

The most successful recording artists become stars. The most enduring stars become legends. But what do you call the entertainers for whom the word “legend” is an understatement?

sir elton!

WHATEVER TERM YOU USE, THERE'S NO DENYING THAT SIR ELTON JOHN belongs in that elite category.

Four decades into his career, after some 50 albums (more, if you count all the compilations), John remains more vital than ever. Both his classic albums and his new releases continue to sell in the millions. He performs hundreds of electrifying concerts each year. And every time Sir Elton records or performs, Yamaha is right there with him.

Sir Elton has used Yamaha Disklavier® Grand pianos exclusively since he first played one many years ago. “When it comes to my piano,” he says, “Yamaha shares my philosophy that anything short of perfect simply isn't good enough. I feel that I can always rely on my Yamaha piano to give me its best.”

But the Yamaha connection is more than piano-deep. The company also provides most of the electronic instruments and sound gear that help ensure that Sir Elton's concerts live up to the singer's notoriously exacting demands.

“Yamaha,” says Sir Elton, “understands my needs as a professional musician and performer.”



Songs From the West Coast, the latest release from Elton has been nominated for 2 Grammys: Best Pop Male Vocal and Best Pop Male Vocal Performance for the smash hit "I Want Love."

To learn more, go to www.eltonjohn.com

YAMAHA

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“Piano A”

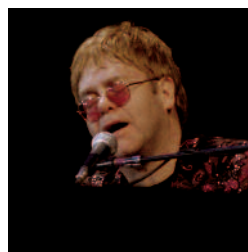
THE STORY OF THE WORLD’S BEST-LOVED KEY BOARD

KEITH BRADLEY

“It’s probably the most played, most traveled piano on the planet.”



“Piano A” is a 9-foot Yamaha Disklavier® DCFIII Concert Grand



IT HAS CIRLED THE GLOBE countless times. It has been played everywhere from the Kremlin and the White House to Gianni Versace’s living room. They even wanted to put it into

the Smithsonian, but Elton John said, “No! I still need it to play.”

It’s “Piano A,” the first and favorite of Elton’s four 9-foot Yamaha Disklavier® DCFIII Concert Grands.

“It’s probably the most played, most traveled piano on the planet,” says Keith Bradley, Elton’s tour director. “Actually, Elton has four touring piano systems, which are represented by the letters A through D. Each system involves a Yamaha Disklavier piano and a rack of gear. There’s also Piano E, a 7’6” Yamaha Grand in London that’s used for most of the studio work. But Elton’s deepest emotional attachment is to Piano A.”

“Piano A was the instrument that made Elton switch to Yamaha from the brand he’d used before,” says Dale Sticha, Elton’s piano technician for the last decade. “That piano has seen so many things: the Princess Diana memorial, the Academy Awards. I really believe there’s some magic there. Elton has become very attached to it, and now it’s a part of him. I don’t want to call it a ‘marriage,’ but it’s definitely a musical partnership.”

Bradley recounts how the partnership came to pass: “At one point about twelve years ago, before Elton played Yamahas, he suddenly decided that the piano he’d been playing was too muddy. He simply walked offstage one night and told me he couldn’t play it anymore! I immediately called Yamaha and asked if there was a piano in New Orleans, where we

were. They told us there was one at the university, which was apparently being used for orchestral concerts. We went and picked it up, and it never went back. I think several factors won Elton over: the weighting of the keys, the faster response time, the brighter tone. At any rate, it instantly became the A piano and has been ever since.”

But are audiences actually hearing Piano A at Elton’s concerts? Absolutely, says Sticha. “Everything you hear really comes from him. There’s no sequencing or tapes or anything like that. The piano is miked, but it’s also a MIDI controller that triggers other sounds such as strings and the electric piano on ‘Daniel.’ So instead of Elton having to switch instruments, we make the piano become those instruments. Also, the piano triggers external piano modules that reinforce the acoustic sound. The audience usually hears a layered mix of acoustic and electronic pianos, which all run through the Yamaha 01V mixer in Elton’s rack.”

Elton has long relied on Yamaha P300s for his supplemental piano sounds, but he’s currently switching over to the Yamaha Motif. “All the Motif sounds are fantastic, and Elton is very happy with them.” And Elton, of course, pilots everything from the Piano A keyboard.

But are Piano A’s days numbered? “Maybe,” sighs Sticha, “Elton has played it so long and so hard that it’s showing signs of wear, though Yamaha’s technicians work hard to keep it going. Maybe it is time to be thinking about a new piano.”

