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Paper:

Johnes, M. (2018). Consuming Popular Music: Individualism, Politics and Progressive Rock. *Cultural and Social History*, 1-20.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2018.1426815>

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Consuming Popular Music: Individualism, Politics, and Progressive Rock

In August 1976 *Melody Maker* reviewed a new band called the Sex Pistols. It declared its singer

the elected generalissimo of a new cultural movement scything through the grassroots disenchantment with the present state of mainstream rock. You need look no further than the letters pages of any *Melody Maker* to see that fans no longer silently accept the disdain with which their heroes, the rock giants, treat them.

They feel deserted. Millionaire rock stars are no longer part of the brotherly rock fraternity that helped create them in the first place. Rock was meant to be a joyous celebration; the inability to see the stars or to play the music of those you can see is making a whole generation of rock fans feel depressingly inadequate.¹

The idea that rock music lost its way in the 1970s became received wisdom in academic and popular histories. The academic historian David Simonelli thus suggested that by the middle of the decade, ‘British rock music seemed dead, emotionally and artistically’.² Contemporary cultural theorists were not impressed either, seeing rock music as another consumer product and, instead, celebrating what they saw as the more authentic and political subcultures of mods, rockers and punks.³

Although the contemporary criticisms were of a broad canon of rock music, in retrospect it is progressive rock that is usually blamed for the state of 1970s music. Progressive rock, or ‘prog’ as it often now nicknamed, was a form of music based around complex and often long songs, virtuoso musicianship, classical influences and surreal or intellectualized lyrics and artwork. None of these characteristics endeared the music to fans or critics who sought something more accessible. One punk singer recalled:

as a music fan in the early to mid 70s, there was precious little to identify with at the time. All that overblown dinosaur stadium rock with those appalling coke fuelled rock

¹ *Melody Maker*, 7 August 1976.

² David Simonelli, *Working Class Heroes: Rock Music and British Society in the 1960s and 1970s* (Lanham, 2013), xviii

³ The classic study is Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain* (Birmingham, 1975).

stars singing songs about Merlin and Pixies and Henry the 8th's wives and the like – what did THAT have to do with a bloke on the dole in Croydon?⁴

John Street's classic study of popular music attacked progressive rock for being conservative and encouraging 'almost complete passivity' amongst audiences.⁵

Even if the accusations of pomp and pretension are accepted, progressive rock still played an important role in British youth culture in the 1970s. Just over a month before the *Melody Maker* crowned the Sex Pistols as leaders of the rebellion, a *New Musical Express* review of Genesis at the Hammersmith Odeon noted that for the audience the progressive rock band 'articulated some very important feelings and emotions, and perhaps even represented a view of the world or a lifestyle'. This was a 'very young' crowd, full of 'lots of intense shining faces and a very infectious enthusiasm' and who 'were absolutely ecstatic. They just went wild.' One of them told the reviewer that The Who and Rolling Stones were 'oldies bands' but Genesis were playing 'the music of the Seventies'. The reviewer agreed, concluding 'They are very much what is happening'. Yet he did not understand or like all the songs and summed up, 'It was like watching a movie in a foreign language – a movie that you have been assured is brilliant, progressive, sexy and all that is good and wonderful and yet being unable to follow the action.'⁶

Trying to decode what fans saw in and derived from the music of Genesis and other progressive rock bands is the overarching aim of this article. It aims to reclaim the historical significance of a derided genre of music, not because of its artistic value but rather its sociological importance.⁷ It also seeks to shift the historiography of popular music from a focus on bands and wider social reactions to a more fan-centric perspective and, in doing so, demonstrate the political and social implications of music forming an integral part of many young people's lives. Social scientists have long pointed to the sense of empowerment, pleasure, and cultural capital popular culture can deliver. Indeed, since the 1990s, 'fan studies' has emerged as a discreet multidisciplinary area of inquiry. It accepts fans as an 'active audience' able to draw their own meanings from texts, whilst also pointing to how

⁴ Captain Sensible, 'Foreword Two', in Alex Ogg, *No More Heroes: A Complete History of UK Punk from 1976 to 1980* (London, 2006), 10-11.

⁵ John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford, 1986), 190-2.

⁶ *New Musical Express* (hereafter NME), 19 June 1976.

⁷ There have been a number of attempts to rehabilitate the genre as a musical form. Most notably see Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell, *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock since the 1960s* (London, 2011) and Kevin Holm-Hudson (ed.), *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (London, 2002).

music can offer a sense of identity and community to those who consume it.⁸ Such perspectives have been important in demonstrating how the meaning of popular music is more complex than it might first appear. Walser's study of heavy metal, for example, argued that while the music might seem to be nihilist, rebellious and rejective, it was actually creating alternative communities based on something fans found more credible than existing identities and institutions.⁹

Historians, in contrast, have often chosen to concentrate on wider reactions to music rather than how and why fans consumed it.¹⁰ Nonetheless, some have also argued that popular music had an influence upon individuals and in turn society. Those studying the 1960s have identified how the decade saw popular music became an integral part of the counterculture, inspiring people to push for social change, even if ultimately unsuccessfully.¹¹ Garland *et al* have suggested that the history of popular music and youth culture matters, not just because it is an important and formative stage in individuals' lives, but also because they facilitate 'much subsequent social, political and cultural change'.¹² Similarly, Donnelly argued that music 'allowed young people to shape their own environment'.¹³ Testing such assertions means looking at the fans themselves. One of the few historians to do this is Keith Gildart. His study of rock'n'roll makes the familiar argument that 'an array of social identities' were being 'confirmed, challenged and transformed by working-class youths in their creation, performance and consumption of rock'n'roll'. But he also actually demonstrates this by examining both the memories and contemporary texts produced by musical fans.¹⁴ Yet, like other historians' forays into popular music, Gildart's work is dominated by working-class genres that were, or are, fashionable or had some obvious wider significance. Thus, while 1950s rock'n'roll, punk and the iconic bands of the 1960s have all

⁸ For social science work on music fandom see Mark Duffett, *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices* (London, 2014) and Dan Laughey, *Music and Youth Culture* (Edinburgh, 2006), 28-37.

⁹ Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, 1993). Another notable example is Susan Fast, *The Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford, 2001).

¹⁰ This is not to argue that such perspectives are not important. For examples of how broader reactions to popular music can be utilised to understand contemporary culture and politics see Marcus Collins, 'The age of the Beatles': Parliament and popular music in the 1960s', *Contemporary British History*, 27, 1 (2013), 85-107. Gillian A. M. Mitchell, 'Reassessing 'the Generation Gap': Bill Haley's 1957 tour of Britain, inter-generational relations and attitudes to Rock 'n' Roll in the Late 1950s', *20th Century British History*, 24, 4 (2013), 573-605.

¹¹ Oded Helbronner, 'Music and protest: the case of the 1960s and its long shadow', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 51, 3 (2016), 688-700.

¹² Jon Garland et al, 'Youth culture, popular music and the end of 'Consensus' in post-war Britain', *Contemporary British History*, 26 (2012), 265-71, 267.

¹³ Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (Harlow, 2005), 35.

