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The Making Of... Greg Lake's I Believe In Father Christmas



Lake and collaborators on the creation of a very unlikely festive hit...



From the Uncut archives this week, the creation of a very unlikely festive hit... war-footage in the promo, a stripper in the studio and “swelteringly hot” recording sessions. Lake himself, co-writer and co-producer Peter Sinfield, orchestrator Godfrey Salmon, ELP tour manager Andrew Lane and manager Stewart Young tell the story of a Yuletide perennial (originally in Uncut’s January 2011 issue, Take 164). Interviews: Garry Mulholland

It’s difficult to sum up the impact of first hearing “I Believe In Father Christmas” as a child in 1975. Greg Lake’s one and only hit solo single defied the jolly party vibe defined by 1973’s Slade shout-along “Merry Christmas Everybody,” while also bringing a subversive political dimension to the traditional “White Christmas”-style ballad. Lyrics that spoke accusingly of an all-powerful “They” who had “sold us a dream of Christmas” and a “fairy story” about “the Israelite” informed you that you’d been brainwashed by commercialism and Christianity. This was before an ironic yet uplifting orchestral motif transported you to a magical Lapland where Santa was still driving a reindeer sleigh piled high with children’s gifts through twinkling snow. Was this record saying that Christmas was great after all? Or nothing more than a

Thirty-five years later, “I Believe In Father Christmas” is still a hardy Yuletide perennial; the one record allowed to question consumerism while pumping out in department stores full of Christmas shoppers. It’s a single that only happened because one member of prog-rock behemoths Emerson, Lake And Palmer – that would be keyboard wizard Keith Emerson – wanted to make a solo record. So guitarist Greg Lake set to work with long-time collaborator and fellow King Crimson graduate Peter Sinfield on what was to be his solo side of ELP double-album Works Volume 1. It was also Emerson who suggested inserting the Troika section of Sergei Prokofiev’s 1934 ‘Lieutenant Kijé Suite’ into Lake’s otherwise gentle acoustic folk ballad, crucially sweetening the bitter pill by making the song sound like “a picture-postcard Christmas, with morbid edges,” as Sinfield neatly puts it.

The rest includes smuggling Vietnam war footage onto Top Of The Pops via one of the first and weirdest travelogue pop promos. Here is a song that was only beaten to the Christmas top spot by one of the most celebrated No 1s of all time, Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody”. And as the famous line last insists, “The Christmas you get, you deserve”. We must have done something right in 1975.

Greg Lake (singer, guitarist, co-writer, co-producer): I wrote it in my house in west London. I’d tuned the bottom string on my guitar from E down to D and got this cascading riff that you hear on the record. But I couldn’t really place what the song was about. I was out driving one day and it was playing on my mind, and, all of a sudden, it occurred to me that the tune of “Jingle Bells” fitted over it. And I thought, ‘Ah... I wonder if this could be a song about Christmas?’ At the same time, I was working with Pete Sinfield on my solo side of the Works album, and I said to Pete, “I’ve been working on this melodic idea. It could be a Christmas song.”

Peter Sinfield (co-writer, co-producer): No. I remember him playing the riff and me saying it sounds like a Christmas song. Him saying it was not the sort of thing he would do. It’s out of character. Not that it matters. It’s quite amusing that there are two egos here, both of which might supersede the truth.

Lake: I think it was Pete that came up with the line, “The Christmas you get, you deserve”. And off we went.

Sinfield: Some of it was based on an actual thing in my life when I was eight-years-old, and came downstairs to see this wonderful Christmas tree that my mother had done. I was that little boy. Then it goes from there into a wider thing about how people are brainwashed into stuff. Then I thought, 'This is getting a bit depressing. I'd better have a hopeful, cheerful verse at the end.' That's the bit where me and Greg would've sat together and done it. And then I twisted the whole thing with the last line, "The Christmas you get, you deserve", which was a play on "The government you get, you deserve". I didn't necessarily explain all the politics or the thoughts behind it. It's not anti-religious. It's a humanist thing, I suppose. It's not an atheist Christmas song, as some have said.

Stewart Young (ELP manager): There was conflict in the band about whether they should be doing solo stuff at all. I think Greg and Carl (Palmer) were against it, but Keith (Emerson) wanted to. But Greg wrote the song that was a smash.

Lake: Keith put the Prokofiev piece in the middle. I associated it with Christmas, but still don't know why. I think we made a small version first with Keith in the Summer of '75 and then made the orchestral version, which is what we always intended to do. Godfrey Salmon conducted the orchestra, which was most of the London Philharmonic.

Godfrey Salmon (orchestral arranger): Actually, it was a freelance band. The 30-piece chorus were freelancers, too. The two sessions were done on August 24 and August 30, 1975. It was swelteringly hot. Greg was very into "vibing", as he called it, so he went and got a 20-foot Christmas tree with lights and fake presents. And he seriously wanted me, in this heatwave, to stand in front of a hundred session musicians in a Father Christmas outfit. I was slightly put out, and refused.

