

GREG LAKE | May 11, 2012 | [ADD A COMMENT](#)

A chat with rock legend Greg Lake: Much more than a lucky man

Upon an exceptional few, we bestow the title “natural.” Athlete, musician or artist, they each have an innate talent that transcends *any* routine-driven ability. Supreme performance is akin to *breathing* for this remarkable assemblage.

For others, excellence is *attainable*, but only through mind-numbing hours of hard work, excruciatingly painful sacrifice – and countless bruised and bloody fingers.

And then there are those whose gifts are so prodigious that even their *afterthoughts* define their brilliance.

Music enthusiasts in the Grand Canyon State get a rare chance to witness such a rare performer when [Emerson Lake & Palmer](http://www.emersonlakepalmer.com/) (<http://www.emersonlakepalmer.com/>) frontman [Greg Lake](http://www.greglake.com/2012tour/index.html) (<http://www.greglake.com/2012tour/index.html>) makes his [Mesa Arts Center](http://www.mesaartscenter.com/) (<http://www.mesaartscenter.com/>) stop on May 16 as part of his “**Songs of a Lifetime 2012 Tour.**”

The legendary vocalist, musician and producer will be performing many of the classic songs he sang with ELP as well as with **King Crimson**. The unique gig will also be highlighted by audience Q&A sessions with the rock icon as well as between-song anecdotes about his matchless career.

As the progressive rock pioneering band ELP, keyboardist **Keith Emerson**, drummer **Carl Palmer**, and guitarist Lake have sold over 48 million records to date, including best-selling albums *Tarkus*, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, *Trilogy*, *Brain Salad Surgery*, *Works Vol. 1* and *2*, and two separate live albums. Each of the albums went platinum, owing in large part to Lake’s sparkling production, insightful songwriting and peerless vocals.

As the multi-talented artist prepared for his eagerly anticipated solo tour, Lake chatted with *Examiner* about his music, his inspiration, and a wildly-successful afterthought or two. Lake was thrilled to be sharing his music with fans on the extraordinary tour.

“Well, going back to the beginning, the idea for this tour came about because I’m in the middle of writing an autobiography. I’ve been writing it,

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so these songs keep popping up – they were special to me in some way or pivotal in my career.”

“It occurred to me that it would make an interesting show – a show out of these songs. I came up with the title ‘Songs of a Lifetime’ because that’s what it is to me. What held it captive for me was these songs are the songs I’ve shared with the audience that’s followed my career.”

“Some people obviously haven’t been on the whole journey. Some people have been on bits of it. But in a way, it represents a sort of tapestry of my career. Because it’s got *all* my songs, there are different elements in there which people may be surprised to hear me sing.”

“But that’s what the evening’s about. So it isn’t just me sitting on a stool strummin’ an acoustic guitar, boring everybody to death. I hope it will be a very entertaining evening with some high impact things and some very passionate things as well.”

Lake likened the show to an intimate evening with a few cherished friends. And while he hopes that there will be younger music enthusiasts experiencing the iconic musician for the first time, Lake feels a special connection with the *long-time* fans.

“Well, you always hope that young people are interested. But my main feeling in my heart and soul, I’m performing the show for people – I suppose they’re older people – who have been there all the way.”

“I don’t think of myself consciously as trying to appeal to a younger audience. You know, it’s just not me. I am what I am and I’ve been doing what I’ve been doing now for nearly fifty years. I look at my audience as being the same as me. As being my friends, really. We grew up together. It’s that relationship that I’m most keen on sharing.”

Even though he’s performed some of the songs thousands of times for the “experienced” fans, pondering their significance once again revealed many things to Lake about his own personal journey.

“You learn things through these experiences, really. And I suppose, these songs are like beacons along the way for me. Certain things you learn through exposure. It’s really the elements which make up *any* artist. You really learn by example. You learn by influence. And some people have a *huge* impact on you and that’s how you become the artist you are.”

Lake once remarked that “the greatest music is made for love, not for money.” Which begs the question – would he have been as successful had his primary motivation been purely financial?

“If I was to be absolutely honest with you, there are two components of it. One component is, I believe you have to create music because you

personally love it. You personally believe in it. You personally dedicate it to making it as great as you can. That's one aspect of it."

"Then of course, there are considerations about how it communicates with people, how it's produced, how it's sold. All of these things are important at the end of the day, because if no one gets to hear your music, then of course it defeats the object."

"But I think good music comes from the heart. That's my belief. You are absolutely right in saying that a lot of the – well, *most* of the hits that I've had, have come about absolutely unconsciously. Things like 'Lucky Man' were never written to even be a *record*, let alone a hit record."

