

France to make Elton's first studio album without an array of session musicians.

"The chateau," says Elton, "had a crumbling splendor and gave us just the atmosphere we wanted. We didn't have to pack everything away at the end of a session and so we could work at night and sleep by day. We had a great little team. Everything was written and recorded very quickly. The album was done in three weeks." The result was "Honky Chateau."

An example of Elton's ready and handsome generosity came in the early part of 1972. Late the previous year, his lawyer had taken him to the new Shaw Theatre in London to see "Good Lads At Heart" — a production by Britain's National Youth Theatre. "The visit turned me on to the theater for the first time," he said later. "I went to the Shaw several times afterwards and was knocked out by its atmosphere and by the efforts of the NYT to provide theater specially for young people." The NYT was seeking financial help at the time and so Elton put on four fund-raising shows at the Shaw — plus a free one for NYT members unable to afford charity prices. His generous efforts raised £3000 (\$8,000) for the NYT.

Suspicious Shoes

Early in April, Elton flew to the States for another tour. His airport arrival at Los Angeles had unexpected results when four pairs of his boots and a pair of his shoes came under suspicion because they had heels seven or eight inches high. Customs agents called a shoemaker to examine them, explaining that: "Shoes with secret compartments are often used to smuggle drugs and jewels." Nothing so sinister was found in Elton's footwear, and rather than throw a tantrum, Elton was characteristically good-humored about the incident. "The star," said an official, "was very cooperative."

It happened that one of Elton's gigs was in Houston, Texas and the link between his latest single, "Rocket Man," taken from "Honky Chateau," and the Apollo 16 mission then in progress didn't need to be spelt out in neon signs. He went to the space center to lunch with Al Warden, Apollo 15 module command pilot, and this time Elton was the one asking for a signed photograph. In the course of the visit Elton and his band spent time in one of the grounded space ships and were at the center at the time of the Apollo 16 splashdown.

After another all-systems-go U.S. tour, Elton returned to Britain. Asked

to explain how his success in the States had started, he replied, "I realized I had to do more than sit at the piano and sing, so I wore a pink lamé suit and sometimes I put on Mickey Mouse ears. But the real pay-off was when I stood on the piano and wiggled my bum!"

"Honky Chateau" and "Rocket Man" were hits on both sides of the Atlantic, but even as the two records were gathering momentum, Elton and his team were back at the chateau. He had had only a short break in Britain before going to France. He was tired but determined to press on. "We went to the chateau in the June with only one song," Elton said later. "Bernie was in America and his lyrics started coming in by post and I just sat down and wrote the music. I really enjoyed doing this despite being in bad health and on the verge of a crack-up. The chateau was really conducive to work because you couldn't yield to temptation and just drive to London. There were no phone calls because the French telephone system was so bad. You were in the middle of nowhere so you just stayed put for three weeks and did what you had to do."

Elton was desperately tired and avoided a complete crack-up by taking a long-planned and much-needed holiday at Malibu Beach in July. "When I got off the plane," he recalled, "people said to me, 'Hey! You're having a nervous breakdown.' The news had got there that fast. I had glandular fever and was on the verge of a crack-up. I was getting moody and shouting at people, personality-wise I was unbearable. I'd had bouts of exhaustion before but had never been in a nervous state like that."

Fame and Fortune

But whatever the pressures, Elton would never have gone willingly into a long seclusion. Nor is he likely to do so. "Fame can make you into a withdrawn case," he once said. "Look at George Harrison, Dylan, Presley, Lennon and Cassidy. They rarely go out. I love success, if I didn't enjoy it, what would be the point? But I know a lot of stars who don't get enjoyment from it and are really miserable. I love going out, I'm not going to be a hermit for anyone. Mind you, when you get plagued by autograph hunters in the middle of a meal, that's a bit of an aggravation." On another occasion he declared, "Sometimes it's a bit of a drag when you go out — always being recognized. You feel like a monkey in a cage. But if you cut yourself off, you start getting paranoid, you have to try

to lead a normal life. Even if you have to sign a hundred autographs when shopping, you have to grin and bear it. You can't tell them to get lost or they might not buy your next record."