Lake: Because we were recording in late summer, we wanted to somehow get a Christmas atmosphere; some sort of fun to get the musicians to loosen it up a bit. Our idea to cheer them up – and I can't remember who suggested it – was to get a stripper into the studio.

Salmon: It was me. But it wasn't a suggestion – it was a joke. But come the second session... there she was.

Sinfield: To be fair she was a fan-dancer

Lake: She went straight over to the lead violinist and started to bury his face into her huge breasts. He went bright red. He was really straight-laced and didn't want it, really. Which, of course, amused a lot of the other players. And a lot of them started running from the back of the orchestra to the front to see better. All of a sudden there was this crunch... and someone had put their foot right through the double-bass. Some of the women in the choir were going, "That's disgusting!" She was only there for five minutes but by the time she left there was total desolation and destruction. This guy crying about his double-bass. Angry women. Guys cheering. So, of course, instead of perking them up, we had to calm them all down. The whole thing cost me a fortune. Eventually, we convinced them all to do a take, just to take their minds off it. And... we did it. The single is the very first take. Great players.

Sinfield: I remember falling on the floor with exhaustion and tears. It was all very rushed and emotional. It was an amazing experience. Overwhelming.

Lake: There were people crying in the room. It really was emotional, with the choir soaring away. It's so uplifting. But... well done, Prokofiev. I don't wanna be too smug. That's why it's stood the test of time.

Andrew Lane (ELP tour manager, video shoot organiser): I'd been an Israeli soldier in the Six-Day War and it was my idea to shoot the video in Israel. I hadn't been back in a few years and it seemed a relevant place for the song. Greg was immediately up for it.

Lake: The religious connection doesn't have to be explained. It just seemed like a clever idea to film it in a place that had dramatic scenery with a connection to Christmas.

Lane: The Bedouins were wonderful. We didn't know what they were thinking, but they made us feel welcome. Of course, we paid them.

Lake: The director told us about an incident that happened on this Liz Taylor shoot he'd done there previously. One of the crew members had gone over to play with a baby camel... and its Bedouin owner, thinking he was going to steal it, stabbed him. They have a different code of conduct. But they were fantastic during our shoot.

Lane: Because of the heat it was difficult keeping the film stock cool. I mean, we

Dead Sea Scrolls were found. The only way to get into it was along an 18-inch precipice with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet down both sides. Me and Greg had been drinking and having a smoke in the limo on the way and we took one look at the drop and said, "No way."

Lake: But then the cameraman, with his camera on his back, walked over it. So that was it. I had to go. It was horrible. It's just a tiny hole halfway up a cliff. But when you're standing in the very spot where the scriptures were discovered, it is a strange feeling. I'm not a religious person as in organised religion. But I do believe in some sort of... other dimension. If you wanna call it God, then you could.

Lane: Sadly, I don't remember the name of the director and have no idea where they got the war footage from. But it's a mixture of stock footage from the Vietnam War and the Six-Day War, I think. The guy at the end who picks up the boy and swings him around was a real-life Israeli soldier. But the boy wasn't really his son. I found the receipt for our payment to the production company yesterday – £15,000. I wonder how much it would cost now?

Lake: The war footage was gratuitous, really. Powerful visually, but gratuitous. I couldn't see the connection with the song, so I didn't mind when the BBC said they didn't want it there.

Young: The BBC did want cuts, but we refused. The video did get shown on Top Of The Pops. Once, maybe twice, because of the whole thing of having to pay big repeat fees to 100 musicians. That was the Musician's Union rule at the time. And neither the record company nor us paid... it was the TV channel. If that hadn't been the case, it would've been shown every bloody week.

Lake: The only other record that had had that more serious tone to it was Lennon's "Happy Christmas (War Is Over)". Slightly edgy, slightly cynical. It was quite bewildering to see it going up the charts. The key is its Englishness. It's a bit like Blake's 'Jerusalem'. It attaches itself somehow to this English spirit of restrained joy.

Salmon: I thought the video was very effective. And I was surprised the single wasn't more successful. I thought "Bohemian Rhapsody" was rubbish, and still do. When it got to No 1 before we'd even brought ours out, I thought it would be long gone by Christmas. How wrong can you get?

Lake: Normally I would've been quite peeved. But a record like that, which, for them, was also a once-in-a-lifetime recording... I don't think you can complain. I got beaten by one of the greatest records ever made. I would've been pissed off if I'd been beaten by Cliff.

Sinfield: It's a bit like Phil Spector records. The hugeness gives it a vast, Disney feeling. We summed up the loss of the illusion of innocence, which I think is what the song is about, in the end. That makes the song more real, and, therefore, more timeless.

Lake: I was taken aback by the acceptance of it by the public. A certain kind of fan liked ELP, but it wasn't for the masses. But the Christmas song reached out right across the board and became an institution. And that means a lot more to me now than the money. That's what people normally want to know, you know: "Greg – what's it like getting those royalty cheques every Christmas?" I wouldn't know. They don't turn up 'til bloody August.

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