

The background is a painting. It features a landscape with a path that winds through a valley. The path is illuminated with a golden light, suggesting a spiritual journey. In the foreground, there is a white cup and saucer, and a book with the title 'TEACHINGS OF THE BUDDHA' visible. In the upper right, there is a portrait of a deity with a crown and a serene expression. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, greens, and golds, creating a mystical and ethereal atmosphere.

# Progressive Rock Reconsidered

Edited by  
**Kevin Holm-Hudson**

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Rock  
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**Kevin Holm-Hudson**

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
Kevin Holm-Hudson	
Part 1. History and Context	
1. Progressive Rock and the Inversion of Musical Values	21
John J. Sheinbaum	
2. The “American Metaphysical Circus” of Joseph Byrd’s United States of America	43
Kevin Holm-Hudson	
Part 2. Analytical Perspectives	
3. Pink Floyd’s “Careful with That Axe, Eugene”: Toward a Theory of Textural Rhythm in Early Progressive Rock	65
John S. Cotner	
4. Progressive Rock As Text: The Lyrics of Roger Waters	91
Deena Weinstein	
5. A Promise Deferred: Multiply Directed Time and Thematic Transformation in Emerson Lake and Palmer’s “Trilogy”	111
Kevin Holm-Hudson	
6. King Crimson’s <i>Larks’ Tongues in Aspic</i> : A Case of Convergent Evolution	121
Gregory Karl	

7.	<b>Tales of Change within the Sound: Form, Lyrics, and Philosophy in the Music of Yes</b> Jennifer Rycenga	143
8.	<b>Precarious Pleasures: Situating “Close to the Edge” in Conflicting Male Desires</b> Dirk von der Horst	167
9.	<b>“Let Them All Make Their Own Music”: Individualism, Rush, and the Progressive / Hard Rock Alloy, 1976–77</b> Durrell S. Bowman	183
<p>Part 3. “Don’t Dare Call Us ‘Progressive’”: “Post-Prog” and Other Legacies</p>		
10.	<b>Somebody Is Digging My Bones: King Crimson’s “Dinosaur” as (Post)Progressive Historiography</b> Brian Robison	221
11.	<b>How Alternative Turned Progressive: The Strange Case of Math Rock</b> Theo Cateforis	243
	<b>Notes on Contributors</b>	261
	<b>Index</b>	265

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# Introduction

Kevin Holm-Hudson

At this writing, rock music has had a history of nearly half a century—longer if one considers the roots of rock and roll to extend farther back into the work of certain rhythm and blues or country artists. Over the last twenty years, rock's history has become a part of academic study, attracting the attention of researchers in musicology, music theory, gender studies, communications, and social sciences, among other fields. While such diverse perspectives have enriched the study of most genres of popular music, progressive rock has until now been explored primarily by music theorists, musicologists, and fans (who have often lacked a necessary critical perspective). Notable earlier studies of progressive rock—including Bill Martin's *Listening to the Future* and Edward Macan's *Rocking the Classics*—have been written from a largely musicological perspective, and—in the case of Macan's study—have focused exclusively on British progressive rock bands. This book brings together—for comparison and contrast—the work of a variety of authors from a wide range of academic disciplines, to reconsider progressive rock in a way that transcends commonly held stereotypes of the genre. The authors in *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* assume a broader view, one that incorporates textual analysis, sociology, journalism, gender studies, and religious studies as well as hermeneutic study of “the music itself.”

From 1969 to about 1977, progressive rock—a style of self-consciously complex rock often associated with prominent keyboards, complex metric shifts, fantastic (often mythological or metaphysical) lyrics, and an emphasis on flashy virtuosity—dominated FM radio and rock album charts. When punk became an ascendant force in popular culture in 1976–77, the excesses and high-cultural pretensions of progressive rock made it an easy target, hastening its demise. Today progressive rock is relegated to a footnote in most rock histories and considered a symptom of 1970s excess rather than a genre worthy of closer examination.

Progressive rock as a *genre* has remained largely unstudied because of its complexity and diversity of styles; this eclecticism also makes it much more difficult to categorize than more homogeneous styles such as reggae or country rock. Indeed, *progressive rock*, as the term was used in the late 1960s, had an even broader meaning than it does today. The phrase was first used by critics such as Lester Bangs to collectively describe a number of emerging styles in the late 1960s, from the “jazz-rock” of bands such as Blood, Sweat and Tears to the Southern rock of the Allman Brothers Band. Each of these styles eventually became established genres, symptomatic of the general fragmentation of the rock audience in the early 1970s. *Progressive rock* came to describe those bands that aimed at incorporating some degree of cultivated musical influence (whether that of nineteenth-century European art music or American jazz) into a rock context.

