



# The Absent Presence of Progressive Rock in the British Music Press, 1968-1974

Chris Anderton and Chris Atton

## ABSTRACT

The upsurge of academic interest in the genre known as progressive rock has taken much for granted. In particular, little account has been taken of how discourses surrounding progressive rock were deployed in popular culture in the past, especially within the music press. To recover the historical place of the music and its critical reception, we present an analysis of three British weekly music papers of the 1960s and 1970s: *Melody Maker*, *New Musical Express* and *Sounds*. We find that there appears to be relatively little consensus in the papers studied regarding the use and meaning of the term “progressive,” pointing to either multiple interpretations or an instability of value judgments and critical claims. Its most common use is to signify musical quality – to connect readers with the breadth of new music being produced at that time, and to indicate a move away from the “underground” scene of the late 1960s.

## KEYWORDS

Progressive rock; music history; music magazines; music press; United Kingdom

## Introduction

Beginning in the 1990s there has been an upsurge of academic interest in the genre known as progressive rock, with the appearance of book-length studies by Edward Macan (*Rocking*) and Bill Martin (*Music of Yes; Listening*), to which we might add, though not strictly academic, Paul Stump. The 2000s have seen further studies of similar length, among them Paul Hegarty and Martin Halliwell, Kevin Holm-Hudson (*Progressive; Genesis*), and Edward Macan (*Endless*), in addition to scholarly articles by Jarl A. Ahlqvist, Chris Anderton (“*Many-headed*”), Chris Atton (“*Living*”), Kevin Holm-Hudson (“*Apocalyptic*”), and Jay Keister and Jeremy L. Smith, as well as Allan Moore and Remy Martin’s substantial chapter on “progressive styles and issues.” The impetus behind these studies is, in part, a desire to present a reassessment of music that had been unfairly ignored or misinterpreted by critics and by subsequent generations of musicians. Punk rock is held to be particularly guilty in this regard, as are those music writers associated with punk who prefer notions of classicism and authenticity as signifiers of value, such as Robert Christgau, Nick Kent, Greil Marcus, and Charles Shaar Murray.

One of the key problems facing any author seeking to examine the genre of progressive rock is one that is common throughout genre studies: to identify the object of study, to delimit our understanding of what, in this case, we actually mean by the term “progressive rock.” Genre theory in the study of popular music locates the identification and

understanding of a genre not only within a set of musical norms and expectations, but also through associated ideological arguments, behaviors, and social relationships that develop and become associated with a particular genre (see Fabbri, “Theory”; Frith; Holt; Negus). A genre will tend to exhibit stability across all these features in order, as Lüders et al. put it, to “reduce contingency in communication, including occasional confusion and misunderstanding” between its participants (musicians, fans, promoters, record companies, etc.) (951). At the same time it becomes a space for experimentation and development, though subject to a set of rules “negotiated and developed to shape the conventions and expectations of performers and audiences” (Atton, “Genre” 428).

This article will first examine how studies of progressive rock have put genre theory into action and suggest four “absences” in these accounts that, taken together, demonstrate a lack of historical situatedness. This lack will be addressed by a detailed analysis of three weekly British music papers active in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This historical documentary approach is adopted, rather than a focus on interviews or memoirs, in order to gain an understanding of the contemporary mediation of what we now call “progressive rock,” and because later memoirs and academic texts have rarely supported their claims with direct evidence (see also Street et al. who make similar arguments regarding the reception of punk rock).

### Academic Claims for “Progressive Rock”: The Limits of a Genre

Beginning with the earliest studies in our list (Macan, *Rocking*; Martin *Music of Yes; Listening*) we find significant agreement. Edward Macan identifies “a progressive rock style” that is “indebted to the classical tradition in the realms of instrumentation, structure and virtuosity” (31; emphasis added). Similarly, Bill Martin emphasizes virtuosity and a “visionary and developmental” approach to rock music that incorporates classical influences (as well as those of folk and jazz) in terms of musical structure (*Listening* 65): “progressive rock is visionary and experimental music played by virtuosos on instruments associated with rock music” (*Music of Yes* 39). He describes this as a “generous synthesis” of musical influences and styles, while Moore and Martin extend the description by noting the exploration of new instrumental and recording technologies that were becoming available in the late 1960s and early 1970s. We might, of course, argue that such a capacious definition be applied to all manner of musical endeavors that are explorative in such ways, but it is clear from the examples cited by Macan and Martin that they mostly cleave to what has emerged as a “classic” membership of progressive rock. Macan’s (*Rocking*) study focuses on four main groups: Emerson, Lake & Palmer; Genesis; Pink Floyd, and Yes, while Martin’s first book on progressive rock deals entirely with Yes. The list of “sixty-two essential albums” given in his second book is largely populated with what we might now consider to be the “usual suspects”: in addition to multiple entries by those mentioned above we also find Gentle Giant, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, and Soft Machine (*Listening*). Admittedly there are some groups we might consider as outliers (Can, Henry Cow, Magma, even the jazz-rock trio Back Door), but in the main we are presented with a membership that appears more or less fixed and, paradoxically, not as generous as Martin’s definition of progressive rock might imply.

The definitions adopted by Edward Macan, Bill Martin, Paul Stump, and others regard progression as measured in terms of musicological sophistication, creating

a “symphonic orthodoxy” (Anderton, “Many-headed”) that serves to exclude some forms of progressive rock music that are today recognized by fans on online forums such as ProgArchives.com. This not only includes styles and bands that have emerged since the late 1970s, such as neo-progressive rock (see also Ahlkvist; Anderton, “Fire”), but also earlier forms such as Krautrock, Indo-Prog/Raga Rock, and Progressive Electronic where prototypical groups and musicians emerged contemporaneously with the “symphonic” progressive bands (see also Anderton, “Many-headed”). All are relatively simplistic in their musical construction and rarely tread new ground in harmonic or metric terms (see Moore and Martin), though may do so in terms of texture and instrumentation. However, as Allan Moore notes, “a high state of development [in music] is no necessary indicator of progress” (73), and we would argue that the reverse is also true: that progress is not necessarily indicated by a high state of development. In this sense, styles such as these may be seen as progressive due to the application of new technologies and the incorporation of stylistic elements drawn from a variety of sources.

