

Roger Hodgson Serves Up 'Breakfast in America' to the World

Gregory Weinkauff HuffPost March 11, 2012

One of the world's greatest singer-songwriters has just begun a new tour of the world. And happily, this tour is called "Breakfast in America," not only cementing his reputation with that much-adored album, but beginning, indeed, here in America. Then going farflung through many lands. Then returning Stateside (some dates below). It'll be a grand year.

The artist's name is Roger Hodgson. You know his glorious voice: a high, haunting tenor which imbues his hits such as "Give a Little Bit," "It's Raining Again" and "Had a Dream (Sleeping with the Enemy)" with a unique and indelible soulfulness. Fads burn weekly, but brilliant songwriting endures. I actually heard the eponymous "Breakfast in America" in the supermarket (!) just minutes before sitting down to write this article, and its wondrous, Klezmer-esque reverie had me bopping through the aisles: *"Take a jumbo / Across the water / Like to see America..."*



Roger Hodgson: Impassioned

A good friend and I trekked across the desert to attend the launch of Mr. Hodgson's new tour, to catch some cool sound-check action, to speak with the man himself, to dine amongst his devotees, and to attend a concert about which, were I only allowed one adjective, I would firmly describe as "swoony."

Oh, and I should probably mention, for the sake of legacy, that Mr. Hodgson rose to fame as co-founder, writer and singer of most of the hits of the classic-rock band Supertramp. However, as we entered upon the sound-check to find his new band deliciously working out the vocal arrangement for "Hide in Your Shell," an exciting factor immediately arose: This is not a bunch of dusty proggies churning out yesteryear's 20-minute jams. Nor is this some brand-name band sans original lead singer, struggling to offer up a substitute. Rather, this is the real deal: a legendary music man, in brilliant form and shimmering presence, supported by a tight, terrific band. When you can catch a show, go. An evening with Roger Hodgson will raise your standards of concert-going.



Roger Hodgson: Playful

I met the charming and gracious Mr. Hodgson backstage, and asked him about the intricacy and sensitivity of his songs: Does he approach them differently now than when he first wrote them?

"You know, I just have a real appreciation of most of the songs," he objectively relates. "They're still very valid, and they came from a very deep place, most of them. They were very personal, very autobiographical, and not contrived. I don't know whether bravery entered into it, I didn't think of it. For me, I was alone, and I just expressed whatever I had to express, and that's what came out. There's some pretty raw, vulnerable emotions in those songs, and yet I think in a way I was a voice for a lot of people who had those same emotions, but had no way to express them. Because we all put on brave faces for the world, and yet underneath it all, we're all insecure, or all have these questions: 'What the hell's life about?' or whatever it is, you know?"

"To tell you the truth, actually, my deepest longing: I really wanted to know why I'm here! What is God? 'God' is the most misunderstood word, and the most abused word, in a way. And yet we're part of it -- there's a very intimate relationship we have with God: in however we understand it; everyone understands God in a different way, but it's very linked with the purpose of us being here.

"And so a lot of what I went to, when I went to an instrument and wrote, is I went to that place inside, of real deep longing: longing for love, longing for God -- and to me it's the same thing, really. Longing for belonging, longing for home. A lot of my songs are talking about wanting to go home, wanting to find home. Home, really, is where you feel at peace, and feel like you belong, and it's an internal thing, it's not 'out there' -- and yet we're not taught that in school, or in very few places in the world. So that was really the place of inspiration, I think: really calling for that place where I felt at peace, and where I felt more unified inside myself. And that came out in a variety of the songs.

"And I think, I don't know, you'll meet a lot of the fans. The connection they have with the songs, and obviously with myself too, is a very deep one. And I think it is because I just -- I am who I am. I don't try to be anything different, and I just put it out there in my songs: who I was, and who I am, and what I'm feeling. And I think there's a lot of very sensitive people out there, who've felt an element of safety, because suddenly there's an artist who was expressing what they were feeling. It helped them not feel so alone, really.