¹⁴ Keith Gildart, *Images of England Through Popular Music: Class, Youth and Rock'n'Roll, 1955-1976* (Basingstoke, 2013).

been studied for their social and political messages and impact, historians marginalize the seemingly trivial and introspective genres of teenage pop, disco and heavy and progressive rock.¹⁵

Exploring the consumption of popular music in the past is not easy but a range of sources do exist. The historian does have access to a range of ethnographic studies from the 1970s that investigated popular music and youth culture more broadly. Historians of class and community have made much use of contemporary ethnography and, although such studies can be frustratingly vague in their methodology and terminology, they are valuable because they at least attempted to offer unprejudiced and descriptions and assessments of their subjects.¹⁶ Oral history and reminiscences, too, have potential but, in the field of popular culture, they are particularly prone to nostalgia. Moreover, those most likely to volunteer for a study of a musical genre are probably those most committed to it, and thus perhaps unrepresentative of its broader appeal. Letters to the music press offer an important alternative. Historians of love and relationships have made particular use of readers' letters, despite concerns around editorial selection, to investigate popular feelings. Langhamer has argued, for example, that advice columns were spaces of 'cultural contestation' where people did not simply accept the perspectives of 'experts' and cultural norms.¹⁷ Letters to the music press worked in a similar fashion and allow the historian of popular music to step beyond a top-down view of a genre. The writers of such letters did not simply accept the critical judgments of journalists; they articulated their own thoughts and feelings around what they listened to. Of course, not every fan read or wrote to a music magazine but the letters were often very self-reflective and aware of how others judged their tastes. They also mattered to the music press, itself an important source. Journalists were interested in their audience. They saw music as both an art form and cultural movement and wrote about it accordingly.¹⁸ Even when journalists disagreed, their readers' views were still published, not least because the irreverent tone of the magazines meant such letters could be laughed at. For readers,

¹⁵ For a short example of the potential of using music that seems to lack cultural value for studying important historical themes see William Whyte, 'The *Jackie* generation: girls' magazines, pop music and the discourse revolution', in Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, William Whyte and Sarah Williams (eds), *Redefining Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London, 2007), 128-37.

¹⁶ For an example of using ethnographies and sociological studies as historical sources see Selina Todd, Afluence, Class and Crown Street: Reinvestigating the Post-War Working Class', *Contemporary British History*, 22, 4 (2008), 501-18.

¹⁷ Claire Langhamer, 'Everyday advice on everyday love: romantic expertise in mid-twentieth century Britain', *L'Homme*, 24, 1 (2013).

¹⁸ For an overview of the evolution of the music press see Gestur Gudmundsson, Ulf Lindberg, Morten Michelsen and Hans Weisethaunet, 'Brit crit: turning points in British rock criticism, 1960-1990', in Steve Jones (ed), *Pop Music and the Press* (Philadelphia, 2002), 41-64.

music magazines were thus more than simply somewhere to find out about music. They were engaged with, thought about and, like other special interest magazines, they helped create a sense of community amongst readers.¹⁹ It was because music magazines helped make readers feel active parts of a cultural group that they are so important to any historian wishing to study that group.

For its fans, progressive rock had real significance. It gave young people both escape and entertainment and a sense of individualism, community, and intellectual reward. As with all forms of popular music, this was derived from both the music itself and the imagery, iconography and style associated with it. The importance of progressive rock to its fans was rooted in the fact that it was not a genre enjoyed by everyone. Indeed, it was consciously regarded, by both its makers and consumers, as distinctly different to more commercial pop music. Yet a few progressive rock records were also amongst the best-selling albums of the 1970s and a genre that was supposed to be about being different became part of the mainstream. The more popular the music became, the more variations there were in listeners' relationships with it. Moreover, many of the values articulated in progressive rock, not least the discontent with contemporary society and the emphasis on intellectual values, were also shared by many within the broader social framework that fans wanted to rebel against. Thus, as progressive rock shows, popular music held a plurality of different meanings for its consumers, some of which were seemingly contradictory.

This is a reminder of the importance of treating the past as a collection of individuals rather than a homogeneous mass. Historians have begun to argue that a popular individualism was one of defining characteristics of the 1970s. It was marked by changes in traditional family structures and rising mass consumption and had profound consequences through the growth of identity politics and the decline of class voting. This probably contributed to Margaret Thatcher's success in 1979 but it also manifested itself in a growing number of non-party-political middle-class campaigns and even the rising number of strikes can be seen as a product of the individualism, citizenship and entitlement that full employment and the welfare state produced.²⁰ Progressive rock was another outcome of individualism and evidence of just how pervasive and far reaching it was. It also illustrates

¹⁹ Carolyn Kitch, 'Theory and methods of analysis: models for understanding magazines' in David Abrahamson and Marica R. Prior-Miller, *The Routledge Handbook of Magazine Research* (London: Routledge, 2015), 9-21.

²⁰ Emily Robinson, Camilla Schofield, Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, 'Telling stories about post-war Britain: popular individualism and the 'crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History* (2017), 1-37.

how the significance of individualism extended far beyond the current historiographical emphasis on how people interacted with politics and wider groupings based on class, gender or ethnicity. Individualism shaped at least some people's cultural tastes and consumption habits but also paradoxically helped form a sense of community amongst individuals who felt different from the mainstream. In this sense, individualism was indeed one of the defining characteristics of 1970s British society and progressive rock was one of its causes and manifestations.

Progressive rock and its audience

Progressive rock's origins lie in the late 1960s fragmentation of popular music into pop and rock.²¹ The former began to be considered by critics as trivial and commercial, whilst the latter was seen as more artistic and serious. Rock also became associated with the counterculture and was judged by musicians and fans as having the potential to transform global culture and politics. It began to absorb a wider range of musical influences, including elements from classical musical and non-western cultures. These two developments led to the label 'progressive' being attached to a wide variety of bands from established rock acts such as the Rolling Stones, and protest singers such as Bob Dylan, to the underground and psychedelic acts that were influenced by LSD and experimented with song structures.

By 1969, psychedelic music was very fashionable and at the heart of the hippie counterculture movement. Its acts, such as Pink Floyd and the Moody Blues, gave concerts with light and visual accompaniments where people could 'freak out' and enjoy 'experiences' rather than just be entertained. They sold albums in healthy numbers too and that led record companies to seek out new bands, to tolerate their existing acts experimenting rather than conforming to commercial expectations, and to throw considerable marketing resources at the results. As psychedelic music moved away from its LSD preoccupations and was promoted by the record companies, what is now regarded as progressive rock emerged. King Crimson's *In the Court of King Crimson* (1969), with its fantastical lyrics and imagery, might be considered the first progressive rock album. It reached number 5 in the charts and soon other bands were also producing albums of long, complex songs with prominent solos and

²¹ For comprehensive histories of the genre's development see Paul Stump, *The Music's All that Matters: A History of Progressive Rock* (London, 1997) and Edward Macan, *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture* (Oxford, 1997).

keyboards, classical influences, and surreal covers and lyrics. These were the dominant features of what was a distinct but complicated genre that was rarely actually called progressive rock at the time by critics, fans or artists. Some preferred the terms art or symphonic rock, especially as bands experimented with orchestras and elaborate visual shows. Whatever it was called, the music was taken seriously by both the musical and wider press. In 1972, for example, a reviewer in *The Times* said that Pink Floyd were the ‘ultimate statement’ of why he believed in pop music.²² Cumulatively, the archetypal ‘prog’ bands - ELP, Genesis, Jethro Tull, Pink Floyd and Yes - achieved sixteen top ten and four number one albums in the UK over the course of the 1970s. These bands also helped boost the whole market for albums, which saw the production of 12” vinyl records in the UK rise from 65.9m units in 1970 to 105.6m in 1974.²³

Anecdotal and photographic evidence of concerts suggests most, although far from all, progressive rock fans were male.²⁴ Less certain is their class base. Part of the contempt progressive rock came to be held in was rooted in the idea that it was a middle-class art form. Even many defenders of the genre accept this class analysis. Musicologist Edward Macan argues that progressive rock in the period 1970-76 was:

a regionally distinct subculture that was essentially homogeneous in terms of its members’ ages and class origins. Like the musicians, the audience was young (under thirty); it was centred above all in southeastern England; its socioeconomic background was solidly middle-class; and it shared the musicians’ general educational backgrounds, and thus their familiarity with the art, literature, and music of high culture.²⁵

Progressive rock was certainly not a southern subculture: its fans stretched across the UK and the university concert circuit was central to how it first gained attention and popularity. Indeed, in 1974, *The Times* claimed that Genesis were ‘the latest product of British provincial audiences’.²⁶ However, the argument that progressive rock was middle-class cannot be dismissed so easily. Certainly, some bands had affluent origins. Genesis were formed at Charterhouse, a leading public school, while one historian has described Pink Floyd as

²² *The Times*, 18 February 1972, 10.

