Listening to images, reading the records: The inclusive experience in British progressive rock of the 1960s and 1970s

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Abstract

The article concerns the form of experience offered by the British progressive rock of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the light of the tendency to view the genre through the prism of modernism. The materiality of key musical albums within the genre—through elaborate aesthetic construction and reliance on literary ideas—played an indispensable role in interacting with the records. I argue that through constructing a narrative message in the form of record covers, progressive rock could be treated as a literary form which functions according to what Nicholas Royle describes as veering and which allows to avoid problems associated with considering the genre as modern or postmodern.

Keywords

experience; progressive rock; veering; postmodernism

To read most rock histories, you’d think women started picking up guitars sometime in the mid-1970s. The truth is, pioneering singer-guitarists like Wanda Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe were as instrumental as any male musician in helping rock’n’roll coalesce out of rockabilly, country, R&B, and blues in the 1950s. But the more low-key aspects of Aerial Ballet reflect the soft rock that would become increasingly popular in the next few years. The record’s haunted soul still speaks to artists like Blood Orange’s Dev Hynes, who sampled “Myself When I Am Real” to introduce his own profound and personal treatise on being black in America, Freetown Sound. Truth, beauty, liberty—it’s all here. Unadorned.

Progressive rock developed from late 1960s psychedelic rock, as part of a wide-ranging tendency in rock music of this era to draw inspiration from ever more diverse influences. The term was applied to the music of bands such as King Crimson, Yes, Genesis, Pink Floyd, Jethro Tull, Soft Machine and Emerson, Lake and Palmer. Progressive rock came into most widespread use around the mid-1970s. GENESIS were already recording at the end of the sixties but their links to the progressive rock were not yet defined. With the album “Trespass”, things became clear about GENESIS. YES and GENESIS remain icons in symphonic rock music.

Canterbury was then to be the cradle for several of the more freewheeling British bands of the post-psychedelic era. The article concerns the form of experience offered by the British progressive rock of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the light of the tendency to view the genre through the prism of modernism. The materiality of key musical albums within the genre—through elaborate aesthetic construction and reliance on literary ideas—played an indispensable role in interacting with the records. I argue that through constructing a narrative message in the form of record covers, progressive rock could be treated as a literary form which functions according to what Nicholas Royle describes as veering and whi