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The Role of Radio, 33 Records and Technologies in the Growth of Progressive Rock

Introduction

For amateurs of progressive rock the title of this article probably seems somewhat sacreligous. An implicit acceptance exists of this genre as a kind of romantic place in which artists, faced with the demands of an increasingly superficial and materialistic world, reaffirm their strength and creative autonomy. Thus to credit their success and viability to the attentions of the media and to the goodwill of the record industry is not without its dangers. Yet this is precisely what I aim to do, in showing that, in certain aspects, Pink Floyd, Yes, and the others, were were not in fact independent of the contingencies of their time.

The Role of the Radio in the Emergence of Progressive Rock

Great Britain

In Britain, it is possible to argue that the backward structure of radio gave rise to new forms of alternative programming destined for teenagers and young adults. By the mid-1960s radio programmes were still structured around a tripartite model dating back to the Second World War. The BBC offered basic entertainment shows to its “lowbrow” audiences; musical programmes, interspersed with practical advice shows, destined for a “mediumbrow” consumer; and programmes with a high cultural content for the “highbrow” end of the market. Within this strict canvas, pop music held only a very limited place, having to make do with short time slots. In fact, music transmitted by antenna was generally played by live resident orchestras performing cover versions of the current hits (both indigeneous pop music and latin american-style tunes), rather than through the playing of vinyl records. (Chapman, 1992) Thus what was on offer was in effect a pastiche of the real thing, increasingly anachronistic in a musical environment in which teenagers were demanding creative commitment and a pure sound as a condition for supporting pop musicians.

This lack of interest and marginalisation of sub-cultures by the BBC and official national radio stations left a vacuum to be filled by pirate radio. If Britain was at the core of this issue, the idea of installing pirate radio stations on board ships navigating in international waters emerged in Scandanavia. In Denmark, there was Radio Mercur (1958-1962) and Danish Commercial Radio (1961), then in Sweden Radio Nord (1960-1962) and Radio Syd (1962-1966), and later others in The Netherlands and Belgium. “From 1964, the trend hit Britain with the establishment of Radio Caroline, then Radio England and Radio Canada right at the mouth of the Thames; Radio 270 in the south of Middlesborough; Radio-City; Radio 390 a few miles from The Isle of Man […] They flooded the country with pop music and made a mockery of the BBC’s monopoly”. (Rault, 1966: 33-39) The pirates were able to profit from loopholes in government legislation and from the slowness of the retaliation to such an extent that, between 1964 à 1968, 21 offshore stations were in operation.

However, these stations had varying objectives and means at their disposal, and were even somewhat naive as to the potential of the teenage market. It was only by 1966, after two years of largely conventional programming, and following the lead taken by Radio Caroline, that pirate radio stations started to adopt a more intuitive approach. The new disc-jockeys at these radio stations became the true experts of pop music and were able to connect with a generation of teenagers who considered pop's ephemeral nature to be a quality and whose tastes and moods dictated which records they chose. Kenny Everett and John Peel, who started working at Radio London in 1967, became part of this revolution by featuring on their shows a hub of around thirty groups and artists including Frank Zappa, Captain Beefhart, The Velvet Underground, The Incredible String Band, Pink Floyd, The Byrds and, of course, the Beatles. (Chapman, 1992: 127) This free programming had two particular consequences; firstly, the underground scene was made available

to British listeners; and secondly to propagate the idea of a coherent underground scene with similar aspirations whereas, in fact, if it existed at all, this was more a loose collection of trends and creative impulses, as much political as mystical.

Once the threat of legislation had gathered momentum, the pirate radio adventure ended abruptly, as their lifeline was essentially cut off by government. Rather than simply banning pirate radio, it became illegal for a British citizen or company to supply or give publicity to an offshore radio station. This was made law on August 14 1967, leading to a gradual silencing of pirate radio stations. However by this time another revolution was underway, since legislation also allowed the BBC to create their own popular music service, as well as local radio stations. Thus in the same year on September 30, BBC Radio 1 was launched.

