

GREG LAKE

SONGS OF A LIFETIME

AS GREG LAKE PREPARED TO TAKE HIS ONE MAN SHOW AROUND THE UK THIS MONTH HE TOLD STEVE PILKINGTON ABOUT THE CONCEPT BEHIND IT, AND WITH HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY SOON TO BE RELEASED HE RELIVED SOME STORIES FROM HIS PAST.

Greg Lake is, of course, someone who needs no introduction to anyone with even a passing knowledge of 1970s classic rock, owing to his time with the genre-defining progressive rock behemoth that was Emerson, Lake And Palmer. It could be said however, that he has been less than prolific in recent years (occasional ELP reunion events notwithstanding), but all of that is changing now as he takes his Songs Of A Lifetime tour around the world, and prepares to release his autobiography. I managed to get together with Greg to discuss these issues, plus some interesting diversions down memory lane, as it were.

I began by asking Greg about the current tour, which is due to hit the UK shortly. 'Yes, it's the Songs Of A Lifetime show that I'm doing, which is not a full band show this time, it's just me and the audience. How it came about is that I've just finished writing my autobiography, and while doing that it came to me that there was a thread throughout some of the songs which have been important or influential to me, some written by myself but some by other people, so I had the idea of doing this intimate kind of show where the audience and I go on this journey that we've shared through these songs. The way it works is that we

kind of exchange memories, because people in the audience might have attachments personally to things like Brain Salad Surgery or Pictures At An Exhibition, and I think what songs mean to people is what gives them their magic. People come up to me all the time and say things like "Brain Salad Surgery got me through college" or "I met my wife when she was playing Still You Turn Me On", that sort of thing – so there are stories attached to these songs, and that gave me the idea to do this show where I play the songs and we chat about the memories. I must stress though, it's not one of those boring shows where I sit there on a stool, like a Legend In His Own Lunchtime kind of thing – the songs are quite powerful, and it's quite a loud show at times as well. The important thing is the shared experience of it, and every night I'll look and see people with tears in their eyes, but then shortly after they'll be laughing, so it's a real roller-coaster of an experience, for me as well as the audience. I wanted it to be an intimate setting, so that I can actually look people in the eyes and get that connection, you know?'

I wondered from this what the repertoire of the show might cover – the storytelling element is clear, but what songs might be involved? 'Well, there's stuff dating back to King Crimson, and of course plenty of ELP songs, but there are also songs by other people which have been important to me. For instance, I do an Elvis song, which might seem unexpected, but when I was very young Elvis was The Man when it came to opening me up to rock and roll, so it's something which had a huge personal influence on my own life. It's great because the fact that the audience know all of these songs makes for some wonderful shared experiences. I'll tell you one story in particular which happened recently – during one of the shows I stopped and asked if anyone in the audience would like to share anything themselves from their experience or tell any stories, because we'd love to hear them. Well, this one woman stood up, and she said 'The thing is, I'm here tonight because I came for my husband', and she pointed to this empty seat. Explained that he had bought the tickets for the show, because he was a huge fan, but a few days before the show he had died, and she said 'It was hard, but I've come because I know he would

have wanted me to, and in a way I've brought him here.' The whole audience just went 'Whoahhh!', and you could have heard a pin drop. I said to her what a lovely thing that was to do, and do you know, the whole audience to a man stood up and applauded – it was amazing, even I was crying! Yet, a few minutes later they were laughing again – I mean, you can't script that stuff, except that I can pretty much guarantee that something along those lines will happen every night, someone will have a tragic story of some kind, and someone else will have a funny story, and it's just such a magical event.'

So, I commented, it seems that the show is kind of promoting the autobiography, with the storytelling element? 'Yes, it is in a way, but I wanted to look at it in a different way. The thing is, I never wanted to do an autobiography, but it was my manager who persuaded me. We'd go out to dinner or whatever, and I'd start telling a story from the old days, and he'd say to me 'You really should write this down.' I wasn't keen at first, but he said that if I didn't write these things down they'd be lost forever, and the way he put it was that not many people had seen everything from inside like I had, so I've tried to present it that way, so people can see what it was like on the other side of the fence, as it were. It's available first as an audio download, because what I've done is I've written the whole thing myself rather than use any ghost writers or anything, and I've then read the whole thing myself as a script so that people can hear me telling the tale myself, and then it will be released as a hardback book so that people who want a physical book to read can do so. I can promise that for anybody who's interested in the King Crimson and ELP story it will be a fantastic read, but anyone who's not will most probably

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Solo tour, 2005



PHOTO: LINDA HEATH

be bored to tears by it – so I hope there's still a few out there! I do like the audio version, because it's a bit of a strange experience hearing the person who actually wrote it reading the words themselves – it's not like these audio books where it's some other interpreter reading it, it's a much more personal experience, and I like that.'

