

# W BEYOND R D S

## THE ART AND LYRICS OF BERNIE TAUPIN

story by HEATHER BURNETT | photos provided by BERNIE TAUPIN

Singing the timeless lyrics to so many of his songs, people around the world have endeared these words to their hearts as well as to the precious dark moments of their lives. Bernie Taupin's life has been the inspirational foundation for the world's most beloved songs brought to life by Elton John. And for more than 20 years, Taupin has fueled his creative energy with painting, something he views to be a cathartic outlet and natural extension to writing a song. He's taken up the art medium in earnest for a simple reason.

"I just love to paint," Taupin said. "I get immense satisfaction and pleasure from it."

Taupin now explores abstract art from his studio located on his California ranch. It's there where he also gets to live out his version of the "Brown Dirt Cowboy." Since 2010, Taupin's art has seen a more commercial appeal and is currently on display on his 2012 tour at galleries around the U.S. and Canada. From Aug. 2-25, Russell Collection Fine Art Gallery in Austin, Texas, will feature his "Beyond Words" exhibit of more than 20 selections from his collection.

"I grew up in a profession that requires a transient nature and a great deal of indulgence and things that are not necessarily regarded as healthy, but you grow up and you get wiser," Taupin said. "And if you're still sane, you make wiser choices and you choose your weapons with care. I think that's basically what I've done over the last 15 years."

It was 1967 when Bernie Taupin met Elton John by answering an advertisement from a record company in the back of a magazine. Their first hit, "Your Song," followed in 1970. After penning more than four decades of hit songs for John, Taupin has written lyrics for other musicians, such as

Rod Stewart, Alice Cooper, Heart, Starship, David Ackles and Willie Nelson. Aside from writing lyrics and painting, Taupin is a radio personality for Sirius XM Radio's The Loft channel, which he broadcasts from his home.

"Painting is something I do continually, where songwriting requires only moderate amount of time because I only work in a musical medium when a project is there," Taupin said.

However, there's no relationship between his songs and paintings; his art is his art in its own right – passionate, colorful

and bold. Taupin favors large canvases and sometimes incorporates mixed media materials. He says nothing is off limits. While he continues to write lyrics, Taupin views his art as a natural transition for his creativity.

"It just so happens that I paint more than I write songs," Taupin said. "If you do one and you immerse yourself in it, then it's a seamless transition."

Unlike his story-telling songs, his art is more singular, inspired by a concept or a thought or a reflection.

"The paintings are so varied in themes and subject matter, and my songs have a definite story line. At times they can be cryptic, but they are still stories nonetheless," Taupin said. "But a painting can be invoked by a singular movement or a city block or a cloud formation or the tones of a piece of music."

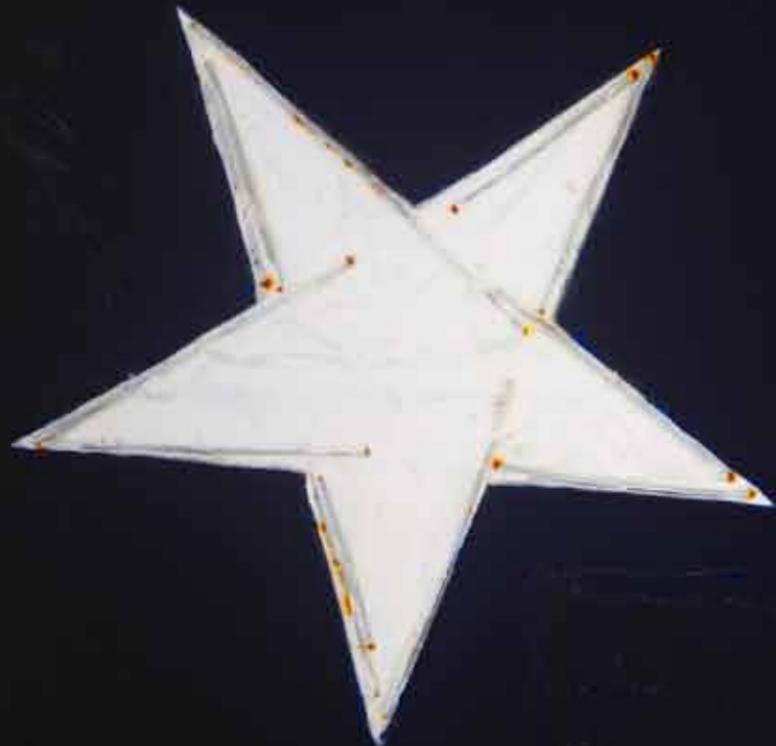
Inspiration is key to all of Taupin's work. Whether it is painting or writing a song, he creates when he's moved by something internally.