Ah yes, the aforementioned "brilliant afterthought."

"'Lucky Man' I wrote when I was twelve years old," confessed Lake. "I wrote it when I first was given a guitar by my mother. I only knew four chords but I used them *all* to write that song. And it just stayed with me, stayed in my head. I didn't even write it on a piece of paper. I remembered it."

"That's one of the things why I knew it was a good song because I just remembered it for some reason. It was many, many years later when we came to record it on the LP (*Emerson, Lake & Palmer*). And even when we *recorded* it, it was only because we were one track short on our first album and nobody had any ideas."

"Everybody had run out of material and so they looked around and said, 'Has anybody got any more songs?' And there was a deathly silence. And I said, 'Well, I got this one little folk song that I wrote when I was a kid if you're just looking for a sort of filler – something to fill the album out.'"

"I played the song and Keith, he just couldn't see it happening. And he said, 'I'm going down to the pub' and he left the studio. I made the record alone, really. It was just me and Carl Palmer. I am everybody on that record. I did all the harmonies, the bass, the guitar, the electric guitar – I made the entire record myself."

"And then Keith came back into the studio and heard it and he said, 'Wow! That was a real shock from going out here and this guy singing this plain little folk song to walking in and hearing this sort of **Beach Boys** type harmonies. He said, 'Wow, I gotta play on this record.'"

Ironically, Emerson's contribution to the hit record ultimately turned out to be "slightly" less than scripted as well. As Lake related, "I'd already played the guitar solo. I said, 'Why don't you just play something on the end as a track?' He said, 'Okay, I'll play on the end.'"

"And as luck would have it, that very day we had delivered into the studio

a synthesizer – the very first Moog synthesizer. And he said, ‘Why don’t we try the new gadget out on it?’ So I said, ‘Yeah let’s give that a go.’ I’d never heard it before – *never* heard it.”

“And he went into the studio and started to mess around with those effects. It’s where one note slides up to another one – swoops up to another one and swoops down. What he was trying to do is to get the distance right so that it worked in time with the track. And he said, ‘Run the track. Let me just experiment with this effect.’”

“I do this by habit. I always record tryouts. If someone plays something out, I always record it because you never know when you’ve captured that magic tape. We came to the end of the song and I said to the engineer, ‘Was it just me, or did that sound good?’ He said, ‘I think it sounded good.’ We played it back and we said, ‘That’s unbelievable. It sounds really, really fantastic.’”

“We said to Keith, ‘You’d better come and hear it.’ And Keith didn’t want to come in. He said, ‘No, no, I’ll do much better. I’ll play a much better one.’ The problem was, we were recording on eight-track, so the only way he could have done another solo was to have wiped that one off and I wasn’t prepared to do that. I said, ‘I’m not wiping that off, Keith.’ He came in and that was the end of it.”

“And do you know something that’s really funny? He still has trouble doing it today. He *still* does. ‘Cause you know, when you do something that’s an accident, your brain never did it. It was just a freak of nature. Trying to actually recreate it faithfully is quite tricky.”

What *wasn’t* accidental was the song’s basic honesty – a hallmark of ELP’s music and an important reason for the band’s success.

“I think it’s the reason for a *lot* of people’s success. A few years back I did a tour with **Ringo (Starr)** and we did a show in Chicago and they recorded the show. After they finished, Ringo came into my dressing room and said, ‘How did it go for you? How did you do?’ I said, ‘It’s great but I made a mistake on one of the tunes. But don’t worry about that. When the tour is over, I’ll go in the studio and repair it.’”

“And he said, ‘No, no, no. Don’t do that, I like it, warts and all.’ I said, ‘Really?’ He said, ‘Yeah. That’s how we did it in **The Beatles**. Always just cut it as is. You tape the thing... you tape it two or three times. You just take the best tape, that’s it.’”

Lake professed his preference for straightforward music. And that was somehow surprising given ELP’s groundbreaking assimilation of complex electronic instrumentation in their sound.

“Absolutely. It’s directly from one soul to another. The less you mess around with that direct communication from one soul directly to another, the more effective it is. That’s how music communicates. That’s why live concerts are so great, that happening, that moment in time.”

“Funny enough, but I remember the very first tour of ELP. We were playing at Madison Square Garden. And I went out backstage to look at the audience because I’d never seen it before with people in it. We did the sound check, obviously, but I’d never seen it with people in it. I thought before I rush out on that stage and start playing, I just got to look.”

