an important commodity that it became a greatly expanded area for content development by the media itself. In a highly convergent media environment, where cross-media and cross-platform content and promotion has become increasingly the norm, the manufacture of and trade in celebrity has become a commercial strategy for media organisations of all kinds – not just the promotions and publicity sectors. Network and cable television, in particular, has demonstrated its ability to produce celebrity from nothing – without any need to establish the individual's ability, skill, or extraordinariness as the precondition for public attention (Turner, 2004, p.9).

The internet has been a key element in the rise of celebrities over the last 20 years or so, and has allowed supplementary information about an artist to be readily available to the public. Through the use of his own website and Twitter account, members of the public are able to access instantly up-to-date information about Elton. Information from such sources has a strong focus on Elton as a music star, even though they may discuss other aspects of his life. In contrast, an artist beginning their career now is likely to incorporate social media into their star image in a far more symbiotic way. The flooding of the music market has led to artists needing to be more active in differentiating themselves from others. As a result, the public is allowed access into their private lives far more openly and freely than an artist of Elton's generation.

Many artists, from Elvis Presley through the Beatles to Madonna, have started as the new 'seven-day wonder' later to emerge as kings and queens of catalogue. Up to the 1960s the route from the one to the other was seen to be through establishing the artist as a mainstream entertainer, while from the late 1960s onwards the strategy emphasised the artistic achievements of the performer and their qualities as a long-term auteur (Wall, 2003, p.155).

Elton is certainly an auteur. Many of his albums contain a strong sense of cohesion, and a clear, unified story behind each one. Examples include *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973), *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* (1975), and *Too Low for Zero* (1983). These albums aren't necessarily concept albums, but Elton is clearly curating the albums as if they were a gallery of artworks. The use of the third person, narration, and story-like lyrics add to the feeling of Elton acting as auteur. The artwork for his albums, usually a photo of himself, is another way in which Elton 'oversees' his records.

However, Elton can also be regarded as a mainstream entertainer. His performances demonstrate an individualistic showmanship. Even the length of his performances – usually 3 hours – suggest that he is enjoying performing for its own sake, rather than as a commercial venture. Elton is certainly a mainstream artist, having performed at many high-profile events across the world.

Arguably, the music industry is reverting back to the pre-1960s strategy. With the rise of celebrity and the mass media, more people are entering the music industry. However, many of these people do not sustain their success and career for more than a few albums. In this situation, artists

are needed to entertain in the short term without achieving the status of auteur in the longer term and relying on celebrity status to remain in the public gaze (Luckett, 2010). The way in which Elton is able to fulfil both roles is perhaps why he has continued to be successful over such a long period. As some 1970s artists have lost popularity with audiences, Elton has been able to alternate between short term and long term appeal in order to maintain his star status.

Elton John and the Audience

Popular music can be found in all the mass media: it is the key element of most radio; it is the soundtrack to films, adverts and television programmes; it is the subject of newspaper and magazine articles and photographs; it is an element within websites and computer games; and frequently a common thread across all media as an artist appears in videos, on websites, in the press and on television. It is hard to think about popular music without the media, and hard to think about the media without popular music (Wall, 2003, p. 107).

As the quote above shows, popular music's influence goes far beyond the stage or recording studio. Through the mass media, popular music can 'envelope' us. Our interaction with, and exposure to, popular music creates a very personal relationship between popular music and the audience, as Stan Hawkins explains:

When we map the musical codes onto that of performance, what is interesting is how the construction of the artist becomes a process for us to understand our own relationships to musical production and identity (...) it has become more and more evident that pop culture forms a site where identity roles are constantly evolving to fit social needs. Seen from this perspective, identity is based around notions of difference (Hawkins, 2002, p.12).

The issue of difference is a salient feature of Elton's career. With so many stars of the late 1960s and early 1970s singing and/or playing guitar (Lennon and McCartney, Mick Jagger, Brian May, etc.), Elton's combination of piano and vocals was different in itself. In 'Crocodile Rock', for example, the keyboards are more prominent than the guitar. The song begins with a pre-introduction chord sequence of 3 chords played by solo piano. This is then followed by a more conventional 4 bar introduction played by piano and farfisa organ (no common rock instruments such as drum kit, guitar, or bass guitar play during the introduction). As the verse begins, bass guitar, drum kit, and voice enter, but still no guitar. In fact, the guitar only plays during the chorus sections. This constrictive approach to the guitar part is highly unusual for Elton's contemporaries and popular music at this time. Artists such as the Beatles, Queen, and the Rolling Stones may have layered the introduction of instruments during a song, but such a key element of the rock line-up would not usually play such a limited role if it was to be used in the song.

Many male popular music artists of the early 1970s dressed in an explicitly gendered way (either masculine or sometimes androgynous). The 1970s also saw long hair become fashionable for men. In contrast, Elton wore comic/extravagant costumes and was losing his hair. For those

performers who chose a less masculine or more androgynous appearance (such as David Bowie), there were ways in which they could counter balance this elsewhere in their performance. As has already been discussed, the use of conventional rock instruments (with their connotations of masculinity) was one way to achieve this. Movement and physical gestures are another way. Vocalists can control the microphone to claim power – the vocalist is often described as ‘taking the lead’, being the ‘leader of the band’, or being the ‘frontman’. Instrumentalists could boost the volume of their instrument in the mix to gain similar power and dominance. Most members of a band stand up to perform, and so they can move about the stage and use physical gestures which have sexual overtones. Elton could not move around the stage – the piano is a static object. Furthermore, Elton does not control the microphone. Because both hands are occupied with playing the piano, he cannot hold the microphone. Therefore, he cannot re-position himself towards the audience for greater intimacy. Also, he cannot move the microphone to alter his performance. If he wishes to produce a more intimate sound (such as that found on ‘Your Song’), Elton has to move closer to the microphone – the microphone does not move closer to him. The piano is a large, opaque object, and makes it extremely difficult to see Elton’s body. Whether he is wearing an outrageous costume (which makes his gender performance more ambiguous) or a suit, the obscuring of his bottom half de-humanises Elton. From the audience, he is just a head and shoulders. In contrast, a guitarist’s entire body is visible and the guitar serves to emphasise the crotch. Elton’s piano is a definite barrier between himself and the audience. A guitarist, with their body visible, looks more like members of the audience. They can move to the very front of the stage to get closer to the audience, and can use their bodies to react to the music and interact with the audience. With Elton, the audience are always distanced. He can use his head and face to react and interact, but he is otherwise limited. This has a significant impact on how the audience relates to Elton, and how Elton is perceived as a star and celebrity. For the audience, Elton is inextricably linked to his music stardom because he is always sat down behind a piano. For a guitarist, they look like an average member of the public, but with a ‘music accessory’ across their front. The electric guitar, with its strong connotation of masculinity, becomes a symbol rather than merely an object. It is, therefore, far easier to imagine them without their guitar. In turn, the audience relate to them more as a person, and details about their private life are interpreted accordingly. However, the bond between Elton the star and Elton the musician is far greater, and information about his private life details a person that isn’t quite the same as the one that sits down behind a big black box on stage. This is unique to Elton. A list of the bestselling popular music artists of all time would include musicians such as Elvis Presley, the Beatles, Madonna, Michael Jackson, Queen, Led Zeppelin, and ABBA, as well as Elton. Out of all of these groups and artists, Elton is the only one who, with the

exception of a group's drummer, sits down to perform and is partially hidden behind their instrument.

Just as star charisma needs to be situated in the specificities of the ideological configurations to which it belongs, so also virtually all sociological theories of stars ignore the specificities of another aspect of the phenomenon – the audience (...) The importance of contradictions as they are lived by the audience members in considering the star phenomenon is (...) to the effect that particularly intense star/audience relationships occur among adolescents and women. They point to some empirical evidence for this. I would also point out the absolutely central importance of stars in gay ghetto culture. These groups all share a peculiarly intense degree of role/identity conflict and pressure, and an (albeit partial) exclusion from the dominant articulacy of, respectively, adult, male, heterosexual culture. If these star/audience relationships are only an intensification of the conflicts and exclusions experienced by everyone, it is also significant that, in the discussion of 'subversive' star images (...) stars embodying adolescent, female and gay images play a crucial role (Dyer, 2007, pp.83-84).

Difference for Elton extends beyond the visual and sonic elements of his performance. Sexuality has been a prominent issue for Elton throughout his career and, using the list above, sexuality is another distinguishing feature for his public persona. The only other gay performer on this list is Freddie Mercury of Queen. Mercury did not make his sexuality known publicly until a few days before his death, and sexuality was a different type of issue during Queen's main career period (1971-1991). Sexuality has certainly been a key talking point in celebrity news about Elton, particularly since the mid-1990s and the advent of the internet as a mass communication medium. Whilst sexuality has impacted upon Elton's celebrity status, its impact upon his star status is less clear. Sexuality has been a pronounced issue for society over the last 50 years. With Elton's status as both a star and celebrity being linked to sexuality, a link between the star and the audience can be made. As Richard Dyer comments, 'Stars embody social values that are to some degree in crisis.' (Dyer, 2007, p.79).

Stars are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces. They do not produce themselves alone. We can distinguish two logically separate stages. First, the person is a body, a psychology, a set of skills that have to be mined and worked up into a star image. This work, of fashioning the star out of the raw material of the person, varies in the degree to which it respects what artists sometimes refer to as the inherent qualities of the material; make-up, coiffure, clothing, dieting and body-building can all make more or less of the body features they start with, and personality is no less malleable, skills no less learnable. The people who do this labour include the star him/herself as well as make-up artistes, hairdressers, dress designers, dieticians, body-building coaches, acting, dancing and other teachers, publicists, pin-up photographers, gossip columnists, and so on. Part of this manufacture of the star image takes place in the films the star makes, with all the personnel involved in that, but one can think of the films as a second stage. The star image is then a given, like machinery, an example of what Karl Marx calls 'congealed labour', something that is used with further labour (scripting, acting, directing, managing, filming, editing) to produce another commodity, a film (Dyer, 2007, p.86).

One outcome of Dyer's description of commodity is that a star is elevated above the public. Members of the public do not have a team of people working to refine and manage their image, and so perceived 'imperfections' in image are more likely for a member of the public than a star. Star elevation can also lead to the audience wanting to be more like the star. Elevation is also common in

a physical sense. Whether on a concert stage, red carpet, or on TV, the audience often have to look up to the star. Elevation also gives the star an almost superhuman quality.

Marx's idea of 'congealed labour' creates expectations of the artist by the audience. The range of expert support staff surrounding the artist results in the audience expecting a polished performance – in this sense, performance covers all interactions between performer and audience. Concert organisation, sound, lighting, as well as music, have to be received well by the audience. If they are not, the audience criticise the star – not specific members of support staff. In this way, an artist's stardom extends to being an ambassador, a representative of the entire group of people that make the star's image. Therefore, there is huge pressure on the star for things to be right. This situation emphasises the commodification of the star that Richard Dyer discusses. By considering the artist to be a commodity, the power shifts towards the consumerist audience. The star is simultaneously a superhuman being and a servant of the public.

The very term 'star' is part of the hyperbole of media-based culture. It suggests a distant, but bright, shining presence, which we gaze longingly at, as it arches high above the mundane lives we live. But it also taps into a longer history of the 'marked' or 'chosen individual', someone whose talent makes them shine out from the crowd (Wall, 2003, p.153).

Small problems can become big issues for a star, depending on the interpretation of the audience. A star's celebrity status can impact directly upon their stardom and the audience's relationship with them, by being the major source of non-musical information about the star. Elton may choose to discuss issues outside of music performance, such as charitable causes, civil rights, or the recording industry. Whilst people may be persuaded to trust a point of view further by a star (a useful role for a star), the elevation afforded to the star by the audience on the grounds of music may not extend to peripheral issues. Therefore, there is a risk of alienating fans. This is a difficult balancing act for the star, but it demonstrates clearly how fragile stardom is.

Popular musicians function consciously and openly as entertainers in a rapidly mutating media environment; yet, at the same time, popular musicians are supposed at all times to be performing themselves, rather than, like actors, performing dramatic roles. Popular musicians are in a unique position to understand and illustrate the complicated use of truth and fabrication and drama and performance and narrative and counter-narrative and, above all, *image* to keep an audience's attention (Johnson, 2004, p.79).

Film stars are granted a greater freedom to express multiple views or different positions on issues than music stars. When George Clooney portrays convicted criminal Danny Ocean in *Ocean's 11* (2001), the audience accepts that he has broken the law and will break the law during the course of the film. Violence will be used against innocent people, property will be stolen, aggressive and foul language will be spoken, and crime will be glamourized. However, when George Clooney

addresses the United Nations about the plight of poverty-stricken countries around the world, no one doubts his sincerity because of his role in *Ocean's 11*.

However, should a music artist sing about drugs or violence and then campaign against drugs or violence, their integrity is questioned. A film star's role in a film is their day job, and the audience only believe the actor and their character to be one for as long as the film's duration. In contrast, the audience do not allow music stars to separate themselves from their work in such a way. The way in which a star's image is constructed has a number of similarities with the way in which an individual constructs their identity. A person's identity contains many parts - parts which cannot be separated or obscured.

A film is always an historical object - it never reaches the present and is not performed live. This is similar to a music album – a record. But music stars also perform their work live, which reinforces and recreates the record (the historical object) and produces something new and unique to that performance. A music artist's stardom is, therefore, being constantly renewed and developed by their work as a musician and performer. Elton has a busy performance schedule, performing as many as 139 concerts a year. With his hit records centred on albums released between 1971 and 1973, it is perhaps understandable that Elton performs so many live concerts each year. In performing songs from his most commercially successful period, he is renewing 40 year old songs and thereby renewing his stardom. Elton is also linking his image with his work, which links his previous repertoire with new ventures.

Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the 'individual'. They do so complexly, variously – they are not straightforward affirmations of individualism. On the contrary, they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality present for all of us who live by it (Dyer, 2007, p.87).

Live performances (either on stage or in interview) are a test for any artist, even one as experienced as Elton. The live setting strips back much of the preparation given by so many people to the artist. When the artist is on stage, it is a sink or swim moment. The hair stylists, make-up artists, roadies cannot help the performer if they play a wrong chord or say the wrong thing. There is no safety net. This is a very humanising experience for the artist. Unlike a film star who can film a scene again and again, the music star, once on stage, has to cope with the pressure and play things correctly first time. In this way, a music star shares similarities with a star of theatre rather than a star of film (there can be stars who participate in theatre and film of course). As Rupert Till writes:

Pop stars' performances are assumed to be real, the emotions they portray, the lyrics they sing, the answers they give in interviews are supposed to portray the real lives of these liquid stars, no matter how plastic their public facades, how well constructed their media-friendly masks are (Till, 2010, p.46).

This pressure and risk of error is symbolic of the struggle in people's lives. The audience can relate to the artist through this struggle, and so the audience can feel closer to the artist. Everybody can make mistakes, and so the artist's humanity is reaffirmed through the live setting.

There is also a sense of virtuosity and heroism about live performance. Classical music contains many works that are designed to push the performer to their limits. Many works also demonstrate the ability of the composer. The underlying story to this type of music is the traditional struggle between good and evil, triumph versus failure. The virtuosity of an artist such as Elton is, therefore, nothing new. But in many ways, he takes this struggle to new levels. He displays his ability as a singer, whilst simultaneously demonstrating his talents as a composer and pianist. The act of live performance is a re-telling of the classic story of a struggle, and the audience can relate this to various parts of their life. The virtuosity on display at a pop concert can be seen, therefore, as a continuation of the live performance tradition dating back hundreds of years.

Elton John and Media

The transformations that have taken place in popular music in the twentieth century can be attributed to a number of factors, including the use of new technologies, changes in the size of performance venues, the growth of the record industry, and the segmentation of the mass market. Discursively, all of these factors have been modalized around concepts of authenticity. At the centre of these debates concerning the authentic nature of the music is the popular music performer, how he or she expresses the emotionality of the music and his or her own inner emotions, feelings, and personality and how faithful the performer is to the intentions of the musical score are all part of how the individual performer is determined to be authentic (Marshall, 2006, p.196).

Authenticity is central to Elton's career. In terms of his music, the audience have to believe the stories that he is telling. But, with the increase in exposure for artists that new technology brings, the way in which Elton conveys his authenticity in the media is just as important. In many cases, the generators of authenticity in media situations are not under Elton's control.

In the late 1980s, Elton's personal life was under scrutiny in the newspapers. There were various stories about drink and drugs, sex (by now Elton had publicly acknowledged that he was gay), and spending huge amounts of money. Elton took libel action against the newspapers and won. Whilst the newspapers may have had ulterior motives about why they ran the stories they did, central to all of the negative newspaper coverage was the issue of authenticity. How could Elton represent the average person if these stories were true? By the 1980s, Elton was already trading more on previous bestselling albums than on new releases. The production of albums had slowed compared to the early 1970s (9 between 1970 and 1975, compared to 9 between 1980 and 1992) and whilst new albums were generally still well-received, they did not have the commercial success of earlier albums. Therefore, when Elton's authenticity was challenged by the newspapers, it was his entire career that was under threat rather than just his current work. All of the musical success he

had had could have been damaged badly by a few newspaper stories. The newspapers were trying to control Elton's authenticity.

By the mid-1990s, Elton had won the libel cases against the newspapers, and stories about his private life had decreased. The main talking point had become his temper. Again, authenticity was the issue. Was Elton a spoilt rock star who always had to get his own way? If he was, he didn't represent the struggles that the general public experienced in their own lives, or indeed, those struggles mentioned in his songs. In some ways, stories about his temper were a greater challenge to Elton's authenticity than those about his private life. Stories about his private life were typical examples of journalistic intrusion, and many stories discussed issues commonly associated with rock stars. But Elton's temper was an individualised problem. Elton decided to gain control of media portrayals of his personal life by going into TV production with *Tantrums and Tiaras* (1997). His partner, David Furnish, would film Elton on stage, backstage, and away from the stage in order to give fans a clearer idea of who Elton John is beyond the label of popular music artist. This was a shrewd move. There was evidence of Elton's temper, and so he didn't try to discredit that evidence. Instead, he sought a greater level of authenticity than stories about him could achieve. He would show himself losing his temper, but also show and explain the situation around it. In the documentary, Elton demonstrates his desire to perform at his best for the audience and just how busy he really is. His desire to please the audience is something that he has to strive for; it is a struggle. This gains favour with his audience. But Elton is also making clear that he is, through his desire to please, serving the audience – not an extremely wealthy individual who does not care. In producing *Tantrums and Tiaras*, Elton is using media to challenge other media. This is a good example of how Elton reaches far beyond music:

Therefore, stars are stars both *of* the media, in that their stardom is conventionally referred to by invoking the precise media form or forms within which they are most active (television, film, records); and *by* the media, since these particular forms represent not only the activities in which they are perceived to excel, but, in addition, through which they are known to the public. Popular music, therefore, provides an especially potent location for the creation of stars, because of the regular forays its practitioners are obliged to make from record into other media, including television, radio, video and cinema (Inglis, 1996, p.56).

As the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Concert demonstrates, there are a number of established, well-known stars who have achieved an even higher level of stardom. Performers included Sir Elton John, Stevie Wonder, Sir Cliff Richard, Sir Tom Jones, Dame Shirley Bassey, and Sir Paul McCartney. As can be seen by their official titles, these people have achieved a high level of recognition. What is interesting is that the Jubilee Concert, as a media event, was a significant display of music stardom. Some of the artists listed are semi-retired and do not release albums very often any more. And yet, when organising the running order, these artists closed the event – traditionally organisers save the

best until last. All of these artists are over 60 years old, with some in their 70s and even 80s. Clearly, age and current music output are not particularly important for the success of this group of megastars.

Megastars such as Elton, Cliff Richard, and Shirley Bassey do not use or feature in the media in the same ways that some of the younger artists performing at the Diamond Jubilee Concert will. Cheryl Cole, Jessie J, and JLS will make use of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, and will appear more often on television shows and adverts. Perhaps megastars such as Elton do not need the publicity. Perhaps their audiences do not use social media sites. Elton still needs publicity to renew his star status, and he appeals to a wide cross-section of society including those that make greater use of technology. The real reason is likely to be the result of the commodification of music and the segmentation of the music market that P. David Marshall mentions in the quote above. Younger artists such as JLS are trying to promote themselves in a crowded marketplace where they struggle to differentiate themselves from other artists. As P. David Marshall writes:

More than any other form of celebrity, the popular music celebrity, and in particular the celebrity who emerges from the adulation of a preteen or young female audience, demonstrates the rapidity of dissipation of the power and influence of a public personality. The reason for part of this dissipation is the way in which the popular music industry has helped to construct itself as a symbol of change and transformation. Thus, each new popular music star represents virtually simultaneously the moment of innovation and the moment of replacement. In popular music's reconstruction of a youth culture, the succession of apparent new images and sounds constitutes the representation of change that is often used by the culture at large as a representation of the vitality of the entire culture (Marshall, 2006, p.217).

Megastars have been able to break this cycle of emergence and renewal. Other artists struggle to find a space for themselves in the market, and in turn this transforms their music from musical work to commodity. Their songs may not always succeed in the charts, and do not become 'classic' hits that are replayed years after they were released. The availability of music from previous decades only serves to exacerbate further the distinction between megastars and stars/music artists. In the past, a teenager may have rejected out of hand any artist that featured in their parent's music collection. However, with the increased exposure to music that we now enjoy, artists are judged more on their own merits. Artists are now less defined by the period in which they emerged. However, waning success is always a possibility:

Out-of-date celebrities live on in the nether-world of re-runs and 'classic' movies on cable television channels, and oldies stations on the radio. Occasionally, they are hunted down and their washed-up status is mocked with programs that inquire: 'where are they now?'. A few celebrities die young and are transformed into cultural icons (James Dean, Che Guevara, Marilyn Monroe), and a few others are able to carry on their fame into senescence, sometimes through political careers (Ronald Reagan, John Glenn). Generally, though, celebrity decays with age (Kurzman et al, 2007, p.354).

This doesn't seem to be the case for Elton. He has maintained his success over a long period. He did not die young (although he did live the stereotypical rock 'n' roll lifestyle), and he has not become a

politician – he is still known primarily as a popular music megastar. If anything, his fame has increased with age. Perhaps Elton is more than a star, more than a megastar.

For a star to progress to a point where they are described as a popular icon requires their achievement of a level of fame at which they are treated with the sort of respect traditionally reserved for religious figures (...) Such popular icons have generally had critical success, have gained financial independence, have achieved a high level of fame, receive unconditional audience adulation, and crucially they are usually known by only one name (...) The importance of image in this process has meant that an artist's image has become as important to success within popular music as the quality of their music. Indeed it has meant that for some artists the careful handling of branding, marketing and image has been the dominant factor in, and feature of, their success. However, most musical artists who have sustained iconic status also have gained recognition at some point for the quality of their music. To identify a popular music star as having achieved iconic status, one would look for identification by a single name, critical success, financial success, international audience recognition and fame, as well as a musical career that is successful in the long term (Till, 2010, pp.47-49).

Rupert Till's criteria for a popular music icon seem to fit Elton exactly. He is instantly recognisable by his first name, and often builds this fame into his set design. Elton has been critically successful over a period of six decades, becoming one of the bestselling artists of all time with records sales reaching an estimated 300 million. His critical success has resulted in financial success. His wealth has bought a number of houses across the world, enabled him to build one of the largest private photography collections in the world, and he contributes millions of pounds to charity each year. Through his charity work as well as music career, Elton is recognised internationally. According to Till's criteria, Elton is a popular music icon.

Elton's status as a popular music icon impacts greatly upon his work. Elton does not need to perform anymore, nor does he need to record albums. He could retire from music completely and live a very comfortable life whilst retaining his star status. This has implications for how the audience interpret Elton as a music artist. His authenticity is boosted through his seeming desire to perform concerts and record albums for their own sake and for the audience's benefit. For twenty years Elton has donated all royalties from singles to charity. For the audience, these facts reduce the commercialism of Elton's music.

Elton no longer needs to consider the commercial aspects of a project. Whether the project makes money, breaks even, or loses money is not important. As a result, Elton can grow his role as auteur. His status as an icon lends weight to a project, and encourages people to participate in its production as well as boosting audience numbers. Elton's role is much more like that of a brand. His 'stamp' on a project means something to the audience, and equates to a seal of approval. From a media perspective, it makes something that might be considered unexceptional or average to become newsworthy. The next chapter looks at the first period of Elton's career (1970-1976), and explores how he began to develop that sense of a brand through the creation of a particular stage persona.

Chapter 4 - Case Study 1 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' (1973)

This chapter takes the song 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' as a case study from Elton's first period of his career. It analyses the way in which he develops a persona during this period, and how the persona is supported or undermined by aspects of the music or performance. The song is discussed in terms of instrumentation, melody, harmony, lyrics, performance, and the listener.

The subject of this case study, 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', is taken from Elton's 1973 album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. The album is his best-selling with over 30 million copies sold, and it contains a number of well-known songs such as 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', 'Candle in the Wind', and 'Bennie and the Jets'.

Instrumentation

'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is a good example of Elton's musical style during this period of his career. It demonstrates elements of the masculine bachelor image that Elton was promoting at the time. The song begins with an introduction played by guitar and drum kit only. The electric guitar, as noted by Mavis Bayton, can act as an extremely powerful phallic symbol in popular music:

The electric guitar, as situated within the masculinist discourse of rock, is virtually seen as an extension of the male body. This is always implicit and sometimes explicit, as when men mime masturbating their 'axes'. Heavy metal guitarists unashamedly hold their guitars like a penis. (Bayton, 1997, p.43)

The prominence of the electric guitar in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is clearly significant, and a powerful symbol of masculinity. When combined with Elton's strutting on stage, the macho lyrics (and song title), and the aggressive and punchy sound, the electric guitar serves to cultivate the macho image that Elton was promoting during this period of his career.

