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Interview with GREG LAKE



May 2013

He was a part of not one but two great groups whose influence on rock is strongly felt to this date yet, whether with the trailblazing KING CRIMSON, excess-exerting ELP or solo, for Greg Lake music has always been a means to reach out on purely human level. Such an approach manifested itself in the most refined form during his recent "Songs Of A Lifetime" tour and in our conversation which could and should have been longer if Lake had more time – but that's life. And then the hour comes to sum it up.

- Greg, what with your latest album and your forthcoming autobiography, you're a great raconteur, but it looks like you're taking stock of your career. Is it so? You're going to stop or is it just a phase?

The point is, I think all musicians have a lot of stories to tell, because we travel around the world so much and get to meet so many people and experience so many things. And I really didn't have any attention to write an autobiography, but one day my manager came up to me and said, "Greg, you know you ought to write all of these things down because, if you don't, all of these stories, all of these things that you've seen and done will become lost." And I suppose I realized that it's all about sharing – music is about sharing – and that's the spirit I wrote this book in: to share these stories with the people who have been with me on this musical journey for the last forty years. And it was when I wrote the autobiography that the idea of these songs would pop up from time to time that were very important to me or important to my career, and at the end of writing the book I realized that these songs represented that journey. And it was that that gave the idea to do the tour of songs of a lifetime and share the story and share the songs. The book itself will hopefully come out later in the year.



- As a book per se? There's been a talk about a USB form?

I tried to do it as three USB volumes, but it's a real problem getting them made, getting them to work correctly – it's a big hassle to get it all done. So what I've decided to do now is to release it as a hardback book, on paper, and also as an online download.

- And you'll have another piece for your first editons collection!

Well, I suppose so. Yes. Yes.

- But how does your show correspond with this old line: "On the death of inspiration I would buy back yesterday"? Do you discover anything new in your past when you're singing these songs?



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No, no, no, it's not that. It is literally that I'm sharing these experiences that I've lived through with the audience, I'm sharing them together in a new way – in a way where we're sitting in a small theater, in an intimate room, and I tell stories and the audience tells stories, and I play through the songs. So it is, in a way, a walk down memory lane – yeah, it is – but you know, music passes from soul to soul, and I see now, when I think of my whole life, how important that word, "sharing," is, because that's exactly what happens: you share the music, the feelings and the memories with the people.

- Are there other people with you on stage, a band, or do you play alone to the backing tracks?

I created a soundtrack for the show, and it took me over a year to make it. All of the tracks are newly recorded; what I did, though, was... Look, I wanted to make an interesting show, not just me sitting on a stool and strumming an acoustic guitar – a legend in his own lunchtime – I wanted it to be an exciting and dynamic show. Actually, people often think that I wrote a lot of acoustic songs, and I did write them on acoustic but almost everything I wrote and recorded was recorded either with an electronic (*sic!*) band or with an orchestra. So I could have done two hours of sitting there with an acoustic guitar but I thought that would be boring. And I thought the show would be more emotional, more stimulating and more dynamic if I created this special soundtrack, and that's what I did. And it's quite interesting because I not only play my songs but I also play songs by people like Elvis Presley and THE BEATLES.

- In ELP, you always seemed to me an acoustic minstrel in the most pompous setting. Didn't you find it strange?

It was strange! But I think it was one of things that people liked about ELP, really, the dynamic of it: one moment, the band would be very intense and screaming, and loud and powerful, and the next minute it would be beautiful and gentle, and soulful and emotional.

- But you looked like a rock in the eye of a hurricane, because Carl and Keith were these heavy instrumentalists. Did you feel a kind of independent entity in the band?

Well, as a singer, yes. A singer has a different way of emotionally connecting... When you play an instrument, you are passing your feelings through it; when you sing, it is really a direct connection. I mean your voice is an instrument but in reality, your feeling is being expressed directly. And I think that in that way it's easier to be more emotional to express feelings better, but Keith used to play some very beautiful things on piano, and sometimes I would do a very intense things – in my career, I've done things like "[21st Century] Schizoid Man" or "Welcome Back My Friends," so it's not that I just play ballads, but it is something that I enjoy doing as a singer.

