

Jeff Lynne,
Bev Bevan,
Roy Wood, and
Richard Tandy
(clockwise from top
left), 1972



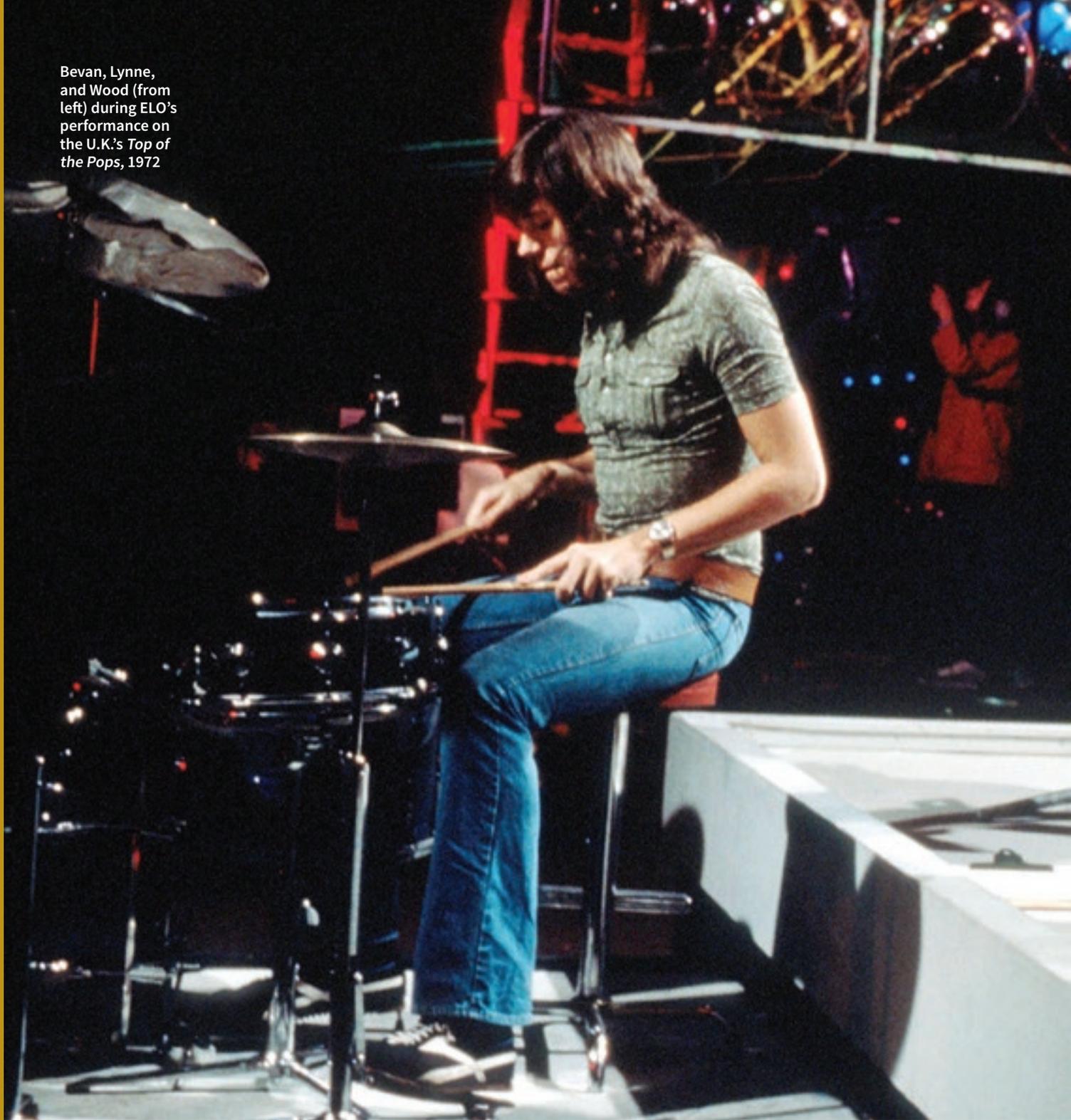
ELO

**THEY ASSIMILATE DIVERSE
MUSICAL ELEMENTS AND EPOCHS
INTO A SEAMLESS POP WHOLE.**

BY PARKE PUTERBAUGH

Imagine a marriage of tuneful, rocking pop songs with instruments from the symphonic realm, and you've got the blueprint for what made ELO one of the most popular groups of the 1970s and beyond. Jeff Lynne, ELO's vocalist, guitarist, songwriter, cofounder, and frontman, conceived of a rarefied musical sphere in which cellos coexisted with guitars, and where classically tinged progressive rock intersected with hook-filled, radio-friendly pop. The result: ELO's boundary-breaking approach to rock that resonated with a global audience, both as a pop singles act and as album-oriented rockers with deep-track appeal. ELO can variously be described as a Beatles-esque pop band, a classic rock band, a classical-rock band, and an act whose sprightliest hits filled dance floors.

