

# Introduction

## “This is the story of Rael”

I do like to have the detail there so if anyone did want to spend their life rooting around the lyrics, it would be like a little paper chase for them – very unnecessary, but great fun!

—Peter Gabriel, March 1973<sup>1</sup>

The crowd files into Los Angeles’s Shrine Auditorium on a cold January evening in 1975. It’s the familiar audience for a mid-1970s “progressive” rock concert, mostly white college-age males. The group they have come to see, Genesis, has not as yet received widespread airplay in the US. The band had played LA only once before, a storied three-night stint at the Roxy back in December 1973. Based on those shows and a handful of other performances in large East Coast cities (New York, Philadelphia, Miami) as well as a handful of important collegiate markets (Boston’s Tufts University, Ypsilanti, Michigan), the audience had heard stories of a British band with an epic, theatrical sound and strange songs about watchers from the skies and ancient Roman hermaphrodites. They knew something of this group’s singer who would tell tales of a senile lawnmower or a malevolent sex-obsessed ghost named Henry, or portray the spirit of Britannia herself. He wore his long, dark hair with a prominent bald spot shaven in front and was also known for donning flower masks and fox heads. There was still something of a novelty to their show. It was a bit like a cross between Yes and David Bowie, people said—a cult attraction.

All the same, audience members expecting to see an elaborate set of the sort that Yes used were in for a surprise. The stage was starkly minimal by 1970s concert standards, with even the amplifiers hidden from view. Writing in *Circus* magazine, Ron Ross described it this way:

Where groups from the Who to ELP [Emerson, Lake and Palmer] impress their fans visually with walls of amplified thunder-machinery, Genesis’ [*sic*] set is virtually bare of electric equipment. Steve Hackett and Mike Rutherford’s amps are so well hidden that their music often appears to emanate from the air itself. No mountains of synthesiser technology surround Tony Banks. Aside from the panoramic three-part slide screen and an odd little rock formation at the center of the stage, the most striking “prop” is Phil Collins’ beautifully complete and well-ordered drum kit. It is almost a sculpture in itself, but, of course, its function is strictly musical. (Ross, 1975, p. 70)

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Bowler and Dray, 1993, p. 68.

When Genesis took to the stage, their charismatic front man, Peter Gabriel, was wearing none of the fanciful accoutrements that had distinguished their earlier Roxy appearance. Instead, he looked much like any no-nonsense pub-rocker of the mid-seventies, wearing a black leather jacket and jeans, his famously long hair cut short. Instead of the glam-like fluorescent eye-shadow and lipstick he had worn for shows on the previous tour, his only make-up this time was some skin base to darken his complexion and a dab of football-player-style blackener below the eyes. As the crowd hushed in anticipation, Gabriel addressed the crowd before a note was played.

Good evening. We've written a big lump of story and music and we'd like to play the whole thing for you tonight. It tells of how a large black cloud descends into Time Square and straddles out across 42nd Street, turns into a wall and sucks in Manhattan Island. Our hero, named Rael, crawls out of the subways of New York and is sucked into the wall, to regain consciousness underground. This is the story of Rael.

And with that, with Tony Banks's now-familiar electric-piano trills introducing the title song, the group launched into their new release, a double-album dramatic work entitled *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. The show was unlike anything Genesis had done before, surprising even fans who were familiar with the group's previous music. The purpose of the minimal staging was then made clear—to focus the audience's attention on Gabriel as he acted out the role of Rael.