- You were a singer in two bands, ELP and KING CRIMSON, who preferred instrumental art to a traditional song form. Would it be right to call you the soul of these ensembles?

I was the voice of those bands! I think if a band is purely instrumental, it cuts itself off from a lot of people, because people really relate to songs, you know – mostly to songs. They enjoy instrumental music, but for some reason it seems to be songs that connect with people more easily.

- Could it be that you feel not brave enough as an instrumentalist on the level of Fripp or Emerson? I think you're a fantastic bass player, but everybody seems to be talking about Keith or Carl, or Robert, but not you. Isn't it strange?

Um, I don't know. I think I've got a lot of recognition as a bass player over the years, but bass is a supportive instrument. But I enjoy playing the bass, I enjoy playing the guitar, but mainly I suppose I'm a singer. That's how I see myself.

- And what do people see in ELP to talk about a reunion all the time and want the band to return?

People always ask that question. Some years ago, I toured with Ringo [Starr] and every time anyone would

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do an interview, they were always asking, "Do you think THE BEATLES would ever reform?" or "Do you think you'd ever put it together with [Paul McCartney](#)?" People always want to go back to the things they love: it's understandable.

- It's understandable with THE BEATLES who played songs that everyone can relate to, but you played sophisticated music, not for average listener.

No, it is a different type of music, and it is complicated, complex – some of it is. But as far as people asking about the band reforming, it's just that every musician who's ever been in a famous band is always asked the same question.

- I'm not sure that Peter Gabriel is asked about getting back to GENESIS.

Well, I'm sure he is, because that's how he began, and it was an important part of his career.

EMERSON, LAKE & PALMER

- Then, what was the most important part of your career?

I think today, for me, right now is important, because I've done what I've done – it's something that I'm very proud of – but the most important thing to me is really what I'm doing now, and the future.

- Don't you miss big audiences now such as that that you had at California Jam in 1974?

Ah, I sometimes play to big audiences. It depends on what I'm doing. Right now, "The Songs Of A Lifetime" is, as I said, an intimate show, so it wouldn't really work in a big arena. When we tell each other stories and I play songs, it's almost like a family gathering, it wouldn't work on a bigger scale, you see.

- On a bigger scale it takes some balls... How did you feel at California Jam following BLACK SABBATH and DEEP PURPLE with Ritchie Blackmore blowing the stage to not be upstaged by ELP?

I never was very interested in who played when, who was headlining and who wasn't, because in the end, you're in competition with everyone in the world. You're as good as you are, and that's the be-all and end-all of it. If you're great then you'll be great, and if you're not you won't be. So we used to go on and play – and just play as well as we could, and that was what we did: it wasn't important to us who else was on the bill. We always went down well and we were always giving everything we had, so it was all about control. We gave everything we possibly could, there's no more you can do, so there was nothing to worry about.

- You always seemed to be a humble person – even your early bands were called THE SHAME and SHY LIMBS...

(Laughs.) Look, I learned very quickly to be humble, because no matter how good you are, there's always someone better: that's the way of the world! No matter how rich you are, there's always someone richer. I don't believe I had a lot of talent, I just was lucky – I was really lucky to start playing very young, and, of course, by the time I was 16 years old, people would say, "He's really talented, he's great!" But I wasn't. It was just that I started early so I was really good, even when I was 15 years old. And I would advise anybody, any young person that's got strong feeling about wanting to do something – whether it's to be a tennis player

or an actor, or a musician, or a scientist, whatever – to get into it as young as you can, because you're very, very powerful, mentally powerful when you're a teenager, you're very strong, you can learn very fast.

- You said, "lucky," which brings us to "Lucky Man." It was the first song you wrote, but did you, a 12-year-old, really write about having ladies by the score, with that sexual connotation?

I wrote those words, yes. I wrote the song as it was. It was just an imaginary, medieval fantasy fairy tale. I didn't even write it on a piece of paper, I just remembered it. As a young man, it seemed like the ultimate privilege (*laughs*) that you had endless money, endless ladies, endless... It was just to say how lucky this guy was, but in the end he wasn't so lucky: "A bullet had found him, and his blood ran as he cried" – as he died. It was just a little fairy tale, it didn't have any meaning at all, really, until we recorded it with ELP, and then I think it became connected more with a Vietnam war, and people took this to be in some way as a sort of parallel with a soldier going to war and then dying. Of course, that wasn't what it was written about, but that's how people took it. Songs change: everyone has got their own understanding of what a song is.

