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## Emerson, Lake & Palmer: Punk's illegitimate dads

February 22, 2011

By [Sound and Fury](#)

In the excellent *Westway to the World*, a Clash documentary directed by Don Letts, bassist Paul Simonon recalls the music his brother would listen to in the '70s.

“He’d listen to stuff like Yes, with birds chirping,” he said, “and I would go, ‘God, what are you listening to?!’”

He could have been speaking about Emerson, Lake & Palmer as well. The British trio (Keith Emerson on keyboards, Greg Lake on bass/guitars and vocals, and Carl Palmer on drums) were the first commercially successful progressive supergroup. They’ve sold more than 40 million records and, in the '70s, only Led Zeppelin attracted

4/1/2011

## Emerson, Lake & Palmer: Punk's illegiti...

more fans in concert. Today, except for diehard fans, they're all but forgotten.

With all due respect to the New York Dolls and the Ramones, I boldly declare: without ELP, there would be no punk. Strictly from a musical point of view, that so-called punk DIY rebellion we all talk about was a direct reaction to the opulence and virtuosity of groups like ELP, which only needed three guys to produce fireworks with such a level of musicianship that it was impossible to reproduce by anyone else.

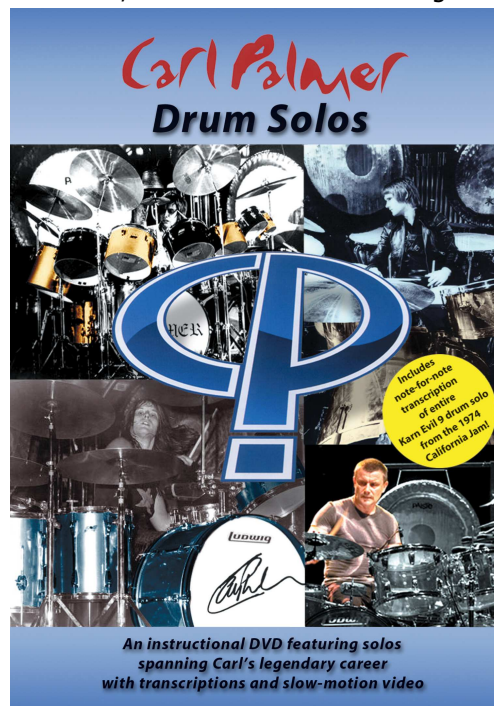
I understand the critics, though. In the middle of this live version of "Karn Evil 9," Carl Palmer starts one of his trademark solos and goes on forever. When you think he's about done, he starts playing symphonic gongs. By the time he ends up playing a bell with his teeth, I was thinking of Christopher Guest in *This is Spinal Tap*. But I couldn't take my eyes off Palmer.

Or look at the flawless, highly complex interplay between Emerson and Palmer in this excerpt from ELP's Mussorgsky recreation (Pictures at an Exhibition). Impressive, yes, but how long can you sit in awe of these guys? That's the great thing about punk music: it was a way to say "Forget about this shit; I can't play, but I'll play anyway."

ELP could slow down, too; they recorded successful, radio-friendly pop gems like this one:

When I grew up, walking with a vinyl copy of ELP's *Trilogy* under the arm was a sign of sophistication, a declaration of principles. "This is what I listen to. Don't bother me with your crap." Today, even musically knowledgeable young people I talk to don't have a clue about who or what ELP is, and that's a shame.

But the P in ELP hasn't gone anywhere, and now Carl Palmer is back with an instructional drum DVD, which was an excuse to talk on the phone to one of the greatest early drum heroes in rock history.



**Why did you choose those particular solos? [“Karn Evil 9” solo from the California Jam TV show in 1974; “The Heat Goes On” solo with Asia in 2008; and “Fanfare For The Common Man” solo with Asia in 2009]**

I chose solos that I thought people would enjoy, historical solos people talked to me about throughout the years. It came about very organically, and I felt it was what other drummers wanted to hear and see again.

#### **How is the DVD structured?**

We structured [it] in such a way that each solo could be reduced in tempo. You can go from 100 percent down to 25 percent. You can understand each solo in a very slow format. Each solo has a PDF you can print out and actually see the notes I’m playing and what drums I’m playing. Once you get better at playing it, you can speed up from 25 to 50, and then up to 100 percent. The actual idea here is to learn everything very slowly, playing it very slowly from the DVD and speeding up when you are ready. Each solo is transcribed note-for-note, and you don’t have to buy an extra book — it’s all on the DVD.

#### **What is it about a drum solo? Is it just technique? Is it about the ability to improvise? Why even bother with a drum solo? Just to show off?**

A drum solo has to be three or four things. It needs to be entertaining because, number one, the problem with a drum solo is the fact that it starts and people get bored immediately. Who wants to hear a drum solo? So a drum solo’s got to have creativity, it has to look good, to please the eye, and it’s got to please a person who isn’t a drummer. Obviously, if you can play interesting things and excite drummers in the room, isn’t that fantastic? But at the end of the day it has to be as visually exciting as it is from a technique point of view. The technique, obviously, is very, very important, because that gives you the longevity in the solo and enables you to play more things. That’s the beauty of a good drum solo.

#### **What drums are you using now?**

[The drums I use now](#) were built for me as part of the 100th celebration of the Ludwig drum company. They made me a stainless steel drum set, which is what I’ve always played. I have one in Europe and one in America. And they’ve just released a Carl Palmer snare drum. (Go to [carlpalmer.com](http://carlpalmer.com) for more info.)

