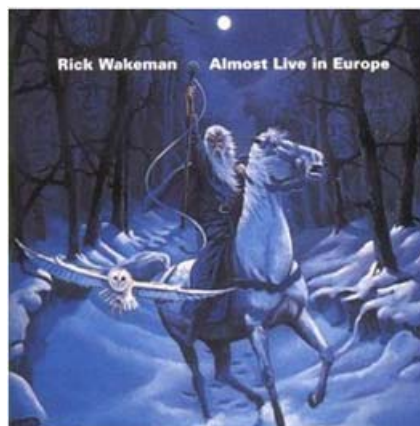




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Rick Wakeman – Almost Live In Europe



By Gary Hill

Overall Review

While you can debate as to what music should or should not have been included to make this a better disc, there's one thing you probably won't quibble about. That's the sound quality of the recording. The reason this is called "Almost Live" is that it's a live recording, but has some augmentation in the studio. The result is one of the best sounding concert recordings Wakeman has produced. The band is in fine form here and they make their way through a series of four medleys of Wakeman's works. There is sure to be something here that fits into everyone's "favorites" list. It's all performed with passion and fire and this is a great live disc. I'd highly recommend it to all Wakeman fans and Yes fans alike. If you are still waiting to discover the magic that is Rick Wakeman solo you might want to start with some studio recordings first, although, this is a great cross section.

Track by Track Review

Elizabethan Rock/Make Me a Woman: Percussion and a funky bass line brings this in. Wakeman's keys come across with a playful sort of neo-classical meets reggae feel. This eventually moves out to a more powerful arrangement and then crescendos. Sedate tones give way to a tasty bass presence and the waves of keys begin to build along side this four string solo. The vocals come in over the top of this motif. This builds gradually in a powerful balladic way.

Catherine of Aragon/A Crying Heart, Pt. 1/Jane

Seymour/A Crying Heart: Launching into what (for many) is more familiar territory, the first snippet in this twenty plus minute medley comes from the *Six Wives...* album. It was also part of Wakeman's solo on the *Yessongs* disc, and other performances. It runs through the familiar segment and then drops to a rather fusion-like mellow movement, with lots of bass running in the backdrop. This is very pretty. It moves through a number of snippets before hitting the song proper. They run through in this balladic style for a time, then explode out into a neo-classical jam that almost feels a bit like modern epic power metal – mind you with a bit more prog sound in it. They move out to a more melodic prog sound for the next portion. The vocals come over, feeling a bit like some pop music from the early '60's – you know, the dramatic, almost theatrical stuff, bordering on lounge music. This works through, then they drop it back down, for Wakeman's dramatic keyboard work on "Jane Seymour." He's joined by the band as they work through a full on arrangement of this classic. As they move through it turns to more of the famous solo from that live Yes album. Wakeman is in fine form here. A number of alterations and variations, most from the original recording, take this onward and upward. It finally resolves out into a new piano solo motif. From there, Wakeman works through a number of different sounds and styles and settles back into the more familiar "Jane Seymour" motifs again, this time working into the more dramatic full band section. The swaying melody line brings it back down to Earth in fine fashion. And we are back on the path again.

Realisation/The Prisoner: The two pieces that make up this medley are introduced as being from the *No Earthly Connection* album. Wakeman starts it off in textural, dramatic ways and then it shifts out to a rather symphonic arrangement. The vocals eventually come in over this in a theatric hard rock style – think "Jesus Christ Superstar." This is a real rocker and is quite dramatic and powerful. It modulates into a rather jazzy little segue. Another round of the dramatic hard rock "song" motif takes it to another jazz-oriented section. Then it wanders off into spacey, effects driven sounds. From there Wakeman fires us into another neo-classical jam. This doesn't stay around long, though. Instead it drops back to a pretty piano/vocal based balladic journey that's full of emotion. This evolves and grows. They explode out into a classic Wakeman rocking arrangement and they work through from there. Wakeman finds plenty of opportunity to throw some great soloing into the mix. After some more vocal work they turn in one of the cooler jams of the disc, with Wakeman's keys tickling over the top of the arrangement. It drops way back down to mellow territory for the next set of vocals. One more killer jam comes in at the end of this and then a short instrumental journey closes it out.

King Arthur/Guinevere/Lancelot and the Black

Knight/The Last Battle: The other twenty minute plus epic here, this one represents a series of music from the *Myths and Legends...* album. It begins with percussion and then Wakeman bring in the familiar opening fanfare. The group joins and they work through the remaining parts of the introductory segment. It drops down to Wakeman's keys for one more flourish and then vocals join as the balladic movement takes it. The next instrumental surge comes at the end of the first section of the lyrics and then it moves back into a more powerful take of the ballad structure. They work through a more extended instrumental motif from there, then it's back to the "song" portion. This general alternating pattern takes us through the remainder of the "King Arthur" segment. It drops down to a piano laden format for the next song in the medley. This has a much mellower, gentle sort of ballad approach. It's essentially a love song and the music fits. Wakeman solos all over the backdrop of this, making it a very dramatic and powerful piece of music. It intensifies a lot and we get some great Wakeman soloing in the course. A staccato sort of jam takes it to transition through the next musical theme. This a more powerhouse jam that represents the fight segment. Wakeman's keyboard soloing on this is purely magical. The vocals are also fiery here. It is softened by a more melodic, pretty section. This is like musical theater of the highest form coupled with progressive rock. The music alters and runs through the various themes again and Wakeman fires of another killer solo. Then they drop it back into fast paced, jazzy sort of movement. The themes from the earlier section are coupled with playful elements and other sounds. This then gives way to a drop to just keys for another evocative section that calls to mind familiar neo-classical themes. We get a reprise of the "fight" section and the instrumental excursion that follows it. This gives way to the return of the powerful rock vocals. It resolves out into the more melodic motif. Well trodden themes return again and end this section. Then the keys work through a series of melody lines in a mellower fashion. This slows down and seemingly ends things. Wakeman's keys rise up from the aftermath in a pretty fashion full of drama. He carries it for a while with some minor accompaniment, mostly bass. This is beautiful music. The first vocals of this final song come in with a bitter sweet message. They

intensify this as they carry on. A crescendo gives way to another drop down. This time the keys and the bass hold almost equal sway in the arrangement. They work through a number of variations and alterations in the course of this musical exploration. It turns more “song” oriented as the instruments move in new directions and themes in a pretty straightforward, classically oriented progressive rock mode. This weaves its way around and eventually ends things in a very satisfying manner.



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