One of Elton's first visitors at the rented luxury Malibu mansion in which he was relaxing, was British movie producer Bryan Forbes, who was planning a TV documentary about the star with the working title "Reg." Among his dinner guests during a highly social stay was Groucho Marx. "I was delighted when such a legendary figure accepted my invitation," says Elton. "It was a hot night but I'd been told that as he was old, he would want a log fire burning, so we lit one. For a while before dinner he sat in the lounge talking — wearing his beret and an overcoat. He insisted on calling me John Elton! Most of the time you couldn't tell whether he was serious or poking quiet fun."

Elton Dietrich

Many rock artists have a yen for the history of their own scene but Elton goes much further. "I am very nostalgic — but not just for the '50s," he says. "I'm very much a legend man. I really like legends. That includes those who made their names, retired and became recluses. People like Garbo, Mae West and Groucho are high on my list. So are departed stars like Noel Coward and Laurel and Hardy."

Among legendary stars, Katharine Hepburn has become a special friend and he tells a story about her that is characteristic of the lady. "One day I was sitting at home by the pool waiting for her to come for tea and to have a swim. She came cycling up and I said there was a frog in the pool. 'I'm scared of frogs,' she said. Then she fished the frog out. I asked how she had done it, since she was scared of frogs. She said: 'Character, dear boy, character!'"

There was the time in London when Elton went backstage after watching a Marlene Dietrich show. "I was spell-bound by Marlene," he recalls. "She had such presence. She was mesmeric. When I left the stage door, there were people asking for my autograph. I signed one book and then hurried towards my car — still in a daze. The girl to whom I'd given the autograph chased after me. Shoving her book under my nose she exclaimed, 'Look! You've signed Marlene Dietrich!'"

During his Californian holiday Elton met David Cassidy in Hollywood and found that they got on well together. "David is a nice guy," he said. "Some people may knock him but I think he has a lot of talent." Elton asked David to stay at "Hercules"

when he visited Britain in the late summer of 1972. But the request was politely – and thoughtfully – turned down. Cassidy knew only too well that such a visit was likely to result in the house and the surrounding area being besieged by thousands of hysterical fans.

Elton at the time was preparing for another tour of the States and his disc situation there certainly promised well for it. "Honky Chateau" had hit the top of the album charts and another track from it, "Honky Cat," had followed "Rocket Man" into the best-selling singles.

He had just done a British tour sporting a sliver-striped tail coat, red velvet trousers with knee-high green silk cuffs, lurex socks of varying hues and silver platform boots marked E and J in red. His hair was silver, too. "I'm not the best-looking guy around," he said, "so I like to do humorous things. Mick Jagger can wear anything and look good. My clothes are deliberately stupid. I've always looked so ridiculous, people have had to laugh."

That's Entertainment!

Elton's love of the ridiculous spilled over into the staging of his concerts which were beginning to reflect his passion for the glamor and spectacle of the '30s screen musicals. For this tour he found a kindred spirit of lunacy in "Legs" Larry Smith, a famous member of Britain's Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band, who had tap-danced during the track "Kill Myself" on "Honky Chateau." Elton and Legs had become close friends sharing a common love of showmanship in the high tradition. Legs was brought into the British tour and then into the American one.

Larry's function was hardly to creep on stage and hide in a corner. His first entrance was made during "Kill Myself" – his rig being immense football shoulder pads, short trousers, tap shoes and a crash helmet mounted with a cardboard wedding couple – when he launched into a dazzling tap sequence. His second appearance was made in a French-style mac and black hat, with umbrella; he handed a twin outfit to Elton, who nipped behind a screen to change and the duo then danced and sang "Singing In The Rain" while being showered with glitter dust. To top this spectacular extravaganza and delight the audience even further, a dozen platinum blondes – as if from a Busby Berkeley movie – tapped their way alongside.