²³ BPI Year Book 1978 (British Phonographic Industry, 1978), 114.

²⁴ For a claim of female teenage progressive rock fans see Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, ‘Girls and subcultures’, in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in post-war Britain* (Birmingham, 1975), 220.

²⁵ Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, 151-2.

²⁶ *The Times*, 15 January 1974, 7.

‘probably the most socially privileged British pop group in history’.²⁷ But some others had distinct working-class roots. The singer of Yes was from a solidly working-class background in Accrington, while the bass-player’s parents were a London cabbie and secretary. Yet he also attended a public school, while other progressive rock musicians had working-class parents but attended grammar schools.²⁸ In an era of social mobility, blurred class boundaries and a mass media, no cultural form could be unproblematically assigned to a particular class.

The earliest audience for progressive music were members of the counterculture, or ‘hippies’ and ‘heads’ as they were typically known. This was the group that took LSD, inhabited communes and squats and supported psychedelic bands in the 1960s; it was also widely assumed to be middle class in background. By the early 1970s, their numbers were dwindling, and some adherents combined aspects of the lifestyle with jobs, but, whatever they were doing, they retained their musical tastes and formed an important component of the audiences of older progressive bands such as Pink Floyd and Yes. Reflecting on a 1971 European tour, Van Der Graaf Generator told an interviewer: ‘Our audience is a pretty interesting cross section – fifty per cent heads and 40 per cent straights’.²⁹ This dichotomy was misleading because the genre’s popularity with teenagers and students, still bound by choice or aspiration to education, meant that even in the late 1960s progressive music was never only listened to by those who had ‘dropped out’. There was also an audience for progressive music amongst more conventional young people who had left education, especially as ‘prog’ bands’ profile grew in the early 1970s. The diversity of audiences is further suggested by a 1973 government investigation into rock music festivals. It argued that that festival-goers were not just long-haired unemployed hippies but also people who felt an antipathy to such types, including young civil servants and non-political youngsters. It thought most of the audiences were between 16 and 30 and that sixty percent were at school, college or university; the vast majority, it concluded, were ‘decent’.³⁰

A handful of contemporary ethnographic studies did try to disentangle the musical tastes of different classes. Although they used wide definitions of progressive music and failed to define clearly where they drew class boundaries, they do suggest that progressive rock audiences were dominated by the middle classes. One study of fifteen-year-olds

²⁷ David Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920-c.1970* (Basingstoke, 2008), 180.

²⁸ Chris Welch, *Close to the Edge: The Story of Yes* (London, 2000), 17, 24. Dan Hedges, *Yes: The Authorized Biography* (London, 1981), 15.

²⁹ *Record Mirror*, 29 May 1971.

³⁰ The National Archives, AT51/64: ‘Pop festivals – what is their attraction’ (1973). From draft report of Advisory committee on pop festivals.

conducted at the end of the 1960s found that whereas 43 per cent of middle-class pupils said their favourite music was ‘Underground-progressive’, just 8 per cent of working-class ones did. It claimed that middle-class children were more likely to see music as a source of values and explained this by arguing that the greater exposure of working-class teenagers to street culture meant they less needed to turn to popular music for the alternative values and roles that school could not give them.³¹ Progressive rock, a genre, as will be demonstrated, imbued with ideas of being different, thus appealed to middle-class teenagers whose lives were otherwise dominated by education. A 1972 ethnographic study in the Yorkshire industrial town of Keighley also found that teenagers in the top stream at school - a mostly but not exclusively middle-class group - preferred progressive to commercial music.³² This all suggests that education was a key determinant of whether progressive rock was liked and since the middle class was more likely to have an extended education, they made up a disproportionate part of the genre’s audience. Nonetheless, thanks to the 1944 Education Act and the expansion of higher education following the 1963 Robbins Report, education was also a route to a degree of contemporary social mobility in the 1970s. By the early 1980s, more than a quarter of university students were from ‘manual homes’.³³ Education thus accounts for the existence of some working-class ‘prog’ fans and perhaps may even have acted as a marker of status for those whose position in the educated middle class was undermined by their family backgrounds.

However, not all working-class fans were in continuing education. The late 1960s study of fifteen year olds also found that young people who were not interested in education but were deeply so in music were the most likely of all pupils to be interested in progressive music.³⁴ The Keighley study similarly found teenagers who had failed educationally but still felt different to the working-class lifestyle that probably lay ahead of them and they used progressive music to find some escape and sense of meaning.³⁵ Another study of teenagers, this time on a north London working-class council estate between 1972 and 1974, interviewed individuals who for whom a taste for ‘prog’, soul or other less mainstream forms

³¹ Graham Murdock and Guy Phelps, *Mass Media and the Secondary School* (Macmillan, 1973), 109.

³² Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London, 1983), 205-12.

³³ Kenneth Roberts, *Youth and Leisure* (London, 1983), 162.

³⁴ Murdock and Phelps, *Mass Media*, 110.

³⁵ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 212.

of music was part of a wider sense of distance from their class and community environments. It offered them some creative outlet that was denied to them in other parts of their lives.³⁶

Thus, although the boundaries were far from fixed, popular music tastes did have some relationship with class, even if it was sometimes a way for people to signal their exclusion rather than attachment to the class cultures of their parents and surroundings. Progressive rock thus confirms the position of those social scientists who argue that lifestyles and consumption can be emancipatory and a way of escaping rather reinforcing class positions.³⁷ However, this was far from universal and class divides were evident within youth culture if only because buying records and attending concerts was not cheap, particularly in an era of inflation and rising youth unemployment.³⁸ The typical Recommended Retail Price for a 12" popular music record rose from £2.12½ in 1971 to £3.25 in 1976 and thus it was perhaps unsurprising that working-class music fans were thought to prefer 7" singles.³⁹ Class may thus have been permeable and in flux in the 1970s but it remained an influence on many aspects of popular culture and the majority of progressive rock fans were probably middle class, if only through their education. Indeed, it is probably better to describe the progressive rock audience as one defined far more by an extended education than by class.

Progressive rock's otherness

As ethnographic studies showed, in both working-class and middle-class groups, progressive rock was always a minority taste compared with commercial popular music. The majority of young people derived their tastes from what they heard on the radio or *Top of the Pops* and judged tunes on the appeal of the singer or the dance potential of the tune rather than the aesthetics of the music.⁴⁰ In contrast, progressive rock fans tended to take the music very seriously. The roots of this were in the counterculture that gave birth to 'prog'. It had placed great emphasis on music's artistic, experimental and spiritual potential. For its members, music was an 'experience' rather than just a source of pleasure. This was especially true

³⁶ David Robins and Philip Cohen, *Knuckle Sandwich: Growing Up in the Working-Class City* (Harmondsworth, 1978), 56, 122-3.