However, this macho image is problematic. Elton may be the centre of attention (in this manner the guitar is subservient to him), he may command the electric guitar (deciding when the guitar should be prominent in the mix), he may even have financial control over the guitarist (pay his wages), but fundamentally, Elton is not the originator of this phallic symbol. At best, Elton is an associate of this symbol, basking in its gendered glow. John Strohm also highlights the cultural significance of the electric guitar:

With its soft curves and sharp angles, the solidbody electric guitar cuts a distinctly feminine figure. Although the object may resemble the female form, its central role in rock music and culture is as a signifier of masculine power and implied sexual prowess. The lightning-fast, screaming lead lines played by the guitar hero testify to his immense machismo and form the foundation of his mythical status in rock culture. (Strohm, 2004, p.183)

But where does this leave Elton? He's not the person playing the guitar even if he's tapping into the convention and associating himself with it. This helps construct his image in a particular way, in terms of gender and sexuality, but perhaps hints at the image not quite fitting properly. Other aspects of Elton's performance are more compensatory than they initially seem. Elton still retains control of the microphone, the other key symbol of power within a rock group. His clothes and stage design are flamboyant, and usually spell out his name. His glasses feature extravagant designs and colours, to the point that they have become a defining feature of his image. Drawing upon semiotics, the designs for Elton's glasses can be seen as an important signifier (Tagg, 1982) of a range of extramusical and cultural connotations. Power is conveyed through his glasses in a number of ways. Elton can afford to create unique sets of glasses featuring intricate and extravagant designs, expensive materials, and non-conformist colours and styles. As symbols of his wealth, the glasses convey a sense of financial power. Even today, there are very few artists who wear prescription glasses, making their use a distinctive feature of the artist. Superheroes often morph from an ordinary person on the street into someone with extraordinary powers through the addition of a costume and, in some cases, a face mask. By featuring his glasses prominently in his general appearance Elton is doing something similar, but redefining his glasses as something extraordinary rather than ordinary. Dressing the glasses up so that they are more than a functional item (he does need them to see), Elton is making them extraordinary. Given his restricted movement compared to many other artists (due to sitting at the piano), by emphasising his glasses, which are uncommon on stage and are clearly visible to the audience even when Elton is seated, he is creating a sense of illusion that the glasses give Elton some sense of physical power. This is in contrast to Superman, who removes Clark Kent's glasses (presumably because they are treated as a sign of weakness) during his transformation. Costumes can be used for similar effect but, given that a lot of Elton's body is hidden behind the piano, glasses are a far more efficient way to do this and an alternative source of power.

Ruth Padel comments that 'performing on guitar, the core act of rock, is whipping out your cock' (Padel, 2000, p.323). Elton has decided to start the track with it, making his sonic intentions clear. The guitar sound is distorted, further emphasising the feeling of power and energy by overdriving the guitar signal through the amplifier.

There is a notable omission from the instrumentation in the introduction – there is no piano. This is surprising given Elton's prominence as a pianist as well as a singer. This suggests a separation between the piano-playing person and their masculine public image. It seems that the less-masculine, and possibly even feminine, piano has been dropped in favour of instruments that suggest a borderline exaggerated masculine image. 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' was

released as a single, reaching 7th in the UK singles chart and 12th in the US Billboard Hot 100. Other singles from his album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* were 'Bennie and the Jets' (reaching 37th in the UK, and 1st in the US), 'Candle in the Wind' (11th in the UK, not released in the US), and 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' (6th in the UK, and 2nd in the US). Interestingly, later versions of the song (such as during his 2004 *Red Piano Tour*) constrain the distorted guitar in favour of more piano and synthesisers added to the mix. Whilst the distorted electric guitar has an aggressive sound, phallic shape, and is positioned in front of the crotch, the piano hides the performer's body from the waist down resulting in the performer becoming slightly androgynous. In addition, the guitar can be moved around whereas the piano is static. The switch from more guitar in favour of piano is a sign that Elton has been able to de-feminize the piano (Laurin, 2009) through the increased recognition by the audience of his virtuosic performance ability.

The bass guitar plays quite a complex bass part, aiding the drums in giving the song a feeling of energy. In this song, energy and masculinity are linked through the lyrics with constant references to age and machismo. The bass guitar also links together the drums and guitar through its energy and phallic shape.

Before the rock era the solidbody electric guitar was not such a loaded signifier of masculinity. Early 1950s publicity photos of husband and wife duo Les Paul and Mary Ford depict them posing with their Gibson electrics in various comfortable domestic settings, smiling and plucking away while living the postwar suburban dream. The seeming awkwardness (to modern eyes) of their electric guitars, the very symbol of macho rock rebellion, in such a setting calls attention to the enormous cultural change the instrument represents. With the advent of rock the electric guitar has come to symbolise the rejection of the very cultural values Les and Mary espoused: domesticity, monogamy, safety, and security. These values also happen to be culturally associated with femininity, so in a sense rock was a rejection of a traditionally feminine value system. (Strohm, 2004, pp.183-184).

The links to the 1950s (the era of rock 'n' roll) are interesting for Elton. With Elton being influenced by the likes of Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Long John Baldry, it is perhaps odd that their guitar sound was not one of the elements of Elton's songs, even though song structure, piano-playing style, vocal style, and performance style do reference an earlier, rock 'n' roll time. Guitar parts in Elton's songs are generally, and particularly in this case, distorted rock textures rather than thinner rock'n'roll timbres. The 'postwar suburban dream' that Strohm describes is very similar to the one that is held up by Elton, particularly between 1976 and 1984, of the happily married (heterosexual) man with a partner and kids, living a successful life in suburbia.

There are, then, a number of factors which can help to explain why so few women play the electric guitar, but I believe the major reason is that the electric guitar, unlike the acoustic guitar, is seen as 'male'. The skills involved in playing the instrument are perceived as 'male' skills, inappropriate for women. A woman playing a rock instrument is breaking the gender code (...) For a man, a good performance on the electric guitar is simultaneously a good 'performance' of 'masculinity'. The 'heavier' the rock the more true that is. When you go to a metal concert, it's the men in the audience who play

'air guitar', not the women. In doing so, they are affirming the male bond between themselves and the musicians on stage. (Bayton, 1997, p.43).

In the quote above, Bayton separates musical instruments according to notions of sex and gender. Using these criteria, it seems that Elton occupies a difficult gender space during the performance of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. Whilst he does not play the electric guitar, there is one present on the track and it is very prominent in the mix. It seems that Elton is creating a third space or middle ground for himself. Bayton's gender coding is clearly present during the song, and being put to good use, but not in the conventional way. Elton's guitarist is male and fits many of the stereotypes and gender-coding factors set out by Bayton. But Elton is the star; it is Elton and the Elton John Band, not simply a group in which Elton is a member. Elton does not seem to seek out some sort of gender authentication. He is playing a non-masculine (perhaps even feminine) instrument, his costumes were often gender ambiguous, and he is not competing with the guitar during the song, as shown in the introduction where the guitar takes prominence. Through these choices, Elton is removing himself from the gender competition. He is portraying a different, incomparable gender role.

In addition to his gender performance, Elton is supported by his relationship with the other musicians. By calling the other musicians the Elton John Band, Elton is able to retain ownership, control and leadership over the group of musicians, whilst separating himself from them sufficiently to enable a clear demarcation between Elton and the other musicians in terms of musicianship and creative direction. Had Elton John been a band, a sense of democracy would have been created between band members. The Beatles are an example of this. Despite Lennon and McCartney writing many of the songs and featuring prominently on most of them, they were only considered to be The Beatles when Harrison and Starr were included. Had it been Elton and his band, this grouping would still have hinted at a more egalitarian relationship between group members. Instead, Elton retains ownership and control of the musicians. Even if Elton was not performing, they would still be the Elton John Band. In this way, the musicians are a subset of Elton John rather than a supporting act. This lends support to Elton's gender role as creator and leader, and facilitates Elton's slightly uneasy relationship with the masculine-coded guitar in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'.

Elton has been able to take the (perceived) link between performance and masculinity and change the instrument that acts as a conduit for this exchange. This is likely to have been aided by Elton's ability as a pianist, and his wider musicianship. Indeed, virtuosic ability is often linked to notions of power and masculinity:

Virtuosity – ultimately derived from the Latin root *vir* (man) – has always been concerned with demonstrating and enacting a particular kind of power and freedom that might be called 'potency'. Both words carry gendered meanings, of course; heavy metal shares with most other Western music a

patriarchal context wherein power itself is construed as essentially male (...) Like all musical techniques, virtuosity functions socially. Some might find virtuosity inherently distancing or elitist, since it is a sensational display of exceptional individual power. But for many others, virtuosi are the most effective articulators of a variety of social fantasies and musical pleasures (Walser, 1993, p.76).

Songs such as 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' amplify the links between performance and masculinity through the traditional and accepted means of a distorted electric guitar and 'heavy' (for Elton at least) rock sounds and rhythms.

It is not only the shape which is symbolic, but also the sheer volume and attack of the instrument which connotes phallic power (...) Advertisers in guitar magazines choose words with care to endow their gadgets with masculinity: 'strong', 'overpowering', 'punch', 'tough', 'cut-throat', and so on. And in both language and image, sexual innuendo abounds (Bayton, 1997, p.43).

This level of volume and attack is evident from the very start of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', with the guitar playing the opening riff with only the drum kit as accompaniment. The words in the above quote, used as examples of advertising descriptions, can also be used to describe the opening bars of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. The drum kit, and in particular the bass drum, can be described as 'punchy', as it cuts through the rest of the sonic material and the sound itself helps to convey the forceful movement needed to generate it. The distorted electric guitar begins the track and remains the dominant sound throughout, overpowering the other instruments and competing with the vocals for the listener's attention. The attack of the bass guitar, highlighted by its treble frequencies and staccato quaver patterns give a sense of precision and strength.

Elton's movements on stage (for example his 1984 Wembley performance may be seen as a good indicator of his onstage behaviour), particularly during the introduction to 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', seek to amplify the descriptions attached to the sound and in particular the guitar. He moves in time with the music, accentuating the beats through his movement. His gestures, such as stomping his feet and aggressive facial expressions, feed into these gender connotations and the lyrics of the song. Jumping onto the piano and strutting across the front of the stage leave the audience under no illusion about who is in charge, who is the dominant male.

Melody

A good indicator of melodic-harmonic divorce is cases where non-chord-tones in the melody do not resolve by step. Such unresolved non-chord-tones do indeed occur frequently in rock – even if we define a 'step' in pentatonic rather than diatonic terms; they occur often in relation to the underlying tonic harmony. Such situations could be said to reflect a 'stratified' pitch organisation. Most often, stratified pitch organisation involves a pentatonic melody, and it normally occurs in verses of songs rather than choruses. A particularly common situation is where the verse of a song features stratified organisation, followed by a chorus which shifts to a 'unified' organisation in which both melody and accompaniment are regulated by the harmonic structure. This strategy could be seen to express a tension between individual freedom (represented by the verse) and coordinated unity (represented by the chorus) (Temperley, 2007, pp.339-340).

The verses of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' use a scale of G pentatonic minor, with some major thirds added. This scale choice demonstrates the influences upon Elton's music, by giving the melody of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' a rock 'n' roll sound, without reaching the even darker sound of the blues scale. The melody avoids the 2nd and 6th scale degrees (A and E respectively), which would suggest a major-type scale. Eb (flattened 6th) is also avoided, and thereby steers clear of a natural minor scale. A G minor blues scale, adding a #4/b5 to a G pentatonic minor scale is also absent. By avoiding these notes, Elton is able to introduce a level of tonal ambiguity into the melody through the avoidance of tones that would confirm a minor, major, or blues tonality. In addition, the remaining notes include the important flattened seventh (see Moore, 1995) and allow a palatable degree of dissonance between the melody and harmony. The inclusion of a major 3rd at select intervals adds a sense of resolution to the melodic/harmonic dissonance, and enables phrases to sound closed (complete) rather than open. The final bar of the figure below demonstrates this select use of the major 3rd for the purpose of harmonic resolution.

This sound is common in 1950s rock 'n' roll songs such as Chuck Berry's 'No Particular Place to Go' and 'Johnny B Goode'. This scale choice adds to the raucous sound of the song, and connects with the topic of the lyrics. The pentatonic minor gives the melody a 'rougher edge', with clashes between the melody and the clearly major tonality of the harmony, simulating the clashes between people described in the lyrics. For example, Elton's piano part draws upon the rock 'n' roll influences of his childhood. Rather than play power chords, Elton plays the full chord. This leads to clashes between the major third of the chord and the often minor third in the melody. The flattened seventh causes similar clashes, especially with its prevalence in the verse melody:

5

Figure 4.

This melodic detail ties into the rough, confrontational content of the lyrics. The repetition of the tonic and flattened seventh and the subdominant and minor third in the verse melody aids the aggression in the vocals. The vocal timbre and repetition in the melodic line makes the song sound more like an aggressive statement and less like a balanced opinion, keen for others' views. This is aided by the pitch of the melody, using the upper register of the voice. By singing the melody high in his range, it is easier for Elton to project power in his voice. By using a simple and highly repetitive melody, Elton is able to focus more on its performance, and less on the notes themselves. He is able to come close to shouting the lyrics without affecting the melody. In addition, the simplicity of the melody helps Elton's portrayal of himself as 'one of the boys'. In order to convince people that he is an ordinary person, he must ensure that the vocals, the most human part of the song, are ordinary and not those of a polished pop star. Should the melody be too complex the effect would have been lost, and Elton would be seen more as a virtuosic global music artist performing a story and less like the main character in the story itself. Simplicity is the key in this situation.

The switching between a B natural and a B flat in the melody, as well as B flats over an F major chord, create a sense of ambiguity within the vocal line. Whilst Elton is singing the melody in a forceful, aggressive manner, he is consistently in direct conflict with the harmony. The consistency with which he does this suggests a show of strength; Elton can resist the constraints and rules of traditional harmony in order to make a statement and demonstrate that he doesn't need to be one of the crowd. In addition, when read from a gender perspective, this ambiguity could hint at Elton performing a more masculine gender portrayal than he is naturally comfortable with. As with the prominence of the electric guitar at the expense of the piano, the ambiguity present in the melodic line is a sign that the conflict is artificial and contrived, as is the overtly masculine persona created for and by Elton in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'.

The melody in the chorus needs to be something memorable so that the audience can join in and feel that they 'own' the song. In order to achieve this, Elton repeats a simple two-part phrase:

Don't give us none of your aggrava-tion We've had it with your dis-cip-line
 4 Sat-ur-day night's al-right for fight-ing Get a litt-le act-ion in
 8 Get ab-out as oil-ed as a dies-el train Gonn-a set this dance ali-ght
 12 'Cause Sat-ur day nights al right for fight-ing Sat-ur-day night's al right
 16 al-right al-right ooh ooh ooh ooh

Figure 5.

The first part of this phrase is an oscillating figure between E and F. This kind of oscillation makes the chorus easy to sing, and links the chorus to a similar pattern in the verse sections. The ease of singing this phrase is not only the result of a repetition of notes, but also their proximity to each other. By keeping the interval small (a semitone), Elton enables both male and female voices to sing this part of the chorus with confidence.

The second part of the chorus's melodic phrase is a descending C minor arpeggio, beginning on the fifth. Whilst this pattern is more complex than the first, the easily recognisable sound (the arpeggio) compensates for the increase in difficulty. This helps the audience to sing this part of the phrase with accuracy.

The second part of the melodic phrase in the chorus is vital to add interest to the melody. When combined with the shifting chord sequence below, the use of an arpeggiated figure adds colour to the melody (through the shifting functions of the melodic notes over the changing harmony) and thereby negates the lack of interest a repetitive phrase may otherwise produce.

Elton affords himself one melodic flourish in the chorus of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', at the very end of the chorus:

Sat-ur-day night's al right al right al right ooh ooh ooh ooh

Figure 6.

This melodic flourish allows Elton to retain his command over the music, the band, and the audience. The audience, who may have been singing along during the chorus, are suddenly faced with a far more difficult phrase to sing. This phrase uses a range of an octave, and reaches the C above the stave. This makes the phrase exclusive – at this pitch, many members of the audience will

struggle to sing the phrase. At this stage, the intervals are greater than at previous points of ‘Saturday Night’s Alright for Fighting’. These leaps add difficulty to the phrase, due to the need for good breath control and confident pitching ability. The band, who had been sharing rhythmic and melodic material with the melody, is at this point in the song clearly subservient to the melody. This phrase is melodically very strong, with a heavy use of chord tones:

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 37-40) shows a vocal melody line with lyrics: 'for fight-ing Sat-ur-day night's al - right al - right al- right ooh'. Below the melody are two accompaniment staves (piano and bass). The second system (measures 41-44) shows a vocal melody line with lyrics: 'ooh ooh ooh ooh'. Below it are two accompaniment staves. A first ending bracket labeled '1.' spans measures 41-42. The score is written in a key with one flat (B-flat major) and a 4/4 time signature.

Figure 7.

This harmonic information helps the melody to stand out from the other parts and really direct the song at this point. Elton’s musical talents are featured in this phrase, and brought to the fore by the arrangement. The lyrics support this change from group chorus singing to featuring the music star, with a change from a group subject to the individual:

Don’t give us none of your aggravation [group]
 We’ve had it with your discipline [group]
 Saturday night’s alright for fighting [fighting requires at least two people]
 Get a little action in.

Get about as oiled as a diesel train [neutral]
 Gonna set this dance alight [neutral]
 ‘Cause Saturday night’s alright the night I like [individual]
 Saturday night’s alright, alright, alright, ooh. [neutral, but melody suggests individual]

Harmony

The timbre of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' may suggest to the listener that this song rejects tradition, but in harmony terms there are clear examples of more traditional harmony and voice leading. This is a feature of Elton's musical style.

In the introduction, for example, there are three distinct sections to the harmony. The first section is a set of V7-I cadences which announce the beginning of the song. The next section comprises bVII-IV7-bVII-IV7. This chord progression adds interest to the introduction by suggesting a flat-wise modulation to C major. The final section of the introduction to 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' reaffirms the key by setting a C major chord between two G7 chords, creating I7-IV-I7. Taking a longer, more complete view of the introduction, it is clear that the overall harmonic structure is one of suspense and resolution. The introduction begins with a powerful V7 chord which is resolved to chord I7 in bar four.

The bVII chord in bar two is the interesting harmonic point of the introduction. The bVII chord hints at the rebellion that will be discussed in the lyrics shortly. This sense of subversion is highlighted through the bold and prominent guitar sound at this point.

In addition to introducing a strong theme of the lyrics, the introductory passage also hints at the harmony of the song, with verses using a I-bVII-IV-I pattern, whilst the chorus modulates temporarily to C major and uses the same I-bVII-IV-I pattern. The introduction manages to encompass all of the chords used within these patterns: G, F, C Bb. The use of chords a fourth apart from each other is very common in Elton's music. 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', for example, makes extensive use of circle of fourths patterns. The verse begins using a very similar pattern to 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting':

The image shows a musical score for the first two lines of the song. The top staff is the vocal line in G major, 4/4 time, with lyrics: "When are you gon-na comelown? When are you go-ing to land?". The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment, also in G major, 4/4 time. It features a bass line and chords that correspond to the harmonic structure described in the text, including the bVII chord in bar two.

Figure 8.

The circle of fourths continues in the chorus:

The image shows a musical score for the chorus of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has a vocal line in the upper staff and a piano accompaniment in the lower staff. The vocal line starts with the lyrics 'the blues' and ends with 'Ah'. The piano accompaniment features a driving, rhythmic pattern of chords and single notes. The second system continues the vocal line with 'Ah' and the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (Bb) and the time signature is 4/4. The score is marked with a '5' at the beginning of the second system, indicating the start of the chorus.

Figure 9.

Bearing in mind the public image that Elton was promoting during the album *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, and in particular during 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', the fact that this song contains clear features of Elton's musical style means that in some ways 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is an introduction to Elton.

The piano part draws heavily upon the rock 'n' roll influences of Elton's childhood. The right hand of the piano part replicates common rhythmic and harmonic patterns of 1950s hits such as Jerry Lee Lewis's 'Great Balls of Fire'. These patterns played on the piano include the alternation between chord I and IV over chord I, the playing of the chord above the staves in sets of quaver notes, and a modulation to chord IV for the chorus or bridge section. The referencing of the past through harmony and playing techniques helped to establish Elton as an authentic artist (who understood and respected his musical past) who added new and different sounds and styles to create something unique.

A key compositional component of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is energy. Energy is clearly a property of the lyrics, using words and phrases such as 'fighting', 'diesel train', 'set this dance alight', and so on. This sense of energy is found in all the parts of this song, from the incessant drum kit (with machine gun-like drum fills) through to the rhythmically busy vocal line. The harmony is no different. There are very few points in the song where every quaver beat of the bar is not played. The way in which the piano part varies between crotchet beats or sets of quavers and off-beat figures at the end of vocal phrases is key to this driving quaver pulse.

The bass line in ‘Saturday Night’s Alright for Fighting’ is simple, and uses a repetitive phrase as its basis. The simplicity of the bass part is not a bad thing. Rather, the use of crotchets and basic groups of quavers hold the beat together whilst the vocal line, piano, guitar, and occasionally the drum kit, emphasise the off-beat quavers. The on-beat nature of the bass line, combined with the drum kit, stops the song losing its solid pulse. In this way, whilst Elton is full of energy in ‘Saturday Night’s Alright for Fighting’, he is still in control. This sense of control is reaffirmed by the frequency of root notes in the bass part. Every new chord begins with the root note played on the bass guitar:

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. It consists of two systems of music. The first system shows the vocal line and the piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and has the lyrics: 'It's get ting_ late, have you_ seen my mates Ma tell me when the boys get here'. The piano accompaniment features a bass line with a repetitive rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and chords. The second system starts at measure 5 and continues the vocal and piano parts. The vocal line has the lyrics: 'It's sev-en o' clock and I wan - na rock wan-na get_ a bel-ly full of beer_'. The piano accompaniment continues with the same bass line pattern.

Figure 10.

Lyrics

As the verse begins, the vocals and bass guitar enter the mix. The vocals have an aggressive edge to them – they are much closer to being shouted than they are to a whisper. The lyrics contain a number of references to masculinity and aggression, including:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| ‘tell me when the boys get here’: | this suggests that Elton is out with male friends, and ‘boys’ gives an impression that they are young (late teens/early twenties). |
| ‘belly full of beer’: | both ‘belly’ and ‘beer’ have masculine connotations. |
| ‘my old man’ ‘my old lady’: | terms more likely used by men than women. The use of ‘old’ can also be seen as a way to link youth with power and strength through perceived physical attributes. By referring to parents as ‘old’, Elton is positioning himself as ‘young’. |

The lyrics, written by Bernie Taupin, conjure up a range of images and sounds that the listener can relate to: 'the sound of a switchblade and a motorbike', 'they're packed pretty tight in here tonight', 'my sister looks cute in her braces and boots, a handful of grease in her hair'. These evocations of memories and experiences take the issue of age to a new level, by encouraging an age-related response from the listener themselves (Whiteley, 2005b, pp.134-135). The lyrics are the ideal method by which to communicate and establish the aggressive feel of the song. Serge Lacasse explains that 'in the context of a popular musical performance (live or recorded), voice usually becomes the sound source with which most listeners identify' (Lacasse, 2000, p.10).

The lyrics of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' also help to raise the issue of class within the song and the scene/image that it projects to the listener. As Nathan Wiseman-Trowse notes:

Class signification within rock music acts as a method of connection with the audience that reassures the listener of the song's authenticity. Authenticity is required to assert the supremacy of creative expression over commercial imperatives. The supremacy of creative expression is required because as the listener performs class signification in the act of listening, subjectivity and agency are potentially compromised by the impact of commercial imperatives. In other words class representation obscures the status of performed subjectivities as being commercially orientated. Where pop music in a more general sense (i.e. mainstream pop) fails to articulate authenticity, the status of the listener as a consumer, or rather as a specific performative subjectivity formed around consumption is not questioned. So class signification acts as a strategy to reassure the listener in the act of listening that performed subjectivities (perceived as their own) are not an effect of an industrialised process. (Wiseman-Trowse, 2008, p.86).

In 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' Elton is portraying a working class character in a working class setting. But the authenticity created by this class signification also acts to reassure the audience that Elton as a popular music artist in a wider sense is authentic. In the live performance setting, the audience themselves can relate to certain elements of the lyrics. They may well be drinking beer, are packed into the venue, and spending time with their friends. The authenticity created through class signification can also be linked to age. Going out drinking with friends (often to excess) is usually associated with younger people, Elton's primary target audience. Whilst a firm favourite in his repertoire now, it is unlikely that the audience would receive 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' in the same way if it was being performed for the first time by a 65 year old. This is exacerbated by changing views in society towards drinking and the health implications of drinking excessively since the song was first performed. Additionally, it is highly unlikely that a multi-millionaire, knight of the realm would go to his local pub on a Saturday night to drink excessive amounts of beer and get into a fight. It would more likely be an expensive VIP party, the drinks would not be cheap beer, and the threat of negative PR would mean that fighting was definitely out of the question. In this way, Elton's current class signifiers mean that his portrayal of class through the performance of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is undermined. But instead the evocation

of memory, of his performance of this song 40 years ago at the beginning of his career, enable the authenticity of the song and Elton as an artist to remain intact.

Performance

The performance of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' at the time of release echoed the sense of energy and masculinity found in the music. Elton wore extravagant costume in many performances, thereby communicating to the audience that he should be centre of their attention. This in itself can be seen as a macho display, particularly when combined with Elton strutting about the stage and jumping on the piano. Many, such as Robert Walser, have described the masculine overtones of virtuosity in popular music (Walser, 1993, pp.119-122). The way in which Elton performed this song in the early 1970s is another example of masculine virtuosity, combined with being young – the ability to jump onto the piano.

In an odd twist in light of the burgeoning women's movement, early 1970s 'glam' rockers such as David Bowie and the New York Dolls began to experiment with gender reversal. Men sporting makeup and platform shoes on stage opened the possibility for women to try out traditionally male roles in popular music. (Strohm, 2004, p.186).