Larry Smith later said of Elton: "What he needed was an outlet for this amazing love of showbiz welling up inside him. It needed to get out

because he's so damned good at it. But just in case the proceedings needed further brightening, Legs Larry appeared later in the tour with a bridal veil flowing from the crash helmet and held at the other end by two midgets; after joining in the tap-dance the midgets then ran off, one returning to hand Mr Smith a bouquet.

What was so impressive was that on top of the razzamatazz, Elton and crew gained profuse critical praise for their music. As one reporter wrote after a super-colossal show before 22,000 at Los Angeles Forum: "Just before midnight Elton and the band finally fell off stage. Soaked with sweat and elated beyond any pitch they had known before, the only reaction they could give was to fall into each others arms and weep."

Jamaica Jamboree

The second chateau-made album had been titled "Don't Shoot Me, I'm Only The Piano Player" and "Crocodile Rock," a track from it, made the British charts late in 1972. Early in 1973, it was followed by another track "Daniel" and "Crocodile Rock" scored in the States as well. Around the same time, the album itself was a hit both sides of the Atlantic, topping the two charts within three weeks of release.

In the meantime came the recording sessions that never were. Elton had wanted the chateau during February but it was to be closed for that month. He then thought Jamaica would be a delightful setting and Gus Dudgeon flew out to check over the studios there. He reported that the people running them had said they had, or would get, equipment on a par with that at the chateau, and thus reassured Elton and company headed for the Caribbean.

But he found no time to take advantage of the sun, sea and sand that the island had to offer in abundance. Instead he launched into a spate of creativity. "It was great, the way the writing went in Jamaica," he recalls. "I stuck at it in the studio for the first few days while the rest of the party went around the island. Soon I'd finished 20 songs which was unbelievable! We began rehearsing them and two others left over from our previous sessions at the chateau and we got it so we could have gone on stage right away and performed all 22. But then the piano we wanted didn't arrive, nor some of the mikes. We tried recording with what we had but it didn't sound right so we called a meeting and decided to cut our losses. I was sorry things had gone wrong, if they hadn't, we might have got a good sound there."



rate as the world's largest pair of boots. They were extraordinary and gigantic examples of footwear that nearly doubled his height. Performing his scenes in them demanded a generous allowance of guts and daring.

When he had completed the shooting, Elton left in October for a 44-city tour of the States and Canada with Kiki Dee and her band. Again, his tour was to be by the Boeing billed as "the largest, most luxurious and most expensive jetliner in the world." The tour was an astounding success, even by John standards and it is estimated his shows were watched by 750,000 with a total box office of \$5,000,000. As usual top stars flocked to see him. When he returned to Los Angeles for a four-night stand at the 18,700-seat Inglewood Forum, the out-fronters included Liz Taylor, Barbra Streisand, David Cassidy, Diana Ross, Ringo Starr and Harry Nilsson.

John and John

At New York's Madison Square Garden near the end of the tour, John Lennon came on stage to join in three numbers. "Originally," says Elton, "I told John, 'Let's do two numbers. Then you'll have to do a third.' I suggested 'Imagine.' He replied, 'Oh no! Boring. I've done it before. Let's do a rock & roll song.' So I thought of 'I Saw Her Standing There' - first track on the first Beatles' album. And it hadn't been John singing it, but McCartney. John was so knocked out at my suggestion, because he'd not sung the lead before."

On came Lennon to join with Elton on the former Beatle's latest hit, "Whatever Gets You Thru' The Night" and then the spotlight focused on Elton as he went into "Lucy In The Sky" with Lennon joining him on the chorus. Then, in his familiar nasal voice, Lennon told the crowd, "We were trying to think of a number to get me offstage so I can be sick. We came up with this one - written by my fiancé Paul." So Lennon sang "Standing There" with a little help from his friend and left the stage accompanied by hysterical acclaim. The number was such a success that Elton even repeated it in London without Lennon's help.

"For us it was very emotional," said Elton later. "Nobody could believe it. I knew John would be petrified but he really enjoyed it. I was more scared than he was - hoping things would go right for him. I wish he could have

Top: Elton, Bolan and Ringo at the premiere of "Born to Boogie."
Right: Lennon's guest appearance.