Progressive rock has also been labeled “art rock,” “symphonic rock,” or “classical rock.” Katherine Charlton, in her book *Rock Music Styles: A History*, prefers the term art rock, noting that “much jazz rock is also progressive rock.”<sup>1</sup> Other writers, however, have reserved the term *art rock* for bands that appropriated an image in a cool, ironic fashion reminiscent of 1960s pop artists (Roxy Music, for example) or those that were inspired by trends in avant-garde art (such as the Velvet Underground or Talking Heads). While these bands are not progressive rock groups, these styles do occasionally converge. For example, Roxy Music’s first album was produced by erstwhile King Crimson lyricist Peter Sinfield, and former Roxy synthesizer player Brian Eno has not only collaborated with King Crimson guitarist Robert Fripp but also with the Talking Heads. Moreover, some of Fripp’s 1970s solo work has

revealed him to be as influenced by minimalism as were bands such as the Velvet Underground.

Jerry Lucky, in his book *The Progressive Rock Files*, has come up with what is perhaps the best definition of progressive rock, if only to highlight the diversity within the genre:

Progressive Rock is music that incorporates:

- Songs predominantly on the longish side, but structured, rarely improvised.
- A mixture of loud passages, soft passages, and musical crescendos to add to the dynamics of the arrangements.
- The use of a Mellotron or string synth[esizer] to simulate an orchestra backing.<sup>2</sup>
- The possible inclusion of a live symphony orchestra backing.
- Extended instrumental solos, perhaps involving some improvisation.
- The inclusion of musical styles from other than a rock format.
- A blending of acoustic, electric and electronic instruments where each plays a vital role in translating the emotion of compositions which typically contain more than one mood.
- Multi-movement compositions that may or may not return to a musical theme. In some cases the end section may bear little resemblance to the first part of the song.
- Compositions created from unrelated parts. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, the potential for any balanced critical appraisal of progressive rock has been tainted by faulty generalizations caused by a lack of familiarity with progressive rock as a whole. Note that Lucky's definition makes no direct mention of classical-rock fusion or of virtuosity, two factors that are often brought up as evidence of "pretension" in progressive rock. Progressive rock has suffered from the misperception that it was a (failed) attempt to merge "classical" music with rock, thereby enabling rock to "progress" beyond its blues-based roots by emphasizing sophistication of structure and virtuosity. Admittedly, that stereotype does apply fairly well to progressive rock's most com-

mercially successful groups such as Yes, Genesis, and Emerson Lake and Palmer (ELP). All three of these bands shared an emphasis on virtuosity and a tendency to explore extended suite-like song structures. All three of these groups also reached their critical zeniths between 1972 and 1974 (Yes with 1972's *Close to the Edge*, Genesis with *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* in 1974, and ELP with *Brain Salad Surgery* in 1973), roughly the midpoint of progressive rock's most visible period.

It is hoped that this book will serve to expand the accepted definitions of progressive rock. The chapters on Rush and Pink Floyd, for example—bands whose “progressive” status is sometimes hotly debated, not least by progressive rock's fans—invite the reader to consider whether it is more important to think of progressive rock in terms of its *groups* or in terms of its *musical style(s)*. Focusing on the musical aspects of a particular group's output (style) rather than a historical/categorical approach (groups) shows that while the number of enormously successful progressive rock groups was perhaps small, the influence of progressive rock style in the 1970s was significant. A number of 1970s groups—Rush, Kansas, and Jethro Tull—went through a “progressive phase.” Even Boston, a group that would hardly be considered “progressive” today, included on their first album the instrumental “Foreplay” (a play on the German word for “prelude,” *Vorspiel*), which is a clear nod to the organ style of Keith Emerson of ELP. The influence of progressive rock style on these and other examples of “prog lite” in the 1970s is perhaps an area for further study.

### About This Book

This book is divided into three parts. The bulk of the essays, in part 2, focus primarily on some of the major progressive rock groups to make an impact on 1970s rock (Yes, King Crimson, and so on). In some instances there are two contrasting essays on each band, inviting cross-disciplinary comparisons of groups in the progressive rock “canon.”