This applies to Elton through his costumes and set design, defining him as a glam artist when he emerged in the early 1970s. He had other glam rock artists, particularly David Bowie and Marc Bolan (both heterosexual and established artists) as contemporaries, and this led to Elton being generalised as a glam artist, with the costumes and stage design simply part of the act. The opening up of roles in rock music for women also benefitted Elton. The fact that he played piano rather than guitar had less of an impact due to this widening participation. Elton's piano playing was less of a handicap and more of a mastery of a slightly exotic instrument (in rock terms), in a similar way to the feminine-shaped guitar being controlled and mastered by the masculine.

The Listener

The timbre of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' contains many of the attributes that Simon Frith ascribes to 'cock-rock':

The music is loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and release. Lyrics are assertive and arrogant, but the exact words are less significant than the vocal styles involved, the shrill shouting and screaming. (Frith, 1983, p.227).

The tempo of the song is upbeat for one of Elton's greatest hits, at approximately 148 beats per minutes. This pulse gives the song a sense of energy, and the maintaining of this energy is a clear function of the drum kit in the introduction of this song. The drum kit also ties in to the lyrical

content of the song. Elton will shortly be singing about fighting, and here is the drummer hitting his drum kit. As Susan McClary notes, 'this musical discourse [in rock music] is typically characterized by its phallic backbeat' (McClary, 2002, p. 154). The whole song has clear masculine overtones, and the aggression in sound and metaphor produced by the drum kit establishes this from the outset of the song. With 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' being the most bold and aggressive song on *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (Elton's most successful album of all time, and the album which establishes him as a global star), the introduction to this track can be seen as a metaphorical announcement of the arrival of Elton onto the world music stage.

From the listener's point of view, the sound of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is very intense. Drawing upon Allan Moore's concept of a 3D 'sound-box' (Moore, 2001, p.121), this song can be described as being at the very front of the sonic space and within a very confined space, equidistant from left and right speakers. From the very start of the song, when the guitar riff is punctuated by the bass drum, the listener is getting a very punchy and aggressive sound that, at sufficient volume, the listener will feel as well as hear.

Elton created a distinct persona during the first period of his career which fitted the image he wished to convey to the audience at the time. This persona was supported by masculine-coded instruments being prominent in songs such as 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', alongside aggressive lyrics and energetic performances. The aggression and self-confidence evident in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' have disappeared by the early 1980s, as the next chapter explains.

Chapter 5 – Case Study 2 ‘Blue Eyes’ (1982)

At this stage [late 1970s], Elton John...was at a low point in his life. His support network of professional friends had gone and he himself was entering a period of sustained self-abuse, a ‘mission’ on which he was joined by many of those around him. For someone who, up until 1975, had never taken hard drugs and had warned others as to their evils, it had been a speedy descent into the world of addiction (Buckley, 2010, p.236).

Things had changed for Elton by 1982. He had enjoyed enormous critical and commercial success 1970-1976. He had gone from pub pianist to achieving his dream of being an international pop music superstar. During this period Elton’s records received a lot of attention, and his output was considerable – 14 albums (sometimes as many as three a year) and almost 500 concert performances. His public image was that of a teen idol, and glam rock enabled Elton to wear extravagant costumes with few questions asked. By 1982 the honeymoon period of critical success was over. Elton was no longer a twenty-something teen idol, he was in his mid-thirties and the audience was expecting something different from him. It is perhaps understandable how the descent that David Buckley describes in the quote above could happen. Elton was facing crises on multiple fronts – as an artist, as a performer, as a person. When combined with his meteoric rise in the early 1970s, it is clear that by the early 1980s the existence of the Elton John brand was in jeopardy and a retreat by Elton was almost to be expected. He released just six albums between 1977 and 1984. His concert performances were few and far between – as low as three in 1978, two in 1981, and just one concert performance in 1983. Issues of gender, identity, and age were in a state of flux for Elton at this time.

As the live performances decreased and Elton threatened to retire from touring, a greater emphasis was placed on the records as the main source of interaction between Elton and the audience. He was no longer averaging a performance every 5 days, as he had 1970-1976. The need to connect with the audience through new records added more pressure to an already stressed situation. Elton was struggling to define the Elton John brand and public image, and as David Buckley describes, his confidence as a songwriter and performer as starting to be undermined:

The business with the costumes was all beginning to get a bit gratuitous, a bit silly, maybe even a bit annoying. In the early 1970s, Elton’s spectacular spectacles, feathers, glittery suits and all-round glam image had fitted the times. By the early 1980s, with glam long gone, dressing-up seemed out-of-kilter. Yet Elton’s response, as the decade went on, was to make bigger, bolder, and even sillier stage costumes. He needed the visuals to attract the audience’s attention, when maybe he knew that his new songs couldn’t. It was almost as if he had lost confidence in himself as a performer. As Elton John headed towards middle age and began putting on more weight, the stage costumes would, he thought, camouflage his expanding girth. Unfortunately, they had the opposite effect...What none of these looks were, however, was fun. Instead, they came across as contrived and overblown...The harsh reality was that for the next two decades, his music mostly failed to come anywhere near the peak moments of his classic 1970s records. It would be foolish to dismiss out of hand all of Elton John’s records in this period. However, it is a fact that, whereas in the past, his albums were, if not always brilliant, then at the very least entirely listenable, his 1980s and 1990s records contained perhaps three or four strong songs, with the remaining tracks fillers. A couple of albums were out-and-out stinkers with not a single

memorable moment. Elton had begun to chase the fashionable sounds of the day and, when artists do that, they tend to lose what it was that was so distinctive about them in the first place (Buckley, 2010, pp.256-257).

The increasingly silly costumes that David Buckley mentions obscured Elton from view during performances. This had a big impact upon his performances. Was it a popular music artist (sporting the youthful and physically fit body stereotype), dressed in expensive designer clothes that the audience would aspire to and connect with the quality of their music? No, it was someone who had gained a noticeable amount of weight since his emergence as a popular music artist, dressed as Donald Duck. The authenticity of previous songs, such as 'Your Song', 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', and 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', is undermined by the visual spectacle of Elton's costume choices. The technical skill (particularly his piano ability, gained in part from his study at the Royal Academy of Music) evident in songs such as 'Grey Seal', 'Border Song', and 'Tiny Dancer', is a 'serious' talent that has required focus, determination, and talent to achieve, and yet these songs are being recreated by someone whose costume is reminiscent of a children's entertainer. And entertainment was presumably important to Elton's performances and public image at this time. The singer-songwriter image portrayed 1970-1976 had been replaced by that of an entertainer – there was now a gulf between Elton's public image as a popular music artist and his performance style.

As David Buckley alludes to, age was a key factor for Elton when deciding on stage costumes during this period. Musically, Elton wasn't affected too much by issues of age. Approaching his mid-thirties, singing love songs, telling stories, even singing about fighting and drinking, would still be accepted by the audience as authentic. His ability as a pianist was still as good as it had been ten years previous. Although his voice would begin to struggle later in the 1980s due to drugs and a busy schedule, even as late as 1982 there weren't any problems. Elton could sing both his old and new material comfortably, without having to re-write the melody lines or change the key of the song. The big effect age had been upon his visual appearance. By 1982 Elton was beginning to lose his hair, something which when combined with age is often seen as a symbol for a loss of masculinity. Another common signifier of masculinity, an athletic figure, was also under threat due to an expanding waistline. These issues impacted upon Elton's identity – for his role as a popular music artist, and for the way in which the audience related to him. Elton's success 1970-1976 had made him a popular music superstar, but as Buckley describes, it was his celebrity status that would become more prominent during the late 1970s and early 1980s:

He [Elton John] was not alone in this, however. In the mid-1980s, even that most hitherto sure-footed of musical experimenters, David Bowie, made records he now virtually disowns. Rod Stewart, Bruce Springsteen, even Lou Reed released music which was heavy on style but light in content: the big drum sound, the cheesy synthesiser chord and the lousy guitar solo ruled...Elton would still have numerous chart hits, sell copious quantities of albums and singles and remain a superstar. Yet, in terms of critical acceptance, the wounds inflicted on him in the punk era by the new breed of rock journalist were slow

to heal. The result was that, not only would Elton's new music be dismissed out of hand: his legacy would be tarnished. Elton, like Liz Taylor in the film world, was in danger of becoming famous for being famous. He was undoubtedly a superstar, but it was as if nobody could quite remember what he was famous for. Nobody talked about his old records; nobody cared much for the newer ones. With his weirdly fascinating and astonishingly colourful private life, he was more famous for appearing on chat shows and in the inches of the gossip columns than as an artist to be taken seriously (Buckley, 2010, pp.257-258).

Buckley makes an interesting distinction between Elton's status as a superstar, a celebrity, and his critical success as a popular music artist. Whilst his status as a superstar was established, critical success was not necessarily linked to that superstar status and was still fluid despite Elton being a superstar. Buckley also highlights the apparent rise of Elton's celebrity status at this time, and the way in which celebrity status plugged the gap left by the decline in critical success. If superstardom was the result of talent and skill and celebrity produced by public image, then this period of Elton's career also marks a shift away from the gifted musician towards the regular human being, and a subsequent change in the listener's perspective. Inadvertently, the change in fortunes and rise of celebrity status Elton experienced 1977-1983 may have been the start of his development from the narrator of songs into an auteur of popular music.

Instrumentation

'Blue Eyes' exemplifies the sounds and instrumentation often used by Elton during the period 1977-1983. There are stark differences between 'Blue Eyes' and 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', and the images they convey to the audience.

The vocals in 'Blue Eyes' are melancholic and lack a sense of energy; very different to the energy and showmanship evident in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. The vocals are much lower in pitch and this affects the timbre greatly. There is a sense of uncertainty about the vocal delivery, and there is an audible quiver in the voice. The brash, macho rock star has been replaced by a recluse lacking confidence. The lack of authority in the vocal delivery makes a sizeable dent in the macho image that Elton had cultivated during the 1970-1976 period. Even on ballads, such as 'Your Song', Elton had given a personal narration to the song which guided the listener through the lyrics and commanded their attention. The vocal delivery in 'Blue Eyes' is understated, diminishing the connection between the performer and the listener. If Elton's stardom had been built upon his technical ability, then the vocal delivery in 'Blue Eyes' was in danger of undermining that ability.

The masculine-coded guitar, so often a feature of Elton's songs 1970-1976, has been completely removed from 'Blue Eyes'. Instead, the song features synthesisers, electric piano, and strings. Elton's voice is never overpowered, but nothing seems to take centre stage either. The lack of any kind of introduction to the song means that a particular instrument is never featured at the front of the mix, and as a result never has to relinquish the spotlight to Elton's voice.

The drum kit plays a very constrained role in 'Blue Eyes', playing a very repetitive and simple drum pattern, only deviating occasionally for the odd climax or drum fill. Whilst the drum kit helps to keep the pulse of the song, its rhythmic aggression has been tamed. Even listening to the song through headphones, there is no apparent aggression from the drum kit and it never pushes itself to the front of the mix. As well as losing the masculine overtones that this rhythmic aggression can produce, the very measured and consistent sound of the drum kit in 'Blue Eyes' challenges the human input needed to produce that sound. The live, human-produced sound of earlier songs is undermined, along with the authenticity that sound generated. The drum sound in 'Blue Eyes' creates a disconnection between the live sound that Elton was known for as a performer, and the album being a permanent record of that sound. Elton had grown tired of touring at the end of the 1970s, and perhaps this explains in part the change in sound – Elton was thinking less about how his new material would be re-produced on stage.

The bass guitar, although still present in the mix, has been almost completely consumed by the synthesisers and lower strings. The punchy sound used on many earlier songs including 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' has been replaced by one which lacks the clarity and treble frequencies of the 1973 hit. The bass guitar part is simpler in 'Blue Eyes', and the bass guitar's role appears to be one of augmentation, by adding more depth to the strings and synthesiser. As is the case with the drum kit, the bass guitar is now subservient to the overall sound of the song, rather than playing an active part in making the song through melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic material.

The piano plays a greater role in 'Blue Eyes' than in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. The piano provides a countermelody to the vocals, filling in the gaps between vocal phrases. In addition, the piano part contains all of the key musical material of the song, making it possible for Elton to perform 'Blue Eyes' as a solo number with the loss of very little musical information compared to the recording. This development in the piano's role suggests a change in Elton's image. Gone is the macho rocker of the early 1970s. But what has replaced this image? The vocals demonstrate none of the virtuosity or embellishments of previous tracks (at the time of writing there are many vocal-only versions of Elton John songs available on YouTube to demonstrate the virtuosity and embellishments found in the vocals), and the piano part lacks the sparkle and technical flair of early 1970s hits. The change in instrumentation found on 'Blue Eyes', and the effect that this had on Elton's image in the late 1970s and early 1980s cannot be underestimated. The sound of 'Blue Eyes' is strikingly different to earlier ballads. Hit songs such as 'Your Song', 'Candle in the Wind', 'Levon', 'Border Song', 'Tiny Dancer', and 'Someone Saved My Life Tonight' can all be considered typical Elton John ballads from the 1970-1976 era. All of these songs use a rock combo line-up, with guitars and drum kit always prominent in the mix. They often enter either half-way or

two thirds of the way through the song to enable Elton to build to a climax for the final portion of the song. 'Blue Eyes' does not reach such a climax, and any sense of climax generated through the song's instrumentation has been carefully controlled or removed completely. Although song climaxes would be subdued for much of the 1980s, 'Blue Eyes' represents a low point for dynamic variation through instrumentation in Elton's music. Later ballads, such as 'Nikita' (1985), 'The One' (1991), and 'Believe' (1995) return to the instrumentation formula employed during the 1970-1976 period. The instrumentation used in 'Blue Eyes' clearly demonstrates how musical style, identity, and persona interlink and generate expectations on the part of the listener, and why 'Blue Eyes' stands out as unusual for an Elton John song. Through alterations to instrumentation, Elton is making changes to his sound (his musical identity) in 'Blue Eyes', but without a clear replacement to his established sound and style.

Lyrics

[Gary] Osborne's words didn't make a good read, as Bernie's usually had. They didn't, for the most part, have a life apart from the music, but seemed wedded to it, like an instrument played through the voice of Elton John. This made sense, given Elton's limited lyrical abilities and Osborne's straightforward approach (Rosenthal, 2004, p.160).

The lyrics of Elton's songs cannot be underestimated as a key reason for his success. Bernie Taupin's lyrics are often biographical and many allow Elton to take the role of narrator. These qualities give Elton ownership of the song. They tell stories which only Elton can tell, he is the messenger and anyone else is an imitation. This supports the notion that Elton John is a brand; he has (through the lyrics) a unique message to give. The 'life apart from the music' that Elizabeth J. Rosenthal describes in the quotation above provides another way to draw the listener in. Whilst they may enjoy the music, it could be the lyrics that really resonate with the audience. The biographical lyrics of 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' are a good example of this. The listener may remember the song as a story with music rather than simply music with words. The lyrics don't just express ideas and emotions that may connect with the listener, they create a world to which the listener is invited (similar to the story of *The Wizard of Oz* from which the album draws inspiration). The lyrics may create a different world for each song, but all of these worlds are part of the Elton John universe. The lyrics can therefore play a crucial role in underpinning the persona performed by Elton, by situating him within the lyrics and establishing him as the narrator of the story.

Gary Osborne's lyrics for 'Blue Eyes' offer description, but lack the biographical and narrative quality of previous Elton John songs. The main points of the lyrics can be summed up as: someone Elton cares about (there is no suggestion that the person is his lover) has blue eyes and he wants to be with them. The audience isn't taken on a journey. The lyrics suggest that Elton has left and

returned to the other person during the course of the song, but no information is given about where he has gone or where he is returning to. The lyrics have no chronological content, they are not set in the past (for Elton to recount a story to the audience) nor do they suggest different time periods during the course of the song itself.

Neither of the characters in the song are introduced to the audience. There is no information about either of them except that one has blue eyes and the other is going on a journey and will return. There is no world created for the audience to explore, and so Elton's persona is not reinforced through the lyrics. Essentially, it could be anyone singing about someone special to them who has blue eyes. With the exception of the use of 'she' when describing the other person, there is no information about the gender or sex of either of the characters. Perhaps Elton's character is setting out on some great but extremely dangerous adventure which will test his strength and determination (and code him as masculine), before he returns to his female lover which reaffirms his heterosexuality. Or perhaps he is simply travelling to work to undertake a very boring and menial job and he is in fact referring to his pet cat. His masculinity is undermined by the lack of control he has at work, and his sexuality is neither confirmed nor denied by the ownership of a pet. The fact that this was one of his most commercially successful songs of the 1977-1983 period (but eclipsed by songs such as 'I'm Still Standing' and 'I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues') shows that Elton's success was being measured by a different scale at this time compared to the early 1970s. The lyrical content of 'Blue Eyes' gives little away, just as Elton's persona didn't in the early 1980s. The descriptive nature of the lyrics shortens the length of phrases, as they rarely build upon each other. In other songs, the lyrics have had some kind of focal point which has usually been used (consciously or unconsciously) as the chorus or refrain. 'Blue Eyes' doesn't offer this kind of development in the lyrics, and perhaps this impacted upon the music and its performance through a lack of lyrical structure. The songwriting partnership between Elton and Bernie Taupin was well-documented from the beginning, and Elton's collaboration with Gary Osborne for 'Blue Eyes' is another symbol of how Elton's public persona, or the Elton John brand, was less defined between 1977 and 1983 in comparison to earlier in his career.

Performance

Performance isn't just about what happens when a performer is on the stage; it's also about context. The context includes what happens before, during, and after the performance, as well as the general climate the performance takes place in (Hanna, 1999, p.123).

Whilst David Bowie could retire Ziggy Stardust in favour of another persona, Elton could not do the same. The person and the persona were too interconnected. This was not just limited to the

stage, Elton couldn't walk off at the end of a show and be someone else. He had nowhere to escape to, no way to separate himself from the artist. This is a key reason why Elton's music career has mirrored his personal life so closely. In some ways, everything (onstage and offstage) is a performance, by a guy called Reg from Pinner. But in other ways, nothing is a performance. The music career cannot be separated from the person. Without Elton the musical superstar, there would be no Elton the person. The retreat evident in 'Blue Eyes' mirrored the retreat in Elton's personal life at this time.

Between 1970-1976, Elton's appeal to the audience had three main strands. Firstly, he was known for his extravagant performances, and this would make his music visually attractive to the audience. Secondly, Elton's ability as a musician was beyond doubt, and his virtuosity helped him to stand out. These things fed into the third strand; his role as an idol. The audience either wanted to be with him or be more like him (have his ability, charisma, flair). By 1977, all three of these strands were under threat. Extravagance (in the form of costumes or actions onstage) was heading towards cringeworthy excess due to drugs and concerns about his appearance. Musical ability wasn't being flaunted as Elton became more introverted, and perhaps a little concerned about virtuosity being seen as arrogant or immature (it brought him fame, but should he really keep reminding the audience about how gifted he is?). These elements, combined with interviews and stories about his personal life combined to undermine his role as an idol. People no longer wanted to be with him, Elton had lost the 'eligible bachelor' image. He was struggling commercially as well as privately. People didn't want to be like him either. 'Blue Eyes' embodies this struggle, and comes at the peak of this period of his career, before Elton's persona changed yet again from 1984 onwards. Elton's performance onstage and off of it was setting a difficult context in which to work and be successful.

And how does the track make itself known to us? Through the identity of the singer. With but few exceptions, it seems to me that when we listen to a track, our attention is focused particularly on the identity of the singer. It is, indeed, to the singer that we give our attention. I have raised the analogy with conversation before. In conversing, we are primarily interested in the person we are conversing with; what else may be going on becomes secondary. And we get to know that person through the interaction. I think something similar is going on in listening to songs: the principal gain is one of feeling that we better understand the 'personality' to whom we are listening (Moore, 2012, p.179).

An introductory passage to a song is a very common device in popular music. Structurally, the introduction ends where the main body of the song begins. Where the main body of the song begins is also often denoted by the singer entering or being moved to the centre of the mix. In effect, the introduction is not only introducing the song, it is introducing the person or persons who will sing the song. Continuing with Moore's analogy with conversation, the idea of an introduction is entirely natural. When conversing with someone, we begin by introducing ourselves or someone introduces us on our behalf. Following the introduction, we enter into conversation and, as Moore

comments, we focus on the person to whom we are talking. In popular music, this is often replicated through a change in dynamics, instrumentation, stereo mix, etc. to bring the vocalist to the front and centre of the audio. This is a sonic appropriation of the typical live performance layout. If the vocalist is not required at the beginning of the song, they often step back into the middle of the stage and join the main group of band members. As soon as the vocalist is required, they step forward to the very front of the stage (they are usually the furthest forward of all of the band members at this point) and stand in the centre.

Elton's performance of 'Blue Eyes' contradicts this established norm in a variety of ways. With no introduction to the song, there is no preparation for the vocalist to emerge. It is as if Elton wants launch into the song without delay. He doesn't want to introduce himself to the audience. A change in dynamic level as the singer enters the mix can be seen as a signifying the vocalist as the leader of the group. They control the dynamic level, and it is only as they gradually increase the volume of their part that the rest of the band is allowed to do the same. Because there is no introduction to 'Blue Eyes', there is no drop in dynamic level as the singer enters. This undermines Elton's authority as the leader, and as the superstar. Referring to Moore's conversation analogy once more, who should the audience focus on as 'Blue Eyes' begins? Who is having the conversation with the listener? Elton hasn't made himself the centre of attention in the mix, and so whilst we are naturally drawn towards the vocalist, it isn't as automatic as it would otherwise be. The dynamic level throughout 'Blue Eyes' remains fairly consistent, with few peaks or troughs. Elton doesn't seem to use dynamics to communicate to the audience his leadership of the band. When considering musicians famed more for their instrumental ability rather than their vocal ability (such Gary Moore or Van Halen), it is noticeable that their chosen instrument (often the already masculine-coded electric guitar) is usually at the very front of the mix. This prominence helps to convey to the audience that their chosen musical instrument is their 'voice'. In 'Blue Eyes' neither the vocals nor piano are given special prominence in the mix. Instead, Elton is relying on the audience to identify the vocals as the focus and opt into the conversation. This is completely different to Elton's songs from the early 1970s, where he is the centre of attention and almost reaches out for a conversation with the audience. The disconnection between artist and audience which is evident in 'Blue Eyes' creates problems for the final part of the quotation from Allan Moore: the audience improving their understanding of the personality to whom they are listening. Whatever aspect of his persona the audience member wanted to engage with, between 1970 and 1976 Elton made clear who he was and what he was about. His persona, both onstage and offstage covered issues such as gender, sexuality, age, and musicianship. Between 1977 and 1983 it was clear that the situation had changed

for Elton; his persona was no longer valid and needed updating. What replaced the unified and successful persona of 1970-1976 was nothingness. It was as if Elton John had come to an end.

But rather than imagine that we are listening to an individual singing to us, an individual able to express himself or herself directly, and through whose expression we understand his or her subjectivity, it is usually more helpful to recognise that we are listening to a persona, projected by a singer, in other words to an artificial construction that may, or may not, be identical with the person(ality) of the singer...Indeed, deciding whether or not the persona is identical to the personality of the singer underpins much of the entire discourse around authenticity (Moore, 2012, p.179).

This quotation from Allan Moore is especially useful for discussing 'Blue Eyes'. The notions of expression and persona are salient features for much of Elton's career, and yet in many ways 'Blue Eyes' seeks to avoid such terms. When performing 'Blue Eyes' Elton is sat behind the piano, his legs and much of his torso is obscured from view. By 1982 the costumes had lost their unique and extravagant quality, and many (such as the Donald Duck costume worn in 1980) were just plain silly. In wearing such costumes and sitting at the piano, Elton had restricted, or even removed, his body as a site for gender identification. The gender coding so often employed 1970-1976 (such as masculine-styled clothes, shirts open to expose his chest, and movement on stage) had been constrained or altered during the period 1977-1983.

As a song, 'Blue Eyes' offers little opportunity for Elton to leave the piano and interact with the audience (to 'strut his stuff'). There is no introduction at all to the song to enable him to demonstrate his command of the stage to the audience (unless material was created specifically for this purpose in live performances). Songs such as 'The Bitch is Back', 'I'm Still Standing', and 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' include an introduction that can be repeated as many times as required and is not dependent upon the piano. As a result, Elton can enter and exit or move around the stage as he sees fit. Other songs, such as 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', 'Crocodile Rock', and 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word', rely upon the piano for the introduction. Whilst Elton needs to be at the piano, he has the control to 'strut' in a musical sense by adding whatever music he wishes. In these cases, the song only begins when Elton starts the introductory passage. This switch from 'musical strutting' to performing a song as the audience have experienced it through recordings and previous performances is usually marked by applause from the audience. 'Blue Eyes' has no obvious point during the song at which he can involve the audience, such as the refrain in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'.

As Moore asserts, the perceived authenticity of the singer's persona informs how the listener judges the authenticity of the song as a whole. In the first period of his career, Elton had a clear public persona and he projected it in front of an audience (in either live or recorded forms). However, during the period 1977-1983 Elton did not have a clear persona and seemed to replace projection with introversion. 'Blue Eyes' is a good example of this shift in Elton's image at this time.

In 1977 Elton turned thirty. The (heterosexual) 'eligible bachelor' image often portrayed 1970-1976 was beginning to wear thin. His physical appearance was changing, and due to experiments with a lower register during the 1979 recording sessions with Thom Bell, Elton was opting for melodic lines that avoided the raucous timbre of many earlier hits in favour of something mellower, something that sounded safer. The lowering of register could have been coded as masculine, as Elton was now using a pitch range that was too low to be sung by a female and therefore could not be considered feminine. However, it is a sign of the vacuum created by Elton's departure from the 'eligible bachelor' persona at this time that a lower register emphasised his age over his masculinity.

