

Progressive Rock & Jazz Fusion - A Short History

Contributed by Alan Williams & Tania Arrais
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Progressive Rock is an elusive term applied to that type of rock music that went beyond the simple 4/4 back beat found in most rock music in the late sixties. Progressive rock, or PROG as it is called today, had its early beginning with the music of the BEATLES, perhaps the most important group in all of rock history.

Albums such as Abbey Road, The White Album, and even Sgt. Pepper & His Lonely Hearts Club Band utilized the techniques that would later be used by the giants of the PROG movement; bands such as Genesis, YES, Emerson Lake & Palmer, Jethro Tull & Pink Floyd all openly pay tribute to the genius that was the BEATLES.

Jazz Fusion, on the other hand, is something of a misnomer, as Jazz Music itself is a fusion of a host of different styles, from Swing to Blues, from Gospel to Bebop, from Cool to Electronic.

For the purpose of this article, Jazz Fusion refers to that music from the late sixties to the early seventies that used synthesizer technology with traditional instruments, to create a new sound, much like Progressive Rock did.

Both genres experienced rapid growth at the same time, propelled by the new sound of instrument like the MOOG synthesizer, the Mellotron, the ARP synthesizer, as well as using tape delay, layering, inventive use of the Hammond B-3 Organ, and sometimes just plain distortion.

The MOOG synthesizer was brought to popular attention in the late sixties by Walter Carlos, with the best selling album, SWITCHED ON BACH, which took classic Bach compositions, and redid them using the MOOG.

This album caused a sonic revolution, which gave birth to a plethora of bands like The Nice, King Crimson, the Moody Blues, Pink Floyd, The Strawbs and The Mahavisnu Orchestra.

This later band was interesting, as it was composed of both Jazz and Rock musicians. At the same time, bands such as Chicago, Blood Sweat & Tears, Lighthouse, Cold Blood were exploring jazz-rock Fusion, with successful and popular results.

The first use of synthesizers in Jazz Fusion came about with the Miles Davis Quintet, featuring Wayne Shorter, Tony Williams, Miles Davis, Ron Carter and keyboardist Herbie Hancock.

Hancock would later go on to a solo career in the early seventies with some groundbreaking albums such as Chameleon and Man Child. His technique actually changed, utilizing a rock approach to jazz improvisation.

Likewise, Keith Emerson, formally of the Nice, and later Emerson Lake & Palmer, was the first rock musician to use the MOOG synthesizer in a rock composition, LUCKY MAN.

When Robert MOOG, the creator of the MOOG, heard the piece for the very first time, he was excited and stunned. Even he did not realize the power of the instrument he created. Emerson used jazz improvisational techniques in his classical rock compositions, such as KARN EVIL 9, TRILOGY & TARKUS.

Before the age of digital technology, Emerson created sounds by using banks of analog synthesizers that had to constantly be adjusted during live performances.

He would play three keyboards simultaneously, in front of crowds of 250,000 people (Isle of Wight Festival, Cal Jam, US festival, etc.), as lightning speed and finesse. To this day, no other keyboardist has matched these feats, even with the

more accessible, user friendly, digital technology.

Rick Wakeman, keyboardist for the band YES, was a close second in technique and power. His use of classical technique gave YES a unique sound that no one else in rock music had.

Albums such as *Fragile*, *Close to the Edge* & *Tales from Topographical Oceans* used madrigal harmonies, deeply rich synthesizer and guitar passages, as well as futuristic and fantasy styled lyrics to suggest other worlds and realities.

His successor in YES, Swiss born Patrick Moraz, went a step farther, creating the first Jazz Rock Brazilian fusion album.

The period from 1970 to 1974 was perhaps the most exciting and experimental period in both Jazz Fusion and Progressive Rock. The breakup of the BEATLES, as well as the Miles Davis Quintet, signaled an open season in free musical expression.

In Jazz, labels such as CTI and Blue Note were allowing musicians to explore the new technology and freedom. In Rock, musicians had far more creative control to experiment with song length, production, tempo, lyric content, and even album cover art.

Bands like Pink Floyd created sonic masterworks like *DARK SIDE OF THE MOON*, still the best selling rock album of all time. Their follow up album, *The WALL*, is still our personal favorite album. It is the most introspective of progressive rock albums.

Around the same time (1974), the band Weather Report, featuring ex Miles Davis alumni Joe Zawinul and Wayne Shorter, created a third world style of jazz, funk and Prog, with albums like *Heavy Weather* & *Mysterious Traveler*.

The use of African and Caribbean rhythms, sparse synthesizer tracks, and of beat time signatures reinvented the Jazz-fusion genre.

