



# Peter Gabriel

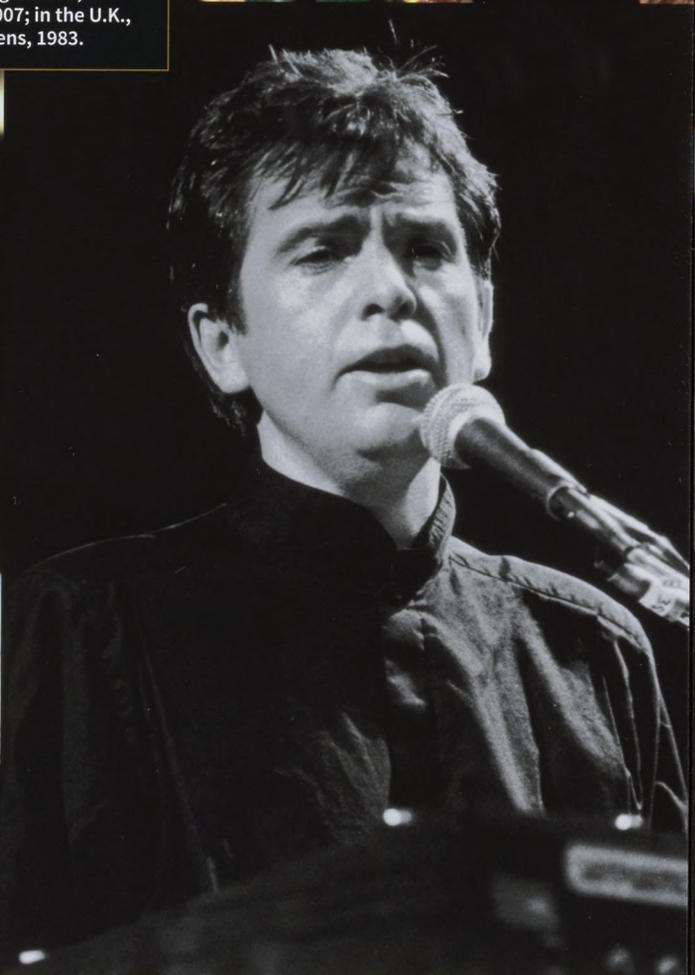
BY WILL HERMES

The multifaceted performer has spent nearly forty years as a solo artist and music innovator.

THERE HAVE BEEN MANY PETER GABRIELS: THE PROG rocker who steered the cosmos-minded genre toward Earth; the semi-new waver more focused on empathic storytelling and musical innovation than fashion or attitude; the Top Forty hitmaker ambivalent about the spotlight; the global activist whose Real World label and collaborations introduced pivotal non-Western acts to new audiences; the elder statesman inspiring a new generation of singer-songwriters. ✨ So his second induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, as a solo act this time – his first, in 2010, was as cofounder of the prog-pop juggernaut Genesis – seems wholly earned. Yet it surprised him, especially since he was a no-show that first time: The ceremony took place two days before the notorious perfectionist began a major tour. “I would’ve gone last time if I had not been about to perform,” Gabriel (b. February 13, 1950) explained. “I just thought, ‘I can’t go. We’d given ourselves very little rehearsal time.’” ✨ “It’s a huge honor,” he said of his inclusions, noting that among numerous Grammys and other awards, this one is distinguished “because it’s more for your body of work than a specific project.” ✨ That body of work began with Genesis, named after the young British band declined the moniker of “Gabriel’s Angels.” They produced their first single (“The Silent Sun”) in the winter of 1968, when Gabriel was 17. In the next seven years, the group released a series of albums that, alongside Pink Floyd, Yes, King Crimson, and others, defined the British progressive-rock movement. Early LPs like *Trespass*, *Foxtrot*, and *Selling England by the Pound* featured extended compositions with ornate instrumentation and themes drawn from Greek mythology (“Fountain of Salmacis”),



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
With Genesis, 1972; masking in 1973; in Amsterdam, 1985; in Rome, 2007; in the U.K., 1987; in Forest Hills, Queens, 1983.





Egyptian history ("Supper's Ready"), Shakespeare ("Cinema Show"), and science fiction ("Watcher of the Skies"). To magnify the music's impact, both artistically and commercially, Gabriel began taking the stage in elaborate costumes and makeup, pioneering a level of theatricality that was then fairly new to rock & roll. He may even have invented stage diving in 1971, after a performance of "The Knife," breaking his leg in the process.

