

Robert Lamm: Chicago and Other Places

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The band Chicago has always boasted multiple singer/songwriters—that's one reason they've been able to generate so many memorable hits during their 38-year career. But the man most responsible for the songs that put the group on the map is keyboardist/vocalist Robert Lamm, who wrote such classics as "Beginnings," "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?" and "Saturday in the Park."

"PEOPLE HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH I APPRECIATE IT WHEN THEY TELL ME how much those songs have meant in their lives," says Lamm. "That's always been hard to grasp for me. But I do know that I love doing what I do, and I'm lucky to be able to have done it for so long. And I'm still engaged in the exploration and discovery that is songwriting."

Brooklyn-born Lamm relocated to Chicago as a teen, where he studied classical music while also playing in bands. "By the time Chicago formed, I was a total Beatles kid," he recalls. "Before that, I'd played electric piano and organ in R&B bands." These influences were front-and-center on Chicago's early albums, which included ambitious programmatic suites, R&B-flavored vocalizing, and hard-driving rockers like Lamm's own "25 or 6 to 4."

But the band's style changed, as did musical fashion. After 10 or so albums, Chicago veered away from its progressive roots in favor of smooth power ballads, often written and produced by pop mastermind David Foster and sung by bassist Peter Cetera. Lamm gradually receded into a supporting role.

Did Lamm regret the change of direction? "I hate to use the word regret," he replies. "I certainly would have been happier had the band chosen to be more adventurous. But if we had, I don't think there would be a band. Given the circumstances we've had to deal with in the last 25 years of our career, I don't think we had any other choice if we wanted to continue. But once the band made concessions in what we recorded, I became less interested in writing in that manner."

Lamm says a turning point came during a meeting with the band's manager. "I asked him flat-out, 'Can you envision my style of songwriting ever being the main direction of any future Chicago albums? Or my voice being the voice on any songs that get to radio?' And he said, 'No, I really don't.' So I went directly home and started writing for myself."

In the ensuing years, Lamm created four solo albums, most recently 2003's *Subtlety and Passion*. While they've never sold as astronomically as some Chicago discs, they are beloved by many of the group's fans, some of whom insist the Lamm records are closer to the original sound and spirit of Chicago than many of the group's own releases. Says Lamm, "Those solo albums have been as necessary to me as life itself."

In one regard, Lamm's attitudes have changed little over the years. He loathes being bogged down by technology. "I've hated manuals since the '70s," he says. "Who has time for that stuff? I only read enough to get up and running."

But the last time Lamm went on tour, he found himself violating his own "keep it simple" policy. "I had a very cumbersome setup," he recalls. "Lots of different keyboards running through big racks of gear. Our keyboard tech, Mark Konrad, was holding everything together with wire and chewing gum. He told me I could get one keyboard that would do it all for me, so I went and played the Yamaha Motif. I was very impressed by the onboard sounds and the various cards you can add. I love the action, because I always play weighted keyboards. I realized the Motif could do everything that's required in the live version of Chicago, so now it's the only keyboard I use with the band. Even when I'm running around stage with the wireless link I use, it's wired right through the Motif."

Chicago will be hitting the road soon promoting the upcoming Chicago XXX, the group's first all-new album in twelve years. This time, Lamm plays larger singing and songwriting roles. And he's the vocalist on "Feel," the first single.

Lamm chuckles when asked if there will be a Chicago L in a few years. "I'm not sure," he says. "But I do know that I want to go like Picasso went. I heard he was working on a painting when he keeled over. I want to go like that—writing a song or playing onstage."