

GREG LAKE:

The Return Of Mr. Progressive

Intervista di Massimo Marchini, Ottobre 2005

MM: Greg, thank you very much for giving us this interview. I know this is a very busy period for you: a new solo album about to be published, a retrospective out on November, on October 22 the new solo tour, a forthcoming book, a new Emerson, Lake & Palmer retrospective DVD, a new one just released containing a Montreux gig of 1997, charity concerts, TV guest spots, etc. can you tell us a little more about your projects for the near future?

Next year is the 35th anniversary of ELP and to commemorate this, Sanctuary is releasing a lifetime history of ELP on DVD. It is a wonderful piece of work, which contains many never before seen film clips of ELP in concert and behind the scenes. I will also be releasing a new album featuring various musical projects that I have been working on over the past couple of years. I also hope to be performing live next year and discussions are now taking place.

MM: Lots of great bands that made the history of popular music, reunited in the last years. A lots of progressive revival is spreading all over the world, bands like The Flower Kings sound very prog-oriented. Are there any concrete plans for a new ELP comeback tour and record?

Both Carl and myself were keen for ELP to perform one last tour to accompany this DVD release and to mark the 35th anniversary of the band. However as it turned out Keith was apparently unwilling to participate, so unfortunately for the fans this now appears unlikely to happen.

MM: Are you still in touch with Keith Emerson and Carl Palmer?

I do speak to Carl quite often but sadly have not spoken to Keith for some while.

MM: I would like to ask you something about what I think is one of your greatest skills: the producer. You did such a seminal work in casting and inventing the sounds of progressive music in the seventies. Not only with KC and ELP, but also the job you did with other bands like "Spontaneous Combustion" for EMI's underground HARVEST label was so great. The last ELP albums lacks of this strength, even though *Black Moon* was very good, *In the Hot Seat*, not so much: do you agree? And why did you let other people have the control on your music? Would you like, if asked, to produce new bands?

Thank you very much for your very kind words. I have always enjoyed producing records and have always had a certain ability to envision how a piece of music could sound when finished. In this way I felt a little like a sculptor who could in some way imagine the figure inside the block of marble. I was basically prevented from continuing to produce the albums of ELP by Keith,

who for some reason, despite the fact that I had just produced six platinum albums in a row, simply did not want me to continue. He insisted on wanting to use an outside producer and rather than being difficult or intransigent I agreed to allow someone else to step in and take my place. Although for *Black Moon* we did have a great producer called Mark Mancina, who later became a close friend, the band was never really the same as on the earlier records. I don't know if this was all down to the method of production but there always seemed to be something missing. The same was essentially true for *In the Hot Seat* produced by Keith Olsen and for that matter *Love Beach* as well.

MM: Your music and your sound did influence so many bands in my country. You also produced for your Manticore Label PFM and Banco del Mutuo Soccorso. Aldo Tagliapietra of Le Orme said that you are one of the best bass players in the world. There was a time where your avant-garde albums actually did act like pollen, fertilizing all the best music in Europe. Italian audiences always loved you very much. Have you also nice recalls of the Italian music scene in the Seventies?

Italy is such a wonderful and artistic country, full of passionate people and with a history of visionary art, which is unsurpassed in the history of the world. Each time I visit there I am simply overawed by the art and the architecture, the music and the beauty. Both as a singer and as a dedicated musician I could easily be persuaded that all roads lead to Rome. It sometimes appears as if the whole of Italy is made of art and one can see that art flow throughout the heart of the world in so many different forms. It is sometimes hard to know where it begins and where it ends. PFM, Luciano Pavarotti, Puccini, Andrea Bocelli, I could go on forever, the list is endless.

MM: You played this and last year charity shows with The Who singer Daltrey and also with Robert Plant. How was it? Any plans with them for the future?

I did play with Roger and Robert on the Teenage Cancer Trust charity shows and I am happy to say that together we managed to raise over 1 million pounds. As you know they are both great talents and really wonderful people as well. I also played on The Who's latest single "Good Lookin' Boy". We have no future plans to tour together but I will probably play the Cancer Trust shows next year, time and circumstances permitting.

MM: Peter Townshend wrote that they loved very much your playing with The Who and said you're a "smashing guy". Ringo Starr said you have the greatest voice and you're a "charming man". Can you tell us about The Ringo and The Who recent experiences?

There are so many things I could tell you about Ringo. He is a great drummer and a great guy. He has a wonderful feel, no wonder those Beatles records did so well! He is also a very considerate and spiritual man with a remarkable understanding of people and indeed of life. He has seen and done so much it is sometimes hard to contemplate; one can only say that in normal terms he has probably lived the equivalent at least four lifetimes. The tour with Ringo and the other All-Stars, Sheila E, Roger Hodgson, Ian Hunter, Howard Jones, and Mark Rivera was one of the most enjoyable tours I have ever played. Working with Pete was also a tremendous experience. He is so talented. A visionary songwriter, a great guitarist and a first class singer as

well. It is no accident that The Who has endured as long as they have. Both Pete and Roger are very special people. Also Pete's brother Simon is a really top class player. Strangely enough, when I played with The Who, the drummer was no other than Ringo's son Zak Starkey, a killer drummer in his own right.

MM: The first album of King Crimson was a revolution and still is. Can you tell us something about this band?