#### **In “Toccata,” you were the first drummer ever to use synthesized drums.**

That’s correct. The sounds in the middle of “Toccata” are very atmospheric, and people thought they were generated by a keyboard, but that was wrong — they were actually generated by electric drums I had made at the time. I had eight synthesizers made the size of a cigar box for each tom-tom. And I could trigger this cigar box synthesizer from an internal microphone I had in each drum. The sounds you hear in the middle of “Toccata” are produced that way. It was the very first electronic drum solo recorded.

#### **The 1970 Isle of Wight festival was a big turning point for the band.**

You have to understand something: before the evening of Isle of Wight, we played at a small center in Plymouth called The Guildhall, and then Emerson, Lake & Palmer were known as individuals, not as a group. The minute we played at Isle of Wight we became an international group. That’s what the Isle of Wight festival did for us, overnight.

#### **I’m sure you’ve heard this question many times before, but I’ve got to ask you: how did you guys react to the advent of punk rock, which, in great part, was a direct reaction to the so-called excesses of bands like ELP and Yes, for example?**

It was obviously a problem for us when punk rock came along because, at the same time — and not because of punk rock — American radio had changed. American radio was not ready to play pieces of music 15-20 minutes long. So that’s the first thing. The second thing was that there was a strong rebellion against anything that was extravagant, such as ELP putting on big rock shows which required us to begin setting up in the next town before we finished playing on the previous one. None of this related to what was happening in the streets, and that was called punk. So there was a bit of a backlash that we got from that. Basically, the music is the music; if you liked it, you liked it. But we were no longer played in what we called drive time; we were now played at 2 or 3 in the morning, and that was a problem, not only for ELP but many bands. Of course, as we know, punk didn’t last as long as one would’ve expected it to. But the music of ELP and many of those prog-rock bands has stood the test of time because it is quality music. That is not to say that certain punk bands didn’t have a certain amount of quality, but I think that prog music, ELP, for example ... We had songs like “Lucky Man,” “Still... You Turn Me On,” “From the Beginning,” “C’est la vie,” and on top of that we had technology in the form of Moog synthesizers and all these things, so we had a slight edge on most bands and our music had endured the pass of time, unlike a lot of punk bands.

**Yet, lots of young people don't know you exist or have forgotten you ... while you can feel the influence of punk all the way to now, especially in the '90s. Don't you feel that?**

I don't feel that personally, but if you feel something has been forgotten that's your prerogative, you're allowed to...

**I mean, for some people...**

I can't talk for some people, Enrique. All I can tell you is that our catalogue still sells. It doesn't get played on the radio that much but it still gets bought, we still get downloads, so that's where we are. Next question!

**You were mentioning about the backlash the group started suffering towards the end of the '70s. But that backlash started after you became huge. Until then, the critics didn't mind what they would later call "excesses." They loved it! It's not that you suddenly changed your sound, you were always bombastic. But sometimes critics feel that, after a band becomes huge, it is their duty to destroy them.**

Some people do that to bands, and some bands like Queen never got attacked [I wanted to interject, because Queen did get attacked, especially after *Hot Space*, but I let it pass], they were always thought of as a sensational group, sensational songwriters, and great performers. Unfortunately, some bands do get attacked, and you're absolutely right: ELP got attacked not only in the U.K., but also to a certain extent in America. But I have to say that the American audiences were always much, much stronger than the U.K. audiences, though the U.K. audiences for the first few years always stood by us and they are still with us even today. We just played last year on the 25th of July [2010] for 18,000 people. The people in the U.K. had stayed by the band, but journalists started attacking the band when we were four years old, in 1974, or late '73. We always had that, but we had less of it in America.

**Again, another question you've probably heard before: What's the true story about Mitch Mitchell and Jimi Hendrix? Was Hendrix ever going to join ELP and thus give birth to "HELP"?**

Hendrix was never going to be part of ELP. That was a complete fallacy, basically put together by journalists who wished it would happen. Hendrix never played at the rehearsal, never came down to see the band, and I never saw him once during my existence in the band. Mitch Mitchell was the first drummer to be chosen for ELP, but he didn't pass the audition and they decided to get rid of him and call me in, and I got the job.

**So all that about "HELP" is just a myth.**

You got it: It's all rubbish. None of it is true. You're speaking to the man, Enrique, this is the story.

**Finally, where is your head and your heart right now? ELP? Your DVD? The Carl Palmer Group? Asia?**

All of the above. I played in America last October and November with the CPG, and I'm coming back this year in October-November. Then I'll play with Asia [Palmer, John Wetton, Steve Howe, and Geoff Downes] April through May, and we'll make a new album next year, celebrating our 30th anniversary. So I can tell you that my heart is in many corners of the room. I do lots of things and need lots of things to keep me interested. In February I played in Mallorca and Barcelona, Spain, with my band. I'm always doing something.

Tags: [Asia](#), [Carl Palmer](#), [ELP](#), [Emerson Lake & Palmer](#), [Enrique Lopetegui](#), [Greg Lake](#), [Jimi Hendrix](#), [Keith Emerson](#), [Music](#), [prog-rock](#)

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I love those guys! " From The Beginning" reminds me of this beautiful girl I used to live with in Oklahoma. We had a three bedroom house near the Okla. Univ. campus. A big front porch, a big back yard and lots of trees. We were young hippies in love in the time of free love and cheap drugs. It was paradise.

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