Subsequent studies have tended to develop in two ways. First, there is a narrowing of focus, as shown by Edward Macan’s study of Emerson, Lake & Palmer (*Endless*); Drewett et al.’s study of Peter Gabriel; and Kevin Holm-Hudson’s study of the Genesis album *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (*Genesis*). Second, there is its opposite: attempts to broaden the scope of what might be understood by progressive rock, whether through musical subject matter (see Hill; Keister and Smith) or through expanding the scope of the genre temporally (see Hegarty and Halliwell for whom progressive rock is “incredibly varied . . . a heterogeneous and troublesome genre” [3]) or geographically and ideologically (Anderton, “Many-headed”). Despite their scope, however, such studies deal primarily with musical matters, only occasionally dealing with the social, the cultural, the political, and the economic. There are few accounts that touch on genre as lived experience or on the mediation of progressive rock in music papers at the time the music was developing. Atton (“Living”) and Ahlkvist engage with fan writing about progressive rock (as does some of Atton’s “Curating”), but in these cases the writing under examination takes place in the 2000s; we are missing any exploration of accounts from what our range of authors consider to be the heyday of progressive rock, from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s.

Throughout the academic literature on progressive rock, cultural and social arguments (let alone cultural and social studies) seem to form little more than a backdrop against which to foreground the music. Such accounts as we have appear only briefly; they seem to function as passing places, brief interruptions along the road to the canon of progressive rock. For example, Paul Stump claims that Vertigo, a subsidiary of the Philips label, and “home of acts as diverse as Black Sabbath and Rod Stewart, is perhaps the most enduring indication of the plurality of the term ‘Progressive,’ circa 1970” (79). He also draws our attention to Decca’s 1969 album sampler, *Wowie Zowie! The World of Progressive Music*, which featured songs by the Moody Blues, Genesis, Savoy Brown, and John Mayall. In this case, though, Stump argues for plurality not as an ideological position but “presumably to cash in on the Progressive sampler craze” (92).

Whatever the merits of these arguments (and it would not be difficult to find counter-examples), they point to a number of related absences in the study of progressive rock. First, as we have seen, little attention is paid to actually existing cultural

conditions at the time of the emergence and development of what we have come to know as progressive rock. Second, little account has been taken of how discourses surrounding progressive rock and the term progressive in particular were mobilized and deployed in popular culture, in particular by the music press of the era. Third, despite the repeated claim that progressive rock begins as an “English” phenomenon, there is no attention paid to the British music press, where we would expect to find the most engaged (and arguably most formative) attempts to discursively represent progressive rock generically. Fourth, the championing of progressive rock since the 1990s by academics (and it is noteworthy that all the studies we cite are almost universally in favor of progressive rock, so to speak) tends to ignore its historical situatedness.

In the remainder of this article we will attempt to address these four absences through a detailed analysis of the term “progressive” across three British weekly music papers of the 1960s and 1970s: *New Musical Express* (*NME*), *Melody Maker*, and *Sounds*. In a contemporary publication, the journalist and author [Tony Jasper](#) describes these as the most important music papers of the early 1970s, with *Melody Maker* being the largest at 40–48 pages and aimed at the late teens/twenties market, including college and university students (45). He regards *Sounds* as being rather similar to *Melody Maker* but with more in-depth artist interviews, while *New Musical Express* is described as seeking a younger market of mid-late teens. We take as our time period 1968 to 1974, as the time during which most scholars argue that the genre emerged and flourished. Through an exploration of feature articles, interviews, record and gig reviews, and readers’ letters we examine how the term “progressive” was applied, to what and to whom and for what purposes. In so doing we excavate the contemporary significance of progressive rock as it developed and became established, and what it came to mean to journalists and their readers. The research findings are organized in two main sections. In the first we examine *Melody Maker* and *NME* in the period 1968–1969 (prior to the launch of *Sounds*), while the second focuses on all three music papers from 1970 to 1974.

### **Progressive Music in the UK: 1968-1969**

From its first issue in 1946, *New Musical Express* presented itself as a source of news about the latest musical trends and throughout its life it focused on major stars and the emerging artists it considered likely to become stars. In the late 1960s, perhaps in order to maximize its readership or its advertising revenues, the *NME* covered everything from the Rolling Stones and Jimi Hendrix to Engelbert Humperdinck and Lulu. The paper’s broad coverage at that time is perhaps best summarized in Nick Logan’s 1969 feature on the Hollies, where he talks of “pop’s warring factions – teenybopper, family entertainer or progressive” (“[Have-a-go](#)”). Setting aside the family entertainers and artists with “teenage appeal, the “progressive” form of pop music seems to encompass not only the likes of Jethro Tull, the Nice, and King Crimson (familiar from progressive rock scholarship), but also Jimi Hendrix, Cream, the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band, Arthur Brown, and even the Kinks and the Faces. However, Logan doesn’t actually explain what he means by “progressive” in the context of the Hollies or of pop music in general, and the term “progressive” is, in any case, rarely used in the *NME* during 1968 and 1969, despite the amount of

coverage that is given to groups retrospectively categorized as progressive rock. For instance, in a feature article summarizing “the sensational 60’s,” [Andy Gray](#) collects together Jethro Tull, Led Zeppelin, Fleetwood Mac, and Ten Years After as representatives of “underground” music. Such groups are, according to Logan, seen as emerging from “a new generation of thinking young people” (“Jethro”).