Bevan, Lynne, and Wood (from left) during ELO's performance on the U.K.'s *Top of the Pops*, 1972



It takes a rare talent to achieve the success Lynne has had with a band that included two cellos and a violin along with a conventional array of guitar, keyboards, bass, and drums: ELO landed twenty songs in the U.S. Top Forty, and twenty-seven on the charts in their British homeland. They have sold more than fifty million albums worldwide, with nine gold or platinum albums in the U.S. At their height, they filled arenas and stadiums, touring with one of the era's most eye-popping props – a glowing, sixty-foot-wide fiberglass-and-aluminum spaceship.

ELO's magic came primarily from Lynne's own head. Reserved and low-key, Lynne wasn't especially drawn to the spotlight but had been drawn to pop songs, musical instruments, and recording equipment since childhood. When the Birmingham, England-born lad showed a burgeoning interest in music, his father bought him a cheap acoustic guitar. The Birmingham rock scene of the early sixties was greatly overshadowed by those in Liver-

pool and London, but a few of the local "Brum Beat" bands – notably the Moody Blues and the Spencer Davis Group – made significant impact beyond the city's borders. In 1966, after stints in the Andicaps and the Chads, Lynne joined Birmingham's popular Mike Sheridan and the Nightriders, replacing local guitarist Roy Wood, soon to be his co-conspirator in the creation of Electric Light Orchestra. Under Lynne's direction, the Nightriders rechristened themselves the Idle Race, a more fitting handle for the mushrooming psychedelic age – and the ELO song "Nightrider," from *Face the Music* (1975), makes a titular nod to these origins.

Meanwhile, in the Move, Roy Wood and phenomenal drummer Bev Bevan (who would be the percussive backbone of ELO) were taking the humming London underground scene by storm. The Move debuted in 1967 with "Night of Fear," whose prominent quote from Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" foreshadowed Electric Light Orchestra's classical-rock fusion. Though suc-



cess in the U.S. proved elusive, the Move racked up a string of Top Ten U.K. hits, the last of which, the chart-topping “Blackberry Way,” was demoed by Wood at Lynne’s studio in his parents’ Birmingham home.

Though the Idle Race didn’t achieve the Move’s level of success, Jeff Lynne’s four years with the group furthered his songwriting evolution and studio know-how. The band’s self-titled second album (1969) marked Lynne’s first formal credit as producer. His endearingly eccentric and eclectic songs with the band, which included the occasional orchestrated arrangement, pointed toward his future adventures with ELO.

Lynne and Wood were already brainstorming “a band with strings” by this time. Knocked out by the Beatles’ heavily orchestrated “Strawberry Fields Forever” and “I Am the Walrus,” they wanted to not only record weighty, symphonic rock pieces but also perform them live. Instead of augmenting studio sessions with hired musicians, they planned to hire string and

wind players to be actual members of the band. A year after Wood originally asked Lynne to join the Move, Lynne agreed in 1970 – primarily motivated to pursue the oft-discussed orchestral-rock project. Over the next two years, the Electric Light Orchestra geared up while the Move gradually wound down. Both were then trios comprised of multi-instrumentalists Wood and Lynne, and drummer Bevan. Wood and Lynne split lead vocals, songwriting, and production.

