

Progressive Rock History

By Steven Wheeler

Progressive Rock (also known as prog rock, or simply prog) is a musical genre that was initially developed in the United Kingdom in the late 1960s and had its golden age in the first half of the 1970s. The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time of musical exploration. Young musicians experimented with new musical instruments and incorporated and combined various musical genres in new, unexpected ways.

Early progressive rock mixed rock, blues, classical music, folk, and jazz elements, sometimes under the influence of hallucinogenics for so-called psychedelic music. In addition to these musical influences, progressive rock musicians added other art forms such as literature, theater and innovative graphic design.



Early progressive rock

Although there are different perspectives about the beginning of progressive rock, early pioneers included the Moody Blues, Soft Machine, The Nice, and Pink Floyd. Experimentation by the Beatles, including one of the early uses of mellotron on “Strawberry Fields Forever,” and ambitious song suites for the second half of Abbey Road, was also highly influential.

The Moody Blues released a landmark album titled Days of Future Passed in 1967 that mixed rock and classical music in the form of a symphony orchestra. The original project, as conceived by the Deram record label, involved remaking Dvorak’s New World Symphony, but the Moodies decided to go with their own compositions instead. Another British band called The Nice, led by keyboardist Keith Emerson, put out five albums in the 1960s and 1970, The Thoughts of Emerlist Davjack (1967), Ars Longa Vita Brevis (1968), Everything As Nice As Mother Makes It (1969), Elegy (1970) and The Five Bridges(1970) that fused rock with classical music and jazz elements.

Pink Floyd, founded in 1965, released The Piper at the Gates of Dawn (1967) and A Saucerful of Secrets (1968) where they combined pop and psychedelic rock. With the departure of Syd Barrett and the arrival of guitarist David Gilmour, Pink Floyd steered towards a progressive rock direction, adding extended musical pieces, additional sound experimentation and incorporating electronic effects. Pink Floyd’s progressive era started with Ummagumma (1969) and Atom Heart Mother (1970).

The 1970s

The early 1970s produced some of the most iconic and memorable progressive rock acts of all time. Leading artists in the 1970s encompassed British groups Genesis, Pink Floyd, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, King Crimson, Yes, Gentle Giant, Van der Graaf Generator, Renaissance, Caravan, Jethro Tull, Curved Air, Gong, Camel, Greenslade, Anthony Phillips (former Genesis guitarist), Rick Wakeman (Yes), and Steve Hackett (Genesis).

Progressive rock-era Genesis

Simultaneously, progressive rock sprouted throughout the rest of the world. Italy produced some of the finest acts and one of the most prolific scenes with first rate bands that rivaled the British acts in creativity and quality. The top Italian acts at the time were Premiata Forneria Marconi, Banco Del Mutuo Soccorso (also known as Banco), Celeste, Il Balletto Di Bronzo, Le Orme, Latte e Miele, New Trolls, and Quella Vecchia Locanda.

The UK Scene in the 1970s

A few British record companies played an important role in the development of progressive rock. These were primarily Charisma Records, Manticore Records, Vertigo Records (as well as its parent company, Phillips) and Virgin Records.

Virgin Records was, at the time, a cutting-edge indie label with a deeply adventurous spirit, releasing albums by Mike Oldfield and a large number of experimental, electronic and progressive rock artists from the UK, Germany, France and Finland, including Gong, Faust, Henry Cow, Hatfield and the North, Tangerine Dream, Kevin Coyne, Slapp Happy, Edgar Froese, Robert Wyatt, Comus, David Bedford, Clearlight, Steve Hillage, Wigwam, Pekka Pohjola, and Can.

Meanwhile, Manticore Records, a record label developed by Emerson, Lake & Palmer's production company, released albums by Emerson Lake and Palmer, singer-songwriter Peter Sinfield and superb Italian bands Premiata Forneria Marconi and Banco.

Zeuhl in France

Magma

A French band called Magma astonished the progressive music world with its powerful mix of rock, jazz, operatic vocals, and contemporary classical music. The band used lyrics written in a rare new language called Kobaian that was constructed by its founder, drummer, composer and vocalist Christian Vander.

Magma became a popular underground act and generated a new sub-genre within progressive rock called Zeuhl that spawned acts created by former members and new bands inspired by Magma.