Externally, Taupin draws on urban surroundings and the beat of urban life, especially places like New York and other cities. Over the years, he's kept sketch books for his art and songwriting ideas, which he claims are the blueprints for his creativity and inspiration.

"Sketch books are a big thing for me, especially when I travel," Taupin said, "but that's where they're a little like songs."



"I JUST LOVE TO PAINT, I GET IMMENSE SATISFACTION AND PLEASURE FROM IT."



When I write songs, they all come from ideas or titles that I've written down in notebooks."

He uses the sketch books to map out ideas. The notebooks are there to guide him as a skeleton plan, and from there he follows his instincts.

The Elton John-Bernie Taupin songwriting team is famously known for their separate collaboration, where Taupin writes lyrics first and then John composes the music separately. With his art, Taupin works alone (save for the occasional moments when his two young daughters, ages seven and four, want to create in the studio with him). Taupin discusses his daughters with as much, if not more, overflowing enthusiasm about the other passions of his life.

"The walls of my studio are plastered with their pictures. When people do come to visit my studio, they're in a quandary whether the pictures on the wall are mine or the kids," Taupin adoringly bared, stating his children are definitely in tune with what their father does all day.

Taupin's art studio wouldn't be complete without a resonating soundtrack. Music plays a huge part in his artistic process, and he finds that playing it while creating makes for a more cerebral environment. Taupin's extensive playlist gets a workout based on his mood, what he's painting or the time of day. In the mornings, he might favor Merle Haggard and George Jones, but later in the day his musical tastes move toward more jazz and blues.

"Coleman Hawkins gets a lot of air time along with people like Miles and Coltrane," Taupin said. "Any driving Chicago blues will get the paint flying."

Always drawn to abstract art, Taupin holds an appreciation for all styles. Growing up on a farm in rural Lincolnshire, England, his mother and grandfather introduced him to poetry, literature and music. Then later exposed to creative professionals during an award-winning career in music, Taupin's approach to art has evolved over the years. Among the artists he admires are Hans Hoffman, Helen Frankenthaler, Anselm Kiefer and Paul Gauguin.

"Paul Gauguin, possibly the most soulful painter ever. His Tahitian canvas can literally make you cry," Taupin said. "There's such a difference to his stuff. His canvases literally speak to you. They're so soulful."

The first thing you notice about Taupin's art is the color. He uses bold, bright, vibrant colors to convey his themes on the canvas. He doesn't like boundaries. A creative person by nature regardless of the artistic vehicle, Taupin admits his work has changed over the years to avoid being locked into one style.

"I'm not going to spend my life writing ballads when I could spend my time writing mid-tempo and up-tempo, and that's kind of how I feel about my art," Taupin said. "For me, the core

of abstract art just utilizes more of the imagination. And as a story teller with a vivid imagination, it works just fine for me." He views being a still life artist or portrait painter to being a photographer.

"I'M NOT GOING TO SPEND MY LIFE WRITING BALLADS WHEN I COULD SPEND MY TIME WRITING MID-TEMPO AND UP-TEMPO, AND THAT'S KIND OF HOW I FEEL ABOUT MY ART,"

One piece in the Austin exhibit, *The Soul Dresses*, has a particular fondness for him. The vertical primary colors seem to evoke an effortless purpose.

"Creatively it came together. Sometimes things don't mesh the way you want them to and you either discard them or paint over them, but that one meshed for some reason," Taupin said. "But it's just big and bold and the colors are very vivid and I just like the movement of it. It's just one of those things when all the pieces came together, the satisfaction level was kicked up a notch."

The pulsating colors of boxy shapes in *Babel* and in *Inconsistent Tides* stand out in the collection as lively interpretations of Taupin's imagination.

For the Texas shows (there was a Houston exhibit in February 2012), Taupin created a few specific pieces that collectors may regard as unique to the collection.

"The Lone Star pieces I'm very happy with, and I'm glad I've got something that's sort of indicative for the Texas show," Taupin said. He's created several flag-themed pieces in the past, including *Rise* to commemorate the 10-year anniversary of September 11. In addition to the pieces shown in select galleries, Taupin is working on an urban-inspired trilogy of work, as well as pieces inspired by 1960s pop art that have yet to be released. Taupin calls them "radically different" from this current exhibit.

So why is Austin so lucky to be the temporary home to some of Taupin's collection? One reason is he is a self-professed foodie, eager to get back to sample more Texas barbecue. He claims he and his team have laid their "battle plans" on which restaurants to try. Of course, that's not the only reason.

"I'm not gonna turn down Austin. It seems an obvious fit," Taupin said. "It's a town that's driven by art and music, and it's a city with a lot of soul, so I'm only happy to oblige."