







# LUCKY MAN



## GREG LAKE'S PROGRESSIVE PASSAGE WITH KING CRIMSON AND EMERSON, LAKE & PALMER

BY ELLIOT STEPHEN COHEN

**BORN GREGORY STUART LAKE IN DORSET, ENGLAND ON** November 10, 1947, Greg Lake's early musical influences were similar to many of his British contemporaries—a mixture of American rockers like Little Richard, Elvis, and Cliff Richard's great home-grown backing band, the Shadows, led by the incomparable Hank Marvin. Later on, the influence of the Beatles went even deeper. "Nothing had hit me as hard musically until they came on the scene," Lake acknowledges. "It was organized music that had quality songwriting, playing, and singing. It was in a different league."



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After learning to play guitar as a youngster from local teacher Don Stride—whose other students included guitarists Andy Summers and Robert Fripp—Lake went on to form the Shame, which in 1966 opened for the Yardbirds. But the 18-year-old was disillusioned by what he saw. "Everything about them was messy and disorganized," says Lake. "It was a bit of a shambles."

Later hooking up with a band called Shy Limbs, Lake's career took off in when

his old mate Robert Fripp invited him to join the group Giles, Giles & Fripp. With Lake setting down his guitar to assume role of the new group's bassist and lead singer, the band reinvented itself as King Crimson. Crimson's debut album *In the Court of the Crimson King* heralded in a new era of progressive rock music.

But before the release of the band's second album, *In the Wake of Poseidon*, Lake met keyboardist extraordinaire Keith

Emerson, then part of the British band the Nice. Rock impresario Robert Stigwood then connected the pair with Atomic Rooster drummer Carl Palmer. Result: Emerson, Lake & Palmer, the most impressive supergroup trio since Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce, and Ginger Baker formed Cream five years earlier.

Emerson, Lake & Palmer's success was instantaneous, their self-titled debut album going platinum soon after its release. Unlike most of their British predecessors, whose influences were mainly early American blues and rock pioneers, ELP's roots were primarily drawn from the European classical tradition.

Lake, the band's singer, bassist, and guitarist—as well as its chief songwriter and producer—led ELP through such esteemed works as *Tarkus*, *Trilogy*, *Brain Salad Surgery*, and *Works, Volumes One & Two*, as well as their unique 1971 live album, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, which featured their modern interpretation of Modest Mussorgsky's famous 19th century classical suite. (A Special Edition DVD of *Pictures at an Exhibition* was released in July by Eagle Rock Entertainment.)

During this time, Lake's compositions such as "Lucky Man," "From the Beginning," "Still You Turn Me On," "C'est la vie," and "Karn Evil 9" also became radio staples, making ELP one of the world's most successful groups. But by 1978's *Love Beach* album, the creative spark had largely left the band, its once-revolutionary music having become stale and outdated. The trio disbanded the following year, with a few subsequent reunions.

Lake's career since then has never reached his ELP glory days. His solo albums, 1981's eponymous debut, 1983's *Manoeuvres*, and 2000's *Nuclear Attack*, all sold poorly. But his pioneering bass work, and his overall musical talents, have led to stints with Trans-Siberian Orchestra, Ringo Starr's All-Starr Band, and the Who. Currently touring with Keith Emerson, Lake still has hopes for a full-fledged ELP reunion, and their return to prominence in the current music world.

**King Crimson's first two albums, *In the Court of the Crimson King*, and *In the Wake of Poseidon*, still sound fresh and exciting. Would you say you were the primary producer of those recordings?**

King Crimson was really a communal band; we all had creative roles to play. But

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of course, as a singer, I had to exert myself a lot, because the music has to be suitable for singing. The thing about King Crimson, unlike most other bands I've been in, was that it was always more important to listen to what everyone else was doing than it was to play. Sometimes Fripp would stop playing for three or four minutes, then come back in when he felt the space needed something.

**Everyone's playing on "21 Century Schizoid Man" is so incredibly fast.**

Robert and I had learned the art of cross-picking, playing up and down strokes with the plectrum. When you get adept at it, you can play very fast. We used to practice these guitar exercises like the ones the famous violinist Paganini used to write to challenge other musicians. So, when it came time for the solo in the song, Robert decided to design one that would totally confound other guitarists who tried to play it. It was a musical joke, really.

**What kind of bass were you playing during your time with King Crimson?**

I've always played a Fender Jazz Bass, and at the time I was also using a Hiwatt amp. I've always preferred Jazz Bases, because their thinner make it easier to play fast.

**In July, Emerson, Lake & Palmer played a reunion show in London that was the first time the band had performed in 12 years. Was the old chemistry still there?**

"As a bass player, you can't play at the same time the drummer is hitting a snare. You have to stop."

