


PERFORMERS



Yes

**THEIR MUSIC HAS PUSHED THE IDEA
OF INSTRUMENTAL PROWESS AND
GENRE-BLENDING TO NEW HEIGHTS.**

BY ASHLEY KAHN



Classic Yes:
Steve Howe,
Jon Anderson,
Rick Wakeman,
Bill Bruford,
and Chris Squire
(from left), 1972

Not so long ago, a home stereo was a portal into a realm of hypersensory interstellar travel. One could drop the needle on the edge of the LP, turn up the volume, stare at the album cover's colorful, hallucinatory landscapes, and let the music take you along galactic pathways to undiscovered planets. Piloting such sonic voyages was a talented group of creative musicians who combined centuries-old musical traditions with the latest tools and an immense spectrum of sounds: symphonic strings, cathedral organs, driving rock drums, meticulous jazz improvisation, offbeat time signatures, dramatic rhythmic shifts. Over all soared vocal harmonies and mystical lyrics.

It was music that bridged space and time, powered on the optimism of an age fascinated by the prospect of a cosmic future. No wonder the group chose for its name the shortest, most positively charged word in the English language: Yes.

The band evolved from humble beginnings. Self-taught bassist Chris Squire played in psychedelic groups in mid-sixties London. After a headmaster sent him home from secondary school with money for a haircut, Squire kept the cash and never returned, later starting a group called Mabel Greer's Toyshop. He soon met journeyman vocalist and songwriter Jon Anderson. Both admired the vocal harmony groups of the day – Simon and Garfunkel, the Association – and first collaborated on “Sweetness,” a sunshine-dappled song of idyllic love. Anderson soon took over lead vocals in Squire's group.

By the summer of 1968, the group developed material and formed its initial five-man lineup. Drummer Bill Bruford was schooled in jazz and had experience in various rock outfits. Keyboardist Tony Kaye had abandoned classical training for jazz and rock. And it was guitarist Peter Banks who suggested the band's new, one-syllable name.

Over the next few months, Yes performed songs by the Beatles, Traffic, and the 5th Dimension, and a growing number of originals. A year later, after copious rehearsals, their chops up to speed, they recorded their eponymous debut for Atlantic Records. *Yes* includes an audacious, suite-like reinvention of the Beatles' “Every Little Thing.” Their version shifts from one melodic flourish to another with a hard-rock punch, the guitar quoting various themes along the way and Anderson's vocals gleefully pushing into the upper-register. It's a nod to the group's psychedelic roots and love of pop harmonies, and a harbinger of the precipitous twists and turns that would become their sonic signature.

Ahmet Ertegun championed the band at Atlantic, giving it the freedom to find its own sound. But when the blend of covers and originals on *Time and a Word* (1970) failed commercially, Yes got word that their third album could be their last at the label. The group then made its first significant personnel shift, replacing Banks with the more accomplished Steve Howe, versatile on both acoustic and electric guitars. His playing, vocals, and compositional skills became a significant part of the Yes sound.

The Yes Album (1971) resolutely sealed the deal with Atlantic – and America. “Your Move” was the group's first Top Forty hit, and an unlikely breakthrough. The single broke countless songwriting rules: enigmatic lyrics employing chess strategy as spiritual advice,

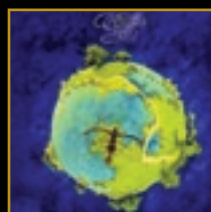
Selected Discography



YES
Atlantic 1969



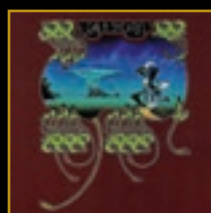
THE YES ALBUM
Atlantic 1971



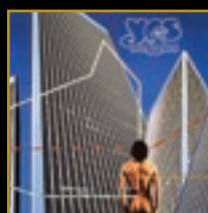
FRAGILE
Atlantic 1971



CLOSE TO THE EDGE
Atlantic 1972



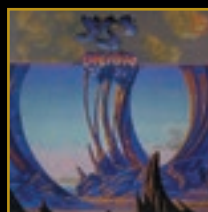
YESSONGS
Atlantic 1973



GOING FOR THE ONE
Atlantic 1977



90125
Atco 1983



UNION
Arista 1991

“It was music that bridged space and time, powered on the optimism of an age fascinated by the prospect of a cosmic future.”

The original 1969
lineup: Squire,
Anderson,
Tony Kaye, and
Bruford (from left)



THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Anderson and Howe, onstage
in New York City, 1978;
Kaye, Squire, Trevor Rabin,
Anderson, and Alan White,
in Rotterdam, 1984.
OPPOSITE PAGE Wakeman
and Squire face off, 1979.



strains of British folk, Portuguese acoustic guitar, and seamless three-part harmonies chanting John Lennon's "Give Peace a Chance." AM radio welcomed the band, and free-form FM rock programming embraced the album's longer, energy-driven "Starship Trooper" and "Yours Is No Disgrace."

"Roundabout," the explosive lead single from Yes' fourth album, *Fragile*, soon followed, rocketing to the Top Twenty. The album saw Kaye replaced with Rick Wakeman, a Royal College of Music dropout with a rich classical vocabulary and abiding feel for sonic grandeur, who had played on sessions with Elton John, Cat Stevens, and David Bowie (including "Space Oddity").

Fragile reached Number Four on the album charts, propelled by tracks that embodied a thoroughly original sound in full maturity. It featured what is now considered the classic Yes lineup: Squire's gravel-toned bass lines; Bruford's percussive snap and ring; Wakeman's adept use of Mellotron and Minimoog and instinct for the right musical reference; Howe's poignant delicacy on acoustic, and rough-edged riffs on electric; and Anderson's distinct, clarion singing, with its precise pronunciation and alto-tenor range.

