

Keith Noel Emerson, 1944-2016

BY JERRY KOVARSKY
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DAVE KILMINSTER
(GUITARIST: KEITH EMERSON BAND, ROGER WATERS)

“My times playing with The Keith Emerson Band are undoubtedly some of my favorite moments, musical or otherwise. Sometimes during a gig (for example, after singing the ‘Stones of Years’ part of ‘Tarkus’) I would just lay out and listen to the incredible interplay going on. Keith was totally fearless on stage, never afraid to take chances, and his improvisational skills were second to none. Sometimes he’d just stretch out and take a piece of music in a totally different direction, or start re-harmonizing the chord progression: He was always creating and constantly trying new ideas. I think he knew that wherever he took the music, we’d be right there with him, and that confidence freed him up to be as crazy as he wanted to be.

“He also loved our little musical “battles”; those Jeff Beck/Jan Hammer-type exchanges we had were some of my highlights of the live shows. Occasionally we’d just abandon musical phrases and have silly conversations by trying to sound like the The Clangers (a British children’s TV series in the ‘70s) or just resort to making stupid noises at each other. He had such a wonderful sense of humor.

“The last time Keith and I played together was in 2009. Keith called me up out of the blue and told me that his mother had just passed away. He asked me to play with him at her funeral, so the two of us (along with a string quartet) played a new piece that Keith had written. Even though it was a very sad occasion, it was such a joy to play together again. Keith last called me in January 2016, asking if I was up for doing some duo gigs later this year, and I so wish we could still do that. Apart from being a musical genius, Keith had such a warm spirit and a beautiful soul, and I’ll miss him more than I can ever express in words.”

“I come from a long line of piano players... my grandfather played, and two of my uncles... and I guess I was maybe 10 or 11 years old when my uncles sat me down and played me the track ‘Lucky Man.’ ‘Take a listen to the

ending' said uncle Pete, and for the next 4 minutes and 36 seconds I just sat there, totally mesmerized and bewitched. From then on I was hooked, and I wanted to play just like Keith Emerson. Unfortunately, there was a small flaw in my plan: My parents didn't have a piano! But I would play at my grandmother's house, and at school whenever I got the chance, just working out songs by ear, or composing new tunes.

“Fast forward a couple of decades (4/2/2000 to be exact), and I'm on stage playing guitar (I never did get a piano) with a group called Qango. Yeah, it was a stupid name, absolutely nothing to do with me! The band featured John Wetton, Carl Palmer, and John Young (Scorpions, Greenslade, The Strawbs), and we're performing at a place called the Astoria 2 in the heart of London, playing a mixture of material from Asia, ELP (I was playing a lot of the keyboard lines on guitar), and some John Wetton solo material. The gig went pretty well, and as we're walking off stage, down the steps I notice this guy waiting at the bottom with this huge grin on his face, his arms outstretched...

'Oh my God...it's...Keith Emerson!'

“No one knew he was there, as he'd come along to surprise his old band mate. He came up and gave me the biggest hug, as if we'd known each other for years, and told me he was really impressed, as he'd never heard a guitarist play his lines before. As I'm standing there totally speechless, he then asks if he can get up and jam during the encore. So there I was, standing on stage playing with Keith Emerson and Carl Palmer, with my two uncles in the audience (yeah, the guys who introduced me to ELP in the first place), and I'm literally floating on air. I can't even remember what we played (probably 'Fanfare'). All I can recall is standing there with this huge, stupid grin on my face thinking 'this is undoubtedly the coolest night *ever!*'

“A few days later John Wetton calls me up, and tells me that Keith wants to join the band! Unfortunately this never happened and the band folded shortly afterwards. In retrospect maybe it was just as well, as our collective initials would have spelt PEWK!

“Anyway, a few years later I was relaying this story to my friend Alan Scally at Korg, saying that I wish I'd had chance to talk to Keith properly after the show, just to say how much that evening meant to me, and Alan says 'well, I have his email if you want.' So I wrote Keith an email, never expecting to hear back, and about half an hour later I receive a reply from him, asking what my voice is like and whether I'd like to form a band!

“A few weeks later, he’s back in England and we meet up in London. He says, 'Do you know a good drummer and bass player?' I ask whether he’s looking for ‘name’ players, and he said 'No, I just want to work with good people.' That was so typical of Keith, absolutely no ego whatsoever. So essentially, Keith had just asked me to put together my dream band. I immediately thought of Pete Riley (drums) and Phil Williams (bass). I’d played with them separately in different situations, but we’d never actually all played together before. I was hopeful that it would work, and work it did, far better than I ever could have imagined.

“During that first meeting we talked about material, and I suggested that we play the whole of 'Tarkus,' as it’s such a wonderful piece. Keith asked me what key I’d like to sing it in, and I said 'the original key of course.' And his face lit up like a little kid at Christmas. (I believe that as Greg’s voice got deeper, they would change keys every tour, which meant that Keith would have to transpose everything.)

“Also his lack of any sort of ego always amazed me; he had a childlike sense of innocence that was so endearing. I remember one day in rehearsal, I was sitting with the guitar on my lap, playing it like a piano. He came in and said 'Hey that’s great: We have to put that in the set!' And sure enough, he decided that during the set I would play the guitar on the floor (I played a part of 'Sabre Dance,' from Khachaturian’s ballet *Gayane*), whilst he would play the keyboards back to front. Keith absolutely loved the theatrics, and of course the audience loved it too.

“During another rehearsal Keith had to pop out for an interview, so the three of us carried on and were messing around with some Led Zeppelin tunes. We’re playing 'Black Dog' as he comes back in, and he says, 'We *have* to do that song!' 'I can’t sing that' I protested. 'Yes, you can,' said Keith. Well, when your musical hero tells you that you can do something, then you just do it. He later told us that 'Black Dog' was his inspiration for writing 'Living Sin' (from the wonderful *Trilogy* album), and we’d often throw it in as a surprise encore.

“Speaking of writing, we actually started working on some new pieces together, but unfortunately we never had chance to finish them. During a Keith Emerson Band tour break I accepted a 'ten week tour' with Roger Waters, which ended up lasting almost eight years!”



(Photo: Tony Ortiz)