

Backstage Pass: Supertramp's Roger Hodgson

Goldmine April 21, 2010 By Peter Lindblad

Progressive ambition and Beatlesque pop can make strange bedfellows. Using that formula, however, Supertramp developed into one of biggest-selling acts of the '70s.

With his emotional, reflective lyrics, refined pop sensibilities, unique musicianship and grandiose arrangements, Roger Hodgson, a native of Portsmouth, England, was as instrumental in Supertramp's evolution from a marginally popular prog-rock outfit into international superstars as partner Rick Davies. His distinctive falsetto made hits like "Dreamer," "Take The Long Way Home" and "It's Raining Again" soar to heights reserved for birds.

After the huge success of 1979's *Breakfast In America*, cracks began to form in the band's foundation, and after ... *Famous Last Words* ..., Hodgson left Supertramp for a solo career that resulted in 1984's *In The Eye Of The Storm*. An accident that left him with two broken wrists kept him out of music for a stretch but, in 2000, he returned with the triumphant *Open The Door*.

This fall, Eagle Vision released Hodgson's *Take The Long Way Home* DVD, on the heels of Hodgson's solo performance at the "Concert For Diana," an event that let everyone know Hodgson is back as a live performer.

Goldmine: With your solo career, do you think you've established your own identity apart from Supertramp?

Roger Hodgson: You know, I really feel like this time in my life is a whole different era. Even though I'm singing a lot of my old songs, it's almost like I'm having a whole new relationship with them. I certainly have a whole new appreciation for them. And I think because I'm enjoying singing, and I'm enjoying performing, and enjoying life in general much more, that's helping to make this feel like a whole new beginning.

I don't know. It's so long ago now, and it was a wonderful time in my life, but I'm 57, and it feels like I've gone through several lives this life. Supertramp was one. My family and marriage was another, and now I feel like I'm in another one.

GM: What's different about this one? Was it coming through the accident?

RH: No, well, the accident was part of my journey. You know, I think I'm just older and wiser. I probably have more questions than ever, but I'm content. And I've found some answers that work for me and keep me basically balanced and happy.

I'm doing music because I want to, and I enjoy giving it and offering it to people, but it's not something I have to do anymore. It's not like I'm out to have a huge career anymore. I'm really um ... very simply, it's my way of giving a little bit (laughs.). I think when people ... there's something beyond the music that happens when people come to see my show, and I think every show, but certainly my show, if people really see someone who's really enjoying themselves, and preferably they do, and just loving what they're doing, it helps them to access that place, because in a way as performers we're just mirrors.

That's all we are for an audience, and if you're having a great time and you're feeling a lot of love for what you're doing, and love for the people, which I do — I love people, so I just love being with audiences and having sung with them — it helps the audience to get into that space too, and they go home feeling great beyond the music, and that's why I say, "Give a little bit. To me, give a little bit of my love to you and you give a little bit of your love to me," and that's really what, to me, that's what concerts are all about.

GM: Talk about the Concert for Diana and some of your charitable endeavors. What have they brought you? Has that helped you get to this place in your life?

RH: Yeah, well, the Princess Di show, I was delighted to be invited by the princes, because I just really thought the world of Princess Diana. I thought she was handed a very, very difficult role and handled herself very well, and turned her fame into what now a lot of performers are, using for philanthropic (matters).

But, yeah, when you're famous, what can you do with it? You can't ... there's a limit to how much it can feed your ego. At some point, the ones who are smart, the Angelina Jolie, the Brad Pitts, the Princess Dianas, they realize okay yeah, I can use all the cameras ... to bring all the cameras to something that's more important than just me. Which is all the causes in the world that really need attention, so I really admire what she did with her life. And I never got to play for her in person when she was alive, so I was very happy to have that desire fulfilled in a way by honoring her on her 10th anniversary.

And the second part of your question, which is ... I think really what your question boiled down to was, what I heard anyway, was what has giving given to you, and to me, it's one of the secrets to life. You know, we live, or you live, or actually most of live, and we're brought up in a very consumer consciousness where having the big car, and having the big this, and having the big that, is what the goal is, and actually, it's a very empty goal, because when you get it all, and I've had a lot of it, it's very empty at the end of the day and it's a major headache.

