

Prog Will Eat Itself: Yes and Post-Rock

Seth Kim-Cohen

Published in the *Chicago Reader*, 2001.



Rock means two simultaneous and interconnected things. Thing 1: a form of music as defined by artistic characteristics (see Joe Carducci's *Rock and the Pop Narcotic* for one proposed definition). Thing 2: the market for the aforementioned form. These two things, though they share a name – Thing 2 always hiding behind Thing 1, so you can never get a clear look at it – are not the same. Thing 1, when ignorant of or unconcerned with Thing 2, is an organism, venturing to pick up new genetic material as it propagates, thereby making each successive generation new and stronger and more robust. But Thing 2 is commodity, and commodity prefers tidy classification. Thing 2 is to Thing 1 what the biologist is to biology. It requires phylum and species – formats for radio and charts – and a history, because a history acts as a standard and standards allow value to be measured and claims of worth to be made. Thus "the new Beatles," "the next Dylan," "heirs to the Beach Boys' crown." Thing 2 manipulates Thing 1 to make Thing 2's job easier. Before you know it things are backwards: Thing 1 is subservient to Thing 2. Welcome to the intersection of art and capitalism, where a \$15 Where's the Beef? hat is exactly as valuable as a \$15 Bob Dylan CD.

Here's some history: Rock historian Greil Marcus identifies the inception of rock 'n' roll as the Orioles' "It's Too Soon to Know," from 1948. Let's go with that. So in 1970, rock was 22. When you're 22 you've just started to get a grip on who you are and what you want. You've probably got a bunch of ideas, some good, some not so good, and the energy to execute them. You're

precocious and ascendant-but, in truth, let's face it, you don't know shit. You lack the apparatus to convert verve into veracity. That's how rock was in the early 70s-searching for an identity, searching for the things it was good at.

Among the more prevalent identities it tried on at the time were protest rock (a failed attempt to simultaneously mellow out the world and change the system), country and folk rock (borrowing from older, native forms in a bid for authenticity), blues rock and acid rock (more and less tame versions of the same beast), funk (an African-American version of the European-American music adapted from African-American music), fusion (Miles and numerous less talented jazzers weaving elements of funk and acid rock into jazz), and progressive rock (the mostly-British urge to incorporate the Western classical tradition into the whole mess).

There were others too. But this article is about Yes, so I'll stop with prog. Rock in the early 70s was trying a lot of different things, but in a climate that couldn't have been more different from the current one, where each new indie genre slices out its own insignificant sliver of the pie. Back then each of rock's multiple personalities staked a real claim to the market. Prog, for one, expanded the conception of what rock could hold, and Thing 2, as Thing 2 is prone to do, capitalized on it. The radio format known as AOR, or Album Oriented Rock, came into being to allow for songs and sensibilities that didn't adhere to the verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-chorus blueprint of Top 40 radio. Yes were arguably the kings of the genre. In 1972, they had three different albums in the Top 40, while "I've Seen All Good People" (or more precisely its first movement, "Your Move") and "Roundabout" even climbed up the singles charts.

For a while prog made it seem that radio and record sales could survive on music that didn't rehash the same ol' same ol'. Prog took risks, often failing,

but sometimes succeeding in new and remarkable ways: Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, a concept album about former bandleader Syd Barrett's descent into madness, stayed on the Billboard Top 200 chart for 741 weeks, longer than any other record in history. In 1974 Genesis released *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, a double album that relates the story of a Puerto Rican graffiti artist battling real and imagined demons in New York City. The Dutch prog band Focus had a hit with "Hocus Pocus" – a song that featured yodeling! It seemed possible that musicians could make music without considering market trends because the trends weren't clearly identifiable.

Prog was an aesthetic revolution, but not a political one. The musicians fell on the art-for-art's-sake side of things, and fans were in it for escapism, often conflating their affection for the music with their affection for Tolkien and Doctor Who. Critics came to see prog as bloated and self-important, because although pretension is often a prerequisite of great art, rock as a form was always meant to diffuse pretension – to make Beethoven roll over. And even though it could be argued that early fusion did a better job of that, fusion foundered, while prog prospered,. Fusion was pioneered by and developed by musicians who came from jazz and who, when they veered, veered back toward jazz. But unlike prog, fusion was embraced by the critics...at first. Miles Davis was already an icon, and his flights into 20-minute booty-shake psychedelia were seen as courageous, unfettered, assimilating ventures. It's easier to get behind a black man staking his claim to a music his people invented than it is to back English hippies trying to replace rock's blues base with stuffy Western canon fodder.

