

I DIDN'T KNOW THAT

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ELTON JOHN

Michael Jackson might have the moniker “King of Pop” but Sir Elton John can also lay claim to the title (with the numbers to back it up).

From the inauspicious start with the release in the U.S. of four albums, *Elton John*, the B-movie *Friends* soundtrack, *Empty Sky* and *Tumbleweed Connection* not to mention the hurried U. S. release of *17-11-70* (to undercut bootleggers), it would seem the budding career of Elton John might be cut short due to overexposure. He not only survived the glut but also endured, becoming one of the hottest tickets of the 1970s, continuing to write and record until present day.

Born Reginald Keith Dwight in 1947 in Pinner, Middlesex, England, the child piano prodigy was the son of a British RAF Lieutenant and his wife, Stanley and Sheila Dwight. England had just emerged from the horrors of World War II, the Nazi attempts to bomb it into submission and Karl Donitz’s wolfpack of submarines patrolling the Atlantic Ocean. At the ripe old age of 11, he was the recipient of a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music. Soon after, he was playing in local pubs and eventually joined the group Bluesology and toured Europe with Patti LaBelle.

A lucky pairing put John with lyricist Bernie Taupin (who admitted there wasn't a lot of work available to the local poet, which Taupin laughingly referred to as "the village idiot.") Elton John (with a new name inspired by Bluesology band members Elton Dean and Long John Baldry) embarked on what would become a decades-long career of superstardom, highs, lows, excesses, activism and solace.

The performances of Elton John can most easily be distinguished as pre- and post-costume. His early flamboyant style begged comparison with Liberace but as Bernie Taupin stated, "Liberace never had that much soul." Without doubt, John caught the critics' eyes with a stage persona but they soon realized there was quite a musician beneath those wigs. His early offerings with Paul Buckmaster's arrangements denote a heavy Classical influence; over three decades and dozens of albums later, still going strong, those who have followed his career from the beginning find a kind of familiarity with his music. His album, *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*, was the first to debut at number one on the Billboard charts. He, with Buckmaster, employed revolutionary string arrangements for songs like *Have Mercy on the Criminal*, *Sixty Years On*, *One Horse Town* and *Ballad of the Boy In The Red Shoes*. For many, Elton's studio work with Buckmaster is as close as they will get to Classical music, especially

Buckmaster's offering of *Four Moods* from the *Friends* soundtrack—a film which didn't even feature Elton. After warning rocker Rod Stewart against the movie *Tommy* he appeared instead as The Pinball Wizard.

After coming out in Rolling Stone as bisexual in 1976, a move that hampered his career, Elton eventually declared himself a "gay man" in 1992.

Known as a quick worker, he rarely devotes more than half an hour to create a melody. Many of his "throwaways" would love to be snapped up by other artists. Taupin's line, from *Your Song*, "Don't have much money" while laughable now, was very true at the time it was written as Elton, Bernie and Taupin's then-girlfriend (immortalized in *Someone Saved My Life Tonight*) all shared a basement apartment.

Practicing what he preaches, he has always maintained that to be successful and prolific, it is absolutely essential that an entertainer be a good live performer; if you listen to live recordings or attend concerts you will also notice the tempos are a hair faster than their studio-recorded counterparts.

A dalliance with marriage ended in divorce, his addiction to drugs and alcohol was both public and well documented. He bottomed out, secretly entering a recovery center in suburban Chicago. It was this recovery that set the stage for his taking his place as one of Rock's elder statesmen. In 1992,

he formed The Elton John AIDS Foundation, an international non-profit organization, with his revenues from singles earmarked for research funding. 1994's *Can You Feel the Love Tonight* from Disney's *The Lion King* brought him an Academy Award. (Even though it is a strong and powerful song, it isn't, for many "die-hard" Elton John fans, the best song from the soundtrack of *The Lion King*.) In 1997, at the request of the Royal Family, he remade *Candle in the Wind (Goodbye England's Rose)*; to be performed at Princess Diana's funeral) knocking Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* from the top spot as #1 single of all time, with proceeds benefiting Diana's charities. In the 1970s, the song *Candle in the Wind* was pulled in America, although quite popular in England, for *Bennie and the Jets*, which received a lot of airtime on U. S. R and B stations. Two decades later, *Candle in the Wind* was released as a live version from *Live in Australia*. Elton's span of 28 consecutive years with a Billboard Top 40 song remains a world record. In 1999, he was presented with the Grammy's Legend (a Special Merit) Award.