A review of Decca Records’ 1969 album sampler *Wowie Zowie! The World of Progressive Music*, which Paul Stump regards as a cynical commercial cash-in by a record company trying to trade on the then contemporary “cool” of the term progressive, is reviewed positively by the *NME*, which asserts that the acts included on the album represent “ten attractions considered way ahead in progressive music” (“World”). This suggests that the understanding of “progressive rock” that has emerged in scholarly and fan publications since the 1990s is somewhat at odds with the understanding of the term as used in the *NME* of the late-1960s, where it was used to encompass a range of musical styles associated primarily with artists that made albums rather than singles, and appealed to an emerging and commercially significant youth market.

This youth market chimed well with *Melody Maker*, which positioned itself as the “thinking fan’s paper” and prized music offering intellectual challenge as well as somatic pleasure. In so doing it also drew on its own history as a music paper for the professional musician (first published in 1926 for an audience of players in jazz and dance-bands), where some level of technical musical knowledge was assumed and where it was possible to use the vocabulary of musical analysis alongside more qualitative approaches to music criticism: what [Lindberg et al.](#) call “metaphoric circumscription” (342). Until the appearance of *Sounds*, the more or less sober and hybridized writing style of *Melody Maker* was in sharp contrast to the effervescent and “pop” orientation of *New Musical Express*.

Our research showed that *Melody Maker* used the term “progressive” more often than the *NME* in 1968 and 1969 though, like the *NME*, it was applied to a much broader range of musicians than we find in the academic studies of the 1990s. In 1968 Chris Welch described the Yardbirds as a band “once hailed as the most progressive in Britain” (“Yardbirds”), while Fleetwood Mac’s Peter Green is quoted making a distinction between the “real blues” and the “more progressive stuff from Jimi Hendrix and the Cream” (qtd. in [Welch](#), “How to”) – which we can interpret as moving from traditional forms and sounds to more experimental structures. Later in 1968, Welch lamented the loss of British bands to the American and European touring circuits, saying:

Our progressive groups have deserted these shores. Traffic, Who, Spencer Davis, Eric Burden and the Animals, Jimi Hendrix’s Experience, Yardbirds, Brian Auger and Julie Driscoll, the Cream and Nice all spend most of their time on the Continent or in America. (“Pop Scene”)

As *Melody Maker*’s champion of progressive music at the time, Welch also rehearses the argument we found in the *NME* about the differences between “teenybopper” and “progressive.” For Welch, though, the term “pop” does not appear as a term of disparagement; for him, and others writing in *Melody Maker*, the term “pop group” can apply equally to a group that is “progressive” (“Is the Day” 12). What matters is that the musicians form “thinking groups” whose music can be considered as a necessary corrective to what Welch seems to consider a degenerate form of entertainment:

What is the role of the pop group in 1968? Has it become a valued contributor to the arts? Or does it remain a sordid outlet for musical incompetence designed solely to reap vast profits? The curious situation that now obtains is that creative, thinking young musicians have taken the initial concept of the pop group and goaded it forward to the very limits of their ability. (“*Is the Day*” 12)

What Welch finds “curious” here seems to be that the “progressive pop groups” (which he describes as “featuring musicians from the rhythm and blues, jazz and folk scenes”) are able to develop their music while remaining part of the commercial music business. He asserts that they have “maintained the same instrumentation, appearance and business approach, work towards hit styles and mass appreciation,” yet at the same time continue to advance their musical creativity (“*Is the Day*” 12). This contrasts with Macan’s claim that “in its early days, progressive rock had been an anticorporate music to its roots” (*Endless* 241) – a view that is also questioned by Robert Fripp (of King Crimson) who, writing in *International Times* in 1969, suggested that “It is obvious that groups who provide thought . . . can be and often are very successful on a commercial plane, so let us stop regarding ‘commercial’ as a dirty word.”

Readers of *Melody Maker* welcomed the rise of progressive music and also considered it to be a highly inclusive label, as Barry Levene’s letter to the paper shows: “There are good progressive groups like Blood, Sweat and Tears, Spirit and Country Joe and the Fish, while in Britain we have Tyrannosaurus Rex, Incredible String Band and Moody Blues.” A further implication of this letter is that, as noted earlier, there are both American and British groups described as “progressive” by British readers of the late 1960s. Musicians too are careful to use the appropriate term. Al Stewart comments on his newly-released album *Love Chronicles*: “[I]t’s folk-rock, which I suppose is an outdated phrase. It’s progressive” (qtd. in *Melody Maker*, “*The Song Al*”). However, other musicians are more suspicious of the term. Ric Grech of Family says that “we don’t want to be classed in ANY bag” and that the band wants to “get across to an audience that wants to sit and listen, not dance” (qtd. in Welch, “*Is the Day*” 13). Similarly, Jimmy Page of the New Yardbirds (soon to become Led Zeppelin) uses the term “progressive blues” to describe the group’s music, while stating his dislike for the term: “[I]t sounds like a hype” (qtd. in Welch, “*Yardbirds*”). Already we are seeing scepticism towards the term (or any attempt at classification) by musicians themselves, yet the term progressive nevertheless has a significance powerful enough for it to be deployed as a shorthand for a range of styles that will be meaningful to journalists and their readers. It is difficult to find any precise definition of the term progressive at this time, beyond the broad claims made for it by Chris Welch, which we might summarize as “thinking” music that goes beyond the commercial formulae of pop and approaches the level of “art” or as music associated with “underground” audiences. The capacious way in which it is used does not help to establish a musically specific definition such as those attempted by authors in the 1990s.

