



A man for all SEASONS

When it comes to Rick Wakeman, the answer to most questions is 'Yes'. Is he easy to get on with? Yes! A brilliant raconteur and exceptional musician? Yes! Which prog rock group is he most associated with? Yes! Does he have Cotswold connections? Sort of, says **Katie Jarvis**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE WILKINSON

“One of the things that amazes me is people who go into the main body of Gloucester cathedral and say, ‘This is wonderful!’ and then go shopping. There is so much more”

Oh, lordy. As I wait in the London restaurant Rick Wakeman has nominated as our meeting place, I pass the time by studying the prices. And then construct a list of pacifying sentences to my editor. (“Honest Injun. I only ordered the luxury hamburger out of politeness, etc, etc.”)

In the event, I could have done my Sudoku.

“Just a coffee for me,” Rick says, as he sails in, larger than life, trademark longish blondish hair, trademarkish beard. “I had breakfast this morning and I’m deliberately not eating anything until I get home, when there will be the world’s biggest plateful of asparagus waiting for me.”

(For anyone unfamiliar with the ridiculously long lead-time of magazines, I am actually interviewing him plumb in the middle of asparagus season.)

“They call us the Good Life,” he says of himself and (fourth, but that’s happily it) wife, Rachel. “We’re quite self-sufficient, but the asparagus comes from a mate of ours who has an asparagus farm. We’re old-school. We eat what’s in season. Tempting as it might be to get asparagus all year round, we don’t.”

I’m waiting for him to be a Grumpy Old Man (“There are three kinds of vasectomy: the short jobbie; the half-hour jobbie; and then the hour-and-a-half job - a general anaesthetic where they remove everything they can, is unbelievably painful, and you can’t walk for a week... Guess which one I had.”) But he isn’t. He so isn’t.

What he is is such a great raconteur that it’s hard to know where to begin.

• Tell me about the time Dr Robert Moog,

electronic music pioneer, dismantled and mended your Minimoog on stage as you performed in front of a 20,000-strong audience, Rick.

• Or about the time your mate Eric Sykes asked Tommy Cooper (also your mate) to meet potential backers for a film of *The Plank*. And Tommy turned up late, still dressed in pyjamas.

• Or the fact that your headmaster wrote on your final report, ‘Wakeman will end up in one of three places - 10 Downing Street, prison, or on the stage at the London Palladium.’

...Though, actually, to be scrupulously fair to the headmaster, hadn’t you just run over his prize rose-bed in a careering car?

“I had.

“I remember my father saying, ‘Well, I hope it’s the Palladium’. I’ve actually done all three - I’ve been on stage at the London Palladium; I’ve been in Number 10 more than a few times; and I’ve actually been in prison - but only as a visitor to help with some stuff at Parkhurst on the Isle of Wight.”

There are several things to say, here. Firstly, it may sound from the above as if he’s full of himself. In actual fact, Rick Wakeman is fantastic company, who so fails to big himself up that it takes you a while to realise he rarely talks about his own talents or achievements. (Apart from the Masons. He likes talking about his membership.) (Though hang on a mo! I thought it was all meant to be terribly secretive I-could-tell-you-but-then-I’d-have-to-kill-you stuff? “It’s not secret at all!” he says. “You can see pretty much anything you want you on the [Chelsea Lodge] website. In fact, we had our



Rick Wakeman performing with Adam, Jemma and Oliver at Blackfriars, Gloucester

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installation last week and there’s a picture of the Worshipful Master - I’m Senior Warden - standing there with full regalia on.”)

The next point I know you’ll want me to tackle is: What exactly is Rick Wakeman’s Cotswold (born and brought up in London; lives in Norfolk) connection? There genuinely is one; though, to put my cards on the table, I’d happily have lied on this point. Besides which, it’s quite complicated and I’m not altogether sure I’ve got it right.

Basically, Rick was asked last year by the organiser of the Gloucester Mystery Plays - the amazing Phil McCormick - to take part in an outdoor pageant, featuring some of Rick’s solo compositions, such as the epic *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and*

the Knights of the Round Table. For detailed (but eminently practical) reasons that leave my head slightly spinning, it didn’t work out; but rather than disappoint anyone, Rick rearranged to come back this June to play the Centaur in Cheltenham - in a show that also featured Worcester Cathedral Chamber Choir and Cheltenham Symphony orchestra - as well as the atmospheric Blackfriars in Gloucester. (For anyone who missed it, there are Youtube clips.) The evenings were not only a triumph but a reminder of this man’s sheer range of talent: the programme included favourites from his own compositions, such as *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* and *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*, as well as the classic *Starship Trooper* from his

days as the keyboardist in Yes. The Gloucester concert was particularly notable for featuring three of his six children alongside him - Adam, keyboardist for Ozzy Osbourne’s band and Black Sabbath; Oliver, also a keyboardist; and Rick’s daughter, the singer Jemma Wakeman.

Is that OK? Are you satisfied? Look - the point is, I really wanted to interview him. Oh - and he loves Gloucester. “It’s such a wonderful city. You’ve got to look in the cracks. One of the things that amazes me about people is the way they’ll go into the main body of the cathedral and say, ‘This is wonderful!’ and then go shopping. There is so much more. I know it quite well because Oliver lives in Bourton-on-the-Water; he was in Northleach first of all.” (See - there

you go! Yet another Cotswold connection!) It might sound like a passing interest - all this history stuff - but the more you talk to Rick, the more you realise the past is deeply imbedded in his psyche. And one overriding reason is that his love for heritage was passed on by his beloved dad, who died over 30 years ago, “at the age I am now - 64.