Elton's 2001 release, *Songs From The West Coast*, marked a return of Elton to making records as he did his first four early-1970 albums. In 2005, his work and career were acknowledged at *The 27th Annual Kennedy Center Honors* and he received a Grammy nomination for his duet with the late Ray Charles, *Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word*, from the CD *Genius Loves*

Company. Just as "The Duke," John Wayne, represents Western films, Elton John defines Pop/Rock.

Currently he divides time between England and the U. S. with his partner, advertising executive and filmmaker David Furnish, with whom he has been since 1993.

THE ST. VALENTINE'S DAY MASSACRE

Many through the years have forwarded numerous assumptions as to what happens at the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Virtually all are justifiable, as no one is ever convicted in court of the horrific offense.

It's generally agreed that the incident occurred on February 14, 1929 at the S-M-C Cartage Company; a red, brick structure on (2122) North Clark Street in Chicago. Seven men are gunned down but the real target is an elusive (and lucky) George "Bugs" Moran.

On February 14, 1929, St. Valentine's Day, gangster warfare enters a new phase. Until then, there have been assassinations and killings on a much smaller scale. But wholesale murders have before then not been part and parcel of operations. Syndicate style "hits" occur on all sides but the garage multiple homicides lead to a public revulsion and an outcry for law and order. Front-page headlines in New York, Chicago, Milwaukee, and other cities echo the news of the day.

Born in 1899, Alphonse Capone, after spending his childhood in New York, is mentored by Johnny Torrio. In Cicero, Illinois, the Capone-Torrio coalition eventually embraces Chicago's South Side, Their rivals, primarily, are Dion O'Banion's gang in Chicago's North Side. O'Banion is

assassinated by representatives of the Capone-Torrio faction in November 1924. An attempt is made on Torero's life by O'Banion's successors, "Hymie" Weiss (Earl Wajciechowski) and George "Bugs" Moran, in January 1925. The attack, although severely debilitating, isn't lethal. Capone's car is fired upon but the crime boss isn't there.

An attempt on one of Capone's deadliest henchmen, Jack McGurn, more likely sets in motion one of the most memorable episodes of the Jazz Age and Prohibition. McGurn fearlessly protects Capone and dispatches several would-be killers. Moran has Capone targeted for assassination but first it is necessary to remove Capone's "muscle" – "Machine Gun" Jack McGurn.

After several days of surveillance, hit men open fire on McGurn as he stops to use a telephone. Although severely wounded, McGurn survives the assassination attempt by two brothers, Frank and Peter Gusenberg.

Knowing any punitive reprisals would reflect poorly on him and his organization, Capone gives his tacit approval—the eliminations serve his interests—but not wishing to be directly involved, he flies to Miami, away from wintry Chicago.

Even though the murders bear a very strong similarity to the actions of Capone, the recriminations are more likely the "official" vendetta of

Capone's "fair-haired boy," the suave, debonair and snappily dressed killer, ex-boxer Jack McGurn (Vincenzo Gibaldi).

McGurn sets up the following plan: two shooters dressed as policemen in fake police cars with the aid of two (probably four) others would, under the pretext of a raid, carry out the executions of Moran and his gang. A bogus shipment of supposedly hijacked inexpensive Canadian Whiskey ensures Moran's gang will be all congregated together. But the out-of-towners McGurn hires as lookouts have only a general description of Moran. They mistake Albert "Gorilla" Weinshank for Moran, so Moran isn't present when his followers are murdered.

With temperatures below freezing, the plan is set in motion.

Moran's gang is confused as they are sure bribes are being paid to avoid these hassles from police, but they comply, not resisting at all, lining up against the brick wall in the garage. The men presume that this is all a "show" for the public. A signal is given to the other plainclothes killers. The "extra" killers enter and cut loose with Thompson Submachine guns (Tommy Gun, the Chicago Typewriter, the Chopper), sweeping back and forth, up and down on the Moran goons. "Mission accomplished," the "regular" killers exit and the "police" follow suggesting for the public an arrest. The "other" killers exit sight unseen.

