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Greg Lake

Greg Lake: Welcome Backstage [DVD]

(Classic Pictures UK) Rated: N/A
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by **Bill Gibron**

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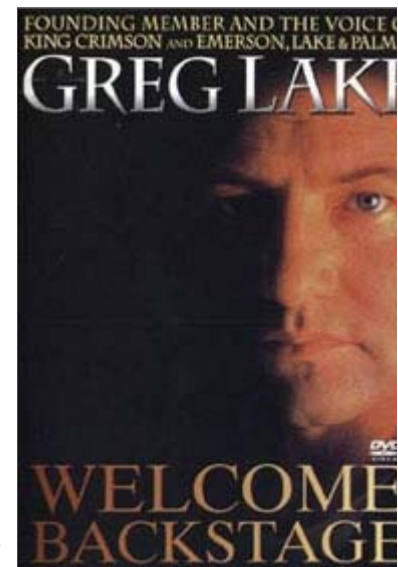
Unlucky Man

Of all the musical genres to suffer a drop off in popularity, only to see themselves reborn a generation or two later, progressive or 'prog' rock has been a highly visible hold out. In a current era when musicianship is less important than ever, when looking good is more significant than playing well, the need for extended guitar solos, droning drum workouts, and killer keyboard pounding just doesn't stir the dance floor tweens. Besides, punk purposely killed off these dirge producing dinosaurs, so extinction appears to be a valid artform finale.

Still, there is a valid, vocal niche out there that wants their Renaissance and Yes, devotees pining away for the day the *real* Genesis regroup and tour with a 2010 update of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. Until then, many in this marginalized demographic have to put up with tired touring troubadours reliving moments of minor grandeur. Greg Lake is a perfect example of this golden oldie gambit.

Until PBS calls for a pledge drive performance of a reformed ELP (the guitarist/ bassist/ vocalist's prime past powerhouse gig), Lake has taken to hitting the road solo, illustrating to audiences how far the once mighty masters of the long form song have fallen. Pudgy, puffy, and lacking the chops to belt out his hits, this shadow of his former heartthrob self still wants to rock. But while the spirit is willing, the flesh is flabby and the wind capacity weak. For a man in his '60s, he seems spry and sober. But no one wants to see an icon from the '70s simply going through the motions. The nostalgia circuit is filled with such one-time talents. No, what fans both old and new really crave is a flawless recreation of their (or their parents') memories, every single element from those far off bygone days meticulously recreated for a web-wired world.

Lake wants to try, at least. His *Greg Lake: Welcome Backstage* DVD is a blatant PR push for upcoming tour, an attempt by some rather savvy managers to restyle the former page-boycot pin-up as a gentele musician. Featuring rehearsal footage, some backstage band interaction, and several EPK-level interviews, we witness the process of professionals convincing themselves of their own good idea. Unlike other artists of the time, Emerson, Lake, and Palmer were never huge household names. Around bong circles and boarding schools,



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however, their laborious LPs (usually centering on a cobbled together concept) were the perfect blacklight backdrop. Simplistic songs were given overgrown structures, while instrumentation and intricacy replaced memorable hooks and pure pop for now people mainstreaming. The elephantine *Works* saw each band member (Lake, keyboardist Keith Emerson and drummer Carl Palmer) fill an entire side with vanity fare. The final segment of the dense double album found the trio collaborating on two (that's *two*) titanic tracks.

It is one of these numbers – the electrified bombast of the Aaron Copeland adaptation "Fanfare for the Common Man" – that starts this disc, and it's a telling indication of what's ahead. Lake, pressured to do little except chord away on his guitar (the track has no singing) plays along like a mannequin's mirage. For those of us who were lucky enough to see the live (back in the dogged days of the Me Decade), Lake played bass on the track, his intricate fingering and fretwork driving what is still a rather memorable performance. But here, he's more than happy to let the rest of the group – a pretty impressive pack of players – take the reigns. Later, new four string sage Trevor Barry will comment on how surreal it is to be the bass player in a noted bass player's new band. Whatever his reservations, however, they aren't shared by Lake.

No, the real shock comes when our yesterday's hero opens his mouth to sing. Several songs require the retirement age artist to warble away like it was 1969, and for the most part, his pipes aren't up to it. Short of breath, rough and ragged of tone, the 2005 Lake sounds like a half-potted Karaoke version of himself. The graceful guile that used to result from his warm, welcoming voice has been replaced with a too many beers and cigarettes stigma. If you listen carefully in between all the rasps and gasps, you can barely make out the man who sold the sonic smoothness of "Take a Pebble", "Watching Over You", and "I Believe in Father Christmas". There are times when the aged attributes actually serve his songcraft. His take of "Farwell to Arms" is wonderfully heartfelt and full. It reminds us of the power inherent in the right singer selling the right song. But for every rarity like this, there are painful pushes to recapture a distant youth. The atonal yelp of "Welcome Back My Friends" is all the proof one requires.

It may seem harsh to criticize a time-honored talent who is merely trying to make his way in this media savvy (and savage) world, but *Greg Lake: Welcome Backstage* has a little too much shilling to be considered completely innocent. Prior to his 2005 tour, it is clear that his people wanted the world to know that the man responsible for the "sound" of King Crimson (though Robert Fripp might have a qualm with such a claim) and ELP was hitting the road with the best band he's ever helmed. It's a brazen and bold assessment, one supported time and time again by interviews with tour managers, agents, and publicists. Thankfully, Lake is more laid back and resolved. He still feels he's all the money, but there's not the hint of desperation evident in his handler's beaming. In some ways, this is more of a showcase for guitar whiz Florian Opahle as it is Mr. *Tarkus*. Our amiable axe handler gets a self-evident solo moment, and plays circles around the rest of the group with his over the top licks.

It's a juxtaposition that perfectly sums up *Welcome Backstage*. Lake's legacy doesn't loom quite as large as the people present believe it does, and when some pipsqueak upstart can remind us of what real rock and roll showmanship is, the pomp and circumstance of the old school muse doesn't resonate so much. This is not to say that there's no place for performers like Emerson, Lake, and Palmer and their prog-producing ilk. A single selection as part of a hit indie soundtrack and the rebirth is right around the corner. Still, some acts wear time well. Others overreach way beyond their physical and esoteric abilities.

Greg Lake: Welcome Backstage is not terrible, it's merely trying. A maturing artist only has to garner goodwill and back catalog to guide him through the autumn years. Here's hoping that is merely a considered and calculated cash grab. Anything outside that is way beyond wishful thinking.