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PROGLAND

“Never took the easy road”: Ton Scherpenzeel looks back on half a century of restless art, Kayak, Camel, and musical transformations

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Ton Scherpenzeel, a Dutch name synonymous with excellence in European progressive music, is more than just the keyboardist and founder of the legendary Dutch band Kayak; he is the unwavering architect of a legacy spanning over five decades—solo, with various artists and bands, and of course, with the ensemble founded in 1972, but whose origins trace back much earlier. As the only musician to participate in all eighteen of the group’s studio albums, Scherpenzeel personifies Kayak’s creative soul, steering the band through a journey marked by a continuous fusion of complex symphonic rock, accessible ballads, and classically-inspired arrangements. His vision has been the driving force behind a career that withstood lineup changes, record label pressures, limiting labels, reunions, and farewells, remaining faithful to his calling to follow only his own inspiration.

Scherpenzeel’s compositional philosophy has always been based on a refusal to conform, an attitude he himself summarizes by rejecting the

term "prog police," which he uses to define "professional" colleagues in rock. His arrangements, which demonstrate a theatrical streak and a remarkable depth, transitioned with equal skill between the orchestral density of conceptual epics like "Nostradamus" (2005) and "Merlin" (1981), and the conciseness of hit singles like the unforgettable "Ruthless Queen." This oscillation between the scholarly and the popular, often confusing the more conservative fan base, is in fact the purest manifestation of his musical "escrevivência" (paraphrasing Conceição Evaristo, an act of self-writing/living): the incessant need to learn, evolve, and never record the same album twice, whether with the same band or collaborating with distinct artists.

Recently, Scherpenzeel definitively concluded Kayak's activities as a touring band with the farewell tour, "Back To Shore – The 2022 Farewell Tour." A decision, he states, made in a calculated and realistic manner, where the logistical and financial effort of maintaining the band outweighed the creative joy. However, the end of the band does not signal the end of his production: the master now turns to a prolific solo phase where his creativity manifests in an even more eclectic way, encompassing instrumentals, baroque pop, and symphonic epics, all released on platforms that grant him total control over the purity of his demos.

In this exclusive interview, we delve into Scherpenzeel's universe through his own words, reflections, and memories. We explore everything from his training in classical double bass, the legendary partnership with the late drummer Pim Koopman, the behind-the-scenes rush of recording *See See The Sun* with Alan Parsons, his experience as a keyboardist in Andrew Latimer's Camel, and the complex conceptual details of his entire body of work. It is a profound conversation with the leader who never sought the easy road, but rather the one that honored the music.

I'd like to start this series of questions by going back to the beginning of your career: what definitively motivated you, at age 17 in 1969, to become a professional musician—first as a bassist, and then as a keyboardist (who back then was certainly called an "organist")?

I did not really decide at age 17 to become a professional musician—that just turned out to be the case 4 years later. Playing in bands, and starting to write my own music was still a hobby at that age. I had no clear image of my future, I just knew that music was all absorbing. I took the opportunity to leave secondary (high) school (I had no idea what I was doing there and was quite a lazy pupil to their standards)

by studying classical double bass on the Music Academy. I thought that was a convenient and logical choice after playing bass guitar in bands. Not that I intended to become a professional classical bass player in orchestras, but it was a good excuse to abandon school. As soon as Kayak had enough work, I quit the double bass study too. But it certainly gave me some classical background that I found really useful later on.

The late Pim Koopman and you played together since high school in High Tide and together formed Kayak. What was it like playing with him and later working with him in the band?

Pim was an immensely talented man, and I think we both found our match in the bands we played in together, and automatically became the creative leaders. When you're young, you don't realize the gift that you're given when you meet that kind of person in your life. We motivated each other, but were also friendly rivals. We brought out the best in each other. As characters, we were totally opposite.