Parts 1 and 3 invite a wider consideration of progressive rock beyond its conventionally assumed historical boundaries. Contrary to some accounts, progressive rock did not spring full-grown, as from the head of a rock Medusa, in 1969; nor did it vanish in 1977. The essay

on the United States of America (USA) in part 1 shows that some of the characteristics of progressive rock are found in so-called “experimental-psychedelic” groups of the 1960s. While other authors (Macan, for example) have previously stated that progressive rock was an outgrowth of psychedelia, USA provides compelling evidence for the roots of not only the eclecticism of progressive rock, but also for its highbrow ambitions (some might say pretensions). John Sheinbaum’s essay establishes an important context for all of the essays in this book; as he notes, the aesthetics of progressive rock—colored by its educated, avant-garde influences—amount to a virtual negation of conventional rock values. Before rock turned “progressive” it had been characterized by its African-American or “blues” derivation, Dionysian values, and working-class socioeconomic status. As a result of “betraying” these root values, progressive rock was widely condemned by most rock critics even in the face of its popular acceptance and consequent commercial success. The essays in part 2, therefore, reconsider—from various analytical perspectives—the merits of this music that had been so subject to critical vilification.

Part 3 focuses on progressive rock’s lingering influence. Although progressive rock no longer dominates the airwaves or the stadium circuit today, its legacy can be found in the countless “neoprogressive” bands that can be found on the Internet and through specialty dealers such as Wayside Music. Progressive rock’s influence has also circumpectly manifested itself through the “postrock” of Tortoise and Jesamine, the art-thrash of bands such as Sonic Youth, and the highbrow pastiche of Radiohead. While these bands may protest being labeled “progressive” owing to that term’s 1970s connotations, without the precedent of progressive rock those bands would have very different styles. Theo Cateforis’s essay on “math rock” at the end of this book explores one of the startling turnarounds of rock history: how progressive rock, formerly blasted into irrelevance by punk, resurfaced in a new guise through the work of certain 1990s alternative bands. The channel between 1970s progressive rock and 1990s alternative has chiefly been through King Crimson, one of the few vintage progressive rock bands to continue “progressing” into the new millennium. The irony is that most “progressive” bands that wear the label have ceased to progress beyond the stylistic conventions established in the 1970s, whereas

those bands that continue to progress refuse to accept the progressive label. Even Robert Fripp has sought to revise King Crimson's history by distancing the group from the very genre it helped create.<sup>4</sup>

In short, to situate progressive rock in its proper musical *and* historical context, we must recognize that its story begins well before 1969 and hasn't ended yet (if bands such as Radiohead are any indication). By reconsidering progressive rock not as a monolith but as a "family tree" of various related styles (with a variety and number of bands far exceeding the few stadium-filling "dinosaur" bands of the 1970s), we can come away with a broader sense of the critical value of the genre.

### Progressive Rock's Historical Context

Virtuosity in rock was nothing new at the end of the 1960s, but many progressive rock musicians extended the instrumental skills of earlier musicians such as Jimi Hendrix or Eric Clapton to a new level of expertise. In fact, the stage histrionics of Keith Emerson's organ playing with the Nice, and later with ELP—which included stabbing the keyboard with knives and coaxing feedback from the instrument—offer compelling parallels with Hendrix's theatrics. However, the blues-based background of Hendrix or Clapton was supplanted with (but not entirely replaced by) classical ambitions, including literal classical training in the case of Emerson or Yes's Rick Wakeman.

The addition of elements of art music (once considered to be rock's antithesis) to the stylistic melange of rock has its roots, along with so many other innovations, in the music of the Beatles. "In My Life" (from 1965's *Rubber Soul*) features a sped-up "classical" piano solo played by George Martin. At nearly the same time, the Byrds released "She Don't Care About Time," the B-side of their "Turn! Turn! Turn!" single, which incorporated part of Johann Sebastian Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" in its twelve-string guitar solo. While these isolated art-music references (melodic or stylistic) are of course not progressive rock, they do offer a glimpse of the ripe conditions for experimentation in rock that ultimately led to the progressive genre.

