

first time around: "Everywhere throughout your Australian tour you had almost capacity houses and . . . the audiences time and time again gave you incredible receptions. Well, we'd love to have you back because if you judge popularity on record sales then you are one of the most popular artists in this country."⁷¹

So Elton returned, and he and Meldrum resumed their friendship. Elton played tennis courts, racecourses, and soccer grounds, much as he had in 1971, but to far larger crowds. The reaction to these shows, both critically and commercially, was cause for nothing but celebration. Elton's spirits rose after the difficulties he had encountered at the Caribou Ranch, and he not only entertained thousands of Australians but, with Meldrum often by his side, himself, too. He scouted lions at Perth's National Lions Park and, ever the music fan, made sure to attend shows by the enormously popular English group Slade.⁷²

Elton's Australian tour garnered enormous attention. He had taken to opening his shows with "Funeral for a Friend/Love Lies Bleeding" and closing them with an encore of "Crocodile Rock" and "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting." In between, he and the band would play a generous offering of other selections from *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road*, also unveiling "Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me." Not to be heard were many of his "old" songs⁷³; the crowds were there to hear the new hits he was churning out at a seemingly unstoppable pace. And if Elton's pianism had lost some of its adventurousness, no one seemed to notice. One reviewer, writing about the February 21 show at the South Melbourne Football Ground, gushed that Elton's "piano playing is comparable to the venom of Jerry Lee Lewis, with at times the delicate touch of a classical pianist."⁷⁴

In endless competition with his own flamboyance, Elton introduced Australian audiences to at least two new feathered outfits. One was his tribute to Josephine Baker, the American star of European cabaret during the 1920s and 1930s. Comprised of a zippered jacket and trousers, the outfit was green on the right, red on the left, and covered with puffs of matching feathers. Accompanying the suit was an elaborate head covering sporting a sequined green net veil that flowed from a wide-brimmed green hat decorated with red pheasant feathers.

But no costume he wore on that tour could top the black Lurex jumpsuit covered with numerous dangling fluorescent balls. The collar and accompanying skullcap were even more stunning, with additional balls that, in the dark, appeared to hover about the musician's head (but were actually attached to the Lurex with lengthy piano wires). Elton's glasses were usually white-rimmed with tinted lenses, though he did shock the crowds midway through some shows with his blinking "ELTON" spectacles.

Elton drew a record-breaking 14,500 concertgoers to his opening show in Perth. In Melbourne, he played for 19,000. At Sydney's Randwick Racecourse, 25,000 came, the highest grossing crowd ever at that venue. Not long before, David

Cassidy had played the same venue, drawing only 12,500.⁷⁵ The final stop, on February 28, was Auckland, New Zealand, for a show that was shaping up to be another record-breaker.

In Auckland, Elton made an impromptu appearance at a David Cassidy concert on February 26, at which Cassidy, in a fit of competitiveness, shout-sang himself into laryngitis.⁷⁶ The pianist also had two parties to attend on February 27, the night before his only concert there.

Things began unraveling at the first party, held by Festival Records, Elton's regional record distributors. A depletion of wine and liquor led to an argument between Reid and a Festival Records representative named Williams. This argument drew the attention of Williams's friend, a model named Judith Anne Baragwanath. She later claimed she only called Reid a "rotten little bastard," but Reid insisted that she labeled both him and Elton, who was not present for the exchange, a "couple of poofs" ("poof" being a derogatory term for a gay man). Reid, who was not averse to using his fists in support of his gentle client and friend, allegedly punched Baragwanath in the face.

Later, at a party for David Cassidy, Reid heard a report that some men were waiting to pick a fight over the earlier incident. Reid gathered his group and said they would have to leave. Elton made his manager tell him why. When he did, the Pinner pianist quickly reentered the party and, mistaking reporter David Wheeler for the source of the threats, collared Wheeler and asked why he and his tour party were being threatened. Reid, close behind, eyed the scene and allegedly decked Wheeler, kicking the reporter as he lay on the floor. The incidents led to the arrest of John Reid on two counts of assault on the day of Elton's Auckland concert, a fact that was kept from Elton until after the show.

The concert, held at Western Springs Oval, was a resounding success, attracting thirty-four thousand fans. But the next day even Elton was charged with assault, although the most he did was grab Wheeler by the collar. Following a New Zealand court hearing, in which it was determined that Elton's treatment of Wheeler had been precipitated by a misunderstanding, he was ordered to pay prosecution costs of fifty dollars (Australian) and released. Reid wasn't so lucky. In addition to being ordered to pay substantial civil damages to Baragwanath, he was convicted of assault and ordered to serve twenty-eight days in jail. His sentence was stayed over an extended weekend while the high court entertained, and rejected, an appeal.⁷⁷

It got worse. Plastered on the cover of the March 16, 1974 issue of the normally lighthearted music magazine *Go-Set* were these awful headlines:

ELTON JOHN SCANDAL
MANAGER JAILED ON ASSAULT
PUNCHES N.Z. MODEL
KICKS N.Z. REPORTER