

A chat with rock pioneer Carl Palmer: Legendary drum role



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There's no such thing as a sure bet in the recording industry. Doubters need only reflect on the innumerable carcasses of one-hit wonders that litter the highways of music history. Who remembers the last time **The Rocky Fellers** had a chart topper?

But there is at least *one* certainty in the world of recorded music: when would-be band members draw straws to decide who will fill the role of the band's "forgotten man," more times than not it's the lonely rhythmist that comes up a "lucky winner." And that might *actually* make sense in some strange parallel universe since "all" the drummer does is keep his bandmates from driving the

rhythm train off into musical anarchy.

Of course, the neglected drummer could always try something novel to get more consideration – say hold out for equal billing in the band's handle. And if *that* doesn't work, they might just try playing in a music-shaping rock band that does nothing but produce influential platinum-selling albums. That has certainly done the trick for **Emerson, Lake and Palmer's** fabled drummer, **Carl Palmer**.

As the pioneering progressive rock band ELP, Palmer, keyboardist **Keith Emerson**, and guitarist **Greg Lake** have sold over 48 million records to date, including best-selling albums “Tarkus,” “Pictures at an Exhibition,” “Trilogy,” “Brain Salad Surgery,” “Works Vol. 1 and 2,” and two separate live albums. Each of the albums went platinum, owing in large part to Palmer’s peerless musicianship and insightful songwriting.

In addition to his brilliant work with ELP, the dynamic showman has thrilled listeners and audiences for four decades with dazzling speed and mastery of the drums for some of music’s most memorable bands including **Atomic Rooster**, **The Crazy World Of Arthur Brown** and **Asia**.

The legendary drummer chatted with me recently as he prepared to take his celebrated show on the road – uh, *sea* – sailing the Caribbean April 2-7, 2014 as an integral part of **The Moody Blues Cruise – Return To The Isle Of Wight**.

Palmer will be joining **The Moody Blues**, along with Isle of Wight Festival alums **Roger Daltrey** of **The Who**, **Lighthouse** and **Shawn Phillips**. The Cruise rounds out the exceptional lineup with **The Zombies**, **The Orchestra starring ELO**, **Starship**, **Little River Band** and other notable ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s artists. And of course, there are those “trifling” stops in the Bahamas and Grand Turk.

Many artists will point to a single pivotal gig as being *instrumental* – pun intended – to their success. And so it is with Emerson, Lake and Palmer and their appearance at the 1970 Isle of Wight Music Festival, a massive triumph for a band that had yet to release their first album.

“The Isle of Wight to me was kind of special,” professed Palmer. “I never saw any acts playing, I didn’t see The Who, I didn’t see **Jimi Hendrix** or **Janis Joplin** – I didn’t see *anyone*. We flew in by helicopter, we jumped out, went in and played and played, got out and that was it. We were one of the very last acts to be booked.”

“We had about 45 minutes to play. We actually played 47 minutes, because it was recorded. We were *very* lucky to get the slot. Prior to that we’d only done one concert before as a group – a promotion with **Dick Van Dyke**, I always remember that – and we then went on to play the Isle of Wight.”

“And from nothing to playing one concert at the Isle of Wight, the next morning we were

known internationally. We were an international group. So the words 'Isle of Wight' basically means to me the remedy for instant success, and it *was*."

It was just one more shining instance of the band's charismatic stage presence. Palmer's own lack of anonymity on-stage is testament to the rhythmic brilliance of one of rock and roll's greatest drummers.

"Oh let me tell you," offered Palmer, "just to put it into perspective, the biggest success of my career was Emerson, Lake and Palmer and I was always right in the middle of the stage. And that was an equal sort of setup there. There was no problem whatsoever there."

"I've never really been anonymous as a drummer. Prior to that, I was with Atomic Rooster. That was another three-piece and I was right in the center of the stage. I've never really been in a support band or backing group since I was 17 years old. I've only ever been in bands where I've actually *meant* something, just like with Asia."

That trend will no doubt continue with Palmer's set on the sea. And the rock icon plans to contribute mightily to a few surprise collaborations aboard the Cruise – in addition to revealing the diversity of his talent in some unexpected ways. "I'm seriously working on that. I don't want to mention any names to you yet. And if I could, you know I would if I've got something actually settled."

"I've made a point of wanting to get involved with a couple of people that are playing on that cruise if they wanted to do it. And of course, that conversation hasn't happened yet. To be perfectly honest with you, I think the only way that's going to happen is when I'm actually there on the cruise and we have been there one night and decide. 'Yeah, let's do that!' And then it will happen."

"On the **Monsters of Rock Cruise** (March 29-April 2) – which I'm doing as well prior to the Moody's cruise – I'm only playing once in the five days there, and that's because there are so many groups. But there is a night where the musicians get up to jam with each other. And though I don't really like a lot of that sort of pandemonium, I'm definitely going to participate in that."