**B**ut for many, Genesis' finest moment was *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, a double-LP concept album whose central character – written mainly by Gabriel – was not a space alien or a gnome, but a Puerto Rican kid from the Bronx named Rael. His main costume for the tour, which debuted in America in late 1974 with a then-cutting-edge stage show involving three projection screens and a thousand slide images, was a simple black leather jacket and blue jeans. It's worth noting that the Ramones, who began playing CBGB that summer, would start work on their debut the following year.

*Lamb* was the story of a man's transformation. "I was trying to give it a street slant, and that was before punk happened," Gabriel told biographer Spencer Bright. "It seemed that prancing around in fairyland was rapidly becoming obsolete."

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Gabriel was undergoing his own transformation at the time, one propelled by his marriage, the birth of his daughter, and his desire to get off the music biz treadmill. ("I didn't leave the band to go solo so much as to stop feeling like a production item," he said.) He played his final gig with Genesis in May 1975, moving to the country with his family to regroup, tend a vegetable garden, and figure out what comes next.

Soon enough, songs were pouring out of him. "I discovered then that I actually love to *write* music, particularly," he said of the period. "That's the thing that I missed the most." Given his taste for "quirky" material, however, it was clear that if he wanted his songs performed, he'd have to do it himself.

The first of his four somewhat perversely self-titled LPs was recorded in late 1976. The songs were his most emotionally potent to date, and they spoke directly of his circumstances. "I was feeling part of the scenery/I walked right out of the machinery," he sang on "Solsbury Hill," named for a landform near his West Country home. On "Here Comes the Flood," he conjured an apocalypse of reckoning – a very literal sea change – of "stranded starfish" with "no place to hide," and of those who "gave their islands to survive."

The musicians he assembled for the LP included fellow traveler Robert Fripp, who had recently disbanded his own prog-rock project, King Crimson,

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**PETER GABRIEL**  
Atco 1977



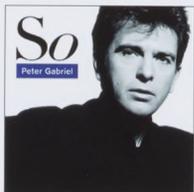
**PETER GABRIEL**  
Atlantic 1978



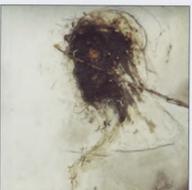
**PETER GABRIEL**  
Mercury/Geffen 1980



**PETER GABRIEL  
(SECURITY)**  
Geffen 1982



**SO**  
Geffen 1986



**PASSION: MUSIC FOR  
THE LAST TEMPTATION  
OF CHRIST**  
Geffen 1989

to chart a new course, and bassist Tony Levin, who would become Gabriel's groove consigliere for much of his career. Both men joined him for a second LP, produced by Fripp (who also produced *Sacred Songs* by this year's inductee Daryl Hall a couple of years later). *Peter Gabriel v 2.0* (1978) featured a powerhouse 21-year-old drummer named Jerry Marotta. Its highlights included "Mother of Violence," a haunting ballad written by Gabriel with his wife, Jill, and featuring beautiful piano by moonlighting E Streeter (and 2014 inductee) Roy Bittan. But it wasn't until Gabriel's third LP that he'd really focus his sound and his band, with Levin and Marotta at its core.

Produced by Steve Lillywhite and engineered by Hugh Padgham, with the indelible melting-face cover art by Hipgnosis, *Peter Gabriel* iteration 3 (1980) was his most fully realized solo record. It introduced signature songs, like the single "Games Without Frontiers" and "Biko," a breathtaking tribute to murdered South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko. It would also, surprisingly, help blueprint the sound of eighties rock through its trailblazing use of what became known as the "gated reverb" drum effect. In search of fresh arrangements, Gabriel decided the record would not use cymbals, and through experimentation – as fate would have it, with pinch-hitting ex-bandmate Phil Collins – the group of musicians and technicians landed on a drum rhythm, played by Collins and run through a gated compressor, that flattened and clipped off the beats. Used on the opening track, "Intruder," the effect was dazzling. Collins would also use it, to greater commercial effect, on his *Face Value* LP (1981), notably on the hit, "In the Air Tonight." The rest is beat-biting history.

