

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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Rocketman (dir. Dexter Fletcher, 2019)

On Camera

Elton John: Taron Egerton: The *Kingsman* franchise (14, 17); *Testament of Youth* (14)
Sheila (his mom): Bryce Dallas Howard: Nasty in *The Help* (11); *Jurassic World* (15, 18)
Stanley (his dad): Steven Mackintosh: Early transgender romance *Different for Girls* (96)
Ivy (grandmother): Gemma Jones: Emma Thompson's mother in *Sense and Sensibility* (95)
Bernie Taupin (lyrics): Jamie Bell: *Billy Elliot* (00); A+ in *Film Stars Don't Die in Liverpool* (17)
John Reid (manager): Richard Madden: *Game of Thrones* (11-13), G. Globe for *Bodyguard* (18)

Off Camera

Director: Dexter Fletcher: musical *Sunshine on Leith* (13); *Eddie the Eagle* (15)
Screenwriter: Lee Hall: *Billy Elliot* (00); *War Horse* (11); Broadway's *Network* (18-19)
Cinematography: George Richmond: Mostly action: *Kingsman* (14, 17), *Tomb Raider* (18)
Original Score: Matthew Margeson: Another constant in the Dexter Fletcher repertory
Film Editing: Chris Dickens: Oscar for *Slumdog Millionaire* (08); *Les Misérables* (12)
Costume Design: Julian Day: *Bohemian Rhapsody* (18); biopics of John Lennon, Princess Di

Other films directed by Dexter Fletcher...

Wild Bill (2011) – British Academy Award nomination for Best Debut Film; story of a hardened ex-criminal who has to pull his life together to take care of his two now-motherless children

Sunshine on Leith (2013) – More or less a “jukebox musical” in the mode of *Rocketman*, using the songs of the Scottish duo The Proclaimers to tell the story of two soldiers coming back from Afghanistan and getting back into the swing of family life and romantic involvements

Eddie the Eagle (2015) – Fletcher's first collaboration with Taron Egerton, starring here as the notoriously determined and ...not-excellent U.K.-born ski-jumper Eddie Edwards

If you liked *Rocketman*...

All That Jazz (1979) – Back in the popular consciousness via the *Fosse/Verdon* TV series, this is a de facto biopic of Bob Fosse, told through his own style of choreography and showmanship

BackBeat (1994) – Biopic of the Beatles in their pre-stardom phase, hanging out in Germany and losing one of their early members, Stuart Sutcliffe, to a German woman he refuses to leave

Velvet Goldmine (1998) – Christian Bale and Ewan McGregor star in this wildly imaginative take on the life of a David Bowie-like figure, transformed into a *Citizen Kane*-style mystery; not the easiest narrative to follow the first time, but totally dazzling in its images, costumes, and songs

Hedwig and the Angry Inch (2001) – John Cameron Mitchell’s adaptation of his own off-B’way rock musical, later revived on Broadway with Neil Patrick Harris; tells the story of the titular transgender vocalist of a European glam-punk band, with buoyant highs and rock-bottom lows

Across the Universe (2007) – Julie Taymor, the stage magician behind Broadway’s *The Lion King*, constructed this pop-cultural fantasia about young Americans resisting war and dreaming of a better planet during the late 1960s, scored to many of the Beatles’ most famous songs

I’m Not There (2007) – If you have a taste for adventurous musical biographies, the same director who made *Velvet Goldmine* (and *Far from Heaven*, and *Carol*) later made this experimental study of Bob Dylan, examining all his personal and creative shape-shifting over his career by having six different actors play him and sing his songs, from Richard Gere to Cate Blanchett.

Begin Again (2013) – Remember how we loved *Sing Street*, about the Irish high-schoolers making their own band? This sweet, sometimes sad comedy-romance by the same director stars Keira Knightley and Mark Ruffalo in a tale about trying to keep your soul in the world of pop music.

Facts about *Rocketman* you may appreciate...

Rocketman has been in development for quite some time, and came closest to being filmed by Michael Gracey (who made *The Greatest Showman*, with Hugh Jackman), until Tom Hardy, the original star, became unavailable. John also declined all studio offers that pushed for a PG13-rated version of his story, essentially downplaying all the addiction- and sexuality-related material. The movie now finally arrives, co-produced by John’s husband David Furnish and coinciding with his three-year retirement tour and a memoir soon to follow in the fall.

