

Driving

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Me and my motors: Greg Lake

BY JEREMY TAYLOR OF THE SUNDAY TIMES

Greg Lake, 58, was born in Bournemouth and first achieved fame with King Crimson before fronting Emerson, Lake & Palmer. His solo Christmas hit, "I Believe in Father Christmas," is a hardy annual. His latest album is Greg Lake Live. Lake lives in London with his wife Regina and daughter Natasha.

Greg Lake's rock career started with an ultimatum. His band or his job. I was working as a draughtsman for a firm in Dorchester but because I was also performing in the evenings with a rock group I kept falling asleep over my desk, he says. His employers told him to quit the group or quit the job. When they put it like that there was really only one choice.

It was the best decision he ever made. A year later he would be back visiting his former colleagues. Except this time he would be in a chauffeur-driven Rolls-Royce Phantom V equipped by the coachwork specialist James Young.

"They were really happy for me but I was a bit of a cocky sod," he says. "I really did go back to see my mates but there was a bit of me that wanted to show the bosses that they had got it wrong and I was a rock star now.

"The Phantom V was the motor of the day. I had seen the Queen riding about in one on the telly and anybody who was anybody had to have that car. It was my background getting the better of me and I just bought it on a whim to show how well I had done. I'd spent a lot of time sleeping in the back of vans and I wasn't going back there."

Lake was 21 and had found success as a vocalist and bass guitarist with the band King Crimson. He formed the group after making a name for himself on the London club circuit with the Shame and Shy Limbs.



Lake's taste in music and cars has settled down since his days with Emerson, Lake & Palmer (Ken Rake)

King Crimson performed at the free Rolling Stones concert in Hyde Park in 1969, an event that catapulted them into the big time and landed a lucrative record contract. In the process the group became the definitive exponents of a new type of “progressive rock” with their debut album *In the Court of the Crimson King*.

“I don’t think I would have made a good draughtsman but I came from a poor background in Dorset and it seemed like a safe number. Music was my passion and I loved the gigs, all that travelling around, plus there were girls everywhere. For a lad my age it was heaven.”

Success meant that Lake was able to indulge his passion for cars. He had passed his test at 17 and his first car, after saving hard from labouring jobs, was a Humber Super Snipe. “I sat the test in dad’s *Triumph Herald*. I thought the Snipe was a bit too flash for a teenager to turn up in.”

The Phantom gave him the taste for luxury and the first car he bought when the money started rolling in was a Rolls-Royce Silver Spur with gleaming ivory paintwork and cream leather upholstery. “It was probably the nicest car I ever owned, the type of motor that you can’t really drive around these days for fear that some nerk will come along with a Stanley knife and decorate the side with his own personal artwork.”

After King Crimson, Lake left to form Emerson, Lake & Palmer. In 1970 the group played at the Isle of Wight festival before a spectacular series of world tours that brought to a new generation of post-hippie music fans a fresh sound that fused elements of classical music with contemporary themes.

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Perhaps the most famous of their recordings was the reworking of Aaron Copland’s “*Fanfare for the Common Man*.” “That track just happened by mistake. Keith (Emerson) was playing the Copland piece in a studio on keyboards and I just started whacking out some dum-de-dum bass line on guitar. Luckily a sound man hit the record button and we got it.”

But the success of the band brought its own problems. Beset by troubles, they disbanded in the mid-1970s, briefly reformed, then disbanded again in 1979. In the meantime, faced with losing 83% of his earnings to the Inland Revenue, Lake became a tax exile in Canada, Switzerland and the Bahamas.

The car that Lake bought when he returned to Britain in the 1980s unwittingly reflected the turbulence of the time: a temperamental Aston Martin V8 Oscar India. “It was cooler than the other side of the pillow but cost me a bloody fortune to run. Every time something went wrong you were absolutely fleeced. I had to replace a small light switch on the dashboard and they stung me for £500.”

“I really had mixed feelings about that car because it was a work of art and everybody loves you driving an Aston. It reminds them of the time when Britain made cars that were the best in the world. It’s not the same in a Ferrari

- drive one of them and people just hate you.

Today Lake lives in London and is working on solo projects as well as with his erstwhile band members. His choice of car has also settled down. He has just sold a dark blue Mercedes SL 500 because it did not have enough headroom, and replaced it with a Range Rover. His main concern is that a car is practical rather than flashy and he has a Mercedes G-Wagon as his family car. Even if he wanted a sports car, he says he wouldn't be able to drive it any more. "I live near Richmond and I have to pass 29 traffic cameras to get into town, plus countless speed bumps, and then the cost of parking is ridiculous, if you can find a space. It's sad but the days of driving for enjoyment are long gone in this country."

And while he may no longer be a tax exile he still resents adding to the Treasury's coffers. "I'm totally fed up with the motorist being seen as a target for extracting revenue. Whatever you do behind the wheel you seem to be hit hard for it."

ON HIS CD CHANGER

"I'm not interested in contemporary stuff; classical music gives me a lift every time I hear it. I like **Andrea Bocelli**, Sogno; **Handel**, Music for the Royal Fireworks; **Respighi**, Church Windows; and **John Lennon**, Imagine"

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