³⁷ Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (Basingstoke, 1985), 16-7.

³⁸ For an exploration of this point for the 1960s see Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain*, ch. 9.

³⁹ BPI Year Book 1978, 116. Geoff Mungham and Geoffrey Pearson, *Working Class Youth Culture* (London, 1976)

⁴⁰ Murdock and Phelps, *Mass Media*, 109, 122.

when they combined listening with drug taking. Hippies reported that music, especially the complex songs with sound effects that characterized progressive rock, could exacerbate the sense of wonder and enjoyment derived from drugs.⁴¹ Underground musicians told an ethnographer in 1970 that their music would liberate people from their social constrictions, enabling them to be happier. This meant the music had an almost ‘magical significance’.⁴² Such interpretations were not just limited to the ‘drop outs’ at the heart of the counterculture. One 1972 ethnographic study noted how fifteen-year-old fans of ‘prog’ and rock listened to the record player with their friends ‘as if it were Moses, bringing messages from on high’.⁴³ The relatively high cost of albums encouraged people to take their purchases this seriously: they were investments, not something to be bought and then quickly forgotten. Many fans were clearly very passionate about the music. A 1972 letter to *NME*, declared, for example of Genesis: ‘melodic beauty complexity and excitement. No insipid boogie music or heavy riffs; no superstars or tasteless synthesizer exploitation; just good, honest music. Take a listen to Genesis and forget about your pin-up heroes. Genesis deserve your attention a million times more than any no. 1 album seller.’⁴⁴ A teenager told the 1972 ethnographic study of Keighley: ‘Rock music, progressive and heavy are fantastic. If they were not there life would not be worth living.’⁴⁵ Thus, it was not without reason, that a philosophical study of the genre argued: ‘people who are into progressive rock seem to *love* this music, seem to think that is important, seem to feel that it speaks to them on the level of the soul and not just as passing entertainment’.⁴⁶

The very character of progressive rock encouraged people to listen carefully and contemplate. The songs were usually longer than the standard three or four minutes of popular music. They often contained multiple sections, lacked regular rhythms and were not something to dance to. The lyrics were a mix of mythology, fantasy, political comment and domestic scenes, sometimes all within a single song and often allegorical or symbolic.⁴⁷ Concept albums, where the songs were joined by an overarching theme or story, were common within the genre. This all created the idea that this was music to be taken seriously

⁴¹ Paul E. Willis, *Profane Culture* (London, 1978) ch. 7.

⁴² Richard Mills, *Young Outsiders: A Study of Alternative Communities* (London, 1973), ch. 5.

⁴³ Frith, *Sound Effects*, p. 211. For memories of this see Giles Smith, *Lost in Music: A Pop Odyssey* (London, 1995), 77-82.

⁴⁴ *NME*, 8 July 1972.

⁴⁵ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 207.

⁴⁶ Bill Martin, *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock, 1968-78* (Chicago, 1997), 15.

⁴⁷ For a full discussion of lyrical themes see Macan, *Rocking the Classics*, ch. 4, and Hegarty and Halliwell, *Beyond and Before*, ch. 8.

and which required attention, in a fashion not dissimilar to classical music. The music press also encouraged fans to see ‘prog’ as something serious that required multiple listens before a judgement could be reached. It was certainly not uncritical in its analyses which discussed and appraised the music.⁴⁸ A review of a King Crimson album concluded ‘*Larks' Tongues In Aspic* is a challenging record, but its rewards are very substantial, even if you'd have to be an odd mixture of a person to like it all without reservation.’⁴⁹ Such judgments invited intellectual curiosity and empowered people’s own sense of individualized taste. The music press also published interviews where artists spoke about their music in high tones, discussing philosophical, religious and classical influences.⁵⁰ Steve Howe of Yes, for example, said in one 1973 interview: ‘*Close To The Edge* was the first humanistic piece we've done. Before, it had always been semi-ethereal. ... We felt the way to reach simplicity is to go through complexity ... If Yes had just gone through projecting simplicity, we'd either have been two years ahead of ourselves or five years behind.’⁵¹ Peter Hammill declared that his albums would not reach a wide audience because some people would think them too difficult.⁵² All this must have encouraged a certain sense of elitism amongst those who felt they could understand the music. Album sleeves reinforced all this. The cover of Egg’s debut 1970 album even stated that the music was serious and ‘not for dancing to’.⁵³ Whereas pop record sleeves typically featured photographs of the artists, ‘prog’ covers were art and held clues, references and symbols that helped explain and expand upon the lyrics printed on their insides. Comedian Griff Rhys Jones recalls spending hours as a teenager browsing in record shops, hardly ever buying anything but instead admiring the artwork.⁵⁴

The seriousness of progressive rock was clear at concerts. Interaction with the crowd from those onstage might be minimal and the music and lights took precedence over showmanship, with some musicians even playing whilst seated. This could all lead to rather strange atmosphere. *NME* noted that the crowd at a 1974 ELP gig in London: ‘were uniform heavy duty denim, unsmiling and dour, almost drab. I think few concerts in recent times have attracted a bunch of people less disposed towards frivolousness.’⁵⁵ A review of King Crimson in 1973 noted that the crowd watched and listened ‘with evident concentration –

⁴⁸ For example, *Let It Rock*, February 1974.

⁴⁹ *NME*, 10 March 1973.

⁵⁰ For example, *NME*, 25 August 1973.

⁵¹ *Disc*, 2 June 1973.

⁵² *Melody Maker*, 3 August 1974.

⁵³ Stump, *The Music's All That Matters*, 78.

⁵⁴ Griff Rhys Jones, *Semi-Detached* (London, 2007), 184.

⁵⁵ *NME*, 27 April 1974.

albeit applauding upon the conclusion of the performance with equally evident feeling'.⁵⁶ When songs were upbeat, as they could be since 'prog' sometimes incorporated elements of improvisation, heavier rock and jazz, concerts could be far livelier. A 1970 review of ELP noted how a 2,000-strong crowd at Birmingham were 'dancing in the aisles, clapping and stamping'.⁵⁷ That same year, ELP's keyboardist proclaimed that the band believed in 'getting the audience to an even bigger better orgasmic peak'.⁵⁸ Whether the gigs were sedate or orgasmic, audiences found them inspiring and even life changing. One fan remembered of his first King Crimson concert in 1972: 'I felt myself somehow altered ... There was a tangible thrill of the unknown in the air, a glimpse of something'.⁵⁹

The wonder some experienced at their first concert probably owed something to the fact that prog was not easily discovered. It was rarely played on the radio (apart from the late night slots on Radio 1) and or on television.⁶⁰ Instead, fans tended to discover it through older siblings, friends or acquaintances at school with reputations for good musical tastes.⁶¹ Even getting hold of records was not always straightforward, with supply chains not as efficient as they might be, independent record stores often depending on the tastes of owners and multiples, such as Woolworth's and W. H. Smith, concentrating on chart music. Yet this obscurity added to the appeal of the music. Consumers were able to think their tastes were not being influenced by commercial forces, even if the music was heavily advertised in the press. Artists also encouraged fans to think their tastes were not based on the influences of marketing men by stressing how their own images were not controlled or dictated.⁶²

Progressive rock thus had an otherness about it that appealed to people who wanted to be different. Danny Baker, then a rebellious working-class teenager, recalled rock's attraction compared with the more fashionable reggae, soul and Motown:

Those records were okay, they were very popular at parties, but they weren't new and peculiar to me in the way that *In the Court of Crimson King* by King Crimson, with

⁵⁶ NME, 3 November 1973.