Two more direct predecessors of progressive rock, however, were Procol Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale" and the Moody Blues' album *Days of Future Passed*, released in 1967 and 1968, respectively. Procol

Harum's song juxtaposed a Dylanesque lyric (and a piano-and-organ dual keyboard instrumentation that also seemed inspired by Bob Dylan) with an organ line paraphrased from two Bach compositions.<sup>5</sup> *Days of Future Passed* followed in the path blazed by the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* with a concept album exploring the metaphysical implications of a day from dawn to nightfall; it also fed the pseudoclassical ambitions of many a progressive rock band to come by employing a symphonic orchestra. Although the orchestrations appeared to owe more to 1940s Hollywood film scores than to Beethoven, the symphonic qualities of *Days of Future Passed* were further strengthened by making heavy use of the mellotron.

Both "A Whiter Shade of Pale" and *Days of Future Passed* are transitional recordings, coming out of the psychedelic trends that were in vogue in 1967 and also pointing the way toward the emergence of progressive rock. Procol Harum's classical borrowings were but one element in a style that drew more heavily on blues, folk, and music-hall pop; and the Moody Blues' second album, 1968's *In Search of the Lost Chord* (which includes the tribute to Timothy Leary, "Legend of a Mind"), shows their psychedelic allegiances more explicitly.

Nonetheless, the critical adulation given *Sgt. Pepper*—including accolades from the art-music establishment (classical-music critic Joan Peyser, for example, wrote that *Sgt. Pepper* "is an extraordinary work, not just comparable to a new sonata or opera, but far more important. It is a work of art that has sprung from unexpected, nonart roots"<sup>6</sup>)—encouraged many rock musicians to think that their music might indeed be "art," and that their recordings were capable of attaining lasting status. As John Covach described it:

What was distinctive about the progressive-rock movement that arose out of the British-invasion scene . . . was an attitude of art-music "seriousness"—critics often called it pretentiousness—that many of these musicians brought to their music making. Among the most ardent fans of progressive rock at the time, there was the perception that these musicians were attempting to shape a new kind of classical music—a body of music that would not disappear after a few weeks or months on the pop charts, but would instead be listened to (and perhaps even studied), like the music

## 8 © Kevin Holm-Hudson

of Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms, for years to come. In their sometimes uncompromising adherence to what they took to be lofty art-music standards, progressive-rock musicians often seemed to be more interested in standing shoulder to shoulder with Richard Wagner or Igor Stravinsky than with Elvis Presley or Little Richard.<sup>7</sup>

### Progressive Rock and Critical Opinion

Ironically, the “serious” experimental impulses that seemed so right to critics in the psychedelic flowering circa 1967 were declared to have gone horribly wrong by 1977. The words of Paul Morley, assessing the conditions that led to the rise of punk rock, are typical:

Look back to 1967, and the rich stream of precocious British rock musicians produced some extraordinary music over the next few months: Pink Floyd, Family, Traffic, Nice, Cream, Audience, Fairport Convention, Who etc. Achieving too much too soon, probably unprepared to accept and adapt to the pressure, the musicians of this beginning soon obliviously caused all the problems (and failed to react to them) that helped create the eventual smugness and complacency. Their adventure and neatly applied musical accomplishment ran into a brick wall; the musicians continued, caring little about their indulgence and isolation. . . . The musicians’ smugness about their early, often accidental successes erupted into intolerable narrow-mindedness about their newer music and its effects. The music became slicker, the morals slacker. “Progressive rock” emerged out of the little, fascinating, psychedelic-oriented burst of the late sixties, a music of horrible hybrid and clinical, cynical technical superiority. Listeners lapped up its empty complexity. . . . The music drifted further and further away from even the vaguest abstractions of what rock & roll is all about. It became, more and more, music to consume.<sup>8</sup>

The long-standing critical antipathy toward progressive rock has led to a dearth of serious discussion of this genre and its cultural context. For example, the only mention of progressive rock in Clinton

Heylin's 670-page anthology *The Penguin Book of Rock and Roll Writing* is the previous paragraph from Paul Morley. Such a parenthetical inclusion, typical of the majority of rock-history texts, implies that the genre had little impact on the rock soundscape of the 1970s; however, the commercial successes of Yes, Emerson Lake and Palmer, and other progressive rock groups during this period certainly indicate otherwise. ELP, for example, earned five million pounds through live appearances in 1974, surpassed in tour grosses only by the Rolling Stones, the Who, and Led Zeppelin.<sup>9</sup> Album sales are even better documented; for example, Yes had five Top 10 albums between 1972 and 1977, with *Close To The Edge* (1972) peaking highest at number 3.<sup>10</sup> Similar chart success can be found for ELP, Jethro Tull, and Pink Floyd (whose *Dark Side of the Moon* was on *Billboard*'s charts for a record 741 weeks). Although progressive rock was never a genre known for its "singles"—with the notable exception of Pink Floyd's "Money" (number 13 in 1973) and Yes's "Roundabout" (number 13 in 1972)—the success of progressive rock albums, bolstered by airplay of album tracks on FM radio, ensured the continued presence of progressive rock groups on the American arena circuit.

