

Keyboard virtuoso Rick Wakeman returns to outer space, progressive rock with *The Red Planet*

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English keyboard player and composer Rick Wakeman, best known for his work in the 1970s as a member of the progressive rock band Yes, released a new instrumental solo album called *The Red Planet* at the end of August.

The Red Planet is Wakeman's first studio recording of new music since 2003 and has been composed and produced to coincide with next year's 50th anniversary of the first orbit of Mars by a man-made probe. NASA's Mariner 9 robotic probe reached Mars on November 14, 1971, the first spacecraft to orbit another planet.

The instrumental album features Wakeman on multiple keyboards—including his signature Minimoog—along with members of the English Rock Ensemble: Dave Colquhoun on guitars, Lee Pomeroy on bass and Ash Soan on drums.

The eight tracks on the album are named after geological formations on the surface of Mars, including five different shield volcanoes, the northern plains, the south pole and the Mariner canyons.

The concept behind the record developed from a discussion between Wakeman and astrophysicist Garik Israelian, the founder of the Starmus International Festival. Starmus (the name pays tribute to “stars” and “music”) is a regular gathering of scientists and artists from multiple disciplines to celebrate the achievements of astronomy and space exploration. Festivals have been held in 2011, 2014, 2016, 2017 and 2019. The next is scheduled for 2021.

In an interview with the *Financial Times*, Wakeman noted that Israelian told him scientists increasingly believe that billions of years ago Mars was a blue planet with oceans and rivers. “Your good friend David Bowie may well have been right,” Israelian said to the keyboard player. Wakeman played the memorable piano part on Bowie's 1971 song “Life on Mars?”

Wakeman's involvement with Starmus began in 2014 when he was invited to perform at the festival by Brian May (guitarist with the rock band Queen), a founder of the event who completed his PhD dissertation in astrophysics from

Imperial College London in 2007.

Describing his approach to writing *The Red Planet*, Wakeman said, “You just have to look at the photos online or in books to be inspired, the landscapes are fascinating, and the volcanoes are huge...bigger than anything on earth. It was the perfect subject for me to be inspired musically.”

Wakeman continued: “The main themes and ideas were all written on the piano, with photographs of Ascræus Mons scattered around. I wanted the start of the album to be a statement and I always felt the church organ as an initial solo instrument said it all. This is certainly a track that screams out to be played live...so I'd better get practicing!”

The Red Planet is a return by Wakeman to the space themes in some of his earlier works. Among his remarkably prolific back catalog of 122 solo recordings are titles such as *No Earthly Connection* (1976), *Time Machine* (1988), *2000 AD into the Future* (1991) and *Out There* (2003).

For both admirers and those unfamiliar with his solo works, *The Red Planet* also marks a return by Wakeman to the progressive rock sound he pioneered with the English Rock Ensemble in 1974. This might be described as orchestral strings and choral voices intermixed with electric guitars and driving rock percussion, with Wakeman's keyboards either carrying the melody or embellishing in solo improvisation.

In recent years, Wakeman has focused on live albums, updates to earlier studio recordings and original piano interpretations of popular and classical music songs.

Like everything else in society, the production and promotion of *The Red Planet* were impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. The original release event, scheduled for April 4, including a playback of the record at the National Space Centre in Leicester, UK, was cancelled.

As Wakeman, 71, told *Prog Magazine*, “It's been a nightmare artistically and work-wise. ... There's been nothing in my lifetime even close to this. This crisis is the first ever that affects everybody worldwide. ... With various

health issues in our family, we've made very good friends with medical people. ...

"It has been horrendous. And so difficult that you can't go to see the families or attend the funerals. At least another 30 friends were diagnosed but luckily seem to be coming out of it. It's terrifying when it's people you know."

Wakeman began his professional career working as a session musician and arranger at age 19 in 1968 while he was still attending the Royal College of Music. Within a year, he had dropped out of school and was working full-time playing keyboards and writing for numerous artists. His talents were in high demand as he picked things up quickly, earning him the studio nickname, One Take Wakeman.

There is no doubt that his early experiences working with dozens of artists each week, combined with his gifts as a keyboard player, are what led to Wakeman's later popularity and success as a rock artist. During the session years, he worked with Bowie playing Mellotron on the hit single "Space Oddity" ("This is ground control to Major Tom. ...") in 1969. He also worked as a session musician with the folk-rock group The Strawbs that year and later joined the band, appearing on the group's first four albums.

A live recording of a concert by The Strawbs at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London in 1970 included an extended organ solo and a piano piece by Wakeman called "Temperament of the Mind," which earned him a front-page photo on the British weekly *Melody Maker* magazine. The publication named him "Tomorrow's Superstar."

Other artists of note that the young Wakeman worked in the studio with in 1971 were Cat Stevens on the piano intro to "Morning Has Broken," Elton John on Hammond organ on "Madman Across the Water" and on piano with T. Rex on the hit single "Get It On."

Wakeman left The Strawbs later that year and joined Yes, following the departure of founding member Tony Kaye, and took over keyboards just as the band was rehearsing for the recording of their fourth studio album, *Fragile*, which would go on to considerable commercial success.

On *Fragile* and the subsequent Yes tour, Wakeman showcased his virtuosity and showmanship—he began wearing a sequin cape on stage—playing while standing up and surrounded by a Hammond organ, grand piano, RMI 368 Electra-Piano and Harpsichord, Mellotron and Minimoog synthesizer.

Along with fellow progressive rock artist Keith Emerson (of Emerson, Lake and Palmer), Wakeman helped transform the keyboard into a solo instrument rivaling the electric guitar. As he told *FT* about the Minimoog, invented in 1970 by Robert Moog, "Guitarists hated it. It has a sound that will cut through concrete. I remember the first time I brought it into Yes and played a solo line, there was a look of abject

horror from the guitars department. I said, 'And I can go louder!'"

Known for his self-effacing humor regarding the grandiosity of progressive rock during its heyday, Wakeman also told *FT*, "I was once asked in an interview, back in the 1970s: 'Prog rock is overblown, it's full of pompous asses and people showing off. What do you have to say to that?' I said, 'That's a pretty good description'."

Due to an unusual set of circumstances, Wakeman maintained a separate solo recording contract with A&M records while he was a member of Yes, which was signed with Atlantic Records. In 1973, he began working on his own ambitious projects that proved to be artistically significant. He left Yes in 1974 to focus on a solo career, although he would later return to the band more than once.

The series of albums *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* (1973), *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1974, recorded live and including the London Symphony Orchestra, the English Chamber Choir and narration by actor David Hemmings), *The Myths and Legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table* (1975, with the New World Orchestra, English Chamber Choir and the Nottingham Festival Vocal Group) and *No Earthly Connection* (1976) are among the most important concept albums of 1970s progressive rock.

Although *The Red Planet* was produced with far less elaborate resources—the members of the English Rock ensemble each recorded their elements of the music remotely from their home studios—Rick Wakeman returns to the sounds and themes of his best work in the new instrumental album.



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