Soon after, with Max and Johan, you quickly gelled and recorded the extraordinary See See The Sun. Is it true, based on available records, that this album was rushed through mixing in two or three days? I imagine how crazy that final stretch was, even if you had gradually recorded the material!

One track had already been mixed (Lyrics, maybe one or two more, I am not sure) but yes, the rest was done in three days in Abbey Road by Alan Parsons. It was our first album, we had no idea how long something like that would normally take. So we didn't experience it as rushing, but Alan probably did. I remember Abbey Road studios as a kind of lab or small factory, with technical and maintenance guys walking around in white coats, and there were strict times for lunch and tea. In the mix room there was Alan, Pim, our producer Gerrit Jan Leenders and me, and a tape operator. To my surprise Alan wouldn't press the buttons of the tape machine if the tape op wasn't there-union rules and all that, I believe. He just waited till the guy came in. It didn't seem like the legendary flashy rock studio we thought we were going to. But Alan did a great job.

Something I find phenomenal about that first album is the instrumentation, especially the keyboards. Do you recall the rig you used at the time, and on the subsequent albums of that first phase?

My live rig was not very impressive yet. For the recordings I used a lot of keyboards that were in the studio or we hired one: grand piano, upright piano, harpsichord, Hammond organ, I didn't have any of those in the early days of See See The Sun myself. On stage I worked with a Crumar piano, a Farfisa organ, and a Davoli synth. It must have sounded horrible, and nothing like the studio recordings. Max Werner played the mellotron. By the time we recorded the second album my set up became much better with for instance a Minimoog, String ensemble, Hammond L100, a Lawrence upright piano (a sort of predecessor for the Yamaha CP80 that I never saw anywhere else), and a Hohner Clavinet.

I'd like to ask you about something that always generates some controversy among more hardcore prog-heads—the early Kayak versus the more "accessible" phase starting with The Last Encore: What are the main differences you notice between the first albums and the works of the Starlight Dancer era? Do you believe the sonic shift alienated the group's previous fan base? Were you and the band concerned about this at the time?

No. That was due to our unstoppable development as writers and musicians. We have always done what they now call proggy stuff as well as short, more accessible songs, from See See the Sun right until Out Of This World. Some albums were more song oriented, others leaned more towards prog, but both ingredients have always been there, on almost every album.

We were never concerned about what our fan base would think. Pretty naive, maybe, and we probably were very bad career planners. We wrote and recorded what we liked and thought was good enough, and sort of expected our audience to understand and feel the same. We didn't care about where we'd fit in, we didn't care about what the prog police would think, and whether we would alienate our fan base. I never saw Kayak as a prog band anyway, and in those days I do not even think the word prog existed. I don't understand how you can be called progressive if you play the same stuff for 40 years. It didn't matter to us if the song was 2 minutes or 12. In the beginning we listened a lot to bands like Yes of course, and you can not deny their influence on our first album. But we listened to Beatles, Beach Boys, Jimi Hendrix, Zappa, to name a few, and classical music too.

But as a band (as writers, I should say) we were aiming to grow, learn and improve, and I now see that that may have confused a lot of fans throughout our career. In those days we were called an 'album group', which to me in fact meant we were not very good in making hits.

There was ever increasing pressure from the record company to have a hit, which made me wonder why they ever signed us, 'cause they knew what they were getting in to. But their pressure helped in re-evaluating and compressing our ideas into shorter formats, which I consider a blessing. Some people say that the musical ideas and hooks of just one Kayak album would be enough for other bands to make at least four albums.

You were gradually achieving good positions on the singles charts before. But I want to ask: did the commercial success of that period, with "Ruthless Queen," affect your mindset as a composer and the band's artistic direction? You became giants in the Netherlands and Europe too, so I imagine it was something new, even as Vertigo pushed for more hits.