Among the seven men gunned down are the Gusenberg brothers (who had attempted to eliminate McGurn. He, like Capone, establishes an alibi [with Louise Rolfe-- The "Blonde Alibi"] that places him far from the North Clark Street garage that snowy morning). Two of the victims, a mechanic and an optometrist (Reinhardt Schwimmer, a gangster "groupie"), aren't a part of Moran's gang, but are potential witnesses. Although not assassinated that day, George "Bugs" Moran, although continuing to be reasonably successful, never regains the lofty stature in which he once reveled following his lieutenants' murder. Frank Gusenberg survives the attack, despite more than a dozen bullet wounds, but dies from his injuries later, refusing to name his assassins, saying instead, "*No one...nobody shot me*". The only "surviving witness" is Highball, an Alsatian dog.

Several theories exist for "Why?"

A requirement to head the Unione Siciliana brotherhood was being a Sicilian but even though he was powerful and wealthy (estimated worth at over \$60 million), Capone is not Sicilian. His designees, Tony Lombardo and Pasqualino Lolordo, are both assassinated by Moran's gang;

McGurn wants to "get even" for the attempt on his life;

Liquor trucks to Capone from Detroit's Purple Gang are hijacked or otherwise "go missing" and Capone blames Moran;

Capone hopes to further his reach into the potentially lucrative Chicago unions and needs Moran out of the way.

The massacre, however, is not successful in its mission of executing Moran and no one will ever know for sure who the killers are. Witnesses outside see two men being escorted by the “police.” But where are their guns? That’s why other killers are possible and probable. Still defiant but essentially alone, Moran later says, "***Only Capone kills guys like that!***"

Ultimately, no one is convicted for the crime but several principals met untimely, miserable or violent ends. Jack McGurn is shot in a bowling alley St. Valentine’s Day Eve, 1936 at 805 North Milwaukee Avenue, Chicago. A comic valentine later found reads, "***You lost your dough and handsome houses, but things could be worse, you know, at least you haven't lost your trousers.***"

Two possible participants, Albert Anselmi and John Scalise (The “Murder Twins”), along with Joseph Giunta, have delusions of grandeur and advancement by murdering “Scarface”. Instead, Capone kills both with a baseball bat (made famous by Robert DeNiro in *The Untouchables*, 1987 and Jason Robards in *The St. Valentine’s Day Massacre*, 1967).

Capone, a former Public Enemy #1 and one of Alcatraz (“The Rock”) Prison’s best-known former residents, dies uneventfully in bed from syphilis

complications at his mansion in Miami Beach (Palm Island), Florida in
January 1947.

JACK DANIEL

“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus,” “Yes sir, that’s my baby,” “Yes, we have no bananas” and yes, there really was a Jack Daniel. In Cave Spring, near Lynchburg, Tennessee, a distiller, Jack Daniel, developed what has become easily one of the most recognized names in alcoholic spirits.

Born in 1846, Jasper Newton “Jack” Daniel learned distilling while quite young and after buying his mentor’s distillery (actually just a still), he moved it near Lynchburg, Tennessee (off what is now US 64) and an integral part of his marketing revolved around a distinctive style that would remind the public of his product; simply put, *“Remember me, remember my whiskey.”*

Daniel wore a knee-length frock coat and planter’s hat; grew a moustache and goatee and used his flamboyant personal image to promote his whiskey. His was a whiskey, not bourbon; all bourbons are whiskeys but not all whiskeys are bourbons. Both require an aging process but because of ingredients, bourbon tends to be less sweet. (Something like *“All collies are dogs but not all dogs are collies.”*) To this day, supporters strongly disagree; which is “better”—Tennessee’s Jack Daniel’s Sippin’ Whiskey or Kentucky’s Makers Mark bourbon? (It can properly be spelled “whisky” or

“whiskey.”) The name “bourbon” comes from Bourbon County, Kentucky but there are no active distillers currently in Bourbon County, Kentucky. (For laughs, Christian County, Kentucky is wet [liquor sales] but Bourbon County, Kentucky is dry.)

