

## Romanticism, Anti-Romanticism, and the Case of Progressive Rock

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By 1966, hippie counterculture was firmly established in America and England, with a radically Romantic perspective: to these young people, a new era in human thought was dawning, and utopian transcendence was indeed possible. Drugs and a new approach to spirituality offered escapes from reality or access to a higher truth. By 1967, this brand of psychedelia had reached the mainstream with the so-called “Summer of Love” - boys and girls in London, San Francisco, and elsewhere seemed to be casting off the social constraints that had previously bound them, reacting in more instinctual, irrational ways to their environment, gaining creative freedom and independence from the culture of their parents. Then, what began as a largely abstract, disorganized movement of social change hardened into political action by 1968 in the form of protests; the radical liberal and collective ideals of the hippies clashed with the classical mores of the Establishment, leading to such confrontations as the riot at the Ohio Democratic National Convention and the Kent State shootings (in 1970). By the mid-1970's, the confrontation had largely been resolved as some of the more acceptable hippie ideas were assimilated into the mainstream. This assimilation (and *negation* of some of the more radical ideas) was prevalent enough that to most radical-minded youths in 1977, hippie ideals of universal peace and love seemed positively dated and irrelevant. This is the course of history as described by authors Paul Stump, Bill Martin, and Edward Macan in their books on progressive rock.

Progressive rock, Macan argues, was the music of the counterculture, at least in England (15); emerging from psychedelic music in the late 1960's, progressive rock is characterized by Bill Martin as “visionary and experimental,” grounded in and extending “rock traditions” in a “rock language,” and “expressive of romantic... aspects of [the counterculture]” (16). This Romanticism has many parallels with the Romantic ideals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: a concern for transcendence, a fascination with fantasy, and autobiographical/heroic concepts are all present in the works of progressive rock musicians.

All histories of progressive rock music assert the genre's origins in psychedelia: Macan

describes “proto-Progressive” bands Procol Harum, The Nice, early Pink Floyd, and The Moody Blues as progenitors of the style from 1967 to 1969. King Crimson's landmark *In the Court of the Crimson King* is generally hailed as the first “true” progressive rock album in 1969, pointing the way for many later bands (Macan 23). Then, these histories describe its ascent to at least partial commercial dominance from 1970 to around 1975, at which point it remained commercially viable but began to be critically reviled as “decadent,” “pretentious,” and detached from the times (Stump 184). The counterculture having dissolved or been assimilated by this point, only major-selling acts could continue to survive; the new youth culture tended towards negativity and suspicion, as the utopian strivings of the sixties failed and a new conservatism emerged in the 1980's.

There is one notable dissenting voice as far as the description of progressive rock's history: Chris Cutler, drummer and lyricist of the uncompromisingly political band Henry Cow, places the *decline* of progressive rock at 1968, *a year before* Macan asserts its true *beginning*. Cutler, as a major exponent of progressive rock himself, invested in the utopian and socialistic ideals of the counterculture, believes that truly progressive rock exists only as a sociocultural phenomenon. As countercultural ideals began to flourish in 1966-67, he asserts, they were still “abstract” realizations of protest from the norm; then, with politicization in 1968 and failed revolution, the counterculture slowly died away as the mainstream assimilated and (to Cutler) destroyed it. Thus, Cutler describes the music of progressive (and commercially successful) bands Yes and ELP (which got their start also in 1969, after Cutler's *caesura*) as signifying its “decline” (70). Stump puts it succinctly when he tackles Cutler's outline: “[Cutler] describes a generation that climbed the ladder of psychedelia, then kicked it away” (117). Cutler, a Marxist, asserts that the commodification of the social impulses behind the counterculture's music essentially “tamed” it into mainstream submission, which then lost relevance as a socially-grounded force. In his history of progressive music, he asserts that it was not until the rise of punk and new-wave music circa 1976 that radical youth culture again had a music to call its own (72).

Progressive rock music in 1966-67 was, as I have said, Romantic art in Romantic times. Even Frank Zappa (a noted anti-Romantic) released his debut album, entitled *Freak Out!*, in 1966; this album, incredibly influential, also contains strong hints of Romantic optimism. With this album, Zappa praised the “freak” movement in Los Angeles, describing “freaking out” as “a process whereby an individual casts off outmoded and restricting standards of thinking, dress, and social etiquette in order to express creatively his relationship to his immediate environment and social structure as a whole” (Martin 50). The music of the album itself reflects this transition: within the album, songs seem to describe a persona becoming increasingly aware of his alienation from normal society; by the album's fourth side, traditional song structure has obliterated into free jams and avant-garde noise representing total artistic and social freedom. It is notable that Zappa, supportive of the counterculture as it grew, became disdainful of it in its decline and commercialization: with *We're Only in It For the Money* (telling released in 1968, the crux of Cutler's caesura), he lampooned “flower power” culture as already having become a tool of the industry, specifically sending up the cover of The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Zappa's anti-Romanticism, formed in the wake of the counterculture's commodification into the mainstream, was to remain a defining element of his career (as well as a very influential factor on later anti-Romantic bands, as we will see).

