



GUY BABYLON

The Supernatural Sounds of Elton John's *Lestat*

Longtime Elton John keyboardist Guy Babylon recently saw the culmination of three years' hard work on the musical *Lestat*, for which he was musical supervisor. *Lestat*, a new Broadway production that opened in April 2006, is based on Anne Rice's best-selling novel *Interview with the Vampire*, with songs by Sir Elton himself.

It's not Babylon's first foray into the theatrical world: he also worked on the Elton John/Tim Rice reinterpretation of the opera *Aida*, and won a Grammy Award in 2000 as co-producer of that show's soundtrack album.

Babylon has accompanied Elton John for years, but he considers himself a musical-theater novice. "But I don't necessarily see that as a weakness," he says. "Naïveté is great—it's part of what I tried to bring to this show."

For Guy, *Lestat*'s biggest challenge was simply the amount of time it demanded. "It just never ended!" he laughs. "A show like that is a constantly evolving process. One thing always hinges on another—for example, the music might get changed, not because it isn't working as music, but because it's not working with whatever is going on onstage."

Babylon started work on *Lestat* in 2003, when Elton John began composing the score. "He'd come into the studio early and write a song, and then I would spend the rest of the day creating an arrangement," he recalls. "Elton's guitar player, Davey Johnstone, was also involved in that process. So it was basically Elton, Davey, and me in the studio with an engineer. We made pretty elaborate demos of all these songs. In fact, if you listen to the demos from beginning to end, it sounds like an album."

Guy also had a hand in crafting arrangements for the final production. "Since I was with Elton when he wrote the songs, I had first crack at the music," he explains. "But overall, I'm just a small part of a team of people. We all did whatever it is we specialize in to make the show as good as possible. I was one of three orchestrators, along with Steve Margoshes and Bruce Coughlin. I also worked with an assistant programmer, John Roggie. But *Lestat*'s music director, Brad Haak, really had the most creative input."

As a longtime user of Yamaha Motif keyboards, Guy knew they'd be perfect for *Lestat*. "I've been using them from the moment they came out," he says. "I use two Motifs in my setup with Elton. And since I was in charge of synth programming for *Lestat*, I decided to use the Motif there too. I used a combination of the Motif's internal sounds and some sampled ones that I put together myself. The sound of the Motif is so embedded in this show. I couldn't imagine doing it with any other instrument."

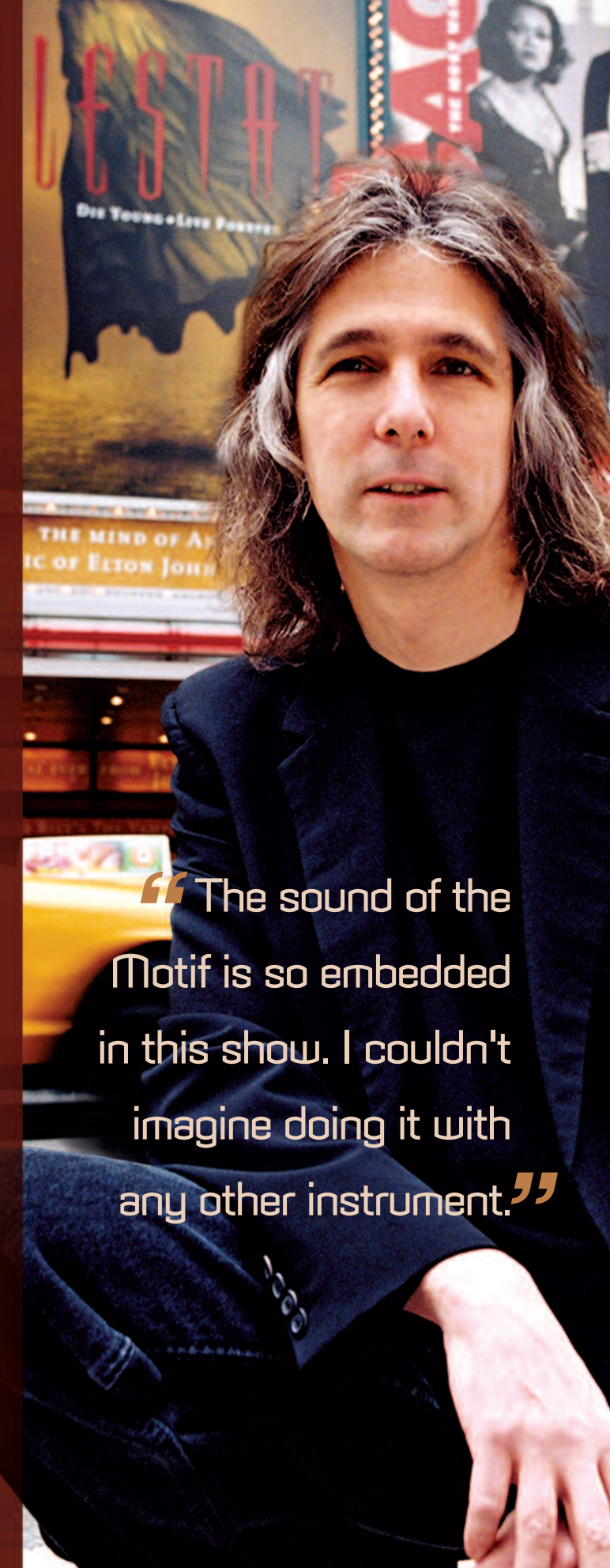
The show relies on four Motifs, plus a fifth one for backup. "We have three keyboard players, and a percussionist who also plays the Motif," Babylon explains. "Jason DeBord mostly plays the piano parts. Andy Grobengieser plays strings and other orchestral sounds. José Simbulan plays a potpourri of harps, synths, harpsichord, and other things. And our percussionist, Thad Wheeler, plays sampled tympani, chimes, marimbas, and so on. Now, these guys have played all kinds of keyboards in all kinds of Broadway shows, and they're absolutely raving about the Motif."

Babylon also praises the keyboards' ruggedness: "One of the things I like most is the quality of the Motifs. They're built so well, and the keys feel so solid under your fingers. For *Lestat*, I felt like I'd never have to worry about the Motifs breaking down."

Guy is far from idle post-*Lestat*. He has an ongoing role in Elton John's Red Piano Concerts at Caesars Palace in Las Vegas, and he recently worked with Sir Elton on an upcoming studio album. "It's called *The Captain and the Kid*," says Guy. "It's a sequel to *Captain Fantastic* and the *Brown Dirt Cowboy*, thirty years on."

Babylon and Elton John bassist Bob Birch also scored a recent HBO documentary about tennis legend Billie Jean King. Once again the Motif played a major role: "We worked on the music in hotel rooms around the world while touring with Elton. I'd have a Motif sent up to my room, and compose and record with it and my laptop computer. I do a lot of my programming on a soft synth called HALion, from Steinberg, and then translate the HALion files into Motif files."

Whether recording and performing with Elton or at work on musical productions like *Lestat*, Guy knows the meaning of the words "team player." "It's important to mention all the people who have worked so hard on *Lestat*, in particular," he notes. "These are the guys who really made it happen. It's definitely not a one-man show!"



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