In the film world, some actors have embraced physical changes in such a way as to accentuate their masculinity. Bruce Willis, for example, uses his age and baldness in *Die Hard 4: Live Free or Die Hard* to demonstrate his masculine superiority, both over his accomplices and his enemies (all portrayed by actors considerably younger than Willis). In doing so, Willis is redefining his masculinity compared to the previous films in the franchise. In the first three films, Bruce Willis is paired with actors who have a similar physical appearance and are a similar age. In these films, Willis's masculine coding is generated by his identification as the alpha male through him triumphing over similarly coded men. In the first two *Die Hard* films, Bruce Willis's character (John McClane) is portrayed as someone in their prime. He has a full head of hair (almost) which can be seen to suggest his virility and youthfulness. Fight scenes are more intense than in later films, and McClane is left with serious injury (covered in blood, limping, multiple open wounds all over his body and face). This tells the audience that McClane can survive serious physical assault and still triumph over his enemies. The physical endurance that he displays is linked to his age – his relatively youthful body (even when up against other men of a similar age and physicality) can take the stress of mortal combat.

In *Die Hard 3: Die Hard with a Vengeance*, Bruce Willis is creating a transition in the masculine portrayal of his character. The emphasis placed upon his family in the first two films (needing to rescue his wife, and a brief visual presentation of his young children) has been removed in the third film. His children are now in their mid to late teens, and he is separated from his wife. John McClane is now someone who has been through the (young) family situation, and he has become a more solitary figure again, without others depending upon him anymore. Willis's appearance has changed since the second film, he is now almost completely bald and what hair he has is now grey. Whilst there was only two years between the first two films, the third film arrived after a gap of five years. There is a stark contrast between the youthful, thirty-something police officer in *Die Hard* and the seasoned, forty-something veteran cop in *Die Hard 3: Die Hard with a Vengeance*. In the third film, the action is toned down so as not to risk undermining the authenticity

of McClane's gender image and Willis's public persona. The fight scenes are shorter, and McClane survives relatively unscathed compared to previous films. Transport has replaced physical exertion. The first film takes place inside a skyscraper, forcing McClane to rely entirely upon physical stamina to achieve his tasks. The second film reduces the need for physical stamina by confining the action to an airport terminal and surrounding area. By the time of the third film, set in New York City, McClane uses the subway, cars, boats, and helicopters to get around. The fourth and fifth films use even larger geographical areas, and transport is employed accordingly. In addition, the 'bad guys' undergo a transition from being physically strong in earlier films to a more intellectual and cerebral state from the third film onwards. The character of John McClane has made an effective transition across the *Die Hard* film franchise in order to modify the gender image projected to the audience in such a way as to ensure that McClane is still coded as masculine, even after more than 25 years.

During the period 1977-1983 Elton struggled to convey a consistent and complete persona to the audience. He was unable to make the transition from 'eligible bachelor' to something else, as the character of John McClane has been able to in the *Die Hard* film franchise. 'Blue Eyes' epitomises this struggle through the lack of an introduction to the song which helps to present Elton's persona to the audience, the use of harmonic and melodic material which is not characteristic of an Elton John song (therefore undermining the authenticity of the song and the artist), and lyrical content that does not feed into a particular public image (including issues such as gender, age, sexuality) that is being reinforced elsewhere as part of the Elton John 'brand'. Indeed, in some ways there does not seem to be a coherent public image presented for Elton at this time. Rather than development and transition, between 1977 and 1983 Elton appears to have created a void. With the *Rolling Stone* interview of 1976 (in which Elton suggested that he was bi-sexual) abruptly ending the persona previously created and projected during the first period of his career, combined with a drop in commercial success in the late 1970s and early 1980s (perhaps not entirely unrelated), Elton was at something of a crossroads (in so many ways) by the end of 1983. The rest of the 1980s would be very testing for him.

Chapter 6 - Case Study 3 'Sacrifice' (1989)

With white hair, bloated, ashen face, and puffy eyes, Elton now *looked* like the Truman Capote figure *Rolling Stone* had called him back in 1974...He was eating so much (as well as drinking excessively) that his continued bulimia was not having the expected result; his stylish Gianni Versace-designed clothing couldn't hide his substantial weight gain. Of necessity, his eyes were obscured behind black sunglasses. During the tour's first week, he collapsed onstage (although he quickly rebounded) (Rosenthal, 2004, pp. 317-318).

Elton had been kidding himself about a range of things for a while. This sense of denial peaked around 1989 and dramatic changes in his personal life ensued. In 1988 Elton and Renate had divorced and Elton publicly acknowledged that he was gay. He had suffered problems with his voice throughout the mid-1980s which had required surgery. His physical appearance had been affected by the pressure that he was under. In 1990 Elton would begin to seek treatment for various addictions, and begin to sort his life out. However, during the recording of *Sleeping with the Past*, his life was still very artificial.

The album cover shows Elton in a very unnatural pose, as if he's sleeping. His hair is bleached blonde, almost white. This is the only time that Elton has dyed his hair such an unnatural colour. There is no clue as to what his profession is on the album cover. This moves the focus onto Elton as a person rather than as a global popular music artist. Clearly, Elton is struggling with aspects of his life, and the album cover seems to be communicating this to the audience. Even just looking at the album cover, the issue of authenticity is becoming a key consideration for the audience at this time. Allan Moore has discussed authenticity in popular music, and the different forms it can take.

[D]iscussions of the attribution of authenticity cannot always take place with explicit reference to matters of sonic design. I start, therefore, from an assumption that authenticity does not inhere in any combination of musical sounds. 'Authenticity' is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed (Moore, 2002, p. 210).

This places the power in the hands of the listener. Whilst the artist can attempt to *influence* an interpretation of authenticity on the part of the listener, they cannot *create* the listener's interpretation of authenticity about a particular artist or song. It is also important to note that when an interpretation of the music is being formed by the listener, they will take into account extramusical information (interviews, TV appearances, magazine articles, etc.) to create that interpretation.

Authenticity of expression...arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience...*Authenticity of execution*...arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance...*Authenticity of experience*...occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them (Moore, 2002, pp.214-220).

These distinctions regarding authenticity are useful to assess how an interpretation is being formed and in what way the listener can interact with the music. The variety of viewpoints will favour different aspects of the song, and emphasise the need to analyse the song holistically. As issues arise for Elton in the late 1980s, it is important to understand how these affect interpretations and notions of authenticity. Even the album cover for *Sleeping with the Past* suggests that there is something wrong in Elton's life and hint at his approach to deal with struggles being quite artificial and superficial.

The sense of artificiality and unnaturalness can be seen in the music too. The first instrument heard 'Sacrifice' is the drum kit. At least half of the drum sounds are synthesised. Biographies, online sources, and the sleeve notes list Johnathan Moffett as the drummer on this track. The drum sound makes it difficult to tell whether a drum machine has been used. The sense of artificiality is increased by the way the drums are played – the pattern is very simple, repetitive, and the drum fills are always basic. Any hint of human originality has been erased; the beats have been evened out by technology.

Various synthesisers enter the track. Elton's piano has been replaced by an electronic keyboard. The other keyboard sounds and the bass guitar fill the 3D space. But there is no definition to them, making the 3D space undefinable. The lack of definition also breaks the link between the human action of playing an instrument and the sound that results.

Elton's vocal timbre is rather unusual on this track. He had begun to experiment with a lower vocal range ten years before 'Sacrifice' was released, and had undergone throat surgery three years before this track was released. On 'Sacrifice', Elton manages to avoid the lower range of 'Blue Eyes', but never reaches the high pitches used in the early 1970s. As a result, Elton's voice has lost some of its distinctive character. The power and warmth of previous tracks have been removed. The music accentuates this further by speeding up the recording. The vocal timbre and piano accompaniment are defining characteristics of Elton's musical style and, whilst both are present in this track, they have been altered and interfered with by technology. As Richard Middleton notes:

vocalising is the most intimate, flexible and complex mode of articulation of the body, and also is closely connected with the breath...Significantly, technological distortion of voice-sound (through use of a vocoder, for example) is far more disturbing than similar treatment of instrumental playing (Middleton, 1990, p. 262).

The sound of 'Sacrifice' is very different to the 'authentic' sound of the singer/songwriter sat at his piano in the early 1970s. But so too is the public image. In 1989 Elton seems lonely and quite reclusive. Although 1984-1993 was more commercially successful than the preceding period, it was still nowhere near the success Elton enjoyed between 1969 and 1976. His on-going stardom was therefore not guaranteed, and his celebrity status was under regular attack by the press, particularly

The Sun newspaper. Elton was relying on memories of the past and had not yet developed a new musical style and public image with which to engage the audience. This was exacerbated by Elton not using material from *Sleeping with the Past* during his 1989 and 1990 performances. As a result, there was a missing link between 'Elton as a celebrity' (news articles and interviews) and 'Elton the star' (popular music artist reputation) – there was no 'Elton the performer' to combine the human (celebrity) and the genius (star) through the act of making music in a live situation.

Instrumentation

The vocal part in 'Sacrifice' sounds very thin. This is due in part to the track being sped up and therefore being raised by the equivalent of a semitone. Whilst this may seem like a small change, the effect on the sound of the song is significant. Elton's voice has lost the warmth and richness of the lower tones which were used as a symbol of greater maturity in many of his late 1970s and early 1980s tracks, such as 'Blue Eyes'. In addition, speeding up the track has left the higher notes of the vocal part lacking the expected power and intensity. Perhaps speeding up the track was an attempt to make Elton sound younger – a desire to return to the successful days of the early 1970s. Whatever the reason, the result is a vocal sound that is artificial and problematic for interpreting through the lens of gender – the sound is unusual in a number of ways and this suggests ambiguity where once there was masculinity.

Elton's vocals in 'Sacrifice' sound restrained, and lack the emotion or finesse of previous songs. In 'Kiss the Bride' (1983), Elton sings about similar issues of sadness and turmoil. However, his vocal performance is markedly different to that employed in 'Sacrifice'. As he is singing about his dilemma in 'Kiss the Bride', Elton conveys a sense of honesty and authenticity through his vocal sound. The timbre of the vocals is characteristically Elton John, which gives the listener the sense that the message contained within the lyrics is coming directly from him. The clarity of vocal timbre in 'Kiss the Bride' allows for greater expression when Elton sings the melody line. The lyrics about the bride are contrasted against the warm, lower register of Elton's voice (the wannabe groom). The dilemma faced by Elton in the song is raised to new heights by the effort required to reach the higher pitches in the chorus. Whilst the message to the audience may not be a happy one, it is at least clear and unified by the various parts gelling together in the mix.

In contrast, whilst the vocals for 'Sacrifice' are central in the mix, they sound separate to the other parts. The separation in the sound of the vocals can be seen as a metaphor for feeling isolated; something which Elton will have undoubtedly been feeling in his personal life at this point. The restraint in 'Sacrifice' is emphasised by the small melodic range. Across the entire song, Elton sings less than an octave (only a dominant seventh). As a result, it is difficult to convey expression through

the melody. Just as lyrics can describe a journey so can the melody, with higher pitches used to suggest a struggle or climax of some kind. Lower pitches, closer to the spoken range, offer a way for the artist to draw the audience into the song (from the spoken world outside) and the ease with which lower notes can be produced lends them to evoking (amongst other things) a sense of retreat, nature (due to their proximity to spoken pitch), or sad emotions (often expressed with minimal energy). A key characteristic of Elton John songs is the way in which he adds embellishments and slides to notes. He is capable of singing more complex melodies than that which is contained in these songs, and the embellishments and slides go some way to hinting to the audience of his underlying vocal abilities. In addition, these embellishments and slides (being a key characteristic of Elton John songs) turn a once generic and anonymous melody into something that is distinctly of Elton's creation. However, in 'Sacrifice' these are missing. The sound of the vocals makes it hard to identify the singer as Elton, the melodic range limits expression which might suggest who the singer is, and characteristic embellishments are missing from the melody. Elton's performance of 'Sacrifice' goes beyond confused or unclear - he sounds uncertain, ambiguous, and anonymous. Ambiguity in the sound of the vocals and performance of the melody in 'Sacrifice' causes issues for how the listener may read the song (and Elton) with regards to age (due to the artificial processing of the track's pitch), as well as when considering gender, sexuality, and identity.

The drum kit in 'Sacrifice' produces a regimented, unimaginative part. There are few drum fills, and the drum sounds are artificial in nature (particularly the snare drum). In other songs, the drum kit links into the rhythms played by other parts either to emphasise certain beats or to contrast beats emphasised elsewhere (e.g. between the drums and guitar in the introduction to 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'). This is not the case in 'Sacrifice' – the drums do not accent or respond to other parts within the music. The result is a sense that the drums are just going through the motions. Their masculine coding (through aggressive performance or percussive sound) has either been constrained or removed entirely.

The pad synthesiser sound on the track is warm and comforting, it has little rhythm or syncopation to the part to suggest movement, aggression, or uncertainty. Instead, it provides a consistent and steady tone that rises above notions of time (timing of event) or space (place of event). The sound is not affected by its environment, due to it being recorded straight from the instrument (unlike a saxophone for example, where the sound is recorded through a column of air). This forms a disconnection between the human being pressing the keys and the resultant sound. The lacking sense of time and space created by the artificial sound suggests that the synthesiser could continue producing that sound indefinitely. From a listener's perspective, the use of such sounds in a song help to transport the audience away from reality, and any negative emotions that could be

connected to a person's experience of reality. This disconnect with reality is often used in films and children's television shows, and the success of franchises such as the fantasy tales of Harry Potter shows the audience's desire for escapism. Returning to 'Sacrifice', perhaps Elton is seeking a sense of escapism. Having left Reg Dwight in favour of Elton John many years before, Elton has no life away from the persona that he has created. In 1989 a variety of issues concerning both his personal and professional lives were undermining his persona – his connection with the audience, and indeed the world. By using artificial sounds, and sounds which lack a connection to their human creator or a specific time or place, Elton is retreating from the dialogue between the music and the listener. It is very difficult to form interpretations of identity, gender, and sexuality from such an artificial sound, particularly when the human originator is seeking to avoid projecting such issues onto the music. The undefined and unnatural soundscape, created by the pad synthesiser sound in particular, leaves the vocals (as the only identifiable human element of the song) sounding isolated in the mix. The synthesiser sound softens the pulse, removing any drive that would otherwise emanate from such a part had it been played on a guitar, acoustic piano, or acoustic strings section (all of which involve a human element). This can be seen as a metaphor for Elton feeling/appearing isolated and lacking drive. Dips in live performances, commercial success, and work output at this time would seem to support this.

Elton established his persona and career as a piano-playing singer-songwriter. Whilst other artists such as Freddie Mercury, Paul McCartney, and Mick Jagger perform as singers and/or multi-instrumentalists, Elton always performs sat at the piano (the notable exception being his performance with the remaining band members of Queen at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert in 1992). The audience almost expect there to be a piano on an Elton John track, even in guitar-led songs such as 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. The piano is a trademark of an Elton John song, and helps the listener to situate Elton in the recording (sat at the piano, whilst singing the lead vocals). By switching to a keyboard sound in 'Sacrifice' which is electronic, artificial, and manipulated, Elton is undermining the very foundations of his persona as a popular music artist. The 1980s saw a rising popularity for synthesisers, and this may account for their use and prominence on 'Sacrifice', but this also demonstrates how things had changed for Elton. In the early 1970s he was leading the field with his sound, setup, and performance style. By 1989 he was following the crowd rather than leading it. This has particular issues for interpretations of age – perhaps this was demonstrating that he was 'past it' as a popular music artist.

The guitar seems audibly present only at certain points in 'Sacrifice'. When it is present, it is usually playing a repetitive, background phrase. As a result, the guitar's role is more of a compositional task than a performance one – therefore undermining the masculine gender coding

that is often ascribed to the electric guitar. The effects that have been added to the guitar sound have removed any hint of aggression, and the distortion so common in earlier tracks has been removed completely. The guitar has been disarmed and its masculinity constricted; perhaps a metaphor for Elton at this time.

The bass guitar, whilst present throughout the track, is hidden below the expansive synthesiser sounds. Its role appears to be to support the synthesisers by adding a slight pulse to the song. The level of attack in the bass guitar sound has been reduced to a minimum and its role in the song is best described as functional, with little hint of a counter-melody. Both guitar parts are muted compared to earlier tracks, and their position in the mix leaves them sounding emasculated.

Melody

The melodic range used by Elton has been reduced significantly for 'Sacrifice'. Elton has removed the lower pitches (mostly unobtainable by women and therefore coded as masculine), and the higher pitches (popular in his 1970s work, demonstrating his virtuosity and masculinity/virility through his command of such high notes) are also reduced greatly.

By removing the extremities of his range, Elton is affecting/removing his 'signature sound'. This makes it more difficult for the audience to identify Elton, to identify with Elton, and thereby to align their identity with the values that Elton is projecting during 'Sacrifice'.

Unusually, there are no embellishments to the melodic line of this song, often a key characteristic of Elton John songs. This lack of embellishment suggests that Elton is giving an artificial performance (for him at least) and not taking ownership of the song (as he is choosing not to add common traits of his songs).

Being no longer able to do something (physical gestures in particular) is often linked to age. Although drink and drugs are likely to have been the key contributing factors to Elton's voice problems during the late 1980s, they built up over time, i.e. as Elton got older. The melody serves, therefore, as a reminder to the listener that Elton has been around for two decades at this point and time is having an effect upon his performance (and compositional choices).

The melody during the verses sounds unsure, due to the abundance of phrases ending unresolved. The entire melody is basic and repetitive, with an obvious call and response occurring between phrases, and phrases in both the verses and choruses being sung more than once in each verse/chorus with little or no variation.

The melody does not alter as the song progresses. There is no build (either in pitch or dynamic range) towards the end of the song. As a result, it is difficult for the listener to remain orientated as to where they are in the song. This in turn undermines the message of the lyrics due to

the listener being unsure of how the song is progressing. Embellishment and an increase in dynamic value can have an emotional effect upon the listener due to their perceived connection to the artist through their voice (the human, natural connection). Consequently, a lack of embellishment or dynamic variation in the melody can render a disconnection between the listener and the artist. This then impacts upon a range of issues for the listener as a human being - authenticity, gender, sexuality, age, etc. - and how they relate to Elton as a representation of those things.

The shape and pitch of the melody in 'Sacrifice' makes it difficult for Elton to express emotion during the song. The almost formulaic call and response between melodic phrases limits Elton's opportunities for building a swell of emotion over a substantial portion of the song. As he reaches the end of one phrase on a high note, he immediately begins the next phrase on a lower note. This is in contrast to the verses of songs such as 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', 'Your Song', and 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word', where the pitch of phrases descends gradually over a number of lines of lyrics. The effect of this in 'Sacrifice' is that Elton reaches the apex and nadir much sooner than in other songs, and this limits the opportunity for expression through the singing of the melody.

This limitation upon expression is exacerbated by the length of phrases in 'Sacrifice'. During the verse, the average length of a phrase is 5.42 notes spread over 2.77 quarter notes. This compares with 4.5 notes spread over 4.58 beats for similarly inexpressive 'Blue Eyes', 8.43 notes spread over 3.86 beats for the 1970 ballad 'Your Song', and 12 notes spread over 7.36 beats for 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. The verses of 'Sacrifice' contain short phrases (beat length) of fairly limited complexity (number of notes). This has implications for Elton as a narrator, auteur, and persona. The shortness of phrases disrupts the flow of the story that he is telling, with few melodic notes occurring before another break. From the perspective of lyrics versus music, perhaps the shorter phrase lengths are indicative of Elton having less to say at this time, or losing his 'compositional voice' (as well as his physical singing voice).

From a perspective of gender, Elton's 'falling apart' during the late 1980s and early 1990s undermined the masculine elements of his persona. The virtuosity of his upper range and the masculine-coded tones of his lower range had been silenced. The narrative quality of the lyrics, and the sense of authority that this afforded to Elton as the narrator, had been replaced with the musical equivalent of sound bites.

Harmony

There are only six different chords in 'Sacrifice'. The song is very simple harmonically, with little variation between the verses and the choruses. There is little evidence of this being an Elton John

song due to the formulaic feel of the harmony. Virtuosity is a key element of the Elton John identity, and an important factor for masculine coding in his music. In terms of the harmony of 'Sacrifice', this is missing entirely. The similarity of the verses and choruses has led to minimal dynamic variation, due to the lack of natural peaks in the music created (in large part) by the harmonic material. The overall result is that 'Sacrifice' is slightly underwhelming, as if Elton is just going through the motions rather than fully engaging with the material and putting his unique stamp on it. This is exacerbated by the major-key feel of the song, when the lyrics are dealing with negative emotions. Minor keys are often used to accompany negative emotions (a tradition established in classical music and continued in popular music) while major keys often suggest positive emotions, and so there seems to be a mismatch between the emotions of the lyrics and the music accompanying them.

All of the chords remain within the home key of C major (sped up to C# major). There is a distinct feel of safety about the harmony of 'Sacrifice', with no dominant 7th chords (to suggest rock harmony over traditional harmony) and no modulations. Unlike many of his songs Elton isn't taking the listener on a journey, and this is seen in the harmonic material.

The traditional and simple harmony of 'Sacrifice' is evidenced by Humdrum correctly identifying the key of the song, with a 73.30% confidence rating. Rather than simple harmonic material being used to allow another element of the music to come to the fore, in the case of 'Sacrifice' the simple harmonic material is consistent with the complexity of other elements of the song. In doing so, Elton has created a song that is missing a number of characteristics associated with his music. If the listener struggles to identify 'Sacrifice' as an Elton John song, then they will struggle to identify with Elton. As a result, the listener's (re-)creation of their own identity to this song is undermined. This in turn can impact upon the commercial success of 'Sacrifice' if the listener feels that Elton isn't speaking to/on behalf of them (Moore's 'authenticity of experience'). The harmonic material, when combined with the sound of the instruments, sounds mechanical, artificial, and impersonal.

The bass line leads the listener through the chord progression in a very straightforward manner, sticking to the root note of each chord with an occasional connecting note. Each chord is predictable, as the bass line prepares the next chord. There are no surprises for the listener, and this sense of the mundane diminishes the human aspect of the music. As a composer, Elton is positioned further away from the listener due to a lack of manipulation of the material to make it his own. By making the harmonic material more varied and less predictable for the listener, Elton would demonstrate his virtuosity for songwriting. His greater level of ability would allow him to know where the harmony is heading, whilst the listener may be unsure. As has already been discussed, virtuosity is often coded as masculine (mastery of skills refined over time), whilst the natural is often

coded as feminine (innate ability, unaltered by an environment or people, e.g. 'mother nature'). So if Elton isn't displaying masculine virtuosity with harmonic material in 'Sacrifice', is he displaying a more feminine, natural ability for songwriting? Something that virtuosity and the natural have in common is complexity. When someone's virtuosity is discussed, a common theme is the way in which they have developed a skill or skills in order to deal with a level of complexity in either the process of demonstrating their virtuosity or in the end result. A discussion of a painter's ability will often discuss the complexities of their brush strokes, the sense of realism in the painting, or their use of colours. When discussing an animal or a plant the focus is often on how complex something that we take for granted actually is. We have a need to explore the details. And yet, in 'Sacrifice' Elton seems to be removing the ability to do that. The harmony is simple with no relief, little variation between the verses and choruses, and very electronic and artificial sounds and instruments are used. A key characteristic of Elton's music is that it is performed by a specific human being with particular traits and skills. Harmonically, as well as melodically and instrumentally, Elton has removed that human element as much as possible, and certainly removed traces of himself from the music.

Lyrics

So many of Elton's songs contain named characters: Susie ('Crocodile Rock'), Nikita ('Nikita'), Levon ('Levon'), Daniel ('Daniel'), etc. Many others, whilst not giving names, contain specific characters, and many songs take the listener on a journey of some kind ('Rocket Man', 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', 'Your Song'). In contrast, 'Sacrifice' gives little away in terms of both character and journey (story). The lyrics are often vague thoughts about a relationship, and this lack of information makes it difficult for the listener to empathise with Elton and the situation that he is describing (in contrast with the vivid images created through the lyrics of 'Crocodile Rock').

If Elton John ballads are read as his relationship with his fans then this makes for interesting reading with regards to his career. 'Your Song' (1970) is Elton John loving his fans and them loving him. 'Blue Eyes' (1982) is Elton loving his fans but his fans not necessarily loving him. 'Sacrifice' (1989) is Elton and his fans existing but, as is written in the lyrics, they are 'living in two separate worlds'. 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' (1997) is the final chapter. With the help and love of his fans (old and new) Elton is beginning to accept who he is again, and the song can be interpreted as him thanking his fans for their support: 'there was a time when I was everything and nothing all in one. When you found me, I was feeling like a cloud across the sun'.

The mention of 'each married man' in the lyrics of 'Sacrifice' is problematic for Elton in 1989. His marriage to Renate Blauel ended in 1988, and at this point he openly came out as gay. As

someone recently divorced, mention of marriage in song lyrics is a little odd – unless it is a reflection upon the past. The idea that ‘Sacrifice’ could be autobiographical is certainly supported by lines such as ‘two hearts living in two separate worlds’ and ‘some things look better baby, just passing through’. However, if the listener rejects the notion that ‘Sacrifice’ is autobiographical then the lyrical content will act to separate Elton from the song. He can’t be the subject of the song, and his role as narrator or auteur is undermined by the lack of an Elton John stamp on the song.

The lyrical content is such that without Elton taking a clear role as auteur, the song struggles to define characters or a target audience with respect to age, gender, socio-economic background, etc. The listener struggles to engage and feel part of the song. Authenticity is in some ways a moot point. Because neither Elton nor the listener seem to be part of the song (and, in particular, part of the lyrical content of the song), there is little on which to judge the level of authenticity. Elton isn’t putting forward a persona or image that the listener can then judge as being authentic or not.