The international scene

Aside from the UK and Italy, other nations produced significant progressive rock acts:

Argentina: Alas, Arco Iris, Bubu, Crucis, Espiritu, MIA

Australia: Sebastian Hardie, Mario Millo, Windchase

Austria: Eela Craig, Isaiah, Paternoster

Belgium: Cos, Isopoda, Machiavel, Univers Zero

Brazil: Os Mutantes and O Terco

Canada: Et Cetera, FM, Harmonium and Maneige

East Germany: Stern-Combo Meißen

Finland: Pekka Pohjola, Wigwam

France: Ange, Atoll, and Pulsar

Germany: Anyone's Daughter, Birth Control, Eloy, Grobschnitt, Hoelderlin, Nektar, Pell Mell and Triumvirat

Greece: Aphrodite's Child

Japan: Shingetsu, Bi Kyo Ran, Ain Soph, Magical Power Mako, Kenso and Quaser

Netherlands: Alquin, Earth and Fire, Focus, Finch, Kayak, Lady Lake, Supersister, Trace

New Zealand: Ragnarok

Poland: SBB and Budka Suflera

Romania: Sfinx

Spain: Alameda, Atila, Azahar, Bloque, Cai, Canarias, Cotó en Pel, Crack, Fusioon, Gotic, Granada, Guadalquivir, Gualberto, Khorus, Iceberg, Imán, Mantra

Sweden: Dice

USA: Ethos, Fireballet, Happy the Man, Kansas, Todd Rundgren's Utopia, Starcastle

Fantasy Artwork

The cover artwork of many LPs of the era reflected an interest in fantasy and science fiction. Roger Dean's designs fascinated fans with colorful dreamlike album covers for artists such as Yes, Gentle Giant and Greenslade, and even African music group Osibissa.

Swiss surrealist artist H.R. Giger made very few album covers during his lifetime. Two of his cover designs were made for progressive rock acts: Brain Salad Surgery (1973) by Emerson Lake & Palmer and Attahk (1978) by French band Magma.

The Influence of Electronic instruments Synthesizer pioneer Don Buchla

The arrival of new technical gear and electronic musical instruments played an essential role in the development of progressive rock. Early synthesizers were originally enormous modular devices that were practically impossible to carry on tours.

Companies like Moog and ARP miniaturized synthesizers and made them portable and affordable. Progressive rock bands, who would normally not be able to afford a real orchestra, were able to use orchestral effects with the aid of string synthesizers and especially the mellotron.

The mellotron is perhaps the most cherished instrument for many progressive rock enthusiasts and musicians. Its synthetic orchestral, flute and choral sounds played, and still plays, a key role in authentic progressive rock music. Musicians who used mellotrons, Moog synthesizers and other keyboards included Keith Emerson (The Nice, ELP), Rick Wakeman (Yes), Tony Banks (Genesis), David Sinclair, Thijs van Leer (Focus), Rick Van Der Linden, Vittorio Nocenzi (Banco), Vangelis and Patrick Moraz.

New electric guitars and effect pedals and other devices added a wide spectrum of new sounds and possibilities for guitarists and bass players.

Late 1970s Decadence

Several factors contributed to the decadence of progressive rock in the late 1970s. Some of the leading groups suffered musical transformations and notorious desertions. When Genesis lost vocalist Peter Gabriel and guitarist Steve Hackett, it changed direction, shifting to pop, and became a chart topping band. Another iconic act, Yes, eliminated its captivating long suites and replaced them with radio friendly Adult Oriented Rock (AOR).

Coincidentally, the first Yes album to not feature at least one long suite since before The Yes Album featured a torn-apart tomato across its cover (Tormato). Did that torn-apart tomato symbolize how their majestic ambition got torn apart?

After making legendary progressive albums, Emerson, Lake and Palmer drifted towards melodic rock and AOR on albums like Love Beach. Similar cases happened in other countries. One of the most bizarre changes happened to Italian band New Trolls. It

switched from classical music-influenced progressive rock to Bee Gees-style disco and pop in the late 1970s, disconcerting its fans.

The pressure from record companies had a major influence in the decline of progressive rock. Record companies wanted pop hits and insisted on making the music more commercial. Radio stations also played a key role. The restrictive formats of commercial FM radio did not contemplate extensive ten, twenty or thirty minute tracks. Spanish progressive rock band Crash mentioned at the time how one of their most ambitious long pieces was sliced into four or five different tracks by their record company.

Pop music critics in the UK, USA and other countries frequently launched vicious attacks against progressive rock, calling it pompous, self-indulgent and bombastic. Many of these critics confused progressive rock with the highly commercial AOR (Adult Oriented Rock) format.