"I will be teaching on one of the cruises, probably the Moody's cruise. I'm holding a master class for drummers if they want to come along and see some tricks of the trade. I'll also be displaying my latest artwork, which we're launching on that cruise, in actual fact. I just had a catalogue of paintings that sold incredibly well called Twist of the Wrist Art Collection."

“So I've been doing a lot of other things apart from jamming and playing concerts on both of the cruises. I'm hoping on the Moody's cruise, there will be something I might be able to do which will be a little more special than most.”

Just about *everything* Palmer touches is a little more special than most – and given his rich and diverse musical background, that shouldn't surprise *anyone*. Palmer's grandfather played the drums, his grandmother was a symphony violinist, his mother played an assortment of instruments, and his father sang, danced and played the guitar and drums as a semi-professional entertainer.

Since joining his first professional band at the ripe old age of 14, Palmer has proven his remarkable versatility by playing in just about every genre known to mankind – and even a few that may *not* be known. While “ordinary” drummers would find it challenging to straddle such disparate styles, it's all in a day's work for the inimitable Palmer.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I've come up playing everything from commercial middle of the road corporate rock with Asia, to playing the most advanced technological prog with ELP, to having one of the biggest underground roots with Atomic Rooster, to being in one of the very first psychedelic groups, The Crazy World of Arthur Brown and now having my own prog rock metal instrumental group.”

“I've been playing now for 52 years. I started off playing in orchestras like **Lawrence Welk**. I've done everything you can imagine from rock to traditional jazz groups, to playing in the London Symphony Orchestra.”

“There is one thing I've never done and I *do* want to do it and I *will* be doing it. I'm not too sure who exactly *with* yet, but I have some ideas. I am speaking to people. I've never been in a heavy metal kind of rock band where it's wall to wall guitars. I am at the moment in a prog rock metal group which is instrumental. But I've never been in an out and out sort of **Black Sabbath** sort of group.”

Should **Ozzy Osbourne** ever come calling for Palmer, the drummer's stints in ELP and Asia will prove to be an invaluable resource. Being integral to the success of not one, but *two* “supergroups” has provided Palmer with unique insights as to whether it's better to have brilliant band mates that have occasionally clashing egos – or somewhat less talented musicians that always seem to get along.

“That's a very important question. And a question that distinguishes a real rock and roll

band and a band that's just *playing* at being a rock and roll band. You need to be rebellious when you're in a group."

"If you're ever in a group and somebody's sitting on the fence, kind of agreeing with everything, thinking everything's marvelous, you don't want to work with that guy. You want talented people who cause problems who have got a strong, objective opinion who really want to try and get their opinion across, they believe in what they're doing, having really strong virtues, you know, *difficult* people, *talented* people."

"Once you get that, you get bands like Emerson, Lake and Palmer. *Nobody* sat on the fence. Everybody said exactly the way it was. I don't mean to be cruel; I would say that, 'I didn't like what you played on that, Keith, I'm really sorry but it doesn't work.' Or, 'Tell me why you want to play that?'"

"There's a certain amount of loyalty that you've got to each other because you've been working together for a long time. He knows that I would only say something like that if I meant it. And when you've got that kind of openness and you've got people who come charging back and give you a really good argument 'why,' then *that's* how you get the music. That's how the spirit is formed."

"So I never want to be in a band where people don't cross check and question 'Why are we doing this?' That's no good because to get the ideas flowing, you need controversy. You don't need people to be difficult just for the sake of it. Please don't get me wrong. You need them to be very professional but you don't need them to be sitting on the fence agreeing to everything. You do need input and input needs to be on a professional level."

That there are still musical frontiers left to explore for the renowned rocker is testament to his still keen enthusiasm for perfecting his craft. "I'll tell you what, I'm still learning. But most important of all, I'm still *improving*. My feet are still improving. It's slow because improvement is extremely gradual, but I've definitely noticed my feet improving."

"I've just had a couple of new bass drum pedals made for me by a great company over on the west coast. I worked on the pedals yesterday and I'm going to work all day tomorrow on them. And I'm getting them just right because you have to spend a lot of time adjusting to get the right tension and stuff."

"I am definitely improving and while I'm improving, I'm still very, very happy. I think I'm only improving because I'm enthusiastic. Obviously, the improvement is unbelievably slow,

because it's bound to slow down. It's not like when you're first beginning and you have these huge advancements at the very beginning. No, it's quite slow."

"Whilst I can keep on advancing, I'm very, very happy. If I can actually carry on playing at a standard, then I'll just carry on. If I can't get better, that's okay. The minute I can't maintain the way you've seen me play or the way anyone else has seen me play, then I will just stop and I will just *disappear*."

The prospect of Carl Palmer simply disappearing is *frightening* for any music fan to consider. But fortunately for aficionados of rock/jazz/heavy metal/big band music everywhere, the luminous rhythmist only seems to get better with each passing year.

See you on the Cruises!