We had had minor single successes like Lyrics, Mammoth, Wintertime, Chance for a Lifetime and Starlight Dancer before, but Ruthless Queen was our first (and last) really big top5 hit and the album Phantom of the Night even got to number one, and received the platinum status. We were totally surprised that we finally cracked it, but didn't understand why all of a sudden now. For me it was just the next album, albeit with a totally new line up. Every song on Phantom of the Night could have been a song on any other album of ours as far as I am concerned. But the line up and production must have made the songs more accessible. Later I learned that if we hadn't had that breakthrough, the record company (Phonogram) probably would have dumped us. Luckily we never realized that. After that hit, we were even allowed to record the next album in Los Angeles. They thought it would help us break through internationally. I wonder why. All the material was prepared and written in Holland, so how could recording it in LA make the difference? It must have cost a fortune, 2 months in LA with the whole band. Of course we tried to repeat that success, but as Ruthless Queen was a surprise to us too, that never really worked. You can not plan a surprise.

Despite the changes, the main lineup of the band remained relatively intact. I'd particularly like to ask you what it was like working with Johan Slager and Max Werner and what your best memories of the two of them are?

I don't really agree that the main line up stayed in tact. In 1979 we had a different vocalist, drummer, another bass player plus female background vocalists. It was almost a complete new band. Guitarist Johan Slager was a very amicable guy to work with, very easy going- sometimes too much. He could not be rushed, which could be charming, but could sometimes drive Pim and me insane. His musical back ground was totally different from Pim, Max and mine, and that gave a special unexpected blend of styles that worked. Max was something else. Very unique vocals, instantly recognizable- you either loved his voice or hated it. He himself hated it, apparently, and that sometimes made it hard to work with him. Deep inside he had always wanted to be the drummer, and in 1978, after Charles Schouten left the band, he succeeded in his mission. In hindsight I can easily understand why, as a vocalist, he had been so decisive for our early musical impact.

We recently lost Edward Reekers, who was the band's voice during that phase, later returned, and was on two of the Kayak albums I love most: Merlin and Nostradamus. What was it like working with him?

All vocalists in Kayak were excellent and everyone was special in his or own way, but Edward was the one that needed the least guidance- he quickly understood what asked of him and executed it brilliantly. Pim always called him Mr Bel Canto. He had (to my ears anyway) an impeccable pronunciation too. Especially in the later years, with the more intimate ballads, it's clear how extremely good and precise he was. And I wonder if Ruthless Queen would have been a hit with another vocalist.

Speaking of which, I'd like to ask precisely about these conceptual albums revolving around historical and mythological figures. Do you prefer working on albums in this format or those with independent tracks? I ask because you have a theatrical and musical vein in your arrangements that makes these albums so tasteful to work on...

First of all, I like history. And I like the challenge of working on a conceptual work like a rock opera, but I never constricted myself to that. I also like a short stand alone song of two minutes. I think that

the fact that I had been writing and working for theatre productions outside Kayak since 1984 ignited the idea that as composers and lyricists we could accomplish something on a bigger scale, a theatre production, with intelligent yet emotional songs, that would still rock. Using choirs and orchestras, and different vocalists for different parts, and with an interesting story line as the underlying framework for the music and lyrics. Although all songs are clearly intertwined, I think that many individual tracks of these rock operas could very well have been stand alone tracks on any other Kayak album. Anyway, we were still developing our craft and trying out new stuff, to see how far we could go- however hard that is in a small country like Holland, simply because of the financial restrictions and limited potential audience.

You re-recorded and reworked part of Merlin in 2003 with nine additional songs. Is there an album from the 1970s that you would like to revisit and re-record, with or without new material, and without necessarily being conceptual?

Not really. What's done is done. Merlin was the exception because we were in a phase as a group that I felt we had to come up with something special. And as the original Merlin was very short (20 minutes, only one side of an LP) there was enough in the legends and stories we hadn't still covered so we saw that as an opportunity. I can not see myself doing rock operas again on that scale anymore. After Nostradamus and Cleopatra I was totally exhausted and wondered why I made such an effort and go through so much trouble when it only attracted a relatively small audience for something like 25 shows. I am still glad we did it, it at least showed what we were capable of. But we overestimated the commercial appeal of what we did.

