

Chatting With 'Lucky Man' Greg Lake

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Greg Lake talks about his legacy including his days with King Crimson and ELP, and describes his 2012 "Songs Of A Lifetime" tour.

*There's a lot of history in Lake's career. The original singer for King Crimson joined the band at the request of school friend Robert Fripp and was a guiding force for the group's 1969 debut album, *In The Court Of The Crimson King*.*

*It was during the early 1970s when Lake teamed with Crazy World Of Arthur Brown drummer Carl Palmer and The Nice keyboardist Keith Emerson to form Emerson, Lake & Palmer. As a leader of the then-new progressive rock genre, ELP filled arenas and released several seminal albums including the group's self-titled studio debut followed by *Tarkus*, *Trilogy* and *Brain Salad Surgery* as well as the band's 1971 live album *Pictures At An Exhibition*.*

Lake recently talked with Pollstar about his newly launched 2012 tour in which the artist is exploring the musical journey he and his fans have traveled during the past four decades. But don't go thinking Lake is doing the "storytelling" thing. As it turns out, the legendary British artist has something quite different in mind.



Greg Lake

(Lee Millward)

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How did you begin planning the "Songs Of A Lifetime" tour?

I just finished writing my autobiography. It started, really, [with] realizing that there were collections of songs that were occurring throughout the book which had been somehow influential or pivotal in my career. I realized that they sort of represented this journey that I have been on with the audience.

So I thought that would make a nice concept, like a rerunning of this journey. I came up with a title – "Songs Of A Lifetime" – that was the basis of it. Whenever I meet someone, they say, "Greg, *Brain Salad Surgery* got me through college" or "King Crimson was the first music that turned me on to rock 'n' roll." There's a story with every record and what I decided to do was I would tell my stories about these songs that were important to me, but I also wanted to hear from the audience about their memories and recollections.

It's kind of an interactive evening. It is not, however, strangely enough, a sort of storyteller concept where a guy sits on a stool, strums a guitar and tells stories. It's not that sort of thing. It's quite a highly complete show with a lot of drama and impact. Some things will really surprise the audience, probably shock people. It's a great entertaining show.

I play a lot of music which is not ELP and not King Crimson. I've designed the show to be entertaining. One of the challenges of being a one-man show is boredom. I know I'd be bored. You think, "Oh, one-man show, sitting on a stool, strumming a guitar" – it's maybe okay for a couple of songs, but you don't want to get two hours of that.

The first thing I realized [is] the challenge lay in making the show entertaining. That is what I set out to do. It's part of sharing this journey with the audience, part is to hear what the audience comes back with, and part is pure entertainment and the challenge of making a show like this really great and entertaining.

Have there been moments where an audience member's remarks have sparked something in your memories that might result in another element incorporated into later shows?

Not yet because the tour has only just started. I have no doubt at all that people will bring up certain songs that aren't included and say, "Why don't you play this one?" The bottom line is that you have to in the end prioritize and make the show a combination of things people will obviously want to hear and things that are important that they don't know they are going to hear but in a straight story that is my life.

I just released this autobiography; it's called "Lucky Man" rather unsurprisingly. That was part of the reason for the chosen material.

How does one start an autobiography?

You pick up a pen and start writing, "When I was born ..." Because what happens is when you begin writing an autobiography you cannot remember a single thing. You don't even know your mother's name. You can't remember anything. Your mind goes blank. It has an involuntary wipeout response, you can't remember anything.

But the moment you start to write down details and look back at things and start to talk to friends about writing the autobiography, very soon, back come the stories. People say, "Do you remember, Greg, when we were young, we did this, or we were there." Dates bring things back into play. They give you some sort of order to the memories. I think what happens, is almost everything is stored somewhere in your memory. The problem is recording it and recording it in some sort of order. Once you develop a structure to the order, the memories seem to come much easier because there is a framework established for them to locate themselves in. When there's no framework, the memories can't find a space to locate ... Once you have a framework established, the memories start coming back.

While looking back through your life, did you see things differently than you did back in the day? That through a 21st century lens, did you perceive a moment or person as being more important to your life than you previously did? That is, were there any surprises?