"In a way, artists -- that's what our job is, as an artist: to share our heart, and help others who can't express themselves not feel so alone." Mr. Hodgson laughs. "What was the question again?" (*Oh, don't worry about it, I think to myself. It had to do with changes in creativity and perception over time, but since time doesn't really exist -- as these concerts boldly attest -- we can explore other themes, further down this article.*)

Post haste, I find myself in the press of the fans, who foregather at Roger's shows and have formed an organic global community, based on their love of his music. A-OK, but I still abide in the harsh city (Los Angeles) Mr. Hodgson exited

three decades ago -- so (to quote "The Logical Song"), it's easy for me to slide into "clinical, intellectual, cynical." My first thought is: "WHITE!" (which, to be fair, is not uniformly the case on Mr. Hodgson's international tours); and my second thought, as I am greeted with passionate story after story after story, is: "WHOA!" We're already well outside my comfort zone (in a meat-heavy restaurant in a smoky casino), and I'm starving (though not spiritually), and it's mighty challenging for "such a simple man" to process the massive outpouring of affection, humanity and life Mr. Hodgson very demonstrably inspires amongst his aficionados. But we'll touch on a few key moments.

Happy couple Toni and Jim Amey hail from D.C. (where they appeared on Fox 5 News defending Mr. Hodgson's essential contributions to Supertramp, leading to a meeting with the man: see link below). They've flown to England, Scotland, Canada, Atlantic City and Florida for his concerts, and anticipate an upcoming Hodgson holiday in France. "I tell people he seduced me to the music," reveals Toni of Jim, "but I didn't really appreciate it until a couple of years ago..." Jim expounds, "I made her a tape of his music." Toni continues: "He brought me a mix-tape in, and said..." "...this is what I'm about," clarifies Jim. Back to Toni (reflecting): "Here's who I am. I hope you like it. It's who I am." She smiles appreciatively: "It worked."

Toni and Jim are joined by Jan Wise, who works as a painting contractor and is helping with the tour. First Jim opines, "If you don't listen to it, you don't know. You don't *hear* it, you *feel* it. To me -- it sounds corny, I know -- it massages the heart and the soul. It just gets inside. It splits atoms." Jan asks of his friends, "Doesn't it just sort of put you in a meditative state, where it gets you thinking...good thoughts? It puts you in a state of ease." Toni expounds: "It's spiritual! We don't go to church. But we have a spirituality. And with Roger Hodgson you realize, it's a spiritual music." Jan nails it: "I've got goosebumps while you're saying it! I feel what you're saying!"

Meanwhile, across the table, it's a family reunion for Lindie and Jon Nelson, who drove down from northern California to meet their daughter Kaelee, who drove up from San Diego State. "We're total Supertramp buffs," says Lindie, "but then you have someone who's eighteen, who's right in there, knowing all the songs." Kaelee chimes in that it was Gym Class Heroes' "Cupid's Chokehold" (which lifts from "Breakfast in America") through which she discovered tonight's maestro: "It was nice at first, but then I found out that the actual song is so much better than the new remake." Kaelee takes a moment to praise journalists ("Writing articles is so cool; I'm majoring in English"), then exclaims of Mr. Hodgson, "I've never seen him before! I'm so excited! My dad got tickets for himself and my mom, and my mom's like, 'I'll bet you Kaelee would want to go!' And my dad asked me, 'Do you know who Supertramp is?' and I was like, 'Are you kidding me? Yes!'"

Lynn St.-Louis (whom Roger later greets from the stage as "Montréal") and David Mendenhall (of California) are hard-core Hodgson romantics. Lynn relates to me her French-Canadian youth in a Catholic all-girls school: "It was exactly what I was going through -- 'Hide in Your Shell' -- and every word of every song he wrote, I could connect with." Lynn attended classic Supertramp shows, and adds, "Music was my hobby. I didn't get into bad stuff, because I was listening to a lot of music." I understand Lynn as she comments that she usually only liked alternating songs on a Supertramp album (Mr. Hodgson often wrote every other one), and we laugh as David joins in. Can you believe this? Without even knowing each other's genders, they met on a chatroom on Roger Hodgson's website (She was "Stranger" [oops; a Rick Davies song]; he "Jai Guru Deva" -- after Roger's fave Beatles song, "Across the Universe," which he's known to perform). Lynn and David are both building-managers, after a fashion, and having met through the Hodgson appreciation society, they split time between Canada and California (when they're not at his concerts). David suggests he has enough Supertramp/Hodgson memorabilia to start a museum (hey, I'd visit), and recalls Mr. Hodgson gearing up to tour anew in the late '90s: "His management were afraid that a lot of people had forgotten him. I was like, 'The hell with that, that's not gonna happen!'"

