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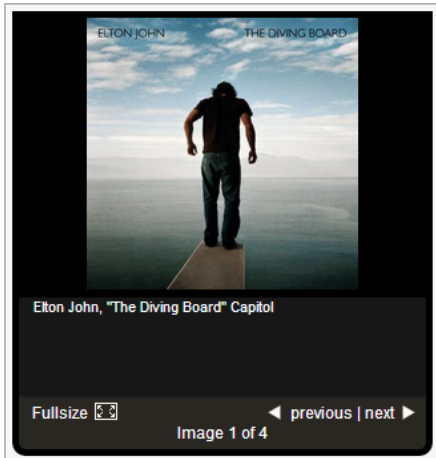
ALBUM REVIEWS

Elton John grows as a songwriter with leap from a bountiful 'Diving Board' on new album

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POP

Elton John, *The Diving Board* (Capitol). * * * *



Elton John has alternated handles "Rocket Man" and "Captain Fantastic" for decades, but on *The Diving Board* his 30th studio album, he should claim "Piano Man" from Billy Joel.

John has never made an album with as strong an emphasis on his piano playing as he has on his latest set. *The Diving Board* strips the musical accompaniment that sometimes overshadowed his main instrument to a core trio of piano, bass and drums, with only a dusting of guitar or warm brass underpinning some tunes.

Since 2001's *Songs From the West Coast*, John has made a concentrated effort to write songs that cut deeper than old hits

like *Bennie and the Jets*. He has said that after 59 Top 40 hits in consecutive years between 1970 and 1999, a record-setting string, he no longer expects to get on the radio. So he has stopped writing catchy three- and four-minute pop songs for the format. At 66, John, whose voice has deepened with rougher edges, has said the reflective, atmospheric and stark *The Diving Board* is precisely the kind of album a man his age should be making. Don't climb its ladder expecting to find a *Honky Cat* poised to make a splash in six-inch heels.

At the same time, faithful fans will recognize stylistic cues that were always laced into his more traditional '70s pop albums like *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy* and *Blue Moves* that led to new tunes like *A Town Called Jubilee* or *Voyeur*.

The Diving Board reunites John with producer T Bone Burnett, who was behind the boards for *The Union*, John's critically acclaimed collaboration in 2010 with pianist Leon Russell. *The Diving Board* boasts a sharper focus than that album, better and richer songs that are more personal. Burnett's rustic, gauzy productions, such as his Grammy-winning *O Brother Where Art Thou?* soundtrack and his work with Robert Plant and Alison Krauss (as well as *The Union*) can feel like museum pieces, meant to be praised and collected, but seldom played. Not so *The Diving Board*, which rewards repeat listens. On the semi-classical first single *Home Again* or the lilting ballad *The New Fever Waltz* John has written some of his loveliest, if subtlest, melodies yet.

As on *The Union*, John returns to the spare, Americana- and country-flavored bluesy narrative tunes of 1970's *Tumbleweed Connection* and 1971's *Madman Across the Water*, before he plugged in the electric boots and mohair suits for a weird and wonderful ride where hits kept coming and the excesses nearly killed him.

"If you break some bones on landing/You know you're built to last," he sings on the honky-tonk gospel number *Take This Dirty Water*. Bernie Taupin, John's primary lyricist since 1967, serves his mouthpiece well. John's a better, more precise singer today than he was in his *Madman* period. Taupin's lyrics are at their most evocative on the steady-rolling pop number, *Can't Stay Alone Tonight* ("You're the last stretch on the highway/And that open stretch of road/You're the diner in my rear view/A cup of coffee getting cold") and the wistful *Home Again*, which seems to sum up the challenge *The Diving Board* strives toward and achieves: "We all dream of leaving/But wind up in the end/Spending all our time trying to get back home again."

<http://www.miamiherald.com/2013/09/20/v-fullstory/3639461/elton-john-grows-as-a-songwriter.html>