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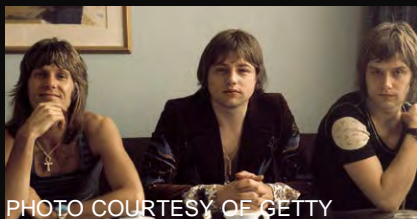


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# The Real Story Behind ELP's 'Tarkus'

Greg Lake and Emerson, Lake & Palmer



POSTED BY  
JOE BOSSO



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Emerson, Lake & Palmer cracked the UK top five with their self-titled 1970 debut album, but it was their 1971 follow-up, **Tarkus**, that went all the way to the top of



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record is generally regarded as the band's masterpiece as well as a milestone in progressive rock.

Mention the word "masterpiece" to bassist/guitarist and singer Greg Lake and he accepts it good-naturedly (he prefers the band's 1972 recording, **Trilogy**), but he readily admits that the term 'progressive rock' makes him bristle. "I just don't like it," he says. "'Prog' or 'prog rock'—it all sounds so elitist and pretentious. I prefer





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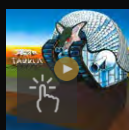
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the word 'original.'  
When we made 'Tarkus,' we were trying to be different. You can't categorize a band that was going its own way, as we were."



Tarkus

Emersc  
Lake &  
Palmer

Along with the debut album and **Pictures at an Exhibition,**

'Tarkus' has recently received the **expanded, remastered and re-issued treatment** (a batch of other ELP deluxe discs are to follow in the coming months). In an in-depth interview with Music Aficionado, Lake reflects on the writing and recording



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of the groundbreaking record.



### Bitches Crystal (Live in Budapest 1997)

▶ Emerson, Lake & Palmer

ELP and Yes were the two prime movers of the—I'll say it—"progressive rock" scene of the early '70s. Did the two bands mix?



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Funny you should ask that, because Chris Squire and I used to live together. We shared an apartment in London, although funnily enough, our two bands didn't really mix. But Chris and I were close friends for a long time.

Did Chris mind being called "progressive rock"?

I don't know. It wasn't even a term that was used at that time. And when we did hear it, it just left that feeling of being smart-ass. That's not what we were about.



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I just don't like the word. I don't like the connotation of it. Like I said, we were trying to be different. We didn't want to fit in. We wanted to be seen as an individual entity. That was the struggle.

One way that we attempted to be original was, instead of looking to the blues or Motown or gospel or country and western— basically, American music—as the roots for our rock music, we tended to look more towards European-influenced music. Both Keith and I liked classical music as a hobby, so that became a

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real avenue of inspiration. Beyond that, we just tried to make music that didn't sound like anything that had gone before it.

I'm not telling you anything that you don't know—the critics were not kind to ELP.

No, they were not. But you know, you've got to break eggs to make omelets. ELP played a lot of live shows, and we had the public's reaction to go by. We knew people enjoyed our music. No matter what the critics said, we knew that when we stood on that

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stage and performed our music, the people loved it. It was that simple. And to be honest, we didn't care what the critics thought.

You should never believe your own publicity. If someone said something nice about ELP, yeah, that was great—we loved it. But you have to remember that if some people like you, other people won't. That's the way of the world and one has to accept that.

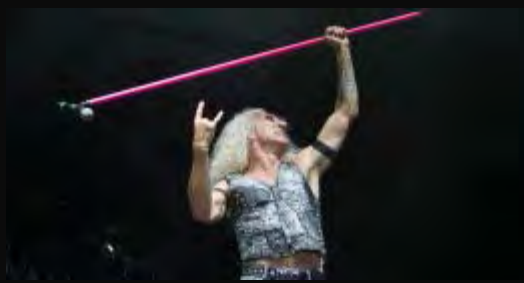
I spoke with Keith several years ago, and he mentioned that 'Tarkus'





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was his favorite ELP record. Where do you place it in the group's canon?

It's very difficult, because all the records we made were very different, although the first five or six were made in the same way—I produced them all. For me, my favorite would be 'Trilogy.' The reason I say that is because that's when the band had really developed its artistic identity. It was also a time in which there was a huge movement in the development of



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musical technology.

These two things came together, and that's why that particular album would be my particular favorite. On the other hand, 'Tarkus' was a complete conceptual sound and a feeling all its own, so I can understand why Keith liked it so much. I also think from a keyboard player's point of view, it was something that challenged him. He felt pride at being able to play those things. It meant a lot to him.

Was 'Tarkus' an easy record to



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make?

It's a strange word —"easy." It's like "work." Was it work? Not really. We enjoyed doing it so much. Did we sweat? Yeah, we did. Did we encounter frustrations? Yeah. Was it challenging? Yes, it was. There were moments of difficulty that we had to overcome, but at the end of the day it was a tremendous sense of satisfaction that we'd ended up with this complete work that we felt proud of. The band was a unit, a family. They were happy times. We really were riding on the

crest of a creative  
wave

'Tarkus' followed  
the debut record  
in a very short  
period of time.  
Did the label  
push you guys  
to work fast?