Performance

The sonic placement of instruments in ‘Sacrifice’ is unusual. The drum kit, synthesisers, and guitars are in the very centre of the mix, with the lead synthesiser part (playing the counter-melody during the introduction and verses) placed slightly above the other instruments. This sonic environment is very different to the approach which seeks to space the instruments out as they would be on stage (drums in the centre but towards the back, lead vocals at the front and centred, other instruments spaced to the left and right), to thereby give a sense of reality and authenticity through the recreation of a live performance on stage. The pad synthesiser fills the soundbox but, without instruments pushed left and right, the left and right boundaries of the soundbox remain largely undefined. The lead synthesiser part being positioned slightly above the other parts suggests some height to the soundbox, but upper and lower boundaries are similarly undefined. This positioning of instruments in the mix makes it difficult for the listener to understand the sonic space and their own position in it and their relationship to it. The result is a sense of artificiality, and the listener’s inability to connect with the sonic environment undermines the song’s authenticity as a realistic representation of a natural, human situation.

The positioning of the vocals in relation to the other instruments is unusual. Whilst the vocals are centred in the mix, the use of reverb solely upon the vocals suggests that the lead vocals are slightly behind the other instruments in the mix. In most of his songs, Elton positions his vocals (and therefore himself) in front of the other instruments. In that situation, the music is supporting him to reach out to the listener; his vocals are the link between the music (song) and the listener.

However, in 'Sacrifice' it is almost as if the music is acting as a barrier between himself and the listener. The mix in 'Sacrifice' is imitating the separation to which the lyrics allude.

The speeding up of the track, changing the key from C major to C# major, has a significant impact upon the sound of the song and specific instruments in it. The effect upon the vocals is particularly noticeable. The natural timbre of the voice is altered, thereby removing a key and unique characteristic of Elton's songs. The sound has been made thinner. Some of the authoritative sound in Elton's voice has been lost as a result, and this impacts upon his perceived command of the song and the other musicians playing on the track. Any masculine coding as a result of the lower range and frequencies of his voice has been removed, without the upper range being able to offer an alternative coding (as either more feminine in pitch or masculine in virtuosity).

Whilst *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973) was released at the height of glam rock and the ambiguous personas that came with it, 'Sacrifice' is in many ways more effective at ambiguity than the songs (and costumes) contained in *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*. Elton would perform 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' in 1973 wearing platform shoes, sequins, and feathers, but this was done with masculine-coded instruments (distorted electric guitar in particular), lyrics with masculine-coded lines (such as 'want to drink a belly full of beer'), and a central character defined by gender, age, and socio-economic background. In contrast, 'Sacrifice' undermines any overlying gender-coded material by lacking the sort of foundation used in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. In 1973, Elton's success at mixing gender coding or even androgyny was in part down to a secure notion of who and what Elton was (and still is), which he could then reinforce or deviate from. With 'Sacrifice' in 1989, he had removed that security. As a person, Elton was at a crossroads. He had seemed to confirm the accuracy of his 1970s bachelor image by getting married in 1984. Getting divorced in 1988 had disrupted that sense of progression, and 'coming out' had destroyed the authenticity of the image cultivated in the 1970s and seemingly revisited in 1984. At this point he wasn't just suggesting a new direction for himself as an artist, he was questioning the validity of the image portrayed during his most successful period of his career to date. With the performance and recording of 'Sacrifice' not offering a clear image/persona of Elton John, it seems that 1989 represented a cul-de-sac rather than a crossroads for Elton. 'Sacrifice' evidences Elton's need to reinvent himself. He had rejected his previous persona, but had not yet created a new one. The artificial nature of much of the sound in 'Sacrifice', together with the unusual placement of instruments within the mix, helped to demonstrate this.

Listener

The audience doesn't listen to a recording within a cultural vacuum. The listener will have been aware, through the press and through TV interviews and appearances, of the struggles that Elton as a person was facing in 1989. They will have listened to 'Sacrifice' whilst being aware of issues regarding sexuality, alcohol, drugs, press intrusion, etc. The listener will have been likely to judge whether 'Sacrifice' is about Elton's own life or that he is telling a story about someone else's life (fictitious or not). If the listener judges the lyrics to be about Elton's own life then authenticity of the story and Elton as an artist lies with how well the song aligns with the listener's knowledge of the extramusical details about the artist. If the listener doesn't believe the song to be about Elton's personal life then Elton's role switches from auteur to story teller and the judgement is about how well he tells the story. By 1989 Elton had had a number of hits telling the story of someone else, either in the first person ('Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' and 'Rocket Man') or third person ('Levon' and 'Tiny Dancer'). Lyrically, 'Sacrifice' struggles to do either. Elton avoids using 'I' or 'my', and thereby removes himself from the song, but he also fails to establish clear characters for the listener to follow through the song. Additionally, the distance Elton creates between himself and the listener within the mix removes the certainty of Elton having a role in the song at all.

Notions of excess and denial are common when thinking about alcohol and drug abuse. The acoustic piano sound, so prominent in much of his earlier work, has been replaced by an electronic substitute. In fact, electronic instruments in general have been used to excess in 'Sacrifice'. The hiding away (through the unusual placing of the vocals in the mix), the lack of a personal narrative or clear role for Elton in the song, and perhaps even the simple contradiction between lyrics concerning a heterosexual married couple and recent events regarding Elton's personal life, give a sense (from the perspective of the listener) that Elton is in denial.

Overall, it is difficult for the listener to develop their own identity through 'Sacrifice'. The lyrics involve a topic (infidelity in a marriage) that probably few fans have experience of, and even fewer would admit to. The song does not encourage the listener to sing along, due to its slow tempo (the slowest of all his greatest hits), its lack of dynamic or harmonic variation, and its unusual mixing whereby the vocals (the key instrument for getting the audience to sing along) are moved to the back of the mix. The lyrical content excludes younger fans based upon age (they are not old enough to marry and potentially experience the subject of the lyrics), alienates older fans (who may be expecting a song more in keeping with his oeuvre), and for fans experiencing similar personal issues, 'Sacrifice' offers few answers due to Elton's own struggle to redefine himself as an artist and person. Luckily things began to improve between 1989 and 1993, and by 1994 Elton was in a much better position.

Chapter 7 – Case Study 4 ‘Something About the Way You Look Tonight’ (1997)

The auction seemed like a purposely engineered watershed event, not unlike his marriage four years earlier, his shocking ‘retirement’ announcement at the November 1977 benefit concert, and his statement in 1976 to Cliff Jahr that he was ‘bisexual’. He wanted change and he made it happen, in a big way (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 304).

The period 1988-1991 was one of massive change for Elton. Every aspect of his life had undergone some kind of transformation, even down to selling clothes and possessions. This is hugely important when considering Elton’s music career and its development over time. Whilst many music artists would alter aspects of their work gradually over time, Elton has seemed to reach a point at which significant change was made with little preparation. Elton often wears his heart on his sleeve, and so changes to many aspects of his life (sexuality, rehabilitation from addiction, relationships, etc.) as well as changes directly to his musical style (balance of live versus synthesised instruments, use of studio effects, or content of lyrics, for example) will have been conscious and deliberate.

The way in which Elton made changes to his persona and music is interesting when comparing him to an artist such as David Bowie. During his career, Bowie has created a range of personas based upon characters, such as Ziggy Stardust and The Thin White Duke. The crucial difference between Elton and Bowie is that Bowie has always had his life as a private person to fall back on (even though he had changed his stage name from Davy Jones to David Bowie), regardless of what was happening musically. In contrast, Elton removed all traces of Reg Dwight – Elton John is his name whether he is on stage or not (he changed his name by deed poll in 1972). Therefore, any change to his personal life is part of the persona that incorporates his music career, and vice versa. This must add pressure for Elton, as any negative articles (reviews or news stories for example) do not separate Elton the person from Elton the popular music artist (and global icon). It also lends support to viewing his music career as four distinct periods rather than one long gradually developed process. As Mark Bego discusses, sudden changes to his life or career did not guarantee a successful life free of strife:

Once he had gone through rehabilitation for alcohol, drugs, and bulimia, Elton John was ready for a new beginning. Does this mean that Elton checked himself out of the hospital in the summer of 1990, and everything was suddenly coming up roses for him? Far from it. It was a vast improvement, but sobriety alone didn’t make the rest of the decade one big piece of cake. For him it was to be a time of new challenges, new career heights. However, there would also be new mistakes, new regrets, and several fresh unforeseen tragedies. The cocaine and booze were gone, but the drama that is Elton John remained fully intact (Bego, 2009, p. 283).

Clearly, Elton had undergone a period of refocusing and reinvention rather than toning himself down. By the time *The Big Picture* was released in 1997, Elton had made changes to both his public

image and his personal life. As David Buckley explains, 'the days of drinking and drugging were long gone. For the first time in maybe 20 years, Elton seemed to be on an even keel, both professionally and emotionally.' (Buckley, 2010, p.335).

'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' is a good example of the transformation that Elton had achieved. From the very outset of the track, the listener hears a powerful sound which helps to create an air of confidence about the track. The introduction begins with a melodic phrase played by the whole band. This unison, or rather unity, helps to announce the beginning of the song and also Elton's audible presence from the start of the first verse. In contrast to the guitar riff used in the opening of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', the introductory phrase used in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' carries fewer connotations of gender. Whilst it gives a sense of power and authority, the bold and masculine sound of the distorted guitar has been removed.

Authenticity is a key theme within 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight'. The use of real instruments for this song helps to build a human connection with the audience, and takes the listener back to the Elton John songs of the 1970s where live instruments were used (such as 'Honky Cat' in 1972) as well as referencing the artists of the 1950s and 1960s that influenced Elton. The use of live instruments also provides a link to live performance, which again boosts notions of authenticity within the song. The commercialism (and any negative impact on authenticity) of a studio recording is limited in this respect.

The first verse begins with a call and response between Elton's vocals and his piano part. Through this use of call and response, Elton is able to make himself the audible centre of attention. At one moment he is singing the complex melody, demonstrating his virtuosity as a singer. The melody contains the trademark Elton John flourishes at the end of a phrase, as well as considerable pitch jumps across a large vocal range. Elton's piano playing is equally complex. Arpeggiated lines are fused with counter-melodies in order to provide support and a response to the vocal line. The clarity of the piano helps to demonstrate the self-sufficient nature of Elton's performance. Although the song is decorated with other instruments and backing vocalists, the song could be performed easily as a solo number. From the perspective of age, Elton's performance shows that although he is no longer in his 20s he is still perfectly able to perform at a high level. His voice is considerably lower than it was in the early 1970s, but by 1997 Elton had become used to his new range brought about by throat surgery in the late 1980s. His vocal control and timbre allow for his vocal sound to be coded as powerful and authoritative without being undermined by any vocal weaknesses often associated with age. 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' does not require Elton to exaggerate his performance, especially in the ways he chose in the 1970s, in order to demonstrate his mastery of songwriting and musicianship.

'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' heralds a return to the love songs written by Elton in the early 1970s, with Bernie Taupin providing the lyrics. The use of the first person in the lyrics allows Elton to take ownership of the song. He is not the narrator of someone else's romance. In this song, it is possible for the listener to feel that Elton is singing about his own romance. This has significance for the way in which the listener relates to Elton via the song, and can be seen as a sign of Elton's newfound self-confidence. Of the songs found on Elton's greatest hits album of 2002, only one song released between 1984 and 1994 contains gendered lyrics, and half of those songs use the third person in the lyrics. In terms of sexuality, Elton is not using the lyrics to make the song explicitly about a gay romance (although the lyrics do seem to read like an autobiographical love letter to his partner, David Furnish), but neither is he putting forward contradictions or false relationships as he did in the past.

Instrumentation

With 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' Elton has returned to using traditional instruments with traditional sounds. The live sound links back to the sound of many songs from the 1970s such as 'Honky Cat', 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', and 'The Bitch is Back'. The traditional sounds enable the listener to imagine a musician playing the instrument (rather than the sound being created by a computer or synthesiser), and this helps build the idea that the sound heard in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' is unmediated and authentic.

The most important of the instruments on 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' is the piano. It adds clarity to the chords which had been missing when replaced by synthesised sounds. The piano fills in the gaps between vocal phrases, giving a sense of unity for Elton between the voice and piano. This dialogue underlines Elton's status as a singer and pianist, and suggests that Elton has regained his 'compositional voice' through the interplay between voice and piano.

The vocals are expressive and feature a greater pitch range to emphasise this. The warmth and authority of the lower pitches in Elton's (now baritone) range have returned and seek to connote a powerful sense of masculinity. The upper register may not be quite as high as some songs from the 1970s ('Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' for example), but they push Elton enough to allow the emotion in his voice to be heard. The sense of struggle in his voice to reach the higher notes is reminiscent of the struggle endured by characters in opera, and is designed to communicate to the audience his virtuosity and masculinity. Given that there is so much expression in the vocal part, it is difficult for the listener to believe that this is false and therefore Elton's authenticity is boosted (he is giving an honest and open performance to the listener). The confidence exuding from the vocal and

piano parts suggest that Elton has risen out of the ashes, accepted his situation, and has created a foundation upon which to develop his new persona.

All of the instruments are prominent in the mix and support the vocals, but never take over. The guitars, keyboards, and percussion provide a bold introduction, with many of the parts playing in unison for added strength. As soon as the vocals enter, however, these parts fade into the background. They have been used for effect, and are subservient to Elton's vocals and piano playing.

The distorted guitar, a symbol of many 1970s hits for Elton (as well as being a prominently gender-coded instrument), is present in the mix for the majority of the song. As the song progresses, the guitar part becomes more improvisatory and adds fills to the gaps between vocal lines. Even then, as the part increases in complexity and volume, it is still supporting Elton's vocals. In a similar way to 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', Elton is using the masculine coding of the distorted electric guitar to maximum effect whilst remaining in charge of it.

The bass guitar plays more than just the root note of each chord. As it weaves between chords creating its own counter-melody as it goes, it gives a sense of completeness and complexity to the lower sounds of the song. The bass guitar part suggests unity between the different sounds of the song by connecting the harmony of the piano and guitar chords with the melody of the vocals and the riffs of Elton's piano and the organ.

The various instruments featured on 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' all serve a purpose for Elton, and act as a reminder of all of his hits thus far. The strings, which increase the intensity later on in the song, are a key feature of hits such as 'Philadelphia Freedom' and 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word'. The keyboards and organ link back to songs such as 'Daniel' and 'Crocodile Rock'. The piano has the sound and prominence afforded to it in 'I Guess That's Why They Call it the Blues', and likewise for the bass guitar and drum kit as in tracks such as 'I'm Still Standing' and 'Kiss the Bride'. The construction of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' and sonic references to earlier material seems to fit with the album title *The Big Picture*. But it also suggests a culmination or goal achievement on Elton's part, as if he has reached some kind of conclusion. For his fans, the use of sounds reminiscent of previous songs to create something new addresses the issue of age. Whilst Elton may have been around for over 25 years by the time 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' was released in 1997, he has demonstrated that he can still be creative and original whilst referencing the material that made him successful in his twenties.

Melody

The embellishments which have become such a characteristic of Elton John songs are present in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight'. This helps Elton to put his stamp on the melody, and thereby improves his role as narrator/auteur. The embellishments demonstrate his vocal ability and command of the melody; he can sing the basic melody and then add to it, highlighting his virtuosity in the process.

The introduction to 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight', as played by the keyboards, guitars, and percussion, finishes on a chord V. This bold start to the song is looking for resolution. The resolution comes in the form of the vocal melody. The instruments used in the introduction, many of which are playing in unison, end on a C#. Elton then begins the pick-up of his very first melodic phrase on a C#, before completing the phrase with a descending run from the median down to the tonic:



The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the song 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight'. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and the time signature is 4/4. The vocal line starts with a whole rest, followed by a quarter rest, and then begins with the lyrics 'There was a time...'. The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand part with chords and a left-hand part with a steady eighth-note bass line. The score is presented in a standard musical notation format with a grand staff.

Figure 11.

Elton's very first phrase of the song offers closure to the open-ended introductory phrase. Immediately, Elton has used the instruments at his disposal to great effect and communicated to the audience that he is in charge.

The melody of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' uses a far greater range than songs such as 'Sacrifice'. The lowest notes for 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' are almost as low as the lowest he sings in any of his greatest hits (he reaches a C# in this song, compared to his lowest pitch of Bb in songs such as 'Your Song', 'Blue Eyes', and 'Circle of Life'). Even almost 30 years after becoming a popular music artist, Elton is still able to sing the same lower register. This produces a sense of familiarity about the lower notes in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight', and means that, providing the upper range is not now out of reach, he can sing many of his older songs with little or no change in key and with a similar vocal timbre. The upper range used in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' may not be quite as high as in songs such as 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' and 'Tiny Dancer', but they require a similar amount of effort on the part of Elton. As the voice of some established artists has started to struggle due to age,

Elton's has survived remarkably intact. By experimenting with a lower register in the late 1970s and having surgery on his vocal cords in the 1980s, Elton introduced his fans to him lowering his upper range before it became a necessity. In this way, Elton is able to sound youthful when compared to some of his peers. In fact, he has adapted or changed his persona, performance, and image in significant ways before they necessarily needed to be changed. By the time 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' was released in 1997, Elton was free to be who he wanted to be and do what he wanted to do, without having to enact necessary changes to his persona, performance, or image. The melodic range used in this song is one way in which he is able to compose and perform freely.

Harmony

The harmonic material in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' displays a number of characteristics common in Elton John songs, notably his use of fourths and chord IV. A large proportion of the piano part is the switch from playing the chord, moving a fourth higher, and then returning to the original chord. Chord IV is the first chord of the song, and creates a IV-V-I sequence to open the track. The ending to the song also features chord IV, this time in a bIII-IV-I repeating sequence. Elton has used chord IV (or an interval of a fourth) in a number of his most well-known songs. In 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' it is the interval between the chords in the introduction. In 'The Bitch is Back', the introduction begins with the guitar playing chord I followed by chord I_{sus}4. 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' uses a chord progression almost entirely constructed from a cycle of fourths. The emphasis placed upon chord IV is likely to be the result of Elton's musical training and the influence of gospel music upon his style. By featuring chord IV so prominently in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight', Elton is using a key element of his established musical style to link back to previous hits – particularly those from his most successful era in the early 1970s.

The chord progression used in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' is essentially a fairly simple I-iv-IV-V (a popular progression for 1950s rock 'n' roll songs, a key influence upon Elton), but with extra or altered chords added to increase the complexity of the song. The result is a chord progression which uses substitutions and altered bass notes to create a I-iii⁷-vi-I/V-IV-ii-V sequence. Chord iii⁷ is very similar to chord I, and can be seen as a prolongation of chord I. The I/V chord provides a link in the bass between the chord vi that precedes it and the chord IV that follows. Chord ii is a substitution of chord IV to avoid two bars of the same chord, and this creates a ii-V-I progression at the end of the main sequence. At points, Elton also changes chord vi to a major chord VI to create a mini V-I cadence to add interest and give the progression (and lyrics) a greater sense of flow at specific points. These are all tweaks that Elton makes to add interest and increase the

complexity of the song, but all of these changes conform to traditional harmony and rock harmony practices. He is not subverting established norms, but instead using his knowledge, experience, and influences to craft something that is more unique than the basic I-vi-IV-V progression. By doing this, Elton is highlighting his virtuosity as a composer as well as a songwriter. In this way, Elton is conforming to Moore's notion of *authenticity of execution*.

If the I-vi-IV-V structure of the main body of the song is viewed as more traditional, then Elton's use of bIII-IV-I for the ending of the song is definitely more modern. The use of a major bIII chord on the first beat of the bar for the recurring sequence at the end of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' is a very bold statement, as the bIII chord slightly undermines the otherwise secure F# major key employed throughout the rest of the song. Elton wants a particular effect and sound for the ending of the song, and he is using the options at his disposal. The bIII chord hints at his rock 'n' roll influences and suggest that, even though the lyrics and the main body of the harmony for the song give an impression of contentment and comfort, he hasn't lost his edge to create something daring or adventurous.

Lyrics

There are a number of lines in the lyrics of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' that clearly establish two characters in the song, one of which is Elton. He isn't singing about a fictitious situation he has been in (such as in 'Crocodile Rock'), and he isn't observing something happening to others. He wants to be part of the song and wants to sing directly to the recipient. To do this, he uses a lot of 'I', 'me', and 'you' to ensure that the listener knows exactly who Elton is singing about. This is a return to earlier work where 'me and you' love songs ('Your Song' for example) were common. In the intervening years he might have been less specific about the characters in a song and positioned the recipient of his singing as someone other than the listener (such as in 'Blue Eyes'), or he may have been making more of an observation with few clues as to who the song was actually about ('Sacrifice' for example). It is a sign of confidence and contentment that Elton has returned to having such specific characters in his songs, and an indication that he was making progress following the struggles of the 1980s.

The lyrics in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' are very descriptive and very personal. Elton is telling the recipient how he feels about them, and explains his feelings in detail with lots of emotion in the lyrics. However, he never ascribes either character a sex. This is important for authenticity. If Elton performed 'Crocodile Rock' in 1997, the heterosexual content of the lyrics would not undermine the authenticity of the performance or of Elton, as he was performing a song from the past. Age and time would separate Elton in 1997 from the content of the

song. This would be the case for all artists, regardless of whether an aspect of their personal life undermined lyrical content. For example, fans watching the Beatles perform 'I Saw Her Standing There' in 1963 may well have felt the Beatles were singing about their own experience. Paul McCartney turned 21 in 1963, and so the line 'she was just 17' would have passed without issue. He could be singing about his own experience, and being only four years older than the girl in the song wouldn't raise eyebrows. However, if he performed the song in 2014 at the age of 72, the line about the girl being 17 would seem extremely odd, especially if the audience still believed the song to be about Paul McCartney in the present day. Instead, the audience is (in present day) focusing more on Paul McCartney as the composer of the song and reminiscing about the Beatles, the song, and themselves (if applicable) in 1963. Therefore, Elton could perform a love song about a heterosexual couple as a gay man in 2014 without the content of the lyrics undermining his authenticity or the reception of the song. However, if the lyrics of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' (performed as a new song in 1997) concerned a heterosexual couple then it would be harder for the listener to interpret Elton as one of the characters in the song. The lack of sex and gender ascription in the lyrics of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' allow a greater range of interpretations that the listener can choose from. Elton could be singing to his fans. He could be singing to his partner. Equally, the listener could put themselves in Elton's place and be singing to whoever they wish. This fits with Moore's *authenticity of experience*. This sense of openness in the lyrics is symbolic of the way in which Elton had retreated from the limelight in the 1980s and was now back, having overcome the range of difficulties that he faced.

Performance

The live sounds and traditional placing of instruments in the mix help the audience to situate themselves in relation to the song. This generates a sense of authenticity, because the audience understand the sound of the song and the environment in which it is created. They are able to focus on the lyrics (the message of the song) and the performance, without having to think about unusual sounds or sonic space and how these may affect their reception of the song. The live, authentic sound also compliments a development in Elton's career in the later 1990s – the start of increased touring and residences (notably at Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas). There is little difference in the sound of the recording of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' compared with a live performance of the song. This helps to build links between the different aspects of Elton's career and the variety of ways in which the audience may come into contact with his music.

'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' has a very confident sound, exploiting advances in recording technology and compression in particular. This has the effect of the song

reaching out to the listening and enveloping them. The result is the audience feeling part of the song, adding to the subject of the lyrics. It is also perhaps a sonic representation of Elton communicating to people that he is once again happy with the attention that comes with being a global music icon and that he is content in his personal life. It would certainly be very difficult to produce such a confident sound and performance if he was still dealing with the issues he faced in the late 1980s.

The sound of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' is fresh, but it links back to many of his hits of the 1970s. Ballads such as 'Your Song', 'Candle in the Wind', and 'Tiny Dancer' all feature the Elton John Band, they are not solo songs (this was certainly the case for the recordings at least). Therefore, the approach that Elton takes towards the performance of 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight', as well as the performance itself, draws upon established conventions of his musical style. Despite being a singer and having the talent and means with which to accompany himself, he often chooses to be supported by a small band.

There is lots of dynamic contrast in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' and this, combined with the developing complexity of parts (such as the vocals and guitar) over the course of the song really add to the expression and emotion contained within the lyrics. There is unity between the content of the lyrics and the sound of the song, and this generates a sense of honesty and openness about the message contained within the lyrics and the performance of the song – and by extension, Elton himself.

The Listener

The mix for 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' really involves the listener in the song, making it sound like Elton is speaking to them directly. In addition, Elton's vocals are always centred and at the front of the mix. There is no excessive reverb on the lead vocals to create distance between Elton and the listener, and at no point in the song does an instrument overpower his vocals (or the piano) or become the focus of the audience's attention. The unmediated effect created by the mix suggests that the message is honest, direct, and Elton can be trusted, thereby conforming to Moore's *authenticity of expression*.

The lyrics for 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight' seem to acknowledge the struggles of Elton's past with the opening lines 'there was a time when I was everything and nothing all in one. But then you found me, I was feeling like a cloud across the sun'. There are no further references to negative emotions, with Elton going on to celebrate having met the subject of the song. This suggests that Elton has overcome the issues present in the late 1980s and is now happy

again, perhaps as happy as he was in the early 1970s given the stylistic references to his music of that era.

The return to lyrics using the word 'you' in them is one such stylistic reference to Elton's earlier material. In 'Blue Eyes' for example, Elton sings about 'she'. This gives the impression that the listener has been invited into a scene from Elton's life, but they are not directly involved. In 'Sacrifice' the subject is almost in the third person, given the emphasis on emotions and description rather than dialogue between characters. The result is the listener feeling that Elton has invited them to view a situation, but Elton may be as uninvolved as the listener is in the scene. By returning to clearly defined song characters of which the listener could be one, Elton is being more direct and making the listener feel like they themselves are his focus and no one else matters. This is surely a good approach for commercial success as well as creating a memorable song.

Chapter 8 - Computer-Aided Analysis of Popular Music

The Elton John Formula

There are a number of issues that must be considered in order for computer-aided approaches to music analysis to be useful and effective. The software and how it is used needs to be tailored to the task and the wider focus of the research. The purpose of the software varies according to the analytical task required of it. It is not intended that computer-aided approaches to music analysis should replace more traditional tools such as harmonic analysis but rather complement them. Whilst computer-aided approaches can provide ways to analyse large amounts of data and give insights into the music, which would otherwise be difficult to attain, it can be a struggle to draw meaningful conclusions about the music being studied.

