

“I’m not interested in showmanship”

Sometime YES man RICK WAKEMAN is also a solo performer of his own fantastic, quasi-historical works. Choirs, actors, orchestras... it’s a lot of plates to spin. “Someday,” he says, “something will be a disaster”

— MM APRIL 13 —

IT WAS UNFORTUNATE that Rick Wakeman fell prostrate with a severe bout of influenza only hours after his MM interview this week. Because the last time we saw him, he was on the verge of collapse after his sensational Royal Festival Hall premiere of *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth*.

They say everything Rick touches “turns to gold”, but the fragile state of his health shows how hard he has been working of late. And there’s much more to come.

The cheerful, friendly giant, apart from being one of the most popular musicians — among musicians and public alike — is in great demand, not only for his full-time work with Yes, but for his outside activities.

At 24, Rick feels he has earned and learned much from the music business, and now wants to put more back. There is much for him to do, and in some ways he’s only started to tap his potential, but he also wants to help others with their careers.


It’s a refreshing attitude and a change from many musicians who, on achieving success, seem only too anxious to retire with the booty at all possible speed. He reflected first on the epic concert he gave at the Festival Hall with the London Symphony Orchestra, choir and group, shortly available on his second solo LP.

“I’ll never do two shows like that in one night again,” he vowed. “If *Journey* went on tour it would have to be one performance a night. At the premiere, the first concert was really good. It had a few mistakes, but it was fresh. For the first time in my life, I was nervous as hell. I suddenly realised I wasn’t sharing the responsibility.

“It was all down to me. I thought the rest of the boys in the group would have been nervous, but just before the show they were chatting away, and drinking, and there was me... a gibbering heap.

“The audience were great — they really came to enjoy themselves. London crowds can be critical, but they were warm and we could feel them willing us to succeed.

“I thought the silent movies would be a disaster, because they only arrived five minutes before the first show, and I had to improvise the piano accompaniment, without knowing what they were like. I used the movies and old-time backing because the second number of a show is so important. It can be a downer or just more of the opening number, and I wanted to give the people something completely different, to relax them for *Journey*, which is 42 minutes long.” »



October 22, 1974: Rick Wakeman during a 20-date tour of North America with the National Philharmonic Orchestra, the Choir Of America and his band

**Wakeman:
quitting
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obvious
move**

"The concert was recorded live on Ronnie Lane's mobile truck, but there were a few problems when it came to preparing the tapes for the LP. We had to change tapes in the middle of David Hemmings' narration, and he flew back from filming to record a bit more in the studio. He had us in stitches, doing it in a German accent, Welsh, Irish, African—he's a clever lad. It took us nine days to do the mixing.

"Someone in the street had accidentally kicked out the vocal mic cable just before we started recording. So we boosted up the vocals that were picked up on the other mics.

"We had another problem too—the snare drum broke and one of the drum mics failed. There were also four bars of complete shambles between the orchestra and the group. Fortunately an identical passage occurred later and we just used that one twice."

The album is now due out on May 9. Another factor in its delay (it was supposed to be rushed out immediately after the concert), was the paper shortage. It has a gatefold and eight-page booklet, and the designer refused to re-jig it as a single sleeve. The designer won, but in the meantime Rick had to go to America with Yes. He heard, and rejected the original cuts of the album while on tour.

"I just didn't like the sound, and it was worth doing it properly for the sake of a few extra days."

The last Yes tour was something of a marathon, and said Rick: "I can hardly remember the individual performances now, except that it was an improvement on the British tour—thank God. We had a few amusing ones. In Memphis they had a union strike and couldn't finish the building, a new hall, in time.

"There was no seating or curtains and there were eight separate echoes, every time you hit a drum or clapped your hands. We couldn't play for long. What a terrible place—and this was in the home of music. Steer clear, all groups!

"On the last night the roadies sent seven streakers across the stage. With 18 tons of equipment to lug around, it was physically and mentally difficult for us all. You just can't sustain it. My gear was just falling apart towards the end. It was all held together with gaffer tape.

"Yes, you can safely say this was the last of the long tours. We'll never do that again, we're all agreed. I want to spread the work out more, so we can do our own individual things, go on the road for a bit, record, and so on."

How had the mighty *Topographic Oceans* fared during the tour?

"We had a meeting and after a couple of weeks, dropped side two from the programme. I thought side three was very messy, but as a compromise we dropped Two, and that actually helped to improve Three. I firmly believe that Yes is an amazing band, and hopefully we'll be going back on the right path once again.

"I was on a plane the other day and they played *Fragile* on the eight-track. I'd not heard it in over a year, and it stood the test of time. It was tremendous, and I got more out of it than when we had first recorded it. We all heard it, and I think it put a glimmer into everyone's mind."