And a big house is wonderful yes, but it's a major headache to look after and pay the bills on, etc, etc. So we get kind of trapped in what we think of as the American Dream — or not just America, but the Western dream. And really, what I've learned is — and I know a lot of performers feel this is that when they do these charitable causes, or these Live Aids, or things like that, they feel really good about lending their services for free, or just giving their gifts for something that's really bigger than them and more important than them.

And so for me, "Give a little bit" has really become my motto, if you like. And ultimately, it's a very selfish thing because actually giving really makes you happy. It's not something that, "Oh my God, I gotta give again." You get so much back from it that you want to do more.

GM: I thought I remember reading that you once called the band's debut your favorite Supertramp album. Was something about that album you liked?

RH: Did I say that? I think they actually caught me at a weak moment (laughs). No, I think it did have a certain magic back then, but I don't really think it stood the test of time. I mean, it's got a certain charm to it, but maybe it shows the seeds of what came later.

GM: At that time, was the band being pulled in different directions and hadn't found its identity yet?

RH: Yeah, we were still trying to find out who we were, and there were three of us writing the songs, Rick and I had just met, so we were just trying to find a way to write together and so it was ... yeah, we were just trying to find our feet.

GM: Talk about developing the distinctive piano style found in "Take the Long Way Home" and "Logical Song" and "Dreamer". Maybe more than any technique, you were able to approximate a feel, get an inspirational style.

RH: Um, you know I really think of myself as quite a primitive piano player, keyboardist. I did take music lessons, or piano lessons, for a year or two when I was a teenager, but they didn't really help. I never got into reading. It was more I just got into playing for fun and out of it, came a very unique style that's actually more percussive, more rhythmic and percussive than technical. I mean, I think of a classical pianist, a good classical pianist looked at my style, he'd say, "Oh my God, how can he play like that? Your hands are in the wrong position, etc., etc."

But it works for me, and I think it was more of a percussive, rhythmical feel that I just developed and it developed over the years. And then, obviously, I did have the very primitive "Dreamer," the very staccato piano style, that I, you know, trademarked.

GM: It sure left an indelible impression in peoples' mind. When you first came up with it, did it feel like that to you and the rest of the band?

RH: No, you know, I don't think ... I never analyzed things as we went along, really. I think the older you get, then you start getting into analyzing, but at the time, no. I was just doing what came naturally, and that's what came naturally.

GM: Describe your working relationship with Rick Davies. You had different styles. Did that ever create problems, or did it actually help Supertramp to have two distinctive writers?

RH: No, it was very much the magic or the essence of Supertramp was the kind of yin-yang polarity of Rick's songwriting and my songwriting and our two musical styles. I mean, Rick was five years older than me, so he had grown up on the music of jazz and blues. That was his background, and that's where he gravitated towards, where I grew up on the Beatles and more the pop rock. Um, so, but actually, when we played together, there was an incredible empathy between the two of us, when it was just the two of us, and it was very magical, especially earlier on when there weren't too many other people around and it was, literally, just the two of us.

And I think as we developed as songwriters, we started writing, obviously, totally separately, but I think just having that competition, healthy competition, that you know, we wanted to give the best of ourselves, and having another writer in the band kind of gave that sense of competition that really did bring out the best in us. And when it came to recording and arranging the songs, that was really my forte more.

I was the main arranger in the band. I wrote all the bass parts, for example, and had all the ... Rick had a quirky, he came up with the quirky ideas, I was the more arranging, I saw the big picture of the song, and Rick came up with the quirky additions, and I loved 'em. "Come on a dreamer, and dream along." That was his idea on "Dreamer." The rest of "Dreamer" was mine, but that little part there just made it for me. You know, I mean, "Take a look at my girlfriend, (voice drops) girlfriend, what you got, not a lot." That was Rick's.

So, he kind of had that quirky way of adding something that added so much, that was ... but in terms of the arrangement, I actually added a lot to his songs, in terms of really bringing them out and embellishing them. So, it was a good marriage. And funny enough, rhythmically, when the two of us played it was really electric and our challenge was really to find a drummer who could support that, the two of us playing, and Bob was the closest we came to it.

