

Rick Wakeman: Interview

Okee dokee folks...The man with a cape and keyboards is headed to Fall River on October 19. Legendary Yes keyboardist Rick Wakeman hits the Narrows Center for the Arts with his Even Grumpier Old Rock Star show. I spoke with Rick last week via a Zoom call.



Rick Wakeman: Hi, John! Hi, my friend!

John Fuzek: Hi, Rick, where are you? in England?

RW: Yes, I am on the East Coast in an area known as East Anglia where I am sitting somewhat soaking wet 'cause I've just taken the dogs for walk in the rain

JF: I have been to East Anglia!

RW: Whereabouts did you go?

JF: Norwich

RW: I'm not far from Norwich

JF: I have friends out there!

RW: It's a lovely county

JF: I wanted to move there, I thought it was beautiful!

RW: You know, there are number of people who come to visit and actually stay, a lot of people in the entertainment business or the acting fraternity, it's amazing the number of people who've got houses around here

JF: Wow, yes, it is a beautiful area and when i came back and landed in Boston it was depressing, the culture difference was maddening, it was like night and day, anyway, so you are doing the Grumpy Old Man tour...

RW: Yeah, even grumpier

JF: Well, you're 72, you're not that old

RW: Ah, thank you! That's the nicest thing anyone has said in a long time!

JF: I have a friend who is a little older than that and he still does stage work!

RW: Excellent, well I am still trying, trying hard, it's um, funny enough the playing and being around recording and doing concerts is good but the traveling gets to you a little bit sometimes, I used to enjoy the traveling but sometimes you've got a ten hour drive and walk straight onto stage after, when you get to my age it gets a little tough, it's like "oh, really, I have ten minutes to have a cup of tea?", it's fine, I do try to take a but more care of myself than I have done for ages, when the pandemic started my hands were getting stiff, this isn't very good, so I started, when the lock down was lifted, this might sound funny, I started a fitness regime, which my wife calls a "fatness regime", but I actually feel better for it, we've increased it for the tour because one of the things that I have understood in recent years, certainly since the pandemic, is that if you want to do your best on stage you've really got to be as healthy as you possibly can, so that's been my aim for the last year and since the restrictions were lifted over here and I do feel better for it

JF: That is encouraging, i am a musician as well and I basically do the same thing where i drive to gig and literally get out and play, I'm 60 and my hands are getting stiff having guitar related hand issues

RW: What has helped is walking the dogs a couple miles a day, you end up walking 14-15 miles a week that you normally wouldn't walk

JF: I did that when I had dogs but now I have cats, I guess we could walk around the house together

RW: We've got three rescue dogs and three rescue cats and the cats are the boss, the cats boss the dogs around and it's quite funny

JF: I believe it! So, I generally read up on people before I interview them, this will sound stupid, but I read your Wikipedia page and after i read it all the last line says "Rick Wakeman does not like Wikipedia"

RW: Well, it's so inaccurate in many places, I went on once to correct a bunch of stuff and as I was correcting it someone was putting it back to the way it was before-totally incorrect, I mean Wikipedia does a decent job, I mean I use it like everyone does when you're looking up things and you kind of accept that there might be things that aren't 100% correct, but at least it hasn't got me down as dead!

JF: That's a good thing, but after reading that Wikipedia page and all the health issues that you've had it is definitely a good thing!

RW: Yes, I have pushed the boundaries, as they say, over my life, I am very grateful to still be around and still be able to play, and because I enjoy it so much it's probably one of the reasons that I am trying to get myself really fit, I'd like to be around for a long time, my wife and I have been together for 20 years and married for 10, she's 25 years younger than me, hopefully wen she gets to 75 I'll still be around at 100, I say still be around, she'll be pushing me around, I've got so much, a lovely family, six kids, thirteen grandchildren, a fantastic wife, my work with animal welfare charity, dogs and cats, living in a lovely part of the world, plus being able to play, I just find that so, so good that i want it to last forever!