⁵⁷ Sounds, 31 October 1970.

⁵⁸ Sounds, 31 October 1970.

⁵⁹ Sid Smith, *In the Court of King Crimson* (London: Helter Skelter, 2001), 7.

⁶⁰ For the BBC's attitude to progressive rock in its broadest sense see David Simonelli, 'BBC rock music programming on radio and television and the progressive rock audience, 1967-1973', *Popular Music History*, 21 (2007), 95-112.

⁶¹ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 209.

⁶² NME, 31 March 1973.

its startling album cover, suddenly was. This was weirdo music, different and difficult to track down ... It was vital and it was happening.⁶³

A 1972 ethnographic study found that teenage ‘prog’ fans thought of their tastes as individual. They chose and listened to records carefully, thinking about and appreciating the lyrics, whilst condemning commercial music as banal and trivial. They saw their culture as a rebellion against convention and unreasonable ideas and as more than just another style or fashion.⁶⁴ This was all a very conscious feeling and something to be displayed rather than kept quiet, leading pop fans to complain to the music press about the snobbery of the ‘pseudo snobs who just carry the album sleeve of an obscure group merely to impress’.⁶⁵ Such actions were perhaps necessary because progressive rock did not have a distinctive dress code and its fans tended to wear the longer hair, long coats or denim jackets that most youths who thought of themselves as somewhat alternative chose, whether they liked heavy rock, folk music or ‘prog’. To signal difference within this broader grouping, fans instead wore badges of their favourite bands or sowed band names onto their jackets. Those most vocal or visible about their progressive tastes seemed to have been the younger fans still at school. They had fewer alternative options to signal their rebellion and nonconformity. Long hair might be banned in their schools but music could offer a substitute.⁶⁶ But others angry or uncomfortable at their place in the world also used music in this way. Contemporary social scientists were right to argue that the young politicized their leisure (even if only in abstract terms) because they lacked power over other aspects of their lives such as education and work.⁶⁷ Music like progressive rock mattered so much to the young because it was almost all they had that was theirs.

Yet the desire for individualism did not equate with a rejection of wider collective identities. Like other musical subcultures, and indeed other broad facets of the rise of individualism, prog combined a sense of individuality with a wider sense of community. Walser has argued that heavy metal was an expression of a heroic individualism that appealed to alienated youths from both the working and middle classes, but which also created a new sense of community, based on the shared values and tastes of those alienated individuals.⁶⁸ Such dynamics led one teacher, discussing mods and rockers in the early 1960s, to write of

⁶³ Danny Baker, *Going to Sea in a Sieve* (London, 2015), 60.

⁶⁴ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 205-12.

⁶⁵ *Melody Maker*, 3 April 1976.

⁶⁶ Jones, *Semi-Detached*, 185.

⁶⁷ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 200-1.

⁶⁸ Walser, *Running with the Devil*.

‘the cult of “individualism in unity”’.⁶⁹ ‘Prog’ worked in a similar way. People listened together, they swapped and recommended records; music was an important glue in friendships.⁷⁰ For all the individuality of ‘prog’, it was a social experience. It was also, like dressing in a certain way or smoking cannabis, a way for teenagers to feel part of an alternative society.⁷¹ Attending a concert was one way to assert that membership. At the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, student unions were important venues for progressive rock concerts since they were happy to book bands that were little known, innovative and challenging. This fitted with the self-image many students wanted to cultivate but it also helped associate the genre as an alternative to mainstream culture and lifestyle.⁷² Reflecting on a 1971 ELP concert in New York, *Melody Maker* proclaimed:

It was an amazing weekend, and proved once again just how today’s rock music HAS united the youth of the world against the crumby society. Bombarded with drugs, crime, war fever, pornography, traffic accidents, phoney patriotism, the young shout their freedom and hang on to their values, through rock music, whoever plays it, and where ever it is played.⁷³

Teenagers in the suburbs and others unable to attend gigs still aspired to be part of this alternative culture. One teenage fan later recalled:

The only obstacle in my path was the mind-numbing middle-class tedium of this deadbeat southern county where bugger-all ever seemed to happen. … There was a party going on somewhere and this wasn’t the centre of it. I wanted to belong to something. I was desperate for a sense of involvement.⁷⁴

Such memories and aspirations of course extended beyond ‘prog’ and they accord with the analysis of Frith who argued in 1978 that the middle-class use of rock was ‘a way into working-class adolescence’ and that it offered ‘the fantasy of a community of risk’, something illicit, exciting and different to their home lives.⁷⁵ The fantasy of this community came from the fact that it was not that different to the mainstream, a commercial product was being consumed and there was no real uniformity to this youth culture. Moreover, as there

⁶⁹ Gildart, *Images of England*, 124-5.

⁷⁰ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 209.

⁷¹ For memories of this Jones, *Semi-Detached*, 185-6.

⁷² Stump, *The Music’s All that Matters*, 72-4.

⁷³ *Melody Maker*, 8 May 1971.

⁷⁴ Mark Ellen, *Rock Stars Stole My Life! A Big Bad Love Affair with Music* (London, 2015), 48-9.

⁷⁵ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 217.

was for teenage girls, there was some safety in the rebellious rituals of listening to records in bedrooms, away from the dangers of humiliation or exclusion found at school or other public social spaces.⁷⁶ Progressive rock, with its weird sound effects, could even supply a narcotic-like experience without having to take any drugs. Whether listeners were actually part of an alternative society was not the point. Progressive rock, like all musical subcultures, made its fans feel they were part of a community of individuals that were beyond the mainstream.

The politics of ‘prog’

In reality, the rebellion that ‘prog’ (like other forms of music-based subcultures) offered was actually quite limited and contained within wider cultural parameters that parents would have approved of, something evident in how artists cited classical influences. Most notably, the genre’s intellectual base was in accord rather than at odds with the traditional requirements of education and a career. Indeed, because some songs and albums were based around often obscure books or legends, many of which listeners had probably not heard of before, two analysers of the genre argued that progressive rock opened ‘up cultural history as a resource’.⁷⁷ For fans from working-class backgrounds, ‘prog’ probably helped reconcile their aspirations and roots by allowing them to champion educational and intellectual values whilst also fitting in with the opposition to the mainstream that their peers who had not stayed on in education might espouse. Even the individualism at the heart of ‘prog’s’ appeal should not be misinterpreted as a sign that young people were all that different to their parents. In both working-class and middle-class culture, individualism and having control over one’s lives had always mattered, despite the simultaneous allure of collective identities based on community, class and nation, and in the 1970s this belief in personal autonomy and expression was growing across society.⁷⁸

The subject matter of progressive rock was conservative too, in the sense that it appealed to currents already strong within mainstream society. Dystopian or apocalyptic visions of the future in the lyrics reflected a fashion for such themes in the era’s fiction.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ McRobbie and Garber, ‘Girls and subcultures’, 220.

⁷⁷ Hegarty and Halliwell, *Beyond and Before*, 75.

⁷⁸ Mike Savage, for example, argue that there was always a strong ‘rugged individualism’ in working-class culture that could sit alongside collective ideals, experiences and outlooks. Mike Savage, ‘Sociology, class and male manual work cultures’, in J. McIlroy et al (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics vol. III The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot, 1999). Also see Robinson et al, ‘Telling stories’.

⁷⁹ Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London, 2009), 180.

