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## The caped keyboard crusader

Rick Wakeman of yes; prog rock lost its cool post '70s. It's staging a comeback



Rick Wakeman spends a down-tempo moment at a piano. His more memorable trappings include capes and stacks of synthesizers.  
Photograph by : Handout

**Mike Doherty, National Post**

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Were he never to speak a word to the media or to his audiences, Rick Wakeman would still be one of the most colourful characters in rock history -- both literally (because of his outlandish capes and the multi-hued stacks of keyboards with which he surrounds himself onstage) and figuratively. Besides his 35-year on-and-off relationship with Yes (who helped put the "prog" in "prog rock") and sessions with everyone from Bowie to Ozzy, Wakeman has recorded more theatrical concept albums than many bands have recorded songs.

Along the way, the original synthesizer superstar has amassed a seemingly never-ending store of funny stories, and his ability as a raconteur is gaining him a new breed of fans. On radio and TV shows in Britain and on his new DVD ( The Other Side of Rick Wakeman), Wakeman

comically skewers pretensions, both his own and those of others.

Take, for instance, the time he was playing with folk-rock group The Strawbs at a circus in Paris in 1971. "I only had this one little solo," the jovial keyboardist recalls over the phone from a tour stop in Rimouski, Que., "and this mustachioed guy with a stick ruined it by jumping up on the stage. I was fuming, so I pushed him off the stage. There was an almighty kerfuffle, and suddenly all sorts of police and officials started appearing. Dave [Lambert, guitarist] said to me, 'That was Salvador Dali.' And I said, 'Well, he wrecked my solo.' We had to leave Paris quite quickly." To this day, Wakeman has no regrets.

Wakeman has always been fascinated by famous and infamous figures from myths, legends and history, and his work inspired by them can tread a fine line between straightforward homage and Monty Pythonesque buffoonery. His first three solo albums, *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* and *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*, were commercially successful and uncommonly grandiose, even for the mid-'70s. *King Arthur*, in particular, grew infamous because of its production on ice at Wembley Arena, where figure skaters in medieval costumes were partially obscured by dry ice mist.

Lately, Wakeman has been revisiting his past, not just in anecdotes, but also in practice. His new Retro series of albums, for instance, finds him unearthing old keyboards such as the mellotron and the mini-Moog. The resolutely prog-rock results seem more up-to-date than many a recording with digital keyboards, partially because of the warmth and character of the sounds and partially because the style of playing -- involving unpredictable song structures and virtuosity -- has to some extent come back into fashion.

Wakeman estimates that 30% of the audience for his concerts with his current band, The English Rock Ensemble, are young people who have been turned on to his music by acts such as Air, Muse, and the Super Furry Animals. After the '70s, he says, "you'd go into a record shop and say, 'I'd like some hip hop and some jazz,' and you'd whisper, 'Have you got any prog rock?'" It would be slipped to you in a little brown paper bag. Suddenly young bands started saying, 'It's actually really good.' "

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