But Gabriel's innovations continued, through his groundbreaking work with the Fairlight CMI, an early sampling keyboard, and with digital recording. His fourth album, self-titled elsewhere but released

With Joan Baez, Youssou N'Dour, Sting, Tracy Chapman, and Bruce Springsteen (from left), on the Amnesty International tour, 1988



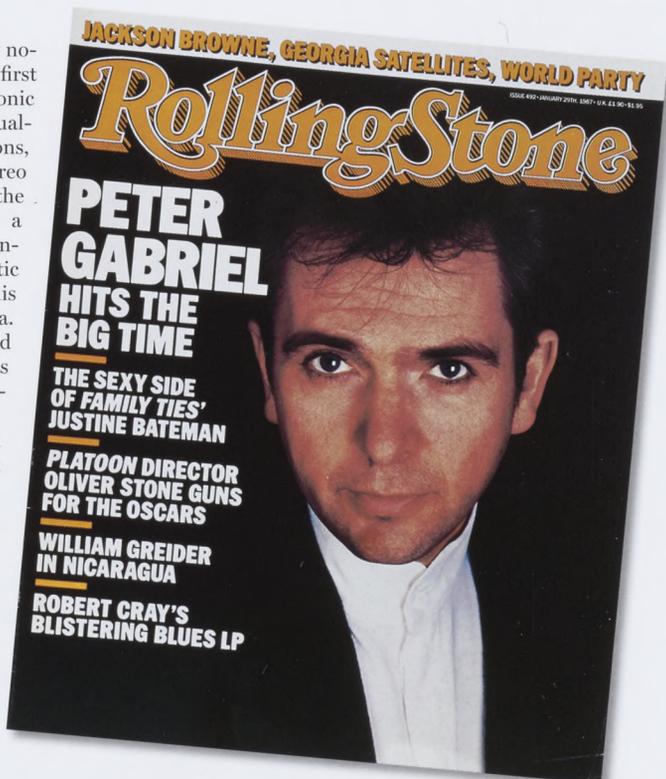
in 1982 as *Security* in the United States by his no-nonsense new label (Geffen), was one of the first to employ fully digital recording – not as sonic shorthand, but as state of the art. The audio quality was astonishing; among other distinctions, it became a go-to demo LP for high-end stereo equipment dealers. The set featured “Shock the Monkey,” Gabriel’s first Top Forty hit, and a song whose video – full of quick-cuts and pantomimed freak-outs – helped set the aesthetic standard for the nascent MTV. And he had his ear to the world beyond England and America. As with his previous record, *Security* explored African music, along with other styles, and was released in an alternate German-language version as *Deutsches Album*.

Gabriel reached his commercial apex with *So* in 1986, which sold more than five million copies in America. Coproduced with Daniel Lanois, it featured the Number One hit “Sledgehammer” – whose eye-popping video is the all-time most-played song clip on MTV – as well as collaborations with Kate Bush (“Don’t Give Up”), Laurie Anderson (“This Is the Picture [Excellent Birds]”), and Senegalese star Youssou N’Dour (“In Your Eyes”). The album made Gabriel one of the biggest names in pop. But megafame was a mixed bag. “It’s a wonderful place to visit and a hellish place to live,” he said of his turn as a Top Forty king.

Gabriel began shifting his attention to projects beyond pop records, with the same broad vision and exacting standards. His culturally polyglot soundtrack for Martin Scorsese’s *The Last Temptation of Christ* (released on the LP *Passion: Music for the Last Temptation of Christ* in 1989) ranks with his greatest work. Its global spirit was furthered with his launch of Real World, a label devoted to curating and presenting international music, along with Real World Studios and the ongoing WOMAD festival. (Among its many accomplishments, Real World helped introduce the powerful qawwali vocal music of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan to rock fans, including Jeff Buckley and Eddie Vedder.)

Gabriel worked closely with Amnesty International, helping spearhead many of their concerts. He co-founded Witness, a nonprofit devoted to enabling the video documentation of human rights abuses around the world. With Brian Eno and Laurie Anderson, he initiated plans for a sort of global-minded, future-forward theme park, which was never realized. Yet Gabriel hasn’t given up on the idea. “You have independent film and independent music, but you don’t have independent theme parks – I think, in a way, Burning Man is as close, probably, as you get,” he said. “I still think there’s room for a lot more of that, and I think there could be a permanent installation.”

Most recently, Gabriel completed a two-part cover song project that has been three years in the making. *Scratch My Back* (2010) featured Gabriel singing compositions by some of his favorite living artists, among them vets like David Bowie, and younger acts like Arcade Fire and Magnetic Fields, all newly arranged for orchestra. The followup, *And I’ll Scratch Yours*, was released in 2013. With many of Gabriel’s greatest songs performed by acts he covered on *Scratch My Back*, it serves as a time-traveling tribute to one of rock’s greatest songwriters, humanitarians, and visionaries – whom we welcome tonight for the second time into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. 🍷



**FROM TOP**

With Bono, 1986; with Nelson Mandela, 2003.