Prog alienated writers whose lives had been changed by good, old-fashioned rock 'n' roll. In retrospect, it's easy to see why. In 1973 – in a move that would have been deemed too ridiculous for Spinal Tap – Yes released *Tales From*

Topographic Oceans. The title was pompous enough, but the liner notes were even worse: Singer Jon Anderson explained that the album (a double LP comprised of four long pieces, each occupying one side of vinyl) had been inspired by a "lengthy footnote on page 83" of Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*. The concept was fleshed out on tour, in a series of "sessions by candlelight in our hotel rooms." The album contained some exhilarating music, but the wrapper rendered it silly.

In the end, even AOR could tolerate only so much silliness. There was no formula for artists to follow, no hit thumbprint for radio programmers to recognize. Culture is commerce in a capitalist society and, as such, must inevitably settle into repeatable formulas. So in the late 70s and early 80s, prog rockers began to let Thing 2 direct Thing 1. Genesis, drummer, Phil Collins and former frontman Peter Gabriel each transformed themselves into sappy middle-of-the-road acts. Yes suffered a slight wane in popularity and released a series of confused, subpar albums: *Going for the One* (1977), *Tormato* (1978), and *Drama* (1980), for which, unbelievably, they adopted two members of MTV footnotes the Buggles. Guitarist Steve Howe left with ex-Buggle Geoff Downes to join Carl Palmer (the P in ELP) and John Wetton of King Crimson in Asia, a radio-ready hit machine in the style of Foreigner. Yes replaced Howe with South African guitarist and studio whiz Trevor Rabin and, in 1983 scored with "Owner of a Lonely Heart" – an unlikely and adventurous pop hit, but hardly prog.

That was the last peak in Yes's commercial career. They've maintained a rotating cast of past and new members ever since, touring, releasing five new studio albums, an equal number of repackaged early works, and almost as many live recordings. But they haven't found a way to be relevant again the way they did in '83.

So when you go to a Yes show, as I did last Friday, you're going to an oldies show. Which, if the paunchy 40-year-old in the tie-dyed Yes T-shirt yelling "Jon, you made my life!" to Anderson, is any indication, is exactly what you want. In a set that exceeded two and a half hours, the band played two songs from their forthcoming album of new material, *Magnification*. Otherwise, they relied on early favorites like "Close to the Edge" and "Long Distance Runaround." They busted out two obscure epics: the 22-minute "Gates of Delirium" from 1974's *Relayer*; and the 21-and-a-half-minute "Ritual" from *Tales From Topographic Oceans*. These were probably the two most challenging, intellectually stimulating pieces of music I've ever seen performed live by a rock band, and yet the audience was more animated than any crowd I've ever seen at the Empty Bottle. Nostalgia is a powerful subcomponent of Thing 2.

But Yes's ambition and lack of self-awareness remain their undoing. The show, staged at the posh Arie Crown Theatre, was part of the Yes Symphonic Tour. The five members of the band – founding members Anderson and bassist Chris Squire, longtime members Howe and drummer Alan White; and a twentysomething keyboard player whose name I didn't catch – were joined on stage by a 50-piece orchestra. Silly, and unnecessarily so: Yes's music is already symphonic. Starting with a few songs on *The Yes Album* (1971) and continuing through *Relayer*, Yes pursued long-form compositions with named and numbered movements featuring contramelodic and contrapuntal lines played by band members on rock instruments. They weren't so much aping classical as absorbing certain elements of it in the creation of a new kind of rock. The orchestra merely muddied Yes's sound, burying some of the more interesting moments. The stars had their backs to the orchestra, and at times the two groups fell out of sync. The conductor tried to watch White for stick clicks and grace notes, but their respective feels for the tempo were decidedly

different. I suppose that, without the orchestra, this tour would have been too similar to last year's Masterworks tour.

As popular accounts would have it, punk was the insecticide that brought down prog's shimmery dragonfly. Neat little bow. But punk didn't kill prog – commerce did. In its day, punk, though briefly fashionable in the UK, didn't generate enough global revenue to kill anything. If punk had won the war, it would have become the dominant commercial music of the 80s. Instead we got hair metal. Kids may have driven the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen" up the British charts, but the mainstream press and most everyone else, all the way up the power structure, was appalled by it. Meanwhile, those fat, faceless, white men who decide what we will want to buy took the opportunity to weed rock's overgrown garden. They yanked out prog by the roots and made the garden a clean, organized affair with rows of easily categorized, easily identified produce for the consumers to choose from. Iceberg lettuce, easy to grow and palatable to almost everyone, abounded. By the end of the 70s radio knew what radio sounded like and so did we, without even turning it on.

