



**ME
★ ELTON
JOHN**

ME

ELTON JOHN



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This book is dedicated to my husband, David,

and to our beautiful sons Zachary and Elijah.

Special thanks to Alexis Petridis, without

whom this book would not have been possible.

prologue

I was onstage at the Latino club in South Shields when I realized I couldn't take it anymore. It was one of those supper clubs that were all over Britain in

the sixties and seventies, all virtually identical: people dressed in suits, seated

at tables, eating chicken in a basket and drinking wine out of bottles covered

in wicker; fringed lampshades and flock wallpaper; cabaret and a compère in

a bow tie. It felt like a throwback to another era. Outside, it was the winter of

1967, and rock music was shifting and changing so fast that it made my head

spin just thinking about it: The Beatles' *Magical Mystery Tour* and The

Mothers of Invention, *The Who Sell Out* and *Axis: Bold As Love*, Dr John and

John Wesley Harding. Inside the Latino, the only way you could tell the Swinging Sixties had happened at all was because I was wearing a kaftan and

some bells on a chain around my neck. They didn't really suit me. I looked like a finalist in a competition to find Britain's least convincing flower child.

The kaftan and the bells were Long John Baldry's idea. I was the organ player in his backing band, Bluesology. John had spotted all the other r'n'b bands going psychedelic: one week you'd go and see Zoot Money's Big Roll

Band playing James Brown songs, the next you'd find they were calling themselves Dantalian's Chariot, wearing white robes onstage and singing about how World War Three was going to kill all the flowers. He'd decided we should follow suit, sartorially at least. So we all got kaftans. Cheaper ones

for the backing musicians, while John's were specially made at Take Six in Carnaby Street. Or at least, he thought they were specially made, until we played a gig and he saw someone in the audience wearing exactly the same kaftan as him. He stopped in the middle of a song and started shouting angrily at him – 'Where did you get that shirt? That's *my* shirt!' This, I felt, rather ran contrary to the kaftan's associations with peace and love and universal brotherhood.

I adored Long John Baldry. He was absolutely hilarious, deeply eccentric, outrageously gay and a fabulous musician, maybe the greatest 12-string guitarist the UK has ever produced. He'd been one of the major figures in the

British blues boom of the early sixties, playing with Alexis Korner and Cyril

Davies and The Rolling Stones. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of the blues. Just being around him was an education: he introduced me to so much

music I'd never heard before.

But more than that, he was an incredibly kind, generous man. He had a knack of spotting something in musicians before anybody else could see it, then nurturing them, taking the time to build their confidence. He did it with me, and before that he'd done it with Rod Stewart, who'd been one of the singers in Steampacket, John's previous band: Rod, John, Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger. They were incredible, but then they split up. The story I heard was that one night after a gig in St-Tropez, Rod and Julie had an argument, Julie threw red wine over Rod's white suit—I'm sure you can imagine how well *that* went down – and that was the end of Steampacket. So Bluesology had got the gig as John's backing band instead, playing hip soul clubs and blues cellars all over the country.

It was great fun, even if John had some peculiar ideas about music. We played the most bizarre sets. We'd start out doing really hard-driving blues: 'Times Getting Tougher Than Tough', 'Hoochie Coochie Man'. The audience would be in the palm of our hand, but then John would insist we played 'The Threshing Machine', a sort of smutty West Country novelty song, the kind of thing rugby players sing when they're pissed, like 'Twas On The Good Ship Venus' or 'Eskimo Nell'. John would even sing it in an ooh-arr accent. And after that, he'd want us to perform something from the Great American Songbook – 'It Was A Very Good Year' or 'Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye' – which enabled him to do his impersonation of Della Reese, the American jazz singer. I don't know where he got the idea that people wanted to hear him playing 'The Threshing Machine' or doing an impersonation of Della Reese, but, bless him, he remained absolutely convinced that they did, in the face of some pretty compelling evidence to the contrary. You'd look out at the front row, people who'd come to hear blues legend Long John Baldry, and just see a line of mods, all chewing gum and staring at us in complete horror: *What the fuck is this guy doing?* It was hilarious, even if I was asking myself the same question.

And then, catastrophe struck: Long John Baldry had a huge hit single.

Obviously, this would usually have been the cause of great rejoicing, but 'Let

The Heartaches Begin' was an appalling record, a syrupy, middle-of-the-road, *Housewives' Choice* ballad. It was a million miles from the kind of music John should have been making, and it was Number One for weeks, never off the radio. I'd say I didn't know what he was thinking, but I knew exactly what he was thinking, and I couldn't really blame him. He'd been slogging around for years and this was the first time he'd made any money.

The blues cellars stopped booking us and we started playing the supper clubs,

which paid better. Often we'd play two a night. They weren't interested in John's pivotal role in the British blues boom or his mastery of the 12-string guitar. They just wanted to see someone who'd been on television.

Occasionally, I got the feeling they weren't that interested in music, full stop.

In some clubs, if you played over your allotted time, they'd simply close the curtains on you, mid-song. On the plus side, at least the supper club audiences enjoyed 'The Threshing Machine' more than the mods did.

There was one other major problem with 'Let The Heartaches Begin':

Bluesology couldn't play it live. I don't mean we refused to play it. I mean we literally *couldn't play it*. The single had an orchestra and a female chorus

on it: it sounded like Mantovani. We were an eight-piece rhythm and blues band with a horn section. There was no way we could reproduce the sound.

So John came up with the idea of putting the backing track on tape. When the

big moment came, he'd drag a huge Revox tape machine onstage, press play

and sing along to that. The rest of us would just have to stand there, doing nothing. In our kaftans and bells. While people ate chicken and chips. It was

excruciating.

