

SUMMARY

ME

ELTON JOHN



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Summary of “Me” by Elton John

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Me is the official autobiography of Elton John.

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Introduction

If you've ever been in a grocery store (and I'm guessing pretty much everybody has), then you know how tabloid magazines line the aisle on your way to the checkout counter, blasting you with headlines about celebrities as you wait to ring up your items. And whether you're one of those people who couldn't care less about Hollywood gossip or an eager member of the fanclub who's probably going to add that copy of *People* to your cart at the last minute, those little snippets of gossip often give you the impression that you know something about these celebrities or that you're somehow part of their world. But what if you could take a look behind the scenes and separate facts from the overblown headlines? Fortunately, that's what memoirs are for! So, through the course of Elton John's autobiography, we're going to peep behind the star-studded curtain and learn more about the experiences that made him the man he is today.

Elton John's Childhood Did Not Prepare Him for Stardom

Some people have lives that are just predestined for fame. Whether it's being born into the right family-- like North West, for example-- or having the right connections early in life-- Natalie Portman got her start in modeling at the age of 11 after being discovered by a talent scout at a local pizza parlor!-- some people's lives just get off to a great start. That wasn't the case for Elton John, however. Born to working-class parents in London 1947, his early life in subsidized housing was already less than picture-perfect. To say that his parents were abusive would be putting it in the mildest of terms. In fact, Elton's mother was so deliberately and strategically cruel that when actress Bryce Dallas Howard was cast to play his mother in the 2019 biographical musical *Rocketman*, she was so alarmed at the reality of her character's behavior, she almost didn't go through with it. The fact that Elton was potty-trained at the age of two by being beaten with a wire hairbrush only scratches the surface of his mother's atrocities.

But sadly, the line wasn't drawn there at all. His parents' marriage was particularly fraught, prompting Elton to remark in an interview with *The Guardian* that, "They gave every impression of hating each other. My dad was strict and remote and had a terrible temper; my mum was argumentative and prone to dark moods. When they were together, all I can remember are icy silences or screaming rows. The rows were usually about me, how I was being brought up." And that anger and criticism influenced both parents' every interaction with Elton as well. Between his mother's violence and his father abusing him physically or verbally (or both at the same time), young Elton was under harsh scrutiny for every little thing, even down to taking off his school clothes or the way he walked. So, not only was his childhood less than ideal, it was so actively toxic that one wonders how Elton managed to retain any shred of hope or creativity at all!

And although his parents eventually split up, their relationships with their son never evolved to reach a healthy place. His father Stanley went on to remarry and have more children with whom he was a completely different man. Yet, inexplicably, he never demonstrated a shred of love or warmth towards Elton, even going so far as to refuse to see him play live on multiple occasions. Unsurprisingly, he also never apologized for his actions or sought reconciliation. So, when he died in 1991, he had not spoken to his son in years and Elton-- understandably-- declined to attend his funeral. But perhaps what's even more surprising is the fact that Elton chose to stay in touch with his mother, even though she continued to be controlling and toxic long after he moved out of her home.

So far from being supportive or proud of his success, Sheila John seemed to focus primarily on how Elton's career could benefit her. Sadly, this was rather unsurprising given that she had a long-standing history of dismissing her son's talent, even when Elton manifested a remarkable aptitude for music at the age of 3. Instead, she remained consumed by the issue of money and how Elton could spend more of it on her. In fact, she even went so far as to dig through her adult son's shopping receipts, call him out on social media for buying gifts for his friends, and accuse Elton's husband David Furnish of destroying her relationship with her son. Elton has since remarked in interviews that, of course, she did a great job of that all by herself and that he doesn't believe her anger stemmed from homophobia, but rather a sense of resentment towards David because of her desire to be the primary person of importance in his life.

So, sadly, from this chapter, we can see that Elton John's childhood was not only unconventional, it was deeply traumatic. And unfortunately, it's also readily apparent that stardom can't fix all the problems in your life. Because the painful truth is that sometimes, you can win the admiration of the world and still never get your parents' love and approval.