Yes are off on a European tour until April 25. "Then I come back to finish off producing a band called Wally with Bob Harris. They're a really great band. They remind me of Yes in the beginning. They are very fresh and dedicated, but playing their own ideas.

"They've got two tours supporting Dave Mason, who's coming over later this year, and Lindisfarne. They're the first new English band with a spark of talent I've heard for a long time. They got to the finals for the MM rock/folk contest last year. They'll surprise a lot of people.

"I'm producing their LP and also I'm helping Mike Quatro, Suzi's brother, who plays keyboards. He's into the Keith Emerson showmanship syndrome. But I'm not interested in the showmanship; I'd like to help his music.

"There's so much I want to do... it sounds funny, but there is an incredible gap in music at the

moment. There's no influx of exciting new bands coming up. There used to be Genesis just waiting to break, and groups like that, but now there's nobody to bridge the gap between the workhorse bands and the top, established groups.

"And I think the established bands should help the new ones come up. That's why I want to help Wally. I've been very disappointed with the LPs in the past year by the established bands. My favourite band are The Who, but to me *Quadrophenia* didn't have the magic of what they had done before.

"And Jethro Tull's *Passion Play* I didn't like at all. British groups seem to have gone over the top, not deliberately. They're just trying too hard. The music business has got incredibly into money—and promoters, agents and managers aren't all that interested in promoting new talent when they've got established bands. The best new band I've seen were a group called Tubes in San Francisco, who are just like the American Bonzos."

One of Rick's ambitions for 1974 is to take his *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* entertainment on the road. "I'd like to do some more concerts. Happy as I was with the first, I'm convinced the more we did, the better it would get.

"I got a tremendous buzz from the show, and everybody involved wants to do it again. It depends how well the LP does—but it's got a 50,000 advance. Simple as the work might sound, the score is bloody difficult, and David Meacham the conductor says there are three other orchestras in England capable of playing it.

"They are the Bournemouth Symphony, the Hallé and the Scottish Radio Orchestra. If we

did it with them we could cover most of the country that way. There's talk of doing it in America, but the cost would be phenomenal. I only want to break even, but if we did it for 10 days in America, it would cost around \$22,000 a night.

"In England it's not so bad, but even here it costs a thousand pounds just to rehearse the orchestra.

"Do you know—I've been offered the chance of playing a Mozart piano concerto with the LSO at the Festival Hall?" Rick lit up with quiet pride. "I'd dearly love to do it, but there are concert pianists about who could do it better than me and would give their right arm for a chance of playing with the LSO. I'd feel guilty because those people were not getting the chance.

"I could do it... but I'd need to practise eight hours a day for a month. David Meacham and the LSO have made me the offer, and I'm very flattered. A solution to the problem would be if I wrote a keyboard concerto of my music. My musical heart is in so many places, and in fact I was a better classical player seven years ago than I am now.

"I've got a lot of material for a new solo studio album, and I'll stay away from orchestras for a while. I've got a lot to learn, but I've gained so much from Yes.

"The big downer to come is if I help produce other bands there will be a percentage of failure, and it's going to upset and disappoint me. It'll be something I believe in and I won't understand why nobody else digs it! Things are going really well for me at the moment. Up at my local pub

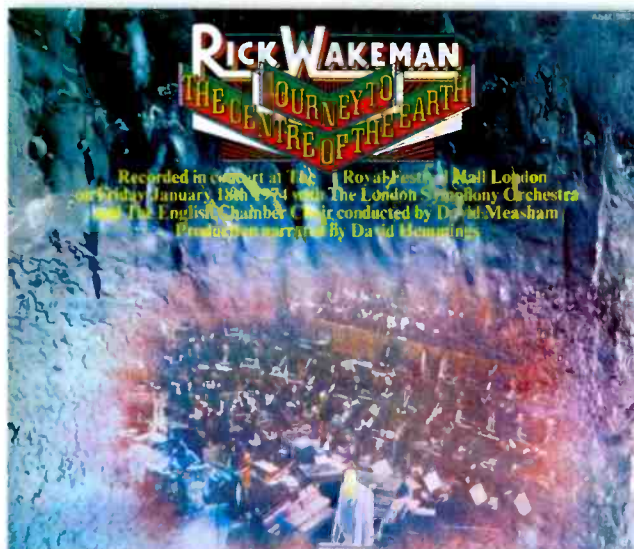
they say, 'Everything he touches turns to gold.' But someday, something I touch will be a disaster, and I've not experienced that yet. Most musicians go through a period of disaster, and either they get through, or it destroys them.