He registered his distillery in 1866, establishing what would become the oldest permanent business of its kind in America. (The *No. 1* on the label exists because when the federal government began giving out registration numbers to distillers, Jack Daniel was first.) For the record, there was a Jim Beam, George A. Dickel and Dr. James Crow as well.

Daniel had no children so his nephew inherited his business.

Jack Daniel died in 1911 from complications arising after not seeking medical help following his kicking a safe he couldn't get open.

FAMOUS LAST WORDS

W. C. Fields wanted his epitaph to read, "*Here lies W. C. Fields. I would rather be living in Philadelphia.*" Fields, a lifelong agnostic, was found reading a Bible on his deathbed. "*I'm looking for a loop-hole.*"

"*Don't give up the ship!*" Captain James Lawrence, mortally wounded, yelled words of inspiration, egging on his officers and men. Lawrence subsequently died and his ship was captured by the British in a naval battle during The War of 1812.

"*Am I dying or is this my birthday?*" Lady Astor, to all those surrounding her, went the humorous route, as did Humphrey Bogart. "*I should never have switched from Scotch to martinis.*" H. G. Wells told his nurse "*Go away. I'm all right.*" Oscar Wilde offered, "*This wallpaper is killing me. One of us has to go.*" American patriot Ethan Allen, when told the angels were waiting, acknowledged, "*Waiting are they? Waiting are they? Well...let 'em wait.*"

Some didn't know the news of the day. John Adams pronounced, "*Thomas Jefferson still lives (survives)!*" Jefferson had died earlier that day. Others hadn't put a great deal of thought into it, like Mexican

Revolutionary Pancho Villa's request. ***"Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something."***

Some didn't grasp the obvious. ***"I'm still alive!"*** yelled Caligula while he was being stabbed to death. Senator and orator Daniel Webster supposedly shouted, ***"I still live!"*** and died soon afterward.

In covering all bases, Voltaire, when asked on his deathbed to renounce Satan, uttered, ***"This is no time to make new enemies."***

There are those that worked to the end, like grammarian Dominique Bouhours ***"I am about to-or I am going to-die. Either expression is correct."*** P. T. Barnum asked ***"How were the receipts today at Madison Square Garden?"***

Botanist Luther Burbank simply said, ***"I don't feel good."*** Before collapsing, Adlai Stevenson complained, ***"I feel faint."*** President Franklin Delano Roosevelt noted, ***"I have a terrific headache."*** George Bernard Shaw felt ***"I just want to sleep...."*** But actor Douglas Fairbanks, Sr. assured others ***"I've never felt better."*** Fellow actor Errol Flynn told those around him ***"I've had a hell of a lot of fun and I've enjoyed every minute of it."***

There are those who don't see the impending peril. Thomas Dylan bragged, ***"I just had eighteen whiskeys in a row. I do believe that is a record."*** Racecar driver Ayrton Senna acknowledged, ***"The car seems***

fine.” Then the steering column broke and he died in a crash. Union general John Sedgwick assured his companions “*Nonsense, they couldn’t hit an elephant at this dist—*”

Some people’s ends invite a smirk. Irene Ryan, performing on Broadway in *Pippin*, had just sung, “*It’s time to start living*” and suffered a fatal stroke.

When asked if dying was hard, actor Edmund Gwenn offered, “*Yes, it’s tough, but not as tough as doing comedy.*”

Others had different things in mind. Confederate General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson recommended to his friends “*Let us cross over the river and sit in the shade of the trees.*” His own men at Chancellorsville then mistakenly shot him.

Some accepted death as inevitable. Lt. Henry H. Morant told his firing squad “*Shoot straight, you bastards! Don’t make a mess of it!*” When asked by priests if he was of a mind to forgive his enemies, Ramon Maria Narvaez said, “*I do not have to forgive my enemies. I have had them all shot.*”

St. John Philly complained, “*God, I’m bored.*” At the end of his last press conference, Elvis Presley intoned, “*I hope I haven’t bored you.*” Henry John Temple Palmerton is supposed to have said, “*Die, my dear doctor? That’s the last thing I shall ever do.*” Of his assistants, Louis IV

asked, "*Why are you weeping? Did you think I was immortal?*" But it was Karl Marx who alleged "*Go on, get out. Last words are for fools who haven't said enough.*"