When Life is Dark, Turn to Music

Fortunately, however, there was a bright spot in Elton's childhood and that was his love for music. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, the artist displayed an impressive talent for music at a very early age, including his ability to play songs on the piano from memory after hearing them only once! Many parents would have instantly recognized that their son was very gifted and sought to cultivate this talent through tutors and music classes and positive reinforcement. But Elton's family offered none of that and so, remarkably, he nurtured his talent on his own.

And as is the case with many gifted artists, the music Elton listened to as a child informed his future sense of style. After becoming enamored with a photograph of Elvis Presley that he saw in a magazine at the age of nine, Elton knew he had to learn more about the singer. Remarking that he thought Presley looked and sang like an alien, young Elton was blown away by a style so different from anything he'd encountered in suburban London. Deciding from that moment on that rock and roll was going to be his thing, nine-year-old Elton embarked on a path that would forever shape his legendary sense of style.

Unfortunately, however, his stylistic awakening only increased the tension in his home. Even though their primary parental functions seemed to be limited to physical and verbal abuse, his parents must have-- on some level-- been concerned for their son's welfare because they, along with everyone else in the 1950s, wholeheartedly subscribed to the belief that rock and roll music would damn young people's souls. And even though that might seem hard to imagine now, the reality is that every generation cycles through their own version of a moral panic; it's just a different worrying fad each time, many of which are ultimately harmless. So, despite his father's concerns that Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly would drive his son into an amoral life of crime, Elton pursued his love of music in secret.

His rock and roll obsession did generate some rebellion, however, because it motivated him to abandon his piano classes. Although Elton had previously been very proud of his acceptance into the Royal Academy of Music, willingly braving a gruelling entrance exam and a long journey to his classes every day, his new idols altered his perspective. No longer content to study classical music, young Elton sometimes skipped his prestigious classes entirely and rode the tube all day, dreaming of playing rock and roll.

That Moment When You're an International Star

If you're an aspiring artist, singer, or actress, you've probably daydreamed about what it would feel like to stare in wonder as thousands of people scream your name and your face is being broadcast on the sides of buses or the TVs in Times Square. But Elton John actually knows what that feels like-- and it feels every bit as surreal as you'd imagine. Because after his first album was released in 1970, he rose to international acclaim almost overnight and started his first tour in the United States. When he arrived in Los Angeles on the very first day, he found a bus outside with his face on it and a big banner screaming, "ELTON JOHN IS HERE!"

But even though the world seemed prepared for him to be a star, Elton wasn't too sure he was ready. It all felt unbelievable when he played the legendary Troubadour nightclub and when the icons of rock and roll that he'd always dreamed of meeting were suddenly lining up to meet him. He couldn't believe it was really happening when he started rubbing shoulders with people like Neil Diamond and the members of The Beach Boys, all of whom were ready to welcome him to the rock and roll hall of fame. Reflecting on that moment with the benefit of time and maturity, Elton remarks that perhaps it all felt so surreal because the world seemed to view him as an instant success, but in reality, his big break did not happen overnight.

In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Starting at the age of 15, Elton had worked long and hard to be discovered and nothing about his early gigs in local pubs had prepared him for international acclaim. During his pub gigs, young Elton played a broken-down piano and received tips in a pint glass before ducking out the window in a panic when the patrons got too drunk and he-- along with every other inhabitant-- started to fear for his life! But even once he said goodbye to near-death experiences, his future opportunities weren't much better. When he joined a local band called Bluesology at the age of 17, he didn't have to climb out of windows, but he

also didn't receive any attention, despite the fact that the band frequently traveled throughout the UK looking for opportunities.

This disappointment motivated him to pursue freelance work as a musician, so he started taking jobs wherever he could, even when that meant recording covers of hit songs that provided more embarrassment than a platform for showcasing his talent. One of his most memorable jobs included being asked to sing "Young, Gifted, and Black," and as you might imagine, a white boy from London isn't necessarily the best person to cover this song!

In another similarly wacky gig, he was asked to sing like Robin Gibb from the Bee Gees, and if you've ever heard the Bee Gees, you know that Gibb's range and Elton's could not be more opposite! But he desperately took the work anyway, even though the only way he could manage to recreate the sound was by strangling himself as he sang! One thing's for sure, though--these weird formative experiences prepared Elton for a colorful and crazy future.

