Greg Lake, pioneer of progressive rock music, dies at 69

By Kevin Reed
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Greg Lake, a pioneer of the popular music genre known as progressive rock, died December 7 in London at age 69. A post on his Facebook page by his manager said Lake had lost “a long and stubborn battle with cancer.”

Greg Lake was a founder, along with schoolmate Robert Fripp, of the British band King Crimson in 1968 and later the 1970s’ supergroup Emerson, Lake and Palmer (ELP) with keyboardist Keith Emerson—who committed suicide last March—and drummer Carl Palmer.

While Lake is known for his alternately sensitive and full-throated lead vocals, he was also an accomplished acoustic, lead electric and bass guitar player. He was a producer, writer and lyricist and was responsible for several popular hits with ELP. Among the more memorable of Lake’s ELP songs are “Lucky Man” (1970), “From the Beginning” (1972), “Still … You Turn Me On” (1973) and “C’est la Vie” (1977).

Gregory Stuart Lake was born November 10, 1947 in the coastal town of Poole in Dorset, England. He described his upbringing as “very poor,” living in a prefab asbestos home built in response to the post-war housing crisis. He began playing guitar at age 12 and was encouraged by his mother to explore popular and classical music.

As with so many youth of his generation, Lake was influenced by early American rock ‘n’ roll, and later by the music of the Beatles and Jimi Hendrix. He dropped out of school at age 16 to pursue his interest in music while working on the Poole docks loading and unloading cargo. A year later, he decided to become a professional musician and remained in the Dorset area playing in jobbing bands as a lead singer and guitarist.

The formation of King Crimson in London in November 1968—with Lake on bass and lead vocals and Fripp on electric guitar, along with Michael Giles, Ian McDonald and Peter Sinfield—was an important milestone. Popular reception in the UK for King Crimson was so enthusiastic that they departed for an American tour in the fall of 1969 and simultaneously released their first studio album, In the Court of the Crimson King.

With heavy use of electro-mechanical recording effects and Mellotron, the album was a foray into experimental, semi-symphonic and avant-garde musical forms. In addition to lead vocals and bass, Greg Lake was a creative force behind several compositions, including the opening and closing tracks, “21st Century Schizoid Man” and “The Court of the Crimson King,” respectively.

In a 2013 Rolling Stone interview, Lake explained the band’s approach: “The music of King Crimson was drawn almost exclusively based on more European structures. It wasn’t the three-minute single. It wasn’t basic blues-riff music. This was using very different harmonic components … The structures were individual and not necessarily any given or prescribed length.”

Some music historians consider In the Court of the Crimson King to be the departure from country and blues-based rock that launched progressive rock. Like most subgenres, progressive rock is diffuse and difficult to define. Sometimes known as art or symphonic rock, it is associated with long and instrumental-heavy pieces possessing an eclectic fusion of jazz, folk and/or classical musical themes.

In its earliest form, progressive rock carried over many of the more unfortunate features of the 1960s’ psychedelic era: heavy reliance on audio effects, distortion, incoherent acoustic doodling, excessively loud live performances and insufferably long instrumental solo improvisations. Along with these often ponderous and difficult music listening experiences, there developed the packaging of recordings into “concept albums” that focused, often in a pseudo-intellectual manner, on one or another central creative idea.

As more rock bands evolved along similar lines—such as Yes, Genesis, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull and Emerson, Lake
and Palmer—the form began shedding some of its more inaccessible musical elements. For a brief period in the early 1970s, progressive rock music produced some interesting, beautiful and stimulating works and attracted a large international audience.

Upon leaving King Crimson in late 1969, serendipity brought Greg Lake into contact with Keith Emerson and Carl Palmer as they were also leaving their previous bands in pursuit of something more professionally substantial and satisfying. With the formation of ELP in 1970 as the first supergroup—a band made up of artists who had previous success as either solo performers or members of other bands—Lake was now in the company of musicians with similar gifts and ambitions.

More than any other group of the genre, ELP emerged with a pronounced classical music influence. Their repertoire included three-piece rock arrangements of compositions by Béla Bartók, Leos JanáÅ¡ek and Johann Sebastian Bach. ELP’s second recording was a live performance of an arrangement for keyboards, bass and drums of Modest Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition. This was challenging music to perform and ELP pulled it off to enthusiastic crowds in the US, Europe and Asia.

While music critics often ridiculed them as pretentious, ELP became increasingly popular in the early 1970s. Their subsequent three studio recordings—Tarkus (1971), Trilogy (1972) and Brain Salad Surgery (1973)—reached top-10 chart status in the US and UK, while their classical music influence was extended to rock arrangements of pieces by Aaron Copeland (Rodeo), Maurice Ravel (Bolero) and Alberto Ginastera (Tocata).

Toward the end of the 1970s, the attraction of progressive rock waned and ELP began to appear as an anachronism. Although audiences continued to turn out—including a sell-out crowd of 78,000 at Montreal’s Olympic Stadium in the summer of 1977—ELP’s world tours took on the quality of absurd excess.

By 1978, the ludicrous scale of it all came crashing down—the band’s 120-date tour had to be cancelled when promoters ran out of money after 18 shows. With punk rock and disco on the rise—each proclaiming a return to the original, less ornamented forms and beats of rock music—ELP’s full orchestra, choir and dozen semi-trucks full of gear became a living example of all that seemed wrong with self-indulgent, progressive rock.

Claims that the genre represented a significant cultural advancement are clearly overstated. The musicians involved no doubt felt constrained by the limits of what was considered possible in rock ‘n’ roll. However, their innovations took place in an atmosphere dominated by the growing social indifference and self-absorption of important layers of the middle class and, no matter their conscious intentions, almost inevitably took on a certain coloring as a result.

Moreover, progressive rock, as part of the same general social process, became a big business. Enormous sums of money were both invested and made on records, concert tours and band merchandising. The heyday of progressive rock (1969-1978) corresponded with a growth of the recording industry through the sales of hundreds of millions of LPs and the expansion of commercial FM radio.

This was an era when record labels, media corporations, promoters and, it should be added, supergroups made significant fortunes. The rapid decline of progressive rock in the late 1970s paralleled the collapse of LP sales, which peaked at $15 billion in 1978 and dropped precipitously to $8 billion by 1983. Only the advent of the audio CD would revive the industry for a brief period before it was decimated once again by Internet sharing and audio streaming a decade later.

It is interesting to note that the type of music most closely identified with Greg Lake—acoustic love songs and ballads—is not among the more bombastic varieties of progressive rock. Lake will be remembered as a sincere artist with significant talents as a singer-song writer and performer. In an interview for a 2006 documentary, he noted in hindsight, “ELP was a bit pretentious … we got up a few people’s noses. But generally, I always felt that the public, the people, loved the band. They knew who we were.”