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Advocate Interview: Greg Lake of King Crimson and Emerson, Lake and Palmer

by Michael Hamad

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Bassist and vocalist Greg Lake, a founding member of two seminal progressive rock groups, King Crimson and Emerson, Lake and Palmer, performs at the Ridgefield Playhouse on April 21, sharing songs and stories about his time in both bands. He spoke with the *Advocate* from a tour stop in Montreal.

[Note: this interview has been condensed and edited.]

I'm fascinated by this format that was mentioned in the press release, that you'll be playing songs and telling stories from your musical past. And I know you are repeating the performance from the last tour. What made you feel that it was time to open up to audiences this way at this time?

The reason for this tour was I just finished writing my autobiography called *Lucky Man* [currently available as an audiobook and to be released as a hard copy book just before Christmas]. A song would pop up that as I was writing that was absolutely pivotal to my life or influential to my career. I had a collection that were really important to me and a lot of them had stories attached to me. It occurred to me that it would make a lovely concert. They really represented the journey the audience and I shared together for the last 40 years. It's like a tapestry you live your life against. So the idea came for the title "Songs of a Lifetime." It's a celebration of these songs and that journey. So I tell some stories about the songs and why they mean a lot to me, then the audience tells me about their experiences. It becomes a bit interactive. That's basically the idea of the show... The idea came up for the show Keith [Emerson] and I about the writing of the material for Emerson, Lake and Palmer. We tried to play the original writing, the pieces in their original form. It was different. This is more of an emotional journey, and there's a lot more entertainment involved. Some of them are funny and there are some shocks. It's not one of those sit-down storytelling kind of things.

Have there been any audience reactions that you couldn't have predicted?

This tour has just begun, so I can't tell you much. I've had some of the most incredible stories told to me about people's reactions, about things in their lives that they've attached to these songs, literally life and death stuff. I write about some of these in my book, because some of them... For example, there was one show where we were playing *Pictures at an Exhibition* in Dresden, and a guy was in the front row literally crying the entire time. He's still in floods of tears. I told the stage manager to find him and bring him backstage because I wanted to have a talk with him. I said, "Look, it's okay for songs to make you emotional, but this is a little too much." And he said, "No no," in broken English... When he was very young, maybe 15, he owned a copy of *Pictures* and he lived in Russia, and they caught him and put him in prison for six months, and listening to us, it came back to him. That's the sort of story you get told. So there's incredible things, emotions attached... These are people's memories. We are going on these journeys, and it's beautiful to see people reliving those things and getting emotional.

Can you look to any one time in your musical life, perhaps a particular album or tour, and say, “Yes, that’s the high point,” or perhaps name a few of them?

I could give you an era but not a single event, and the reason is that between 1969 and 1978 almost every day was extraordinary: the Isle of Wight Festival, the California jam... really life changing events, even the making of the [King Crimson] record *In the Court of the Crimson King*. We were absolute nobodys, but we knew it was important. That was a strange feeling, very unusual. It’s very hard to tell you a single moment but over that period there wasn’t a week that something happened where I said, "I’ll never forget that." Walking onstage at Madison Square Garden for the first time. I’ll never forget that. But you do develop a sense of immunity after a while, because if you really allowed yourself to feel the full impact of those things, it would be too much.

Going back to that the first King Crimson album, which is hailed by many as being the quintessential prog-rock album of all time, what gave you the sense when you were making it that it was going to change rock music history?

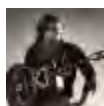
All I could tell you is that it was a very strange band. Robert [Fripp] and I grew up together, we had guitar lessons together, practiced together... We were joined at the hip, musically speaking. You see that in groups like the Bee Gees. We had a very close understanding of music. Ian McDonald, who wrote a lot of material, had never been in a rock band before. He had been in the military. He didn’t know what a rock band was like. [Drummer] Michael Giles was like someone from *The Great Gatsby*, a real 1920s gentleman, very reserved, a very peculiar person. What happened was we realized that most rock bands took their influence from American music: gospel, soul, R&B. To be different, we would take our influences from European music. We made a point of not leaning on the blues and all forms of American music. That made it different. And because Robert and I shared this knowledge together, Paganini exercises and stuff like that, we had all this knowledge and it all came bursting out. There was something strange that none of us could put our finger on. We were pulled along by an energy that none of us really controlled. The Beatles were a band that just got pulled along. I was talking to Ringo about it, and I said, “You know what, Richard? We’ve had one hit. How do you have 200?” He said, “All I could tell you is every day John [Lennon] and Paul [McCartney] would come in and they’d each have a song they’d written. And every one would be a hit.” It’s not something you

would manufacture. It's a chemical reaction that just takes place. It wasn't the same with Emerson, Lake and Palmer. It was more of an organization, in a way a contrivance. We knew what we were doing and we did it, quite well, I think. But it wasn't a spiritual thing.

I'm constantly amazed by the way the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and other institutions have shunned progressive music. Is it surprising to you as well?

I am surprised, because the word "museum" surprises me. To be a museum, you have to be factually accurate. To leave out progressive music is at least an oversight, at worst a selective process. My guess is that it's because it's not of an American heritage, or did not appear to be of American heritage. But had it not been for the great people of America, prog rock would not have existed. I mean, Ahmet Ertegun, Atlantic Records, Broadway, New York... If not for the U.S. nurturing that form of music... It's very silly to deny something they've had a hand in creating. So maybe it's not from the Mississippi Delta. So fucking grow up. It came from somewhere. It was embraced by the people of America. It has influenced bands ever since. In truth, you know, if you really think about it, *Sgt. Pepper* was progressive. It was not blues-influenced. It broke boundaries. "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," these were really out there songs. I mean, *Electric Ladyland*, this was not normal. They were not your normal pop songs. They were starting to probe and penetrate the exterior, and it opened a crack and bands like King Crimson burst through it. We came though with new music but we were unheard of. The Beatles were at the end of their run. It looks like we invented [progressive rock] but we didn't. We were part of a run.

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