What may be the most rock-oriented album of that same year in Jazz-fusion, was the masterpiece *ROMANTIC WARRIOR*. Made up of Chick Corea (also from the Miles Davis group), guitarist Al Dimeola, bassist Stanley Clarke and drummer Lenny White (who had played with the rock group Frank Zappa), *ROMANTIC WARRIOR* took fusion to new level of power and speed, not unlike what Progressive Rock groups like Rush, ELP and YES were doing.

The difference was that rock had lyrics and vocals, while jazz-fusion usually did not. The musical styles of the two genres seemed to merge at this point.

The same year, the band Genesis released its finest album; *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*. This 2 record set explored the world of a teenager named Raoul, who lived in New York City, and who came of age.

Similar in theme to the Who's *Tommy*, this record used dissonant tonalities, thundering arrangements and constantly changing tempos. Peter Gabriel, the lead singer for Genesis, would wear over six costumes on stage while performing *Lamb*.

His use of outrageous costumes rivaled everyone in the rock field, even that of his contemporary and friend David Bowie. Gabriel quit Genesis after the final show of *Lamb*, and after a 2-year hiatus, went on to a successful solo career that is still active.

He was on lead vocals replaced by drummer Phil Collins, who kept the spirit of Prog alive with the follow up albums *The Trick of the Tail* & *Wind and Wuthering*. The band changed its style after that, to become more pop oriented. The group recently united to re-create the last section of *Lamb* for the box set, *Genesis, Volume 1*.

Jethro Tull explored darker themes in music, with the album *Passion Play* (1973), a story about the devil and temptation. Incorporating children's nursery rhymes, rich guitar passages, and tempo changes, this was an entire concept album from start to finish, one continuous piece of music.

Such was the freedom in professional music at the time, where artist themselves could dictate to the studios what they wanted to produce, unlike today. Yesâ€™s *Close to the Edge* featured an entire side, 26 minutes in length, with one piece.

Their follow up album, *Tales*, featured four compositions, each an album side in length, exploring the *Book of Life*. It was a bit much for critics to digest, who dismissed the band as pompous and pretentious.

It was in fact rock criticism itself that brought about the demise of Progressive Rock as a viable genre. Dubbed Dinosaur Rock, critics constantly lambasted all the key bands of the genre, all the while touting Glam Rock as the next big thing, or later Disco, then Punk and New Wave.

The vast majority of rock criticism truly had it in for Prog. The rise of corporate radio in the mid seventies, along with the demise of free style programming, doomed any sort of experimentation, beyond that which was socially accepted by the radio station and their advertisers.

Long tunes like *Tales*, *Passion Play*, *Lamb*, *Tarkus*, would never be played on radio again. This cut into sales, which affected the artists chance to experiment.

The groups were still able to perform their longer work to the live audiences, but as far as the radio was concerned, they were locked out forever. Like the dinosaurs they were named after, they perished or faded in to oblivion.

Or did they? With the rise of the baby boomer market, and the desire to see old bands perform again, a resurgence of Prog happened, thanks primarily to the Internet.

Fans were able to talk to each, organize concerts, tours, and reunions. A horde of new bands appeared world wide, in countries like Sweden (*The Flower Kings*), Italy (*Banco*), Brazil (*Tempus Fugit*), and elsewhere. Concert gatherings like *Prog West*, *Baja Prog*, and others were held in all over the world.

While the USA seemed bored with the genre, the rest of the world did not. Band such as *Spocks Beard*, which we have seen a few times, play to crowds of 500 people here, can perform to thousands of fans in Europe, and are as popular over there as Rap is over here.

In Brazil, *Rush* played to widely enthusiastic sold-out performances in Rio (*RUSH in RIO*), Sao Paulo, & Florinapolis. Brazil currently host one of the largest Progressive Rock Festivals annually in Sao Paulo.

And what of Jazz Fusion? After the ground breaking of *Chick Corea*, *Weather Report*, *Herbie Hancock*, *Miles*, et al. the sound became pasteurized and homogenized.

It became the status quo of jazz, becoming what is referred to as *WAVE* music. Musicians such as *Spyra Gyra*, *Kenny G*, and *Grover Washington, Jr.*, made fusion easy listening music. The fire was gone.

That period, from 1970 to 1975, from the end of *Beatles* to the birth of *Disco*, still remains the most experimental and challenging period of pop and jazz music, thanks to technology and opportunity, creative freedom and fan enthusiasm. *Progressive Rock* and *Jazz Fusion* pushed the limits of what was possible.

With outstanding laser light shows, inventive stage design, state of the art electronic musical instruments and coliseum-sized crowds, *Progressive Rock* challenged the senses.

Even the most popular band of today have borrowed from the same techniques pioneered by ELP, YES, RUSH, GENESIS, FLOYD, etc.

These bands still perform today; still produce new work, though admittedly not as profound as their earlier masterworks. That task is left to the younger generation of progressive music.

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