For the purposes of analysing Elton's musical style, there were a number of goals. Given the length of his career and the number of albums that he has released, it was clear that a meaningful group of songs would need to be identified and analysed, which would need to include songs from each of four periods of his career. Elton's *Greatest Hits 1970 – 2002* album would serve as the body of work to analyse. Having removed songs from the album that were not written by Elton, this resulted in a body of work for analysis totalling 38 songs. A key reason for selecting this album to be the focus of the analysis is that success of this compilation album has led these songs to have become a canonical representation of Elton's repertoire. This decision was made having considered a number of different approaches and metrics, such as single releases, sales, dates and reception. A number of different issues problematized the selection, such as the different hits in the UK and USA, and a number of popular songs that never made the charts. This provides a set of material with which to explore further what constitutes Elton's musical style. It was pleasing that this meant that the decision of which material to select was made by Elton and/or his record company, driven by audience popularity and reception.

Focusing on Elton's musical style immediately raises. In this research project, it was intended that composition elements should take precedence over aspects of performance. Elton writes his own material and is part of a successful songwriting partnership. Performance was still to be discussed, but as a form of dissemination of the music, rather than the central process. With this in mind, the case for a score rather than recording-based approach to computer analysis is strengthened. Traditional analytical tools, combined with interpretations in relation to contextual issues such as gender, sexuality, and identity are suitable for exploring notions of transmission (Elton performing, on or off stage) and reception (the listener interpreting the performance whether it is on stage or off stage). Computer-aided analysis has been used to look at the creation of the musical composition before it is transmitted and received. It is important to note that the listener does not

listen to each new Elton John song in a cultural vacuum. Just as Elton's role as a celebrity provides the listener with off stage information about him, his musical style creates expectations in the mind of the listener. The aim of this research has been to identify what elements form that musical style, just as traditional analytical tools have sought to explore how Elton's role as a celebrity and human being can influence an interpretation of his music. Musical style has been defined to include issues that aren't able to be included in a score but which do impact upon the creation (and subsequent transmission and reception) of a song, such as track length and concert tours. Whilst live performances are unique versions of the song, the recording allows fans to share a common frame of reference. In a recording, the track length is fixed and the recording can be seen as providing a more 'stable' document of what compositional elements form the song (particularly when Elton records a song and then performs it, rather than the other way around).

Concert performances are interesting because they are an environment created to enable transmission and reception of the song to occur. They allow a human interaction between artist and audience that is more direct than for example that experienced in a download, stream or CD purchase. Concert tours rely on there being material to perform (whether old or new), and they require the artist to be physically present and mentally fit to play to an audience. In the specific case of Elton, live performances have always (and continue to be) central to his persona, perhaps because he is probably the most successful musical artist (in terms of sales) still performing from the 1970s or beyond. This can influence the composition of a song (he needs to be able to perform the song in a live setting) and establishes expectations on the part of the audience. If Elton likes performing and the audience expect him to perform, then looking at concert tours can provide a useful insight into whether these elements are undermined or supported (Elton disliking live performance at certain points of his career or the audience becoming less enthusiastic about seeing him perform, for example). Should Elton be less inclined to perform live, then this could indicate issues in other aspects of his life. These may coincide with events in his music career. If the link between composition and performance is damaged for Elton, then the need to write songs that are readily performed live (for example avoiding unusual sonic elements or ostentatious instrumentation) is lessened. Additionally, a lack of desire to perform live could lead to output being in a format other than an album. This can demonstrate a rejection of a key tenet of Elton's persona and public image (live performance), a desire to try something new (a fresh start, not often limited to musical matters), or a display of virtuosic talent (demonstrating his ability to produce a greater variety of compositional output).

Another research question is to establish what the 'building blocks' of an Elton John song actually are. If someone sat down at a piano and wanted to write a song in the style of Elton John

how would they go about it? What key should they choose, and what tempo? How long should the track be, and what range of notes should they use for the melody? Should the pitch of the melody move around a lot or should it be fairly consistent? What chords does Elton tend to use in his songs? These are all questions that help us to understand Elton as a popular music songwriter. Listeners and fans are used to consuming his music as an end product, but what ingredients go into making that musical product? Such ingredients are different for every popular music artist and many have cultural baggage attached to them. By understanding Elton's unique mix of songwriting ingredients we gain a better idea of how that end product is created, just as interpreting his music through a lens of gender, sexuality, identity, or age allows us to explore socio-cultural environment in which the music is received.

A range of computer software was used to achieve this aim. This was partly through necessity. No one program currently can do all the analysis intended, and not all of the software programs available were designed with the specific goal of music analysis in mind. The range of software used was also to explore the affordances of various programs, particularly those that were created with another purpose in mind. It is hoped that as software becomes more inter-compatible and user-orientated, the need for multiple programs will be reduced. It is also important to note that the elements of Elton's music analysed here with computer software is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it focuses upon those elements deemed to be of greatest salience to the specific research questions, and demonstrates the sort of things that can be analysed using computer software and a score-based (as opposed to a recording-based) approach.

The Humdrum Toolkit

The Humdrum Toolkit was created by David Huron at Ohio State University in 1986. A music score, saved in Kern format, can be loaded into the Humdrum Toolkit and be analysed using a range of commands. The data from this can then be saved to a text file and opened in text editors and spreadsheet programs as desired. The Humdrum Toolkit was designed to work primarily with classical music rather than popular music, and this is reflected in its programming. This makes it a particularly interesting tool to use for the analysis of Elton's music, given his classical training and rock 'n' roll influences. The ability of the Humdrum Toolkit to analyse a particular Elton John song can give an insight into the stylistic influences at work in the composition. As an academic program (as opposed to a commercial program) it is free to use, but the lack of commercial backing affects its features, as well as how often it is updated and improved.

A key strength of the Humdrum Toolkit is that the analytical process is intended to be user-led. This is intended to stop the Humdrum Toolkit from leading a researcher down a certain path,

and allows the user to employ their knowledge of the artist and repertoire in question to tailor the analysis to the focus of the research. There are some negatives to such aspirations for freedom, however. The user may not know what they are looking for and wish the Humdrum Toolkit to highlight aspects of the music worthy of further investigation (such as identifying patterns within the music). This can be problematic due to the input requirements placed upon the user. In addition, whilst the user can select which commands to use, the number of commands on offer is limited by the Humdrum Toolkit's programming. Whilst the number of commands available as part of the Humdrum Toolkit is by no means small, it is by no means comprehensive, and it is geared towards classical music.

The main negative experience when using the Humdrum Toolkit is the age of the program. At almost 30 years old, it is somewhat outmoded. As a result, compatibility with up to date operating systems is sometimes an issue. The data outputted can be transferred to programs such as Microsoft Excel, but it not straightforward and a lot of unnecessary data is carried across, requiring manual cleaning and deletion by the user. The process of inputting data (in the form of a music score) into the Humdrum Toolkit would be easier if it could read modern data formats such as Extensible Markup Language (XML). The lack of a modern graphical user interface is both a strength and a weakness of the Humdrum Toolkit. Whilst it allows greater freedom on the part of the user to analyse the score data in a specific way, it also makes the program less user friendly and harder to navigate. For a computer programmer this might not be a problem, but for someone coming from a musical background it is problematic. Furthermore, the programme does offer specific analytical tools, and does encourage researchers to take particular approaches, in part because other approaches are more complex to implement. While Humdrum is a useful program, it requires a high level of computer literacy, is counter intuitive and not at all user friendly. It only works with outdated windows operating systems and is therefore cumbersome to use.

Humdrum was used in this project in combination with Sibelius 7. The latter allows one to create or edit a score, and output it in a database driven format that can be read by Humdrum. Initially Sibelius was used simply to provide datasets for Humdrum to analyse, but it quickly became clear that Sibelius could carry out some of the analysis required quicker than Humdrum.

Sibelius 7

Sibelius notation software is one of the most popular score writing programs available in the UK. It is widely used in schools and universities, as well as by a range of professional composers. Whilst the price of the software has dropped since the company was taken over by Avid Technology in 2006, it is still a substantial outlay for a private user. Sibelius 7 is the latest version and provides a high level

of compatibility with different software and formats. A new addition for this latest version was the direct ability to save scores in Music XML format. Musical Instrument Digital Interface (MIDI) format is also supported, along with the capability to save scores as audio files and graphics files. A number of plugins are provided with Sibelius 7 to carry out common tasks such as adding chord symbols (analysed and added by Sibelius itself) and proof reading scores (such as checking for parallel 5ths and octaves). In addition, an increasing number of plugins are being created and shared by users, thereby increasing its flexibility.

Its user friendly interface is a key strength of Sibelius 7. Users are able to view the music as a score as well as in formats such as Music XML and MIDI. Music can be edited instantly, speeding up the analytical process. All the possible options are laid out in front of the user, on graphical menus. Functions and tools are grouped together, which develops an understanding of how operations and functions can work side by side.

Sibelius 7 is extremely versatile as music notation software, and can carry out a number of analysis tasks. Data can be selected and transferred easily, allowing the user to switch to other programs for specific tasks (building tables and graphs in Excel for example). Add-on programs such as PhotoScore and AudioScore allow Sibelius 7 to go beyond music scores and offer a greater range of input possibilities. PhotoScore allows the user to scan sheet music into Sibelius 7, which can then be edited and saved in a variety of formats. This application can speed up inputting score-based music considerably. AudioScore allows users to transcribe music from a recording directly into Sibelius 7, using up to 16 instruments at a time. This can reduce the time taken to transcribe music by hand. However, the software still needs further improvement, as it is somewhat unreliable.

Updates to Sibelius software are regular, with new versions being released on average every two years. New versions often contain significant improvements and enhanced functionality. This ensures that the software is up to date with developments elsewhere, and helps to keep Sibelius software compatible with as many products as possible. Recent developments have included expanded functionality in the areas of film music composition, sound sampling, and compatibility with Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs). With Avid Technology's purchase of Sibelius in 2006, it is likely that the lines between score-based software and audio-based software (such as Avid's Pro Tools) will soon become blurred. This would be a significant development for popular music analysis, allowing a song to be explored as a recording and a score simultaneously to maximise the quality of the data gained.

Whilst Sibelius 7 is very good for score-based music, this is also its main weakness. As an increasing amount of music is created without sheet music being produced as part of the process, there is a considerable amount of research into popular music that Sibelius 7 is not able to assist

with. This does not diminish its ability to deal with notation-based analysis, it can do this well and has the potential to do a lot more. But Sibelius 7 cannot answer all of the questions posed when analysing popular music. Although AudioScore is trying to bridge the gap between score and recording, it needs further development. Plugins (either created by Sibelius or by users) are a good way for the software to expand, but these are limited by the aims of the creator. At present, analysis is seldom the reason for creating a plugin.

Microsoft Excel

Humdrum outputs datasets but without a great deal of detail, or the ability to analyse such data sets. Excel was used in order to explore the data created by Humdrum, and analyse, interpret and visualise that data. Microsoft Excel was created in the mid-1980s, but has been updated regularly in order to respond to development of new formats and the varying needs of users. Excel is a powerful spreadsheet software program with the ability to output data as a variety of graphs, tables, and charts. This flexibility is valuable given the range of musical data that can be generated and analysed. An output visualisation format suitable for discussing the key of songs may not be suitable for exploring the pitch range of the melody.

There are many features in Excel which make the process of analysing musical data easier. Simple commands such as 'Text to Columns' and 'Find and Replace' can reduce significantly the amount of time needed to convert data strings into a more useful format, for example. However, Excel was not designed to undertake music analysis. Another software program is required to generate the data before it can be analysed and manipulated in Excel. In addition, Excel uses an alpha-numeric format. This can cause issues when inputting music data, especially note names. Excel doesn't understand that pitch C3 is not immediately followed by pitch C4. This can be overcome, but adds time to the research process.

The 'Elton John Formula'

The project aimed to try to establish a formula that defined the content of Elton's music. Listed below is analysis of a number of elements relating to Elton's greatest hits, including key, tempo, track length, composer, lyricist and melodic intervals. All of the 38 tracks analysed are in 4/4 time.

Key

The most common key for an Elton John greatest hit is C major. Out of 38 songs analysed, 11 (28.9%) are in C major. The next most common keys are Bb major (6 songs, 15.8%), G (4 major, 2 minor 15.8% in total), and F major (5 songs, 13.2%). In total 28 out of 38 (73.7%) of the songs are in these

four keys. These are perhaps the easiest keys to play in on the piano, with only one or two sharps or flats. Playing piano and singing simultaneously is not easy, and especially since in some cases Elton’s performance style is highly energetic, one can understand why he favours keys which are straightforward. It is interesting that he does not seem to have selected keys based on his vocal range. When breaking the 38 songs down into the four identified periods of Elton’s career, the number of songs using the keys highlighted is:

- 1970-1976: 13 songs out of 19 (68.4%)
- 1977-1983: 6 songs out of 6 (100%)
- 1984-1993: 3 songs out of 4 (75%)
- 1994-2002: 5 songs out of 9 (55.5%)

Of the songs that reached the top 10 in the UK, 14 out of 17 (82.4%) are in the keys highlighted above.

The Humdrum Toolkit is able to analyse the music and suggest what key the song is in. In addition to its suggested key, the Humdrum Toolkit also provides a percentage to show how confident it is that the suggested key is correct. Given the Humdrum Toolkit’s classical music programming, the percentage can be interpreted as a calculation of to what degree the song conforms to the conventions of classical music practices and theory. This is especially useful when analysing the music of Elton John, given his formal (classical) training at the Royal Academy of Music and tension between this tradition and the influence of rock ‘n’ roll artists such as Chuck Berry, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Little Richard upon Elton’s approach to composition and performance style.

Title	Year	Track Key	Humdrum Key	Confidence
Your Song	1970	Eb	Eb	22.80%
Border Song	1970	C	C	62.90%
Levon	1971	F	F	43.80%
Tiny Dancer	1971	C	C	73.20%
Rocket Man	1972	Bb	Bb	4.70%
Honky Cat	1972	G	G	14.10%
Goodbye Yellow Brick Road	1973	F	F	94.20%
Candle in the Wind	1973	E	E	95.60%

Daniel	1973	C	C	59.60%
Bennie and the Jets	1973	G	G	28.60%
Crocodile Rock	1973	G	G	36.70%
Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting	1973	C	F	6.20%
Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me	1974	C	C	62%
The Bitch is Back	1974	Ab	Ab	73.80%
Someone Saved My Life Tonight	1975	Ab	Ab	37.10%
Island Girl	1975	Dm	F	13.70%
Philadelphia Freedom	1975	F	F	61.90%
Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word	1976	Gm	Gm	46.80%
Don't Go Breaking My Heart	1976	F	F	55.10%
Song for Guy	1978	C	F	10.60%
Blue Eyes	1982	Bb	F	38.00%
Nikita	1982	G	G	55.80%
I Guess That's Why They Call it the Blues	1983	C	C	26.80%
Kiss the Bride	1983	C	C	29.90%
I'm Still Standing	1983	Bb	Bb	19.80%
Sad Songs	1984	C	C	69.90%
I Don't Wanna Go On with You Like That	1988	Am	Am	31.40%
Sacrifice	1989	C	C	73.30%
The One	1992	Bb	Bb	31.40%
Can You Feel the Love Tonight	1994	Bb	Bb	77.20%
Circle of Life	1994	Bb	Bb	74.80%
Believe	1995	Gm	Cm	4.30%
Made in England	1995	F	C	38.90%
Live Like Horses	1997	C#	C#	35.40%

Something About the Way You Look Tonight	1997	F#	F#	82.90%
Written in the Stars	1999	C	C	86.50%
I Want Love	2001	A	A	32.30%
This Train Don't Stop There Anymore	2001	Ab	Fm	26.70%

Figure 12.

As can be seen in the table above, the Humdrum Toolkit is able to identify correctly the key of the song in most cases. Excluding songs where the Humdrum Toolkit has identified the song to be in the relative minor or relative major of its actual key, there are only four songs where the Humdrum Toolkit has failed to identify the correct key: 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', 'Song for Guy', 'Blue Eyes', and 'Made in England'. Of these four songs, only two ('Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' and 'Made in England') are Elton John/Bernie Taupin collaborations. 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' is very rebellious in lyrical content as well as sound, and the sense of rebellion extends to the harmonic material used in the song. The prominence of chord bVII and the lack of perfect cadences, together with a modulation from G major in the verses to C major in the choruses, are likely reasons for the Humdrum Toolkit struggling to identify the key of 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. Indeed, the Humdrum Toolkit is only 6.20% confident that its suggested key is correct. Such a low percentage correctly indicates a strong blues/rock'n'roll influence in the song.

'Made in England' also contains harmonic elements that are likely to throw the Humdrum Toolkit off course. The introduction is a C7sus chord, with a melody based on F pentatonic major. The ambiguous tonal centre of the pentatonic scale combined with a lack of harmonic variation may have led the Humdrum Toolkit to consider the C7sus chord to be the tonic. Indeed, when listening to 'Made in England', the repetition and ambiguity of the introduction does make the F major chord of the verse (the real tonic chord) slightly unexpected. In addition, the key change for the final verse (from F major to G major) may have indicated to the Humdrum Toolkit that the song is in three large sections (perhaps an influence of its classical music programming), in C major (introduction), F major (main body of the song), and G major (final verse). Taken holistically, the Humdrum Toolkit could have interpreted this as a song using the primary chords of C major. It is interesting that the Humdrum Toolkit is 38.90% confident that C major is the correct key, suggesting that a song that initially sounds quite simple, actually has an extra layer of harmonic complexity that leans towards a different key.

'Blue Eyes' is not an Elton John/Bernie Taupin collaboration, as the lyrics are written by Gary Osborne. 'Blue Eyes' is only one of two Elton John greatest hits songs that doesn't have an instrumental introduction. The other is 'Rocket Man', there is an introduction of sorts, but Elton is

singing during it. Harmonically, 'Blue Eyes' is the only song under consideration that launches straight into the main chord progression of the track without some kind of preparation. Although the verse begins on chord I (Bb major), the sequence does not end on chord I. Half way through the verse, the sequence ends on chord V (F major). At the end of the verse, the sequence ends on an A7 chord to prepare for the D minor chord at the beginning of the chorus (the A7 chord itself is prepared by chord IV – Eb major – being raised a semitone to E minor, to create a ii-V-I cadence in D minor). Additionally, the final phrase of the lyrics ends on an F major chord, not the tonic of Bb major. This chord is preceded by a C major chord, and it is understandable that the melody ending with a perfect cadence in F major would lead the Humdrum Toolkit to be 38.00% confident that the song was in F major rather than Bb major.

'Song for Guy' is unusual in a number of ways. It is a largely instrumental song, with only one line of lyrics, 'life isn't everything'. This is the only song on Elton's greatest hits album constructed in this way. In addition, this is one of only a small number of songs where the lyrics and music are both written by Elton. Given the minimal lyrics (and therefore melody), the Humdrum Toolkit will have placed more emphasis on harmony. The main chord progression is I-V-bVII-IV, a typical blues/gospel/rock'n'roll sequence. It is likely that the bVII chord indicated to the Humdrum Toolkit a key of F major rather than C major to account for this. The usual of altered bass notes to create a descending sequence may well have also influenced the low confidence percentage the Humdrum Toolkit gave its key identification for this song (10.60%). Again though, Humdrum's low confidence statistic gives an indication of a song that is influenced by blues rather than western diatonic harmony. It is interesting to note the use of metrics and systems designed for classical music analysis to indicate something completely unexpected by the programmers, when the software is used in a popular music context.

Tempo

The average tempo across all 38 songs is 89.44bpm. Dividing these into slower songs (tempo less than 120bpm) and faster songs (tempo over 120bpm), the averages are 71.35bpm for slower songs and 140.1bpm for faster songs. Out of 38, 28 songs (73.7%) have a tempo below 120bpm, and 22 of those (78.6%) have a tempo below 80bpm. Of the songs that reached the top 10 in the UK, 11 out of 17 (64.7%) have a tempo of below 80bpm.

Track Length

The average track length for all 38 songs is 4:37. The shortest is 'I'm Still Standing' at 3:03, and the longest track is 'This Train Don't Stop There Anymore' at 6:45. The track closest in length to the average is 'Don't Go Breaking My Heart' at 4:36. When comparing Elton's average track lengths with

averages over the last 60 years of popular music (see Baio, 2008), his tracks are always longer than the average:

Decade	Elton John	Average
1970s	04:46	03:30
1980s	04:16	03:59
1990s	04:48	04:00
2000s	04:38	03:50

Figure 13.

Interestingly, Elton’s average track length for 1970 is 3:36. This means that as he became famous, he was conforming to the average track lengths of his peers. From the perspective of gender he was also conforming to stereotypes at the time, and his persona 1970-1976 was largely accepted by the audience and therefore stable. As Whiteley has commented popular music artists are often young (Whiteley, 2005b, p.175) and so in the early 1970s Elton also conformed to the norms on age.

However, Elton does not conform to the average track length for the entire decade. For the 1970s, he produced tracks that were on average 1:16 longer. In the 1980s, his tracks were on average only 17 seconds longer than the norm. This increased slightly to 48 seconds longer in the 1990s, and remained at 48 seconds longer than the average in the 2000s (4:38 for Elton, 3:50 for the decade). Reading this from the perspective of gender, the stability of his persona 1970-1976 allowed him to create songs without concern for others and the result was tracks that were on average 1:46 longer than those produced by his peers. The 1980s were a difficult period for Elton, particularly with regard to gender. At this time he came close to conforming to the averages for the decade. This could be a conscious decision to look around at the output of other musicians for inspiration and to gain a sense of belonging at a time when his identity and persona were in crisis. Alternatively, conformity in average track length in the 1980s could be the result of Elton rejecting his own identity and musical style at this time and falling back on the averages and conventions of the time. This supports the idea that ‘Sacrifice’ is more of a typical 1980s pop song than a typical Elton John song, specifically in terms of performance, instrumentation, and composition (as discussed in chapter six). By the mid-1990s, Elton had regained a sense of stability in his personal life and was returning to success as a popular music artist. The increase to 48 seconds in average track length over the decade norm is a sign that he was aware of current trends in popular music but was comfortable to do things his way. His compositional voice had returned and his musical style was once again his own. Elton’s gender performance and persona had recovered by the mid-1990s from crisis in the late 1980s.

Pitch Range

Elton was writing songs in the early 2000s with a similar vocal range to those from the early 1970s. The songs from the first period of his career, 1970-1976, span a range of Bb2-D5 (two octaves and a 3rd). This is very similar to the vocal range used in songs from the final period of his career, 1994-present, which is Bb2-Bb4 (two octaves). This is impressive and unusual given the length of time between these two periods. Elton is able to write songs in his 60s that use a similar vocal range to those composed in his 20s. The implication of this for gender and identity is that Elton is still able to recreate the melody of songs from the past, thereby evoking memories of a previous time. A link is established between the Elton of the early 1970s and the Elton of the early 2000s. Through this link, the audience is able to focus on the shared characteristics of the performances rather than the discrepancy between Elton's ages in the two performances. In doing so, Elton is able to transcend some of the extramusical information surrounding the performance by transporting the audience to a point in history.

Elton's gender performance, and in particular connotations of masculinity, are renewed through his ability to recreate the melody of older songs in his repertoire. Elements of virtuosity in his performance, such as his piano playing ability, would be undermined if Elton was unable to sing the melody. A reduction in vocal range, likely to be linked to age, would damage his performance persona. In addition, a disconnection between the performer of the past and the performer of the present would occur. Elton's physical appearance is different to how it was in the early 1970s. The timbre of his voice has altered too, even if the range has remained fairly consistent. The physicality of his performance has diminished since the 1970s, and changes to his personal life mean that the persona developed 1970-1976 no longer works. Because of these factors, the ability to perform the songs in a way which resembles their performance in the early 1970s is very important for Elton as a cultural icon as well as a popular music artist.