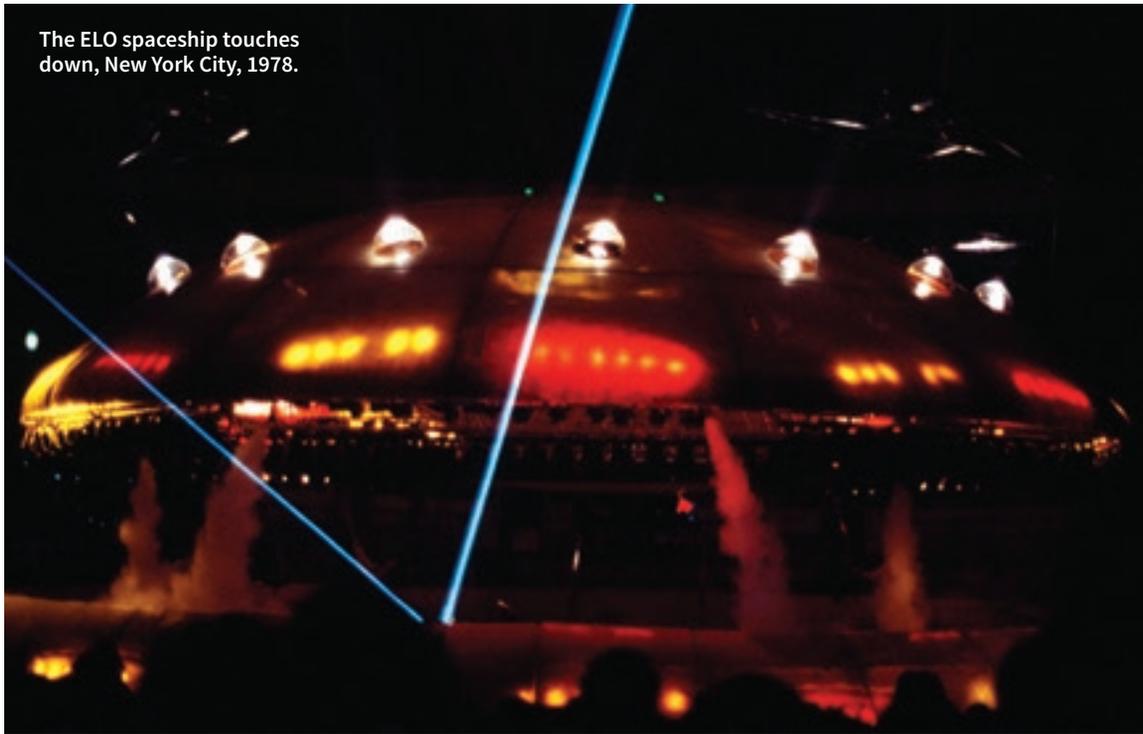
This was a formidable pair of musical visionaries, locking heads and, at times, horns. The resulting Move and ELO records from that period were deep, dense, and often precociously brilliant, starting with the Move’s single “Brontosaurus,” as heavy as its title, and proceeding to the albums *Looking On* and *Message From the Country*. Meanwhile, the trio labored for a year on the first Electric Light Orchestra album, self-titled in England but released as *No Answer* in America. The first ELO single, Lynne’s “10538 Over-



FROM TOP Jeff Lynne in the studio, working on *ELO II*; ELO onstage with cellos and violin, Los Angeles, 1978.



The ELO spaceship touches down, New York City, 1978.



ture,” reached the U.K. Top Ten in 1972. Its thick, grandiose arrangement included multiple overdubs of Wood’s cello parts to complement Lynne’s heavy guitar riffing. A proper band was formed for touring, including Birmingham native Richard Tandy on bass. ELO tested the waters as a live act, initially running into the problem of miking strings, which produced terrible feedback. They solved the problem with better pickups.

Surprisingly, as they began to prepare for the next album, Wood left. In the push and pull of creative work, perhaps this particular kitchen couldn’t accommodate two such highly motivated, talented chefs, though their friendship remained intact. Wood went on to continued success in Britain with his new band Wizzard (which had Number One hits there with “See My Baby Jive” and “Angel Fingers”) and various solo projects, including *Boulders*, a cult favorite.

Lynne carried on as ELO’s uncontested leader. The second album, *ELO II*, found Lynne and Bevan joined by bassist Michael De Albuquerque, violinist Wilf Gibson, and cellists Mike Edwards and Colin Walker, with Richard Tandy now handling keyboards. Tandy still serves alongside Lynne as a multi-instrumentalist, co-orchestrator, and valued musical partner. *ELO II* was the group’s most self-consciously “progressive” album, a musical adventure consisting of five extended, labyrinthine compositions. It gave ELO their first charting U.S. single, a spirited reworking of Chuck Berry’s “Roll Over Beethoven.” Lynne’s arrangement incorporated snatches of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony into a bona fide fusion of rock and classical music.

With *On the Third Day*, the classic ELO sound began to take shape: a more concise, song-oriented approach, but founded on Lynne’s notion of a rock-band-with-strings. The album ranged from a pair of rocking, string-driven hits (“Showdown” and “Ma-Ma-Ma Belle”) to the classical gas of ELO’s stomping assault on Grieg’s “In the Hall of the Mountain King.” Notably, this was ELO’s second album of 1973. The group was just warming up.

The next four years saw a procession of albums that defined ELO’s sound and cemented its legacy: *Eldorado* (1974), *Face the Music* (1975), *A New World Record* (1976), and their double-album zenith, *Out of the Blue* (1977). “I’ve always loved classic rock-pop with melo-

dies that take you somewhere,” Lynne explained of his magic formula. “I’m interested in harmonies and the tension you get from chord changes.”

The definitive ELO lineup was forged during this remarkable run of albums: Lynne, Bevan, and Tandy were joined by bassist Kelly Groucutt, violinist Mik Kaminski, and cellists Hugh McDowell and Melvyn Gale. *Eldorado* was subtitled “A Symphony by the Electric Light Orchestra,” and it explored the theme of a loner escaping into a dream world, accompanied by the exquisite strains of a full orchestra. *Face the Music* gave ELO its first platinum album and a Top Ten hit in “Evil Woman,” driven by a bouncy, disco-ish rhythm and Richard Tandy’s percolating clavinet. The atmospheric “Strange Magic,” with its swooping strings and yearning guitar, charted nearly as high. The album track “One Summer Dream” endures as one of Lynne’s most beguiling, evocative compositions.

