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Meet Greg Lake, prog rock's self-proclaimed lucky man

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July 25, 2012 | Susan Sliwicki



By Jeb Wright

When the topic of prog rock comes up, few bands can hold a candle to Emerson, Lake and Palmer. One band that does is King Crimson. The bands have one thing in common: their bass player and singer was Greg Lake. Lake, originally a guitar player who loved 1950s-era rock 'n' roll, was swept up into the world of progressive rock before the genre was officially born. With King Crimson, Lake performed to more than 600,000 fans, opening for the Rolling Stones. While the band was short-lived, a serendipitous situation led him to join forces with Keith Emerson in a hotel bar just hours after King Crimson's final gig with the original lineup.



— In addition to his solo work, Greg Lake has been part of some of the biggest acts of progressive rock: King Crimson, Emerson Lake and Palmer (where he landed after King Crimson broke up the first time) and the prog-rock supergroup Asia, where he served as a singer for the band's 1985 tour. Lee Millward photo.

GM: I have heard you are planning a book and a very special tour in the USA.

GL: I am just finishing off an autobiography. It is nothing high-minded; it's just the story of how I relate to music and the part that followed and the things that happened to me. Everybody saw the major things that happened in the bands I have been in, so I have tried to concentrate on the things behind the scenes of interest — the things from behind the curtain, as it were. In order to promote it, I thought it would be fun to do a tour called "Songs of a Lifetime" and play a selection of songs that have been very important to me over the course of my life. It will be half storytelling and half music. I will play some songs that I've written and other songs that influenced me. It is going to be the musical story of my life.

GM: You did not come from a prog-rock background.

GL: My heritage was rock 'n' roll, like Elvis and Little Richard. It was only when I came to King Crimson that I didn't play that kind of music. With King Crimson, we decided that we wanted to do something different. The first thing that struck us was for us to not try to be American. Most of the bands up to that point were taking their influences from American bands. We decided to stick to more European influences, which was our real first departure from the norm.

GM: Did you and Robert Fripp know each other before King Crimson?

GL: Robert and I grew up together and went to the same guitar teacher. It ended up that because of that, I knew everything that Robert would do, musically, and he knew everything that I would do.

GM: Robert had been failing before King Crimson.

GL: He had a band called Giles, Giles and Fripp. It was a very strange band. It was sort of a half-comedy thing. They really weren't doing very well, and they had to change direction or the record label was going to drop them, so that is when I came into the picture. We had rather long discussions about what we were going to do and how we were going to do it.

GM: When you joined Fripp, had the name King Crimson been chosen?

GL: No, when I showed up we didn't have a name for the band. We were just a group of really good musicians. We were also very strange concerning our background. For instance, Robert Fripp had never played in a band before. Ian McDonald had never played in a rock band, as he came from the military and had been in a military brass band. I was really the only one that came from a rock 'n' roll background. Mike Giles, the drummer, had been more of a jazz player. You had a jazz drummer, a rock 'n' roll lead singer and bass player, Robert on guitar and Ian playing a multitude of instruments. There was no semblance or sensibility of being in a rock group, which, in a way, was in our advantage in the end. We didn't go down that normal road. Half the band didn't even know what the

normal stuff was. We sort of had an automatic originality.

GM: King Crimson skyrocketed to popularity out of nowhere.

GM: Yet it was only a year or less later that you played your last show at the Fillmore in California.

GL: It wasn't very long. We did a tour of the states right after the Hyde Park show that we did with the Stones. We only did one tour of America, and it finished in San Francisco.

GM: Did you know that was your last show with King Crimson?

GL: At the end of the tour, Ian and Mike told us that they really didn't like the traveling. Everybody was friendly about it; we still are to this day. It was one of the friendliest bands that you will ever meet, to this day. It was the flying that they didn't like. It wasn't like it is today, back then. We flew in a lot of propeller planes booked on Sudden Death Airways.



— Greg Lake relaxes with Keith Emerson and Carl Palmer of ELP during a 1977 photo shoot in Montreal. Photo courtesy Shout! Factory.

GM: Keith Emerson was on the bill on the last King Crimson show at The Fillmore.

GL: On the bill was King Crimson, The Nice, and, believe it or not, The Chamber Brothers. After the show, Keith and I met up in the bar at the hotel, as musicians do. We just started chatting. I said, "What are you up to?" He said, "I think I've taken The Nice as far as I can take it. I really want to do something else." I said, "That's interesting, because my band has just broken up." Keith said, "Maybe we could form a band." We decided there and then that we would form a new band. Looking back on it, it was unbelievable. It was very natural at the time, because he had come to the end of his band right as my band had broken up. He didn't know what else to do with his current lineup to move forward. He'd come to a dead end, and I'd come to a dead end. There we were, two dead-end, washed-up musicians in San Francisco. What do you do? You form a band!

GM: Legend holds that ELP was originally going to be called HELP and include Jimi Hendrix.

GL: It's almost true. When Keith and I got back to England, one of the first things we started to do was look for a drummer. At that time, the Jimi Hendrix Experience had broken up, and we got in touch with Mitch Mitchell. Mitch came over to my house, and we started talking. He said, "Why don't we get together with Jimi?" We said that we would do it.

I think that Jimi was in America playing with Band of Gypsies. We were scheduled to get together for a jam. I got a call from Robert Stigwood, who was the manager of the Bee Gees, Queen and others. He said, "I heard you're looking for a drummer. I've got a guy who would be perfect named Carl Palmer. He's a great drummer. He's been working with The Crazy World of Arthur Brown and Atomic Rooster." We called Carl and said, "Stigwood said you are really good and that you might want to try out for our band." Carl said, "Yeah, I'd love to."

