

## No more Donald Duck for E.J.

It's typical that, not 13 months after his last album and the "Reg Strikes Back Tour," Elton John should already be back on the road in promotion of his 29th effort, *Sleeping With the Past*. The man just can't stop. Since he first made it big with "Your Song" in 1970, he has released one or more singles annually, most of them hits. Elton John may be rock's most prolific artist. World record sales of his albums stand in excess of 100 million.

It ain't bad for a tubby little Briton who only wanted to write music, a fact that some might find hard to believe. Yes, the man who strutted the stage dressed as Donald Duck, Mozart, et al., the man who wore neon spectacles and 54-inch-high boots, the legendary rocker who many say gives the best performance of them all — only wanted to be a writer.

This, in a sense, is what he has returned to after his much-publicized image-shedding of last year. His stage props were featured in an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. After the props were photographed for *Reg Strikes Back's* album cover, they were boxed up, all of them, and sent off to Sotheby's for auction, where they made a spanking \$8 million. Gone is the Eiffel Tower hat; the Statue of Liberty costume is no more.

Undoubtedly it was time for a change. Elton has been plagued with problems in the last few years. An emergency throat operation was necessary in 1987, an event quickly followed by the amicable break up of his short marriage. But, as ever, it was the British gutter press that bugged him most, with allegations about his sex life. He sued, and won an unprecedented front page apology. Clearing out his closet was a symbolic move. Now, he seemed to be saying, it is time to concentrate on the music.

Such concentration is not some-

### RICHARD SMITH concert

thing that has characterized all of Elton's output, a fact that his longtime collaborator and lyricist Bernie Taupin is ready to admit.

"I think one of the problems with being so prolific is that we've maybe been too versatile on a lot of our past albums," Taupin said. The typical Elton John '80s album release delved into many styles — R&B, rock 'n' roll, synthesized pop, the candlelit ballad for two — producing no more than, say, two memorable songs per effort.

But the renewed commitment has undoubtedly paid off. The songwriter and lyricist planned the new album very carefully. They decided to pay homage to their roots, and returned to their earliest sources of inspiration, the R&B artists of the 60s — Ray Charles, Jackie Wilson, Otis Redding, Sam & Dave.

"We decided this time to take the spirit and vigor of those '60s classics and try and make an '80s record that captured all of that — a white soul record for the '80s," says Elton. He calls *Sleeping With the Past* "the strongest record we've ever made" and "in a sense ... the first conceptual album we've done since *Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy*."

He's right. *Sleeping With the Past* is Elton's most convincing set of songs since 1983's *Too Low for Zero*. The current single, the slightly overblown "Healing Hands," is not really indicative of the album's conceptual flavor. More telling are the Drifters-inspired "Club at the End of the Street," and the title track, with its thumping R&B beat a la "Philadelphia Freedom." With his deeper voice and Gianni Versaci-designed suits, he's back to blow away the competi-

tion. Let's face it, when the country is besieged with aging rockers on expensive, over-hyped tours, Elton, who's only 42, seems refreshingly youthful.

So what can we expect from a no-frills Elton? Unlike previous tours, he plays a number of songs from his latest release, *Sleeping With the Past*, revealing his confidence in the new material. "Sacrifice," "Whispers" and the title track are likely to be featured cuts. The concert as a whole will have a more R&B feel.

Don't expect any let-up in Elton's performance. Get set to rock all night to "Bennie and the Jets," "Saturday Night's Alright for Fighting" and "The Bitch is Back," and bring the Bic lighters for "Candle in the Wind," "Daniel" and "Don't Let the Sun Go Down On Me."

The shows are running over two and a half hours, with one costume change and no break. Make no mistake, Elton John is still standing, better than he ever did...

Elton John plays at the Dean E. Smith Center at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Sept. 23. Tickets are still available at \$22.50 each. Call 962-2296 for more information.



Elton John celebrates his 29th album with a new world tour

## Drivin' n' cryin' cruises solo

### ALISA DEMAO concert

For most of us, our only exposure to drivin' n' cryin' was during the R.E.M. concert last spring. But with only eight songs and 30 minutes on stage, it was hard to grasp the group's diversified approach to music. Triangle music-lovers will get a second chance tonight when drivin' n' cryin' bring their special brand of bluegrass-country-punk-metal-rock 'n' roll to the Cat's Cradle.

Reactions to the band last spring were varied; their music was hard to classify, but standouts like "(I'm Goin') Straight to Hell" seemed to please everyone. This was not just a result of the short timeslot. Drivin' n' cryin's work is characterized by varied styles and intense drive.

The Atlanta-based group came of age during the punk era, but their music avoids the nihilism that characterized that sound. The band has roots in other styles as well; their influences range from the Clash to the Ramones and Hank Williams. The result is a theme common to all their work concerning everyday blue-collar people who just work out their problems and live their lives.

This unique blending of genres is a result of the band members' diverse backgrounds and musical styles. Singer/songwriter Kevn Kinney, bass player Tim Nielsen, drummer Jeff Sullivan and guitarist Buren Fowler each inject their unique personalities into their performances, regardless of the musical style.

Kevn Kinney grew up in Milwaukee. In 1980, he formed the Prosecutors, a band that worked the Midwest circuit. Simultaneously, he

played solo acoustic folk-singing gigs. Whenever possible he followed his heroes, the Ramones, around the Midwest.

Tim Nielsen's family moved from Minneapolis to Atlanta when he was in eighth grade. Although he is now drivin' n' cryin's bass and sometime mandolin player, he started out on the guitar. He was influenced by alternative radio rather than mainstream rock. In fact, when he joined his first band in high school he had never listened to Led Zeppelin.

After a brief stint in a small Georgia college, Nielsen returned to Atlanta where he formed the Nightporters with friends he had jammed with in high school. They became one of the top unsigned bands on the Atlanta music scene.

In 1985 Kinney and Nielsen met in Atlanta. Kinney hadn't thought that he would play with another group after leaving Milwaukee, but he had made a tape of his music which he played for Nielsen in the car one day. The two formed a band with former Nightporters' drummer Paul Lenz and, briefly, a mandolin player. Their name, drivin' n' cryin', was taken from a Prosecutors song.

The band made it big on the local club scene, playing the 688 Club until it closed its doors. They then released an independent album on the 688 Records label. *Scarred but Smarter*

earned critical acclaim with its combination of punk, acoustic ballads ("You Mean Everything"), and metal ("Saddle on the Side of the Road"). Copies of this indie release are practically impossible to find now.

The present drummer, Jeff Sullivan, joined the band after *Scarred* at the age of eighteen. He had previously played with a cover band and "a bit more established" group, Mr. Crowe's Garden. He had also worked as a roadie for drivin' n' cryin' before contributing musically.

Drivin' n' cryin's 1988 release on Island Records, *Whisper Tames the Lion*, was produced by Anton Fier of the Golden Palominos. This release continued the band's peculiarly diverse brand of music with a heavier bluegrass influence than the previous album with tunes such as "Catch the Wind" and the Zeppelin-esque "On a Clear Daze."

Their 1989 effort, *Mystery Road*, was followed by a tour opening for fellow Georgians R.E.M. This chance at national exposure enabled them to bring songs like "Syllables" and "With the People" to a larger audience. The group gained a broader following without having to sacrifice the integrity that made them cult favorites from the start.

Drivin' n' cryin' is a band for everyone. Their forte is being able to take many different musical styles and weave them into a cohesive whole and, in the process, expose their listeners to unfamiliar music without driving them away.

Drivin' n' cryin' plays *Cat's Cradle* tonight at 10. Tickets are \$7.

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