I don't know if "surprises" is the right word, but certainly perspective. It gives you a sense of perspective. It made me realize that I've been very lucky. I'm not very talented but I was very lucky. I also saw how important other people's contributions were to my career. I could also, not just through writing the autobiography, but recording the experiences I had along the way, really see the value, or the lack of value, in material things. There's very little value in material things. I think I learned that by it. Things that are worth something, money can't buy.

Were there people along the way that you might now feel were more important to your career than you realized at the time?

There were people, for example, Michael D. Anthony, who was an early manager of mine. He taught me so much about America. He taught me so much about the craft of performance, I suppose the [term] would really be "show business." It's more to do with the art of performance, really.

I'll give you an example. One day we [ELP] were playing Madison Square Garden for the first time. I went backstage before the show started and looked through the curtains. It was a shocking sight. You're looking at 22,000 people. It's quite a fearsome sight. Especially if you've never played it before. I was very young and

hadn't played anywhere like that before. I said to Anthony, "Wow! That's a really nerve-racking thing to walk out there."

And he said, "When you walk out there, you're looking at 22,000 people, but in reality each one of them is just a single person. To them they're just one person looking up at you. Really, you're only performing to one person, albeit 22,000 times, but only one person. Never forget that you're only performing to one person."

I never forgot that. To this day I remember and I perform to one person. So that's something I learned that was significant. When I wrote the autobiography, I remembered him telling me that. He's dead now, so it's combined with a lot of feelings of sadness and gratitude and a feeling of richness. I've come a long way. I'm one of the people that survived in the music business, thank God. That's why I think I'm lucky and that's why I think the title of the book is appropriate.

You're a survivor of an era that saw more than a few artists fall victim to their own demons, bad business decisions and feuds with their fellowband members. But like, say, Pete Townshend or Keith Richards, you're still recording and performing.



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(Lee Millward)

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That is an element of it. I think partly because I love it and partly because I've always loved it, the music I've made tends to endure. You can still buy copies of most ELP albums and they've managed to endure over the years. I've always tried to do the best I can. I've never made a record ever for commercial reasons. I've made it to be the very, very best it could be. I think that in a way is one of the reasons the music has endured and that, really, is why I endured. Without the music there wouldn't be anything. It's a lovely feeling.

That's the other thing, when I do these shows now, when I walk out on stage it's more like walking into a room with your family. You know all these people. We've been there together for a long time. It's not like walking out to an audience that has never seen you and you've never seen them. I'm walking out to an audience that knows me personally, and they certainly know the music and they know a lot about me and the bands I was in. So we really know each other a lot.

Your career spans decades. How long has it been since you've performed in front of an audience that didn't know who you were?

Certainly [with] King Crimson people didn't know who I was. That was walking on stage cold, if you like.

[Being known] has an advantage and disadvantage. Once you're known you can never be new again. Another thing that was a real pain in the ass was, coming out of King Crimson and going into ELP, they invented the title "supergroup" and that was the first time that name was applied to a band. It was at the Isle of Wight and they said, "Look, here's a "supergroup." I think they had just been using the term "supermodel" on these girls, and all of a sudden we became a "supergroup" and it was because Keith and I were known previously for being in King Crimson and he was in The Nice. We were both well known, so it looked as if we were the sons of rich and famous fathers. Born with a spoon in our mouth and didn't have to do anything. It wasn't helpful. It made it look as though it all came too easy. But in reality I had spent the last 10 years sleeping in a van.

Since you weren't pleased with the term "supergroup," how do you feel about the phrase "progressive rock?" Are you comfortable with that?

The early problem with it was ... back at that time, almost all British bands were into American music – blues, soul, gospel, country & western – that was what they were taking as their influence. It was very difficult to be original because that well had been visited so many times it was virtually dry. So there was a need to still be original. There needed to be some different influence in the music. And we realized that the thing to do was to look to more European roots, to look to European music to take our influence, because that would be different and that was exactly what we did.

When you hear this sort of progressive music, and this is the thing I don't like about it, it appears to be more intellectual music and that is wrong. I don't like that tag about progressive music, that it's somehow more intelligent, more clever. That aspect became sort of a crutch for people, playing in ridiculous time signatures, gratuitously, and trying to use lyrics that were meaningless but lent themselves to medieval knights in armor and all of that bullshit.