In fact, the only entertaining thing about the live performance of 'Let The Heartaches Begin' was that, whenever John sang it, women started screaming. Apparently overwhelmed by desire, they'd temporarily abandon their chicken and chips and run to the front of the stage. Then they'd start grabbing at the cord of John's microphone, trying to pull him towards them.

I'm sure this kind of thing happened to Tom Jones every night and he took it

in his stride, but Long John Baldry wasn't Tom Jones. Rather than bask in the

adulation, he'd get absolutely furious. He'd stop singing and bellow at them

like a schoolmaster: 'IF YOU BREAK MY MICROPHONE, YOU'LL PAY

ME FIFTY POUNDS!’ One night, this dire warning went unheeded. As they

kept pulling at the cord, I saw John raise his arm. Then a terrible thud shook the speakers. I realized, with a sinking feeling, that it was the sound of a lust-

racked fan being smacked over her head with a microphone. In retrospect, it was a miracle he didn’t get arrested or sued for assault. So that was the main

source of amusement for the rest of us during ‘Let The Heartaches Begin’: wondering if tonight would be the night John clobbered one of his screaming

admirers again.

It was the song that was playing when I had my sudden moment of clarity in South Shields. Ever since I was a kid, I’d dreamed of being a musician.

Those dreams had taken many forms: sometimes I was Little Richard, sometimes Jerry Lee Lewis, sometimes Ray Charles. But whatever form they

had taken, none of them had involved standing onstage in a supper club outside of Newcastle, not playing a Vox Continental organ, while Long John

Baldry alternately crooned to the accompaniment of a tape recorder and angrily threatened to fine members of the audience fifty pounds. And yet, here I was. Much as I loved John, I had to do something else.

The thing was, I wasn't exactly swimming in other options. I didn't have a clue what I wanted to do, or even what I could do. I knew I could sing and play piano, but I clearly wasn't pop star material. For one thing, I didn't look

like a pop star, as evidenced by my inability to carry off a kaftan. For another, I was called Reg Dwight. That's not a pop star's name. 'Tonight on *Top of the Pops*, the new single by ... Reg Dwight!' It obviously wasn't going to happen. The other members of Bluesology, they had the kind of names you could imagine being announced on *Top of the Pops*. Stuart Brown. Pete Gavin. Elton Dean. Elton Dean! Even the sax player sounded more like a pop star than me, and he had absolutely no desire to be one: he was a serious jazz buff, killing time with Bluesology until he could start honking away in some free improvisational quintet.

Of course I could change my name, but what was the point? After all, not only did I think I wasn't pop star material, I'd literally been told I wasn't pop

star material. A few months before, I'd auditioned for Liberty Records. They

had put an advert in the *New Musical Express*: LIBERTY RECORDS

WANTS TALENT. But, as it turned out, not my talent. I'd gone to see a guy there called Ray Williams, played for him, even recorded a couple of songs in

a little studio. Ray thought I had potential, but no one else at the label did: thanks but no thanks. So that was that.

In fact, I had precisely one other option. When I'd auditioned for Liberty, I'd told Ray that I could write songs, or at least half write songs. I could write

music and melodies, but not lyrics. I'd tried in Bluesology and the results could still cause me to wake up at night in a cold sweat: 'We could be such a

happy pair, and I promise to do my share'. Almost as an afterthought, or a consolation prize after rejecting me, Ray had handed me an envelope.

Someone responding to the same advert had sent in some lyrics. I had a feeling Ray hadn't actually read any of them before he passed them on to me.

The guy who wrote them came from Owmbly-by-Spital in Lincolnshire, hardly the pulsating rock and roll capital of the world. He apparently worked

on a chicken farm, carting dead birds around in a wheelbarrow. But his lyrics

were pretty good. Esoteric, a bit Tolkien-influenced, not unlike 'A Whiter Shade Of Pale' by Procol Harum. Crucially, none of them made me want to rip my own head off with embarrassment, which meant they were a vast improvement on anything I'd come up with.

What's more, I found I could write music to them, and I could write it really fast. Something about them just seemed to click with me. And something about him just seemed to click with me, too. He came down to London, we went for a coffee and we hit it off straight away. It turned out that Bernie Taupin wasn't a country bumpkin at all. He was extremely sophisticated for a seventeen-year-old: long-haired, very handsome, very well

read, a huge Bob Dylan fan. So we'd started writing songs together, or rather,

not together. He would send me the lyrics from Lincolnshire, I'd write the music at home, in my mum and stepdad's flat in Northwood Hills. We'd come up with dozens of songs that way. Admittedly, we hadn't actually managed to get any other artists to buy the bloody things yet, and if we committed to it full-time, we'd be broke. But other than money, what did we

have to lose? A wheelbarrow full of dead chickens and 'Let The Heartaches Begin' twice a night, respectively.

I told John and Bluesology I was leaving after a gig in Scotland, in December. It was fine, no hard feelings: like I said, John was an incredibly generous man. On the flight home, I decided I should change my name after all. For some reason, I remember thinking I had to come up with something

else really quickly. I suppose it was all symbolic of a clean break and a fresh

start: no more Bluesology, no more Reg Dwight. As I was in a hurry, I settled

for pinching other people's names. Elton from Elton Dean, John from Long John Baldry. Elton John. Elton John and Bernie Taupin. *Songwriting duo*

Elton John and Bernie Taupin. I thought it sounded good. Unusual. Striking. I

announced my decision to my now ex-bandmates on the bus back from Heathrow. They all fell about laughing, then wished me the best of luck.

