Elton John - The Captain & The Kid (2006)



1. Postcards From Richard Nixon 2. Just Like Noah's Ark 3. Wouldn't Have You Any Other Way (NYC) 4. Tinderbox 5. And The House Fell Down 6. Blues Never Fade Away 7. The Bridge 8. I Must Have Lost In On The Wind 9. Old '67 10. The Captain And The Kid Elton John - Piano, Vocals Guy Babylon - Arranger, Keyboards Bob Birch - Bass, Vocals (Background) Davey Johnstone - Banjo, Guitar, Harmonica, Mandolin, Vocals (Background) John Mahon - Percussion, Vocals (Background) Nigel Olsson - Drums, Vocals (Background) Matt Still - Mixing, Vocals (Background)

Ever since 2001's Songs from the West Coast, Elton John and his longtime collaborator, Bernie Taupin, have been deliberately and unapologetically chasing their glory days of the early '70s, but nowhere have they been as candid in evoking those memories as they are on 2006's The Captain & the Kid, the explicitly stated sequel to 1975's masterpiece Captain Fantastic and the Brown Dirt Cowboy. That record was an autobiographical fantasia of John and Taupin's early years -- the days when they were struggling to make their mark, right up till their glorious success -- and the idea behind this album is to tell the story of those salad days, which not only isn't a bad idea at all -- it's clever and well-suited for John, the most self-consciously unautobiographical of all major rock artists -- but fits right into Elton's desire to make records like he used to; after all, if he's trying to sound like the way things used to be, he might as well sing about the way they used to be, too. And The Captain & the Kid is nothing if not a proudly nostalgic piece of work bearing no modern touches; even the synths that occasionally color this country-ish rock are old fashioned analog synths. It sounds like an dream project on paper, but like a lot of dream projects, The Captain & the Kid doesn't quite live up to its lofty ideals. Part of the problem is that John has patterned the music not after Captain Fantastic -- which lived up to its glamorama title through intense flights of camp and glitz that helped give its narrative a theatrical flair, not to mention a hell of a lot of color -- but after the stripped-down, country-tinged pop and rock of Tumbleweed Connection and Honky Chateau. That is the sound at the core of most of his best music of the early '70s, but it's not necessarily the best choice for this album, since it doesn't quite fit with the original Captain Fantastic or the gaudy story of their success; it's a tale that calls for bright neon colors, and everything about this album is muted and tasteful.

It might not quite seem like what a Fantastic sequel should be -- in fact, it seems more like a sequel to its direct predecessor, 2004's Peachtree Road -- but that's hardly a bad thing. Like that album and Songs from the West Coast before it, The Captain & the Kid is a sharp, professional piece of work by sharp professionals conscious of their past and no longer wishing to rest on their laurels, so they're consciously evoking their best work without quite recycling it. They might not hit their mark directly, but they get close enough -- it may be a little self-conscious and the production is a shade too clean, but the performances are warm and intimate, so this music feels right even if it doesn't necessarily feel exactly like Elton's '70s heyday. And the more familiar this song cycle becomes, the easier it is to admire the craft behind it, particularly in individual moments like the slow build on "Wouldn't Have It Any Other Way (NYC)," or how "Tinderbox" hearkens back to "Somebody Saved My Life Tonight," or the lightness of "I Must Have Lost It on the Wind," or the lazy blues of "Old 67," or how "The Captain and the Kid" brings to mind not Tumbleweed Connection but Billy Joel's approximation of that album on Piano Man. So, no, The Captain & the Kid isn't quite the second coming of Captain Fantastic, but it's hardly a cash grab by an aging diva -- in other words, it's no Basic Instinct 2. John's intentions are pure and even if he doesn't quite make an album as good as his '70s work, it does stand alongside that work nicely -- it's clear that he and Taupin are really trying, and it's far better to have albums like this and Peachtree Road that fall short of the mark but nevertheless get close than to have an endless series of well-produced but empty records like The One and Made in England. ---Stephen Thomas Erlewine, AllMusic Review

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