The preoccupation of some progressive rock artists with aspects of serious "art music" was condemned by many mainstream critics as abandonment of rock's roots in the blues; as Morley writes, "the music drifted further and further away from even the vaguest abstractions of what rock & roll is all about." While it is true that progressive rock tended to downplay the explicit blues style (and blues covers) of groups such as Cream or the Rolling Stones, the blues was not ignored altogether. In fact, among the mainstream progressive rock groups, only Genesis seemed to ignore blues influences entirely. Emerson Lake and Palmer frequently used twelve-bar-blues structures in their songs; King Crimson frequently incorporated passages derived from the twelve-bar-blues harmonic progression (from the "Mirrors" section of "21st Century Schizoid Man" in 1969 to the metrically distorted blues progression in the middle of 1974's "Starless"); and even Yes made the Beatles' "I'm Down" a staple of their mid-seventies live shows.

Morley's assertion that progressive rock "became . . . music to consume" also does not hold up under scrutiny. The music of the 1970s *in general* could be described as "music to consume," in large part due to

the rapid merging of record labels during this period into multinational conglomerates such as WEA (Warner-Elektra-Atlantic). Disco—with an impact extending to songs such as Rod Stewart’s “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy” and the Rolling Stones’ “Miss You”—and radio-ready harmonized soft rock by bands such as the Eagles and Fleetwood Mac are perhaps more apt examples of “music to consume,” and arguably contributed as much to the general musical stagnation that led to punk’s abrasive corrective. The number of comparably successful progressive rock bands of this period could be numbered in the single digits (Yes, ELP, Genesis, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, and perhaps, sporadically, King Crimson); others remained “cult” bands with little commercial impact. Clearly most progressive rock bands weren’t simply doing it for the money.

It is also a misconception to equate all (or even most) progressive rock with attempts to integrate aspects of art music into the rock medium. This oft-cited merging of the highbrow and lowbrow is the “horrible hybrid” to which Morley refers; as Lester Bangs memorably put it, “Everybody knows Classical-Rock (alternating with -Jazz) Fusions never really work.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, only Emerson Lake and Palmer (and, to a lesser extent, Renaissance) incorporated literal classical themes into their work to any great degree; Emerson’s solos with ELP frequently quoted from a variety of nonclassical sources as well, from jazz standards (such as “Salt Peanuts”) to “Turkey in the Straw.”<sup>12</sup> While some groups did experiment with extended suite structures that developed material in a manner reminiscent of classical music, this tendency may also be traced to the Beatles, who connected several previously unrelated songs in a suite-like fashion on 1969’s *Abbey Road*. On the other hand, a lesser-known progressive rock scene associated with the Canterbury region of England (exemplified by bands such as Soft Machine and National Health) eschewed the classics in exchange for a jazz-rock orientation.

### A Network of Styles

When progressive rock is considered in terms of more than the handful of superstar bands that toured U.S. arenas in the mid-1970s, it is revealed to be an extraordinarily fluid style, bringing together influ-

ences as diverse as John Coltrane (Magma), Japanese koto music (Jade Warrior), early music (Gryphon), Béla Bartók (King Crimson), British and Celtic folk music (Jethro Tull), and free improvisation with real-time electronics (early Pink Floyd). Given these many distinct styles, a picture of progressive rock emerges that is somewhat less well defined than the prevailing critical view of it (i.e., “classical” influences, long songs, virtuosity, pretentiousness, British-based), but is richer for it. There is not much common ground between ELP and Jade Warrior, but there is room for both within the genre of progressive rock (and within Jerry Lucky’s definition of the genre). Similarly, while groups such as Pink Floyd or Tangerine Dream might not share all of the commonly accepted attributes of progressive rock (virtuosity, for example), they certainly shared overlapping audiences and exhibited the same progressive tendencies toward experimentation and breaking out of traditional rock music song forms.