Actually, Elton and his team have already done more than just think about A’s successor. “Our problem,” says Bradley, “is that A has been the one used for the nightly, three-hour touring shows, while the

others tend to be flown around for, say, special one-hour performances or a single-song television appearance. Because they’ve been played so much less, they inevitably feel stiff by comparison. But we recently managed to get pianos B, C, and D into one place at the same time for rehearsal, and the boys from Yamaha came out for a little conference. They looked at the pianos’ action and everything else, and now I feel we have three excellent pianos that are very similar to A.”

Does Elton agree? “Well,” says Bradley “Piano A is in for service right now, so Piano C is going up onstage for tonight’s concert, and Elton is very, very happy with it. In fact, he says he’s over the moon with how his pianos are performing right now, and he couldn’t be happier regarding the service he gets

Yamaha Products on the Road with Elton

- 4 – CFIIIs Midi Concert Grands
- 2 – PM1Ds
- 2 – PM4000s
- 5 – 01Vs
- 2 – 02Rs
- 8 – Motif Synths
- 4 – P300s
- 1 – AN1X
- 4 – TG-77s
- 2 – DTXXTREME Kits
- 1 – RS7000
- 1 – MDF3
- Various Yamaha Mixers

DALE STICHA

Dale Sticha with “Piano A”



**"I like Elton's perfectionism.
It keeps me on my toes."**

ALAN RICHARDSON

Alan Richardson with the PM4000M

Mixing Elton for Elton: A Talk with Monitor Engineer Alan Richardson



ELTON JOHN IS SUCH AN AUDIO PERFECTIONIST that the only person he trusts to run his front-of-house mix is Clive Franks, a noted producer who has worked with the singer since 1969. But the job of mixing for the pickiest ears in the venue falls to the man at the side of the stage: monitor engineer Alan Richardson.

"I'm responsible for everything Elton hears onstage," says Richardson. "I've been mixing monitors for him since '96, and I feel we have a really good relationship. He understands that there will be nights when it's not 100% perfect, but he knows that I'm usually good for 90% of a perfect show."

Richardson's 90% figure may err on the side of modesty — his reliability has earned him gigs with Kenny Loggins, Bob Dylan, Steve Miller, Bon Jovi, and the late Frank Sinatra, who always referred to Alan, already far beyond boyhood, as "the kid."

"I tend to stay with artists long-term," says Richardson. "That's because the more I get to know them, the better job I can do for them. Elton knows that I'll give it my all, and I know that he is completely uncompromising. I like his perfectionism. It keeps me on my toes and keeps me interested. Frankly, it can get boring working for someone for whom 'pretty good' is good enough. But Elton wants to give his best performance every single night, and he performs best when he doesn't have to worry about the sound he's hearing onstage. When he feels comfortable with the mix, we're both happy."

While many singers only care about hearing themselves in the monitors, Elton expects a full, active mix. "He wants it to sound like a record," says Richardson. "He wants to hear the toms, the drum overheads, every bit of percussion. Essentially, I create a full studio mix for him every night, incorporating almost every mic onstage. And Elton isn't a 'set it and leave it' sort of guy. It's a fly-by-wire situation that's different every time."

That's one reason Richardson prefers to keep his gear as minimal as possible. "People are amazed at how simple my monitor rig is," he says. "I don't use much outboard gear because it tends to dirty up monitor sound. Remember, the artists have got a 60,000-watt PA pointed away from them, and all they can hear of it is the muddy wash bouncing back from the rear of the venue, so they need clarity. If you start adding gear, you risk fogging it up."

In fact, the ongoing search for simplicity has inspired Richardson to switch to a new mixing board. Until recently he used a Yamaha PM4000M, a smaller cousin to the PM4000 Clive Franks uses out front. But both engineers are currently adopting Yamaha's new PM1D console. "I haven't had much hands-on time with it yet, because it's so



Clive Franks

new," says Alan, "though it's a step up in quality from the Yamaha O2R I use for Elton's solo piano shows, and I love the sound of that mixer. Both boards have instant recall, which I also love, but in addition, the PM1D lets you store all your settings onto a PCI card small enough to fit in your pocket. That means I'll be able to simply carry the card with me and have instant access to my exact settings on any PM1D anywhere in the world. That's going to be a major stress-saver."

If an Elton John fan were to step onstage to hear the singer's personal mix, would anything surprise them? "The volume," says Richardson. "It's just phenomenal. People always have a hard time believing Elton's onstage level is as loud as it is. He just likes to feel his entire body vibrating from the sound of his voice. Trust me — it's pumpin'!"

John Mahon: Elton's Trigger Man



JOHN MAHON HAS BEEN ELTON JOHN'S percussionist and backing vocalist for five years, but sometimes he still feels like pinching himself onstage.