At this point I took Greg back to his ELP days, and brought up the fact that of course his acoustic pieces were always a highlight of the albums for a lot of people. Would it be fair to assume, I wondered, that these were his favourite part of their repertoire? 'Well, in some ways it is, yes – it gives me a chance to play some acoustic guitar, and they're songs I really love singing and that mean a lot to me, but on the other hand I love all kinds of music, and I loved playing all facets of ELP's music. I mean, how could anyone not enjoy singing some of that stuff – 'Welcome back my friends to the show that never ends', fantastic, uplifting music, wonderful. Both sides of the coin had their appeal in different ways for me, and it all comes down to whether you can touch someone else with the music – if you're a musician and you're doing your job right, what you play or sing should be able to enter someone else's soul, and if it does so that's the most tremendous gratification in the world. I often find, you know, that a lot of people's perception of ELP was that they looked at us and thought

"Nah, bunch of smartarses, the music's a bit pretentious", and in a way they were right, but the thing is that beneath that veneer there was an awful lot of passion and feeling – and I would even say soul. If you dig deep enough in the music you will find a lot of soul there – not in the sense of copying blues or soul of course, but in the sense of the European influence.'

I agreed with this at this point, citing Tarkus as an example of a supposedly overblown piece, whereas sections like *Stones Of Years* and *Battlefield* have a lot of feeling in them. 'Yes, they do – and the thing about that is, if you take a song like *Stones Of Years*, it's OK, but when you set it against something like the 5/4 intro to *Tarkus*, THEN it's impressive. The pieces on their own are less impressive, but when they are put together then that context makes it special, they gel so well together. And that for me is the key to a lot of what made ELP what they were, the way the dynamics worked – one minute you'd be screaming or playing something really aggressive like *Barbarian*, then the next you could be singing something like *Watching Over You*, or the Christmas song. I used to love the transition from something really wild and ferocious to the pastoral beauty and deep sense of pathos that you might get from one of the subtler pieces, and I think that went a long way to making ELP special, there weren't that many bands who could switch between such extremes

so quickly.'

Moving back to Greg's own role within ELP, one thing which he rarely utilised was electric guitar, despite moments such as the solo in *Battlefield* being quite sublime. I wondered about the reasoning behind this. 'Well, basically that's because, without a proper bass player, the price is too high. If I picked up the electric guitar, Keith would try to fill in with bass pedals or whatever, but it's not the same. We could have overdubbed it in the studio, but we didn't want to do that as we couldn't have reproduced it live. I did do a little bit on *Brain Salad Surgery*, in *Karn Evil 9*, but not a tremendous amount. You can get away with it for a little while, but after a time the bottom end becomes really cloudy and it's just not practical. That's one of the reasons that I liked to do my own things on the acoustic guitar, to give me that change. Because at the end of the day, what I am really is a guitar player who switched to bass. I actually went to the same guitar teacher as Robert Fripp, as indeed did Andy Summers of *The Police*, and right up until *King Crimson* I was purely a guitar player. In *Crimson*, of course, there really wasn't room for a second guitarist alongside Robert, and as we were short of a bass player, I was asked if I'd switch – so I had to learn to play bass pretty quickly! At the time I just thought 'How hard can it be, four strings instead of six', but I soon had my eyes