It is hard to describe the band in such a few words. We were all so different and embodied so many different perspectives. Ian McDonald came straight from an army marching band, Bob Fripp and I had the same guitar teacher and consequently knew virtually every note each other played before we played it. Mike Giles had the extraordinary ability to play in different time signatures with both hands and with both feet simultaneously. I have never seen this done before or since. Pete Sinfield was a remarkable lyricist and poet and I could sing a bit. So there you have it. Cat's foot, iron claw, neurosurgeons scream for more! At paranoia's poison door, 21st Century Schizoid Man.

MM: Very few rock stars have written words that can be considered, from an objective critical point of view, poetry. Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, and surely Greg Lake and Peter Sinfield. Some of the songs you wrote together are really breathtaking. Did you ever think about writing poetry apart from music? Did you love writing with Sinfield? Listening at the songs "Still" from Peter's solo LP, there is a point when you take the lead vocals that is breathtaking for everyone who listens to it. Do you remember these sessions?

I remember all these things and yes I was always dedicated to writing poetry rather than simply writing a string of words that made up what most people would call a song. All the lyrics I have ever written have inner meanings and use perfect rather than near rhymes.

MM: For what it matters, "The Sage" is my favorite Greg Lake tune. Is there a favorite Greg Lake song for you?

I can't say that I really have a favorite song. I suppose it's a bit like children, you love them all and at times they drive you mad.

MM: You have a very beautiful website. Sometimes I browse on it and I see it has thousands of hits every day. Lots of fans talk like old time friends in the chat area about the most different variety of subjects. How does it feel to have such a great base of people all over the world so devoted to your music? Last week I drove with a friend to Rome and on his car an iPod was playing "Closer to Believing" (one of my favorite songs, by the way). I mean, it must be fantastic to think that in a car, driving in some highway in some part of the world there is people listening to your music!

The internet is a wonderful thing as indeed are most of the modern electronic music reproduction devices. Although there are some negative aspects concerning downloading, etc., on balance I think they are a wonderful invention. One of the great things about the electronic age is that it has enabled us to share music together over distances and in places we would otherwise not have

been able to. The one reservation I have is with the Walkman style devices. When these arrived on the scene the whole thing became more of a private and inward, rather than a shared listening experience. I think like most things, music is better when shared.

MM: I was told that one of your favorite hobbies is reading history books. Do you have a particular favorite historical period?

I have books from many different periods in history. I possibly like the 18th century the best. The people then were more like those we would recognize today but stories and characters were still from a world that was largely unexplored and full of undiscovered potential. Books are strange articles though, because you can love them for the text alone, or you can love them because of their antiquity. You can love them for the beautiful way in which they are bound or you can love them because of their importance in history. There are so many different facets to books and that is why I love collecting them.

MM: What was the last record you bought? The first?

Can't really remember.

MM: In a 1988 interview, Frank Zappa told me that ELP was his favourite European band, even though he wasn't a rock music listener. Do you have any memory of FZ? I think you shared with him the interest in classical music and both of you helped young people in listening to "serious music". Do you agree?

Frank was an extremely creative person. I never really got to talk to him but he certainly did a great deal to awaken people to a whole new way of thinking about and listening to music.

MM: The early eighties Greg Lake Band: did you attempt a commercial AOR success in the states with this project? How are your memories about this band? Wasn't it a little bit straightforward for your sophisticated songwriting standard?

I think it was a strange period in my life when things just became blurred and confused. For one to view this period with any sort of balanced judgment one has to really understand what I had been through in the ten years previous. Ten years which was like a whirlwind of experiences. Ten years virtually without a break, album followed by tour, followed by album, followed by tour, followed by album, followed by...well I'm sure you get the picture. I was tired and in a way quite stunned. I knew I needed to do something but wasn't quite sure what. I met Gary Moore and remembered how much I had enjoyed playing the electric guitar, so that's what I did. I didn't think too much about the writing or the songs; I just wanted to play and in a way forget. The whole ELP experience had become quite arduous and unpleasant by that time and things had not ended up in the way that I would have liked them to. It was, in a way, an escape. I have to say that now I listen back I still like some of the material contained on those records. I like the song I wrote with Bob Dylan, "Love You Too Much", and I like some of the other songs like "Haunted" and "For Those Who Dare".

MM: I know you never trade quantity for quality and are very self-critical. But don't you think you have left your fans too long without a new Greg Lake songs album?

I never want to make uninspired records and I never make records just for the money and I never make records out of some misguided sense that I have a duty to deliver. No one wants to hear records made simply to fulfill some sort of obligation. What people want to hear is honest and inspired music played from the heart. When I feel the time is right I will release the records. Until then I have been happy playing live tours performing on other people's records and writing.

MM: Did you read Keith Emerson's book? And Sid Smith's one about King Crimson? Can you tell us your opinion about those books?

I haven't read Keith's book although Carl who apparently has read it, tells me that it didn't seem to reflect much of what he remembered as being the real history of ELP. It's not really the sort of book that I collect. I must confess that I haven't read Sid Smith's book either. It's just so boring reading about oneself.

MM: Last question. I saw on your site a sort of a "How the new Greg Lake Band should be" forum poll and the winner was an acoustic, intimate set with you on your celebrated heart shaped new Gibson J-0 and voice, a cellist and a tabla player. What do you think about that?

I think it's a great idea! And I would certainly give it a try. Anybody know any tabla players?

MM: Thank you very much Mr. Lake and we all hope to see you very soon on stage in Italy, with or without a cellist and a tabla player and, most important, thank you very very much for the gift of your music over all those years and for the future.

Thank you also for providing me with such an array of interesting questions. I very much look forward to playing in Italy again in the near future. I actually visited in Portofino this summer and it once again reminded me of the many happy times I have spent in Italy over the years.