- I guess that makes a song timeless, doesn't it?

Oh, I suppose it does. But, strangely, people have their own impression of what a song means to them, and I've learned that over my career, but it's better to let people have their own understanding of a song, it's much better because that's how you share it. The interpretation of a song by the person who listens to it is their own creation, it belongs to them, it's their way of feeling that song.

- But you're not always so vague. The later song "Daddy", I know what it's about, but it clearly could only be written from a point of view of father of a girl, and you do have a daughter.

Yes, that was a specific song written from a specific experience. And I suppose being a father, that was why when I heard about this young child [*Sara Anne Wood, a 12-year-old who disappeared in 1993*] being murdered, it hit me so hard. I think writing this song was a way of getting it out of my system, because that was just haunting me, so I had to write it, to put it down, and then it was used for charity which was the whole other aspect to it. Different songs have different applicationsc but a lot of songs have more vague meaning, and they can be interpreted in different ways.

- Talking about experience, one of your early band was a proto-supergroup THE GODS.

Yeah, but I wasn't in THE GODS for very long, it was very brief. I just did it... really, I did it to move up to London. I lived in the countryside, in Poole, in Dorset, which is maybe a hundred miles from London. And musicians at the time needed to be in London, because that's what everything was happening, so I got this phone call one day, from an ex-manager who said, "Look, I don't know if you'd be interested but they're looking for someone to play in THE GODS. It would bring you up to London, you could make a record with them..." So I did it but I didn't really connect musically with anyone there – there were [Ken Hensley](#) and Lee Kerslake there. And I wasn't in it very long, I only played live shows with the band.

- You played guitar or bass?

Both. A mixture of both.

- Did you follow Ken and Lee in [URIAH HEEP](#)?

No.

- But do you think you, having moved on to KING CRIMSON, influenced a lot of heavy metal players with "21st Century Schizoid Man"?

I think we did, in a way, yeah, I think we did. (*Smiles.*) It is a very heavy track in that sense. Funnily enough, I heard a version [of it] the other day by a Norwegian band: very, very heavy, indeed! They played it a half-speed. So I see the connection with heavy metal in it, I can... But again, it was used by Kanye West in his

song "Power," so it has a lot of different ways of being interpreted, I think. But it still sounds contemporary to me, that song.

- Sure. But on the first CRIMSON album, was it more Robert Fripp's vision or Ian McDonald's vision? Nobody gives much credit to McDonald, which I think is unfair.

It is unfair. Ian was a very big writer in the whole thing, I think what happened was, when Ian and Mike Giles drummer left the band, the band broke up, and I formed ELP, but Robert carried on with KING CRIMSON, and he became the name attached with the band. Ian and Mike, in a way, got a bit left behind, because they weren't big and featuring in any other major band. Ian did play for FOREIGNER, but I went on with ELP, which was a very big band, and so people knew my name and they saw how my career carried on and how Robert carried on, and Ian and Mike kind of faded back, out of the scene. But you're right to say that Ian McDonald was a very big part of KING CRIMSON, that is why when he and Mike Giles left, I didn't want to carry on with Robert. Robert wanted to carry on with the name KING CRIMSON, and I just didn't feel that that was honest, that we could just replace Ian and Mike and pretend nothing had happened.

- So was it all in the name or did you feel that without Ian there wouldn't be such high level of creativity in the band?

With Robert Fripp

I said to Robert, "If you want to form a new band, we can do that. I'll be happy to form a new band," but I didn't feel comfortable continuing with the name without Ian and Mike, as if anybody could replace them. Ian wrote so much of the material that I thought he was part of the identity of KING CRIMSON.

- Interesting that you tell me about McDonald's last days with the band, and a couple of days ago, [Judy Dyble](#) told me how she brought him into GILES, GILES AND FRIPP. By the way, have you heard Judy's [version](#) of "C'est La Vie"?