My favorite of the band, along with See See The Sun, is Nostradamus. The album tells the story of the seer Nostradamus but from the viewpoint of a Flemish monk, Yves de Lessines, based on the (unproven) theory that De Lessines was the actual writer of the famous "Centuries," which contained a secret code for the Knights Templar's treasures. Where and why did you decide to adopt this specific historical focus, and what, compositionally, did it enrich for the album and for you as a keyboardist and arranger within this theme?

I am especially proud of Nostradamus, where we really told our own story, whether proven or not. In Merlin and Cleopatra we took the 'official' narrative, and that puzzle was hard enough. But with Nostradamus we created extra layers: Nostradamus here is the

protagonist as well as the antagonist- he has a reputation of being a seer, but we unmask him as a cheater. He's supposed to be the hero, but at the same time he's sort of pathetic, being corrected on stage from heaven by the monk who, supposedly, really wrote the Centuries long before Nostradamus used them as his own 'prophecies'. Of course, it's all a matter of speculation and opinion, but it was intriguing enough to write this rock opera about him. It gave our story depth, drama, humor, love and loss, and a bit of royal grandeur. It also gave me the chance to dive into my favorite classical and musical period and use that in our songs.

Is Nostradamus one of your favorite or your absolute favorite work by the band? Revisiting this album, I consider it one of Kayak's peaks... You also played bass on it, correct?

Thank you. As an album it is one of my favorites indeed and I feel it is very much underrated- it was probably too difficult or pretentious for the average prog/pop lover, and on top of that I have hardly ever read a review that showed understanding of what we offered. Half of the people just don't care about lyrics or storylines, and the so-called critics didn't come much further than "great but long". That's Holland for you. Nice, but small. Well, we never took the easy road. Yes, I did play the bass on it, as we didn't have a bass player at the time and I love playing bass (I played bass in bands I was in before Kayak). In fact I almost prefer playing bass over keyboards.

As the only member to have played on every Kayak album (over 18) and the band leader, I notice the group always reinvents itself: doing acoustic works, these conceptual pieces, something more accessible, complex, and so on. Is it difficult to constantly introduce new working patterns in such a veteran band? I believe the new lineup and members help a lot in this regard...

I never looked at it that way. We were professionals. It must have been much harder for the fans- what the hell are they doing now? Where's my favorite singer gone? However much I appreciate fans, most of them are conservative. Which is perfectly fine and understandable, but what's the point of recording the same album over and over again, even if we could? And if we did, then the critics would complain that they've heard it all before. Yes, the last line up was very open to what I was trying to achieve, besides being fabulous musicians, and I thank them for that.

Just like in the beginning, I can only follow my heart and whatever it is that inspires me to write. That hasn't changed and never will. With Kayak being the vehicle for that creativity, I could only hope the musicians in the band want to and are able to perform what I want them to do. The working patterns haven't really changed that much, although in the early days we used to spend more time in the studio together, as a band. Since the computer and digital recording, everything is pre-produced. Which is a blessing because we can not afford spending weeks in an expensive studio anymore. Every line up has its strength and weaknesses. It's up to me to find out what they are- and that usually takes some time, of course. As for the live performances, I am not someone who wants it live to sound exactly like the record because that's impossible with so many different members. They have some freedom in their interpretations.

I'd like to ask something I also talked with Kristoffer Gildenlow. You are releasing the live album Back To Shore – The 2022 Farewell Tour, which is stunning, but it needs clarification: is Kayak really going to cease activities? Has the time come to slow down? And what led to this decision?

I announced in 2022 that tour would be Kayak's final tour, but I kept the door ajar, meaning that if I wanted to use the name again for a special project or whatever, I would. There's no reason why not. But as a band, it's really over.