Taron Egerton, born in Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlantysiliogogoch, Wales—yes, that is the name—trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts, where he was younger and less class-privileged than most other students. Despite making his name in action films, he has said this kind of role is much closer to his comfort zone. Egerton does all his own singing in the film and was encouraged by John not to imitate his vocals but attempt his own versions. The first sequence he shot was the star-making performance at the Troubadour in Los Angeles.

Jamie Bell, who plays lyricist Bernie Taupin, has longtime creative connections to screenwriter Lee Hall, who wrote *Billy Elliot*, and to Elton John, who wrote the songs for the Broadway musical adaptation of that film. He started *Rocketman* shortly after a grueling shoot for *Skin*, where he plays a neo-Nazi, and experienced the warmth of this project as an enormous relief.

Bryce Dallas Howard was cast as John’s mother only six days before she shot her first scene. She kept her English accent throughout the weeks of filming, since she’d had no time to practice it beforehand. Suspicious that the script’s version of Sheila was slanted too heavily against her, she secretly consulted with other people who knew Sheila and had no link to the movie, only to learn that their accounts of the woman’s personality and ambivalent-at-best parenting echoed the script. Sheila died in 2017, barely a year after reconnecting with her long-estranged son.

John Reid, the manipulative manager and partner played by Richard Madden, is the same person played by Aiden Gillen in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, in the scene we analyzed at the Oscar party for its very poor (and yet, Oscar-winning!) editing. Reid, of course, did not consult on this film.

Broad conversation topics about *Rocketman*...

Parameters: Elton John canceled an October 1984 concert at Madison Square Garden almost 45 minutes after it was supposed to start, citing “viral flu.” This is the incident that inspires the frame story for the film, as he abandons the venue and arrives to an AA meeting. The script conjoins this moment with John’s newfound embrace of sobriety, which happened around 1990, and with his release of the single and video “I’m Still Standing,” which debuted nearly a year before the canceled Madison Square Garden date. Historical fidelity aside, since it’s hardly the movie’s primary interest, what did you make of the movie’s decision to end its story on these notes (so to speak)? Many musician and artist biographies have constructed themselves around addiction struggles; did you gain new insight into these conflicts from the way *Rocketman* depicted them? Would you have been curious to explore more of John’s career after he became sober, or did this seem like the right chapter to wrap things up?

Therapy: Related to the questions above, what did you think about the choice to structure the whole movie as a sort of extended therapy session (during which, for better or worse, nobody else in that recovery circle ever gets to speak!). Were you affected by the psychological and emotional catharses that John experiences by the end—especially when all those good and bad phantoms from his life enter the therapy circle and allow him to speak to them? Do you think biopics like this exert a kind of “therapeutic” effect on audiences? As in, do the stories of famous people and their struggles help you rethink or process your own? Or do you find yourself watching them more externally than that, more out of curiosity or nostalgia?

Visual Artifice: Clearly, moments of heightened fantasy exist throughout *Rocketman*, often conveyed through non-realistic colors, special effects, and other visible elements of artifice. Even in more “realistic” scenes, though, including several in young Elton’s household or in the restaurant where he fights with his mother, the photography has a flat, hard, digital look that doesn’t look period-accurate, or even all that “real.” Admittedly, the rage for digital cameras hasn’t done wonders for studio-film cinematography in recent years, but what if *Rocketman* intends for even its real scenes to look stagy or faked? What if John’s life didn’t alternate between authentic and theatrical episodes but existed always along that spectrum?

Sound Mix: *Rocketman* often mixes the music of John’s songs much louder than their words, which also represents either a flaw in execution or a pointed artistic gesture. For one thing, this might reflect a greater desire to showcase John’s compositions over Taupin’s lyrics. But there’s also a sense that once John’s songs have been given over to an audience or amped up in a giant arena, they are no longer as clear or as personal as they were when he wrote them. Sometimes they become a harsh wall of sound—one way of giving his fame a heavy edge.

Clothes: Egerton wears 64 different costumes in *Rocketman*, together requiring more than one million Swarovski crystals. The outfits get flashier, alternate faster, and appear more briefly on screen as the film continues, reflecting John’s highly addictive relation to shopping... and, if you stayed for the final credits, you saw how the film illustrates how closely costume designer Julian Day reconstructed some of John’s wildest, occasion-specific outfits. In this or in other ways, did you see the film’s flashiest elements mostly as eye-catching entertainment or as honest documentation of an outsized life, or did they do other kinds of storytelling work?