Occasionally this difficulty is acknowledged. In an article on Blood, Sweat & Tears, Tony Wilson refers to the “more progressive elements of pop” but writes that he uses the term “loosely and for categorisation purposes only.” His meaning is not entirely clear, but the other groups he lists in his piece (among them Ten Years After, Jon Hiseman’s Colosseum and the Electric Flag) suggest that he is not claiming progressive as a genre but as a much broader “family” of musicians (perhaps similar to Anderton’s

much later argument for European progressive rock as a meta-genre [see “Many-headed”]) who, in the words of Blood, Sweat & Tears’s Dick Halligan, are responsible for “pop music getting better as it continues to assimilate from [sic] other musical forms” (qtd. in Wilson). One further element to how “progressive” music is being presented at this time in the *Melody Maker* is, as noted above, the relationship of the music to its audience. John Morgan (of the group Spirit of John Morgan) insists that progressive music should still be entertaining and that groups have to decide “whether you are going to be a dancing band or a listening band” (Dawbarn, “That’s the Spirit”). Gig listings of the time make it clear that in the UK the university circuit was a major source of audiences for progressive music, which itself seemed to determine a type of audience that “want to sit and listen” to “progressive bands that want to play original music” (Roger Powell of Mighty Baby, qtd. in Welch, “Action”).

Finally, the difficulty of making any precise definitional claims about the coverage of progressive music in the late 1960s is shown vividly in an eclectic end-of-year list of recommended releases for “progressive fans,” which we list in full below (*Melody Maker*, “Groovy Gifts”). It would appear that the “progressive” audience is a marketing category (and taste culture) loosely defined as open to a broad range of new music from British and American artists who focus on the album rather than the singles market, and whose music requires, perhaps, the active listening mentioned above.

Bob Dylan, *Nashville Skyline*  
 Edgar Broughton Band, *Wasa Wasa*  
 Fairport Convention, *Unhalfbricking*  
 Yes, *Yes*  
 Blodwyn Pig, *Ahead Rings Out*  
 The Clouds, *Scrapbook*  
 Julie Driscoll, Brian Auger and the Trinity, *Streetnoise*  
 Blind Faith, *Blind Faith*  
 Jeff Beck, *Beck-Ola*  
 Johnny Almond Music Machine, *Patent Pending*  
 Cream, *Goodbye*  
 Cream, *The Best of Cream*  
 Ten Years After, *Stonedhenge*  
 Mothers of Invention, *Ruben and the Jets*  
 Liverpool Scene, *The Amazing Adventures of ...*  
 Keef Hartley, *Halfbreed*  
 Family, *Family Entertainment*  
 Brian Auger, *Definitely What!*  
 Country Joe and the Fish, *Electric Music for the Mind and Body*  
 Moody Blues, *On the Threshold of a Dream*  
 Jack Bruce, *Songs for a Tailor*  
 Joni Mitchell, *Clouds*  
 Van Morrison, *Astral Weeks*  
 King Crimson, *In the Court of the Crimson King*  
 Pink Floyd *Ummagumma*  
 Soft Machine, *Volume 2*  
 Pentangle, *Basket of Light*

## Progressive Music in the UK: 1970-1974

*Sounds* launched in 1970 and its first issue proclaimed its difference from the *NME* and *Melody Maker* with a front cover editorial that included these statements:

SOUNDS believes that categories no longer matter. It's the music that counts.

For another thing, SOUNDS believes that the new music of the Seventies deserves a paper of the Seventies. NOT a paper of the past desperately striving to keep [up] with it. (*Sounds*)

We can read that final declaration as a challenge to the established weekly papers (principally *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*); here is a paper that is committing itself to modernity, that understands the present and its future and does not carry the weight of old-fashioned trends. *Sounds* appears as a celebration of the new. That first statement, though, is telling, and appears to contradict Lindberg et al.'s suggestion that *Sounds* was "specifically designed to cover progressive rock" (197). The roster of musicians featured in its first issue confirms the paper's eclectic/broad interest, as it contains news, features, and album and concert reviews about Deep Purple, the Who, Pink Floyd, Free, Buddy Miles, Muddy Waters, James Brown, Pentangle, Chicago, Taste, James Taylor, and Joni Mitchell.

In its first eighteenth months *Sounds* published interviews with Ian Anderson, Jon Anderson, Keith Emerson, Robert Fripp, Genesis, Peter Hammill, and Rick Wakeman, but these interviews take their place amongst features on other, non-progressive, acts and do not overshadow the rest of the paper's content. For many of these artists and their respective groups the coverage may simply be due to their popularity and sales success, rather than any ideological promotion of the progressive by the paper. Indeed, from 1970 to 1974 there are very few instances of the term, or its attendant discursive markers of classical influences, instrumental virtuosity, lyrical and structural complexity, transcendent musical experiences or status as art music (Atton, "Living"), being used in the paper, despite the coverage given to bands we now regard as exemplars of progressive rock. The readership was clearly dominated by fans of these bands – for example, the *Sounds* readers' poll of 1973 saw Yes take the top band accolade, while Keith Emerson (keyboards), Carl Palmer (drums), and Chris Squire (bass) all won their respective instrumental categories (with Steve Howe voted second best guitarist after Eric Clapton) – but the paper's eclectic coverage and its lack of any explicit ideological preference for "progressive" music in the early 1970s strongly suggests that, editorially at least, *Sounds* still preferred to pursue its first issue's argument that "categories no longer matter."

Throughout the early 1970s *New Musical Express*, like *Sounds*, continued to cover what we now consider to be progressive rock, though hardly ever using the term or explicating its significance. Apart from the occasional reference to classical influences (appearing most often in relation to ELP) and compound time signatures (the only concession to musical terminology), writers approach the music using a vocabulary common to rock writing of the time, emphasizing rock as artistic expression, as emblematic of authenticity, praising virtuosity (not considered to be the preserve of the progressive rock musician), and gauging success through album sales, chart positions, venues played, and concert tickets sold.



