

Greg Lake of King Crimson and ELP

Greg Lake is quite simply one of the biggest names in rock. He played Friars Aylesbury in 1969 with the emerging King Crimson and is one third of Emerson Lake and Palmer, one of the UK's biggest rock acts. Also the creator of the greatest Christmas song ever, he has been in the business over forty years. In 2010 he is touring the States with Keith Emerson and he returns to London in the summer with both Emerson and Palmer for one of most hotly anticipated shows in recent times. Greg kindly broke off from rehearsals for the upcoming Lake and Emerson tour in Los Angeles to talk exclusively to the Friars Aylesbury website.

Hello Greg, thanks for talking to the Friars Aylesbury website. Your history goes back to the early days of Friars when you played Aylesbury in July 1969 with King Crimson and at Watford in 1970 with ELP. What are your memories from that King Crimson period just as the band was really breaking through?

I did give this some thought and I have no specific recollections of that gig (Aylesbury) but that is no indicator of anything....things were happening so fast, it was so exciting. We were caught up in this whirlwind of unexpected popularity. In spiralled out of control. It was the first time I have felt as a musician.....the popularity of King Crimson was building, but we weren't doing anything. It was just happening around us. It was a very strange feeling, almost disconcerting, because you didn't know where it would all end. One week you are playing to 200 people, the next week 500 people, and then it's 2000. It's a lot of stress.

The Friars King Crimson gig was, I think, about a week or so after you played to over 600,000 at Hyde Park with the Stones....

As I said, we were caught up in this storm of quite remarkable events. It was a fantastic time, but it went by like a blur, so I don't remember much about individual shows, but I do remember the Hyde Park one, it would be hard to forget it..

That Hyde Park gig must have been an incredible experience..

Yes, it was.

In terms of looking at things through Friars history, you had left King Crimson by the end of 1969?

What happened was King Crimson went on tour in America. Mike (Giles) the drummer and Ian McDonald didn't like flying and flying between shows. The touring of that intensity....they decided they would prefer to work in the studio and left the band. Robert (Fripp) wanted to keep the band together but I felt uneasy about it. If just one band member had left, I would have been prepared to carry with the name and continue. But with two of them leaving, it felt like half of the identity of the band had disappeared and I didn't feel good about it, so I said I would rather try something different.

Wasn't that how you met Keith Emerson...wasn't he on tour with The Nice in America at the same time?

After the two guys had said they wanted to leave the band, the last show we did was at Filmore West in San Francisco and co-incidentally on the same bill was The Nice, whose keyboards player and leader was Keith Emerson. We were staying at the same hotel and in the evening, Keith came over to me in the bar and said "how's your band going?" I said to be honest, it's not really going as we've just broken up. He said "that's interesting because we've taken The Nice as far as it can

possibly go and want to do something different" I thought maybe we have some common ground here, so that was really the beginning of ELP.

Carl Palmer had also played Friars in 1969 with Atomic Rooster and I think again with Arthur Brown, so how did he come to join up with you?

When Keith and I decided to form a band, we decided it should be a three piece. Keith thought it was a good solution and a good way to run a band. So we had to find a drummer. We looked at many drummers (including Mitch Mitchell from the Jimi Hendrix Experience) and in the end Robert Stigwood got in touch and said he had a drummer we should look at and that was Carl Palmer.

The rest as they say.....

It was really. We had a rehearsal in Soho Square and we played together and it was immediately obvious there was a chemistry. Carl was very good technically and an effervescent character and helped build the chemistry. Keith and I realised we didn't need to look any further. He was keen to join and very good technically and a positive character. We then started to try to think of a group name and couldn't think of anything that was right so we settled on using our own names.

Was there ever a debate about what order the names should be?!

We just did it alphabetically.

Aside from anything else, it probably looks better aesthetically that way than maybe another combination...

Actually it probably does, thinking about it. Keith was the principal musician and writer so it was probably right it was that way. It certainly felt that way.

In the very early days of ELP, you played Friars Watford in 1970, this must have been your first major British tour as the new three piece band?

Yes, that would be true.

As has been defined clearly elsewhere, Emerson Lake and Palmer helped create a new genre of music, specifically progressive rock, the kind of music that was starting to open up to audiences. Did you see it this way?

I see it that way now. At the time, it wasn't our intention or aim to be influential. We wanted to be original. When I look back on it, I can see that it did create a pathway for people to be far more experimental than they had been. Some of the more abstract ELP albums like Tarkus or Brain Salad Surgery...they did open up the genre and an extension of the progressive direction which opened up the doorway for a lot of bands to be influenced.

Even today, you get people like the Red Hot Chili Peppers telling me how big an influence ELP were...

That's a surprising one in some ways, that a band of their type is paying you such a huge complement...

The strange thing is, most musicians are affected by most music. True. We have all heard everybody. To a lesser or greater degree, people are influenced by the good bits of someone's' career. It's hard not to be. It's hard not to be influenced by The Beatles, or The Rolling Stones. The best of these bands is very influential.

I agree. Moving full circle, you're about to start a US tour with Keith

(Emerson) and then you're back in London for the big one, the ELP reunion at the High Voltage Festival. Is the ELP show in London just a one off?

We're hoping we'll do some more. In the States and Europe? I'm hoping worldwide as people would like to see ELP for possibly the last time and it would be a nice thing for us to do.

How are the shows you and Keith are doing going to work? Is it a mixture of solo stuff with ELP stuff or new stuff you're doing together?

It's kind of an insight into the music we've made in our entire lives. It's basically an intimate look at how the stuff was written, like under a microscope in a way: very bare, very stripped down and reveals to people the writing relationship, I think that's what it does. We're playing something from everything. So that will keep everyone happy? I think it will. It's very different to ELP, it's very personal and intimate and not a loud extravaganza.

Are you planning to bring that show over to the UK?

I think we will be touring the world with it.

To finish, I have to ask.....do you find *that* Christmas record (I Believe In Father Christmas) a millstone round your neck? Do you think people identify Greg Lake with that song or more with ELP?

A bit of both really. I like it!

I love it!

There's also a bit of "oh, that's him, he wrote the Christmas song!" Part of it is down to ELP not touring much in recent years and I haven't toured that much so when the Christmas song comes out every year, it becomes a point of focus really.

The song is railing against the commercialisation of Christmas isn't it?

It is. It was written about Christmas becoming a commercial enterprise rather than 'peace on earth and good will to all men' It was never intended to be a single, it was a commentary on the degradation of Christmas. It got picked up as a single by accident. The record company thought it could be a single. Keith and I told them they were out of their minds. We said, don't be silly.....

They were right though!

Yes.

We know when it's Christmas here in the UK when all the radio stations play your song. I'm sure you didn't think it at the time, but it's probably the greatest Christmas song ever made. I still have that on vinyl.

That's very kind of you to say so.

Thanks for your time Greg. Good luck with the upcoming tour and the ELP gig in London.