Nor should the fantastical nature of many lyrics be mistaken for something removed from the mainstream; Tolkien and C. S. Lewis were both very widely-read authors, at least amongst the middle class.⁸⁰ Fantasy and science fiction might appear escapist on the surface but their appeal was often the fact that they spoke to cultural currents, whether that was the need for good to triumph over evil, cold war anxieties, environmentalism or even imperialist nostalgia. Alternatively, at a time when a sense of national decline was becoming part of the popular narrative, ‘prog’ could also be patriotic in ways the right-wing establishment might approve of. Steve Howe of Yes told the press that England ‘excites me more than any other country’.⁸¹ Some letters to the musical press explicitly celebrated how the quality and diversity of British rock bands showed that the UK led the world.⁸² When artists concentrated their gigging on the more profitable American market or left the UK for tax reasons, there could be a sense of almost patriotic resentment and frustration amongst fans.⁸³ The bands themselves did not appear to see themselves as particularly politicized, even in the early underground days. Pink Floyd’s drummer remembers that they were sympathetic to the underground’s aims but that their real interest was making it in the music industry.⁸⁴ Musicians shied away from overtly discussing politics but when they did their comments could be quite right wing. In 1971, for example, Keith Emmerson of ELP complained about unions crippling the economy, concluding that the working class was not that intelligent and could only be happy when it was being told what to do.⁸⁵

Even when artists were trying to say something political, there was no guarantee that all fans would consume music in the way its creators intended. After all, sometimes the symbolism could be so obscure that it was difficult to understand. Even members of Yes later conceded they did not always understand the lyrics of their own songs.⁸⁶ Establishing precisely how any form of music was listened to is impossible but progressive rock encouraged rather than required enraptured listening. The meanings of lyrics, artwork and musical passages did not have to be discussed or contemplated. An album could just as easily be background music played to accompany chat and play. Research in 1960s America found that many high school and college students did not understand or know what the

⁸⁰ Meredith Veldman, *Fantasy, the Bomb and the Greening of the Bomb: Romantic Protest, 1945-1980* (Cambridge, 1994), 94-8.

⁸¹ *Disc*, 2 June 1973.

⁸² *Melody Maker*, 10 July 1971.

⁸³ For example, *Melody Maker*, 19 April 1975 and 3 August 1974.

⁸⁴ Nick Mason, *Inside Out: A Personal History of Pink Floyd* (London, 2005), 49.

⁸⁵ *Crawdaddy!*, August 1971.

⁸⁶ *Rock Family Trees: The Prog Rock Years*, BBC2, 1998.

protest songs they listened to were about.⁸⁷ Such songs did not have the aura of complexity that surrounded ‘prog’ but a study of 1990s progressive rock fanzines argued that the music was not on the whole discussed in cerebral terms and that they had generally had an ‘anti-intellectual’ tone.⁸⁸ Although their readers were older and thus probably less likely to take music as seriously as the young, there is no reason why the same might not also have been true for some 1970s fans. While many certainly closely analysed the music, others probably just liked the tunes and the aura of difference it could give their image. Even the importance of this otherness might be diminished by the fact that progressive rock could be just one genre that people liked. Ethnographic studies seem to suggest that progressive rock’s fanbase overlapped with heavy rock but ‘prog’ records could also sit alongside pop, glam rock and soul in some people’s collections, just as fans of those genres also listened to other bands and artists.⁸⁹ Thus not every listener was likely to take progressive rock as seriously as its form and as sources from the music press might suggest, even if it is impossible to evidence what proportion of the audience behaved like this.

This does not mean there was no political significance to progressive rock and, like other forms of music, it had the power to shape and frame ideas.⁹⁰ It is unlikely that many fans would have thought much about the rights and wrongs of the 83 per cent taxation rate introduced in 1974 had it not been for the complaints of rock stars and the impact on their touring and place of residence.⁹¹ Within progressive rock songs, although sometimes hidden in allegory or symbolism, were social critiques of wars, modernity and politics.⁹² These might not have been different to themes common within more mainstream cultural and political discourses but that does not make them insignificant and they can be seen as another manifestation of the middle-class frustrations that were emerging at a time when the optimism of the counterculture had vanished, salaries were being eroded by inflation and young people could no longer rely on their education leading to a secure career. Even just through encouraging fans to think and question what they read, saw and heard, the music

⁸⁷ J. P. Robinson, and P. M. Hirsch, ‘Teenage responses to rock and roll protest songs’, and R. S. Denisoff and M. Levine, ‘Brainwashing or back-ground noise? The popular protest song’, both in Denisoff and Peterson, *The Sounds of Social Change* (Chicago, 1972).

⁸⁸ Chris Atton, ‘Living in the past? Value discourses in progressive rock fanzines’, *Popular Music*, 20, 1 (2001), 29-46.

⁸⁹ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 214.

⁹⁰ John Street, ‘Rock, pop and politics’, in Simon Frith, Will Straw and John Street (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock* (Cambridge, 2001), 243-55, 246-7.

⁹¹ For example, *Melody Maker*, 27 July 1974. For a fan’s concern around the impact of the tax see *Melody Maker*, 15 November 1975.

⁹² This has even two analysts to claim prog had a nasty side. Jay Keister and Jeremy L. Smith, ‘Musical ambition, cultural accreditation and the nasty side of progressive rock’, *Popular Music*, 27, 3 (2008), 433-55.

must have had some impact on people's world views in much the same way as humanities degrees developed critical thinking. Progressive rock, with all its undertones of challenging the mainstream, can also be seen as another agent within the gradual drift away from conformity within all aspects of British culture from sexual behaviours, to dress and religious adherence. This was not a rejection of hegemonic social values but rather a reluctance to be bound by old constrictions on individual behaviour and freedoms. Just as the growing numbers of people having pre-marital sex was not a rejection of marriage or family, the rebellion and individualism of progressive rock was not a rejection of consumerism, capitalism or the basic hierarchies of society. But it could encourage a sense of the right to be different and debate about how lives should be led and broader political issues. Perhaps it even fed into the support for the Conservatives in the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s. After all, Thatcher's appeal was rooted in rejecting the prevailing direction of 1970s society and reasserting the rights of the individual. It certainly became an integral part of some fans' understanding of who they were. One critic remembers that after writing that Genesis were dull and its singer was ugly, he received hundreds of neatly-typed letters from young professionals who felt he was 'deriding their way of life' and 'undermining their identity'.⁹³

One issue the genre did encourage open debate about in the music press, and possibly in student and sixth-form common rooms, was class. In a 1974 review of albums by Peter Hammill and Genesis, *NME* asked what public schoolboys were doing in rock, proclaiming it like finding a feminist splinter group at the Women's Institute or Hell's Angels at a Conservative club.⁹⁴ This offended some readers who thought it harsh, left wing or just bringing politics into music where it was not needed, probably replicating amongst youth the sense so prevalent amongst their parents that the middle class was underappreciated and undervalued.⁹⁵ Others argued over whether public-school musicians had improved music. One reader replied argued: 'I am sick of rock being exploited by middle-class parasites. Ever since the largely middle-class-dominated flower power period, we have been listening to, looking at, and reading about the fantasies of too many of these 'liberal' pansies.'⁹⁶

But this was an unusual example and for its fans 'prog' was rarely so overtly political. It provided entertainment, relaxation and escape more often than political inspiration. For

⁹³ Simon Frith, *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (London, 2007), 267-8.

⁹⁴ *NME*, 14 September 1974.

⁹⁵ On middle-class pessimism see Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979* (London, 2012), ch. 16.