But one of art's miraculous properties is its ability to make the worn-out fresh again. In the late 90s, the fugitive strands of prog and fusion reunited, most notably here in Chicago, becoming the template for a much vaunted challenge to rock's dominance. Post-rock makes rock seem silly, doesn't it? How can we still find Angus Young credible in his Aussie schoolboy getup, duckwalking with his Gibson SG in hand like a demonic puppet? He can be replaced. So, apparently, can Yes's caped, sometime-keyboardist Rick Wakeman. Instead, the underground music press and today's cognoscenti (tomorrow's fat, faceless white men?) look to the likes of Tortoise's John McEntire. He's so much more rational. As we are rational. McEntire, with his wordless, intellectually abstract music, a protean hybrid of electronic and

organic tones, with his techno-wiz production of nostalgic futurisms like Stereolab – this is our (post)modern man!

Out with the old and in with the old: Tortoise's first album sounds a lot like Brand X, the 70s prog-fusion outfit that featured drummer Phil Collins of Genesis. Tortoise wasn't copping the Brand X sound, but via different roads they wound up in a similar place: sinewy bass lines, complex rhythms, sidestepping rock's use of guitar as the preeminent instrument, no vocals. While we're at it, some of the music of post-rock progenitors Slint sounds a fair bit like the instrumental passages from King Crimson's mid-70s period. Doug Scharin outfit Him goes straight to the source of fusion, possessing the skeleton of Miles's *Bitches Brew* and *Live-Evil*.

It was inevitable that prog would fall from marketplace grace – by design, everything does. The real legacy of a musical movement, though, is its lasting impact on Thing 1, not its momentary impact on Thing 2. Punk had no impact on Thing 2 until its revolutionary power had subsided and culture had absorbed and blunted its most recognizable traits; by then Thing 2 could establish those traits as commodities. But in the underground, where Thing 1 is made, punk's legacy has been enormous. Without punk, much of the best music of the past 25 years (remember, we're talking about Thing 1 here) would never have happened. Brief survey: Pere Ubu, the Fall, Television in the 70s; the Birthday Party, Sonic Youth and the Minutemen in the 80s; Nirvana, PJ Harvey, and Pavement in the 90s (just to name a few). It can even be argued that it has subverted Thing 2 to a degree: the current underground economy in which post-rock and electronica flourish was made possible, in part, by punk's DIY ethic.

Prog inspired no such legacy because it couldn't, or wouldn't, propose itself as revolution. But its distant descendent, post-rock, is now being proposed as

just that – if not by its progenitors, who are reluctant to even use the term post-rock, then by its fans. Much like prog fans 30 years ago, post-rock's admirers are drawn to its cool sophistication. Post-rock is serious music, the players are often formally-trained or even virtuosic; it's calculated, not naive, not primitive, not bogged down or limited by human language. But the r in this revolution is vestigial. Marshall McLuhan thought of technology as an extension of our central nervous systems. He said "The extensions of man with their ensuing environments, it's now fairly clear, are the principal area of manifestation of the evolutionary process." The technological (r)evolution is a commodity (r)evolution. Corporations have installed themselves as de facto governments. They, more than politicians, set national agendas, determine the rules/desires by which individuals live, and dictate morality (privacy rights, intellectual property ownership, stem cell research, etc). These corporations thrive on the instant obsolescence of the electronic information age. The technological (r)evolution is an advancement in ease for the already-at-ease.

The information we are programmed to believe we need – breathing and beating from billboards and dashboards and wristwatches, from palm pilots and laptops – strives to create a sterile, utterly rational, utilitarian environment. Post-rock is the perfect music for this environment – it's easy to imagine Tortoise providing the sound track for a remake of *The Fountainhead*. But where Canadian second-generation prog band Rush adopted Ayn Rand's self-centered, objectivist philosophy to lend the illusion of intellect to its lyrics, Tortoise's connection would be to the meaningless, dehumanized, centralized dystopia Rand imagines as our future. Prog, even in the midst of its structural meanderings and self-conscious time signature shifts, tried to engage in meaning-making. Post-rock, though, stands aloof: emotionally, contextually, and epistemologically neutral. It aims to be a music of and for the head, as opposed to the heart or the body. But even in

that role it's a sheep in wolf's clothing. It makes no attempt to incorporate the power of myth or the universal; it offers nothing for the head but a borrowed evocation of meaning without meaning, the suggestion of suggestion. It subverts the value of confronting experience in favor of the empty pursuit of ease. In failing to resist Thing 2's pursuit of the greater domination of culture by commodity, it fails to defend itself from accusations of complicity.