

Ultimate tribute: the cover artist Elton John hired to portray him as part of farewell tour

Tribute artist Rus Anderson reenacts Elton John performances in his 'Rocket Man' show, and for the icon himself

By Juliet Pennington Globe Correspondent, Updated July 14, 2022, 12:29 p.m.



Rus Anderson as Elton John in "The Rocket Man Show" at the Providence Performing Arts Center. Rus Anderson / PPAC

Most cover artists typically are not recognized by the musicians they're emulating, let alone hired by them.

But those two things happened to Rus Anderson.

The Scottish-born Clearwater, Florida, resident, has worked as an Elton John tribute artist since 2009. In 2017, he was hired by John and his company, Rocket Records, to be the superstar's body double in media and promotional material for his "Farewell Yellow Brick Road" tour, including a virtual reality video. Anderson also appears in video footage during John's performances that is displayed on a large screen behind him and his band.

When fans walk into any venue on the "Farewell Yellow Brick Road" tour, they will see an image on the screen of John as he looks now, and next to it a picture of what appears to be a younger John wearing a sequined Los Angeles Dodgers bodysuit (harkening back to the 75-year-old's 1975 concerts at Dodger Stadium). That "younger John" is Anderson.

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Anderson will be performing in his "Rocket Man Show" this Saturday at the Providence Performing Arts Center.

"When we were originally casting for this Elton John 1970s version, I was a little skeptical when I heard about this tribute artist," said Los Angeles-based artist and "Farewell Yellow Brick Road" director Damian Fulton in a voicemail Wednesday, "but after meeting [Anderson] live, I was impressed with how dedicated he was to getting all the little nuances and subtleties of Elton John.

"I'd worked with Elton before and I knew that he is very persnickety when it comes to any kind of version of his work — and especially

someone who is doing a version of him — so we had to get it right,” Fulton said. “When I met Rus, I was blown away by not just his technical prowess — I mean, the guy’s a trained concert pianist and phenomenal on keyboards — but I was more impressed with his desire to get Elton right and the respect he had for the body of work and his legacy.

“I can tell you [that] personally speaking with Elton, he was flattered and blown away at the level of authenticity that Rus brought to the party,” Fulton said.

In a phone interview from his home, Anderson said he almost went into shock when he received an email from someone at Rocket Records that would catapult him into a new level of tribute artist.

“I remember it like it was yesterday. I was waiting to go on stage at Harrah’s Casino in Atlantic City and I received an email saying ‘This is the office of Elton John and we’d like you to call us immediately,’” he recalled. “At first I thought it was a joke, that it was a friend of mine winding me up. But then I thought it might be real and I went chalk white. I was terrified.”

He explained that as a tribute act, “you kind of want to be popular, but you don’t want to be on the radar of the real artist” because of copyright laws and other legal matters.

But that was hardly the case. Anderson said that John had apparently seen some YouTube videos of him performing his “[Rocket Man](#)” tribute show, and that John “wanted me to play him for some reenactment footage of his ‘70s and ‘80s concerts.”

Anderson’s dedication to detail impressed his director.

"[Anderson] really did a deep dive study on all the little nuances that make Elton Elton — so much so that I'm convinced that even the most critical fan would be completely captivated and would feel what it must have been like to see Elton John in the '70s," Fulton said. "That was so important to us because none of the existing footage of Elton in the '70s is really very good quality, and we had an opportunity doing this film in virtual reality to actually capture what it would be like to see Elton live and in 3D."

It was all new to Anderson.

"That was huge for me, because I had never done anything in front of a camera. I was strictly a live musician who had been playing the piano since I was a little boy," he said. "Things moved quickly. It went from that email to all of a sudden I was in Hollywood doing video projects and photo shoots with Elton John himself."

Before that could happen, Anderson had some work to do.

"My measurements had to match his exactly, and while I'm 5-feet 6½ inches, just like him, early on in his career he was thin," he said. "He was 155 pounds, and of course when I got the call, I was 175 pounds."

Anderson, now 42, said that John's team "had me G.I. Joe it" for four weeks, to get in shape for the role.

The hard work and discipline paid off, Anderson said, because the experience of being photographed and singing with John — "he was so nice and complimentary," Anderson said — was "something I wouldn't have ever even dreamed of."

A Glasgow native who started playing piano at 4 years old, Anderson

moved to Florida in 2003 to attend St. Petersburg College, where he studied hospitality and entertainment, and then criminal justice.

"But my heart wasn't into anything else except music," he said. "So when I was able to, I would sing at the beach bars and piano bars in the St. Petersburg-Tampa area. I just got more and more popular and it kind of became a full-time thing for me."

At the beginning, Anderson was performing top-40 songs that included some of John's tunes. He said the crowd seemed to really respond well to them. People would tell him that he reminded them of the pop icon.

"I was a big fan of Elton's and knew his entire repertoire. I also noticed that nobody else was doing Elton John songs, so I thought "Maybe I should get a pair of glasses and a sparkly jacket and put together a show with just Elton John songs."

Lucky for Anderson, his wife, New Jersey native Somali Rose, whom he married in 2007, was a talented seamstress and was able to make his costumes.

On the strength of his sound and his look, which included a makeshift gap between his front teeth and the over-the-top attire, Anderson was booked for two shows in Clearwater — both of which sold out.

The popularity of the shows caught the attention of local media, and after a newspaper article about him, Anderson said he began receiving calls from booking agents and artist managers.

"It was like overnight we went from doing one or two shows to having 50 shows booked, so of course with that I couldn't just do a little piano-type tribute to Elton," he said. "We got very serious about it at that

point, and started really focusing in on things that were very Elton-like: his costumes, his mannerisms ... watching old YouTube videos of him [in an effort to] capture the essence of Elton."

Anderson hired a full band and began touring regularly all over the country, getting media attention and building a large fan base.

Then in 2017, he received the most coveted attention of all: that of the Rock & Roll Hall of Famer.

These days, Anderson has an even busier touring schedule, both nationally and internationally. He has upcoming gigs booked in Canada and Brazil, and is playing large venues like the Providence Performing Arts Center this summer, bringing John's '70s and '80s sound to audiences in his "Rocket Man" show — named for his favorite song.

"['Rocketman' is] just so iconic and is so instantly recognizable. Musically, it's possibly the most unique-sounding song of all time. I mean, I don't think anyone up until that point and anyone since has managed to capture a space sound along with a classical piano sound at the same time," he said. "As a piano player, that's what originally struck me. ... It was that song when I was 4 years old. I fell in love with it — that and 'Daniel.'"

Anderson said that Providence-area fans can expect a greatest-hits show with reenactments of John's most popular concerts — going as far back as 1970 to his first performance in America at West Hollywood's legendary Troubadour nightclub.

"I love what I do and I think audiences can tell things like that," Anderson said. "It's going to be a lot of fun. I've never played in Providence before, and allegedly the audiences are pretty wild. I'm

looking forward to that."

This story has been updated with comments from "Farewell Yellow Brick Road" director Damian Fulton.