We got together with Carl, and we had a play together, and the band was instantly formed. The chemistry was obvious. All of a sudden we were in the same room — a tiny little room, actually, about the size of a McDonald's, and the room was just shaking. The energy level was so high. I remember we finished a song, and everybody just laughed because it was just so obvious. It was locked up, powerful and fun. It sounded huge for three people, and we knew that was it; that was the band. We decided, there and then, to form the band with Carl. Very sadly, a couple of weeks later, Jimi Hendrix was found dead of an overdose, so that never went any further. I don't think it would have gone any further anyway. We were very happy with Carl.

GM: Little did you know that you signed a deal with the lyrical devil to have to write words to crazy time signatures for the next several years.

GL: The thing that was difficult about it was to make it sound natural. It really isn't natural to put words to those odd time signatures. In a lot of instances, with ELP, I was singing over instrumentals, as a lot of that music was not song material. I made it song material because that is really what was needed. The reason I did that was because it was different and original.

"Karn Evil" is a very original song; you just won't hear a song like that many times. It is really not a song at all, as it is really an instrumental piece, but I was able to put "Welcome back my friends..." over it. That song is really all about the music, but when you are able to sing across that song, then it becomes something very unusual.

At the end of recording the first album with ELP, we were short one track and nobody had any more music written. I had "Lucky Man" from when I was 12. Keith didn't even want to record it. He heard it and he said that he didn't know what he could even play on that. He went down to the pub, and I made the record with Carl.

When we started recording the song, it was just acoustic guitar and drums and it sounded pretty dreadful. Voice, acoustic guitar and drums is not a nice sound. When I put the bass on it then it started sounding like a song. I then put two more tracks of acoustic guitars on it and six tracks of vocal harmony and it really started to sound like a complete record. By the time Keith came back from the pub it was a finished song and he heard it. He said, "I've got to play on that."

There really wasn't any room for him to play on the song, but there was room on the end for a solo. We had just taken delivery of the Moog synthesizer, which, to us, looked like a huge telephone switchboard. Keith had never played the thing before.

There is an effect on the Moog where the notes sweep between one and another. Keith was trying to figure out how long it took for him to sweep one note all the way up to another note. This swooping sound had never been heard on record before. As Keith was experimenting, I pressed the record button. What you've got is a recording of him experimenting. We stopped at the end of the song, where it fades out and collapses at the end. When it was done, Keith said, "Is it me or did that really sound great?" I said, "I think it sounded great, let's play it back." It was really happening, so I said to Keith, "You don't need to experiment anymore, because this is perfect." Keith wasn't having it at first, as he was saying, "No, no I can do a much better one." I said, "Keith, believe me, it's perfect." In the end, I went out into the studio and said, "Keith, I need you to come into the booth and listen to this. If you don't like it then you can do another one." If we would have re-recorded it, then we would have lost the one that we had, as there were not any more tracks available. It was either keep it or say goodbye to it. He ended up keeping it, and it worked.

GM: There is such a progression of a band feeling each album leading up to "Brain Salad Surgery."

GL: The first ELP album did not have an identity. It was the three of us coming together, like a sort of collision. It wasn't ELP. Just like on "Lucky Man," that was Greg Lake crashing into Keith Emerson. Some songs were more Keith crashing into me, but somehow, it all came together.

In a way, it was like the first rehearsals with Carl. It was that initial coming together in a sort of effervescent way. It was like mixing chemicals together and seeing what boils over. The first album didn't have any form, really. But after that, the albums began to take shape from an inventive point of view. They become conceptual, and they had a definition and a character. You knew it was ELP; no one in the world sounded like ELP.

We had an identity, and all of the great bands had that. When you hear Jimi Hendrix, you know it is him. ELP took that identity though those albums — "Tarkus," "Trilogy" and "Brain Salad Surgery." Those albums were the — and I say this word with all of the humility that I can muster — masterpieces. After that, the band began to disintegrate when we started recording "Works Volume I." When I say "disintegrate" I mean that it became fractured, and people started going in their own directions. We each had a side on the album, and it was no longer the band that made "Tarkus," "Trilogy" and "Brain Salad Surgery;" it was a different band. In a way, it was the band that made the first album.

GM: Looking back, why did ELP have to break up?

GL: I don't know. At the end, you could say it was egos, maybe. I always felt there was jealousy in the band, and that sort of tension. All of the bands that became really huge seemed to have that same sort of interaction within them. They all fell out with each other. There was always a boiling pot of something that was waiting to boil over. I suppose it's because all of the people involved are strong characters.

GM: In your mind, can you see any new music coming from ELP?

GL: I very much doubt it. It is sad, really, as all three of us are still alive. There isn't the kind of spiritual well-being that is needed to bring us back together to share in a musical vision. A couple of years ago, Keith and I got together and did a bit of writing in my studio, and there is some lovely stuff, but I just don't think it will happen. However, I've been wrong too many times in the past to say. You never know, because people do have revelations and then see things in a different way. My answer would be, I doubt it — but you never know.

GM: Do ELP have anything left, musically, to say?

GL: The basis for the motivation, the honest feeling that there is music to be shared together is what is necessary. If you put three guys in a room who don't really want to be there and don't really want to make music — they can be the most talented people there are — but if they don't want to be there, then there is not much you can do to light that fire. That is what is missing with ELP.



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