"These are some of my favorite songs," he says. "When I sing something like 'Levon,' I have to remind myself, 'Hey — I'm singing it with the guy!'"

Instrumentally, Mahon's expertise in both acoustic and electronic percussion makes him uniquely qualified to realize Elton's huge songbook onstage. He recreates both the subtle hand-percussion shadings of the early material and the rhythm loops that drive many of the newer tunes.

The heart of Mahon's custom-designed setup is a set of six Yamaha DTXREME pads. "They truly feel like acoustic drums," he says. "They're mounted like toms, so they have a very tom-like feel. I also like the fact that they're small enough to fit closely together. Some of the other electronic pads are just monstrously large."

The rig also includes a dual-trigger Yamaha bar pad and a DTXREME kick-drum trigger. The nine control surfaces drive a Motif. "The Motif drum and percussion sounds are just great," enthuses Mahon. Also onstage: a Yamaha MX12/4 mixer and a 12" Yamaha Peter Erskine signature snare. "It's a beautiful maple drum with a vintage-style finish," says John. "I play it with brushes on a few songs and man, it just sings."

Ironically, Mahon first made his name singing from behind a drum kit, not a percussion rack. "When I moved to LA from Canton, Ohio, in 1983," he recalls, "I was doing a sort of Phil Collins thing, singing while drumming. After that I played with some smooth jazz guys and with Al Stewart of *Year of the Cat* fame. But when Chuck Negron

—continued

JOHN MAHON

John Mahon's set-up consists of six DTXreme pads

**"When I sing something like 'Levon',
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re-formed Three Dog Night, they asked me to play percussion and sing, and I really enjoyed it. I like the fact that as a percussionist, I have more of a chance to sit back, listen, and absorb the overall picture of the music."

Did the drum-set background influence Mahon's style? "Absolutely," he nods. "I don't consider myself a master percussionist by any means, but I do tend to get along with drummers very well. Part of that is a matter of just staying out of the drummer's way and remembering that the drums are the real foundation. I think of the percussion as the next little layer above that."

Mahon is a perfectionist when it comes to making rhythm loops groove perfectly with the band's realtime playing. One technique he relies on is to chop a two-or four-bar pattern into eight-note slices. "Then," he explains, "I play each slice in real time, triggering it with a pad. That way, the feel locks in better, and if Elton decides he wants to play something a little faster or slower, I don't have to mess with time-stretching."

Of course, Mahon isn't the only perfectionist in the group. "Elton is very particular about tempos, tones, and harmonies," says John. "He has every detail in his onstage monitors, even my smallest percussion things. Once I played a tiny little bell sound at the end of a song, and he said, 'That's not on the record, is it?' There was nothing nasty about the way he said it — it's just that he knows exactly what he wants. Trust me, he hears everything."

Elton's One Man Orchestra

WHY, YOU MIGHT ASK, DOES THE WORLD'S MOST POPULAR pianist rely on a second keyboardist to put his music across live?

"It's very simple," explains Guy Babylon, a 13-year veteran of the Elton John band. "Elton plays the piano, and I play everything else. Sometimes that means synthesizer sounds. Sometimes it means clavinet. But the majority of my work involves emulating the sounds of an orchestra." And since the band never relies on sequenced or taped tracks, Babylon has his hands full, especially when it comes to replicating the ornate Paul Buckmaster string arrangements of such Elton classics as *Levon*.

Not that Guy's complaining. "It's a blast re-creating all that old Paul Buckmaster stuff. Obviously, I can't exactly duplicate every tiny detail from the record, but I try to re-create the most audible parts, which are usually the string section's top and bottom lines. Of course, I fill in the middle parts, too, but I emphasize those outer ones."

While it would be possible to trigger all the orchestral sounds from a single keyboard, Babylon chooses to perform with four

separate controllers. It's not just for show, testifies keyboard technician Tony Smith, also a member of the Elton team since the '80s: "Almost every keyboard gets used on every song. Guy does so much!"

"I like to think of each keyboard as a separate instrument for each song," says Babylon. "One might be woodwinds, one might be brass, one might be strings. And sometimes I like to have different string sounds on two keyboards so I can double the same part with each hand, because the little variations in touch give it a more realistic texture. But of course, I don't always have the luxury of using both hands for a single part!"

That's where Guy's feet come into play — he also sculpts his sounds via foot controller. "Using pedals keeps everything much more musical," he states. "At this point, I can't even feel comfortable at a keyboard without having my foot on a pedal."

