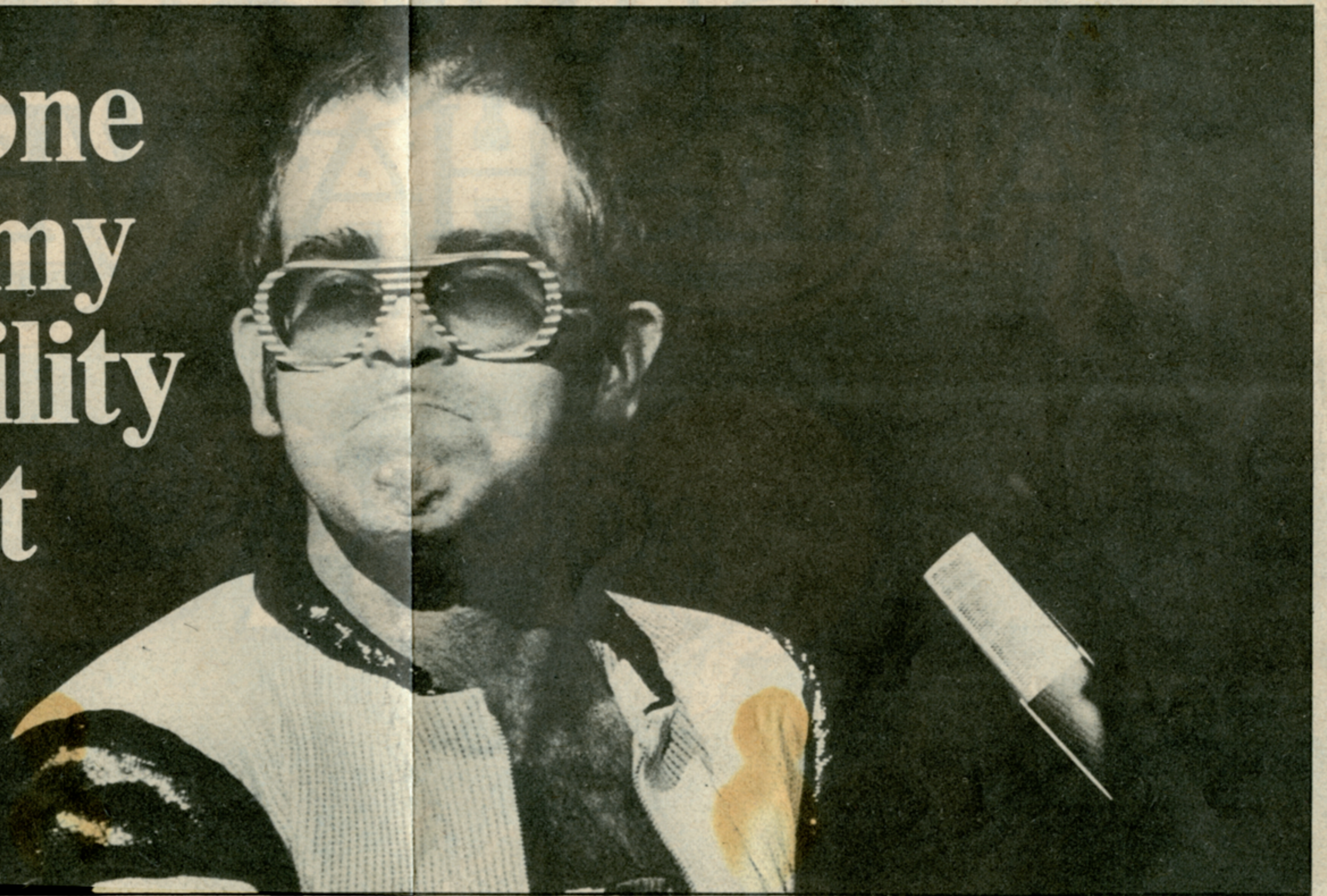


SOUNDS STAR RATING
 ***** Very Important Platter
 **** Good album, hear it if you can

ALBUMS

*** Worthwhile
 ** Dull or disappointing
 * Re-cycle!

Someone saved my credibility tonight



SONGS IN THE KEY OF EH? Elton gets up, Bernie gets down.

ELTON JOHN: 'Blue Moves' (Rocket ROLL 12) ****
 EVEN BEFORE I'd heard one note of 'Blue Moves' I had divined that this album was going to be the Big one.

