Naughty but nice
Rick Wakeman enjoys Pictures of an Exhibitionist, Keith Emerson's honest account of his life in rock'n'roll

Rick Wakeman
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Pictures of an Exhibitionist
by Keith Emerson

When I informed my late father (once a fine pianist himself) that I wanted to have a career in music, he sat me down and told me, in no uncertain terms, that life as a professional musician would be a never-ending apprenticeship, in life as well as music. I was 12 years old at the time.

In many ways, Pictures of an Exhibitionist mirrors these parental words of wisdom, as Keith Emerson, of The Nice and of Emerson Lake and Palmer, takes us through his own musical apprenticeship, virtually starting his story in his mother's womb.

This account of his upbringing helps you to get to know him both as a musician and a person. It soon becomes clear that after nearly 60 years on this planet, he now "knows himself" extremely well and is as happy to share his personal failures as his successes.

He lays bare his teenage frustrations on the sexual front (although it has to be said that this is something which he makes up for in true rock'n'roll fashion in later years). The people who were around him during his childhood clearly play a very important role in his life and his respect for them shines through as he recounts his early days learning the piano and taking part in music festivals. He talks at length about his various piano teachers and also of his parents (whom he repaid not only with respect and love, but also with a nice new bungalow to replace the Worthing council house he grew up in).

Knowing Keith well and also having met his mother on a few occasions, I am sure that
his record of these early years is extremely accurate and that they did a lot to shape the life that was to come - and indeed, once he has dealt with childhood and his early life on the road, he moves swiftly on to the glory years of the late 1960s and 70s for which he is best known.

There is no doubt that Keith's apprenticeship prepared him well for stardom. To have worked extensively with Jimi Hendrix (in 1967 The Nice opened for Hendrix at the Marquee in London then toured Britain with him; Hendrix often played with Emerson then) is something to be relished, and relish it he did. As a musician myself, I would have liked to know much more about this particular era, though, as so little has been written about the collaborations between Hendrix and Emerson.

The book is certainly not all musical facts and figures. There are more than a few hilarious stories of "rumpy pumpy" (to use Emerson's own phrase), as he seeks to become a veritable athlete both on and off stage. He also openly discusses his experimentation with drugs and the sadness that often resulted from their use. A true rock'n'roller in every respect.

The accuracy with which he describes his personal life is echoed in his descriptions of the musical history of which he was very much a part - although I'm not entirely convinced by his recollection of our first meeting, way back in 1971. What is certainly correct is his account of me standing at the side of a stage somewhere in America in 1972, watching him perform with Emerson Lake and Palmer on a tour supported by Yes, which I had just joined at the time.

His left-hand work was, and still is, unsurpassed in its technique and musicality and considering the tragedies that have befallen his right hand (a cyst removed in 1988, a fracture in 1990, and an operation on a nerve in 1993 which dramatically opens and closes the book), it is pretty amazing that he has been able to continue working at all.

There are of course many moments of Spinal Tap hilarity (some of which are all too chillingly familiar to me), especially those involving groupies, whose gymnastic agilities are described extremely graphically for the undoubtedly interested reader ... (pause to wipe sweat from brow). Having said this, like all musicians whose performances and music are brimful of emotion, his love-life mirrored this emotive side as well, and his obvious love for his children, and the women who have been part of his life, shines through.

There is pretty much everything in this book, from The Nice to the nasty. Alongside the awards and the great reviews are several "not so nice" ones, which gives a very balanced account of his reception. There is no real ending, but there can't be, as Keith's career is still very much happening.

Pictures of an Exhibitionist is a very easy read and indeed certain chapters are unputdownable. It unashamedly concentrates on the glory days - an era that I believe will prove to be the greatest decade of progression in both music and the music industry. (Having said this, though, music should be judged purely on merit and its life span dictated by the listener and not the reviewer.)

This book should be read by people interested not only in the prog rock era of the 70s but also by all aspiring musicians who yearn for longevity in the music business. It shows that the apprenticeship route really does work. It also shows that for each individual, life is simply that - individual - and at the end of the day that is what shapes a great musician.

3Rick Wakeman is a musician and composer.
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