“When I was younger, he’d take me to stately homes; and when you’re younger, you don’t want to go to stately homes. But he would say things like, ‘You see these pictures of people who lived here? Yeah? Well, close your eyes and imagine they’re here and imagine exactly what it was like - no electric lights’. And that started to bring things to life. He just loved

history and heritage; it's in your blood, then, isn't it?"

So did that initial interest develop into his ability to translate historical characters into music? I'm thinking of his brilliantly interpretive King Arthur and Six Wives compositions, for example?

"I'm sure. I was about eight when my grandmother on my mother's side was about to die. I'm not being flippant but grandma was about to die every year. And, in fact, she was about to die for the next - crikey - nearly 30 years. Anyway, this particular year, I was sent to a place in Devon called Trafalgar, and I was taken to so-called King Arthur's castle at nearby Tintagel. I just thought this was absolutely wonderful and, thanks to my father, I could transport myself back in time."

Although he went on to study music, it's imagination, not academia, that's at the forefront of his compositions. "I don't try and write period music because that's a mistake. I know how to do it; but that's not my job. What I try and do is to take my knowledge of music of today back in time. And imagine, if I had all the wherewithal I have now back then, what I would do.

"I sound Salvador Dali-ish in as much as, when I write the music, all I'm doing is thinking about the subject matter. When I do the Six Wives and people ask: Why was Jane Seymour done on a church organ? I go: That's what I heard; I spent months reading and that's her."

So let's go back in time ourselves. If you want an excellent - and hilarious - mini-biography, then read through the timeline at www.rwcc.com. ("1951 - Still refused to walk apparently. This was cured in later years by strapping a golf bag on his shoulder.") In essence, Rick Wakeman was born in 1949 in West London to Mildred and Cyril, into the kind of musical family where Sunday evenings consisted of dad on piano, mum singing and Uncle Stan on ukulele. He was an only child because his parents couldn't afford another. "It was when people lived within their means. They thought sensibly."

Reading between the lines, his was a semi-lonely childhood, partly because - through an admin error - he ended up at a grammar school a nine-mile walk/bus/train/walk away from home. Music, however, was a solace - piano with Mrs Symes, clarinet with William Herrera ("a brilliant man in his late 50s who ran off to Spain with a girl from the fourth form, where they married and lived happily ever after"), and church organ lessons. "By the time I was 13, I was playing in pubs, which was good fun because I wasn't in the social group of the school - for the pure reason



Rick Wakeman performing at The Centaur, Cheltenham

6 I learned a lot from Eric Sykes. He came to see a couple of shows and said, 'Never be frightened of silence. Never be frightened to stop and give the audience a chance'

that I lived nine bloody miles away."

Not quite so happy was his decision to enrol at the Royal College of Music, where he studied piano and clarinet. He doesn't quite say why it didn't live up to expectations; but what is well known is that he signed himself out early to forge his own career, beginning as a session musician (he played on many David Bowie hits, including *Space Oddity* for a fee of £9, and was pianist on Cat Stevens's *Morning Has Broken*) before joining the Strawbs in 1970. In mid-1971, he was asked if he'd like to play with Yes - and it was during his time with the prog rock group that he also began forging his solo career.

Because I've got to fit this biography stuff in, what I'm missing out is the detail.

The fascinating detail. Because everything Rick Wakeman says is a story. He talks a lot about the power of laughter, for example, as well as being very funny himself. "I remember playing Glasgow Apollo and I thought it would be really cool to come on for the encore in a kilt. Now I'd been told Scotsmen don't wear anything under a kilt, and the stage at the Apollo was about 14 foot high - an old cinema complex. The encore was cut short mainly due to female contingent in the front row, who were overcome by shock."

Or there's the anecdote about living in Switzerland with his second wife, Danielle, and settling down with friends to watch a *Match of the Day* video, purchased from a specialist video-recording company. "I put this VHS on and thought: First time I've ever seen a naked woman in a football match. And then Fabrice, one of my friends, said: 'Where did that donkey come from?' We all looked at each other and I said, 'I think they've sent the wrong tape'."

In point of fact, his friendship with Eric Sykes was forged thanks to his extensive - but more generally sober - video collection, which included a rare recording of a comedy classic, which Sykes was after. "The man was a joy. It was an honour to know him. I learned a lot from Eric. He came to see a couple of shows where I was doing anecdotes and he said, 'Never be frightened of silence. Never be frightened to stop and give the audience a chance.'"

So there you have it. I've run out of room to tell you any of Rick Wakeman's Tommy Cooper anecdotes: "He was a good mate, but he was an enigma." Or about how his dad rose from tea boy in a London construction company to valued board member (but even with their later affluence, his mum still kept jars on the shelf for gas, electricity and water). About how wonderful the Masons were when his dad died. Or why being on stage in the Albert Hall is a piece of cake for Rick Wakeman, while a cocktail party is a nightmare.

Ho hum. Talking of stages - next year, he'll be taking a massive new tour of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* on the road, to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the album's release. Will it be calling by the Cotswolds? "It depends on the size of venues," he says, "but I would like to think we'll get to as many places as we possibly can. It's a massive, massive undertaking."

Ah - there you go. He might revisit the Cotswolds. Another almost-connection. ■

To find venues and book tickets for the 2014 tour of *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth*, visit www.rwcc.com