

# How Elton and John Got It Together



With the release of the Elton John biopic *Rocket Man* recently and as we approach the 45th anniversary of the last ever live performance by John Lennon, we thought we should look at their collaborations in 1974. There are not many musicians that can say that they have played live with all four Beatles. Elton John is one of the few; others include Eric Clapton and Billy Preston. Elton performed with John Lennon in New York's Madison Square Garden on 28 November 1974.

Lennon had moved to the USA in 1971. From early 1972 he was having immigration problems and faced possible deportation. The Nixon presidency perceived him as a threat and wanted him deported. As a result, any live performances were restricted to the USA. The 'John Sinclair Benefit Concert' in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was one of several shows John performed in. By 1973, the pressures from the numerous court cases and Lennon's infidelity led to Yoko suggesting he take a break and move out, accompanied by their aide May Pang. This was the beginning of Lennon's infamous 'Lost Weekend'. John and May, now a couple, moved to Los Angeles to promote *Mind Games* and began working on an album of rock 'n' roll songs, produced by Phil Spector. John was keen to get the album out quickly but Spector disappeared with the tapes and the album was temporarily shelved. Lennon needed a new album and, preferably, a hit single. He had met Elton John in July 1974 when the latter was recording at Caribou Ranch in the Rocky Mountains. Elton asked Lennon to contribute guitar and vocals to his version of 'Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds' (credited to 'Dr Winston O'Boogie'). Shortly after, Elton



was in New York City and he dropped by the Record Plant one evening with Tony King from Apple. John was back in the city recording 'Whatever Gets You Thru' The Night' for his album *Walls and Bridges*. Elton offered to put some piano on the track. Lennon loved it. John was well aware that he was the only Beatle who didn't have a number one single in the USA. Jokingly, Elton made a bet with him that if the song went to number one, Lennon would have to join him on stage in New York.

*In the studio*

'Whatever Gets You Thru' The Night' became Lennon's only US number one single during his lifetime and, keeping to the bet, he joined Elton on stage at Madison Square Gardens. Dressed in a black shirt and playing a fender guitar he and Elton played the two singles and closed with 'I Saw Her Standing There'. John introduced the song as one from an old estranged fiancé of his called Paul. It is ironic that the last song John played live on stage was one written by Paul McCartney. John later recorded a live performance for a television tribute to Lew Grade in 1975 but, in terms of concerts, Madison Square Gardens is seen as his last ever live show.

*Madison Square Gardens*

The three songs Elton and John played that night were released as an EP in 1981 and, in 1990, they appeared on the 4-CD box set simply called *Lennon*.

The pair remained close friends and Elton became Sean Lennon's godfather. Following John's death, Elton released his own tribute called 'Empty Garden'.

*Ernie Sutton*