⁹⁶ *NME*, 21 September 1974, 5 October 1974.

those wanting to get on, music provided relief from the pressures of education and seeking a career and a sense of ‘irresponsibility, self-indulgence, [and] fantasy’, as one academic put it in 1981.⁹⁷ It probably allowed people to feel they were rebelling without actually having to, even if no historical source actually ever says that. Many young people may have been angry at the state of the world but they still tended towards conventional aspirations for a family and a career and only a minority was politically active. A 1976 study of European youths found that that 41 per cent of British 17- and 18-year-olds felt they had ‘a lot to complain about’ but that just 7 per cent of UK respondents had a ‘strong’ or ‘very strong’ interest in politics.⁹⁸ ‘Prog’, like other musical forms, was an expression of that dissatisfaction but it did not articulate a solution. Indeed, any music that did offer a solution only risked alienating those who did not agree. Even punk, viewed by 1970s sociologists as a ritual of resistance, was not quite what it seemed. As Worley has argued, it gave ‘vent to frustrations of both socio-economic and existential origin at the precise moment when Britain itself was passing through a period of crisis, uncertainty and change’ but it was also not political in any traditional sense, rejecting links with any organization or party.⁹⁹ Similarly, Doyle’s study of 1970s northern soul argues that despite its drug associations and rebellion against Metropolitan fashions, it was escapism and a ‘culture of consolation’ rather than a ritual of resistance.¹⁰⁰ Progressive rock is a demonstration that it was not just the marginalized working classes who sought consolation in music. The socially mobile and middle classes too wanted music that voiced a sense of dissatisfaction with the mainstream but offered a sense of escape rather than a solution. Their parents complained about taxes and inflation and read pessimistic broadsheet accounts or books with titles such *The Decline and Fall of the Middle Class*, whilst finding consolation in laughing along with the sitcom rants of Basil Fawlty or Rupert Rigsby; at least some of their children expressed their dissatisfaction through, and found their consolation in, progressive rock.

Entering the mainstream

⁹⁷ Simon Frith, ‘“The magic can set you free”: the ideology of folk and the myth of the rock community’, *Popular Music*, 1 (1981), 159-168, 167.

⁹⁸ Schildt and Siegfried, ‘Youth’, 10, 11.

⁹⁹ Matthew Worley, ‘Shot by both sides: punk, politics and the end of ‘consensus’’, *Contemporary British History*, 26, 3 (2012), 333-54.

¹⁰⁰ Barry M. Doyle, ‘More than a dance hall, more a way of life: Northern Soul, masculinity and working class culture in 1970s Britain’, in Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried (ed), *Between Marx and Coca-Cola. Youth Cultures in Changing European Societies, 1960-1980* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), 313-32.

The prevalence of primacy of pleasure over politics in what fans took from progressive rock acts increased as the genre became more popular and grew into the mainstream of popular culture. This was not a universal trend but really one that centred on two albums: Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon*, which was released in 1973 and spent 367 weeks in the charts, and Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*, released in the same year and which spent 279 weeks on the charts. These huge sellers took the genre into the homes of people who had never before, and would never again, buy a 'prog' record. Both albums became parts of mainstream culture and were the fourth and fifth best-selling records of the decade, only outsold by Simon and Garfunkel and Fleetwood Mac. Their success owed much to how they made excellent incidental music: they were bought by different ages, played at dinner parties and, as one journalist noted, 'Millions of people across the globe have fucked to Dark Side of the Moon'.¹⁰¹ Both were also indicators of how aspects of wider youth culture – such as longer hair, flared trousers and falling deference – were becoming absorbed into the mainstream. People who had grown up with rock'n'roll in the 1950s were now responsible adults and happy to consume rock music that was melodic and pleasant rather than loud and rhythmic. Of course, these casual fans were less likely to be politically influenced by the music. One academic critic argued in 1983 that rock music in the previous decade had become routinized as its consumption became a matter of pleasure and the politicized leisure it had represented in the 1960s was lost.¹⁰² Albums that sold in their millions might be thought of as evidence of that but the fact that 'prog' and other forms of loosely-rebellious youth culture did become mainstream, and moved beyond youth itself, demonstrates that they did have some revolutionary potential. This may not have been in terms of the Marxist revolt that some contemporary academic commentators hoped for, but it was a cultural shift all the same.

However, given that 'prog' had started as the music of nonconformity and otherness, both fans and bands could feel unsettled by commercial success. Even before these two albums, there were teenagers worrying that the music was becoming too fashionable. With *Dark Side of the Moon*'s success fans remember 'part of you couldn't help slightly regretting that everyone else loved it too. Your band was [now] everyone's band.'¹⁰³ *Sounds* noted that *Tubular Bells* had been 'unanimously greeted as a masterpiece' upon its release but 'Rather mystifyingly, it has since been denigrated in some quarters as little more than brightly

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Schaffner, *Saucerful of Secrets: The Pink Floyd Odyssey* (London, 1991), 171.

¹⁰² Frith, *Sound Effects*, 195.

¹⁰³ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 205-12. *The Spectator*, 18 March 2006.

patterned aural wallpaper – due, no doubt, to its crossing over into the Leak hi-fi, a dozen albums and ‘have another martini...’ market.¹⁰⁴ But commercial success also brought money and that meant bands did not shy away from it, even when they were uncomfortable. Indeed, even the early idealistic hippie bands found it difficult to compromise between what fame and fortune would bring them, not least in the ability to spread their messages, and their desire to escape the corporate music industry. They were repulsed by the music industry but also annoyed when they did not make money from it.¹⁰⁵ Genesis even changed their musical style to seek more success, although this was not appreciated by some of their longer-term fans. One complained to *Melody Maker* in 1978 that the band had gone commercial, was being played by Radio 2 and that his mother liked their last single.¹⁰⁶

The music press liked to think of popular music as an authentic art form and, like many artists and fans, it worried about any idea that records might, first and foremost, be a commercial product. Thus progressive rock’s commercial success undermined its status with the music press and contributed to the rejection of ‘prog’ by the critics in favour of punk, a genre that was supposed to be more accessible, down to earth and authentic. Some journalists had always criticized over the top lyrics and pretentiousness in the genre but after the arrival of punk the attacks grew vicious.¹⁰⁷ A *NME* writer recalled that the paper ‘poured as much energy into tearing up the old world as trumpeting the new one, as if ashamed it ever liked it originally’. In 1978, it even declared that ‘the vacant ‘progressive rock’ period’ was continuing to ‘misshape much modern thinking’.¹⁰⁸ Nor was it just the music press that turned its back on ‘prog’. In 1978, *The Spectator*, reviewing the rise of punk, complained that in the early 1970s the ‘megagroups’ had crushed ‘all beneath them in an inexorable advance of bombast, pretension and mediocrity.’¹⁰⁹ Older fans, with memories long enough to compare the music of the sixties and seventies, also began to despair. Even at ‘prog’s’ height, music papers published letters complaining that rock had lost touch with its roots through its gimmicky and artistic pretensions.¹¹⁰ In 1976, one nostalgic letter to the *Melody Maker*, remembered how in the early 1960s records were affordable and pop was exciting because it was new. Now it was just a normal part of life but also harder to discover new bands because of the costs. It concluded ‘once rock music was for me and the kid next door

¹⁰⁴ *Sounds*, 6 November 1976.

¹⁰⁵ Mills, *Young Outsiders*, 139-40.

¹⁰⁶ *Melody Maker*, 8 April 1978.

