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Journey to the Centre of Rick Wakeman

By Tony Watts - Editor - 16/04/2007

"Rick Wakeman is releasing a new CD and DVD. Would you like to interview him?"

When PRs ring up with offers like that it's hard not to sound uncool and offer to walk over hot coals to do the interview. Two out of three interview opportunities you say "no" to. The keyboard maestro of Yes recorded "Close to the Edge" - one of the great records of the 70s and one of the most influential pieces of vinyl in my life. Of course I want to interview him.

Naturally, he has recorded rather more than that. In fact his discography is enormous, stretching back to the late 60s when, as part of Strawbs, he was part of what he describes as "probably the first electric folk band". He had long left the band when they hit it big with "Part of the Union" - but by then Yes were massive. Looking back, it wasn't a bad career move.

"It was a great time," he recalls. "There was the old college circuit in those days when you could work your way up the bill, and you would get some really big bands playing. Sadly that doesn't seem to happen these days." Indeed, it's hard to imagine the headline bands I remember playing at our students union in the early 70s - The Who, ELO, Wishbone Ash and Lindisfarne - all at the height of their fame, playing anything but big stadiums if they were touring today.

The late 60s and early 70s were when Rick burst onto the music scene, putting in a prolific number of session recordings (his credits include Space Oddity and Morning has Broken) as well as moving from the folk scene into the music expanding world of Prog Rock. But what was - and still is - exceptional about the man was his ability to produce a string of complex solo works as well as collaborate with others.

The Six Wives of Henry VIII, King Arthur, White Rock and Journey to the Centre of the Earth are just a few of his better-known works. All this alongside adding his distinctive keyboard skills to work by acts as diverse as Black Sabbath, Mary Hopkins, Cilla Black, Clive Dunn, Elton John, Edison Lighthouse, Lou Reed, Dana, Des O'Connor and Al Stewart - an estimated 2,000 in total.

And yes, he is still touring; though not, he admits, as often as he was as a few years ago when - on a couple of occasions - his workload saw him being taken seriously ill on a couple of occasions. "I suppose it's about twelve concerts overseas this year," he says.

"And what's lovely about it is that is the real mix of people who come along - families with grandparents, parents and grandchildren."

His work has given him a global fan base; however, he says, selling records is not his main aim today. "I've reached the stage in my life where I don't have to worry about whether a work is commercial or not," he says... "I have my own studio and record what I want to record."

But at the concerts he is still sufficiently in touch with his audiences to be prepared to play what they've come to hear. "It's probably 70% of the best known material," he says, "but with the other 30%, I try and surprise people."

And while he still plays with a diverse range of musicians and orchestras, he is equally pleased to play with some other very talented musicians: his six children. "All of them have gone into music," he says, "and Gemma actually appears on my latest CD - although she was very poorly the day she recorded the song."

His second son plays with Black Sabbath; and as Rick observes, "I watched him play in New York recently, playing a track I originally recorded with Ossie. That was a bit weird."

The fact that his children have inherited his musician gene is obviously a great source of pride to him, and so too is their very open and eclectic attitude towards music. "I remember when Oliver - who's 35 now - was much younger and he came along and said he'd found a fantastic record in my collection." It turned out to be "In the Court of the Crimson King", the classic 1969 album which did so much to open the doors to progressive rock music as well as open up a whole new era in cover design. "I expressed surprise - it was an old record then. He said: 'I don't care how old it is. The thing is, dad, you were born before rock music developed. You saw it happen and so you put a date on everything. When you listen to Mozart, do you worry about which work came first?'"

“He’s right of course. If you were there when the great records and bands were changing music you’re conscious of the music happening. But all his generation worry about is: ‘is it good’.”

It’s a powerful observation: it’s fascinating how music can unite generations today where not that long ago it would divide them.

Today, of course, he has the choice to make the music he wants. But his latest venture will have raised a few eyebrows... even amongst those who know of his long and deeply held faith.

As he says, many hymns have entered our psyche. “I just love what they stand for and the fantastic role that they play in our worship. I also consider the hymn to be an important part of outreach, especially at Easter and Christmas. Not only do some have lyrical and meaningful words that help us all with our worship and understanding, but the melodies are some of the most beautiful ever written.”

His new “Amazing Grace” album has taken these hymns including There is a Green Hill Far Away, Jerusalem and Abide with Me and woven variations upon the original themes - introducing new chord structures and new harmonies.

“I call myself a Christian,” he says, “though I find it hard to say that I belong to one church or another. I was brought up going to the local Baptist church, and I still have very clear memories of how differently the various Christian churches approach things.

“In our church we weren’t really supposed to drink or smoke, although I did. I was going out with a Catholic girl and went to meet her once after mass – and waited for her in the club next to the church, which actually had its own bar. And the priest offered me a drink and a Rothmans. I remember thinking: ‘This is God’s way of trying to persuade me to be a Catholic!’”

Not surprisingly, Rick has some excellent tales to tell of his earlier days in music. But equally he’s keen to talk about what is happening now in society. “I firmly believe that you don’t necessarily lose your creativity as you get older,” he says. “In fact I think you can become more creative because as you age you acquire something else – experience.”

And, he agrees, you also have more to say.

“You look at the creative industries and media and wonder why there is so much emphasis on youth. We waste a phenomenal amount of talent because industry, the creative sector, the media, are all chasing youth. Look at the TV presenters they are getting rid of.”

What has become very apparent in recent years is that many of the artists who launched their careers in the 60s are still making great music. The big difference now is that they are now more accomplished musicians. Nor is this generation of musicians afraid to adopt new technology to reach their audiences. Amazing Grace can be purchased as downloads from his site - which is linked below.

Talking to Rick Wakeman is akin to talking to a compilation of the last 35 years of music. He has not only worked with many of the best artists of their day, but seen music change along the way – and survived. The arrival of punk was supposed to kill off prog rock "dinosaurs" like Yes. It just pushed it out of the way for a few years, but the integrity and originality of the music has meant that it is still reaching audiences today.

And Rick, who has remained totally grounded during the intervening decades, and as ‘ordinary a bloke’ as you’re likely to talk to, is also still doing what he has always done best: still creating brilliant new music.

Relevant links

- [Rick Wakeman's site \(Opens a new window\)](#)

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