In fact, Pink Floyd’s distinctive contribution to progressive rock is what John Cotner describes as the “quasi-instrumental fantasy” in his essay discussing Pink Floyd’s “Careful With That Axe, Eugene.” Although Cotner maintains that the “fantasy” is unique to Pink Floyd’s work, Gregory Karl independently arrives at a similar conclusion in his examination of the “narrative form” of King Crimson’s *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic* compositions. Similarly, Emerson Lake and Palmer’s “Trilogy,” which I analyze in this collection, follows a psychodramatic pattern not unlike the nineteenth-century tone poem, with its emphasis on narrative established through thematic development. The emphasis on suggesting a narrative or merely fantastic imagery through sound alone is another vestige of psychedelia, with the added awareness of nineteenth-century programmatic art music.

In general, it may be more accurate to describe progressive rock as an attempt to merge rock’s beat with certain aspects of art music’s style, in terms of harmony, metric complexity, or extended form (a “classical influence” in all three of these areas need not be present). The presence of classical elements in this style has until now invited more traditional theoretical analysis, particularly of harmony and form. Dirk von der Horst’s essay in this book, therefore, contributes a new approach. In his look at a disputed sonata form in Yes’s “Close to the Edge,” von der Horst avoids the traditional theoretical examination of “the music

itself,” instead examining the song from a “reader-response” perspective influenced by scholars in gender studies and feminist criticism. His analysis of the song comes down somewhat closer to traditional negative assessments of progressive rock’s “classical aspirations,” because he sees such aspirations as contributing to progressive rock’s constructions of masculinity.

### But Is It Art?

Progressive rock’s “art” posturing also would appear to militate against its status as a “music to consume.” Bill Martin negotiates this paradox by claiming that progressive rock functioned as a “popular avant-garde”:

In its time, progressive rock represented something unique in the entire history of art: a “popular avant-garde.” For most aestheticians and social theoreticians, the very idea is oxymoronic. Supposedly, an avant-garde can only be appreciated by an elite; supposedly, this elite appreciation is part of the very definition of the concept of avant-garde. But we might take a page from Marx, and argue that “once the inner connections are grasped, theory becomes a material force”. . . . The point is that the motive forces of society are grasped when a significant part of society is compelled to expand its understanding of these forces. Then this understanding becomes a real force in the lives of many people. As the late sixties gave way to the seventies, many people were prepared by their social experience to be open to experimental, visionary, and utopian music that was brilliantly crafted and performed.<sup>13</sup>

Durrell Bowman makes a similar point in this collection. His argument is that certain rock music following in the wake of early-’70s British progressive rock served as an “alternative classical music” for young, white, suburban and working-class North American and British males. This included the late-’70s “progressive hard rock” of the Canadian band Rush, the music of which inscribed a peculiar, experimental individualism (which itself contradicts the countercultural/Marxist

utopian thesis espoused by Macan and Martin), but one that made use of various musical elements common to progressive rock, including extended formal constructions, instrumental virtuosity, and complex metrical patterns.

Gregory Karl, in one of the Internet discussions that took place during this book's formative stages, concurred with this view of progressive rock as an "alternative classical music," noting that

[progressive rock was] created or intended as art and was, not uncommonly, received in that spirit as well. Moreover, some of it . . . was, apparently, consciously created under the same aesthetic premises as much western art music of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—that music captures important aspects of internal life, that it invites deep spiritual involvement, etc. Of course, such ambitious intentions are apt to come off as pretensions when reach exceeds grasp. But on its own terms . . . [progressive rock] captures some aspects of the '70s *Zeitgeist* extraordinarily well, particularly, in its portraits of terror. I suspect that some of this music will be of interest to future generations who want to broaden their understanding of what life was like for the first generation growing up under the shadow of mutual assured destruction.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, while progressive rock may not always explicitly draw from nineteenth-century art-music models, its "popular avant-garde" orientation as argued by Martin certainly seems logical. In fact, Joseph Byrd of the American band The United States of America claims today that the group aimed to introduce the techniques of the avant-garde into a rock context. Their sole album (which predated the 1969 release of King Crimson's *In The Court of The Crimson King*, considered by most writers to be the first true progressive rock album) can be regarded as an early experiment with many of the same techniques and ideals that came to distinguish progressive rock (see "The 'American Metaphysical Circus' of Joseph Byrd's United States of America" in this volume).

