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Welcome Backstage (DVD) Greg Lake (CD) Greg Lake



No longer tied to a band, Greg Lake still possesses the talent and fortitude to keep his musical palette salivated and slippery. Like his former bandmates, he relies heavily on a rich and gloried past, even more so in light of the fact that a purported new Greg Lake solo album seems like an impossibility. Still, who can turn away from the **Welcome Backstage** DVD and a live CD simply titled **Greg Lake** — a pair of retrospective-style releases that prove the man still has the pipes and chops to make it all sound good.

The DVD is the more unique of the two. Glimpsing a rehearsal for Lake's 2005 European tour (he has yet to hit the states since leaving ELP), we get an insider's view of a young group of musicians helping the master recreate timeless classics, and doing an astoundingly accurate job of it. "Fanfare For The Common Man," the Aaron Copland piece Emerson, Lake and Palmer turned into a hit, gets a nice workout by Lake and an extensive band that includes both David Arch and Josh Grafton on keyboards (it apparently takes two people to play Keith Emerson's parts), the young and accomplished German guitarist Florian Opahle, Trevor Barry on bass and Brett Morgan on drums.

A little razzle dazzle between songs finds Lake picking on a Stratocaster and sweating bullets under the hot stage lights. From there, Opahle takes over with some slick classical guitar soloing. Lake finally assumes the lead, talking about the chemistry of his band and how much he's enjoying himself (they all say that, don't they?). And when his rich baritone buoyantly fills the verses of "Farewell To Arms," it's as if the man has been reborn. Indeed, the voice that spent some time in the shade during the 90s has somehow been released from its cage. During an impromptu version of "Watching Over You," a ballad from **Works, Vol. 2**, Lake gives an unsteady and shaky performance. But he bounces back with "I Believe In Father Christmas," and truly bristles with confidence on "Karn Evil 9."

The CD captures the band two months after the rehearsal at the Stevenage Concert Hall in Hertfordshire. Playing a full set presents a more complete picture. Lake and his band certainly sound well-rehearsed as they launch into an epic reading of "In The Court Of The Crimson King." The choice of "Paper Blood," from ELP's 1992 reunion album **Black Moon**, seems arbitrary at best, but the end result is satisfying enough. "Touch And Go" undoubtedly brought the crowd to their feet and "Take A Pebble" probably drew more blank stares than applause, despite a smooth run-through that features Lake and Opahle's assured fret jumping.

For a song that dangled over the edge when Mr. Emerson injected a few strokes of his mighty Moog, "Lucky Man" is surprisingly spry here. I could have done without the "oohs" and "aws" from back-up singers Jai Ramagae and Bekki Carpenter, but it cycles down well enough to make the trip worthwhile. Then "21st Century Schizoid Man" comes screaming out of the speakers, and you wonder why Lake quit Crimson in the first place. It certainly wasn't so he could play "Pictures At An Exhibition," which doesn't belong in Lake's solo repertoire no matter how you look at it. If anything, it shows how much he needs Emerson and Palmer. But none of that matters as the piece lurches forth on its ELPish legs, leaping behind rocks, making strides here and there, but overall not advancing Lake's cause to be a solo artist. Certainly, there are sections of "Pictures" that soar and Lake sings the hell out of it; but I would have rather heard a couple of cuts from, say the singer's two solo albums of the early 80s, just for a change.


So, instead of "Nuclear Attack," which would have been a nice surprise, the CD finishes up with the predictable "Karn Evil 9." Sure, you love it and you always welcome it back. And it welcomes you back. It's a show-stopper. A natural closer if there ever was one. You scratch your head and again wonder, this time: "Couldn't he be doing this with ELP..." Then you realize, you're just happy he's doing it all. C'est La Vie indeed.

~ Shawn Perry

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