



The Malcolm Garrett Collection Playlist #2

Advanced progressive (for beginners)

Compiled in 2009

There was once a time (as the '60s turned into the '70s) when pretty much all music that wasn't classified as pop, classical, jazz, or (the dreaded) easy listening, was known simply as 'underground' or 'progressive'.

Everything contemporary, unusual and otherwise unclassifiable found its way into a rack in the record store that was labelled just 'progressive'. Naturally this was the principal place I would look for anything exciting or challenging. I would return to the same few stores in Manchester and thumb through the same collections of discs week by week, wondering whether or not to buy a particular disc, invariably one adorned with a curious image and with an esoteric sounding title, trying to decide if the music would be as enjoyably intriguing as the sleeve. There was no internet to aid research, so almost everything I sampled was based on personal recommendation, or a lead from an enthusiastic NME or Melody Maker review. More often than not I simply bought it on a whim, or after a cursory listen to a track or two in the listening booths still installed in the better stores.

Faced with a mixed lot of largely unknown and previously unheard discs, and with precious little guidance, it is remarkable that most albums I picked up mostly sounded fresh and eminently listenable. Some of what I found was truly progressive, in a way that I don't think has been heard since. The world of music really was opening up. In that first explosion of audio experimentation, I discovered things that are genuinely timeless, and so, with the passing of time, here I am still listening.

A cautionary note, however. Please do not confuse 'progressive' with 'Prog'. At some sad time in the early- to mid-seventies, the likes of Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Rick Wakeman and Yes would appear to have embarked upon a wilful and systematic ruination of the genre. With each new album they recorded longer and longer pieces, but for no discernible benefit, and with less and less musical discipline or charm. Often they had fairly meaningless 'concepts' underlying them, in an attempt to imbue them with some sort of higher musical significance.

Thus it was that the perfectly acceptable, and suitably descriptive, tag of 'progressive' was mercilessly shortened to the much derided 'Prog' rock. This is a quite different term for what I consider to be quite different music altogether, albeit springing from similar origins. This rather pejorative term has lingered in the collective memory as one which not only sums up this other largely unforgiving musical backwater, but sadly has also besmirched the heritage and credibility of genuinely sophisticated recordings such as the ones to be heard in this collection.

What we have in this playlist, by way of clarification, is mostly work from those early days of progressive, and is definitely not

what I would call 'Prog'. This, instead, is from the time when pop seemed to turn to rock almost overnight, and the LP found favour as a preferred medium to the 3 minute single, which by then had for bands like these become somewhat redolent of the first psychedelic era. A later playlist will address more directly the transition from pop single to rock LP track, but these recordings are definitely album material only. They are somewhat longer than 3 minutes, no longer constrained by 7" vinyl nor daytime radio restrictions, and whilst they feature extended instrumental passages, and are musically quite complex, they display a sparkling sense of musical invention. The basic instrumentation of electric guitar, bass, drums was augmented first with keyboards, then often with wind and strings, and most significantly, with their electronic counterpart: the magnificent mellotron.

This collection begins and ends with pieces by Van der Graaf Generator, who are archetypal 'progressive', and a band truly without equal. The opener *Man Erg*, from their opus *Pawn Hearts*, has been played continually by me since its release in 1971, and it still chills me with its haunting presence. The last piece, *Childlike Faith in Childhood's End*, was the closing track of the penultimate Van der Graaf album, *Still Life*, before they called it a day in 1976, and laid the way clear for Punk.

I could write much more about the other songs in this list, but I'm hoping that you'll discover and enjoy this music with that same spirit of enquiry that I did first time around.

Artists featured...

Van der Graaf Generator
Genesis
Caravan
King Crimson
Gong
Matching Mole
Egg
Yes
High Tide
Atomic Rooster
Khan
Captain Beefheart & his Magic Band
Gentle Giant
Jethro Tull

For some obscure reason I chose not to include anything by Hawkwind or The Mothers of Invention, two of my favourite artists from the time. The Mothers have their own playlist [*Ugly Love*] coming up, but I must compile a Space Rock list too.

This playlist was first posted on Matt Cooper-Wright's 'Internet Music Programme' in November 2009.