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THE S&V INTERVIEW

Greg Lake & ELP: Welcome Back to the Hi-Fi Show That Never Ends

By Mike Mettler • Posted: Sep 7, 2016

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Emerson, Lake & Palmer were always at the forefront of progressive music — albeit with one caveat. “The actual word ‘progressive’ has become elitist, and in some ways, pretentious,” observes ELP vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Greg Lake. “That aspect of it, I don’t like. But the underlying intention is to make music that hasn’t been made before; it’s to try and be original. So I would rather use that word.”

Being original has been a hallmark of ELP ever since their adventurous self-titled 1970 debut, and now the band’s sonic legacy has been distilled into a nice three-disc collection, *The Anthology* (Manticore/BMG), which also serves as a 39-track sampler of a full-bore catalog reissue series, which recently commenced with three two-discs sets, each complete with outtakes and bonus cuts, for 1970’s *Emerson, Lake & Palmer*, 1971’s *Tarkus*, and 1971’s *Pictures From an Exhibition*.

Though ELP lost one-third of its brotherhood when keyboard wizard Keith Emerson sadly passed away this past March, the scope and breadth of these three reissues and *The Anthology’s* key selections from 1970–98 affirm the band’s aural legacy. “Certainly these records were made as works of art, rather than commercial

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packages,” clarifies Lake (at left in the above vintage band photo; drummer Carl Palmer is at the center, and a bearded Emerson is on the right). “It doesn’t matter what style it is, how old it is, or who did it — music is either from the soul and from the heart and it’s sincere, or else it’s commercial trash. In the end, I think the music itself is the thing that matters. One of the great gifts I’ve had in this life is to be able to make music, and it’s something that will outlive me. That alone is a phenomenally gratifying and rewarding thing. To have left a mark — just that alone is a real privilege.”

I Skyped with Lake, 68, across The Pond to discuss how effectively ELP utilized the stereo soundfield, why he prefers the analog format, and what the ultimate key is to making good records. Ooh, what a Lucky Man he still is.

Mike Mettler: Stereo was used to great effect in a lot of ELP recordings. For example, in “From the Beginning” [on *Anthology* Disc 2, originally from 1972’s *Trilogy*], Keith Emerson’s back-half synthesizer solo totally dominates the right channel.

Greg Lake: Stereo still fascinates me. To be able to move a sound in space — that’s a magical thing. I’ve always tried to use stereo in an effective way. It gives you more perspective on a recording. If things are occurring in different places in the spectrum, it’s like a painting. It becomes more vivid and colorful if things are coming at you from different places.

Mettler: Is there one particular best example of the stereo effect you wanted to achieve?

Lake: Oh, the Moog solo on “Lucky Man” [on *Anthology* Disc 1, originally from 1970’s *Emerson, Lake & Palmer*] has got an amazing feel to it. It wasn’t just the effect of swooping it around — it was *placement*. Placement is a big thing, and it can make a lot of difference on a record.

I was at my friend’s house in Italy the other day, and he played “Take a Pebble” on vinyl on his expensive hi-fi system. I was *staggered*. It was as if I was standing in the room where the recording took place [in 1970, at Advision Studios in London]. It took me back there.

It’s just the way the analog reproduction reaches you in a far more realistic way. We all get used to listening to high-fidelity digital music, and I always had the feeling that, though digital has the appearance of being better quality, it’s rather like wrapping something in cellophane. It looks nice and shiny, but there’s actually a veneer over the reality of it, in some way.

Mettler: “Take a Pebble” [on *Anthology* Disc 1, also from 1970’s *ELP*] is a perfect example of something that works great in the analog form. It’s got a number of movements including your folk guitar section, and there are a few differing swells of the volume dynamic as well.

Lake: Yes. I’ll tell you the thing that really struck me — the grand piano, and all the transients. I am still really fascinated by sound, and sound reproduction. That just continues to fascinate me.

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Mettler: You have a lot of roles in ELP — vocals, acoustic guitar, electric guitar, bass. You're the man with many hands on every track. It must have been a lot of work coming up with the right balance between it all in the final mixes.

Lake: It was a lot of work, but it also gave me a deep insight into the construction of the music. And that's really more than half of the story of making a really good record — to understand the music you're recording. If you understand the components, you start to understand the dynamic relationship between them. And then you're able to paint a more vivid and more meaningful picture in the end result.

Mettler: You mentioned "Lucky Man," which, as many of us know, was a song you wrote when you got your first guitar at age 12. When you got to an adult age, it had

to be told and performed in the right context.

Lake: It was a very strange thing, you know? It was one of those strange coincidences in life where something you did in all innocence when you were young just happened to translate easily — rather like a film, I suppose. Like a film that was made 50 years ago — they'll make it again today, if it translates well.

Mettler: The story is that your mother bought you that guitar. What was the brand of that guitar?