Progressive Rock Confusion

One of the biggest problems with progressive rock is the fact that many acts changed genre throughout their career. Poorly informed music critics and music fans were not aware that certain recordings in a band's career were not progressive rock.

Radio friendly groups such as Styx, Asia, Foreigner, Saga, Toto and Journey were categorized by the pop music media as progressive rock when they were clearly not, even if the line-ups included former progressive rock musicians. For example, Asia had fantasy-style covers and featured prominent musicians from some of the finest progressive rock groups, such as Yes, King Crimson, Emerson Lake and Palmer and hard rock band Uriah Heep. However, all their musical pieces were short pop songs intended for commercial radio. Unfortunately many pop critics regarded as progressive rock any band that used a large number of keyboards.

Rock bands like Argent, Manfred Mann's Earth Band and Rush had a progressive rock phase in their career and made progressive rock albums, but the rest of their discography was clearly not progressive rock.

The Progressive Rock Underground: Treasure Hunters

While it seemed like progressive rock was on its way out in the late 1970s, many fans across the globe were not ready to give up. This became the period of collectors and mail order companies. The word got around that there were progressive rock recordings worldwide and music fans found ways to acquire LPs through travel, friends and pen pals. Registered postal packages circulated worldwide, bringing cherished treasures to collectors. For example, the album by Cuban progressive rock band Sintesis 'En Busca De Una Nueva Flor' was very hard to get directly from Cuba, but a licensing deal in Mexico made it available to international audiences.

Japanese collectors and specialty stores were specially good at discovering progressive rock from all corners of the world. Sometimes they introduced rare albums by European bands to Europeans themselves.

Despite the difficulties, there were still musicians who braved the odds and continued to perform progressive rock. One of the finest British progressive rock bands of the 1970s, UK, was formed during that period. The group included singer and bassist John Wetton (King Crimson); masterful drummer Bill Bruford (Yes); virtuoso keyboardist and violinist Eddie Jobson (Frank Zappa); and groundbreaking guitarist Allan Holdsworth (Gong).

The 1980s, the Renaissance and Neoprog Era

In the 1980s, progressive rock experienced a comeback. Some critics and fans call it the Neoprog era. The progressive rock renaissance took place in many nations during the 1980s, although, once more, it was UK bands that initially re-popularized the genre. The most influential was Marillion, a group inspired by early Genesis. Other popular acts included IQ, Pendragon, Pallas, The Enid and Twelfth Night. Additional British progressive rock bands of the era include Arena, Enchant, Haze, Final Conflict/FC, Fish, Dagaband, Galahad, Jadis, Janygium, Landmarq, Mach One, Mindgames, Clive Nolan, Quasar, Shadowland and Sylvan.

Japanese Powerhouse

Japan went from an importer of international progressive rock to an explosion of first rate bands influenced by the 1970s pioneers. Leading Japanese acts from the 1980s include Asturias, Gerard, Kenso, Mr. Sirius, Negasphere, Outer Limits and Vermilion Sands.

Explosion of the Progressive Rock Indie Scene

Music enthusiasts turned their interest in progressive rock into a profession. Specialized magazines and fanzines sprouted in various parts of the world. Naohiro Yamazaki's Marquee (Japan) was one of the most visible, with beautiful color covers and extensive information about the current and past progressive rock scene. Marquee also became an importer of international progressive rock, including rare recordings from all parts of the world.

In the United States, Archie Patterson's Eurock magazine was a must read. The English-language publication specialized in progressive rock and other "progressive" styles like electronica and avant-garde music. Eurock also had an impressive mail order service that carried some of the best releases from numerous countries. Other American catalogs with an admirable collection included ZNR and Wayside Music.

In Europe, French progressive rock collectors Bernard Gueffier and Francis Grosse set on a mission to hunt down and reissue many of the international progressive rock gems that were out of print, while at the same time, they started to release recordings by new acts as

well as new recordings by veterans. The name of their company was Musea and it has grown to be one of the largest progressive rock labels in the world. Grosse and Gueffier also wrote and published a bilingual book (French/English) titled “La discographie alphabétique du rock français” in 1984. The discography featured an extensive list of French rock bands and solo artists from the 1970s and early 1980s that included a large number of progressive rock and electronic music acts.