USA

In the United States, the situation was very different, but equally revealing. From March 1968, the phrase " progressive rock format " started to emerge to describe those FM stations which were dissociating themselves from AM radio by targeting a different public (aged from 18 to 25) and by playing progressive rock, interviewing or broadcasting live performances The expression "progressive rock format" refers both to the aesthetic and to the technology.[1] According to accounts of the time, this practice first emerged during the early months of 1967.

"Progressive rock programming which started as a sort of fluke more than a year ago is suddenly blossoming into a format that is giving to some FM stations much needed attention." (Hall, 1968a: 20)

This new type of programming was not simply a reflection of a new aesthetic, but rather the fruit of technological development and judicial decisions. The progressive rock format was linked to the multiplication of FM (Frequency Modulation) stations, and to the rapid expansion in the number of radios equipped with an FM band, which expanded from 10%, at the beginning of the 1960s, to 36% in 1966, a year in which 13.6 million radio sets were sold (figures supplied by "Billboard Magazine").[2] Why such an enormous success? FM sets were cheap, easy to operate, and had a vastly superior sound quality. Up to the mid-1960s, the programmes broadcast on the FM band were the same as those on Medium Wave (MW). What should be noted, within the context of progressive rock, is how the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decreed that the FM band should be used for broadcasting entirely different programmes from those on AM stations. Thus, as a result of this decision, FM stations directed their ouput towards ethnic minorities, as well as jazz and classical music enthusiasts, while in the suburban areas of the West Coast, they played a part in the birth of underground radio.

The rest of the story is well known. In 1967, the presenter Tom Donahue started a non-stop rock radio show on the San Francisco FM station, KMPX. He subsequently did the same at a rival station, KSAN,[3] in 1968. His formula was simple. Instead of playing on rotation the current hits of the moment, based on sales figures supplied by the record industry, he relied largely on his own tastes.

He would therefore focus attention on local groups whose music was not necessarily attuned to the radio format, some of whom existed in obscurity without even a discography. Within a few months of the end of 1967, this programming model had spread across the US.[4] What became known as "progressive rock music", by so-called "anti-establishment" groups, was transmitted by young and popular presenters who wouldn't hesitate to play two or three album tracks, and, on some occasions, the entire album. This new style of programme accentuated the gulf between artists belonging to the show business circuit and those considered alternative. The

[1] "[a music which] had something to say in its lyrics or was hard-driving, exciting music…such as could not be found on radio anywhere else". (Hall, 1971: RN 38)

[2] Nevertheless, FM broadcasting is nothing new. It has existed since the beginning of the 1940s and the frequencies have been allocated since the end of that decade. See Lynn, 1967: 20

[3] The first letter of the abbreviation of the radio stations indicates that it can be found to the East (W) or to the West of Mississippi (K). The other letters refer to places, people or groups of media.

[4] Billboard recounted this expansion weekly. During the first half of 1968, the magazine published short reports on new programmes in Los Angeles, Philadelphie, Dallas, Chicago, etc.

“progressive rock format” became a banner under which FM radio stations engaged in propagating a counter-culture were grouped, thus setting themselves in opposition to “pot pourri pop”, described as “a format based on both rock’n’roll and easy listening music”. (Hall, 1968b: 1) Disparate elements were therefore brought together, creating contact between artists of many different backgrounds, at more or less the same time as European pirate radio, which also suggested the idea of a community sharing the same aspirations.

It should be underlined here that, in the context of a radio industry in full expansion, progressive rock, psychedelic rock, and generally all the underground styles of music of this era, represented a cultural alibi. Whether legal or not, the new radio stations of the US, UK or Europe, justified their existence by the need to defend the repertoires of marginalised, ignored or scorned artists. This media reconnaissance played a major part in the promotion and ultimate success of progressive rock at the beginning of the 1970s, for which there is ample proof. In February 1968, Genesis’ first single *The Silent Sun* was first aired by the BBC, but it was Radio Caroline who played it the most regularly. The first song played on Radio 1 at their launch was *Flowers in the Rain* by Move, official proof that mainstream radio was finally conscious of the needs of the young.