Well, see, ELP hit  
the headlines very  
quickly. Even before  
the band was formed  
it was getting quite a  
lot of publicity—there  
was rumors about  
what we were doing.  
As soon as we  
actually made a  
debut album and  
came out with it, the  
very next thing was,  
"Well, what next?"  
Then we played the  
Isle of Wight  
Festival, and very  
quickly there was

demand for another album. The pressure was on, really. So yeah, we worked fast.



Tarkus

▶ Emerson, Lake & Palmer

The **20-minute title track** is a very complex piece of music. Keith told me that it filled you with some

angst, that you thought it was too much of a classical piece.

No, no, no. When Keith played the initial riff to me, the opening 5/4 riff, I was really against what some bands were doing at that time—they were trying to establish their prowess and how clever they were musically. They would play things in 9/4 and these ridiculous time signatures, which were really just to impress people. So I had this inherent dislike for demonstrative time signatures.

That was my

problem initially with "Tarkus." Keith was very keen on it. I think he felt it was a demonstration of his independence, his left and right hands. Indeed it was, but at that time I really thought that we needed to make an album that was conceptual, and to me, "Tarkus" wasn't enough to hang a concept on.

However, he liked it and we went along with it, and it grew out of there. The song has a lot of different sections that were edited together, and then we would go and create the next piece and then edit that on.

Not much of the

album relates to the opening. It's a very varied album.

Is it true that you and Keith would sit around and play records for each other—you playing Simon and Garfunkel and Joni Mitchell, and him playing classical albums?

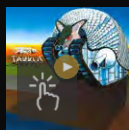
Yeah. We used to exchange a lot of musical ideas. That was one of the things, because in order to move forward you've got to have some sort of plan. It doesn't just happen. You don't just walk into a



rehearsal room and all of a sudden you're making new and original music. You have to really figure out what you're going to do to be different. We would do a lot of, not really research, but in the sense of exchanging what we thought was good and different and stuff that could be influential in the right way.

Another thing Keith told me was how concerned he was when you recorded the vocals to **The Only Way (Hymn)** and you sang the line

"Why did he  
lose six million  
Jews?"

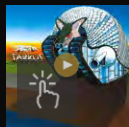


The  
Only  
Way  
(Hymn)  
Emersc  
Lake &  
Palmer

I think it was quite a profound thing to say—obviously. On the surface of it, any mention of the Holocaust immediately provokes a reaction, and sometimes not a good one, but I explained to Keith that in the context of the song, really, what I was doing was asking a question about God. If he's so good, why did he lose six million Jews? That was the question I put. When he understood that, I

think he was fine  
with it.

A real change of  
pace is the '50s  
rock 'n' roll of  
**Are You Ready  
Eddy?**—your  
little tribute to  
engineer Eddy  
Offord. Is that  
the kind of thing  
you guys would  
jam on to blow  
off steam?



Yeah. It was

Are You  
Ready  
Eddy?

♪ Emersc  
Lake &  
Palmer

instantaneous, just  
something we did for  
fun. This puts what I  
said before into the  
right context. We  
realized we needed  
a balance to the  
more serious and

complex things we did. We didn't want to come off as some sort of highbrow "look how clever we are" band, so we purposely went out on every album to try to do at least one or two things that were very simplistic - humorous stuff that was lighthearted. And I must say, Eddy Offord was fantastic. He was a big component in the quality of those records.

The band worked pretty exclusively at Advision Studios in London. What did you like about the place so much?

It was a friendly and professional place. Once we got set up there, it was like Abbey Road with the Beatles. They would walk in and they knew where they were. They knew how it sounded. That's the big thing: You get to know the room and you know what sounds good. You also know what doesn't sound good because you have that meter of judgment. If you keep changing studios, you lose that. All of a sudden everything sounds different.

What was the band's reaction when 'Tarkus'

went to number one?

We were pleased, to say the least. The success was lovely. It's always lovely. It's a form of recognition that you've done well—that's the main thing. We make music for people's enjoyment—we're entertainers—and when someone enjoys our stuff, that's the reward we want. It's more important than the money or anything else. It's just that somebody actually likes what you did.

The reissue contains the Steven Wilson remix disc. Did you have any

input into that?  
What do you  
think of the  
remixes he's  
done to your  
work?

I didn't have any  
input on them. I did  
listen to them. I don't  
really... It's like  
somebody taking a  
photograph of an  
original oil painting.  
Yeah, it's fine. That's  
how it feels to me.  
Often photographs  
can enhance  
something, but at the  
same time they can  
ruin it. Is it as good?  
I don't know. I prefer  
vinyl, to be honest.  
When you go back  
and you listen to  
those records on  
vinyl, it really is an  
eye-opener.

Last question:  
Even though  
you don't like  
the term  
"progressive  
rock," did the  
band feel as  
though it was  
pushing music  
as a whole  
somewhere  
totally new?

Yeah, I think so. We  
were conscious of it  
being different.

Before ELP, very  
little rock music  
contained any  
European influence.  
After ELP, there was  
a torrent of bands  
that did so—like  
Queen. There were  
tons of them. To that  
extent, we knew that  
we had created  
something new,  
something that was




unique, and a lot of people picked up on that. I'm pretty proud of that.

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