JF: I didn't know about the animal welfare things, I am a huge animal lover

RW: I am an ambassador for Animals Asia, we save as many moon bears as we can from the bear bile farms, which basically kills the bears, we've got about 600 in a sanctuary in Cheng Du, I've got a moon bear myself called Moon, he's in the sanctuary, and also I am involved with a charity saving suffering strays where we save street dogs from Eastern Europe, mostly Romania an Bosnia, we've actually got two street dog rescues from Sarajevo from the war zone who were so badly treated it was unbelievable, we got them home and they are the most adorable, lovable dogs, and this one might sound strange but recently, just two weeks ago now, our third dog arrived, a little Labrador, she was bought from the meat trade, from the butchers in China

JF: I cannot even fathom how people can do that

RW: luckily, as part of the charity that we are involved with they bought her, it literally was like, "how would you like her?" and I said, "on a lead, please", it took seven months to get her here, and she's gorgeous, they all get along great, and we've got three rescue cats, one in particular, we call him GT, he eats a lot, he's the big boss, the dogs are terrified of him, TERRIFIED of GT, and the ten year old Lab/Bernese Mountain Dog mix, Garrow, he's huge, but a real softy, he's terrified of little GT, it's really funny, GT hides around the corner of the door and when the dog's face appears, and Garrow goes, "oh, no it's him", it's lovely, we are heavily involved in that.

JF: That's great! I respect you even more now. I already did before but I really respect people who help animals, they are a huge part of my life, I've been a vegetarian for 35 years because of that

RW: Right, they are the voiceless ones, a friend of mine, a wonderful actor, Peter Regan, says, "someone has to speak for the voiceless ones"

JF: Ricky Gervais does a lot of that as well

RW: I know Ricky very well, he's heavily involved as well as Brian May, Brian, Ricky, myself and Peter

Regan, Susan Nichols and a few others, there's quite a few of us and we're not frightened to say what we think, we were also involved with helping Pen Farthing get his animals back from Afghanistan...when I look at our three dogs they are just so gorgeous and so loving, and Pete Regan says they've all got lots of love to give they just need the opportunity to give it

JF: I put my dogs on the cover of my CD and named it A Dog's Age and wrote the title track, "A Dog's Age"

RW: Brilliant! I always put pages in the program for the different animal welfare charities and I did record a trilogy a few years ago which started off being written about the cats, it's called "Cathedral Cats", I've never done anything with it but I was thinking of adapting it and making it all of the animals that I am involved with, there were two bears, moon bears, I had one called Rocky and one called Cyril, both sadly died because the bear bile trade causes them to have kidney failure, I wrote a piece called "Rocky" and another one for Cyril, they're both around on YouTube somewhere, I felt such a sense of relief after having written them, that I'd actually done something, just talking to you I might just resurrect the "Cathedral Cats" thing and look at all the animals that I have been involved with over the years and then do pieces specifically for all of them

JF: I would love to hear that...so, I watched a video of you, it's a few years back now, when you were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, it was a view from over your keyboards and it showed your hands just flying across the keys with such a light touch, it was amazing

RW: I don't see that very often because I play 95% of the time with my eyes closed, and that stems from one early piano teacher from the age of 5 right through when I went to the Royal College, and from day one she said to me, "you're going to learn to read music and you're going to learn pieces, once you know the pieces I want you to put the music to one side, close your eyes and see pictures of the music, cause music is painting pictures, I want you to paint pictures and it can be anything you want as long as it depicts the music in your mind", and I've always done that and I still do it to this day, so quite literally 95% of the time I am playing with my eyes closed and I see pictures all the time

JF: Well, we are almost out of time so I just want to wrap this with one more question. What can we expect at your Grumpier Old Man Show at The Narrows on October 19th?

RW: A bit of a mixture, I am taking a couple of keyboards as well as a piano so it enables me to do some pieces that work better on keyboards than piano, things like some of the organ pieces, the church organ type pieces that I've done, there'll be that and there'll be the odd, slightly serious moment, which doesn't happen very much...I want to do something that is a sort of a Q&A, when people arrive they have the chance to write some questions or anything they want and they can be put in my dressing room at half time...I'll look at the questions and there's bound to be a few that are the same and there's bound to be a few weird ones and just at a couple of places in the set I will get those questions out and either give incredibly good answers or incredibly stupid ones, I think the odds are they are more likely to be stupid.

JF: It's just going to be you on stage, solo, correct?

RW: Just me with a grand piano and some keyboards

JF: Thank you for taking the time to talk! I will see you on the 19th!

RW: You certainly will. Cheers!

Rick Wakeman brings his Grumpier Old Man Tour to the Narrows Center for the Art on October 19. For more about the show "Roundabout" to: NarrowsCenter.org Also coming up at the Narrows: Rodney Crowell, Leo Kottke, Marty Stuart and His Fabulous Superlatives, Suzanne Vega, Samantha Fish and much more!

That's it for now, thanks for reading. www.JohnFuzek.com