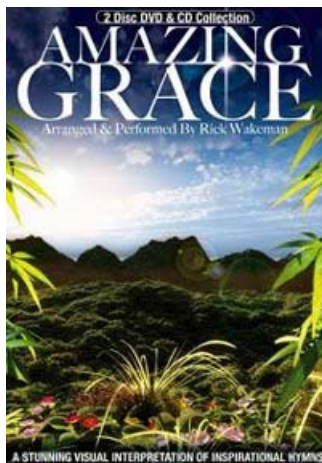


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Amazing Grace Rick Wakeman



It's best not to get me started on what a God I think Rick Wakeman is! Along with Keith Emerson, Wakeman made my teenage keyboard fantasies sparkle with Moog sodden brilliance. His solo gems — **Journey To The Center Of The Earth**, **The Myths & Legends of King Arthur & the Knights Of The Roundtable** and **No Earthly Connection**, among them — have stood the test of time. Then there's his work with Yes and all those studio sessions he's been part of — he's all over Bowie's **Changes** album and plays piano on Cat Stevens' "Morning Has Broken." Rick Wakeman was really one of a small handful of keyboardists who help shape 70's rock. More recently, he has been following a rigid Christian path, and to that end we have the DVD/CD collection, **Amazing Grace**.

Although the packaging is nothing special — there isn't any sort of booklet or even pictures of Wakeman — this is a double CD/DVD set featuring a 'Godly' amount of music. The CD features Wakeman's interpretations of such classic faith-based pieces such as "Amazing Grace," featuring his daughter Jemma on vocals, "All People That On Earth Do Dwell" and "Jerusalem" (ELP covered this national treasure on **Brain Salad Surgery**). With the exception of the title track, the remaining 19 songs — including an alternate solo version of "Amazing Grace," which is truly amazing — mostly feature Wakeman playing piano unaccompanied, with the occasional embellishment. It's all pretty stuff, well played, even some quite startling like "There Is A Green Hill Far Away" and the absolutely stunning rendition of "Morning Has Broken."

For the most part, there's a lack of real excitement. Not that these songs would ever be all that exciting because this isn't really a rock album per se. I can't fault the playing of course; the man is as adept as ever and his touch is second to none. I just wonder, other than truly hardcore Wakeman fans, would dig all this spiritual stuff?

The DVD is 14 songs, slightly shorter than the CD, and basically Wakeman playing over a running montage of beautifully filmed nature settings, along with some stock news reel war footage. Maybe because the music is so solemn and sedate, I found the DVD worked better for me than the CD (and believe me — I am no fan of videos!). The songs worked with a pretty pastoral scene or two (as in the scenes shown for Jerusalem), the aerial shots of rolling English hills, and the magnificent stone and stained-glass of old churches. On most of the DVD, Wakeman begins each song sitting at the piano, giving us a brief history of what we are about to hear. He's very brief, never speaking for more than a minute or two. The stand-out on the DVD (and the CD) is "Morning Has Broken," one of only a handful of songs Wakeman plays live.


Amazing Grace really is for the Rick Wakeman connoisseur. Certainly the CD of this package might be a bit too sedate for those of us who only know Rick Wakeman from his blistering organ solo on "Roundabout" or his infamous gold capes. But when the visuals are added via the DVD, this achingly beautiful music comes alive as the soundtrack to some arresting images.

~ Ralph Greco, Jr.

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