¹⁰⁷ For example, see the attack on Genesis’ lyrics in *Melody Maker*, 23 November 1974.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Ellen, *Rock Stars Stole My Life*, p. 88. *NME*, 11 November 1978.

¹⁰⁹ *The Spectator*, 7 January 1978.

¹¹⁰ For example, *NME*, 11 May 1974.

... [It] wasn't about limousines and private 'planes.'¹¹¹ Similarly, a 1978 letter to the *NME* from someone who claimed to have been a hippie in the 1960s, said he had ended up a 'suburban conformist playing Genesis albums'. He now realised that a decade of progressive music and 'peace 'n' love' had resulted in little more than a few millionaire ex-rebels and long hair and flairs being 'the mark of middle-class, middle-aged, Marks & Sparks conformity.'¹¹²

Yet the press, or even the letters within it, were not as powerful indicators of tastes as might be imagined. One 1976 study suggested only 5 per cent of British youths regularly read youth (including music) magazines and 63 per cent never read them.¹¹³ Neither fans nor journalists turned their back on progressive rock to the extent that the idea of punk as the authentic music of the late 1970s suggests. In the month that the Sex Pistols released their first single, *Melody Maker* said of the new Genesis album, 'Rock can still have some vestige of pride left in itself when musicians like these are still working, unaffected by the clamorous pursuit of trivia elsewhere.'¹¹⁴ All the major 'prog' bands continued to sell well, both on the live circuit and in terms of albums, and they outlasted punk's brief flourish.¹¹⁵ When in 1980 *Melody Maker* ran a sneering review of Genesis' new album and the fact that half a million people had applied for tickets to see the band, there was an angry response from readers, one of whom called the paper 'arrogant, intolerant and self-righteous'.¹¹⁶ In 1980 Genesis even won the paper's band of the year poll, to the exasperation of some readers who bemoaned that people were drifting back to their old bland tastes.¹¹⁷ Whatever some contemporaries and historians thought, 1970s rock music did not simply wither in the face of punk's assault.

Conclusion

In 1974, Nick Kent, a writer for *NME* who would later become a big advocate of punk, called Pink Floyd the 'quintessential English band. No other combine quite sums up the rampant

¹¹¹ *Melody Maker*, 30 October 1976.

¹¹² *NME*, 15 April 1978.

¹¹³ Schildt and Siegfried, 'Youth', 25

¹¹⁴ *Melody Maker*, 18 December 1976.

¹¹⁵ Hegarty and Halliwell, *Beyond and Before*, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Melody Maker*, 29 March 1980, 12 April 1980.

¹¹⁷ *Melody Maker*, 18 October 1980.

sense of doomed mediocrity inherent in this country's current outlook'.¹¹⁸ At one level, progressive rock can be seen as bland. It had none of the overtly rebellious exuberance of punk or the youthful exuberance of more traditional rock bands.¹¹⁹ If only the music and the lyrics are looked at, it would be easy to dismiss progressive rock as pretentious, whimsical and removed from the realities of life in 1970s Britain. However, historians of popular culture should always consider its audiences rather than just its form. Parts of British youth, especially middle-class pupils and students, had considerable emotional investment in progressive rock. The seriousness, intelligence and obscurity of the music all gave the genre a sense of otherness and nonconformity and its fans the belief that they were individuals who were different to the mainstream. 'Prog' thus played a role in promoting the importance of individualism in British culture. This was still an era when popular music was relatively new and its emancipatory powers seemed very real. However, many of the values progressive rock celebrated were actually part of middle-class culture and even some of doubts and frustrations the genre expressed about the modern world would have been shared by the parents of the would-be rebels. Indeed, some of the parents and others of their generation bought the more accessible progressive records and a genre that defined itself as different to the mainstream became part of that mainstream. The genre might even thus be thought of as updating middle-class identity for a new generation that did not want to think of itself as conforming, even if it was often was, and which was casting aside traditional markers of middle-classness such as accent and vocabulary.¹²⁰ This supports the arguments of Gildart and Simonelli that popular music reassured but also evolved class identities.¹²¹ This, however, happened at an abstract level and a range of cultural theorists have seen music subgenres as 'coded' rather than explicit expressions of class consciousness.¹²² It tended to be those who did not like the genre who outwardly accused it of being middle class, a term that embarrassed many of those who could be described by it.

Progressive rock was never an exclusively middle-class phenomenon and that became especially true as its popularity increased. It reaffirms how the boundaries between classes were increasingly fluid and permeable and warns against any claim that the subgenres of youth culture were always class bound. Indeed, progressive rock shared many of the

¹¹⁸ NME, 23 November 1974.

¹¹⁹ On excess in 1970s bands see Marcus Collins, 'Sucking in the seventies? The Rolling Stones and the aftermath of the permissive society', *Popular Music History*, 7, 1 (2012), 5-23.

¹²⁰ Brian Harrisson, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom, 1970-1990* (Oxford, 2010), 145.

¹²¹ Gildart, *Images of England*. Simonelli, *Working Class Heroes*.

¹²² Graham Murdock and Robin McCron, 'Consciousness of class and consciousness of generation', in Hall and Jefferson (eds), *Resistance through Rituals*, 203.

characteristics of musical subcultures more commonly associated with the working class. First and foremost, like punk, soul, glam rock and heavy metal, progressive rock was about pleasure, even if somewhat more earnestly; listening to music was something that people enjoyed and pleasure was something all groups sought out.¹²³ All these genres were also a way for fans to say something about themselves, to exert an individualized identity, membership of a wider collective, and a sense of difference from the mainstream. The personalization of a teenage or student bedroom through a poster of an album cover heavy with symbolism was ultimately no different to a teenage girl doing the same to her room with a poster of dreamy pop star. The rebellion of punk was not that different to the escapism of fantasy lyrics. Both were more about escape and otherness rather than actually trying to change anything in mainstream society. The sense of disillusionment and difference that ‘prog’ articulated may not have been as obvious or overt as punk but that does not make it any less powerful for those who experienced it. Thus, while music was being used to signal an individualized sense of identity, it was also evidence that music united as much as divided youth culture. The music of different youth groups sounded different but for all them it had the same function.

The differences between youth subcultures were thus rather superficial and there were experiences and outlooks that united most young people and set them apart from the older generation.¹²⁴ The common ground between musical genres and subcultures is also emphasised by the fact that few people just liked one kind of music. Indeed, the music scene itself was a diverse creature and genres and audiences crossed over and merged into each other.¹²⁵ That audiences rarely only listened to one kind of music exacerbated the fact that music had varied meanings for its consumers. Some even heard it involuntarily, at a party, dinner or even through the bedroom walls of a family member who had the volume too loud. Of course, the meanings of any form of popular culture will always vary across and within nations, regions, genders and classes but even amongst its strongest adherents, not every fan fixated on the same aspects of ‘prog’. What all this suggests is that what really matters is not so much what music is being listened to but how it is being listened to. This makes fans as important to the history of popular music as artists. The nature of the historical record may require some speculation as to the exact relationship between those fans and the music they

¹²³ A contemporary study of Blackburn argued that the young were hedonistic and committed to enjoying themselves. Jeremy Seabrook, *City Close-up* (London, 1971).

¹²⁴ Frith, *Sound Effects*, 217.

¹²⁵ For a discussion of this in the context of the 1970s see Andy Bennett, ‘The forgotten decade: rethinking the popular music of the 1970s’, *Popular Music History*, 2, 1 (2007), 5-24.

listened to but without attempting to decipher what was happening the real significance of popular music is lost amidst the tunes and their lyrics.