Ever since March, when Elton first started recording in Canada, I've been hearing whispers suggesting that this is the EJ album to end them all, to erase the comparatively unhappy memories of 'Rock of the Westies' and 'Here and There' (Elton's two least commercially successful albums in ages) and restore Elt to his rightful place at the right hand of God (well, some people believe that's where he belongs) and as the undisputed dollar-earning heavyweight of the music business ring.

As far back as April Bernie Taupin and Bruce Johnston (the former Beach Boy responsible for some of 'Blue Moves' vocal arrangements) were describing the album as the most eclectic and accomplished Elton album ever, and now here are Rocket Records treating it like the Mona Lisa — look, but don't touch; special sneak-previews a week before official release (October 22) on the company stereo, but no pre-release review copies.

So, after two full-plays and some cursory track-hopping I can honestly say, hell — I'm really not sure just how good or not this album is. All I do know is that 'Blue Moves' really needs to be listened to rather than just heard.

Whatever else it may or may not be this is certainly not Elton's most impactful album to date. Only two of the eighteen songs here have stayed with me, and those more by a process of osmosis than sheer and immediate force of power. This is an album that's going to slowly insinuate its way into your bloodstream, pump round your body for a few days and finally end up lodging in your brain, rather than grabbing you by the throat and demanding you to take notice. It couldn't be otherwise.

For most of 'Blue Moves' Elton has eschewed the direct, simplistic (some called it mindless) approach of 'Rock of the Westies', opting instead for an altogether more ambitious ap-

proach in composition, arrangements and performance. 'Westies' was very much a *group album*, showcasing Elton's then new touring band with a streamlined, hard-edged rock 'n' roll performance which for the most part effectively overshadowed or at least compensated for, some rather lacklustre material.

For 'Blue Moves' he adds strings, horns, choirs, experiments with a diversity of different instruments from dulcimer to accordion to sitar (yes, sitar!) and seems generally concerned with a richness of texture — fattening up the calf to slaughter the diner. Just *why* is anybody's guess. An over-reaction to the criticism which greeted 'Rock of the Westies' perhaps? Or just the logical outcome when you've got extravagant ideas and a budget to match but nobody to put a check on excess?

Whatever, the result is sometimes what you'd expect from D. W. Griffith doing a remake of a Bergman movie — theatrical overkill.

This is exemplified by 'One Horse Town' Starting with a deceptively placid intro the song is dramatically ignited by a sharp switch of tempo, an urgent guitar refrain and a kicking rhythm section — but the fire all this generates is almost completely doused a superfluous, fussy string arrangement. Similarly 'Crazy Water', a pleasant enough melody with a smart, pointed lyric about the sea coming between a fisherman and his lover, doesn't have quite the necessary bouyancy to carry Paul Buckmaster's string arrangement with it.

The use of ambitious arrangements and unorthodox (for Elton at least) instruments is more successful elsewhere. 'Wide Eyed and Laughing', for example, combines acoustic guitars, synthesiser, rototoms, backing vocals by Crosby and Nash and sitars, played strictly for effect rather than musical artistry, to powerful effect, creating the sort of haunting, melancholic feel which Elton last achieved, albeit in a different musical context, on the 'Elton John' album.

'Where's The Shoorah' sees harmonium (a beautifully expressive instrument) and the Corner Institutional Baptist and Southern California Community Choir added to some majestic piano playing to achieve a gospel/revivalist feel that echoes 'Burn Down The Mission' — though the lyrics, about fire in the heart turning to ashes in the mouth — hardly have that songs exuberance.

And both 'Boogie Pilgrim' and 'Shoulder Holster' employ a horn section which includes the Brecker Brothers and David Sanborn to good effect. 'Boogie Pilgrim' is particularly good, with its reedy organ, a sharp, slinky descending horn riff and shouted chorus (again with the Corner Institutional Choir) giving the song a tough, cocky R&B feel.

'Shoulder Holster' rolls rather than struts and has Elton singing in a contrivedly 'black' nasal voice which could be irritating but in fact sounds most effective. The song also has a well-shaped lyrical narrative — a variation on the Frankie and Johnny/lover's revenge theme. — It's just one of a dozen or more good lyrical ideas contained in 'Blue Moves' In fact, while the album is lacking in immediately strong melodic content — which I've always found to be one of Elton's strongest points as a performer in the past — it is brimful of well-crafted, incisive and often deeply affecting lyrics.

