



Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture

By Edward Macan

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Few styles of popular music have generated as much controversy as progressive rock, a musical genre best remembered today for its gargantuan stage shows, its fascination with epic subject matter drawn from science fiction, mythology, and fantasy literature, and above all for its attempts to combine classical music's sense of space and monumental scope with rock's raw power and energy. Its dazzling virtuosity and spectacular live concerts made it hugely popular with fans during the 1970s, who saw bands such as King Crimson, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Yes, Genesis, Pink Floyd, and Jethro Tull bring a new level of depth and sophistication to rock. On the other hand, critics branded the elaborate concerts of these bands as self-indulgent and materialistic. They viewed progressive rock's classical/rock fusion attempts as elitist, a betrayal of rock's populist origins.

In *Rocking the Classics*, the first comprehensive study of progressive rock history, Edward Macan draws together cultural theory, musicology, and music criticism, illuminating how progressive rock served as a vital expression of the counterculture of the late 1960s and 1970s. Beginning with a description of the cultural conditions which gave birth to the progressive rock style, he examines how the hippies' fondness for hallucinogens, their contempt for Establishment-approved pop music, and their fascination with the music, art, and literature of high culture contributed to this exciting new genre. Covering a decade of music, Macan traces progressive rock's development from the mid- to late-sixties, when psychedelic bands such as the Moody Blues, Procol Harum, the Nice, and Pink Floyd laid the foundation of the progressive rock style, and proceeds to the emergence of the mature progressive rock style marked by the 1969 release of King Crimson's album *In the Court of the Crimson King*. This "golden age" reached its artistic and commercial zenith between 1970 and 1975 in the music of bands such as Jethro Tull, Yes, Genesis, ELP, Gentle Giant, Van der Graaf Generator, and Curved Air.

In turn, Macan explores the conventions that govern progressive rock, including the visual dimensions of album cover art and concerts, lyrics and conceptual themes, and the importance of combining music, visual motif, and verbal expression to convey a coherent artistic vision. He examines the cultural history of progressive rock, considering its roots in a bohemian English subculture and

its meteoric rise in popularity among a legion of fans in North America and continental Europe. Finally, he addresses issues of critical reception, arguing that the critics' largely negative reaction to progressive rock says far more about their own ambivalence to the legacy of the counterculture than it does about the music itself.

An exciting tour through an era of extravagant, mind-bending, and culturally explosive music, *Rocking the Classics* sheds new light on the largely misunderstood genre of progressive rock.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

The enormous success in 1967 of the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band inspired other bands to expand and refine this blending of rock, folk, and classical into a style that came to be known as progressive rock. Throughout the 1970s the form developed into a core element around which colossal light shows, elaborate props, and outlandish costumes were added as bands like Genesis and Yes moved the music into arenas and stadiums. Though hugely popular, many critics considered the music emotionally cold and pompous. By the end of the decade a backlash against progressive rock and disco led to do-it-yourself movements like Punk and New Wave. The music's continued success, however, indicates that this is an important if controversial subgenre of rock music. This extremely detailed and scholarly book offers a unique overview. Its style limits its recommendation to libraries with serious music collections that focus on contemporary forms. ?Dan Bogey, Clearfield Cty. P.L. Federation, Curwensville, Pa.
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Review

"This extremely detailed and scholarly book offers a unique overview."--*Library Journal*

"Outstanding....Highly recommended--a must-have book for any fan of progressive music."--*Progression*

"While there have been thousands of books written on every form of music, progressive music as such has gotten a raw deal. Edward Macan has been brave enough to write the quintessential book on a curiously underrepresented form of music--and it's about time."--Keith Emerson, *Emerson, Lake and Palmer*

"An impressive piece of work....Macan knows this music backwards and forwards: he combines a fan's detached knowledge of minutiae with what if often a quite sophisticated agenda of cultural criticism....I was delighted to find some intelligent, detailed, and nuanced writing about progressive rock....The writing is excellent--the author is always vivid, elegant, and engaging....It contributes another valuable genra study to a burgeoning field."--Robert Walser, author of *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*

"I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book; once I began reading it I found it almost impossible to put down. Macan has put together a wonderful account of the Yes-Genesis-ELP crowd, and much, much more....Macan does an exceptional job of pulling together a tremendous amount of information and assembling it into chapters that are very user friendly. His understanding of the English roots of this style is perhaps the most valuable aspect of his account and will be often cited....Intelligently organized. The number of albums referred to is a remarkable feat of scholarship."--John Covach, *University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

"Comprehensive....Macan gives the much-maligned genre the kind of respect and serious study it deserves."-
-*Cleveland Scene*

From the Back Cover

Despite having authored what is to my knowledge the first comprehensive study of progressive rock, I must admit that my involvement in the progressive rock scene has heretofore been as an objective observer, not as a participant. To be sure, I was a fan during the music's commercial heyday of the mid- to late 1970s--although I never was involved to the point of joining any band's fan club--and I have attempted to remain abreast of developments in the progressive rock scene.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Kirk Fonseca:

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Brenda Lee:

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Nancy Ochoa:

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