Despite its historical reputation as the irreverent and hip music paper of the seventies, *New Musical Express*, in common with its rivals, found space for major features and interviews with groups such as ELP, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, and Yes. Equally in common with *Sounds*, the paper very rarely uses the term “progressive rock,” or even “progressive,” to refer to these groups. In only a handful of the hundreds of features, interviews, concert reviews, and album reviews surveyed was either term used by either paper during the period under consideration (1970 to 1974), and these mostly in 1970. For example, [Richard Green](#) refers to *Ten Years After* as “one of the country’s biggest progressive groups” alongside Jethro Tull and Fleetwood Mac, though he also notes that “progressive” is used interchangeably with “heavy” and “underground,” while Jon Anderson of Yes states in a 1970 interview that “we’re not a blues group, not a jazz group, just a pop group. . . . We have been classed as a progressive group, but this isn’t how we see ourselves” (qtd. in [Nesbit](#)).

There is a sense that the term “progressive” is associated with the past. For instance, the *NME*’s “A-Z Guide to the Sound of the 70’s,” published in early 1970, states, “Call them Underground, or Progressives if you MUST but the information and pictures we gathered for this 3-part A to Z supplement is [*sic*] really all about Pop . . . the Pop sounds of the 70’s” (“A-Z Guide”). The selection of artists listed suggests an extremely diverse and inclusive notion of “underground” or “progressive” music, including Argent, Blodwyn Pig, Colosseum, Leonard Cohen, Canned Heat, Fotheringay, Free, and King Crimson. There are only fleeting references to “progressive” in 1971 and these tend to distinguish the artists under consideration from a mass of groups. Jethro Tull is described as “removed from the mainstream of progressive music at most points” ([Logan](#), “I’m Much”). In the same article, Nick Logan briefly posits an evolutionary understanding of progressive rock: “Jethro are what you might term second generation progressives, the third generation being the Sabbaths, the Deep Purple, the Curved Airs.” Who comprises the first generation he does not say. Similarly, two years later, in a review of *Selling England by the Pound*, [Barbara Charone](#) declares that Genesis “stand head and shoulders above all those so-called progressive groups.” It is as if the term “progressive” carries too much negatively critical weight and that writers need to show how “their” group rises above what we might call the “everyday progressives” and displays unique features, not those of the herd. What those features are and how they work to distinguish one group from another, the writers do not, however, explore.

In 1972, editor Alan Smith followed *Sounds* by declaring the *NME* “an intelligent weekly” that disregards genre categories and is suitable “for music people who rate Beefheart but don’t necessarily slam Bolan.” He goes on to demonstrate the paper’s new found eclecticism in a list surely calculated for its inclusivity: “Steeleye [Span], rock n’ roll, the charts, Jethro [Tull], Cat Stevens and much, much more.” Genres will not matter, “so long as it’s good music” ([Smith](#), “A Message”). Later in the year, a second front-page editorial confirms the paper’s inclusive policy, “covering music from hard rock, folk and soul through to teenybop” (*New Musical Express*, “*NME World’s Fastest*”), and while coverage of groups we now refer to as progressive rock continues to be a significant part of the paper’s agenda, the term “progressive” hardly appears at all between 1972 and 1974.

In the early 1970s the term “progressive” is used much less frequently by the *Melody Maker* than it had been in the 1960s, perhaps reinforcing the notion that “progressive”

music was associated with the previous decade. Where it is deployed, it is used interchangeably with other terms such as “pop” and “heavy.” For instance, [Dennis Detheridge’s](#) 1971 feature on the closure of Birmingham’s live music venue Mothers, describes it as “almost a shrine for followers of progressive pop during the past three years,” before adding that “it was generally accepted that a heavy group had not really arrived until they had been given a gig there.” His list of artists includes Jethro Tull, Colosseum, the Moody Blues, and the Nice, alongside Joe Cocker, Fairport Convention, Fleetwood Mac, and Led Zeppelin. Lennie Wright of the lesser-known group (The) Web continues the argument that progressive music is for “thinking” people, for people who have “outgrown the old type of music.” Consequently, “the music must be more intelligent too. . . . Only the groups who have the technical ability to play progressive music will survive” (qtd. in [Dawbarn, “Web”](#)). Wright’s position equates intelligence with a high level of instrumental virtuosity, an argument that readers of the paper seem to support. On the letters page of the issue of 17 January 1970 one reader suggests that the content and style of progressive music are more enduring than those of “pop” and that they ensure that the “new music” will have “lasting value and is not an eight week wonder” ([Henchall](#)). Another reader finds so much variety in the music “which fuses existing forms into a completely new style” that it “defies all categories. . . . What labels can we find to stick on this kind of music? “‘Progressive’ is inadequate” ([Smith, “Untitled”](#)).

*Melody Maker’s* “Rock Report” of April 1973 presents a re-assessment of “Britain’s rock establishment” that includes overtly critical opinions on many bands now routinely classed as progressive rock. ELP “must beware that the emphasis on technology doesn’t overpower the progression of their music,” while for “non-believers” Jethro Tull may appear to be “pretentious and amateurish,” and the Moody Blues have “become repetitive and hollow” (“[Rock Report](#)”, 21 April 32–3). None of the groups listed in the report, which includes Yes, Traffic, Soft Machine, and Pink Floyd, are termed progressive, though a follow-up report on American rock music states that Jefferson Airplane are “one of the few genuinely progressive groups,” while others previously deemed to be “progressive” are now simply “rock,” including Blood Sweat & Tears, the Grateful Dead, the Mothers of Invention, Santana, War, and the Doors (“[Rock Report](#)”, 28 April 32–3). Later in the same year, the paper presents a four-part “History of Pop,” with the final installment covering the years 1967 to 1973. As we might expect, there is much attention paid to developments in popular music during this period, including the “Blues Boom” (Fleetwood Mac, Ten Years After), “Electric Folk” (Fairport Convention, Pentangle), and “a new kind of rock based on technical expertise” (King Crimson, Yes). “Jazz-rock” is discussed (Blood, Sweat & Tears, Chicago, Colosseum), as is “heavy” music (Black Sabbath, Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin), but “progressive rock” is conspicuous largely due to its absence as a genre term (“[History](#)”, 28 July 29-30, 35-36). In November 1973, a feature article on Pink Floyd describes the band as a “true progressive band” that founded “intellectual rock” where the “appeal of the music is on a mental plane rather than an emotional one”. The band is described as “the model of what a good rock band should be: progressive, inventive and forever willing to absorb new ideas” ([Oldfield](#)). This view is echoed by a reader’s letter from December 1973 that criticizes the paper’s “ignorant criticism” of recent albums by