The Role of the Media in the Emergence of Progressive Rock

The high fidelity market was still based on technology from the late 1940s. After a “speed war” between Columbia, who had submitted a patent for the 33 speed vinyl record, and RCA, holder of the 45 speed patent, it was decided to adopt both speeds with an implicite acceptance of 45s as a medium for popular music and 33s for a more classical repertoire. The appearance of rock added a new dimension, since the music industry were able to tap into a middle-class intellectualised segment of the market, through sales of its 33s. The lack of success of popular music in penetrating this new market can be analysed in the light of the development of the hit parade.

The Hit Parade

The single was the principal means of achieving fame in the mid-1960s, and formed the basis of the hit parade, in which the 33 long play hardly figured. In “New Musical Express” (NME), four out of five of the hit parade categories were devoted entirely to 45s. A “top 30”, reflecting sales in Great Britain, was presented as the “First ever chart in Britain”, a “Top 30… [of] Best selling pop records in US” and two “Top 10”s reflecting the situation five and ten years earlier. LPs were given only a British “Top 10”. In “Melody Maker” the situation was similar, albeit with a more pronounced national bias. The “Pop 50” (45s) took up nearly a whole page, above, in small characters, a “US Top 10” and a “UK Top 10” of 33s.

A change can be witnessed from December 17 1966 when the NME’s British Top 10 LPs became a “Top 15”, but it was not until 1971 that the “Top 30” of 33s acquired the same status as the “Top 30” of 45s. This development was also reflected in “Melody Maker”, though with some significant chronological distinctions. In April 1967 the “Pop 50” of 45s became a “Pop 30” in an effort to limit wilful manipulation of sales figures, according to the magazine’s editor. And in October 1968, without explanation, their LP “Top 10” became a “Top 20” , the printed characters grew in size but remained inferior to those of the “Pop 30”. It was not until February 14 1970 that the editor adopted a “Top 30” of LPs equal to that of the 45s.

This system remained in place for six years, from when changes were of a more stylistic nature. From January 1 1976 new hit parades would list music by styles, for example “Top 20 Soul”, “Top 20 Reggae” and “Top 20 Country”.

The issues here were thus mixed. The transformation of hit parades in the mid-1960s suggests that what was an offer was as much a new technology as new music. Could it be suggested then that, as with the evolution of jazz music before the Second World War, the technology gave rise to the musical form? In other words, did the music adapt to advances in technologies, or conversely, was technological innovation itself accelerated by the output of musicians. It is worth pointing out that, in the pop music domain, the pre-eminence of the album over the single had already been widely discussed for some time. Eric Clapton complained of the influence of the 45 over the British media, by highlighting two major inconveniences. Firstly, the 45

represented a commercial system in which glory was conferred on the basis of an artist's hits, and secondly it held back creativity. "To get any good music in a space of two or three minutes requires working to a formula". (*s.n.*, 1967: 12) Such a view was taken up by a major part of so-called counter-culture artists.[5]

The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album without doubt gave a decisive push to an attitude which, up to that point, had remained largely theoretical. Their approach, in common with The Beach Boys or Frank Zappa, was to consider the 33 LP in a creative context independent of material requirements of the era. This was essential for the development of progressive rock since the 33 LP was no longer simply a means for promoting the big single, with the addition of a few songs of varying quality.

Instrumental Technology

There is clearly no unilateral network of influences between progressive rock and its context. This is shown by the development of synthesizer technology. When Robert Moog used a recording called Switched on Bach by Walter Carlos to promote his Big Moog, his goal was evidently to find favour with the larger record companies and the world of classical music. The record was released on CBS Masterworks and contained only works from Bach, with sounds aiming to imitate classical music instruments. However, even though the studios showed some interest in this instrument, the majority of orders came from rock or jazz-rock keyboard players.