[one](#)

It was my mum who introduced me to Elvis Presley. Every Friday, after work, she would pick up her wages, stop off on the way home at Siever's, an

electrical store that also sold records, and buy a new 78. It was my favourite time of the week, waiting at home to see what she would bring back. She loved going out dancing, so she liked big band music – Billy May and His Orchestra, Ted Heath – and she loved American vocalists: Johnnie Ray, Frankie Laine, Nat King Cole, Guy Mitchell singing 'she wears red feathers and a huly-huly skirt'. But one Friday she came home with something else. She told me she'd never heard anything like it before, but it was so fantastic she had to buy it. As soon as she said the words Elvis Presley, I recognized

them. The previous weekend I'd been looking through the magazines in the local barber shop while I was waiting to have my hair cut, when I came across a photo of the most bizarre-looking man I'd ever seen. Everything about him looked extraordinary: his clothes, his hair, even the way he was standing. Compared to the people you could see outside the barber shop window in the north-west London suburb of Pinner, he might as well have been bright green with antennae sticking out of his forehead. I'd been so transfixed I hadn't even bothered to read the accompanying article, and by the time I got home I'd forgotten his name. But that was it: Elvis Presley.

As soon as Mum put the record on, it became apparent that Elvis Presley sounded the way he looked, like he came from another planet. Compared to the stuff my parents normally listened to, 'Heartbreak Hotel' barely qualified

as music at all, an opinion my father would continue to expound upon at great

length over the coming years. I'd already heard rock and roll – 'Rock Around

The Clock' had been a big hit earlier in 1956 – but 'Heartbreak Hotel' didn't

sound anything like that either. It was raw and sparse and slow and eerie.

Everything was drenched in this weird echo. You could barely understand a word he was singing: I got that his baby had left him, after that I completely

lost the thread. What was a ‘dessa clurk’? Who was this ‘Bidder Sir Lonely’ he kept mentioning?

It didn’t matter what he was saying, because something almost physical happened while he was singing. You could literally *feel* this strange energy he was giving off, like it was contagious, like it was coming out of the radiogram speaker straight into your body. I already thought of myself as music mad – I even had a little collection of my own 78s, paid for with record

tokens and postal orders I got on birthdays and at Christmas. Until that moment, my hero had been Winifred Atwell, a big, immensely jolly Trinidadian lady who performed onstage with two pianos – a baby grand on which she played light classical and a battered old upright for ragtime and pub songs. I loved her sense of glee, the slightly camp way she would announce, ‘And now, I’m going to my *other* piano’; the way she would lean back and look at the audience with a huge grin on her face while she was playing, like she was having the best time in the world. I thought Winifred Atwell was fabulous, but I’d never experienced anything like *this* while listening to her. I’d never experienced anything like this in my life. As ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ played, it felt like something had changed, that nothing could really be the same again. As it turned out, something had, and nothing was.

And thank God, because the world needed changing. I grew up in fifties Britain and, before Elvis, before rock and roll, fifties Britain was a pretty grim place. I didn't mind living in Pinner – I've never been one of those rock

stars who was motivated by a burning desire to escape the suburbs, I quite liked it there – but the whole country was in a bad place. It was furtive and fearful and judgemental. It was a world of people peeping around their curtains with sour expressions, of girls being sent away because they'd Got Into Trouble. When I think of fifties Britain, I think of sitting on the stairs of

our house, listening to my mum's brother, Uncle Reg, trying to talk her out of

getting divorced from my dad: 'You can't get divorced! What will people think?' At one point, I distinctly remember him using the phrase 'what will the neighbours say?' It wasn't Uncle Reg's fault. That was just the mindset of

the times: that happiness was somehow less important than keeping up appearances.

The truth is that my parents should never have got married in the first place. I was born in 1947, but I was effectively a war baby. I must have been

conceived while my father was on leave from the RAF – he had joined up in

1942 at the height of World War Two and elected to stay on after the war ended. And my parents were definitely a war couple. Their story sounds romantic. They met the same year my dad joined up. He was seventeen, and had worked in a boatbuilding yard in Rickmansworth that specialized in making narrowboats for canals. Mum was sixteen, her maiden name was Harris, and she delivered milk for United Dairies on a horse and cart, the kind

of job a woman would never have done before the war. My dad was a keen amateur trumpet player, and while he was on leave, he apparently spotted my

mum in the audience while he was sitting in with a band playing at a North Harrow hotel.

But the reality of Stanley and Sheila Dwight's marriage wasn't romantic at all. They just didn't get on. They were both stubborn and short-tempered, two delightful characteristics that it's been my huge good fortune to inherit.

I'm not sure if they ever really loved each other. People rushed into marriage

during the war – the future was uncertain, even by the time of my parents' wedding in January 1945, and you had to seize the moment – so maybe that had something to do with it. Perhaps they had loved each other once, or at least thought they had, in the time they snatched together. Now they didn't

even seem to like each other. The rows were endless.

At least they subsided when my dad was away, which he often was. He was promoted to flight lieutenant, and was regularly posted abroad, to Iraq and Aden, so I grew up in a house that seemed to be filled with women. We lived with my maternal grandmother, Ivy, at 55 Pinner Hill Road – the same house I was born in. It was the kind of council house that had sprung up all over Britain in the twenties and thirties: three bedrooms, semi-detached, red brick on the ground floor and white-painted render on the top floor. The house actually had another male occupant, although you wouldn't really have

noticed. My grandfather had died very young, of cancer, and Nan had remarried, to a guy called Horace Sewell, who'd lost a leg in World War One. Horace had a heart of gold, but he wasn't what you would call one of life's big talkers. He seemed to spend most of his time outside. He worked at

the local nursery, Woodman's, and when he wasn't there, he was in the garden, where he grew all our vegetables and cut flowers.