Yes' material pushed the idea of instrumental prowess and musical dedication in rock to new heights. If one wanted to hear Yes, and hundreds of thousands did, LPs had to be purchased, concerts attended. As rock became big business in the seventies, Yes was at the forefront, each album a bestseller, each concert packing theaters, then arenas and stadiums.

The cover art of *Fragile*, with its distant, undiscovered planet of giant trees being approached by an oar-driven space schooner, created a visual iden-

tity (what we'd call a "brand" today) for the band. It was the work of the artist Roger Dean, in a style that proved hugely influential among rock fans. Yes' albums became Dean's best-known canvases; Dean's spacescapes and his famous Yes bubble logo made him an indispensable member of the group.

Burgeoning success enabled Yes to launch into bolder, more ambitious projects: *Close to the Edge* (1972) took the idea of suite structures to an extreme, its title track stretching to an entire album side. The laborious studio process was enough to convince Bruford to depart, replaced by Alan White, an alumnus of groups led by John Lennon, George Harrison, and Steve Winwood. More Top Twenty efforts followed: *Yessongs*, the group's first live album, in 1973, and the double concept album *Tales From Topographic Oceans* with its four extended compositions. After Wakeman left to pursue solo projects, he was replaced by Patrick Moraz, a Swiss keyboardist with substantial jazz cred. The resulting *Relayer* (1974) reflected the band's further lean toward the jazz fusion its music had always suggested; then, from 1975-77, Yes took the first of many sabbaticals so members could record their own albums.

That Wakeman would soon return to Yes, depart a second time, and return again, all with minimal acrimony, illustrates an unusual flexibility that counters the typical "once gone, forever gone" ethos among most rock bands. Though the group has had disagreements over the decades, Yes has accommodated its members' needs to venture out on their own, and welcomed back old colleagues. Only Squire remained with the group continually from its inception until his passing in 2015 from leukemia, playing on all twenty-one recordings.





1983 lineup: White, Anderson, Squire, Kaye, and Rabin

In 1977, *Going for the One* was a Number Eight seller, elevated by a reunion of the group's classic lineup; it was followed in 1978 by *Tormato*. In 1980, with Anderson's and Wakeman's departure from the band, in came singer Trevor Horn and keyboardist Geoff Downes, both from the Buggles ("Video Killed the Radio Star"), resulting in *Drama*, another strong charter. In 1983, with the rock scene reeling from seismic musical and technological changes, Yes re-formed once again, with Anderson on vocals, Kaye on keys, and a new member, South African vocalist and guitarist Trevor Rabin. Horn remained as producer.

Yes returned in 1984 with what one record executive termed a "game-changer": a song and studio approach that helped redefine the industry. *90125* (generically named for the album's Atco catalog number) yielded the single that connected the group to a new generation, new sound, and new age. "Owner of a Lonely Heart," with its interplay of raw, electronic instrumentation; odd samples; sudden

sound effects; shifting dance rhythms; and an ethereal melody, shot to Number One, its video on heavy rotation at MTV. The unabashed result of synthesizers and heavy studio manipulation, the song wore its production proudly. Its influential blend – mixing samples with performance, juxtaposing musical moments to seize ears and create drama, and making multiple remixes for different playback contexts – is now standard across many musical genres.

Subsequent efforts in the 1980s, including *Big Generator* (1987) and an album and tour reuniting Anderson, Bruford, Wakeman, and Howe (1988), set a further pattern for the group's disassembling and re-forming without ever losing critical or popular regard. While the Squire-led Yes was still on the scene, the so-called ABWH lineup released a Top Forty album on Arista. In 1991, to quell any legal saber-rattling, Arista released *Union*, a Yes reunion album featuring eight current or former members, with Anderson singing on all tracks.

Into the new millennium, Yes remains a solid



Together again in 2004: Wakeman, Squire, Howe, Anderson, and White

presence, their albums selling well, their tours never failing to draw. They've continued to enjoy the freedom to create spinoff groups and solo projects, celebrate their history with tribute concerts, box sets, and documentaries, and allow their music to be performed in symphonic contexts with accompanying light shows and other multimedia displays. In recent years, Yes have recruited new talent that the group itself inspired and helped shape, including vocalists Benoît David (from a Canadian Yes cover band) and Jon Davidson (of the prog-rock group Glass Hammer).

Speaking of that "progressive-rock" moniker: The true gauge of Yes' lasting appeal and persistent influence is arguably found in the extended family of creative ensembles they helped engender – Rush, Primus, the Mars Volta, and the style and approach of various R&B and jazz-fusion bands. Many today follow in Yes' footsteps, challenging themselves to play music that demands instrumental prowess, employs unusual song structures and time signatures, and draws freely from

classical, jazz, and other sources. It's a fertile blend that defines the genre known as prog.

But in measuring Yes' history and impact, and in welcoming them into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the prog label feels somehow insufficient. From the outset, a palpable joy defined the music Yes created, along with a gleeful disregard for stylistic names or categories. Only later did cultural reporters decide to append the words "progressive" and "rock" to describe a general hybrid, and then start lumping together bands of diverse methods and sounds. Many of these pioneers favored dark moods and earthy matters; their music searched inward and down.

To this day, Yes stands apart from their prog-rock peers, still true to their original vision of unity and uplift, still drawing on the power of love and the spirit of dreams that flowed in the sixties. Still looking skyward. "Yes I said . . .," the great James Joyce once wrote, giving the words to his elemental, life-affirming character Molly Bloom. "Yes I will Yes."