"Something went wrong. *Switched on Bach* was meant to be an artistic experiment, a learning and testing vehicle, an example of a contemporary composer trying to find himself - not the marked commercial success it has so clearly become".[6]

400 000 copies of this record were sold in the first year, primarily to fans of rock and jazz, while the principal clients of Moog (as well as the early EMS and ARP synthesizers) came largely from the pop music milieu.[7]

This leads us to the conclusion that progressive musicians were at the origin of a revolution in musical instrumentation, reflected in the changing client base for electronic instruments, following the success of synthesizers, which had shifted at least in part from the world of classical music to the lucrative market of pop. This was confirmed at the beginningof the 1970s when the doyens of rock keyboard playing took steps towards classical music, particularly in their style of interpretation.

The synthesizer's development was influenced by the need to find a reliable instrument, not too large, which could easily be reconfigured during the course of a concert. The best example of this was the marketing of the Mini Moog in 1970.

This influence of progressive rock on the development of synthesizers must however be tempered, since although it became one of the emblems of the genre, its arrival was somewhat late. Keith Emerson acquired his first modular Moog in July 1970 (three years after its appearance on the market), and his first Mini Moog at the end of 1971 which he subsequently used on the recording of *Trilogy*, the fourth ELP album, available to the public only in July 1972! Another emblematic figure of the genre, Rick Wakeman, introduced the Mini Moog to the music of Yes in the middle of 1971, but on the album *Fragile* was often limited to giving pastiches of classical musical. It is thus possible to claim that the progressive keyboard player's typical instrumentarium was only in place from the middle of 1970s. Another essential point is that the late intervention of polyphony suggests that the glory days of progressive rock coincided with those of monophonic synthesizers.

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[5] The members of Pink Floyd gave a similar account to that of Eric Clapton. (Walsh, 1967: 9)

[6] Rachel Elkind, in Walter Carlos, *The Well-Tempered Synthesizer*, CBS, S 63656, 1969.

[7] While Stockhausen bought a VCS 3 and John Cage a modular Moog, they seem to be the only ones. Among those who acquired a modular Moog, Eddie Offord allowed Move to figure amongst its first users, Keith Emerson, Florian Fricke (Popol Vuh), Rick Wright and Frank Zappa. The ARP 2500 or 2600 were acquired by David Hentschel (Genesis' producer), Klaus Schulze, Florian Schneider, Tony Banks, Miquette Giraudy (Gong), Steve Hillage and Mike Oldfield; whereas the VCS-3 was preferred by Dave Brock (Hawkwind), Francis Monkman (Curved Air), Brian Eno (Roxy Music), Edgar Froese (Tangerine Dream), Eddie Jobson (UK), Mike Pinder (Moody Blues), Patrick Moraz (Yes), Klaus Schulze, Pete Sinfield, Rick Wakeman and Robert Fripp.

Conclusions

An analysis of the development of radio, hit parades and of synthesizer technology should not be viewed from an Adornian or Marxisant perspective. There is no question of suggesting that musical output arose entirely out of the prevailing context, but rather to demonstrate how the interaction between music and environment was complex and widespread. Amongst a wide range of influences it is possible to affirm that:

- The enormous success of progressive rock betwwen the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s can be directly attributed to the emergence of FM radio stations, pirate radio, and the commercial activities of multinational record companies in promoting the 33LP;
- One of the aesthetic characteristics of progressive rock is its evolutionary rather than revolutionary nature, as confirmed by its technological and mediatised development. Its uniqueness comes in part from the incitement it gave to the commercial and media sectors to reconsider the use of technology dating back to the 1940s (FM radio and 33LPs). One of its great contributions was that it forced a rethinking of the whole sector, and in this way it truly was, for a brief moment, progressive.

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