

Rocketman (Elton John) and *Pavarotti*, about the operatic tenor: Two lives in music

Joanne Laurier
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Rocketman directed by Dexter Fletcher, screenplay by Lee Hall
; *Pavarotti*, directed by Ron Howard, screenplay by Mark Monroe

Rocketman

Dexter Fletcher's *Rocketman* is a generally entertaining, fantastical tribute to the music of British singer-songwriter Elton John, one of the world's most popular musical artists. Industry estimates place the number of records he has sold at more than 300 million. John's most fruitful period was the 1970s, during which he turned out numerous albums and singles that captured a mass audience. His songs, at their best, possess an appealing, melodic exuberance and "catchiness" that is hard to resist.

Elton John was born Reginald Dwight in 1947 in a London suburb. The postwar period opened up new possibilities, economically, technologically and culturally. John's parents were both musically inclined. According to a biographer, they "were avid record-buyers, exposing Reggie to the music of pianists [Trinidadian] Winifred Atwell, Nat King Cole, and George Shearing, and to singers Rosemary Clooney, Frank Sinatra, Kay Starr, Johnny Ray, Guy Mitchell, Jo Stafford, and Frankie Laine." A friend observed that John developed a startlingly eclectic taste in music: "He would listen with interest to anything that was put onto the turntable." John built up a vast record collection and acknowledged that he spent much of his childhood with these "inanimate objects."

A prodigious and precocious talent, the future performer won a junior scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music at the age of 11. He attended Saturday classes at the Academy for five years at a time when the school taught only classical music. One of his instructors there, Helen Piena, described his ability to play anything he heard with near perfect reproduction: "I played some [George Frideric] Handel to him, which was four pages long. He played it back to me just like a gramophone record."

At 17, he dropped out of school to pursue a career in the music industry. In 1967, John began composing music to lyrics written by Bernie Taupin, his songwriting partner to the present day. John's first great critical and commercial success came in 1970. An astonishing series of hits followed ...

The filmmakers have crafted *Rocketman* with extravagant

musicality and staging. Twenty-nine-year-old British actor Taron Egerton, who plays Elton John, sings with great skill and showmanship, displaying an obvious affection for the subject matter.

The movie unfolds within the loose, overall framework of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Lively renditions of John's songs become the means of addressing various aspects of his life, including a problematic, somewhat lonely childhood, the growing awareness of his homosexuality and later problems with drugs, as well as his celebrity and success. In this fashion, moreover, Reggie/Elton confronts his childhood self.

For example, "I Want Love" is sung by Kit Connor as a young Reggie. Steven Mackintosh plays his cold, distant father, Bryce Dallas Howard his self-involved mother and Gemma Jones his kindly supportive grandmother. His perpetually battling parents eventually divorce.

His classical training at the Royal Academy notwithstanding, Reggie—soon to become Elton—throws himself into rock 'n' roll music. There is a fantasy sequence at a bar in which the singer pounds out "Saturday Night's Alright" on the piano to a high-spirited crowd. He then becomes the pianist for a touring American soul group. It is not long before Elton begins to collaborate with Taupin (Jamie Bell), who writes lyrics as fast as Elton sets them to music. Their intense, "brotherly" friendship is a stabilizing force for Elton. The duo is soon picked up by executives at Liberty Records (Charlie Rowe aptly plays the crusty, cigar-chewing Ray Williams), who are impressed by songs such as "Daniel" and "I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues."

Elton and Bernie hit the big time with a transcendent gig at the legendary Troubadour club in Los Angeles (in August 1970), where Elton performs "Crocodile Rock" in an ecstatically choreographed segment in which he and the audience levitate in slow motion.

The handsome, cool John Reid (Richard Madden) enters Elton's life as his lover and manager ("It's going to be a wild ride!"), only to exploit him, helping the now-wealthy rock star descend into a nightmare of substance abuse.

Rocketman bathes the viewer in Elton John's well-known ballads, creating lavish set pieces that seek to dramatize the singer's inner experience of the world (e.g., John the human rocket literally blasts off into space at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles in 1975). Egerton thoroughly inhabits his role, ably

singing and dissolving himself into the flamboyant interludes. In fact, all the performances are top-notch with the music produced by Giles Martin, son of famed Beatles' producer George Martin.

