

EJ proves he's 'still standing' after 5 decades



Elton John rarely took a break from cranking out the tunes on the piano Aug. 8 Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – When legendary performer Elton John launched into the “B itch is Back” on a warm Lake Tahoe night, the crowd sprang to its feet, and I was immediately transported into total nostalgia as my childhood took center stage in my mind.

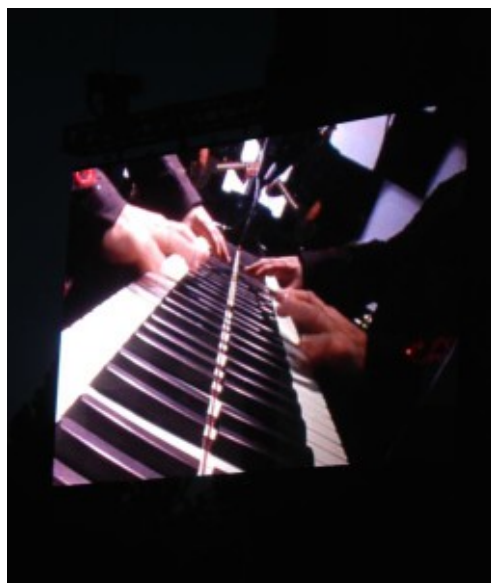
Like many people (a cluster of them around me at the Harveys Summer Outdoor Concert Series Saturday night), I grew up with this rock icon who has sold more than 300 million records and become one of the best-selling artists in the world. Despite the shared experience with so many others, his performance seemed so personal to me.

I owned a handful of albums, and as an adolescent locked myself in my room for hours to listen to his music – even convincing myself “Captain Fantastic” and the “Brown Dirt Cowboy” (named after the 1975 album) represented real people. After all, the songs of EJ aren’t all about his catchy singing, masterful ease of piano playing and ideal sing-along melodies.

His lyricist since 1967, Bernie Taupin, partly spawned my desire to be a writer. His impression spanned beyond me in South Lake Tahoe. I sat next to well-known Realtor Carl Fair most of the evening, and we discussed the show as if we were record producers.

“One of Bernie’s best,” Fair said to a few songs, while I nodded in agreement.

In particular, Fair was patiently waiting for EJ, which the crowd yelled on occasion, to perform his favorite – “Daniel” off the “Don’t Shoot Me, I’m Only the Piano Player” album. John delivered the sentimental piece in more of an electric rock format than the recording. Still, it had an impact.



Elton John’s fingers fly across the ivory.

Since the song is about a brother, I thought of growing up with my late sister – and how music was so instrumental in our lives. The 1973 album came out the same year as one of his best-selling albums “Goodbye Yellow Brick Road.” Back then, albums had passages you could read, and I used to open this one to learn all I could about the English performer. On this song collection, he produced “Bennie and the Jets” – with its signature piano key pounding heard again Aug. 8, complete with the “ssssss” at the end of “Jets.” Also from “Goodbye,” he performed the title song – which everyone mouthed the words to – along with “Candle in the Wind.” The song written for actress Marilyn Monroe is the best-selling single of all time.

Dressed in a black pant suit with simple sequins on the sleeves and back (rather understated compared to when I saw him dance on the piano a few decades ago at the Irvine arena), John played hit after hit with no breaks to speak of except to stretch, bow and reach out to the audience. John provided little dialogue except near the end when he tipped his hat to the audience for supporting him.

“It’s been the most incredible journey. Through 47 years, there’s been one constant – the audience buying the records and the audience coming to these shows,” the 68-year-old said. “Thank you for all the loyalty and love.”

The message was appropriate from a performer who wholeheartedly admits to believing in love and even wrote and performed “Believe” to the enchanted crowd.

Many of John’s library of songs revolve around love, whether it’s the down-to-earth 1970 timeless hit “Your Song” that he also performed to the hushed Tahoe audience or something totally out of this world like his other blockbuster number “Rocket Man” off the “Honky Chateau” album.

As the crowd swayed and recited every word, I returned to my childhood recalling my feelings when I heard this song while

moving to Virginia from Vermont. It was pouring down rain, and my mom could barely see as she followed my father in the truck. Still, I felt safe and confident that my world on Earth was going to pan out as I looked out the window in the pitch-black sky at age 12. Like the astronaut, I longed for a promising, adventurous life. I remember thinking what a genius Taupin was at capturing the human experience: "It's just my job, five days a week." I even bought a jean shirt because Taupin wore one on one of the album photos. I passed on the outrageous costumes and wild glasses John is known for, though a woman sitting behind me wore her glasses.

Through the years, John has slowed on his movement on stage and flashy costumes. His band – complete with original musicians Nigel Olsson on drums and Davey Johnstone on guitar – graced the stage with suits and ties. Even with the fresh, stylish look, a close glimpse of Johnstone's experienced guitar playing showed aging, wrinkled hands. The long-time musicians were joined by bassist Matt Bissonette, Kim Bullard on keyboards and percussionist John Mahon, who was fun to watch as he brought out rattles, chimes and tambourines. John, who played in Tahoe five years ago, got personal pointing out how Mahon was celebrating his 35th wedding anniversary, delighting the mostly older Tahoe concert crowd.

Behind the band, a giant screen flashed images ranging from a checkerboard and psychedelic experience to photographs depicting memories and John's various looks in more than four decades of making at least 50 Top 40 hits.

The music was full and solid – and I especially appreciated the hot vocals since many concert sound engineers tend to up the instruments, thus drowning out the vocals. Not so for a superstar like John, who has lost a slight bit of range, but still puts out a powerful performance.

The singer even overcame being hospitalized for an abnormal swelling of his leg playing tennis near his home in Nice,

France, less than a week ago to make the Tahoe concert, according to a Daily Mail report.



Saturday's show was Elton John's second at Lake Tahoe.

Tennis is one of John's favorite sports. Fans got a hint of this early on when he wrote with Taupin "Philadelphia Freedom" off "Captain Fantastic" in honor of the tennis team of his dear friend Billie Jean King, a legend in her own right on the courts. Patriotic images swirled across the giant screen during that song.

Other images came to mind when EJ started "Tiny Dancer," the poignant tune off the 1971 album "Madman Across the Water." That's what the John-Taupin collaborations accomplished for decades, creating words that have an impact on listeners. We can all share the pain and anguish of "Sorry Seems to Be the Hardest Word" and "Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me," which I stood up for amid a seated crowd.

Then there are the silly and jovial "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" and "Crocodile Rock." The latter was expected as the fun encore, and John delivered. And as a hint the night was coming to a close, John autographed records, shirts and CDs for the concert-goers up front. It was refreshing to see a middle-aged man in front of me yelling: "Rock on that piano, baby."

Notes: The Harveys concert series rocks on with the band Slightly Stoopid on Aug. 13; country act Dierks Bentley on Aug. 23; and Sammy Hagar on Sept. 5.