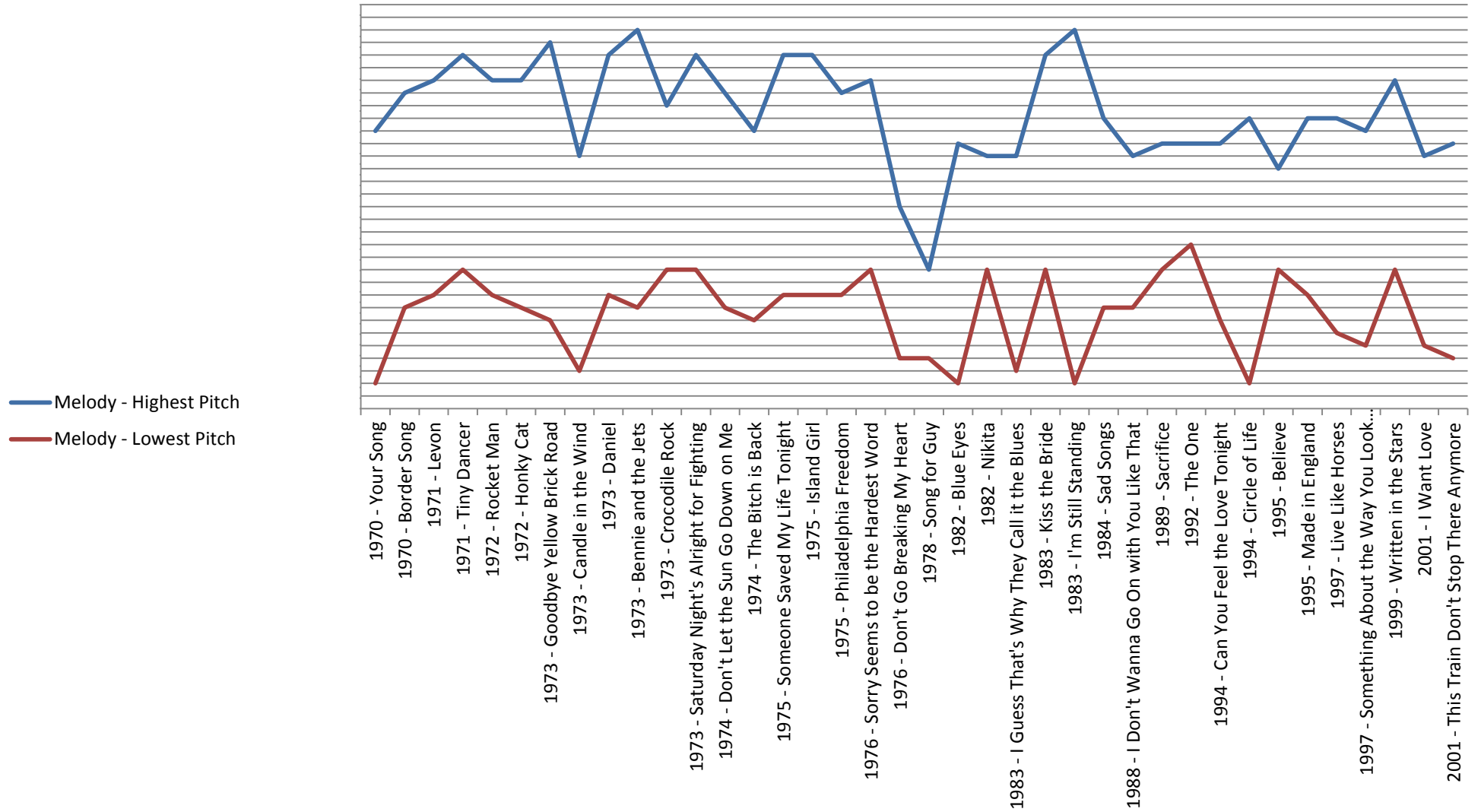
Between the periods of 1970-1976 and 1994-present, his range does contract. This is clearly demonstrated in the line graph below. The greatest contraction is between 1988 and 1992, around the time that songs such as 'Sacrifice' and 'The One' were released. During this period, Elton underwent surgery to remove non-cancerous polyps on his vocal chords. This could have affected his singing voice in terms of timbre and vocal range. Whilst the timbre of Elton's voice does seem to change around this time, it is unlikely that the surgery affected his vocal range as his range has returned to that of the 1970s. The changes to timbre could also be the result of age and Elton giving up alcohol and drugs in the early 1990s. It is possible that the contraction in vocal range in the late 1980s and early 1990s was linked to personal problems that Elton faced at that time. Elton had been suffering from voice problems since the mid-1980s. As Butcher has noted, voice loss can be linked to mood and emotional state:

The person feels low because inner conflicts have not been resolved, and because the voice disorder frequently has a handicapping effect by preventing the person from performing normally, often having a negative impact on work and reducing social integration. In many circumstances they are grieving over the loss of normal voice function and are experiencing feelings of helplessness – features commonly associated with depression. However, given that many have been experiencing interpersonal difficulties and have difficulty expressing feelings, it would not be surprising if their lowered mood emerged in this context and became evident prior to voice loss. If this is the case, voice loss then becomes yet another thing to be depressed about (Butcher, 2007, p.5).

Given the personal struggles that Elton faced in the late 1980s and 1990s regarding sexuality, substance abuse, and celebrity status, it is likely that his performance was affected by personal issues. By writing songs with a smaller vocal range, Elton's music style was being influenced by personal issues and aspects of his role as a celebrity, such as negative newspaper stories. This demonstrates how popular music is created as well as received and interpreted in a context larger than the music in isolation.

The subsequent re-expansion of Elton's vocal range in the final period of his career, 1994-present, is an indication that there is a link between his vocal range and stability in his personal life. As his initial success as a popular music artist begins to decline in the late 1970s the vocal range decreases. The pitch of the highest note in the melody drops considerably at this point but recovers slightly as the 1980s progress. However, the contraction of vocal range continues before reaching its nadir at the end of the 1980s. This matches a decline in commercial success for Elton during the 1980s, and a range of personal issues such as sexuality and substance abuse coming to a head around 1989. As the 1990s progress, Elton's personal life improved and he resolved a number of issues. By 1994 he was in a stable relationship and he had overcome a variety of addictions. His career was also picking up again, with improved commercial success from 1994 onwards. As the graph shows, the improvement in fortunes for Elton in the mid-1990s corresponds to his vocal range returning to almost the same span as in the early 1970s.

Figure 14 - Line Graph: Pitch Range



Composer/Lyricist

When considering the complete list of greatest hits, Bernie Taupin was the lyricist for 81.8% of songs. Elton composed the music for 90.9% of the greatest hits. The greatest hits that were not written by Elton John and Bernie Taupin were sometimes composed with another lyricist during periods of struggle for Elton, such as 'Are You Ready for Love' released in 1979 and 'Blue Eyes' in 1982. Other songs were created as part of work other than albums in the 1990s; 'Can You Feel the Love Tonight' written for *The Lion King* is an example of this. Some, including 'True Love', were recorded for the 1993 album *Duets* which Elton himself saw as a new a musical experience (Rosenthal, 2004, p.372). He had never recorded an entire album of duets before. During periods of crisis, Elton's identity was undermined. Changing lyricists at these points may well have been the result of a search for a more stable identity. Working with lyricists other than Bernie Taupin on projects that were different in some way was recognition by Elton that his identity had become more secure and he could undertake new music projects without de-stabilising his persona or musical style.

Melodic Intervals

As the graphs below demonstrate, Elton is consistent with his choices of melodic interval across his entire career. Melodic intervals in Elton's songs do not appear to have increased or decreased at any point during his career. The most common melodic interval found in an Elton John song is unison, i.e. it is most likely that the next note of the melody is the same as the preceding note. At 34.90%, this is a significant proportion of the melodic intervals. This supports the idea that Elton's songs have a strong narrative quality which is supported by little movement in the melodic line. In doing so, Elton John is making the melody resemble speech. There are some occasional leaps of more than a perfect 4th, but these are rare compared to smaller intervallic movements in the melody. When considering how Elton demonstrates virtuosity through the melodic contour of a song, it is clear that he uses high notes and considerable leaps in pitch for effect – otherwise he employs a relatively static approach to the construction of the melody. This is in contrast to songs and musical styles (such as in some opera) where the virtuosity of the performer is connoted by significantly larger intervallic steps.

If Elton doesn't stay on the same pitch for the melody, 26.64% of the time he moves by an interval of a major 2nd. Stepwise motion in the melody is, therefore, a key feature of Elton's musical style. Moving in such a way can help to lead the listener through the song a step at a time, in a musical way. Keeping the melodic intervals small also helps the audience to sing along. Elton's songs often have a memorable chorus section to them and keeping the melody simple helps to achieve this. An interval of a minor 3rd can provide a jump of two notes in a major or minor scale (2nd degree

of a major scale to the 4th degree, for example). An interval of a minor 3rd may also indicate Elton using more rock 'n' roll inspired melody choices by singing a flattened 3rd or flattened 7th. It is therefore unsurprising that Elton uses this interval 12.44% of the time. The next most common interval is a minor 2nd, at 9.45%. This is slightly unusual, as minor 2^{nds} are not that common in major and minor scales in their natural forms. In a major scale, the only diatonic notes that form a minor 2nd interval are between the 3rd and 4th scale degrees and the 7th and 8th (octave) scale degrees. Likewise, in a natural minor scale intervals of a minor 2nd only occur between the 2nd and 3rd scale degrees and the 5th and 6th scale degrees. Most intervals in these scales are major 2^{nds}. Suspended 4ths and movements between chord I and IV are common in Elton's music. The introductions to songs such as 'The Bitch is Back' and 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', and the chord progression of 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road' are good examples of this. Perhaps Elton's preference for minor 2nd intervals in the melody of songs is something similar to this, given that in a major key one of the minor 2nd intervals is between the 3rd and 4th scale degrees. Additionally, Elton's use of the minor 2nd interval occurring between the 7th and 8th (octave) scale degrees in a major key may hint at his classical training. When following established voice leading principles for a final V-I cadence, the 7th degree of the scale (which is the major third of chord V) usually rises to the 8th (octave) degree of the scale (the tonic of chord I). In some songs, such as the ending of 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word', Elton follows the established practice of turning chord V of a minor key into a major chord in order to resolve upwards to the tonic of chord I:

The image shows a musical score for the song 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word'. It consists of two staves: 'Voice' and 'Piano'. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4. The voice part is written in a treble clef and features a melody that starts on a G4, moves to A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, and then a half note on G5. The lyrics are 'sor - ry seems to be _____ the hard - est word.' The piano part is written in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and features a descending bass line in the left hand and block chords in the right hand. The chords progress from a D minor chord (D-F-A) to a C major chord (C-E-G), then to a B-flat major chord (B-flat-D-F), and finally to a C major chord (C-E-G). The piano part ends with a final C major chord.

Figure 15.

The piano voicings Elton uses in songs often follow voice leading conventions. Indeed, 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word' is a good example of chord inversions being used to minimise movement and create a descending bass line. As shown above, Elton is happy to emphasise these traditions in the melody too. These are two ways in which the actual notes played and sung in 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word' contribute to a sense of calm and composure about the song. Even though the subject of the lyrics is quite sad and negative, Elton is able to communicate to the audience that he is

in control through the way he conforms to traditional voice leading principles – as opposed to deviating from them and suggesting that his actions are erratic and out of control.

Figure 16 - Stacked Column Graph: Melodic Intervals - All Songs

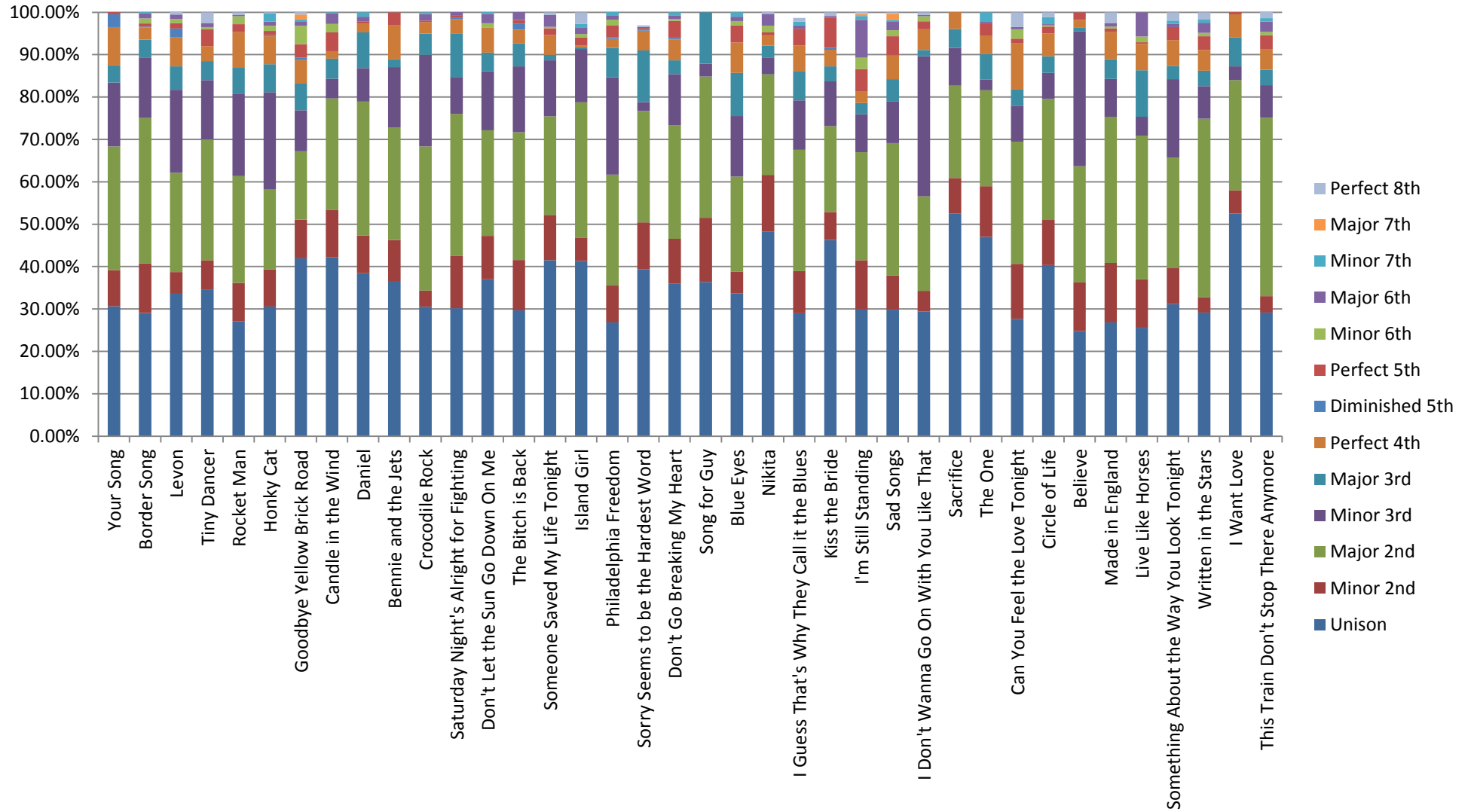
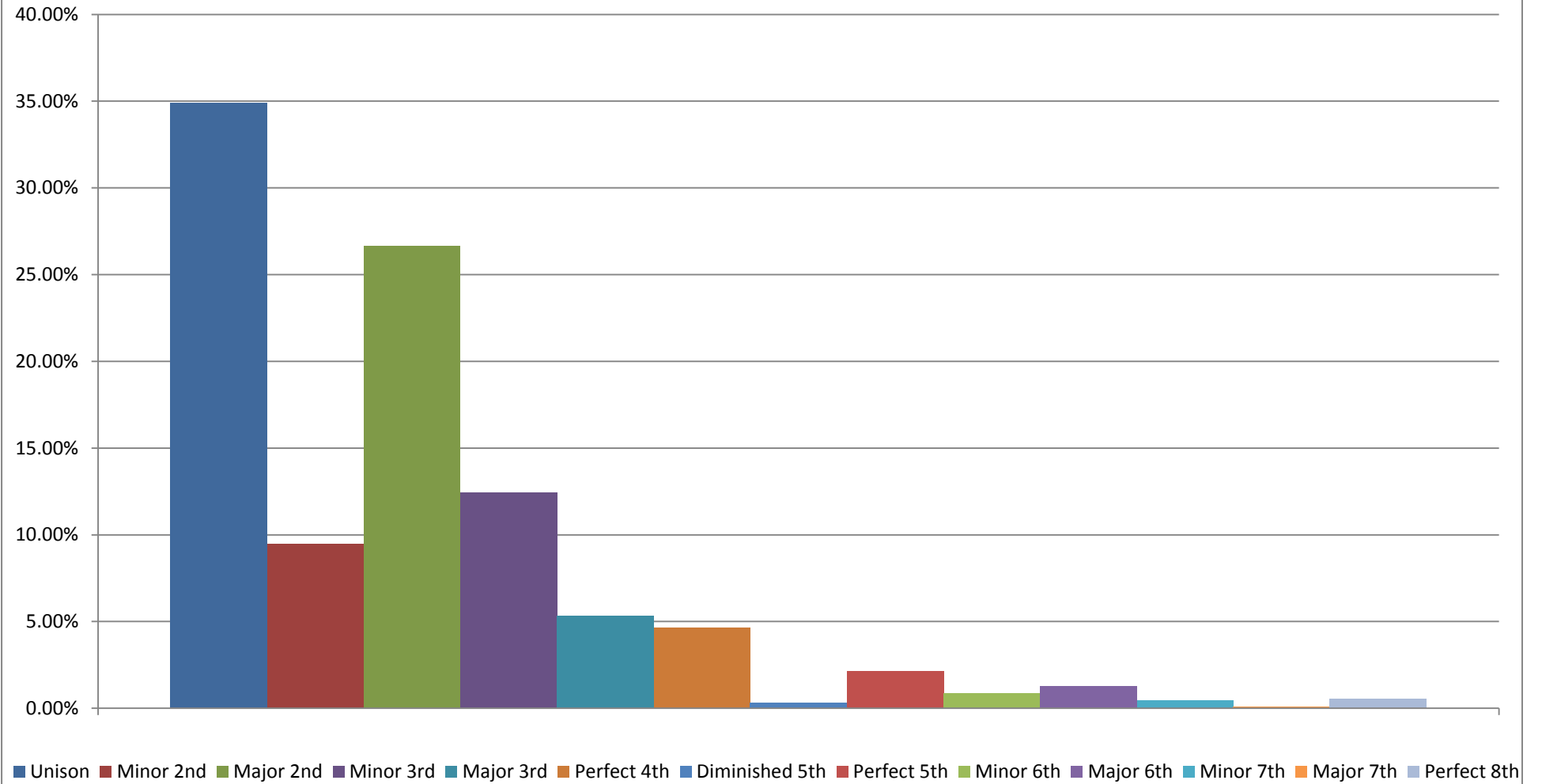


Figure 17 - Bar Chart: Melodic Intervals - Average Across All Songs



The radar graph below demonstrates how consistent Elton has been in composing melodies over the course of his career. The percentage of unison intervals in Elton's songs is usually between 30% and 40%, and for intervals of a major second the percentage is most commonly 20% - 35%.

There are some exceptions to this. For unison intervals, 'Nikita', 'Kiss the Bride', and 'The One' are all notably above the 40% mark, with 'Sacrifice' and 'I Want Love' exceeding 50%. Out of these five songs, three reached the UK top 10: 'Nikita' (peaked at number 3), 'The One' (number 10), and 'I Want Love' (number 9). In the case of intervals of a major second, 'Written in the Stars' and 'This Train Don't Stop There Anymore' are the only songs which exceed 40%, and both were recorded in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Since the early 1990s Elton's persona has emphasised his virtuosic ability as a way to counteract expectations of popular music artists that he no longer conforms to, such as his age. The increase in intervals of a major second may be one way in which he seeks to highlight his musicianship, by creating melodies that are more complex than they once were (when the majority of intervals were unison).

With the exception of 'Border Song', 'Crocodile Rock' and 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', Elton uses more unison intervals than major second intervals in all of his hits until 'Sad Songs (Say So Much)' in 1984. This is in contrast to the final era beginning in 1994 where a number of his greatest hits songs use more major second intervals than unison intervals. The four songs mentioned all have a specific purpose which benefits from greater movement in the melody. 'Border Song' draws heavily upon gospel music, which was an influence upon Elton and his musical style. The lyrics act as a proclamation, with a number of religious references. The joy and celebration inherent in proclaiming something is highlighted by larger melodic intervals. In addition, a hint of virtuosity in the melody adds to the idea that the person making a religious proclamation is an authority who should be listened to. The lyrics of 'Crocodile Rock' suggest emotions of desperation and sadness at the end of a relationship. Larger melodic intervals help to convey that the narrator of the song is genuine about the emotions that they are feeling and they care for the partner that they have lost. They are making more of an effort in their performance to sing larger intervals. 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting' has masculine overtones and seeks to establish connotations about Elton's virility and masculinity through his virtuosity (his strength as a singer is demonstrated by his ability to sing intervals that are demanding of the performer). By 1984 Elton identity and persona are in crisis. 'Sad Songs (Say So Much)' is an unusual song. Whilst the tempo and chord sequence suggest something positive, the lyrics deal with a subject which has negative connotations. This conflict mirrors the conflict Elton was enduring in his personal life at this point. The larger melodic intervals are a way in which he overcompensates for the negativity in his life at this point.

The linear bar chart below displays clearly the variation of unison and major second intervals. As the graph shows, Elton uses more major seconds than unisons in the first and final eras of his career. 'Sad Songs (Say So Much)' is the exception to this, with more major seconds than unisons in 1984. If major seconds are seen as having a greater level of expression compared to unison, then the first and final eras are more expressive melodically. Being happier and more comfortable in himself could be expressed through larger melodic intervals and the extra effort they require to sing. It is easier and less effort to stay on the same note. This fits with Elton having a stable persona in the early 1970s and after 1994, but being troubled in the late 1970s and 1980s. The greatest difference between the number of unisons and major seconds used is in 1989 with 'Sacrifice', the year that Elton hits rock bottom. If unison suggest being comfortable due to the ease with which they are sung, then the increase in major second intervals in 'Sacrifice' is a sign that he was at his least comfortable at this time and was feeling more negative emotions.

The linear bar chart also demonstrates just how often Elton repeats a note or moves by step in the melody compared to moving by a greater interval. The difference between unison and major second and the rest is stark. This is a common feature of Elton's songs and is not always the case with other well-known pop songs. 'Yesterday' by the Beatles, for example, uses a similar number of unison and major second intervals (29.17% and 33.33% respectively) and a significant number of minor second intervals (15.28%). Comparing Elton's songs with the work of a larger number of artists would ascertain whether this is a trend in a popular music or something particular about his music. Elton always plays and sings, and so the smaller melodic intervals used may be a way in which he makes it easier to do both at the same time.

Figure 18 - Radar Graph: Percentage of Unison and Major 2nd Intervals

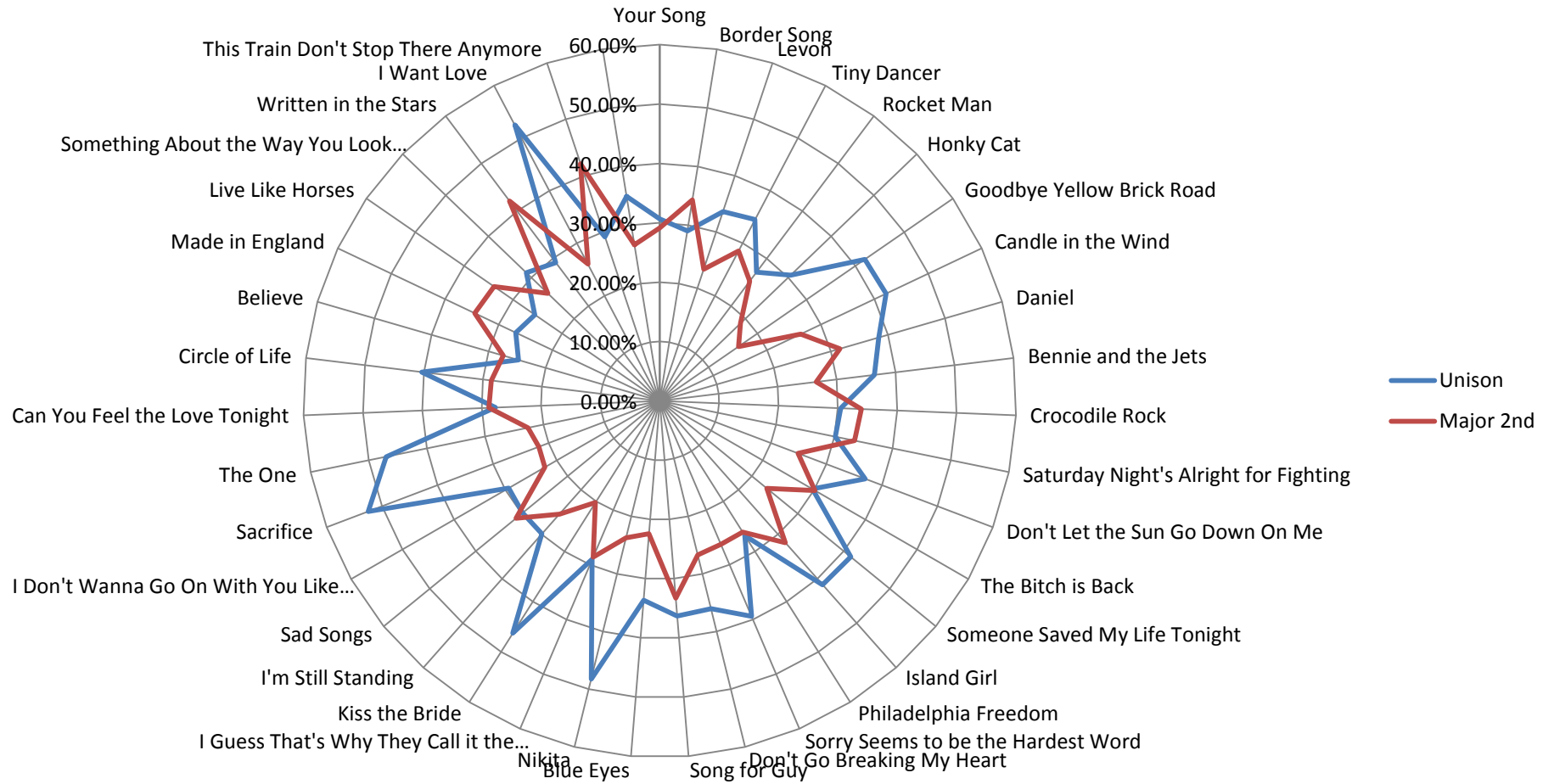
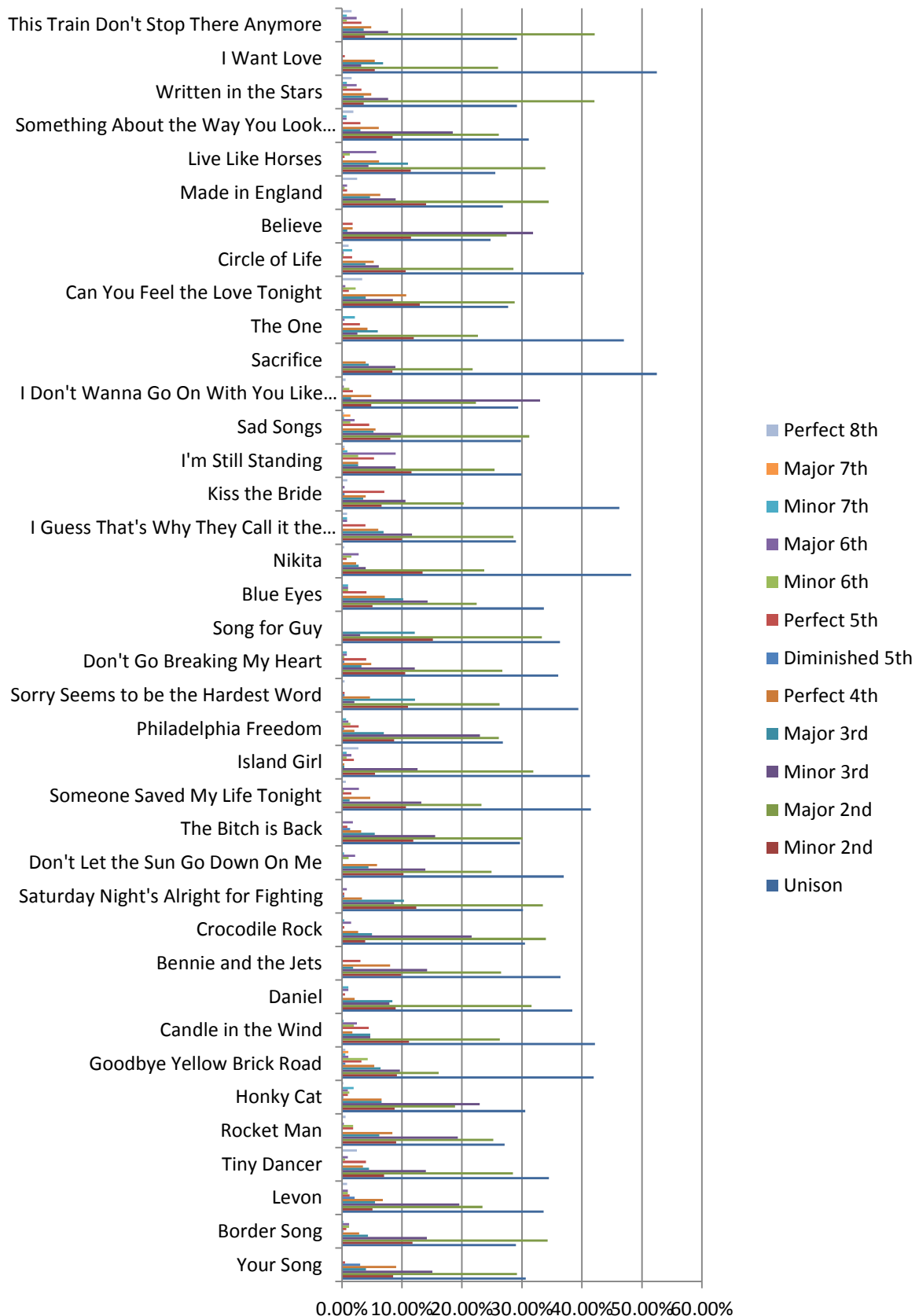


Figure 19 - Linear Bar Chart: Melodic Intervals - All Songs



Concert Dates per Year

Live performance has always been a key part of Elton's music career. Between 1970 and 2013 he has averaged 73 shows a year (one every 5.00 days).