Of course, the movie, like John's career itself, leaves out many things. The singer reflected one side of life in the 1970s, the vitality associated with a greater psychological and sexual openness in particular, coupled here to enormous popular music gifts. As the decade wore on, John's career also became associated, however, with the increasing hedonism and self-absorption of substantial portions of the middle class. Extravagance for its own sake, "over-the-topness" as a thing in itself wears thin.

The 1970s were also dominated by the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Nixon resignation and the beginning of the decades-long decline in the conditions of life of masses of people in the US, Britain and elsewhere. On this score, Elton John was largely clueless. Eventually, his enormous fame and wealth brought him into contact, whether he desired it or not (he claims to "loathe celebrity"), with the likes of Princess Diana and such.

A music career does not take place in a vacuum and an artist living in stagnant times without an oppositional compass inevitably falls in with the "wrong crowd." This has something to do as well with John's musical exhaustion.

Music critic Robert Christgau observed in 1975, at a time when John was the most successful pop music artist in the world, that there was both "something wondrous about Elton John, and something monstrous. The preeminent rock star of the '70s seems out of time, untouched by the decade's confusion"—a reference to the performer's relative social indifference.

Christgau went on, "Yet there are few people who like rock and roll, or any pop music, who remain unreached by Elton John. It's not just that he's so pervasive, although that helps; quite simply, the man is a genius," adding that John's "gift for the hook—made up whole or assembled from outside sources—is so universal that there is small statistical likelihood that one of them hasn't stuck in your pleasure center. Or your craw. Or both."

Whatever *Rocketman*'s shortcomings, or its subject's, the film is an exhilarating ride and a reminder of why so much of Elton John's music is appealing and enduring.

Pavarotti

Luciano Pavarotti (1935-2007), the great Italian operatic tenor is the subject of *Pavarotti*, an intriguing documentary directed (surprisingly) by Ron Howard. The filmmaker was given access to the Pavarotti estate and his movie is made up predominantly of rare footage of the opera star.

The production notes explain that Howard and his collaborators conducted more than 50 new interviews in New York, Los Angeles, Montreal, London, Modena and Verona from April 2017 to June 2018. The notes further assert that the conversations "brought in the perspectives not only of wives, family members, students and fellow performers from both opera and rock, but also

the managers, promoters and marketers who helped to etch the unusual trajectory of his career and take opera to places it had never gone before." The interviews, for the most part, express uncritical admiration.

American opera soprano Carol Vaness terms Pavarotti's voice "heaven on earth," and fellow American soprano Madelyn Renée describes her personal and professional relationship with a man who consumed life, she implies, with every fiber of his being.

One of Pavarotti's most famous pieces, the aria "Nessun Dorma" ("None shall sleep") from Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*, is the movie's emotional pivot.

The singer was born in Modena, Italy on the eve of World War II. "I was born during the war, so I'm carrying that," says the singer.

"The human voice is the centerpiece of our movie. It is the greatest tool musically there is. Nothing crosses all disciplines in music and all touchpoints with human emotion like the human voice," says sound-mixer Chris Jenkins. "And Pavarotti's voice is the most exquisite of instruments. That's why rather than be sequestered into opera, I think his voice transcends categories. His voice is about those universal emotions we seek in all great painting, music, food, love and compassion."

Pavarotti, early in his career, hit nine high Cs in Donizetti's *La Fille Du Regiment*. "Most tenors," explains the movie's production note, "transpose the note to a more mortal yet still highly challenging B-flat, but not Pavarotti. With that string of Cs, he made opera history and was thereafter dubbed 'The King of High Cs.'"

One of the film's most compelling moments, aside from "Nessun Dorma," is the performance of The Three Tenors, Pavarotti, Spaniards Plácido Domingo and José Carreras, conducted by the renowned Zubin Mehta at the ancient Baths of Caracalla in Rome, Italy on July 7, 1990. The recording of this debut concert became the best-selling classical album of all time. The popular operatic trio would collaborate throughout the 1990s and 2000s.

The documentary makes clear that Pavarotti too fell into the celebrity culture, also rubbing shoulders with the ubiquitous Princess Diana. Money, ego, a reactionary climate almost inevitably took their toll in his case too.

One suspects that both personally and professionally Howard's film, produced with the aid of the tenor's estate, also leaves a good deal out. More critical voices are not heard here. This is a readily digestible version of Pavarotti's life and career.

But even those who criticized his artistic choices, including his forays into popular music, and various commercial endeavors always come back and pay tribute to Pavarotti's voice, which, as one commentator puts it, was "bright, clear, unmistakable even to the untrained ear."



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