

'Lyricist? I think of myself as a storyteller'

Bernie Taupin, songwriting partner of Elton John, tells Mick Brown about their 28th album together, and why he'll never return to England

After more than 40 years as one half of one of the most successful songwriting partnerships in British musical history, Bernie Taupin says that he now considers writing lyrics simply as "a hobby".

At his ranch in the hill country above Santa Barbara in California where he has lived for the past 20 years, Taupin spends most of his time pursuing other passions.

He paints, cooks and reads. And from a small study above his studio – decorated with a poster for *The Wild Bunch*, a fine pencil drawing of a young Taupin by Don Bachardy, and a photograph of Leonard Nimoy signed "to a fellow Rocket Man" – produces a weekly programme, *American Roots Radio*, for the American satellite station Sirius, playing an eclectic mixture of the traditional blues, country and rock 'n' roll that has always been his abiding musical obsession.

It is a matter of principle for Taupin that all the music he plays is from his own collection.

In the early days of his partnership with Elton John, when Taupin was living at John's mother's house in Pinner

– when he was earning £5 a week, and Elton £10, "because he sang" – the two friends were both in the habit of spending every available penny on albums. Elton, ever fastidious, would sheath his albums in clear plastic sleeves and file them alphabetically in shelves ranged along the bedroom wall.

Taupin was no less fastidious. He has 50,000 albums filed and boxed upstairs in his home. Selected items are brought down to the large living room to play on his hi-fi. On a coffee table there are copies of vintage albums by Lightnin' Hopkins and Junior Wells – in clear plastic sleeves. On the wall are photographs of Howlin' Wolf, taken on the European folk and blues tours in the early Sixties. "I was living in the wrong place and too young to see them," he says, sounding genuinely peeved. "But I've got them all on DVD and watch them every month or so."

There is a sense in which Taupin has always felt more American than British. As a child, growing up in the Lincolnshire village of Owmby-by-Spital he was obsessed with cowboy movies; his first serious musical love was Marty Robbins's *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Ballads*. Frontier and Civil War imagery had infiltrated his lyrics even before he first set foot in the country, when Elton made his American debut at the Troubador in Los Angeles in 1970. "When I got here," Taupin says, "it really was a

case of thinking 'I've come home'."

He has now lived in America for almost 40 years, and it is 10 since he was last in Britain. He has no desire to go back.

"The England I remember doesn't really exist any more. The last time I went there I definitely felt like a stranger in a strange land." The ranch, where he lives with his wife and two young children, is set on 30 acres in idyllically beautiful countryside, miles from the nearest town. Taupin is a man who values his privacy, and his solitude. "The more people I meet, the more I like my dogs, as they say." (He has five).

Taupin bought the property 10 years ago, to indulge his passion for horses. "I wanted to be a cowboy. I wanted to really just bury myself in that whole lifestyle, not as a plaything. If you live in this area, you're going to grow grapes or raise horses or cattle. You don't come here for any other reason."

He became expert in "cutting" – a rodeo event where the rider "cuts" a steer away from the rest of the herd – regularly competing in rodeos and competitions across California and down to the Mexican border against professional cow-punchers. (He also co-owned a bucking bull named Little Yellow Jacket, which was recently retired as an



unprecedented three-time world champion.)

"One of the things I liked about it," he says, "was that nobody knew, or cared who I was. And the adrenalin rush of those two minutes, there's nothing like it."

But age and injury have put paid to the cutting; the horses have gone and the stables and ranch-hand bunkhouses are empty. "Horses and restaurants – they're both a bottomless money pit,"

he says with a sigh. "And I've tried them both."

"He is a gentle and unassuming person who has perfected the technique of remaining anonymous in the crowd," is how the director Bryan Forbes described a youthful, long-haired Taupin in a 1972 television documentary. "The Cartier-Bresson, as it were, of the pop world... Success has singed, but not burnt him..."

"Oh God, bless his heart, but that was the most pretentious..." Taupin laughs. "Of course, at the time I had no idea who Cartier-Bresson was."

The youth, and the hair, have gone. Taupin is a stocky, well-muscled man with close cropped hair, dressed down in a T-shirt and jeans, the only sign of ostentation his designer spectacles with silver hinges, shaped like the head of a guitar.

But he remains gentle and unassuming; singed, but not burnt. In their first flush of fame, he would often join Elton on tours: the limousines, the bodyguards, the parties... "Oh God, I got that all out of my system real quickly. I wouldn't want that now for all the tea in China." He laughs, gesturing, to one of his dogs, splayed out in a chair. "That's my bodyguard now."

In the years since the first Elton John album in 1969, he and Elton have made 28 albums together. (Elton has made two, *A Single Man* (1978) and *Victim of Love* (1979), with other lyricists). The frenetic output of the early period – seven albums in the first five years – has somewhat relaxed. It is three years since their last record, a collaboration with Leon Russell, *The Union*.

Now comes a new album, *The Diving Board*, and Taupin has been indulging his "hobby" again.

Like *The Union*, it has been produced by T-Bone Burnett, and was recorded "live" in the studio giving the album a tight, uncluttered and naturalistic feel that compounds *The Union's* return to form (see review, overleaf).

"There have definitely been periods that weren't so good," Taupin says. "In the late Eighties and early Nineties we made some albums that, quite honestly, were crap records. There was a certain amount of distance between Elton and me. I don't mean in our relationship; I just think we were floating in different spheres. We weren't communicating enough, and complacency set in."