Perhaps he was just in the garden to avoid my mother, in which case I couldn't really blame him. Even when Dad wasn't around, Mum had a terrible temper. When I think back to my childhood, I think of Mum's moods:

awful, glowering, miserable silences that descended on the house without warning, during which you walked on eggshells and picked your words very

carefully, in case you set her off and got thumped as a result. When she was happy she could be warm and charming and vivacious, but she always seemed to be looking for a reason not to be happy, always seemed to be in search of a fight, always had to have the last word; Uncle Reg famously said

she could start an argument in an empty room. I thought for years that it was

somehow my fault, that maybe she never really wanted to be a mother: she was only twenty-one when I was born, stuck in a marriage that clearly wasn't

working, forced to live with her mum because money was so tight. But her sister, my auntie Win, told me she was always like that – that when they were

kids it was as if a dark cloud used to follow Sheila Harris around, that other children were scared of her and that she seemed to like that.

She definitely had some deeply weird ideas about parenting. It was an era when you kept your kids in line by clobbering them, when it was generally held that there was nothing wrong with children that couldn't be cured by thumping the living daylights out of them. This was a philosophy to which

my mother was passionately wedded, which was petrifying and humiliating if

it happened in public: there's nothing like getting a hiding outside Pinner Sainsbury's, in front of a visibly intrigued crowd of onlookers, for playing havoc with your self-esteem. But some of Mum's behaviour would have been

considered disturbing even by the standards of the time. I found out years later that when I was two, she'd toilet-trained me by hitting me with a wire brush until I bled if I didn't use the potty. My nan had, understandably, gone berserk when she found out what was going on: they didn't speak for weeks as a result. Nan had gone berserk again when she saw my mother's remedy for constipation. She laid me on the draining board in the kitchen and stuck carbolic soap up my arse. If she liked to scare people, she must have been overjoyed by me, because I was fucking terrified of her. I loved her – she was

my mum – but I spent my childhood in a state of high alert, always trying to ensure that I never did anything that might set her off: if she was happy, I was

happy, albeit temporarily.

There were no problems like that with my nan. She was the person I trusted the most. It felt like she was the centre of the family, the only one

who didn't go out to work – my mum had graduated from driving a milk cart

during the war to working in a succession of shops. Nan was one of those incredible old working-class matriarchs: no nonsense, hard-working, kind, funny. I idolized her. She was the greatest cook, had the greenest fingers, loved a drink and a game of cards. She'd had an incredibly hard life – her father had abandoned her mother when she was pregnant, so Nan was born in

a workhouse. She never talked about it, but it seemed to have left her as someone nothing could faze, not even the time I came howling down the stairs with my foreskin caught in my trouser zip and asked her to get it out. She just sighed and got on with it, as though extracting a small boy's penis from a zip was the kind of thing she did every day.

Her house smelt of roast dinners and coal fires. There was always someone at the door: either Auntie Win or Uncle Reg, or my cousins John and Cathryn, or else the rent man, or the man from Watford Steam Laundry, or the man who delivered the coal. And there was always music playing. The

radio was almost permanently on: *Two-Way Family Favourites*, *Housewives'*

Choice, *Music While You Work*, *The Billy Cotton Band Show*. If it wasn't, there were records playing on the radiogram – mostly jazz, but sometimes

classical.

I could spend hours just looking at those records, studying the different labels. Blue Deccas, red Parlophones, bright yellow MGMs, HMVs and RCAs, both of which, for reasons I could never figure out, had that picture of

the dog looking at the gramophone on them. They seemed like magical objects; the fact that you put a needle on them and sound mysteriously came out amazed me. After a while, the only presents I wanted were records and books. I can remember the disappointment of coming downstairs and seeing a

big box wrapped up. Oh God, they've got me Meccano.

And we had a piano, which belonged to my nan. Auntie Win used to play it, and eventually so did I. There were a lot of family myths about my prodigious talent at the instrument, the most oft-repeated being that Win sat me on her lap when I was three, and I immediately picked out the melody of

'The Skaters' Waltz' by ear. I've no idea whether that's actually true or not, but I was definitely playing piano at a very young age, around the time I started at my first school, Reddiford. I'd play stuff like 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', hymns I'd heard in assembly. I was just born with a good ear,

the way some people are born with a photographic memory. If I heard

something once, I could go to the piano and, more or less, play it perfectly. I was seven when I started lessons, with a lady called Mrs Jones. Not long after

that, my parents began wheeling me out to play 'My Old Man Said Follow The Van' and 'Roll Out The Barrel' at family gatherings and weddings. For all the records in the house and on the radio, I think an old-fashioned sing-song was the form of music my family loved the most.

The piano came in useful when my dad was home on leave. He was a typical British man of the fifties in that he seemed to regard any display of emotion, other than anger, as evidence of a fatal weakness of character. So he

wasn't tactile, he never told you he loved you. But he liked music, and if he heard me playing the piano, I'd get a 'well done', maybe an arm around the shoulder, a sense of pride and approval. I was temporarily in his good books.

And keeping in his good books was vitally important to me. If I was marginally less terrified of him than I was of my mother, it was only because

he wasn't around as much. At one point, when I was six, my mum had made

the decision to move us away from Pinner and all her family, and go with my

dad to Wiltshire – he had been posted to RAF Lyneham, near Swindon. I

can't remember much about it. I know I enjoyed playing in the countryside, but I also recall feeling quite disorientated and confused by the change, and falling behind at school as a result. We weren't there for long – Mum must have realized she had made a mistake very quickly – and after we came back

to Pinner, it felt like Dad was someone who visited rather than lived with us.