Lake at High Voltage 2010

PHOTO: LEE MILLWARD

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realised that we didn't have an album cover. None of us knew anything about graphic design or anything like that, and suddenly Pete Sinfield (lyricist and 'associate member' of the band) says "Well, I've got this friend, and I think he works for a graphical design company, so maybe I could ask him", to which we replied "Okay Pete, that sounds interesting – give him a call when you get home". Anyway, that was that, and we went back to recording, and while we were finishing off the Schizoid Man track this guy walks into the studio, and none of us knew who he was except Pete, who calls over "Hey Barry, come in!", because it turns out this was Barry Godber, the guy Pete had called to ask about the album cover. So he comes in, and we see that he's carrying something under his arm wrapped in a brown paper parcel tied with string. He comes over, shakes hands and says hello, and then he takes a pair of scissors out of his pocket and cuts the string on this parcel, unwraps it and drops the full size album cover on the floor, and there is the face of Schizoid Man. There was a moment of breathlessness where our hearts just stopped, because there was no way he could have possibly known what we were recording that afternoon – we didn't even know beforehand – and there we were, staring into the face of what could only be the 21st Century Schizoid Man. We were just stunned, and there was never even any discussion about whether that was to be the album cover or not, because it was just obvious to everyone that this was the cover. Anyway, that's not the end of the story, because tragically, not long afterwards, young Barry who had painted this incredible cover, just dropped down dead in the street of a heart attack in his early 20s. We were just shocked beyond belief, when we heard – this

opened to the fact that playing bass is a whole different world if you want to do it properly – even though I was a pretty good guitar player at the time, there was a lot to learn, and I spent a lot of time listening to people like McCartney to pick things up from the masters. The thing about the bass is that it's primary role is supportive, but as bass players became better and better, their playing started to become more decorative, and all of a sudden you'd realise that you were actively listening to the bass - which is a wonderful thing if it's done with taste and discretion, but it's a ball-ache if it ends up as 'me and my bass solo', you know? Just wait for my 'Bass Concerto'! Ha-ha!

After assuring him that I would not be at the head of the queue to review his bass concerto if it appeared, I moved on to that great first King Crimson line-up, which was together for such a frustratingly short time. 'Yes, that's right, it was. But you know, that was such a magical band, with such magical properties, and it really was all for one and one for all. There was no selfishness or anything like that in that original band, that was the amazing thing. If we'd stayed together

and made more albums then I don't know what it would have become, but for that short time around the first record it remained this delicate, wonderful unique thing – a great, great time. Everything about that first album just came together effortlessly, it was just as if we had a following wind and everything fell into place – even the album cover. In fact, I'll tell you the story about how that album cover came about if you like.'

I'm sure most readers of this will be aware of the iconic cover art from that debut release 'In The Court Of The Crimson King. Depicting a contorted, screaming face with the wraparound to the side of the head on the gatefold, the cover has no writing whatsoever on the front or back of the outer gatefold, which was quite a leap for the time (1969), and has become synonymous not just with King Crimson but with early progressive rock as a whole. Greg at this point proceeds to relate the inside story of how the cover came to be. 'It was towards the end of the making of the album, and we were recording the song 21st Century Schizoid Man at the time. A little while before, we had been talking and had

The iconic cover of the classic album *In The Court Of The Crimson King* by King Crimson



young, incredibly talented guy who had painted this gloriously brilliant and coincidental picture and he just drops down dead. The thing was, we were young at the time, and at that age you haven't really known a lot of people to die, only grandparents and stuff like that, so we were just shell-shocked. I'm so glad the album became such a success though, because what a wonderful tribute to the guy, that his work still lives on so universally, wonderful. What an incredible cover, and what an incredible album!

I asked at that point why the band fell apart so early, was it perhaps the first inkling of Robert Fripp's famously restless nature? 'No, no it wasn't that. The band actually fell apart in America when Ian McDonald and Michael Giles decided that they didn't want to be touring any more, and they wanted to just make studio albums. This was after the Beatles had set the precedent of coming off the road, so they maybe got the idea from that, I don't know. Anyway, Robert wanted to carry on with the name King Crimson and replace the guys and carry on, but I just couldn't see it to be honest. If it was just one guy then maybe, but this was losing half the band, and Ian McDonald actually wrote quite a lot of the material as well, so I just didn't think it would be the same. By the time the second album came out (*In The Wake Of Poseidon*), the band that had recorded that had already splintered, and from that point on it just became Robert's singular vision, with a sort of travelling collective of various players under the banner of King Crimson. Good musically, don't get me wrong, but never remotely the same as the King Crimson that I knew.'