Not really. I don't know why, it's hard to say. You know when you hear records, they either grab you or they don't.

- That was a song you wrote with Peter Sinfield...

Actually, I wrote it and Pete kind of finished it off, helped me to finish it off.

- ... so did you have a special creative connection with Pete?

Oh yeah. Pete and I co-wrote all throughout KING CRIMSON and EMERSON, LAKE AND PALMER.

- But you're not a mean lyricist yourself.

No, I'm not a mean lyricist. I mean I wrote a lot of songs on my own, I wrote a lot with Pete, and a lot of the lyrics that Pete and I did together, I wrote. So it was a collaboration.

- And you also produced Pete's album "[Still](#)", right?

Well... Um, not really. Pete and I did it together as I remember, but I did go there and help him. But because we worked so closely together, he said, "I want to make this album. Would you help me do it?" I said, yeah,

OK. But he had quite a clear idea of what he wanted.

- I know you're not a big fan of the "Love Beach" album, but would it be right to say that it, being more song-oriented, reflected more of your vision than that of Emerson and Palmer?

No, it wouldn't be right. It wouldn't be right. It's not that "Love Beach" is a bad album, it was an album that the band really didn't want to make. We were forced to make it contractually, but once we'd decided to do it, we gave it our best shot. And there are nice things on it, but again, Pete and I did some of the work on it; Keith did a lot of work on it. So it was another ELP album, but it wasn't the best of ELP records – it wasn't "Tarkus," "Trilogy," "Brain Salad Surgery," "Pictures At An Exhibition" or "Emerson, Lake And Palmer," or "Works Volume 1." It wasn't that quality. It was an album that was tired creatively.

- Maybe it's because I listened to "Love Beach" for the first time recently – I never got to it back in the day – but the songs there somehow connected, in my eyes, to what you do now. "The Gambler" reminded me of Elvis and his "Guitar Man," (Greg laughs) and "For You" sound soul-influenced and you love soul and sing "People Get Ready" on this tour.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. What we used to do with ELP, it became almost traditional that we would do some sort of a lighthearted song: we used to do songs like "The Sheriff" and "Jeremy Bender" and all these things. They were funny songs, because I think ELP was quite a dark band in many ways, and we tried to lighten it up somehow. We thought it was good to have something that was just humorous or carefree on the record. And "The Gambler" was that part of it.

- But still, did it come through Elvis' influence?

I cannot honestly remember how it about. I don't think it did and if it did, it was just an accident. But there may have been some influence; I have to listen to it again – I haven't heard it for many years. I'll have to go back and listen. But sometimes you can pick up influences without even realizing it.

- Back to your productions: what about [SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION](#), [Keith Christmas](#) and [STRAY DOG](#), all these Manticore acts?

Yeah, but this was to do with Manticore. We had this idea of starting a label to help develop artists that were finding it hard to get record deals, because the record business had become such a big money business and some artists were just not able to get into it. If you didn't get a big record deal, you just couldn't compete, and I knew a few really great artists, like the ones you've just mentioned, and I didn't want them to go by without having a career. So I decided to form this label, Manticore. The problem was that ELP took up such a lot of our time, and we didn't have enough time to run the label properly. So in the end, what we did was, we got all the artists deals with various record companies, and we shut it down. Strangely enough, I'm just about to reopen Manticore Records, because I'm going to start doing the whole series of vinyl records of mine and, of course, other people's; I'm just interested in vinyl.

- And who you're going to sign?

I'm not sure yet.

- Was old Manticore a subsidiary of Island?

It was an independent label, but we distributed [records] through Island in Europe and Atlantic in America.

- Of the acts I named, STRAY DOG were Americans. Was it you who brought them over to England?

Yes, I think it was, actually. They must have written to us or something or

sent the demo in, maybe. But as soon as I heard them, I realized that they were terrifically talented and fantastic. Funnily enough, their lead guitar player, a guy called Snuffy Walden, has become a very successful film score composer.

- I know, but first time I heard him was on a record by FREE; and he also played on your first solo album, "Greg Lake."

I don't think he did. It was Steve Lukather and Gary Moore.

- I took it from Wikipedia.