Oh, yeah—it was great. It was a difficult show to play, because we hadn't been together for a very long time, and we didn't have the luxury of doing some small shows to warm up for it. What was particularly impressive to me was the warmth and enthusiasm that the audience had for us. The other thing was that the majority of people there were under 30, which came as a complete shock to me. They loved us, and we loved them.

**When ELP disbanded in 1979, prog-rock's popularity had been greatly usurped by punk and new wave. John Lydon (of Sex Pistols fame) complained to the press that bands like ELP were dinosaurs—that their music was overindulgent. He felt these groups had removed the fun element out of rock & roll, and rendered it monotonous. Did you see any validity in his prognosis?**

Lydon was never in a position to comment on music, whatsoever. He's not a musician, so I can't take anything he's said seriously. He's a clever media manipulator. Back then, the press was coming up with new musical genres every week. One week it was garage, then punk, then new wave. Everyone was desperately floundering

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around to find something that could be the next genre after progressive music started to fade, and they couldn't find it. So new bands had to resort to insincere, stupid behavior, putting spikes in their heads, dressing up like idiots, and spitting on people, hoping it would be considered some new sort of musical revolution. Emerson, Lake & Palmer never stopped anyone from playing anything. We made our contribution, and welcomed everybody else to play their own music.

**Do you think that music has gone downhill overall since then?**

If you compared all of the music made before 1980 and what's gone on since, I don't think you'd have a hard time convincing most people that the best music was made back then. Ever since, there's been no real definition in music—no virtuosity, sincerity, depth of emotion, poetry, or originality.

When I first started in music, if you put on any of the current albums, within the first few seconds you would know immediately if it was the new Jimi Hendrix, the Who, Pink Floyd, or Jethro Tull. These

bands had their own identities. Nowadays, you put on a record, and by the time it's finished, I couldn't tell you who it was. In the '60s and '70s, the whole weight of importance was to at least try to make an effort to be original. That's where the concept of progressive music came from. It was all about trying to do something different.

**Would you say one of ELP's greatest contributions was exposing young people to such classical works as Aaron Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man," and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, via your more modern interpretations of them?**

I think inadvertently, it was. We didn't consciously set out to do that, but it became a byproduct of what we did. Before we did those interpretations, classical music was largely perceived as being for the elite, the upper class, people who had a good formal education, and people who had money. Most ordinary working class young people had no exposure to classical music. They were made to believe that it was exclusively for people who were smarter, or generally

better than them. After we started doing our versions of the classics, it gave those people a real sense of belonging with the music.

**What do you think drew the average fan to the band's shows during the peak of its popularity?**

While our music did have an intellectual appeal for some people, the bulk of our audience were people who enjoyed hearing "Lucky Man" and "Karn Evil 9," and seeing Keith throw the organ around onstage, playing it with a knife edge. We never designed our music to appeal to intellectual people. Keith Emerson is not a classically trained musician, and we never had any aspirations to be seen as intellectual or clever. We just felt it was more honest for us to play music that had European roots, rather than American ones like most other British bands.

**What impact did ELP's lack of guitar have on your bass playing?**

I had to compensate a lot. There was an art to it, because we haven't got the same freedom as guitar players. For example, as a bass player, you can't play at the same



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time the drummer is hitting a snare. You have to stop, whereas a guitar player can play right across it. So, there are definitely limitations with the bass, which makes it what it is. It's a supplementary instrument, but I've always tried to play it in a way where it's both supportive and percussive.

**How would you say your style has evolved over the years?**

My journey from guitar to bass was a strange one. The longer I've played, the more

respectful I've become of what makes good bass guitar playing. Now when I play, I don't try to do too much. I just think, What's the right bass part to play? The older I get, the more I realize that sometimes the less you play, the better. Holes are fantastic things.

**Back when ELP was recording, you sometimes used a very unusual 8-string Alembic bass.**

I did use the Alembics for a while. The company built a whole series of custom

basses for me. The one you're probably referring to had lights going up and down the neck. It was a fabulous bass guitar, but unfortunately the tension was always too great, and the headstocks would snap.

**What were some of the best-known tracks that you used it on?**

It was during the period when we did "Fanfare for the Common Man" and "Karn Evil 9." I didn't use it for everything during that time, because it was incredibly heavy, and also very twangy sounding.

**You also provided quite a bit of acoustic guitar work for the band.**

Yes, my primary guitar was a Gibson J 200. I've always used them. They just have this wonderful rich tone, and you can use them equally well for both picking and strumming.

**In a career that's lasted over 40 years, what are your proudest accomplishments?**

I feel more lucky than proud. A lot of my success has just been the good fortune of the wind blowing in the right direction. I suppose I am proud that the music of both King Crimson and ELP has endured the test of time, and I believe that's the true mark of quality. When those bands were creating the music, we did everything in our power to make our music great works of art, not just rock & roll records to make money. BP

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