Babylon uses Yamaha Motif synthesizers for the lion's share of his orchestral sounds, including all those luxuriant strings. It's ironic, given that he was initially reluctant to investigate the Motif. "I thought I had my system all set up," he recalls. "Then I tried the 88-key Motif strictly as a controller keyboard, not even caring about its sounds. It felt great — it had a nice, realistic piano feel, good and solid. But soon I started integrating the Motif sounds and liking them a lot. I fell in love with the string sounds in particular, especially some of the smaller chamber ensembles — they're just beautiful. Now I'm changing my entire system so that it's based around the Motifs."

Keyboard tech Smith, who has also worked with Prince, the Who, INXS, Bryan Adams, and Devo, shares Babylon's enthusiasm for the Motifs. "They're fantastic keyboards with great sounds. They're very sturdy, but then Yamaha always makes good, sturdy products.

Guy's new rack will also include a Yamaha 01V mixer. I used 01Vs when I worked for Tina Turner, and they were always solid and reliable."

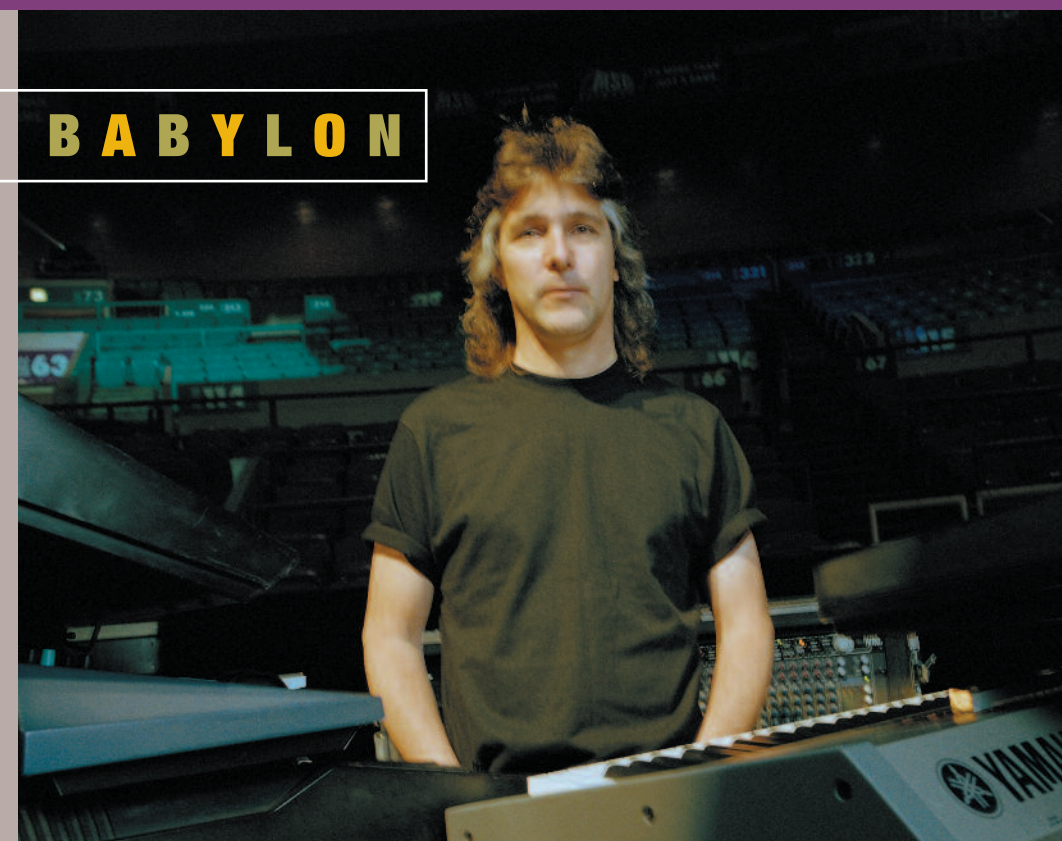
Babylon says the Motifs will permit him to simplify his keyboard rig: "I'll be using a few software-based synths and samplers, but the meat-and-potatoes sounds will come directly from my keyboards, with very few external sound modules." Another simplifying factor is the Motif's "performance mode," which allows players to store four sounds complete with splits and layers. "Performance mode lets me pull up everything I need for each song with a single program change," notes Guy.

"I never have to worry about doing any changes within a song. That's great, because I worry enough about just playing the right notes at the right time!"



GUY BABYLON

"I like to think of each keyboard as a separate instrument for each song. One might be woodwinds, one might be brass, one might be strings."



Guy Babylon's System is comprised of Motifs with an 01v mixer

TONY SMITH

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