GM: Piano wise, the way you played, did that take away from what the drummer was supposed to do?

RH: Well, it was supposed to suggest what the drummer was supposed to do, and ideally, the drummer would come in and play, and they'd be married together, my style and the drummer. But you're right, it's interesting when you've probably seen the DVD by now ... and you do kind of hear the beat in my left hand and my right hand, and you can hear what the drummer's supposed to be doing.

GM: Crime of the Century was a breakthrough for Supertramp. I know you didn't analyse things back then, but did it feel like the band came into its own?

RH: Yeah, well that was a very, very exciting time for us, because we'd just found the band, we'd just found John and Bob, and even Dougie hadn't been with us that long, so ... and the record company had heard the demos of "Bloody Well Right" and "School" and said, "Hey, there's something here, let's support them." And they put us ... we wanted to .. it was the fashion of that time; Traffic had done it, and so we wanted to do it. We wanted to be put in a farmhouse and just live together for a few months to really bond and come up with something really great, and that's what we did.

We spent three or four months in the west country of England, where we all lived together — the wives, the dogs, the babies, everyone — and we literally had our equipment set up in the garage and dreamt and came up with Crime of the Century, and then from there, we went and recreated what we'd come up with demo wise in the farmhouse with Ken Scott in the studio. And It was a very magical time.

GM: Seems like so many great albums come up that way, maybe when in a place far away from a city studio. I guess there's something about being alone and kind of working together that makes those things come about.

RH: Yeah, well, I've heard arguments the other way, too. Sometimes it helps to have the pressure of a clock ticking away and being a 9-to-5 environment, so I've heard both. But yeah, I think back in those days I think time was more available. Record companies were willing to take the time and support you and invest in you. Nowadays they just can't do that. Just financially they can't do, so they want a result much quicker.

GM: With that album, you have two concise pop numbers in "Dreamer" and "Bloody Well Right." And the rest of the album had kind of a wandering, exploratory quality to it. Was it difficult to reconcile the Beatlesque pop influences with that tendency to stretch out and want to explore?

RH: No, you know ... Supertramp was always out of step with the times, out of step with fashion. And you know, it was our blessing and our curse.

I mean, we never looked at the world and think, "Oh my God, we've got to do a disco record" or "We gotta do this because that's what's happening out there." We were just doing our own thing, and we didn't even have any guidelines within the band, you know. A great pop song, "It's Raining Again," for example, was as much fun to play as "Fool's Overture," which was epic, or "Rudy."

So, we just sort of enjoyed all of it, and we didn't ... the great thing about it was we didn't censure ourselves or limit ourselves, or I didn't anyway, and I think that's the secret. I think when you start doing that — which I've fallen into, I've fallen into that whole when you start trying to come up with a hit, or trying to create an album that's going to fit with the current music scene, you're doomed.

GM: What too many artists are trying to do today?

RH: I think there are incredible pressures today to do that, and um ... yeah, I think a lot of musicians fall into that hole, but I think it's not just today, I think they always have.

GM: Lyrically, what were your influences? Was there something literary or just kind of a general kind of looking at the world the way it was?

RH: No, they were very much what was going on inside me, really. Whatever it was at the time. I mean, there are various themes which you'll find through my songs, a lot of soul-searching questions — Who am I? Why am I here? What's my purpose? How can I find love? What is love? — "Hide in your Shell" is very much, you know, hide away from the world because it's too painful to expose yourself. "Give A Little Bit," "I Believe In Love" — I still do — I mean, they're very personal, and I think that's actually what's made them so personal to a lot of other people, because really, my experiences are not just unique to me; a lot of people experience what I feel, or what I've felt, and what I've expressed in my songs, and I think a lot of people have found comfort in that, that they're not alone.

GM: Is that still the way you like to do things?