The first progressive album, actually, was *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The inspiration and the roots of that [was] from European music. That was the first album that really didn't employ the blues or rock 'n' roll in that traditional sense. It stepped outside of that and used European music as its roots.

Then followed all kinds of records, you had Pink Floyd, King Crimson, ELP and a lot of other bands. Then, of course, progressive music as a form became more and more mainstream in a way and had a big influence. Even today it has an influence on a lot of mainstream rock acts. In a way it broadened out and actually influenced mainstream rock 'n' roll.

The public perception is that it [progressive rock] was somehow crushed by punk music. That, of course, is absurd. Punk and all the other rubbish genres that were invented, grunge, house, new wave ... there was a genre a day and none of them have a musical foundation. So, from that basis, progressive music was the last in a long line of rock genres that really meant something. It hasn't been surpassed. I actually believe that it is now, today, being revisited by bands almost as a way of reliving the last good moment of rock 'n' roll before it went off the rails.

And it went off the rails in a way, the music business imploded and the start of that problem really was the Sony Walkman. Before the Sony Walkman music was a shared experience. You'd buy an album, sit around with your friends, you'd listen to the record, you'd look at the record sleeve. Their eyes were open to art because of album sleeves. You'd share the record and the enjoyment. Then came along the Sony Walkman and it became a solitary experience. You'd listen to music alone and it stopped being shared. You'd buy an album and listen to it alone.

Then the music industry became evermore controlling. The music industry went from being run by entrepreneurs and visionaries like Ahmet Ertegun (Atlantic Records founder), Jerry Moss of A&M, David Geffen, these entrepreneurial people who were artist-driven. They developed and nurtured artists. The music business changed and was now handled by accountants and lawyers who new fuck-all about music and even less about the art of rock 'n' roll. All they knew was the bottom line – money. What they did was look at it as a product and said, "The public likes beads, let's give them more beads. Originality is not required. What we need is what is selling well." And that was the beginning of the end.

The final dagger in the back was when copyright became impossible to protect. That's

really the history of what's happened. Now, I think, what bands are saying is, "No money coming from the record companies. I can't get my music on the radio. So, fuck it, I don't care. I'll play what I want," going back to the progressive bands because that is what they did.

You mentioned that progressive was thought to be intellectual music. Do you think bands recording with orchestras helped promote that idea?

ELP did this piece called *Pictures At An Exhibition*. What that did was make classical music accessible to everybody. Before that, classical music was only for them what knows. It was for the elitists, the intelligencia. It wasn't for the ordinary kid. What we did was brought it into that arena and the ordinary young person responded and was lit up by it. The sales of the orchestral versions of *Pictures Of An Exhibition* quadrupled. People were buying the original version because they liked the electronic version. We opened up a new appreciation for classical music because there was a way to be accessible because it was made more simple, more accessible.

In that regard that was actually playing classical music in a rock format. Having an orchestra was sort of inevitability. In the case of ELP, it was actually the beginning of the end. *Tarkus*, *Brain Salad Surgery*, that vein of records ceased with *Works Vol. 1* and we never had a visionary record after that. It [*Works Vol. 1*] wasn't a dream, it wasn't a vision, it was a collection of orchestrated songs and material. And they were songs that were, in a way, normal, untypical of ELP.

What's next for Greg Lake?

I'm going to make a record.

Have you already written the songs?

Some of them. I haven't felt like recording for a while, many years, actually. I think I have a new appetite. Coming out on this tour makes me realize that there doesn't have to be a music business. I can do without a music business. As long as people want to hear me play a collection of new songs, they can buy them if they want. If they don't, I'm still all right. I don't have to have a hit record in order to be able to play and that's a really nice thing.



Greg Lake

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(Lee Millward/GTR)

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Upcoming dates on Greg Lake's "Songs Of A Lifetime Tour" include Durhan, N.C., at Carolina Theatre April 25; Atlanta's Variety Playhouse April 26; two nights in Clearwater, Fla., at Capitol Theatre April 28 & 30; Jacksonville, Fla., at Florida Theatre April 29 and Dallas at the Granada Theater May 3. For more information, please visit GregLake.com.

--Jay Smith

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