Even more unusual, the group had decided to begin the show with this new, largely unfamiliar 90-minute opus in its entirety. Even by the excessive standards of 1970s rock shows, this was a risky undertaking. Only Yes, on their *Tales from Topographic Oceans* tour, had previously attempted introducing so much new material to their audience without the relief provided by "the hits," or at least older, more familiar material. And Yes had failed—after only a few shows the group was forced to begin their concerts with familiar material, moving the complete *Tales* to the end of the show, and eventually they were forced to edit down *Tales* itself for live performance. And Yes, of course, were one of the top progressive-rock concert draws of the 1970s, with two top-10 albums prior to the release of *Tales*. Although *The Lamb* had been released about five weeks prior to this performance, it is a fair assumption that this music would be completely new to most of the audience who had come to this show out of curiosity regarding the group's reputation. Compared to the prog-rock giants such as Emerson, Lake and Palmer or Yes, Genesis was still regarded as an "underground" group with no hits to speak of stateside. How would their story of an American street punk named Rael and his strange journey into a metaphysical realm of the subconscious be received?

As it turns out, very well. While *Tales from Topographic Oceans* never quite recovered from the critical vilification heaped upon both the album and the tour that followed (even today, it symbolizes the excesses of progressive rock's "golden years" from 1969 to 1977), the reputation of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* has steadily increased over the years. Although the album received only lukewarm

critical response on its release, the tour that followed greatly enhanced Genesis's standing in the US, then the largest market for popular music. So successful was the tour, and Gabriel's personification of Rael, that Gabriel came to be seen as the major creative figure in Genesis; and when Gabriel announced his departure from the group in 1975, critics were prepared to write off the group's future. Unbeknownst to the public at large, however, the experience of recording *The Lamb* fortified the group for working without Gabriel; the follow-up album *A Trick of the Tail* heralded the beginning of Genesis's hugely successful period with Phil Collins as singer and charismatic front man.

Writing in 1986—the peak of Genesis's post-Gabriel popularity—*Village Voice* critic Barry Walters wrote a surprisingly appreciative assessment of *The Lamb* that indicates something of its staying power nearly 12 years after it was released:

With more braggadocio than L. L. Cool J and a harder gangster attitude than Schooly-D, Rael Imperial Aerosol Kid was also the way Gabriel saw himself, especially in relation to the future AOR horrors he then sang and conceptualized for, Genesis. During the oblique narrative course of *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway's* four sides, Rael joins the Grand Parade of Lifeless Packaging, gets shot up by the Supernatural Anaesthetist, suffers castration, and finally dissolves to be reborn. It seemed incomprehensible in 1974, but *The Lamb* basically is a confined artist's struggle for liberation. (Walters, 1986)

One of the reasons that *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* has aged so well over the years is that its lyric content may be seen as allegorical on several levels. First, it may be enjoyed at face value as a consummately bizarre surrealist epic—the logical extension of the fanciful and bizarre stories that Gabriel began improvising on stage to cover the awkward moments of tuning guitars between songs. It is also a religious allegory, which Gabriel has compared to John Bunyan's epic *Pilgrim's Progress*. As such it is a notable example in the long line of songs with religious themes in Gabriel's output, beginning with the songs on Genesis's debut *From Genesis to Revelation* and continuing through "Visions of Angels" and "Supper's Ready" all the way to later solo songs such as "Blood of Eden" and the *Passion* soundtrack for Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The album also has intriguing psychological themes, which again characterize both Gabriel's work with Genesis ("The Musical Box") and his solo work ("No Self Control," "We Do What We're Told [Milgram's 37]").

Moreover, *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* holds up well as a historical document. It is a product of its time, reflective of the general economic and social turmoil of the early 1970s. It was a time of unprecedented economic expansion for the music industry, but the same economic conditions conveyed in the album's title track ultimately prefigured the industry's recession-era implosion and retrenchment. *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* is one of the last classic concept albums of the 1970s, released at a time that concept albums were—thanks to albums such as *Tales from Topographic Oceans*—decidedly out of fashion. Beyond all that, it is—as Walters (1986) put it—"the funkiest, most tuneful progressive rock album."