"But I'm really proud of what we're doing now. I feel that we've refound our footing, and our passion."

Over the years Taupin and Elton have developed a practised, if idiosyncratic, working relationship. They seldom see each other – Elton has visited Taupin's ranch only once in all the years he's been living there; but communicate frequently.

When Elton has a new album in mind, he gets in touch. Taupin then spends two or three weeks writing lyrics, accompanying himself on guitar, which he then emails to Elton. "I used to have to fax them. It took a long time to drag this guy kicking and screaming into the 21st century, and I'm not sure he's mastered that yet. I'm sure he has somebody print them out. But he's got plenty of people to do it."

Elton, he says, writes everything in the studio: he never practises piano, and never plays for his own amusement.

"He's very methodical in that the only time he ever plays is when he plays live and when he's in the studio writing and recording. They set up a booth for him with a piano and record everything he works on. 'We'll sit down, and I might say, 'I kind of see this as a Gram Parsons kind of song'. Or 'there's a very Ray Charles feel to this'. He likes bullet points. But then he'll go off on a tangent and take it totally somewhere else."

"But I never argue with his melodic stylings because the guy is a genius as far as I'm concerned."

Elton, famously, can write a song in as little as five minutes, and dispatch three in a day.

"I'm not sure that's something you should tell people," Taupin says with a laugh. "Because they tend to think you should spend longer on it and maybe you can improve it; but that's not his modus operandi, so I'm not going to argue with it."

Taupin dislikes the term lyricist. "It's such a strange word. I think of myself as a story teller."

The songs on *The Diving Board* include a meditation on old soldiers, inspired by his father, who fought against the Germans in West Africa and the Japanese in Burma; and a vignette of life in a Mexican town. *The Ballad of Blind Tom* was inspired by the true story of Blind Tom Wiggins, an idiot-savant piano player who went from being a house-slave to performing for crowned heads in Europe. While *A Town Called Jubilee* is vintage Taupin Frontier-Americana.

"Lilly pulled a horseshoe from a pile of junk/ Said 'I'm gonna keep this good luck piece of iron inside my trunk/ The boy just whispered 'OK' and grabbed his old black dog/ As we piled on in and cut out through late November fog".

"That's a perfect example of how a song just grows from the first line," he says. "I just got the image of a farm being sold, and all the junk lying around, and the first stanza just came to me in one thought, as it were."

"*Rocket Man* was the same thing. 'She packed my bags last night preflight, zero hour, 9am. And I'm gonna be high as a kite by then...' I remember, I was driving to my parents' house in England and not having anything to write it down, and just driving like crazy to get there before I forgot it."

He resists any kind of analysis of his songs. It was Paul Simon, he says, who remarked on the common occurrence of people venturing a meaning of a song which was not at all what Simon had in mind when he wrote it – but was often much more interesting.

"I remember when we did *Madman Across the Water* people were saying it was about Richard Nixon. It had never crossed my mind for a minute, but I thought that was a



fabulous idea.

“For me, explaining songs is a bit like explaining abstract painting, I don’t think you should.”

It is painting, he says, that now occupies “80 per cent” of his time. He would always travel with a sketch book, and pastels, but moving to the ranch, and converting an old racquetball court into a studio enabled him, as he puts it,

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Vivid blocks of colour: Taupin's paintings sell for up to £16,000

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“to start throwing a lot of paint around”.

In the studio, shelves of pots and brushes stand beside racks of canvasses. A small but nice, splashy, Pollock-esque abstract rests against the wall. He laughs. “That’s by the children...”

Taupin’s paintings are large-scale abstracts in vivid blocks of colour. Hans Hoffman and Rothko were both, as he puts it, “guilty of casting some sort of imaginative spirit on me”. But he has begun to introduce more sculptural elements into his work; he pulls out a new trilogy of paintings based on the blues, dark and brooding, incorporating guitar strings and snatches of lyrics from Lightnin’ Hopkins.

“They’re both coming from the same place of course, but my songs don’t influence my paintings at all. It’s two different worlds. One of the things I like is when I’m writing it’s going to be delivered to someone else to continue it, whereas with painting I’m doing it solely for my own satisfaction.”

A collection of his work has recently been touring American galleries. His paintings sell for up to \$25,000 (£15,900). He leads the way out of the studio. It’s high noon. The bougainvillea is blooming, and the sky is a cloudless blue.

“I used to really dislike the word contentment,” Taupin says, “because I always thought it meant you had nothing more to do. That you’d folded up and died. But as I’ve got older I’ve realised, it has a different connotation. I’m extremely content now.”

Among the songs on *The Diving Board* is one called *Home Again*. “We all dream of leaving, but wind up in the end/ Spending all our time trying to get back home again”.

“My brother Tony listened to the song and sent me an email saying ‘Please tell me you weren’t thinking of Owmbly-by-Spital when you wrote it.’” Taupin laughs.

“I said, no Tony, it’s a state of mind. Owmbly is the last place I’d want to go back to.”

● *The Diving Board* is released on Monday. See review, below





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In sync: Elton and Taupin hit the big time in the Seventies

Partners in rhyme: Bernie Taupin and Elton John have made 28 albums together since 1969. 'The guy is a genius as far as I'm concerned,' says Taupin of his friend