Jethro Tull, Yes, ELP and Led Zeppelin (which shows the beginning of a backlash against the commercial success and musical direction of these bands), arguing that,

The whole point is that it is progressive music. Yes could have stopped musically after The Yes Album, and continued to release album after album in the same vein. . . . Instead, Yes have gone on to increase their complexity, to the delight of their fans – leaving the impatient and the critics by the wayside. (Etheridge)

The range of musicians encompassed by the term “progressive” is suggestive less of a generic label and more of a set of cultural practices that are informed by an ideology of progress and that are spread across a diversity of musical forms. To an extent, this concurs with Moore and Martin’s description of progressive rock as “a series of related but separate styles, each with their internal consistencies” (73–74), yet the internal consistencies that came to be recognized in the academic and fan discourses of the 1990s and beyond (Macan, *Rocking*; Martin, *Listening*; Anderton, “Many-headed”) are largely absent in the coverage of the music papers of the early 1970s. The articles, reviews, readers’ letters, and interviews discussed above suggest that there was an ideology at work that brought together aesthetics and commerce. In the late 1960s, the term “progressive” seems to have been deployed as a marker of aesthetic value to signify a species of modernity – in this sense, “progression” appears to possess a cultural value similar to that of classical music’s avant-garde. By contrast, however, to the exclusionary nature of much avant-garde composition, where popularity is treated as an index of failure (McClary), “progressive” popular music is presented as commercially significant and as a shorthand way to discuss music that moved beyond the singles charts of bubblegum pop. Yet by the end of the 1960s this was identified by musicians and listeners as a new form of “hype,” and some musicians were at pains to avoid being labelled as “progressive.”

*Sounds* and *New Musical Express* both published editorials in the early 1970s that argued that categories were no longer important in music – a position that allowed them some ideological separation from the music industry. As a result, the term “progressive” begins to be used less frequently in the early 1970s than it was in the late 1960s when UK bands were typically referred to as making “progressive pop,” “progressive blues,” or “progressive music,” or simply as “thinking groups.” Nevertheless, it is clear from our research that there was relatively little consensus in the British press of the late 1960s and early 1970s regarding the use and meaning of the term “progressive,” though some of the stereotypes that we associate with the term today were present. These include the value that is placed on the album rather than the single, on the need for artists to develop and improve their playing technique, on the increasing complexity of the music (whether musicological, technological, or ideological), and on the pleasures of listening rather than dancing.

A variety of terms were used to describe the music of bands that, by the 1990s, were routinely termed “progressive rock.” These included “classical rock” (Thomas), “electronic chamber music” (Walters), and “technoflash” (Edmands). Tony Jasper’s contemporary review of British pop music in the early 1970s adds “head,” “acid,” “psychedelic,” and “heavy” as alternatives in common usage at the time (15), while Yes are referred to as “rocko-phonic” in a 1973 live review for *The Times* (Shelton). These examples do not exhaust the lexicon but, if they signify anything beyond

rhetorical invention, they point to either multiple interpretations or a developing instability of value judgments and critical claims. By far the most common use of the term “progressive” in the press of the era was as an adjective mobilized to signify the quality and appeal of the music – to help connect readers and potential fans to the breadth of new music being produced at that time, and to indicate a move forwards from the “underground” scene of the late 1960s.

## Conclusion

Throughout the three papers discussed in this article there is little clarity or consistency in the use of the term “progressive” by musicians, journalists, or readers, and little sense of it constituting a recognized genre. There is a parallel here with Deena Weinstein’s study of the origins of the term “heavy metal” in which she found that the term was “in the cultural air of the times” but that musicians and the press of the time would not “have given the genre the same configuration and sensibility that it has [since] taken on” (36). In the case of “progressive rock” and the British music press of the early 1970s, we refer to this as an absent presence. The bands routinely referred to as progressive rock today were regularly featured in the most important weekly music papers of the time, yet in the period up to 1974 they were rarely discussed using the genre term “progressive rock.” Instead we see them validated more generally as part of Britain’s “rock establishment” (*Melody Maker*, “Rock Report”, 21 April). Franco Fabbri’s study of “progressive rock” in Italy offers an interesting parallel. He finds that the term “progressive rock” does not appear to be in use in that country during the early 1970s despite Italian musicians performing and releasing albums that we would now classify as progressive rock, and the popularity of British (as well as American) “progressive” acts among youthful Italian audiences at that time (“*Progressive*”; see also Anderton, “Full-Grown”). Fabbri suggests that “pop” was “the name that was by far and large the most used in Italy to describe new and interesting popular music for youth audiences” though he suggests that the term “pop” was not used in the same way in the British press of the era (“*Progressive*” 87). In light of this, it is interesting to note that one of the first encyclopedic publications about Italian progressive rock was called *Il Ritorno Del Pop Italiano*, published in 1990 (Barotto). When Barotto published *The Return of Italian Pop* (an updated English language version) in 1998 it had the subtitle *A Complete Guide to Italian Progressive Music*.