Other Romantic bands in Romantic (pre-1968) times were Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, and The Beatles, all of whom either disintegrated or underwent massive stylistic changes by 1970 as the counterculture dissolved beneath them. Pink Floyd's *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* is a thoroughly Romantic journey through outer space, Tolkien-esque landscapes, and fairy-tale abstraction; however, as 1968 came and went, Syd Barrett (their primary songwriter) suffered bouts of madness (possibly the result of consuming too much LSD) and an inability to adapt to the structures of adult life; tellingly, he was the only member of the band absolutely given over to the revolutionary ideals of the counterculture. The band's lyrics became ever-more cynical as they entered the 1970's and bassist

Roger Waters assumed control; by the late '70's, they were positively acidic in their indictment of mainstream culture, possibly frustrated at the failure to establish utopia in the days of their youth.

Soft Machine was Pink Floyd's sister band in the underground psychedelic clubs of 1967; their sound on their debut and sophomore efforts is characterized by an intensely personal, experimental approach to rock music, infused with jazz. By 1970, however, their sound had hedged almost completely in the direction of more mainstream English jazz currents, the more irrational and vocal elements of their early LP's dispatched. Their frustrated vocalist and drummer Robert Wyatt left the band in 1971; the story of his solo career is important as he, too, became more politically involved in the late 1970's, mirroring Pink Floyd.

One could propose that anti-Romantic and Romantic concerns had yet to split prior to 1968; whimsy, criticism, and utopianism went hand-in-hand. On Soft Machine's self-titled 1967 debut, Robert Wyatt, abhorred by blatantly cliché love lyrics he had written years prior, re-wrote the vocals for the song "Why am I So Short?" in a drastically mundane realism describing his love for sleeping and playing drums. This sort of autobiographical "truth" extended in his re-writing of the 20-minute "Moon in June" for performance at the BBC: the song was meant to be lyrically adaptable for any situation, to capture Wyatt's environment no matter what. To this end, Wyatt ends up singing about the pleasure of playing music and drinking tea at the BBC (Wyatt: "very low-key, but true... like the fact there's a tea machine in the hall and it works..."). This sort of Situationist or Dada-esque engagement with veracity would later give birth to the likes of the politically-astringent Henry Cow in the early 1970's.

The Beatles, as I have already mentioned, were a major defining force of progressive rock; the steady expansion of their musical syntax from *Rubber Soul* on mirrors the rise of the counterculture. "A Day in the Life" (off of *Sergeant Pepper*) is often described as the very first progressive rock song, because of its unusual song-within-a-song structure and extremely experimental transitions (Macan 50).

After the culmination of their Romantic expression on the thematically unified Sargent *Pepper*, they too began a process of anti-Romanticism with *The Beatles* (also known as *The White Album*) in 1968, creating increasingly post-modern and fragmented works, then breaking up in 1970.

Influenced by all of these bands were a slew of progressive rock bands that formed between 1968-69: Yes, Genesis, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, Gentle Giant, Van der Graaf Generator, and others. These bands, fed on psychedelia, were dedicated to expanding the language of rock music through a radical eclecticism and appropriation of Classical techniques. Their lyrical subject matter continued trends of Romanticism begun before their formation; however, as Romantic artists in non-Romantic times, darkness and descriptions of madness seeped into the materials of some.

Yes is one band that epitomizes “Romantic” progressive music. Their songs describe heroic struggles, cosmic transcendence, an embracing of nature, motion, change, and love. Optimism permeates all of their songs, even their name. Yes's music steadily became more and more complex and intricate from about 1968-1976, experimenting with new and larger forms and means of expression. Their *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (1974), for instance, consists of four side-long pieces of music, comprising a massive and bizarre concept abstractly related to Shastric scriptures. This music was panned as “decadent” and “pretentious” by critics, “dangerous” to everything that was “gutter pure” in rock music (Macan 167).

Van der Graaf Generator forms the dark side of the optimistic/pessimistic dialectic of 1970's progressive rock music; their sound, driven by dissonant, honking saxophone and gothic organ textures pitted against fierce jazz-inflected drumming, conjures images of a negative utopia. Singer Peter Hammill describes alienation and madness in his lyrics, a pessimism made possible by the steady dissolution of the dream of the hippie counterculture. The music of Van der Graaf Generator is still essentially Romantic, however; the lyrics tend to describe epic concerns of universal unification, then lament their loss or confusion.