There is never just one reason for a decision like that- there are several factors that play a role. Overall you could say that the effort it took me to keep the band going outweighed the joy and satisfaction of playing. I am a bit of a control freak, and worry about everything that could go wrong. If I only could have concentrated on the music, we would probably still be going. But we are not Pink Floyd or Genesis, with a massive budget to tour and record. Every euro counts. After 50 years, for me that's not very inspiring anymore. Keeping Kayak afloat became a burden, however great this line up may have been. I have to say that the last line up with Bart, Marcel, Kris and Hans was the most enjoyable of them all. No big egos or divas, everyone understood his role within the band and we laughed a lot. But that wasn't enough, and I had to be realistic: I am not a young man anymore, with fantasies of conquering the world with my music. The business has changed dramatically. How much longer do I want to go on pursuing that? I'll have to stop one day, even the Stones will not go on forever, mark my words. So I decided: better too early than too late. I know

everyone in the band wanted to continue, which made the decision even harder, but I think I made the right choice.

Luckily we recorded two shows of the last tour and I'm glad OOB Records embraced the idea of releasing the 2CD/DVD 'Back to Shore-The 2022 Farewell Tour' which became a worthy final to 50 years of Kayak. There are even two never before released studio tracks on it.

Do you see yourself focusing more on classical music work in the coming years, similar to your solo records?

I've done four solo albums since 2013: The Lion's Dream, Velvet Armour, Virgin Grounds and Achter De Schermen, all available through OOB Records (www.oob-records.com) and they encompass three totally different musical directions. And my output now is still as eclectic as it ever was. Instrumentals, pop songs, baroque/classical style music, symphonic epics and folky stuff- I've got like 35 tracks lined up. So my creativity isn't slowing down, fortunately, it's what keeps me going. I simply love writing, creating, and constructing a song.

At the moment I am concentrating on writing and releasing my music through Bandcamp. Basically I consider them as demos. The great thing about demos is that they hold a certain promise, they're still unfinished, and the idea is that they can only get better when doing it 'for real', in a studio, not at home. Only in my reality these demos often did not get better in the studio, something was lost along the way and it's hard to fathom exactly what that is. Creative energy, imperfection, the spark of an idea. It's a well known dilemma for many musicians, called 'demo-it'. Once it's released on CD or vinyl, or whatever, that's it. No going back. With Bandcamp I can withdraw the release, replace the songs with better versions or other tracks or even delete them. The downside is that this service is not like Spotify that reaches millions of people as a user friendly digital jukebox. Bandcamp has the appearance of a shop, which of course in fact it is, there's a limit to how many times you can stream a track without paying. But it offers better sound quality than Spotify.

Anyway, I've got this virtual album now on Bandcamp called 'Various Singles', because the songs and instrumentals are less connected style wise than on my previous real albums, and I just posted it to see which way it would go. I do the vocals as well. It is as close as you can get to me as a creator. It's always been very hard to find the right vocalist for my songs anyway, and I am getting more and more

comfortable with my own voice, however limited I may be as a singer. I found that the older you get, the closer you should or can stay to yourself, true to your core. I don't have to prove anything anymore. But I am open for suggestions. I always say: they'd have to be "me", but with a better voice. Of course, those other, better voices can make the song more accessible. Whatever, 'Various Singles' will remain online till December 31st, then it will be removed from Bandcamp. People who bought the tracks can still stream them after that, so they're not really lost.

Before discussing Camel, I wanted to ask about a solo album of yours I like, *Le carnaval des animaux* (1978), an adaptation of Saint-Saëns. Where did the idea for this work and for adapting this piece come from?