Between 1970 and 1979 he performed 583 shows, averaging 58.3 shows a year (one every 6.26 days). The largest number was 120 in 1979, the least was three in 1978. Between 1980 and 1989 he performed 545 shows, averaging 54.5 shows a year (one every 6.69 days). The largest number was 116 in 1982, the least was one in 1983 and 1987. 1983 was taken up with recording *Too Low for Zero* and, as the album title suggests, Elton was going through a difficult time personally, with questions being asked about his sexuality once more. 1987 was spent recovering from throat surgery, having found non-cancerous polyps on his vocals the year before. Between 1990 and 1999 he performed 616 shows, averaging 61.6 shows a year (one every 5.92 days). The largest number was 118 in 1998, the least was two in 1991. Between 2000 and 2009 he performed 1,013 shows, averaging 101.3 shows a year (one every 3.60 days). The largest number was 139 in 2008, the least was 75 in 2001. The lower numbers of tour dates often correspond with significant years in Elton's private life: 1977 and 1978 (nine and three concerts respectively, fallout from infamous 1976 interview with Rolling Stone magazine), 1981 (two concerts), 1983 (one concert), 1987 (one concert, sexuality prominent in celebrity news and divorce from Renate Blauel), 1991 (two concerts, death of friend Freddie Mercury, death of Ryan White previous year, entered into rehab for multiple addictions), and 1996 (four concerts, a year off to rest having returned to success in the early 1990s).

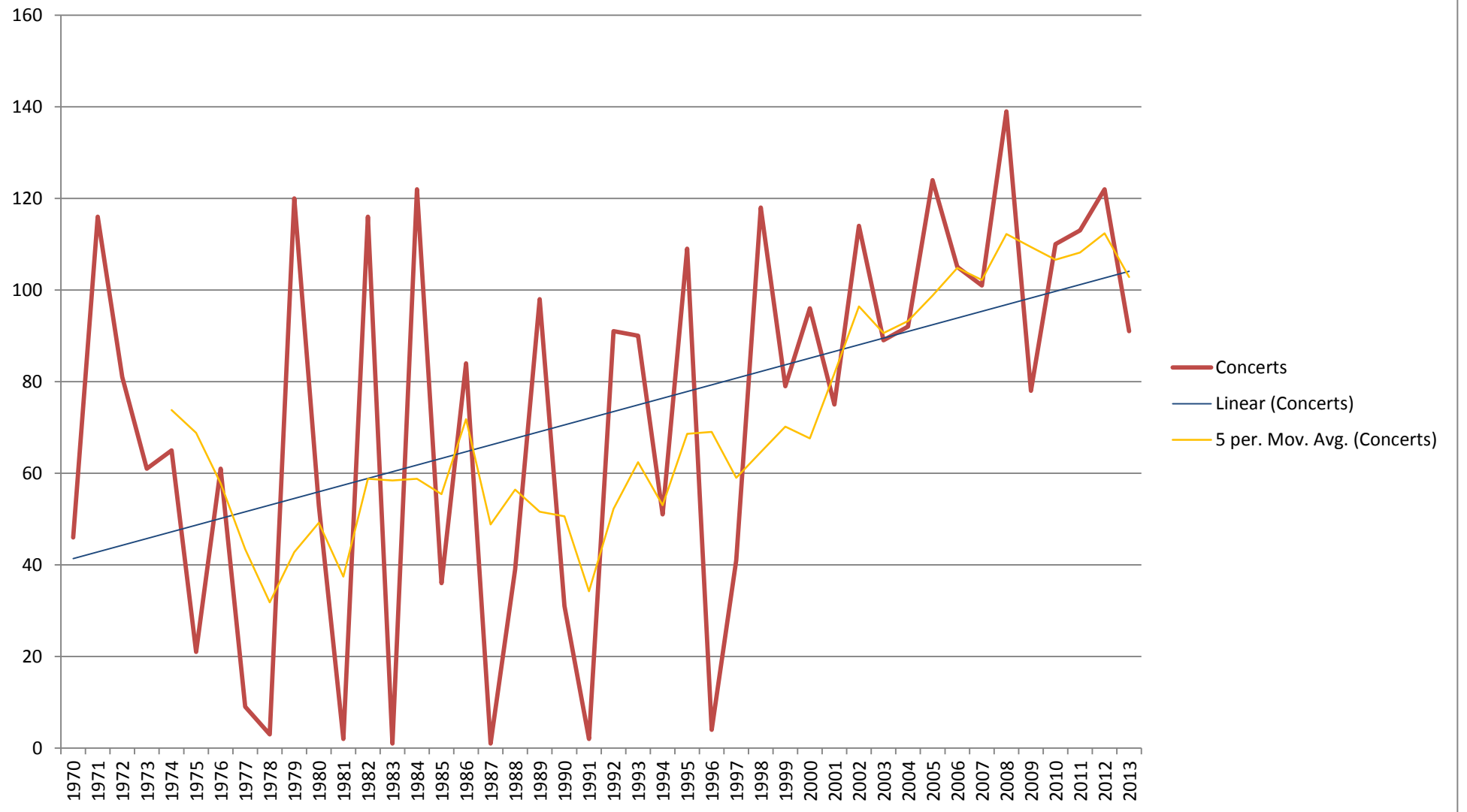
As the graph below demonstrates, Elton's concert dates per year have been irregular for much of his career. There could be natural reasons for fluctuations in concert dates per year, such as the release of an album influencing the tour schedule. It is important to note that the number of performances during the period 1970-1976 is consistent, with the exception of 1975. The drop in performances in 1975 is likely to be a combination of album timings and a desire on Elton's part to change the line-up of his band. *Caribou* had been released in June 1974 and this had been followed by a US/Canada tour October – December of that year together with Christmas shows in London. The touring did not continue into 1975, and *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* was not released until May 1975. Following this, Elton decided that it was time for a change to his band and he released Nigel Olsson and Dee Murray. Elton performed only six times between January 1975 and September 1975. *Rock of the Westies* was recorded in June 1975 and released in October 1975, with a tour covering the end of September and the whole of October 1975.

Between 1978 and 1996, Elton's concert performances fluctuate wildly. This is at its worst 1978-1990. 1976 had been the infamous interview with Rolling Stone magazine, and this impacted upon Elton as a person and a popular music artist. 1977 was the first year that he did not release an

album, and this will have reduced the need to perform in 1978 (to promote an album). The erratic nature of concert performances 1979-1990 is an example of how issues in Elton's personal life have at times affected his music career. From this perspective, the graph below can be read like the output of a seismometer. During this period Elton suffered numerous personal problems regarding relationships, sexuality, court cases, and even voice loss. He also lost interest in touring, threatening to retire from live performances altogether.

1991 was Elton's low point. He had suffered personal tragedies that year, such as the deaths of Freddie Mercury and Ryan White, and was now seeking help for multiple addictions. The graph shows a steady increase in concert performances 1992-2013. 1994 and 1996 are the only years that show a significant drop in performances. 1994 saw the release of *The Lion King*, and this impacted upon Elton's time to perform live. In 1996 Elton decided to take time off from touring and recording albums, instead writing material for future albums and other projects. Returning to the idea of the graph being a seismograph reading for Elton's personal life and music career, it is clear that 1992-2013 has been far more consistent for him. Overall yearly totals for concert performances have increased, largely due to residences at Caesar's Palace, Las Vegas starting in February 2004.

Figure 20 - Line Graph: Concerts Per Year



Chapter 9 – Conclusion

An interdisciplinary approach has been essential when carrying out this research into Elton's musical style. His career has spanned such a significant period of time and his persona and brand extend to so many areas beyond music, that interdisciplinarity is necessary to adequately frame a discussion of Elton's role as a popular music artist and his musical style. Part of this discussion has to deal with what musical style includes. This thesis has taken a broad view and considered issues that occur away from the stage, such as gender, identity, and celebrity. Issues such as this inform and influence our interpretation of what happens on stage or recording; we do not listen to music in a cultural vacuum. Likewise, access to music is not limited to the concert stage or recording medium. We engage with music in many settings and environments. Music can be uplifting, dramatic and memorable, but music arouses these emotions and states as much because of the environment in which it is heard and the specific attributes of the person listening, as due to its musical content. By taking an interdisciplinary approach to this research, some aspects of the environment and how the listener is influenced have been explored in addition to elements of the music as sound. Issues such as gender, sexuality, and stardom have been selected for analysis due to their relevance to discussions of Elton. It is important in such a study that extra-musical topics are selected carefully with the artist or research topic in mind in order to create a tailored approach to the analysis.

Through a combination of traditional musicological tools and computer-aided analysis, it has been possible to balance qualitative and quantitative data. This is important as it combines interpretation and evidence, thereby strengthening the points made. Quantitative data can also be useful to catalogue and categorise music. This allows larger analyses to be undertaken which would be extremely time-consuming or even impossible by hand. Even presenting the same data in different types of graph or table can provide insights that would be otherwise unobtainable.

Many of the perspectives explored during this research would benefit from further investigation in their own right. However, given the aims of this research, it was right to combine a range of perspectives and areas for examination. This is the first sustained academic investigation of Elton's music, and it was important to highlight some of the many relevant fields of interest in need of exploration. In addition, it was a key aim of this thesis to explore the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach and the broad methodological issues relevant to an analysis of this kind. This work is intended as the beginning of a new area of research, but there is plenty still left to do. It would be possible to write a thesis on one Elton John album, to analyse from solely from a gender perspective, or in relation to his role as a celebrity, or to study only his use of costumes for live

performances. These are just a few possibilities. Larger studies and a greater diversity of studies are now needed.

The 'Elton John Formula'

As can be seen from the data analysis, Elton is most likely to create a hit song in the key of C major, G major, F major, or Bb Major, keys with few accidentals which make piano playing simple for someone who needs to be able to sing at the same time. The time signature is always 4/4, and the tempo is usually between 70bpm and 90bpm, a range of fairly slow tempi. The average track length for Elton's greatest hits is 4:37, relatively long for a chart hit.

The songwriting partnership between Elton John and Bernie Taupin is a key part of their success, on a par with Lennon and McCartney. This partnership is about more than writing music and lyrics. Through their work together over more than 40 years, Elton John and Bernie Taupin have been able to provide a sense of stability and familiarity to the Elton John brand. Part of Elton's identity as a performer is defined by this songwriting partnership. Taupin's lyrics have been able to provide songs with a strong narrative quality and offered a diversity of perspective that would be very different had Elton created both the music and the lyrics. Many songs contain lyrics about Bernie Taupin growing up in Market Rasen, Lincolnshire. 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', for example, draws upon Taupin's experiences at his local pub. However, a dichotomy is created in performance, as Taupin's lyrics are sung by a (now very famously) gay man. A key distinction between the songwriting of Elton John and Bernie Taupin, and Lennon and McCartney, is that only Elton is on stage when their songs are performed. This is quite an unusual arrangement. It may well be a reason why the partnership has lasted so long, Elton John and Bernie Taupin have had specific roles to play and have rarely encroached upon each other's job.

As has been discussed in the case study chapters, Elton John often uses chords a fourth apart. This is demonstrated clearly in songs such as 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', 'Your Song', and 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. The movement I-IV (in many instances over I in the bass) is a very common feature of Elton's music and is a key component of his sonic signature. This may have arisen as a result of both his classical music training and the influence of gospel music upon his musical style.

Whilst his harmonic intervals are fairly large at a fourth, melodic intervals are usually small. His most common melodic interval choice is to stay on the same note (unison). This can help to make the melody sound more like speech, thereby promoting the narrative quality of the lyrics. When combined with harmonic intervals of a fourth, it is clear how stasis and movement are used to great effect in Elton's music. It is surprising that larger intervallic leaps are not used by Elton, given

the connotations of virtuosity regarding his popular music persona. In addition, for an artist who could accompany himself, there are a large number of songs which would work well as solo numbers but instead Elton chooses to involve the rest of the band. 'Your Song', 'Sorry Seems to be the Hardest Word', and 'Daniel' are all examples of this. Elton is able to convey virtuosity in other ways, and so he may feel that a greater level of complexity in the vocals is unnecessary. Alternatively, he may consider his vocals to be inferior to his piano playing and not wish to push his vocal performance too far. After all, the majority of his classical training focused upon the piano. Whilst his vocal range has remained largely the same over the course of his career, the early years included rock 'n' roll influenced tracks such as 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting', 'Crocodile Rock', and 'The Bitch is Back'. Songs such as these include sections of music where Elton is singing towards the top of his vocal range. Smaller melodic intervals may be necessary because Elton cannot sing any higher. Should this be the case, then it is an example of how influences (such as the rock 'n' roll that he listened to and played in the 1960s) impact upon Elton's songwriting and by extension his musical style.

Computer-Aided Analysis

This research has demonstrated some of the possible uses for computer-aided analysis, through the use of three software programs: the Humdrum Toolkit, Sibelius 7, and Microsoft Excel. These programs have been valuable for input, analysis and graphical display of data.

The Humdrum Toolkit has been useful when exploring the influences of rock 'n' roll music and classical music upon Elton's musical style. Whilst the program isn't particularly user friendly, the range of analysis options available have compensated for that. The interface could be much better, however. Commands are often long, and even the slightest mistake will return an error. The result is that the user has to re-input the command, and this can be a time-consuming process. Data results are displayed in a table format that is not user-friendly, rather than a representation such as a score. Whilst this is possible to navigate, a score or other graphical representation would be easier to read. The data input into the Humdrum Toolkit usually starts life as a score, and so the user is already familiar with what the music looks like when represented in this way. Perhaps the biggest drawback of the Humdrum Toolkit is its age. As well as impacting upon the visual design of the software, this also results in limited compatibility with more modern programs.

Sibelius 7 delivers a high level of user friendliness in its display and operation. The graphics are clear and provide the user with a high level of flexibility when inputting, editing, and analysing data. In comparison to Humdrum, for a user with an understanding of music theory, when using Sibelius for musical analysis, the research process is sped up thanks to the ability of Sibelius carry out

analysis directly within a scored format. The function to play the music score allows the user to check the accuracy of the score as well as getting an idea of how individual parts sound. Sibelius 7 has in-built Music XML compatibility. When used with programs such as the Humdrum Toolkit, Music XML moves the music score one step closer to being in the Humdrum Toolkit's desired format (Kern). Music XML also enables data to be transferred into programs such as Microsoft Excel with no format change required. This saves a substantial amount of time and keeps the analytical process as simple as possible. The ability to save scores (or extracts of scores) as an image file or a sound file is another useful feature. The main criticism of Sibelius 7, certainly at the time of writing, is the limited number of analysis plugins available for the program. Whilst the number of analysis plug-ins for Humdrum is significant, there are currently very few for Sibelius 7. It would be useful if Sibelius 7 partnered with more developers and academics to widen the range of plug-ins available. It is difficult for academics with limited funding to create a sophisticated, graphically driven piece of software, with a high level of support and user friendliness. In addition, it is difficult to provide updates for all platforms and developments of operating systems when the developer is funded by a grant, or operating as a research project, instead of being part of a commercial organisation. Sibelius 7 was designed primarily for the creation and publication of music scores, analysing scores is an additional function that is in addition to its main use. The plugins for analysing the music score are divided into two groups, those created by Sibelius (often more basic functions) and plugins created by users (usually for specific analysis tasks). Should the number of analysis plugins increase, Sibelius 7 will become a very powerful tool for computer-aided methods of analysis. Given its flexibility and versatility, I would propose that Sibelius 7 could be an excellent software choice for score-based music analysis, especially if the kind of user that has in the past focused on Humdrum would instead focus on writing plug-ins for Sibelius. Compatibility with audio-based programs such as Pro Tools and Sonic Visualizer would be a positive step for music analysis.

Microsoft Excel is an accessible and powerful tool for music analysis. There are a number of time-saving features, and its presence on the majority of computers (certainly Windows-based systems) means that most people are familiar with its operation. Excel is highly effective at collecting and collating data and displaying it in tables and graphs, allowing for quantitative data collection and manipulation to be carried out in a timely and user-friendly manner. The addition of quantitative data to qualitative interpretation provides a more well-rounded approach to music analysis and presents data in a format which is more accessible for people outside of popular music research, requiring minimal music literacy. This allows interdisciplinary work to be undertaken without non-music specialists being at a disadvantage because of the format in which the data displayed (often as a score or sound wave). Simple practical issues are easily overcome when using Excel for music

analysis. The cataloguing of data by Excel will prove useful for further research into Elton and other popular music artists. The format used is compatible with many other computer programs and does not require specialised software. Comparative data for other artists, such as the Beatles, Rolling Stones or Michael Jackson, one would be able to better assess to what extent compositional formulae of different artists can be differentiated. This further refinement could lead to a better understanding of what makes a song popular, or even to algorithmic composition. This research has found that a combination of the use of Sibelius 7, Humdrum, and Excel is most effective to deal with the needs of popular music analysis. However, further development of Sibelius 7 would render Humdrum surplus to requirements.

Computer-aided analysis has a part to play in musicological research but is not a complete solution. Instead, it complements traditional analytical tools and allows aspects of the music to be explored that would either be difficult or even impossible to achieve by hand. All of the tools used need to be selected for specific tasks and tailored for the research project in question. Issues such as gender, sexuality, identity, stardom, and celebrity have been shown to be relevant and interesting perspectives from which to analyse the musical style of Elton. These issues in relation to Elton can and should now be explored individually in greater depth, and there are undoubtedly other perspectives from which to analyse his music. In addition, the methodology applied in this thesis can be used for other popular music artists. This would allow for comparison between different musicians, and help to build up a body of data that can be used for new research projects and expanded even further.

This thesis has shown that studying Elton's musical style is valuable in order to explore how popular music can be analysed using an interdisciplinary approach. The ways in which popular music and cultural studies overlap have been examined, and the benefits of an analysis which incorporate aspects of both areas of study has been highlighted. A methodology which can be applied to other popular music artists has been designed and tested.

Reg Dwight began as an insecure young man seeking recognition in the world of popular music by donning the disguise of Elton John. Elton acted as a frame that signified the musical world that could be seen through the anatomically unnecessary but flamboyantly extrovert glasses he took to wearing. Over time Reg Dwight became Elton John, and the increasingly extreme life style he led affected his music, his voice and his personal life. His music moved through stages of youthful rebellion, questioning, crisis, and maturity, reflecting the changing stages and states of his personal life, through to an end in which professional and private life become healthily separated, and Elton is left to rest within the recognition of a major body of work that is an established part of the popular music canon. His is a good example that shows how musical content and sociological context are

fundamentally interconnected, and this research has shown with quantitative data derived from the use of a range of software, how the one has tracked the other through over forty years.

The methods and methodologies applied here provide a new model for analysis of popular music from a musicological perspective. They provide a working example that responds to the call of individuals such as Tagg (2011), as well as institutions such as the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, for research that is fundamentally interdisciplinary. It aims to respond to the suggestion that the music in popular music studies has not been given the attention it deserves (Tagg 2011), without simply adopting methods from classical music uncritically.

The project has been able to provide a first serious study of the music of Elton John, uncovering a complex net of connections, relationships, types of content, issues, fields, frameworks, techniques and meanings. It has highlighted the need to take an interdisciplinary approach to popular music analysis, and shown some of the issues and fields that can be incorporated to provide a more holistic view of a popular music artist and their musical style. The artist in question has been considered as a cultural icon as well as a global music star, demonstrating how popular music is part of a wider social narrative.

Case studies have illustrated the key points raised and opened up areas for further research, both into the music of Elton John and the interaction between popular music and wider cultural and social issues. Traditional musicological tools and avenues for exploration, such as harmonic analysis, instrumentation, and sonic environment, have been complemented by quantitative data gained through the use of a range of computer software programs.

In the first period of Elton's career he was playing the part of Elton, performing a version of masculinity evident in 'Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting'. His musical style contrasted the rock 'n' roll and gospel influences of his childhood with the classical training he received as a teenager, drawing upon elements of each, such as the use of the flattened seventh and circle of fourths prominent in rock 'n' roll and gospel music, and combining them with a classical approach to voice leading and harmony.

The second period of his career, 1977-1983, saw Elton lose control of the new persona that he had created for himself. Drugs, drink, and the press de-stabilised the identity created to replace Reg Dwight. The study of 'Blue Eyes' shows how a stable identity, evident in his musical style as well as his persona, was eroded and not replaced for some time. The audience had developed a set of characteristics for Elton which were missing or subdued during the second period of his career. Elements of composition such as vocal range, melodic intervals, and tempo fluctuated as Elton sought to re-establish his persona.

Elton reached crisis point during the third period of his career, from 1984-1993. His music changes to be less expressive, more superficial, and drawing upon standard practices of the time. In 'Sacrifice' we can see the chord progression drawing upon basic and repetitive patterns. His vocal range shrinks to less than an octave, and electronic sounds and effects are used in a way which puts distance between Elton and the audience. This fits patterns in his personal life at the time where he was living in a state of denial, particularly with regards to substance abuse. The heavy use of reverb and other studio effects on the vocals pushes Elton back in the mix and creates a sense of distance between him and listener. Elton sounds isolated in the mix, likely mirroring emotions at this time. Just as a drug user may deny that there is a problem with people responding that it is the drugs talking, the speeding up of 'Sacrifice' changes the timbre of Elton's voice, giving the effect that Elton is not being entirely open or honest with the listener. Just as drugs can affect the user's personality, the use of artificial sounds in 'Sacrifice' undermines established characteristics of Elton's songs and his authenticity.

In the final stage of his career, he has refined the Elton John 'brand'. In his personal life he finds stability in relationships and completes treatment for multiple addictions. In his music, he returns to characteristics established in the first period of his career and combines them with his new-found confidence about who he is. This is demonstrated in 'Something About the Way You Look Tonight', by the powerful sound of the song. It features natural instrument sounds, in particular an acoustic piano sound, promoting a sense of authenticity about his music making. The piano and vocals take centre stage, emphasising some of the key characteristics of an Elton John song. Complexity and virtuosity have returned to his music, and his persona and identity have been stabilised. In this period his melodic range increases again and a balance returns between the use of unisons and intervals of a major second.

Through all of these stages, aspects of his personal life, persona, identity, and the context of the musical culture surrounding him interact with his music. His musical style frames his work and his performance, both on and off stage.

This project has shown the importance and possibility of examining in detail the musical content of a popular music icon and relating it to contextual content. This is difficult because of the fluid nature of contextual concepts, and developments over time. But it is vital to take this approach in order to engage seriously with the music of popular music studies. The combination of established tools (such as harmonic analysis) and computer-aided methods of analysis has demonstrated that there exists a wealth of useful data about songs which has hitherto been largely unexplored. Whilst this data is valuable for specific popular music research, it has even greater potential as a way to undertake meta-analyses of popular music. By carrying out such research, we can gain a much better

understanding of popular music and its development over the last 60 years. As this research has shown, popular music is inextricably linked to socio-cultural issues such as gender, identity, and the rise of celebrity. Therefore, we have something to learn about ourselves and how society has developed during the last 60 years from this kind of meta-analysis of popular music. With the popular music marketplace becoming increasingly crowded and technological developments allowing people to make music more easily, this research has demonstrated how Elton has been able to develop a music brand that has achieved ongoing success over a long period of time and remained relevant to his audience.

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