Thus, what Macan, Stump, and Martin describe as “true” Progressive rock (with its origins in 1969), is perhaps in fact a sort of neo-Romanticism – here was Romantic music that achieved mainstream commercial success in post-Romantic times, and, as such, became to be seen as increasingly detached from the sociocultural histories that had fed it in its infancy. I will now look at two very important *anti*-Romantic bands, and the circumstances of their formation.

The Residents were formed, tellingly, in 1969; too young to have been active in the 1967 “Summer of Love,” its members drove from Louisiana to San Francisco in an attempt to be a part of the countercultural arts scene; when they arrived, they were disappointed. They began recording albums in their home studio, eschewing musicianship in favor of raw expression, bizarreness, and satire; here was progressive music that rejected the very idea of utopia and Romantic aspiration, following in the footsteps of their idol Frank Zappa (whose “King Kong” they covered on their explicit, unreleased *Baby Sex* album [1971], available only via bootleg). Their music was made to intentionally engage and repulse; amateurism and naivety were their calling-cards, and they began pressing records independently in 1972, releasing their music outside of any known circulation.

They were utterly unheeded; their *Meet the Residents* (1974) and *Third Reich n' Roll* (1976) were released to total indifference; both albums featured acidic deconstructions of pop pretense, carving up rock n' roll standards for avant-garde purposes. Their single release of a cover of the Rolling Stones's “Satisfaction” (1976) featured horrifyingly dissonant guitar overdubs and angrily altered lyrics screeched by what sounds like the most depraved, deprived, desperate man on earth. This was radical negation of a different sort; not only were the utopian strivings of the counterculture impossible, they were worthy only of mockery and disdain by young adherents deprived of a role within it by their very lateness to the scene.

In 1978, however, The Residents' music came to the attention of rock cognoscenti in England; England, in the throes of punk rock, embraced them emphatically as true revolutionaries. The Residents

hid their true identities behind a mask of anonymity, claiming (perhaps satirically) that only obscurity could generate aesthetic purity. Their *Commercial Album* (1980) was their final statement before the end of their underground acceptance in new-wave circles; as punk culture also dissolved beneath their feet, The Residents were forced to strike out on their own, altering their music and aesthetic significantly in the process. By 1982's *The Tunes of Two Cities*, it was clear The Residents were in crisis, having lost many of their original members and featuring a truly gutted, culturally non-engaged product.

Before their massive commercial success in the early 1980's, Devo was perhaps The Residents' rival underground post-modern anti-Romantic band. Formed in 1972, its members attended Kent State during the fateful shootings during demonstrations in 1970, and this has been cited as a formative element in their music. Devo embraced the idea of "de-evolution" in their music, proposing that culture was in fact proceeding backwards, and inspired by pseudo-scientific comics and questionable Max Nordeau-like apocalyptic prediction-books. The members of Devo were active exponents of the counterculture when they attended college in the late 1960's; but, like The Residents, they were too young to truly take part creatively until it had dissolved beneath their feet. Killing what they could not have, culturally, Devo represented anti-Romanticism at its most caustic.

For one, their music *rejected* the notion of being progressive (and in doing so, was ironically pretty progressive). For Devo, the world would be a world of surfaces: in their early demo tapes before commercial acknowledgment in 1978, horrendous synthetic noise underpins purposefully frivolous lyrics describing acute degeneration of the brain. Their performance at the WHK auditorium in 1975 was an act of musical terrorism: billed as a Bad Company cover band, Devo (wearing masks to hide their identities, as The Residents would later do) spat out bizarre pieces of deconstructional rock n' roll to a confused audience of latter-day Ohio hippies, and were promptly unplugged and asked to leave.

Devo underwent a cynical transformation in 1976 as its members decided they wanted

commercial success, something they had previously rejected; citing mainstream acceptance as a prime factor in continuing de-evolution (echoing Cutler's similar remarks), they sought to become examples of their own crack-scientific theories. Their sound was streamlined and adapted to new-wave trends, and they became instant darlings of the underground, especially in England during the punk rock heyday. By 1980 they had commercialized their sound further, resulting in their hit single "Whip It" off the album *Freedom of Choice*; the joke, supposedly, was on their audience – "Whip It" is a satirical piece of devolved rock music inspired by "go get 'em" up-by-the-bootstraps corporate catchphrasing, while the title of *Freedom of Choice* was a direct lie, the band's bassist and lyricist Gerald V. Casale being an avid opponent of the notion of free will or human agency.

The band continued to devolve throughout the 1980's, finally becoming utterly disposable with 1984's *Shout*, where even their sadistic tongue-in-cheek tendencies abandoned them, except on that album's final track, "R U Experienced," a hideous synthetic mangling of Jimi Hendrix's hippie-culture original. In the video for the song, an office employee discovers a peace symbol by the road, tossed aside by children at play in an industrial plant, and mutates into a bizarre lava-lamp creature destined for bodily malfunction.