Expanding beyond the high-culture positioning of the musical "text" in progressive rock, one can observe a similar influence in progressive rock's lyrics. Classic works of literature influenced a number of progressive rock songs. While this is certainly not true of all such songs,

and although there are again psychedelic-era precursors (for example, Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit," based on Lewis Carroll's *Adventures of Alice in Wonderland*, or Cream's "Tales of Brave Ulysses," inspired by Homer's *Odyssey*), an unusual number of progressive rock songs are inspired by ambitious, occasionally even obscure literary sources. Genesis's "The Fountain of Samalcis," for example, is an adaptation of the myth of the first hermaphrodite found in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid (4.285–388). Yes's vocalist/lyricist Jon Anderson has related that the lyrics to "The Gates of Delirium" were inspired by a reading of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.<sup>15</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *The Rime of The Ancient Mariner* not only inspired Rush's "Xanadu" (discussed by Durrell Bowman in this volume), but also an entire concept album by David Bedford. Homer's *Odyssey* was the inspiration for King Crimson's "Formentera Lady" and "The Sailor's Tale" on their *Islands* album (1971).

A more unusual literary source led to the making of Yes's *Tales from Topographic Oceans* in 1973; the entire eighty-minute, two-album composition is based on a single footnote found in Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. The obscurity of this reference—and the length of the album it generated—added fuel to critics' charges that progressive rock was self-indulgent and pretentious; indeed, *Tales* has retained a special notoriety as emblematic of all that was critically "wrong" with progressive rock. Jennifer Rycenga examines the literary and religious symbolism in Yes's work of this period, both on *Tales* and *Relayer*. Her findings regarding Jon Anderson's familiarity with Hinduism are perhaps not surprising, but what is surprising is that this aspect of *Tales* has not been previously considered.

Sometimes the literary connection has to do more with a general style than an individual work. The lyrics of Pink Floyd's Roger Waters espouse a remarkably consistent existentialist worldview; it is this consistency of vision, according to Deena Weinstein, that raises Waters's lyrics to transcend their genre and become "art." Weinstein also situates Waters's lyrics within other prevailing social and literary trends of the late 1960s, including the antiwar movement and naturalistic romanticism.

The "serious" subject matter of progressive rock songs did not escape the ironic commentary of its own practitioners. Jethro Tull, for

example, took the literary preoccupations of their peers to satirical extremes by conceiving *Thick As A Brick* (1972) as a setting of an epic poem by the (fictitious) writer Gerald “Little Milton” Bostock. More recently, King Crimson’s “Dinosaur” (from 1995’s *THRAK*) is, according to lyricist Adrian Belew, literally about a dinosaur; yet, with its guitar-synthesizer timbres that evoke the sound of mellotrons and Robert Fripp’s famous remarks in 1974 about progressive “dinosaur bands,” a more ironic interpretation is hard to resist. Brian Robison discusses the factors contributing to widespread fan misinterpretation of “Dinosaur” in this volume; his essay also raises pertinent questions about how progressive rock has become “fossilized” as a historical category rather than a musical one.

At the root of progressive rock’s so-called highbrow positioning, both musically and lyrically, is the sociology of its audience, which was markedly different from that of other contemporary rock styles. Class distinctions are particularly important in Britain, a rock culture that “prefers its heroes, if not genuinely working-class, at least superficially so.”<sup>16</sup> Edward Macan, in his excellent study *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture*, has pointed out that British progressive rock groups virtually without exception were formed and nurtured in universities or the British equivalent of private schools. Their members made no effort to conceal their upper-middle-class background, an attitude critics condemned as elitist.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the British progressive rock scene has its roots in the south of Britain, an area more upper-class and white-collar than areas farther north. Macan writes, “Obviously, a style like progressive rock, with its references not only to classical music but also to the art and literature of high culture, was not going to spring from a working-class environ. Its emergence depended on a subculture of highly educated young people.”<sup>18</sup> Conversely, the emergence of punk is linked to its roots among the large numbers of disenfranchised, working-class youth who were marginalized from this elite demographic that had been at the core of the progressive rock audience. When one considers the allegiance of most mainstream rock critics to the ideal of rock as a working-class form of cultural expression, it is easy to understand why progressive rock was so vilified by critics in its day, and airbrushed from latter-day rock histories as an anomaly.