Of course, that original line-up is one of the few truly classic band line-ups which has never had any kind of reunion (apart from the '21st Century Schizoid Band' collective which partially reunited some members). 'Yes, which is a shame really, but that's just Robert I think, he doesn't really like looking back at things. I've never really talked to him about it to be honest, but if you asked him I think he'd say he wants to look forward and move on whereas that would be retrogressive, blah blah – which is fine as his view, but I think sometimes there is a value in looking back at things. I mean, take this show that I'm doing now – the whole concept is about looking back, but the point is that what makes it special is not just the songs but the shared experience of it, which is why that kind of thing can be so exciting, and dare I say even important, since people can have such emotions tied up in the music. So to that end, yes, I think going back is valid, I have no problem with it.'

Recently, there has been some speculation on various internet forums about the 'untitled ballad' bonus track which was pulled from the *Tarkus* remaster. I asked Greg what the story behind that was. 'Ah well, it's not me, I can tell you that. What I believe happened is that someone found this track in the ELP vaults which someone had sent in to Manticore records as a demo, and it had got mixed up with our own stuff. They must have thought 'Oh, that must be Greg', because it did sound a bit like me, but I can assure you it wasn't. As soon as the mistake was discovered they rectified it – it is definitely not a great lost ELP track!'



At this point I started to wind up proceedings, but not before I put Greg on the spot with a couple of questions. Firstly, I decided I had to ask just what was the meaning behind the infamous line 'Someone get me a ladder' from the track 'Still... You Turn Me On'? 'Well, it's to escape from somewhere, to get out of a situation, that's the only meaning really. But in answer to what you're asking, in terms of how it ended up in that song, I'll be honest and say I have no idea, I can't remember! But in all honesty one reason that I don't like discussing lyrics is the fact that they can mean different things to different people, and if someone attached their own meaning to a song, and it speaks to them in that way, who am I to spoil it by analysing what I was thinking when I wrote it?' A good example of that, I suggest, is the line from *Battlefield* 'were the blades of grass and arrows rain, then there'd be no sorrow, be no pain', being in the sense of 'if the blades were blades of grass and the arrows only rain', whereas I have heard people over the years hearing it as 'Where the blades of grass and arrows reign', giving it a totally different interpretation. 'Yes, you're right, that's a good example of what I'm talking about, that can be taken in different ways. But you're correct though, the first interpretation there is the correct one, that's how I wrote it.'

Finally before finishing, I had to bring up one of the most famous ELP stories of all, that of Greg and his 'carpet roadie'. The story went that in the 70s ELP had become such bloated dinosaurs that Greg refused to perform unless he was standing on the expensive carpet that his dedicated employee used to maintain for him. So, could he confirm or scotch the myth – did he have a Carpet Roadie? 'Well – it wasn't his sole job! (laughs). It wasn't his only responsibility, but he did used to carry the carpet around and roll it out on the stage, yes. I'll tell you where that came from though, in my defence! The

thing was, the reason I wanted something to stand on was because I got electrocuted one night, and they gave me rubber mats to prevent it happening again, which were awful to stand on, so I asked couldn't we get a bit of carpet which would be a bit better. So the roadie went off to get some carpet, but in those days there was a lot of money floating around, and the roadies carried the cash, so off he went and came back with this Persian carpet made from real silk which cost about eighteen thousand quid! They brought it in and it never occurred to me, I just went 'Oh, that looks nice.' I thought they'd found it out the back somewhere or something – no wonder it looked nice! So that was how the thing arrived, but then what made it worse is that before every show the guy would come out about fifteen minutes before the show started and roll it out. I was in the dressing room, so I never saw this, but he waited until all the audience were in place watching, rolled out this Persian rug, and then to make matters worse he started to vacuum it! No wonder I got a reputation – but it was a good story, so we let it persist. That was the 70s, after all!'

So with that particular piece of rock and roll folklore laid to rest, or at least partially explained away, Greg took his leave to continue preparations for the UK leg of his *Songs Of A Lifetime* tour, which sounds as if it promises to be a unique experience not to be missed. It's good to see him active again. ☺

Greg Lake's *Songs of a Lifetime* show is in the UK during November - dates can be found at the back of this issue.

Greg Lake's autobiography, *Lucky Man*, is set for release later in the year. The first audio volume of the book will be available during the tour.