THERE ARE NO melodies here to demand your attention in the way 'Goodbye Yellow Brick Road', 'Saturday Night's', 'Don't Let The Sun' or even 'Island Girl' did, but there are lyrics to stand alongside the best of Taupin's past work. It's a delightful surprise to find that the man whose songwriting talent appeared to have gone into a state of atrophy on 'Westies' has rediscovered his old lyrical perception and strength; It's ironic that the catalyst appears to have been the emotional traumas which Taupin has evidently been suffering over the last year or so. When I spoke to Bernie last April he warned that 'Blue Moves'

would be a 'suicidal' album, and he's right.

Two songs here, 'Cage The Songbird' and 'Someone's Final Song' confront the subject head on — dealing with the deaths of a starlet and a 'nowhere man' respectively. They might almost be Taupin's own vicarious self-snuff, for most of the rest are steeped in a pain which is all the more lacerating because it is the first time we have actually been forced to share it. Taupin's lyrics have not often been autobiographical, and in those instances where they have been they have rarely proved as self-revealing as those here.

In short Taupin has always sought to exorcise in private whatever demons may be tormenting him. Now estranged from his wife Maxine, however, he presents a different face. Five of the songs here reflect on what one can safely presume to be the more bitter moments in his marriage it's sad aftermath and Taupin's consequently morose state of mind.

The three most potent and moving songs are 'Between Seventeen and Seventy', 'Tonight' and 'Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word' The former is a late-night reflection on the inexorable deterioration of a relationship and its heart-breaking consequence: a one-time friend ending up between the sheets of the girl. The lilting melody with its Beach Boys style popping counterpoint harmonies is seductive enough in itself but seems incongruous to the stark poignancy of the lyrical theme.

'Tonight' is the album's wide-screen epic. To a lyric which captures the quiet and ineradicable sense of despair which impregnates an affair in its death-throes with a terrible honesty, Elton has added an orchestral arrangement which transforms his partner's suffering into a 3D technicolor spectacle.

Featuring only Elton's piano, beautifully played against an orchestral arrangement (by James Newton-Howard) which sweeps you over with its sheer force of emotional power, the song plays melodrama to its eight minute hilt. It is a romantic's view of suffering, pain transmuted into sentimentality, and it's enough to

make a strong man weep.

Just to put his intentions beyond a shadow of a doubt, for the third song 'Sorry Seems To Be The Hardest Word' Elton employs the most blatant romantic hokum, adding an accordion to the weeping strings and trilling vibes. Only someone who cried to 'Moulin Rouge' could have thought that one up.

Two other songs reflect Taupin's sense of disillusionment. 'If There's A God In Heaven (What's He Waiting For)', a song about poverty, warfare and human suffering which stands out as one of the album's strongest cuts, and the extraordinary 'Idol' — a song about a star (presumably Elvis) who can no longer deliver the goods in the way he once did.

He was tight-assed/Walking on broken glass/Highly prized in the wallet-size' 'But his face has changed, he's not the same anymore/And I have to say that I like the way his music sounded before' Elton delivers this in a clipped, contrived drawl over a soused piano, with brushed drums, bass and maudlin horns. Slicker than hair-oil, more drunken than a footballer on a

night out, this would go down an absolute storm at the Sands or some sleazy, cornball cocktail bar in Pittsburgh. I'm still undecided whether Elton's playing it straight or tongue-in-cheek.

With so much pathos, heartache and pain it seems like a token concession to the cause of optimism that the album should go out on an energising if not ecstatic tone. After spending the best part of two sides leading you to the conclusion that the best option is to slash your wrists Elton exhorts you to 'Bite Your Lip (Get Up and Dance)'. If you think a string-driven Latin hustle is the answer to your problems you might feel inclined to take him up on the invitation.

Add one engaging instrumental minuet composed by Caleb Quaye, and two undistinguished instrumentals composed by Elton and you have 'Blue Moves' A disappointment in some areas; a triumph in others.

More than enough anyway to keep me listening — at least I will be when Rocket take off the wraps. And five stars for the highly-tasteful if irrelevant cover. Patrick Proctor rools O.K.? — **Mick Brown.**