Lake: Ahhh... now you're taxing me. (both laugh) I will try and think about it (brief pause)... It was a Rosetti — there you go!

Mettler: That guitar should be in a Hall of Fame somewhere.

Lake: It really should!

Mettler: One thing that fascinates me about "Lucky Man" is the song was born from the first four chords you learned on that guitar.

Lake: That's absolutely right. That guitar looked great. It was a white guitar with a black scratch plate — I'll never forget it. (chuckles) When I first got it, I was just thrilled. It was actually not a very good guitar, and I changed it very soon after I brought it to the guitar teacher. But there was that magic there, really, and I think that spurred me on. I felt lucky. And that was probably part of the reason I wrote "Lucky Man" — just because I felt so excited to have a guitar, you know?

Mettler: Lucky us, I'd say! Did you ask your parents for that guitar? Were you that much into music already that you wanted one?

Lake: Yeah, I asked for it. I asked my mum if I could have a guitar for Christmas, and she said, "No!" (chuckles heartily) And then on Christmas Day, there it was. And how that moment changed my life — in one split second, an entire lifetime was mapped out, really.

Mettler: You could almost say you believed in Father Christmas at that point.

Lake: You could almost say that, yeah.

Mettler: Somebody should write a song...

Lake: There you go, you see! That sounds like a song to me. (both laugh)

[This is a nod to "I Believe in Father Christmas," Lake's 1975 solo holiday single, which reached #2 in Britain behind Queen's long-running chart-topping juggernaut, "Bohemian Rhapsody."]

Mettler: Were your mother and father able to see the eventual success of "Lucky Man" all those years later?

Lake: Yes, they did. They really saw, certainly, the beginnings. They also came to Madison Square Garden [in New York] and watched us perform there. Yeah. They saw it come to fruition.

Mettler: That's nice. Did your mom ask for points on that record?

Lake: (laughs) Should have done, right?

Mettler: I think it's probably been paid back in full. Are you still working on your autobiography?

Lake: I just finished it! I don't know if you can ever say that you've "finished" an autobiography. Here I could be talking to you, and you could say something and I'll

go, "Oh God, I've left it out of the book!"

Mettler: Like the Rosetti guitar?

Lake: Yes. And then I'd have to go back in, and insert it. I'd like to be done with it, to be honest with you!

Mettler: Is there a publication date yet?

Lake: No, we're just talking to the publishers right now.

Mettler: And it's still to be called *Lucky Man*?

Lake: I believe it will be called *Lucky Man*, yeah.

Mettler: Great, great; looking forward to reading it. To bring things into the modern day, how interesting was it to you to hear your voice coming out of a Kanye West song, "Power" [from 2010's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*]?

Lake: It was very strange! That's the beautiful thing about music. Once you create it, if you're lucky, it'll stand the test of time, and go down through the ages. [Kanye sampled Lake's lead vocals from King Crimson's "21st Century Schizoid Man," from the band's 1969 debut, *In the Court of the Crimson King*.]

That's why I'm very pleased about these ELP reissues. Some of these records were made over 40 years ago, and to have them reissued the way they are now — I suppose it's an honor, really.

Mettler: There are those of us who grew up with that music as kids, and now there are new generations that have no baggage when they listen to it. Maybe they have a different level of appreciation for it than even we did.

Lake: That's right. And they see it from a new perspective. They view it from a different prism.

Mettler: When you were doing your live solo storytelling shows at various points over the past few years, did you see a younger audience out there?

Lake: I saw all kinds of people, yes. Of course, the majority of the people had lived with and lived through the bands I'd been with over the years — King Crimson, ELP. We shared so many of the experiences of the times — the laughs, and the tears. We shared them together. It was that sharing that was really the big thing about those shows.

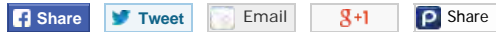
Mettler: I'd say you're a modern-day minstrel, in terms of the songwriting approach you've taken over the years.

Lake: I suppose that's how it was. The minstrels would go around, they'd tell a few stories, and they'd sing a bit. I think it's a lovely thing to do. I'd never done it before, and it was something that I was really quite uncertain about before I did it. But once I started, it was like a huge unveiling. It's a wonderful feeling. It's like being invited to someone's house, with 500 people in it. (chuckles) Just a wonderful, warm feeling.

Mettler: To some degree, the tour you and Keith did together around 2010, which I saw in New York, had a similar feel, because there was some story-setting before each song started. And I'm really glad we have an album that came out of that tour, so at least it's on record [*Live From Manticore Hall*; released 2014, recorded 2011].

Lake: Yeah, that's right. Well, the idea behind the show that Keith and I did was to try and play the version of the music as it was written. Later, when you make the records, everything changes. What we thought was interesting was to try and get it as near as we could to what the original created versions were. At least that was the

idea in the beginning, anyway.



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