A New World Record, a title inspired by the 1976 Olympics, might just be ELO’s single-album apotheosis. It’s a high-spirited, energetic piece of work that embeds stringed instruments in a rock matrix in a compelling way. It added another trio of hits (“Telephone Line,” “Livin’ Thing,” “Do Ya”) to ELO’s canon and furthered their appeal as a top concert attraction in America. On-stage, ELO were a sight to behold: an amusing gaggle of colorfully attired performers attacking the music with gusto – especially the cellists, who handled their symphonic instruments with frenetic abandon.

Out of the Blue followed, vaulting ELO into the stratosphere much like the space station depicted on the cover. Lynne, now ensconced in the proverbial “zone,” wrote the seventeen-track double album in a two-week flurry of songwriting that kicked off with the sunny-weather-inspired “Mr. Blue Sky.” Between ELO’s touring juggernaut and an unabated stream of hits, including “Sweet Talkin’ Woman” and “Turn to Stone,” the band rose to the top of the rockpile. By the late seventies, ELO were among the biggest – and, at times, arguably *the* biggest – rock group in the world. *Discovery*, released in 1979, closed out the decade with the biggest hit yet, “Don’t Bring Me Down,” which reached Number Four.

But as the ELO song without strings, “Don’t Bring Me Down” heralded the end of an era. The times, and

Lynne's mind, were changing: He was sick of touring and getting tired of strings. The band's frantic pace of releasing ten albums in ten years and constant road work was coming to an end. The band was shrinking as well, as Lynne whittled down his supporting cast to a core of Tandy, Bevan, and Groucutt. Only three-and-a-half ELO albums – *Time*, *Secret Messages*, *Balance of Power*, and one side of the *Xanadu* film soundtrack – were released in the eighties. Each was worthy in its own way, generating a hit or two, but did not produce the sustained fire that had powered ELO through the previous decade.

By 1986, having met all contractual requirements for ELO, Lynne retired the band name for fifteen years. He transitioned into the role of producer and collaborator for such luminaries as Tom Petty (*Full Moon Fever*), Roy Orbison (*Mystery Girl*), and George Harrison (*Cloud Nine*). In 1988, Harrison and Lynne enjoined Petty, Bob Dylan, and Orbison to form a casual garage-band supergroup. Known as the Traveling Wilburys, they made two well-received albums. In 1994, Lynne oversaw sessions for two new tracks, based on unfinished John Lennon demos, for the briefly reconvened surviving Beatles. He subsequently produced much of Paul McCartney's *Flaming Pie*, as well as a few tracks for Ringo Starr's *Time Takes Time*.

Lynne returned to the ELO moniker for *Zoom* in 2001, although this was essentially a solo album. The same held true for *Lost in the Universe* in 2013 – credited to Jeff Lynne's ELO. Surprisingly, ELO proved to be a phoenix as a live act in September 2014, performing before fifty thousand enthusiastic fans in London's Hyde Park. The twenty-first-century iteration of ELO also features Richard Tandy, whom Lynne calls "my lifetime mate in that band."

Tonight, the induction of ELO serves as acknowledgment of the group's stature as classic-rock innovators with a classical twist. It's also a testament to Jeff Lynne's sustained ability – as a songwriter, producer, arranger, and musician – to assimilate diverse musical elements and epochs into a seamless pop whole. His is a rare skill indeed.

In a note for the ELO box set *Afterglow*, Lynne stated, "Making records has always been such a great pleasure for me . . . Sometimes I wish I knew as much about making records as I think I do."

While the modesty is becoming, it can be fairly argued that, based on fifty years of evidence, few people on the planet know as much about making records as Jeff Lynne. Case closed.

Selected Discography



NO ANSWER
United Artists 1972



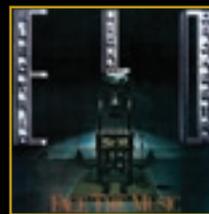
ELO II
United Artists 1973



ON THE THIRD DAY
United Artists 1973



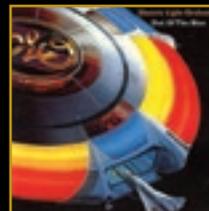
ELDORADO
United Artists 1974



FACE THE MUSIC
United Artists 1975



A NEW WORLD RECORD
Jet 1976



OUT OF THE BLUE
Jet 1977



ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE
Columbia 2015

“Making records has always been **such a great pleasure** for me. . . . Sometimes I wish I knew as much about making records as I think I do.”



Long-burning: Lynne fronts ELO at the U.K.'s TFI Friday, 2015