Their perseverance paid off -- Roger has even dedicated "Lord Is It Mine" to David for his birthday -- and the dates are tidy, too: Lynn and David got together on May 9, 2000; on May 10th, Roger's rather excellent solo album *Open the Door* (recorded in France, no less) was released. It all connects, around the world. "Roger's fans are so nice!" exclaims Lynn. "I feel they're a lot like Roger: They're giving, and nice, and kind people. So when we see each other, it's a laugh! We're having a good time! I feel like I can travel the world, just through Roger's fans!"

Linda Gianotti echoes this sentiment. She attended her first Supertramp concert at 16 (for \$7!), and reflects that she, too, usually skipped to every other song, to hear Roger's. (But take heart, Rick: We concur that "Goodbye, Stranger" and "Bloody Well Right" are okay.) As "webmistress" of Roger Hodgson's social media for nearly three years now (links below), Ms. Gianotti experiences and processes Roger's global fandom every day: "As far as their intense love for him,

and his music -- it's not just the music, it's him! Every country, no matter where you go -- there's an Italian fan club, Spanish fan club, Portuguese, French, U.K. -- all of these people know each other, they communicate with each other, they go to shows together. It's really become a community of friends, and that's one thing that he loves the most: we call it the international community. I've heard it referred to as The United Nations of Roger! Religion, race, language -- there's no barriers."

And then, just as suddenly, it's showtime. I figure that Mr. Hodgson will open with his uniquely bluesy-ethereal-mystical "Take the Long Way Home" (he often does), but even this foreknowledge can't diminish my excitement: We're at a Roger Hodgson concert! That Supertramp guy! That ubiquitous and magical voice! The energy sizzles in the sold-out hall.

Now listen, I'm a seasoned critic. I can take anything apart, down to its molecules (or even atoms). And I've attended shows and shaken hands with some of music's biggest and best icons, from James Brown to Donovan to Brian Wilson to Cyndi Lauper and Morrissey. The Roger Hodgson concert experience? Wow. He and his band give us the hits like they're brand-new gems ("The Logical Song" has never sounded fresher), they deliver album tracks like they're part of your DNA (I've got a big crush on "A Soapbox Opera"), and songs from then and now which may be new to you ("Lady," "Along Came Mary") will become insta-faves.

What makes me remove my thumb from my chin and embrace this experience not just as a showcase but a *show*, however, is Mr. Hodgson's presence, pure and simple. The lighting is pretty, the stage looks nice, the twelve-string rings out like a heavenly harp. But what Roger Hodgson is doing up there is basically the inverse of what most musicians do: He's not dependent upon spectacle or posturing; rather, the songs stand entirely on their own, and indeed (although I'm no easy convert) he delivers them very much like a friend imparting wonderful gifts. It's a further credit to him (and his band) that all the artistry involved feels transparent, not once blocking the fine songwriting and often glorious playing and singing.

Earlier in the day, I asked the bard-turned-elder another question: Since he's begun touring anew, Roger Hodgson has been experiencing many diverse cultures, in many nations, around the world. I sincerely wonder how he's seen things changing, and/or what he'd like to see change.

"Well, to me, it's actually very simple," Mr. Hodgson replies. "The common element, with all cultures really, is that everyone has a heart. And I think that's what we've lost touch with. If we were really in touch with our hearts more, we couldn't do a lot of the atrocities we're doing to each other, and to the world. We couldn't tolerate it. I think that's why a lot of women, especially mothers, they can't commit those abuses.

"I think because we're so caught up in external -- whatevers, external desires, or whatever -- it's really a disconnection from the heart, that I think is causing a lot of the wars. Because you have to be totally numb to be able to commit the abuses that are happening. So I think that's where the giant healing needs to happen. And I think unfortunately, as a world, mankind, we've chosen the hard way. It's gonna come through with some real hard lessons. And we're gonna be forced to feel deeply, we're gonna be forced to work together, and co-operate, and care about each other, in order to survive. That's just basically what we've created here.

"And for me, what I try and do in my concerts -- if I step back -- is just really share my heart, and as a performer I'm kind of a mirror for the audience, and because they're watching someone who's sharing from his heart, then that kind of allows their heart to come forward. And if I can let people go with a smile on their face, and maybe feeling a little bit more love in their heart, then I've done a good job. That's the greater job, in a way, and I try not to see it as a job, it's just, for me it's as simple as going onstage, and just really have fun, and enjoy myself, and just give my best, and give a little bit of my love."

"Give a little bit!" He actually said it. So there you go.