RH: Well, it's just the way I do things, it's not the way I like to do things (laughs). I mean, songs come from inside, and it's not like ... I've never sat down and thought, "OK, what am I going to write a song about. Let's write a song about the political situation or something else." That's just not how it works. They come from a very ... it's a very magical place. Um ... They come when I get out of the way. That's the process. It's not something that comes from the mind. The way I've written and the way I do write is I start playing an instrument and just allow the music to take me, so that is the key, when the music is taking me rather than me trying to force the music to go whichever direction. And it's the same way with lyrics. I'll just start singing, and all of a sudden a line will pop into my head, and then it'll start building on that, and then I'll kind of, generally, then I'll know what I'm trying to say through the song, and then I'll finish it.

GM: The albums after Crime of the Century... Were they steps in kind of an evolution to a more pop-oriented sound, and did they set up Breakfast in America?

RH: Well, that sounds like what you believe.

GM: Well, I'm not sure, because you can see them as being separate, and they each have their own identity.

RH: Yeah, they do have their own identity and very much dictated by what the band was going through at the time. I mean, Crisis? What Crisis... There was a lot of pressure to come up with an album quickly and go out on tour after the success of Crime of the Century, so there was a lot of pressure on that one. I knew we had the songs.

I think Crisis? What Crisis is a great selection of songs, but they didn't come out as good I was hoping, anyway. And part of that was just the stressful situation we were under, so yes, the title of that album definitely suited what was going on with the band. Crisis? What Crisis? in fact came from a sketch that Rick did in the waiting room of the studio, and it reflected the stress we were under in just getting that album completed.

Even in the Quietest Moments really reflected my spiritual search. I had done a lot of searching in California, and done a lot of yoga retreats and meditation retreats, so the mood of that album I think came from those experiences.

Even in the Quietest Moments that has the feeling of that because of what I was going through in my life. Breakfast in America was, again, just a collection of songs. I've always had about 60 or 70 songs to pull from, I still have. So when it came to making an album, Rick never did have a backlog, so I had to kind look at what he had, what he was writing, and see which songs of mine blended with his to make a great listening experience. So, I was always trying to find the best collection of songs. Like if you ... "Fool's Overture" wouldn't have belonged on Breakfast for America, you know? Or "School" wouldn't have belonged on Crisis? What Crisis? It's amazing how each album does have its own vibe.

GM: Do you and Rick still talk, then?

RH: We actually have been lately, yeah.

GM: Would there ever be a time do you think when you two would hook up again to make an album?

RH: Um ... I don't know. I haven't actually talked to him lately about that. Um ... I'm open to it. I'll never say never. It really depends on ... depends on a lot of things really. But, obviously it depends on whether he wants to. I did ask him whether he was interested a few years ago, and he said, "No." So, we'll see what the future holds.

GM: As far as yourself and you're solo career, do you have an inkling of what's next?

RH: Um, yeah, I think just more of what I'm doing. Word is spreading that I'm back, and that I've got a great show and that I'm in good shape and people are really enjoying it. So, we're getting offers in every day. It's wonderful.

The word is spreading, so I'm just very happy to be in such good shape and having such a good time, and whether an album is in the future, probably is, but I don't know what the timing of that is. Right now, we've got the DVD coming out in September, and that again, will help people connect the dots because I've been away a long time. People don't really associate these songs, most people don't, with me, and so I kind of need to connect the dots a little bit. And then before I start introducing new music, or more new music, and just going one step at a time.

GM: Did your performance at the Princess Diana concert re-establish you in the minds of the public?

RH: Um, I don't know. It helped. I think it was so different in a way, different to everything else that was happening that ... but to me, it's ... again, I only analyze myself and what's happening, really, when I get asked in these things in interviews, but you know, in a way, it's kind of why I think I like what I'm doing.

And when I watch the Princess Di performance, it's really just a man and his music, naked out there, just singing, and enjoying it. And believe me, it was not the easiest situation going on in front of 80,000 people with a voice

that was not working particularly well that day, and pulling it off. And you know, I literally pulled it off with just enjoying myself, and I got the place on its feet and they were singing along, doing "Give A Little Bit" with me, and it went off great, but there's something ... with all the paraphernalia of all the productions and all the stuff that can get away, really, for me, it starts with heart to heart.

It's my heart to the audience's heart, and everything else gets in the way of that. It doesn't have to. It can embellish it. But the beauty of what I'm doing is, literally, it's a man and his music and either you like it or you don't. But, um, there's something about being out there naked.