By the 1990s “progressive rock” appears to be almost a defensive term, used to recapture musicians and recordings that fans consider to have been marginalized: for instance, the American magazine *Progression* begins publishing in 1992, while several British fanzines organized around specific artists or groups of related artists also began at a similar time (Atton, “Living”). These supplement the book-length studies by Macan, Martin, and Stump discussed earlier in the article and which are also, arguably, rooted in fandom. The 1990s, then, stands as a time when classification and boundary policing emerged around the term “progressive rock,” where it was not only the quality of the music that was at stake, but also what counted as “progressive” in musical terms. We might see this as an attempt at historical revisionism, where little connection was made between the authors’ own ideologies and the active, living cultures of what Martin argues was the “time of progressive

rock.” It is this historical revisionism that this article has sought to investigate through documentary research – to uncover how the term was used in the press of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Our findings suggest that a more capacious version of “progressive” was at play at that time. The relatively recent extension of progressive rock’s genre boundaries and content on online fan forums and websites (see for example Anderton, “Many-headed”) would seem to be closer in spirit to how the music emerged and was perceived in the early 1970s, than to how the genre was codified in the academic work of the 1990s.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

**Chris Anderton** is Associate Professor of Cultural Economy at Solent University, Southampton, UK. He is the author of *Music Festivals in the UK: Beyond the Carnavalesque* (Routledge, 2019), co-author of *Understanding the Music Industries* (Sage, 2013, with Andrew Dubber and Martin James), and has published and presented internationally on music festivals, the music industry, and music history. He is currently working on the book *Music Management, Marketing and PR: Creating Connections and Conversations* (with James Hannam and Johnny Hopkins) and an edited collection on music history called *Media Narratives in Popular Music* (with Martin James). At Solent University he manages and teaches music business degrees and runs the in-house music organization Solent Music (solentmusic.com).

**Chris Atton** is Professor of Media and Culture in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University. His books include *Alternative Media*, *Alternative Journalism* and the *Routledge Companion to Alternative and Community Media*. He has made special studies of fanzines and the media of new social movements, as well as the cultural value of avant-garde and other “difficult” forms of popular music.

## Works cited

- Ahlkvist, Jarl A. “What Makes Rock Music ‘prog’? Fan Evaluation and the Struggle to Define Progressive Rock.” *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 34, no. 5, 2011, pp. 639–60. doi:10.1080/03007766.2010.537893.
- Anderton, Chris. “‘full-grown from the Head of Jupiter’? Lay Discourses and Italian Progressive Rock.” *De-Canonizing Music History*, edited by Vesa Kurkela and Lauri Väkevä, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 97–112.
- . “A Many-headed Beast: Progressive Rock as European Meta-genre.” *Popular Music*, vol. 29, no. 3, 2010, pp. 417–35. doi:10.1017/S0261143010000450.
- . “Fire in Harmony: The 1980s UK British Progressive Rock Revival.” *Prog Rock in Europe. Overview of a Persistent Musical Style*, directed by Philippe Gonin, Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2016, pp. 151–64.
- Atton, Chris. “Living in the Past?: Value Discourses in Progressive Rock Fanzines.” *Popular Music*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2001, pp. 29–46. doi:10.1017/S0261143001001295.
- . “Genre and the Cultural Politics of Territory: The Live Experience of Free Improvisation.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 15, no. 4, 2012, pp. 427–41. doi:10.1177/1367549412442671.
- . “Curating Popular Music: Authority and History, Aesthetics and Technology.” *Popular Music*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2014, pp. 413–27. doi:10.1017/S026114301400035X.

- Barotto, Paolo. *Il Ritorno Del Pop Italiano*. Vinyl Magic, 1990.
- . *The Return of Italian Pop*. Vinyl Magic, 1998.
- Charone, Barbara. “The Pound Recovers.” Review of *Selling England by the Pound*, by Genesis. *New Musical Express*, 29 Sept. 1973, p. 23.
- Dawbarn, Bob. “That’s the Spirit!” *Melody Maker*, 29 Nov. 1969, p. 16.
- . “Web Want to Forget the Singles.” *Melody Maker*, 3 Jan. 1970, p. 7.
- Detheridge, Dennis. “Musicians Mourn Mothers.” *Melody Maker*, 9 Jan. 1971, p. 5.
- Drewett, Michael, et al. *Peter Gabriel, from Genesis to Growing Up*. Routledge, 2016.
- Edmands, Bob. “ELP: Art, Rot, or Entertainment?” *New Musical Express*, 19 Oct. 1974, pp. 19, 50.
- Etheridge, Mark T. “Stop the Yes Bashing.” *Melody Maker*, 29 Dec. 1973, p. 9.
- Fabbri, Franco. “A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications.” *Popular Music Perspectives*. edited by David Horn and Philip Tagg, International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1981, pp. 51–81.
- . “Progressive Rock in Italy in the 1960s-1970s: Communities, Styles, Relations with Other Genres/Scenes.” *Prog Rock in Europe. Overview of a Persistent Musical Style*. directed by Philippe Gonin, Editions Universitaires de Dijon, 2016, pp. 79–95.
- Fripp, Robert. “Looking at the World Thru Crimson Coloured Glasses.” *International Times*, vol. 63, Aug. 29–Sept. 11, 1969, p. 18.
- Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music*. Oxford UP, 1996.
- Gray, Andy. “The Sensational 60’s – History of the Pop Decade.” *New Musical Express*, 27 Dec. 1969, p. 24.
- Green, Richard. “TYA Plan 33 Speed on 7 Min Single.” *New Musical Express*, 25 Apr. 1970, p. 11.
- Hegarty, Paul, and Martin Halliwell. *Beyond and Before: Progressive Rock since the 1970s*. London: Continuum, 2011.
- Henchall, Malcolm. Untitled Letter. *Melody Maker*, 17 Jan. 1970, p. 28.
- Hill, Sarah. “Ending It All: Genesis and Revelation.” *Popular Music*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2013, pp. 197–221. doi:10.1017/S0261143013000044.
- Holm-Hudson, Kevin, editor. *Progressive Rock Reconsidered*. Routledge, 2002.
- . “Apocalyptic Otherness: Black Music and Extraterrestrial Identity in the Music of Magma.” *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, pp. 481–95. doi:10.1080/0300776032000144931.
- . *Genesis and the Lamb Lies down on Broadway*. Ashgate, 2008.
- Holt, Fabian. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago UP, 2007.
- Jasper, Tony. *Understanding Pop*. SCM Press Ltd, 1972.
- Keister, Jay, and Jeremy L. Smith. “Musical Ambition, Cultural Accreditation and the Nasty Side of Progressive Rock.” *Popular Music*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2008, pp. 433–55. doi:10.1017/S0261143008102227.
- Levene, Barry. “Why Moan? Today’s Scene’s the Best.” *Melody Maker*, 17 Aug. 1968, p. 40.
- Lindberg, Ulf, et al. *Rock Criticism from the Beginning: Amusers, Bruisers, and Cool-headed Cruisers*. Peter Lang, 2005.
- Logan, Nick. “Have-a-go Hollies Cut Most Progressive Hit Ever.” *New Musical Express*, 18 Oct. 1969a, p. 14.
- . “Jethro – The New Breed.” *New Musical Express*, 1 Feb. 1969b, p. 2.
- . “I’m Much Too Pigheaded to Have Prostituted My Music.” *New Musical Express*, 13 Mar. 1971, p. 14.
- Lüders, Marika, L. Proitz, and T. Rasmussen. “Emerging Personal Media Genres.” *New Media & Society*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2010, pp. 947–63. doi:10.1177/1461444809352203.
- Macan, Edward. *Rocking the Classics: English Progressive Rock and the Counterculture*. Oxford UP, 1997.
- . *Endless Enigma: A Musical Biography of Emerson, Lake and Palmer*. Open Court, 2006.
- Martin, Bill. *Music of Yes: Structure and Vision in Progressive Rock*. Open Court, 1996.
- . *Listening to the Future: The Time of Progressive Rock, 1968–1978*. Open Court, 1998.
- McClary, Susan. “Terminal Prestige: The Case of Avant-garde Music Composition.” *Cultural Critique*, vol. 12, 1989, pp. 57–81. doi:10.2307/1354322.