This book examines *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* from all of these perspectives. In Chapter 1, I examine the social and economic contexts in which *The Lamb* was released. The emergence of progressive rock as a genre—and, indeed, as a marketing category—is situated within the globalization and consolidation of the music industry and the emergence of related industries such as concert promotion and merchandising. At the same time, I also examine social and political conditions in the US (then the world’s largest market for recorded music, and the market in which Genesis was poised for a significant breakthrough in 1975) and the UK. Sociocultural tensions engendered by the Watergate crisis and the OPEC oil embargo of 1973–74, for example, were manifested in the popular music of the era, and Genesis was no exception. The energy crisis, in fact, directly contributed to structural changes in the music industry in the mid-1970s—among these changes, it can be argued, was the demise of progressive rock, an inherently cost-ineffective “art for art’s sake” genre that was difficult to promote to radio and expensive to mount on tour. Chapter 1 also includes a brief survey of Genesis’s career up until the recording of *The Lamb*; although this information is found in each of the many books that have been written about Genesis (Bowler and Dray, 1993; Fielder, 1984; Gallo, 1980; Hewitt, 2000), its inclusion helps to situate *The Lamb* within the emergent career of this prominent and uniquely theatrical British band. Chapter 1 accordingly closes with some observations on the role that theatre played in Genesis’s performances, and the relation of Gabriel’s adaptation of various stage personae to the glam rock movement that was at its peak in the UK during the same period.

Chapter 2 details the process of composing and recording *The Lamb*. Again, although this information has been covered in the various biographical accounts of the band, this section brings together the various strands of information into one narrative. Gabriel’s different versions of the story line, both from the album packaging and in press interviews, are also brought together for comparison and commentary.

Chapter 3 is a detailed musical and textual analysis of *The Lamb*, song by song. While some fan documents (see, for example, Hoppe, 1998; McMahan, 1998) provide some textual analysis, the actual musical content is generally passed over. In the spirit of music theorists such as Walter Everett (1999, 2001) and John Covach and Graeme Boone (1997), I believe that an informed musical analysis can enhance appreciation of the listening experience, and consequently I attempt to place musical analysis on equal footing with the textual component. Although the ability to read music will be helpful to derive maximum benefit from some parts of this chapter, I have attempted to steer clear of overbearing technical jargon. Musical examples are only provided inasmuch as they help to clarify points in the text, and CD timings are provided for easy aural reference. Nevertheless, readers may pass over the passages of musical analysis if they see fit, with no disruption of the reading flow.

Chapter 4 examines the public reception to *The Lamb*, considering reviews of both the recording and the world tour that followed. Chapter 5 is a survey

of different interpretations of *The Lamb* as allegory, addressing the album's psychological themes, its musical references (mostly to 1960s and 1970s pop and rock songs), and its religious imagery. In so doing I draw upon some of the existing fan interpretations of this album (found on the Internet and elsewhere) while adding some of my own. Finally, Chapter 6 considers the lasting influence of *The Lamb* on both Gabriel's solo career and the career of the band he left behind after six studio albums, as well as *The Lamb*'s continued longevity through neo-progressive bands and Genesis tribute bands such as The Musical Box.

Although *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* may not have the iconic stature of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* or Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, it nonetheless manages to encapsulate both the zenith of progressive rock and the decline of the 1970s. Like *Dark Side of the Moon*, *The Lamb* possesses a timeless quality that transcends the historical period in which it was made, retaining its emotional and dramatic power even today. At the same time, it represents the culmination of a period when record companies and producers took on the role of impresarios, providing seemingly unlimited financial resources for the creation of music guided by the principle of "art for art's sake." After *The Lamb*—and perhaps spurred by the debacle surrounding *Tales from Topographic Oceans*—economic constraints began to curtail the wilder creative flights of fancy (some would say excesses) of progressive rock musicians. The economic and social conditions that led to the "retreat to simplicity" epitomized by punk and new wave are in fact prefigured by *The Lamb*, which manages to comment upon the period in which it was created even as one may listen to it without being reminded of that period.

This, then, is the story of Rael . . . .