I know. Wikipedia has all [sorts of] things in it, it's an Internet fantasy. I read sometimes and I think, "Where did they get all this information?!" Having people just post stuff up there is very, very loose.

- Guess so, but I think when it comes to records, they just reprint what's on the cover, no?

Ah, maybe. I don't think you'll find Snuffy played on that first album.

- But did you use extraneous bass players there, being a bassist yourself?

Yes. On my solo stuff, I play guitar, I play all guitar.

- And then there was Gary Moore.

Yeah, there was Gary Moore, too. We both played guitar.

- Were you familiar with Gary's work in COLOSSEUM II?

Yeah.

- So when he was brought in to record with you, what did you think of the first – of THIN LIZZY or COLOSSEUM II?

You know I didn't really have any opinion of [him], I just loved the way Gary played, I loved him as person – we got on very well together, we both loved guitars – and we became very close friends. Until the day he died, actually.

- But you didn't know him personally before that first record?

No, that's right, I didn't. I didn't know him.

- So by which Moore's record you knew his playing?

By no record. Somebody recommended him. I'd co-written a song with Bob Dylan, it's called "I Love You Too Much," and I wanted to have a very blistering, fast guitar solo on the record, just on this one song. I could

hear it in my mind, and I don't play guitar like that. I was recording at Abbey Road, and I asked my manager, "You know, I really need a guitar player who plays this blindingly fast, riffing rock solos." And for some reason, he had been working on some project with Gary, and he said, "Oh, the guy that might suit you is Moore. I'll ask him if he would come in and play it, and you'll see how it goes. So they got Gary come in to Abbey Road – we met, said "Hello" and went into the studio, he put his guitar on and played the song. And that was it, that was the first time I really heard Gary play in the sense of identifying him. And he was just fantastic.

- He became a perfect foil for your songs, didn't he.

Indeed! He was wonderful! That was one of the things about Gary – he's so good... he was so good that he really could play anything. I mean people had no idea of the extent of what Gary could play: he could play country-and-western – fantastic!

- Like Rory Gallagher.

Yeah, but I think Gary was in a different league personally, although that's my opinion.

- Was that a sign of your respect towards Gary that the "Greg Lake" album starts with Moore's song "Nuclear Attack"?

I believe it did. Just because it was a great song to start a record [with]. He had that written, pretty much. I don't think I was involved in the writing of that at all. I produced it but it was Gary's song.

- Your singing on another of his songs, "A Woman Like You," from "Manoeuvres," reminded me of Marvin Gaye. Did you try to be soulful on your records?

I always try to be soulful. (*Laughs.*) But the reason of that was that Gary was a very creative person, and I wanted to make sure that he had a voice in those records, because he was putting his heart and soul into it. And every now and again, he'd have a good song and I was happy to record them.

- Were you happy, then, to sing Phil Lynott's part on "[Parisienne Walkways](#)"?

Yeah. [It's a] wonderful song! Wonderful song! Another of the evergreen songs that got to live on.

- Why did you stop your solo career in the '80s?

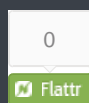
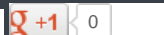
I can't remember. I think I just got disenchanted with music and the music business. It just wasn't attractive. Somehow the business changed, and I didn't feel inspired. I guess that was the reality of it.

- But there should have been many possibilities. I mean not everybody could dare ask Dylan for an unfinished song.


No, no, no. Why should I be afraid of Bob Dylan? By the time I approached him, I'd sold almost 14 millions albums. Does that put it in perspective for you? But well, yeah, I think he's one of the great, if not the greatest, guitar-singing songwriter. I wanted to sing a Bob Dylan song, just as a tribute to him, but I didn't want to do one of the ones that are well-known, so I asked him if he had any new songs that were unrecorded that I could cover, and he sent over this tape of him doing "I Love You Too Much": he'd written a couple of verses, that's all, he had the hook, and he said, "Look, would you finish that song? Then it'll be something that we've done together."

- Two more songs, "For Those Who Dare" and "Farewell To Arms," sound very Scottish to my ears. Do you have Scottish heritage?

None that I know about. But I do like Celtic music, Scottish music. Yeah, there's something about folk element that I like. I suppose it's a minstrel part in me that I just love this music that's so ancient.




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