*I got to know and play *Le Carnaval des Animaux* when I studied double bass on the music academy, so between 17 and 20 and really enjoyed it, playing 'The Elephant' bass solo. After a couple of years in Kayak I thought it would be nice to rework it in some kind of pop arrangement and turn it into a solo album. I liked doing it, but it's not the highlight of my career, to be honest.*

In 1983, you joined Camel for the album *Stationary Traveller*. How did Andrew Latimer become familiar with you, and what was your initial impression of working outside the Kayak environment?

*Camel and Kayak had the same record label in the US (Janus Records) and the A&R manager used to send us each other's albums. So I got Camel albums, and Andrew got the Kayak albums, and therefore knew me. He asked me, it must have been early 1984, to play the keyboards on the *Stationary Traveller* tour. I also played on the album, but by the time I arrived in London, much of it was already finished. My impression of working outside Kayak in a band was that I finally did not feel the responsibility for everything, and I could just concentrate on my playing. It was Andy's band, and I had no ambition to be anything else than the keyboard player, and not worry about rehearsals, merchandise, transportation, schedules, and all that comes with leading a band like this.*

That album has a conceptual theme about the Cold War. What was your main challenge in terms of arrangement and performance when integrating into Camel's established sound and the compositional style that Andy already envisioned for the band?

Andy must have asked me because he liked my musical approach, and of course it's a matter of trying out what works. The guitar is leading in Camel, while in Kayak it was only one of five instruments, that sometimes took the lead. But I can easily adapt, I don't need to be the leader and if you don't give me any solo, that's fine too. I understand where he's coming from because I was in the same position in Kayak. Andy gave me directions as to what he wanted to hear, and I suppose he was quite happy with that. The only thing I found really hard was that when playing the older stuff like Snow Goose, and so on, I had to think and play like Peter Bardens. But I use different sounds and my playing is much more 'classical' and pianistic, if you want. I tried my best, but on the other hand, if you ask Ton Scherpenzeel, you get Ton Scherpenzeel. Copying someone else doesn't give me much satisfaction, and it's also not my strong point. There's one track on the album I wrote, called After Words. I was sort of fiddling around with the unfinished idea on the piano upstairs in Andrew's home studio. Apparently he and Susan were downstairs and had heard what I was doing and wanted it on the album.

You mentioned that working with Camel allowed you to see things from another perspective, focusing only on playing rather than leading. So I ask: what was it like having Andrew Latimer as a leader? He seems like such a calm, patient person—a boss any musician would love to have...

Andrew as a person (and leader) is calm and patient, indeed. And there's a bit of melancholy too, which you can hear in his music, and I can relate to that as it's also in mine. But he can also be very persistent and determined, which I can appreciate, and is necessary if you're the leader of a band. And I never forgot that Camel is his baby, not mine. I was a band member, but a guest as well.

You continued to play sporadically with Camel live at certain shows. With the band, did you have a favorite song to play live?

I did three European tours, so that was a bit more than sporadically. My role in the band ended because I do not fly. I can't expect Andrew to use other keyboard players on every other continent, just because of me. And with Peter Jones, Camel had an extraordinary musician on board. So, that's it. We still have contact every now and then. My favorite song live was Long Goodbyes. That could have been a Kayak track, so it felt really comfortable.

Speaking of emblematic songs: if you were to select two tracks from Kayak, Camel, and your solo records that most represent you as a musician, which ones would they be?

That's a hard one. Selecting only two would almost eliminate the other 200 because they represent me as well. I will rationally choose one from the early period (1972-1981), If This Is Your Welcome, and from the latest period (2000-2025) Larger Than Life. As for Camel, I'd say indeed Long Goodbyes and Sasquatch. Solo: Heart Of The Universe (1984) and River To The Sea (2021). The latter has an unfortunate title- it has nothing whatsoever to do with that terrible Hamas slogan. That connection makes me very sad.

If you could define your style as a composer in one phrase or word, what would it be?

Eclectic but still very recognizable. I can not escape myself. Oops, that's two phrases. Thank you for your thoughtful and well informed questions!

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