Battle lines need not be drawn, however. Rock has always been shamelessly eclectic, even parasitic in its appropriation of musical styles and extramusical references; at its peripheries, the distinctions truly become sloppy. More recent progressive groups such as Ozric Tentacles add reggae to their mix of styles, and the Orb self-consciously draw on progressive rock's legacy even as they continue to be categorized as an "ambient techno" band. "Chamber progressive" or "avant-prog" groups such as Thinking Plague are perhaps better described as contemporary classical ensembles with a rhythm section. (Some of the members of Thinking Plague even perform live using scores and music stands—as did, for that matter, The United States of America.) "Post-progressive" groups such as Don Caballero and Radiohead also draw upon selective aspects of vintage progressive rock, even as they actively seek to distance themselves from associations with the genre. Given these examples, one may indeed wonder where progressive rock "ends" and becomes psychedelia, free jazz, experimental art music, or heavy metal.

Progressive rock is a style far more diverse than what is heard from its mainstream groups and what is implied by unsympathetic critics. In fact, CD stores with a separate "progressive" section often continue to file ELP, Rush, Yes, and the other more popular progressive groups in their mainstream "rock/pop" section. It is this rich complexity of styles—not just its intricacy of arrangements or the virtuosity of some of its musicians—that enables progressive rock to maintain a devoted and growing "taste public" years after being consigned to the ash bin of irrelevance by rock critics. In this sense, perhaps progressive rock has indeed become the "alternative classical" music suggested by Covach and Bowman, even as traditional art music repertoires find themselves forced by declining and aging audiences to market themselves in ever more innovative ways.

## Notes

1. Katherine Charlton, *Rock Music Styles: A History* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 164.
2. A mellotron is a keyboard instrument that functions somewhat like an analog version of today's digital samplers. The keyboards generally came with several factory-preset sounds, including a choir, strings, and flutes.

- Pushing down a key would trigger a tape of, for example, strings playing the desired pitch.
3. Jerry Lucky, *The Progressive Rock Files* (Burlington, ON: Collector's Guide Publishing, 1998), 120–21.
  4. Robert Fripp, "Afterword One: Prog Rock and Its Criminals." Booklet notes to King Crimson, *Epitaph* (Discipline Global Mobile compact disc DGM9607, 1997), 43.
  5. The two Bach pieces alluded to in "A Whiter Shade of Pale" are the "Air on a G String" from the *Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D Major*, BWV 1068, and the fourth movement (chorale) from the cantata *Wachet Auf, Ruft Uns die Stimme*, BWV 140.
  6. Joan Peyser, "The Beatles and The Beatless," in Jonathan Eisen, ed. *The Age of Rock, vol. 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969), 131.
  7. John Covach, "Progressive Rock, 'Close to the Edge,' and the Boundaries of Style." In John Covach and Graeme M. Boone, eds. *Understanding Rock: Essays in Musical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.
  8. Paul Morley, "New Pop UK." In Clinton Heylin, ed. *The Penguin Book of Rock and Roll Writing* (New York: Viking, 1992), 201–2.
  9. Paul Stump, *The Music's All That Matters: A History of Progressive Rock* (London: Quartet Books, 1998), 184.
  10. Joel Whitburn, *The Billboard Book of Top 40 Albums* (New York: Billboard Books, 1995), 340–41.
  11. Lester Bangs, "Exposed! The Brutal Energy Atrocities of Emerson Lake and Palmer." *Creem*, March 1974: 43.
  12. In this respect, Emerson's performance practice may be regarded as descending from the soloing of Jimi Hendrix. See, for example, Hendrix's "Strangers in the Night" quotation in the middle of his performance of "Wild Thing" at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, or his quick reference to the Beatles' "I Feel Fine" in his often-bootlegged performance of "Hey Joe/Sunshine Of Your Love" on Lulu's January 1969 TV special.
  13. Bill Martin, *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1998), 2.
  14. Gregory Karl, personal communication with the editor, July 28, 1999.
  15. Martin, *Listening*, 233.
  16. Nick Logan and Bob Woffinden, "Genesis." In *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Rock* (New York: Harmony Books, 1977), 91.
  17. Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). See especially chapter 7, "A Sociology of Progressive Rock," 144–66, and chapter 8, "The Critical Reception of Progressive Rock," 167–78.
  18. Macan, *Rocking*, 147.

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