“Well, I went up on stage with **Dee (Anthony)**, the manager. I peeked through the curtains and I looked round and I said, ‘Whoa, that’s a terrifying sight! I’m really nervous about walking out there.’”

“He said, ‘Greg, just think about this. When you look out there, you’re looking at 22,000 people. But in reality, each one of them is just one person. To them, they’re just one person looking up at you. You’re just playing to one person, albeit 22,000 times, but you are playing to one person.’”

“And I never forgot that. Ever since then, whenever I’ve performed, I’ve always performed feeling like I’m playing to one person. That I think is the most honest and direct way you can perform.”

“Audiences know everything. They are intuitive... instinctive. They know if they’re being lied to, they know when it’s honest, they know when it’s heartfelt. You can’t fool an audience. What is the famous saying? You can fool some of the people some of the time and you can’t fool all the people all the time. That’s true. Audiences are very, *very* smart.”

The talented guitarist startled me with *his* perspectives on his musicianship. “I’m not really very good. You know, there are people probably within ten miles from where I’m sitting that could make me look like nothing.”

“What I’ve *got* though is experience. I’m good at knowing what *not* to play. That’s the key to a lot of debut musicians, knowing when not to play. I like **Paul McCartney** when he plays because it’s what he leaves *out* that’s great. It’s knowing when not to play.”

“When I first began playing bass guitar, there was a drummer I was playing with – **Mike Giles** – we started playing this song. All of a sudden, I hear ‘bang, bang, bang’ on his snare drum. And he stops the music and he looks over at me with this sort of sad-dog look on his face. And he says, ‘Greg, you *never* play when I’m playing the upbeat on the snare drum.’”

“And you know, that hadn’t occurred to me. It was so embarrassing

because when you say it, it's obvious. But at that time, I was playing on all four beats and the snare wasn't coming through. Of course, the moment you leave off the bass, you leave a hole where the offbeat should be. Now, you've got a real great backbeat, you know. So *there's* an instance when you don't play, it sounds better."

"The playing of spaces is as important as the playing of notes. Any great player knows it. You often find young players, they're hashing away but they're not really sounding good. They're not really playing anywhere particularly."

Over his long and storied career, the rock veteran has seen a number of changes in music – and not all of them have been favorable.

"There was an era where there was such effervescence, that period between the mid-'50s and shall we say, to put a date on it, maybe 1980. That was the era in my view of great rock music. After that, I remember people inventing music genres, like one a day – garage, grunge, new wave, house – I mean, it was endless. They were almost panicking to find new musical genres. And none of them, not *one* of them had any musical foundation."

"There's another thing too which I've found very interesting, which a friend of mine told me. **Chris Blackwell**, who formed Island Records, said to me one day, 'Greg, where the music industry changed is when the Sony Walkman was invented. Before that, people used to buy an album, they'd go home, they'd sit with their friends, they'd play the album, they'd share the music together.'"

"They'd listen to it together, they'd pass around the album sleeve, they would read the credits, they would listen to the music. It was a shared experience. When the Sony Walkman came out, it became a solitary, lonely experience."

"And that's really what his perception is. The great change is when music became a solitary experience rather than a shared experience. That defined rock and roll – the shared enjoyment of rock music."

It's that shared enjoyment of music that still drives Lake – nothing more, nothing less. "I've lived such an incredible life and I've been so blessed. I've been able to do things that are beyond belief."

"But what I *do* have left is, I love doing what I do. I love entertaining people. I love communicating with music. It's a beautiful way to communicate with people. I love sharing that bond of music with people. That is my only ambition – to keep doing that, because that is the greatest thing, really."

And as far as Greg Lake's devoted fans are concerned, that really *is* the greatest thing.

Tickets are available for Lake's Mesa Arts Center show and can be purchased at www.dannyzeliskopresents.com (<http://www.dannyzeliskopresents.com>) or by phone (480-644-6500).

Here are the remaining "Songs of a Lifetime 2012 Tour" dates:

5/11 -- Woodstock, IL, Woodstock Opera House

5/12 -- St. Charles, IL, Arcada Theatre

5/16 -- Mesa AZ, Mesa Arts Center

5/17 -- Ventura, CA, Ventura Theater

5/18 -- Los Angeles, CA, Orpheum Theatre

5/19 -- San Francisco, CA, Grand Ballroom at Regency Center

5/22 -- Seattle, WA, Triple Door Theatre

5/24 -- Portland, OR, Aladdin Theatre

5/26 -- La Quinta, CA, La Quinta Resort & Spa-Ballroom



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