But when he did visit, things changed. Suddenly, there were all these new rules about everything. I would get into trouble if I kicked my football off the

lawn into the flower bed, but I would also get in trouble if I ate celery in what

was deemed to be The Wrong Way. The Right Way to eat celery, in the unlikely event that you're interested, was apparently not to make too loud a crunching sound when you bit into it. Once, he hit me because I was supposedly taking my school blazer off incorrectly; sadly, I seem to have forgotten The Right Way to take off a school blazer, vital though this knowledge obviously was. The scene upset Auntie Win so much that she rushed off in tears to tell my nan what was going on. Presumably worn down

by the rows over potty training and constipation, Nan told her not to get involved.

What *was* going on? I haven't got a clue. I've no more idea of what my father's problem was than I have about my mother's. Maybe it had something

to do with him being in the forces, where there were rules about everything as

well. Maybe he felt a bit of jealousy, like he was shut out of the family

because he was away so much: all these rules were his way of imposing

himself as the head of the household. Maybe that was the way he had been

brought up, although his parents – my grandad Edwin and grandma Ellen – didn't seem particularly fierce. Or maybe both my parents just found dealing

with a child difficult because they'd never done it before. I don't know. I do

know that my dad had an incredibly short fuse and that he didn't seem to

understand how to use words. There was no calm response, no 'now come on, sit down'. He would just explode. The Dwight Family Temper. It was the

bane of my life as a kid, and it remained the bane of my life when it became

apparent it was hereditary. Either I was genetically predisposed to losing my

rag, or I unconsciously learned by example. Whichever it was, it has proved a

catastrophic pain in the arse for me and everyone around me for most of my adult life.

Had it not been for Mum and Dad, I would have had a perfectly normal, even boring fifties childhood: *Muffin the Mule* on TV and Saturday morning children's matinees at the Embassy in North Harrow; the Goons on the radio

and bread and dripping for tea on a Sunday night. Away from home, I was perfectly happy. At eleven, I moved up to Pinner County Grammar School, where I was conspicuously ordinary. I wasn't bullied, nor was I a bully. I wasn't a swot, but I wasn't a tearaway either; I left that to my friend John Gates, who was one of those kids that seemed to spend their entire childhood

in detention or outside the headmaster's office, without the range of punishments inflicted on him making any difference at all to the way he behaved. I was a bit overweight, but I was all right at sport without any danger of being a star athlete. I played football and tennis – everything except

rugby. Because of my size, they put me in the scrum, where my main role involved being repeatedly kicked in the balls by the opposing team's prop. No thanks.

My best mate was Keith Francis, but he was part of a big circle of friends, girls as well as boys, people I still see now. I occasionally have class reunions

at my house. The first time, I was really nervous beforehand: it's been fifty

years, I'm famous, I live in a big house, what are they going to think of me? But they couldn't have cared less. When they arrived, it might as well have been 1959. No one seemed to have changed that much. John Gates still had a

twinkle in his eye that suggested he could be a bit of a handful.

For years, I lived a life in which nothing really happened. The height of excitement was a school trip to Annecy, where we stayed with our French pen pals and gawped at the sight of Citroën 2CVs, which were like no car I'd

ever seen on a British road – the seats in them looked like deckchairs. Or the

day during the Easter holidays when, for reasons lost in the mists of time, Barry Walden, Keith and I elected to cycle from Pinner to Bournemouth, an idea I began to question the wisdom of when I realized that their bikes had gears and mine did not: there was a lot of frantic pedalling up hills on my part, trying to keep up. The only danger any of us faced was that one of my friends might be bored to death when I started talking about records. It wasn't

enough for me to collect them. Every time I bought one, I kept a note of it in

a book. I wrote down the titles of the A and B sides and all the other information off the label: writer, publisher, producer. I then memorized the

lot, until I became a walking musical encyclopedia. An innocent enquiry as to

why the needle skipped when you tried to play ‘Little Darlin’ by The Diamonds would lead to me informing everyone within earshot that it was because ‘Little Darlin’ by The Diamonds was on Mercury Records, who were distributed by Pye in the UK, and that Pye were the only label that released 78s made from new-fangled vinyl, rather than old-fashioned shellac,

and needles made from shellac responded differently to vinyl.

But I’m not complaining at all about life being dull – I liked it that way.

Things were so exhausting at home that a dull life outside the front door seemed oddly welcome, particularly when my parents decided to try living together full-time again. It was just after I started at Pinner County. My dad had been posted to RAF Medmenham in Buckinghamshire and we all moved

into a house in Northwood, about ten minutes away from Pinner, 111 Potter Street. We were there for three years, long enough to prove beyond any doubt

that the marriage wasn’t working. God, it was miserable: constant fighting, occasionally punctuated by icy silences. You couldn’t relax for a minute. If you spend your life waiting for the next eruption of anger from your mum, or

your dad announcing another rule that you'd broken, you end up not knowing

what to do: the uncertainty of what's going to happen next fills you with fear.

So I was incredibly insecure, scared of my own shadow. On top of that, I thought I was somehow responsible for the state of my parents' marriage, because a lot of their rows would be about me. My father would tell me off, my mother would intervene, and there would be a huge argument about how I

was being brought up. It didn't make me feel very good about myself, which

manifested in a lack of confidence in my appearance that lasted well into adulthood. For years and years, I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror. I really hated what I saw: I was too fat, I was too short, my face just looked weird, my hair would never do what I wanted it to, including not prematurely fall out. The other lasting effect was a fear of confrontation. That

went on for decades. I stayed in bad business relationships and bad personal relationships because I didn't want to rock the boat.

My response when things got too much was always to run upstairs and lock the door, which is exactly what I used to do when my parents fought. I would go to my bedroom, where I kept everything perfectly neat and ordered.