"I'm very lucky, because things have developed nice and slowly, right down to good management and musicians to work with. It helps a lot. You have to try and keep your head in this situation and keep a balance."

If Rick Wakeman stays the way he is, come success or failure, then he won't have much to worry about.

Chris Welch

"The *Journey...* album is how I would have liked Yes to have gone"





Rick Wakeman in London, January 1974: "Isambard Kingdom Brunel will be another long-term project"

— MM JUNE 29 —

RICK WAKEMAN HAS a grand design afoot that could result in one of the most extraordinary, epic concerts in the history of popular music. In fact he has TWO grand designs. Apart from plans to base his next album on the Arthurian legend, there is also a scheme to set the saga of Victoria engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel to a rock'n'roll beat.

These are his first plans since leaving Yes. Had the split with Yes been friendly and had there been any changes in Rick's playing since? "Well, I hope there haven't been any changes. The lads wouldn't let me cock things up, anyway. Yes, the split was very amicable. In fact, Jon has been ringing me up to ask if there was any way he could help. After two years with The Strawbs, and three years with Yes, it sounds funny... and I'll never be in Yes again... but it does get in your blood, that band.

"It's their whole attitude towards music that instills a belief in what you are doing. It's their precision and integrity that counts. The band taught me an awful lot, and in a strange way, hopefully, my music will develop in the way Yes would have developed. In fact *Journey* is how I would have liked Yes to have gone."

All this week Wakeman, who is beginning to equal Elton John for consistent hard work and energy, has been rehearsing with his new band, in readiness for this weekend's *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* concert at London's Crystal Palace.

And after that is a tour of America, which began life as a few promotion dates, set when Rick was still a member of Yes. The band are still somewhat dizzy from the events of the past few months. Consisting of old friends and some newcomers, they are used to life scuffling for gigs in clubs, pubs and holiday camps. The news that they were playing Madison Square Garden on September 14 was a bit like winning a substantial sum on the pools.

The lineup consists of Jeff Crampton (guitar), Barney James (drums), Roger Newell (bass), John Hodgson (percussion), and Ashley Holt and Gary Pickford-Hopkins (vocals). Between playing darts, bar billiards and sinking pints of bitter in the nearby Valiant Trooper, the band have polished up the complex arrangements to *The Six Wives Of Henry VIII* and *Journey*.

"Jeff is so clumsy, he keeps falling over things," said Rick in a break in rehearsals, "but he's really come out of his shell as a guitarist. He's an outstanding player—one of this year's finds. The band desperately needs

to get on the road. After the first concert we did together at the Festival Hall there was an incredible affinity between us.

"Once they have had a good, hard American tour, they will be so tight. We were intending to play just a few dates in America, but the album sold quicker and more copies than we expected.

"It's so exciting the way things are going at the moment. The band are playing 100 per cent, and they're pulling all the stops out. I'm lucky, because I didn't want to poach them from their regular bands, but Gary rang me up and asked what was happening, and said that his band [Wild Turkey] had broken up.

"I was going to ask Glenn Cornick anyway if he didn't mind if I pinched Gary for a few concerts, when I made the decision to leave Yes down in Devon, and sent the telegram to our manager. There's not a lot of singing to do anyway at the moment, and he gets on really well with Ashley.

"The band knows all the arrangements now, and we're just improving on the chords and tidying things up for our own egos' sake. We did a potted version of *Henry* and *Journey* at the local club we play at, and the audience went mad. They were expecting the usual rock'n'roll night. It's important for us to keep playing all the time—anywhere.

"I want to do one more English date before the American tour, and it looks like it will be in Manchester with the Hallé Orchestra. There's an offer from Granada TV to screen the show live, which would help a lot with the cost. I don't mind losing a bit, but I could go bankrupt if I'm not careful. On the American tour we're going to charter one plane, a Boeing 727, and travel with one orchestra and choir.

"I don't know which orchestra we'll be using yet; Brian only just told me about it. Apart from Madison Square, we'll be playing at the Philadelphia Spectrum and the Hollywood Bowl, which was built for orchestras. I don't give a monkey's where we play as long as the acoustics are OK!

"I was going to do the King Arthur story anyway, and Isambard Kingdom Brunel will be a long-term project. I'd like to do the music for a cartoon on his life story, and if I start it now, there should be an LP out in a year and a half.

"The King Arthur story is marvellous, with all the legends and all the characters. Lots of the places and people actually existed, like Tintagel castle. I'd like to hold a day of pageant there with jousting tournaments and people in armour and costumes.

When will Rick record his next album?

"We'll do it in November or December to get an LP out in March. We'll probably record in Brussels for tax reasons." *Chris Welch* •