Somewhere between the dialectic of Romanticism and anti-Romanticism lie the bands of England's Canterbury scene; adherents of dada but still connected to social undercurrents of the hippie counterculture, bands such as Henry Cow (lyricist: Chris Cutler) and individuals such as Robert Wyatt (ex-Soft Machine) carried on in socialistic opposition to the Establishment. Their stated intent was decidedly anti-Romantic: to wake the people up, get them to think and to criticize; Henry Cow's music became ever-more dissonant and complicated, peaking with 1975's *In Praise of Learning* LP. One song from that album, "Living in the Heart of the Beast," traces the progress of a persona as she comes to terms with alienation in Capitalist society, finally resolving to revolutionary political action. Here were radical, politically-engaged, anti-Romantic sentiments; but the *mode of conveyance* was decidedly

*Romantic* and linked with the methods of other major progressive rock acts at the time (Henry Cow's theoretical opposite, Yes, composed songs of a similarly “heroic-struggle-to-victory” nature around the same time, their most mature being 1972's “Close to the Edge”). Henry Cow, in this way, continued the original counterculture's transcendent aspirations while bitterly opposing commercialism; this, contrasted with the post-modern satire of The Residents and Devo, is still uplifting music with Romantic outlooks, critically-engaged or not. That Henry Cow embraced virtuosity and compositional refinement and *progression* also separates them from those groups. Cutler: “We were serious about rock, and its potential. And we were serious about politics. We weren't happy to see the defeats of the late 1960's rest as defeats” (144).

Robert Wyatt, self-exile of the now very conventional-sounding Soft Machine, joined the Communist Party in the late 1970's; his *Nothing Can Stop Us* (1981) reflects this. Wyatt, whose previous lyrics were generally abstract, willfully mundane, or whimsical, adapts a jazz-inflected protest angle, directly criticizing the English government from a socialist perspective derived from the counterculture. This blatant hardening into political expression rather than abstraction was also reflected in the lyrics and music of his old chums Pink Floyd, who by *The Wall* (1979) had dropped their spaced-out textures altogether in favor of a modern, hard-edged production. The concept describes an alienated rock star that goes steadily insane (echoes of former bandmate Syd Barrett) and builds a mental wall between himself and an uncaring world. Their next album, *The Final Cut* (1983), directly addresses Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher; Roger Waters cries accusingly, “Maggie, what have we done?!” The dreams of the counterculture by this point had truly evaporated.

By the early 1980's, the “neo-Romantic” progressive bands had petered out, deprived of their cultural sustainability. Many simply disintegrated; others commercialized their sound so that progressive or Romantic elements linked to the counterculture were utterly absent. Even The Residents and Devo had ceased to be relevant by the mid-'80's, where even bereavement of the counterculture

could not be appreciated by yet another new youth culture; the critical engagement of punk rock was also stillborn by this time. In the wake of this stylistic dissolution there sprung new bands to carry the Progressive rock banner, which fall into two categories: “neo” progressive and “avant” progressive. The former category includes bands such as Marillion, IQ, and Twelfth Night – primarily English bands with absolutely no connection to the ideals of the counterculture, neo-progressive rock continued the surface *sound* of the 1970's neo-Romantic bands in a post-modern pastiche context. Avant-progressive bands such as Thinking Plague or 5uu's, on the other hand, mixed influences of Yes, Henry Cow, and a true connection to the spirit of the counterculture to further *progress* the language and radical formal possibilities of rock music (Storløyken 5).

Thinking Plague and 5uu's both formed in America during the mid-1980's; fans of progressive and experimental rock, their lead composers Mike Johnson and David Kerman felt a deep connection with the concerns of the hippie counterculture, though they were only teenagers during the late 1960's. Fans of Henry Cow (and later, similar bands promoted by Chris Cutler), avant-progressive bands reconnected with the Romantic aspirations of the original and neo-Romantic progressive rock bands of the '60's and '70's in a way that sought to be original, inventive, and expansive. Their music is highly angular, dissonant, and contrapuntally conceived; lyrics tend to be bitter and critical, yet steeped in Romantic imagery of heroic struggle. The original ideals of the counterculture continue in this music, as a cult phenomenon beyond any pretense of commercial success, thoroughly removed from any sort of modern *zeitgeist*.

Progressive rock was a complex phenomenon informed by many social and cultural factors; formed in Romantic psychedelia, then brought mainstream success by neo-Romantic bands (later assaulted as Decadent), it was anti-Romantically renounced by younger counterculturists left out of its initial wave, then finally ignored into cultural irrelevance with the advent of 1980's neo-Conservatism, Progressive rock lives on today, underground, sustained by isolated enthusiasts and musicians still

possessed of the Romantic ideals which gave it birth, the utopian idealistic dreams of the counterculture.

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