It wasn't just records I collected, it was comics, books, magazines. I was meticulous about everything. If I wasn't writing down the details of a new single in my notebook, I was copying all the different singles charts out of *Melody Maker*, the *New Musical Express*, *Record Mirror* and *Disc*, then compiling the results, averaging them out into a personal chart of charts. I've

always been a statistics freak. Even now, I get sent the charts every day, the radio chart positions in America, the box office charts for films and Broadway plays. Most artists don't do that; they're not interested. When I'm

talking to them, I know more about how their single's doing than they do, which is crazy. The official excuse is that I need to know what's going on because, these days, I own a company that makes films and manages artists. The truth is that I'd be doing it if I was working in a bank. I'm just an anorak.

A psychologist would probably say that, as a kid, I was trying to create a sense of order in a chaotic life, with my dad coming and going and all the reprimands and rows. I didn't have any control over that, or over my mother's moods, but I had control over the stuff in my room. Objects couldn't do me any harm. I found them comforting. I talked to them, I behaved as if they had feelings. If something got broken, I'd feel really upset,

as if I'd killed something. During one particularly bad row, my mother threw

a record at my father and it smashed into God knows how many pieces. It was 'The Robin's Return' by Dolores Ventura, an Australian ragtime pianist.

I remember thinking, 'How can you do that? How can you break this beautiful thing?'

My record collection exploded when rock 'n' roll arrived. There were other exciting changes afoot, things that suggested life might be moving on, out of the grey post-war world, even in suburban north-west London: the arrival in our house of a TV and a washing machine, and the arrival in Pinner

High Street of a coffee bar, which seemed unimaginably exotic – until a restaurant that served Chinese food opened in nearby Harrow. But they happened slowly and gradually, a few years between them. Rock 'n' roll wasn't like that. It seemed to come out of nowhere, so fast that it was hard to

take in how completely it had altered everything. One minute, pop music meant good old Guy Mitchell and 'Where Will The Dimple Be?' and Max Bygraves singing about toothbrushes. It was polite and schmaltzy and aimed

at parents, who didn't want to hear anything too exciting or shocking: they'd

had enough of that to last them a lifetime living through a war. The next, it meant Jerry Lee Lewis and Little Richard, these guys who sounded unintelligible, like they were foaming at the mouth when they sang and who your parents hated. Even my mum, the Elvis aficionado, bailed out when Little Richard showed up. She thought 'Tutti Frutti' was just a terrible noise.

Rock and roll was like a bomb that wouldn't stop going off: a series of explosions that came so thick and fast it was hard to work out what was happening. Suddenly, there seemed to be one incredible record after another.

'Hound Dog', 'Blue Suede Shoes', 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On', 'Long Tall Sally', 'That'll Be The Day', 'Roll Over Beethoven', 'Reet Petite'. I had

to get a Saturday job to keep up. Luckily, Mr Megson at Victoria Wine was looking for someone to help out in the back of the shop, putting empty beer bottles in crates and stacking them up. I think there was a vague idea of my saving up some money, but I should have realized that idea was doomed to failure from the start: Victoria Wine was next door to another record shop. Mr Megson might as well have just put the ten bob he paid me straight into their till and cut out the middleman. It was an early example of what turned out to be a lifelong attitude to shopping: I'm just not very good at keeping

money in my pocket if there's something I want to buy.

Sixty years on, it's hard to explain how revolutionary and shocking rock and roll seemed. Not just the music: the whole culture it represented, the clothes and the films and the attitude. It felt like the first thing that teenagers

really owned, that was aimed exclusively at us, that made us feel different from our parents, that made us feel we could *achieve* something. It's also hard to explain the extent to which the older generation despised it. Take every example of moral panic pop music has provoked since – punk and gangster rap, mods and rockers and heavy metal – then add them all together

and double it: that's how much outrage rock and roll caused. People fucking *hated* it. And no one hated it more than my father. He obviously disliked the music itself – he liked Frank Sinatra – but more than that, he hated its social impact, he thought the whole thing was morally wrong: 'Look at the way they dress, the way they act, swivelling their hips, showing their dicks. You are *not* to get involved.' If I did, I was going to turn into something called a wide boy. A wide boy, in case you don't know, is an old British term for a kind of petty criminal – a confidence trickster, someone who does a bit of wheeler-dealing or runs the odd scam. Presumably already alive to the

thought that I might go off the rails thanks to my inability to eat celery in the

correct way, he resolutely believed that rock and roll was going to result in my utter degradation. The mere mention of Elvis or Little Richard would set

him off on an angry lecture in which my inevitable transformation into a wide

boy figured heavily: one minute I'd be happily listening to 'Good Golly Miss

Molly', the next thing you knew, I was apparently going to be fencing stolen

nylons or duping people into playing Find-the-Lady on the mean streets of Pinner.

There didn't seem much danger of that happening to me – there are Benedictine monks wilder than I was as a teenager – but my father was taking no risks. By the time I started at Pinner County Grammar School in 1958, you could see the way people dressed was changing, but I was expressly forbidden from wearing anything that made me look like I had some connection to rock and roll. Keith Francis was cutting a dash in a pair of winkle-picker shoes that had pointed toes so long the ends of them seemed

to arrive in class several minutes before he did. I was still dressed like a

miniature version of my father. My shoes were, depressingly, the same length

as my feet. The closest I got to sartorial rebellion was my prescription

glasses, or rather, how much I wore my prescription glasses. They were only

supposed to be used for looking at the blackboard. Labouring under the

demented misapprehension that they made me look like Buddy Holly, I wore

them all the time, completely ruining my eyesight in the process. Then I had to wear them all the time.

My failing eyesight also had unexpected consequences when it came to sexual exploration. I can't remember the exact circumstances in which my dad caught me masturbating. I think I was attempting to dispose of the evidence rather than engaged in the act itself, but I do remember I wasn't as mortified as I should have been, largely because I didn't really know what I was doing. I was a real late developer when it came to sex. I wasn't really interested in it at all until I was well into my twenties, although I made an impressively concerted effort to make up for lost time after that. But at school, I'd listen to my friends talking about it, and it would just leave me really bemused: 'Yeah, I took her to the cinema, got a bit of tit.' How? Why?