- Melody Maker*. "Groovy Gifts for Christmas." *Melody Maker*, 6 Dec. 1969a, p. 28.
- . "The Song Al Hopes Everyone Will Understand." *Melody Maker*, 1 Feb. 1969b, p. 18.
- . "The History of Pop, Part 4: 1967-1973." *Melody Maker*, 28 July 1973b, pp. 29–30, 35–36.
- . "The Rock Report." *Melody Maker*, 21 Apr. 1973a, pp. 32–33.
- . "The Rock Report: The Americans." *Melody Maker*, 28 Apr. 1973c, pp. 32–33.
- Moore, Allan F., and Remy Martin. *Rock: The Primary Text - Developing a Musicology of Rock*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2019.
- Negus, Keith. *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. Routledge, 1999.
- Nesbit, Jan. "Yes (Atlantic)." *New Musical Express*, 28 Mar. 1970, p. 12.
- New Musical Express*. "World of Progressive Music." *New Musical Express*, 13 Sept. 1969, p. 10.
- . "A-Z Guide to the Sounds of the 70's." *New Musical Express*, 14 Mar. 1970, pp. 9–16.
- . "NME World's Fastest-growing Music Weekly – Official." *New Musical Express*, 26 Aug. 1972, p. 1.
- Oldfield, Michael. "Pink Floyd: The True Progressive Band." *Melody Maker*, 24 Nov. 1973, p. 31.
- Shelton, Robert. "Yes. Rainbow Theatre." *The [London] Times*, 21 Nov. 1973, p. 11.
- Smith, Alan. "A Message from NME Editor Alan Smith." *New Musical Express*, 5 Feb. 1972, p. 1.
- Smith, Andrew. "Untitled Letter." *Melody Maker*, 17 Jan. 1970, p. 28.
- Sounds*. "Sounds – For the Seventies." *Sounds*, 10 Oct. 1970, p. 1.
- Street, John, M. Worley, and D. Wilkinson. "'does It Threaten the Status Quo?' Elite Responses to British Punk, 1976-1978." *Popular Music*, vol. 37, no. 2, 2018, pp. 271–89. doi:10.1017/S026114301800003X.
- Stump, Paul. *The Music's All that Matters: A History of Progressive Rock*. Quartet, 1997.
- Thomas, Ray. "Ray Thomas of the Moodies in Blind Date." *Melody Maker*, 6 June 1970, p. 21.
- Walters, Idris. "God Gave Rock 'n' Roll to You." *Melody Maker*, 26 Apr. 1975, pp. 18, 71.
- Weinstein, Deena. "Just so Stories: How Heavy Metal Got Its Name – A Cautionary Tale." *Rock Music Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2014, pp. 36–51. doi:10.1080/19401159.2013.846655.
- Welch, Chris. "How to Upset the Blues Purists." *Melody Maker*, 16 Mar. 1968a, p. 5.
- . "Is the Day of the Thinking Man's Pop Group upon Us?" *Melody Maker*, 3 Aug. 1968b, pp. 12–13.
- . "Pop Scene '68 – Freaking Out." *Melody Maker*, 1 June 1968c, p. 11.
- . "The Yardbirds: Only Jimmy Left to Form the New Yardbirds." *Melody Maker*, 12 Oct. 1968d. *Rock's Back Pages*. <http://www.rocksbackpages.com/article.html?ArticleID=8922>. Accessed 15 May 2019.
- . "Action Grow into a Mighty Baby." *Melody Maker*, 20 Dec. 1969, p. 26.
- Wilson, Tony. "Blood, Sweat & Tears." *Melody Maker*, 17 May 1969, p. 15.