One Chance Meeting Can Change Your Life

Many great artists have a story about how early disappointments contributed to the establishment of their successful career and Elton John is no different. For example, Elvis Presley was told that he was too weird and no one would ever want to listen to him. One record label decided to pass on Taylor Swift, adding insult to injury by telling her she couldn't sing. And in Elton John's case, that pivotal moment of rejection occurred in 1967 when he had his first big audition. If he was successful, he would get signed to a record label and have the opportunity to finally be paid for performing his own songs. But unfortunately, he bombed the audition so spectacularly that by the end, he couldn't even keep up hope that maybe they would somehow still say yes.

But even though the news was crushing at the time, Elton now knows that if he hadn't failed that audition, he would never have gotten his big break. That's because this failure gave him the opportunity to meet a man named Bernie Taupin who-- as cliché as it sounds-- would change his life forever. But in fact, he didn't actually meet Bernie, he met his work when, on his way out, the music producer picked up an envelope and offered it to Elton without explanation. When he looked inside, he found that it contained song lyrics written by another young man with dreams very much like his own. The only difference was that Bernie Taupin was a gifted lyricist while Elton was a talented musician. And when they met in person, they discovered that this made them the perfect pair. Their personalities were also similar and they complemented each other so brilliantly that that first meeting led to a partnership that would last over 50 years.

In fact, it was that partnership that created Elton's big break. Because when Bernie dreamed up the lyrics to "Your Song" one morning on a whim and Elton composed the accompanying music in a shocking 15 minutes, the demo led to a 6,000 pound album deal from a record label. That album ultimately became the Emmy-nominated Elton John album that kicked off his break.

The Struggles of Success

When many people dream of becoming famous, it's with the expectation that stardom will solve all their problems and the hope that, with fame, money, and throngs of adoring fans, they'll finally feel happy and complete. But as Elton John knows all too well, nothing could be further from the truth. Because as proud as he was of his success and as much as he was in love with a life of playing music, deep down, he still felt like that sad, scared little boy who had been rejected by his parents. And unfortunately, that insecurity dogged him throughout his successful career, leaving him in such turmoil that he turned to drugs, alcohol, and food to cope.

Cocaine and alcohol eliminated his anxiety, leaving him happy, uninhibited, and free to create. But unfortunately, it removed his inhibitions so completely that it also made him a nightmare to be around. Drunk and high, Elton was prone to unpredictable fits and destructive ages which he wouldn't remember afterwards. These episodes led him to do things he later greatly regretted, like destroying his personal assistant's hotel room before passing out or ordering a random tram carriage for his garden for no reason. And sadly, his insecurity also caused him to develop a tumultuous relationship with food. Because although he loved eating, he was deeply scared of becoming fat, and this drove him down a bulimic path of bingeing and purging which also filled him with pain and regret.

His wake-up call arrived in July of 1990 when, after locking himself in his house with nothing but whisky, drugs, and pornography-- and the commitment to do another line of cocaine every 5 minutes. After this immensely self-destructive cycle, Elton thankfully realized that he was destroying himself unnecessarily and committed to stop. So, he checked himself into a rehab facility in Chicago. And even though his stay in rehab got off to a rocky start, he ultimately found that it was a positive experience and even one for which he was grateful. In rehab, he was able to relinquish the pressures of stardom and fame and simply work through his issues as himself, free to be nothing more than an ordinary guy who struggled.

Today, he's still sober and he uses his experience to help others in need, even personally encouraging other stars like Rufus Wainwright to seek help and go to rehab.

Final Summary

We know Elton John as the musical genius who's gifted us with musical moments that entire generations can cherish for a lifetime. But his autobiography reminds us that behind the glamor and the stardom lurks a painful reality much like the struggles many of us face. This only makes him more relatable, however, as we remember that even superstars battle anxiety, addiction, and the scars of a traumatic childhood.

Fortunately, however, his story is also a reminder that anything can be overcome with enough willpower, commitment, and the comfort of music. And finally, from Elton John's story, we can also learn that even though a new star's success might appear to have happened overnight, it's more often the result of years of practice and hard work.



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