What was that supposed to mean?

So I think what I was doing was more about experiencing a pleasant sensation rather than a frantic expression of my burgeoning sexuality. Either way, when my dad caught me, he came out with the well-worn line about how if I kept Doing That, I would go blind. Obviously, boys across the country were given exactly the same warning, realized it was a load of rubbish and blithely ignored it. I, on the other hand, found it preying on my mind. What if it was true? I'd already damaged my eyesight with my misguided attempt to look like Buddy Holly; maybe this would finish it off. I

decided it was better not to take the risk. While plenty of musicians will tell you that Buddy Holly had a massive impact on their lives, I'm probably the only musician that can say he inadvertently stopped me wanking, unless Holly happened to walk in on The Big Bopper doing it while they were on tour or something.

But despite all the rules about clothes and warnings about my sure-fire descent into criminality, it was too late for my dad to tell me not to get involved in rock and roll. I was already in it up to my neck. I saw *Loving You*

and *The Girl Can't Help It* at the cinema. I started going to see live shows. A

big crowd from school headed up to the Harrow Granada every week: me,

Keith, Kaye Midlane, Barry Walden and Janet Richie were the most devoted,

regular members, along with a guy called Michael Johnson, who was the only

person I'd met who seemed just as obsessed as me about music. Sometimes, he even seemed to know things I didn't. A couple of years later, it was he who came to school brandishing a copy of 'Love Me Do' by The Beatles, whoever they were, claiming that they were going to be the biggest thing since Elvis. I thought that was laying it on a bit thick until he played it to me,

when I decided he might have a point: another musical obsession was sparked.

A ticket for the Granada was two and sixpence or five bob if you wanted the posh seats. Either felt like good value, because they packed the shows with singers and bands. You would see ten artists in a night: two songs from each until the headlining act, who would do four or five. Everybody seemed to play there, sooner or later. Little Richard, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis, Eddie Cochran, Johnny And The Hurricanes. If by any chance someone declined to grace the Harrow Granada with their presence, you could get the tube up to London: that's where I saw Cliff Richard And The Drifters at the Palladium, before his backing band changed their name to The Shadows.

Back in the suburbs, other, smaller venues started putting on bands: the South

Harrow British Legion, the Kenton Conservative Club. You could easily see two or three gigs a week, as long as you had the money. The funny thing is, I

can't recall ever seeing a bad gig, or coming home disappointed, although some of the shows must have been terrible. The sound must have been dreadful. I'm pretty certain that the South Harrow British Legion in 1960 wasn't in possession of a PA system capable of fully conveying the brutal, feral power of rock and roll.

And when my dad wasn't around, I played Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis songs on the piano. They were my real idols. It wasn't just their style of playing, although that was fabulous: they played with such aggression, like

they were assaulting the keyboard. It was the way they stood up while they played, the way they kicked the stool and jumped on the piano. They made playing the piano seem as visually exciting and sexy and outrageous as playing the guitar or being a vocalist. I'd never realized it could be any of those things before.

I was inspired enough to play a few gigs at local youth clubs, with a band called The Corvettes. It was nothing serious; the other members were all still

at school too – they went to Northwood, the local secondary modern – and it

only lasted a few months: most of the gigs we played, we got paid in Coca-Cola. But suddenly, I had an idea what I wanted to do with my life and it didn't involve my father's plans for me, which centred around either joining the RAF or working in a bank. I would never have dared say it aloud, but I quietly decided he could stick both those plans up his arse. Maybe rock and roll had changed me in the rebellious way Dad feared after all.

Or maybe we never really had anything in common, except football. All the happy childhood memories of my dad are related to that: he came from a

family of football fanatics. Two of his nephews were professional players, both for Fulham in south-west London – Roy Dwight and John Ashen. As a treat, he would take me to watch them from the touchline at Craven Cottage,

in the days when Jimmy Hill was their inside right and Bedford Jezzard was their highest scorer. Even off the pitch, Roy and John seemed like incredibly

glamorous figures to me; I was always slightly in awe when I met them. After

his career ended, John became a very astute businessman with a thing for American cars – he'd turn up to visit us in Pinner with his wife, Bet, parking

an unreal-looking Cadillac or a Chevrolet outside the house. And Roy was a fantastic player, a right-winger who transferred to Nottingham Forest. He played for them in the 1959 FA Cup Final. I watched it at home on TV, with a supply of chocolate eggs I'd saved from Easter in anticipation of this momentous event. I didn't eat the chocolate so much as cram it in my mouth

in a state of hysteria. I couldn't believe what was happening on the screen.

After ten minutes, Roy scored the opening goal. He was already on the verge

of a call-up for England. Now he'd surely sealed his fate: my cousin – *an actual relative of mine* – was going to play for England. It seemed as unbelievable as John's taste in cars. Fifteen minutes later, they were carrying

him off on a stretcher. He'd broken his leg in a tackle and *that* was what sealed his fate. His football career was basically over. He tried, but he was never the same player again. He ended up becoming a PE teacher at a boys' school in south London.

My dad's team were the substantially less glamorous and awe-inducing Watford. I was six when he first took me to see them play. They were toiling

away at the bottom of something called the Third Division South, which was

as low as you could get in the football league without being thrown out entirely. In fact, not long before I started going to Watford games, they had played so badly that they actually had been thrown out of the football league;

they were allowed to stay after applying for re-election. Their ground at Vicarage Road seemed to tell you all you needed to know about the team. It only had two very old, very rickety, very small covered stands. It doubled as

a greyhound racing track. If I'd had any sense, I would have taken one look at

it, considered Watford's recent form, and opted to support a team that could actually play football. I could have saved myself twenty years of almost unmitigated misery. But football doesn't work like that, or at least it shouldn't. It's in your blood: Watford were my dad's team, therefore Watford

were my team.