The Exposure progressive rock series gave opportunities to new bands through a collection of progressive rock samplers that included Exposure (No Man’s Land, 1986), the 2-LP Double Exposure (No Man’s Land, 1987) and Exposure 88 (Andraea crt, 1988). The people behind this project were British musician Steven Wilson (who later formed Porcupine Tree) and Spanish music journalist and record producer Angel Romero. For the third project of the series, Exposure 88, Dutchman Peter Lindenbergh joined Steven and Angel.

New progressive bands from the 1980s that appeared in the Exposure series included:

UK: Abe Ganz, Coltfoot, Borag Thungg, No Man is an Island Except the Isle of Man, Twice Bitten, Comedy of Errors, The Bond, Mazlyn Jones, No Man Is an Island, Haze, Plenty, Wierdstone, Rog Patterson.

Spain: Pharaon, Aletsesoida, Heimdall, Galadriel, Harnakis, Rivendel.

Italy: Airspeed, Notturmo Concertante, Barrock, Asgard

Netherlands: Egdon Heath, Odysdice, The Last Detail

Sweden: Isildurs Bane

Germany: Rousseau

The 1990s, the Third Generation

Although some of the second generation progressive bands from the 1980s continued into the 1990s, the new decade was characterized by a whole new wave of progressive rock bands. In the UK, the influential Ozric Tentacles released its first album. They are an unconventional act, a sort of progressive psychedelic rock jam band that has had numerous changes in its line-up, with electronic and world music elements. Ozric Tentacles was the nursery for numerous projects that included other space rock bands and electronica acts.

In the 1990s, Sweden became a progressive rock powerhouse, with some of the finest third generations acts, such as Änglagård, The Flower Kings and Anekdoten.

Other essential acts from the era include Big Big Train (UK), the highly influential Spock's Beard (USA), Finisterre (Italy), Höstsonaten (Italy), IZZ (USA), Echolyn (USA), and Iluvatar (USA).

Meanwhile, consolidated bands from previous decades continued releasing high quality progressive rock albums: Kenso (Japan), IQ (UK), Ain Soph (Japan), Djam Karet (USA), Miriodor (Canada), Galadriel (Spain), Pendragon (UK), Glass Hammer (USA), Eris Pluvia (Italy), Cast (Mexico), Amarok (Spain).

The first annual North East Art Rock Festival (NEARfest), one of the most iconic progressive rock festivals in North America, took place in 1999 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Prog Metal, Confusion Continues

Confusion in terms of what is and what's not progressive rock still maligned progressive rock. While in the 1970s and 1980s Adult/Album Oriented Rock (AOR) was frequently confused with progressive rock, in the 1990s, heavy metal was thrown into the mix. Marketers, labels, and music writers started including heavy metal acts under the category of progressive rock and called it prog metal. Additionally, the progressive rock genre name was also shortened by some and it became known as prog rock or simply prog.

The 2000-2010 Era

During the first decade of the 2000s, several bands consolidated their positions as leading progressive rock acts, including supergroup Transatlantic (Europe-USA), and Spock's Beard (USA), as well as Glass Hammer (USA). Other groups changed direction. Porcupine Tree (UK) moved away from psychedelic progressive rock and embraced hard rock and even blistering metal riffs.

Progressive rock legends from the 1970s returned. Yes reformed without a keyboardist and stylistically chose to pursue highly creative progressive rock with the release of *Magnification*, which featured a symphony orchestra instead of keyboards.

Van der Graaf Generator, another cherished band from 1970s, reunited and returned with a double album titled *Present*.

Kostarev Group, from Russia, proved to be one of the most exciting new acts, combining classic progressive rock with fusion and electronics.

Prog Rock Revisionism

Some music critics and record labels have cast a really wide net to include numerous artists and genres in the progressive rock category. This is the case of quite a few heavy metal bands who were labeled 'progressive.' In some circles the term 'progressive metal'

is used, although most of these bands are heavy metal acts, rather than progressive rock. Heavy metal bands that some have reclassified as progressive rock include Dream Theater, Queensrÿche and Fates Warning.

A popular band that is frequently miscategorized is Rush. Although they ventured into progressive rock in two albums and frequently recorded long pieces, Rush was and is essentially a hard rock band. Rush was reclassified by some critics as progressive rock. This has created confusion with some music fans and young musicians who believe that any hard rock band influenced by Rush is automatically performing progressive rock. Another frequent problem that adds to confusion are bands that change musical genre, like the previously mentioned Genesis, Yes and ELP. Other acts that frequently get mistakenly categorized as progressive rock include Asia (AOR), Supertramp (pop-rock), Styx (melodic pop-rock), Circa (AOR), and Saga (AOR).

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