And besides, I didn't care about the ground, or the hopelessness of the team, or the freezing cold. I loved it all straight away. The thrill of seeing live

sport for the first time, the excitement of getting the train to Watford and walking through the town to the ground, the newspaper sellers that came round at half-time and told you the scores in other games, the ritual of always

standing in the same spot on the terraces, an area by the Shrodells Stand called The Bend. It was like taking a drug to which you instantly became addicted. I was as obsessive about football as I was about music: when I wasn't compiling my chart of charts in my bedroom, I was cutting football league ladders out of my comics, sticking them to my wall and making sure the scores on them were completely up to date. It's one addiction I've never shaken, because I've never wanted to, and it was hereditary, passed on to me by my dad.

When I was eleven, my piano teacher had put me forward for the Royal Academy of Music in central London. I passed the exam, and for the next five years that was my Saturday: studying classical music in the morning, Watford in the afternoon. I preferred the latter to the former. At the time, the Royal Academy of Music seemed to smell of fear. Everything about it was intimidating: the huge, imposing Edwardian building on Marylebone Road, its august history of turning out composers and conductors, the fact that anything that wasn't classical music was expressly forbidden. It's completely

different today – whenever I go there now, it's a really joyful place; the students are encouraged to go off and do pop or jazz or their own writing as

well as their classical training. But back then, even talking about rock and roll

at the Royal Academy would have been sacrilege, like turning up to church and telling the vicar that you're really interested in worshipping Satan.

Sometimes the Royal Academy was fun. I had a great teacher called

Helen Piena, I loved singing in the choir and I really enjoyed playing Mozart

and Bach and Beethoven and Chopin, the melodic stuff. Other times, it

seemed like a real drag. I was a lazy student. Some weeks, if I'd forgotten to

do my homework, I didn't bother to turn up at all. I'd ring from home,

putting on a voice and saying I was ill, and then – so my mum didn't realize I

was dodging – take the train up to Baker Street. Then I'd go and sit on the

tube. I'd go round and round the Circle Line for three and a half hours,

reading *The Pan Book of Horror Stories* instead of practising Bartók. I knew

I didn't want to be a classical musician. For one thing, I wasn't good enough.

I don't have the hands for it. My fingers are short for a piano player. If you

see a photo of a concert pianist, they've all got hands like tarantulas. And for

another, it just wasn't what I wanted out of music – having everything

regimented, playing the right notes at the right time with the right feeling,
no

room for improvisation.

In a way, it's ironic that I ended up being made a Doctor and an Honorary Member of the Royal Academy years later – I was never going to win an award for star pupil while I was there. But in another way, it isn't ironic at all. I'd never, ever say the Royal Academy was a waste of time for me. I'm really proud to have gone there. I've done benefit gigs and raised money for a

new pipe organ for them; I've toured with the Royal Academy Symphony Orchestra in Britain and America; I pay for eight scholarships there every year. The place was full of people I'd end up working with, years later, when

I became Elton John: the producer Chris Thomas, the arranger Paul

Buckmaster, harpist Skaila Kanga and percussionist Ray Cooper. And what I

learned there seeped into my music: it taught me about collaboration, about chord structures and how to put a song together. It made me interested in writing with more than three or four chords. If you listen to the *Elton John* album, and virtually every album I made afterwards, you can hear the influence of classical music and of the Royal Academy on it somewhere.

It was while I was studying at the Royal Academy that my parents finally

got divorced. In fairness to them, they had tried to make their marriage work,

even though it was obvious they couldn't bear each other; I suspect because they wanted to give me stability. It was completely the wrong thing to do, but

they made an effort. Then, in 1960, my father was posted to Harrogate in Yorkshire, and while he was there, Mum met someone else. And that was the

end of that.

My mum and I moved in with her new partner, Fred, who was a painter and decorator. It was a really hard time financially. Fred was a divorcee too; he had an ex-wife and four children, so money was really tight. We lived in a

horrible flat in Croxley Green, with peeling wallpaper and damp. Fred worked really hard. He did window cleaning and odd jobs on top of his decorating: anything to make sure we had food on the table. It was tough on him and it was tough on my mum. Uncle Reg had been right – there really was a stigma around getting divorced in those days.

But I was so happy they'd got divorced. The daily friction of my mum and dad being together was gone. Mum had got what she wanted – rid of my

father – and, for a while at least, it seemed to change her. She was happy, and

that happiness trickled down to me. There were fewer moods, less criticism.

And I really liked Fred. He was generous and big-hearted and easy-going.
He

saved up and got me a drop-handlebar bike. He thought it was funny when I started saying his name backwards and calling him Derf, a nickname that stuck. There weren't any more restrictions on what I wore. I started calling Derf my stepdad years before he and Mum got married.

Best of all, Derf liked rock and roll. He and Mum were really supportive of my music career. I suppose there was an added incentive for my mum, because she knew that encouraging me would infuriate my father, but, for a while at least, she seemed to be my biggest fan. And Derf got me my first paying gig, as a pianist in the Northwood Hills Hotel, which wasn't a hotel at

all, it was a pub. Derf was having a pint there when he learned from the landlord that their regular pianist had quit, and suggested they give me a try.
I

would play everything I could think of. Jim Reeves songs, Johnnie Ray, Elvis

Presley, 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On'. Al Jolson numbers: they loved Al Jolson. But not as much as they loved old British pub songs that everyone could sing along to: 'Down At The Old Bull And Bush', 'Any Old Iron', 'My