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# Can Yes Break Its Watery Godspell? The Story Behind 'Yessongs'

Jon Anderson happily chatted about cracking the strange spell that has gripped the band through four LP's. But their new LP proves you can't kill the sound that made you famous.

Jon Anderson ran his hand through a tangle of almost shoulder-length black hair, uncovering the small "Infinity" button pinned to his blue t-shirt. His red sunburn, the souvenir of a recent Australian visit, stood out colorfully against the backdrop of the all blue suite at Los Angeles' posh Beverly Hilton Hotel. He sat passively, almost tranquilly, glancing from time to time down at his leather moccasins or at the beautiful black woman by his side, his wife Jenny.

For years, Yes has been pelted by critics with accusations of sounding as cold and precise as "a mechanical heart." But Jon Anderson is planning to put a stop to that. "Yessongs signifies an end-of-an-era for us," he said softly, while Jenny bubbled enthusiastically by his side, a sparkling contrast to Anderson's own reserve. "We're going to get a little funkier. What I see in groups like The Band, I want to see in Yes. The overall . . . funk of it."

But even as Yes jetted off a few days later from America to their homes in England to begin work on a new double LP set that would usher in a new era of what guitarist Steve Howe called "brilliant improvisation," a three album set entitled *Yessongs* was showing that the old Yes songs were far less computer-like than the critics had complained. It showed, in fact, that the songs Yes has spun over the last year have been as organically interwoven as the cells of a sea anemone.

Jon Anderson: Yes' diminutive writer/vocalist relaxed in his plush Beverly Hilton suite and revealed the tangled dreams and mysteries that went into the making of *YESSONGS*.



The pratfalls of the plunge: *Yessongs* was the band's first attempt to convey the "funky" sound that has become a major topic of conversation—and possibly of battle—within the group. With the LP, they were able to capture a long sought-after spontaneity that most observers said could never be recorded live. But the plunge into even greater spontaneity is apparently putting a strain on the group. "Chris Squire sits back and analyzes every song before he plays it," said Anderson with a hint of impatience. "It's as if his bass is a lead instrument. But it would help if he became a little less lead and a little more earthy."

When Anderson gets impatient it often means that heads are about to roll. Two years ago, he became restless with organist Tony Kaye. Within weeks, Kaye had been replaced by Rick Wakeman. A year later Jon became dissatisfied with drummer Bill Bruford. In a move that took the music world by surprise, Bruford was out and stick man Alan White was in. Could Chris Squire be the next to go? That thought may well have been behind a mysterious admission Squire made before a recent performance: "The garden looks rosy now," he cautiously emphasized. "But if I thought too heavily about the future, I might become so interested in what I'm going to do tonight that I might go onstage thinking about something else."

**Breaking the fiery Godspell:** The future for Squire's fellow Yes-men seems infinitely more secure. In seven



months, guitarist Steve Howe will finish a solo LP backed by synthesized instruments and a bit of keyboard work from Rick Wakeman. And Wakeman himself, far from idle in his spacious Gerrard's Cross suburban home, will follow his first solo LP, *The Six Wives of Henry The Eighth* with a new solo effort, based on *Journey To The Center of the Earth*, followed by a five-date worldwide tour with the London Symphony Orchestra, coordinated by producer Lou Reizner who masterminded the resurrection of *Tommy*. Meanwhile, the group itself has buckled down in their new London studio to work on the LP that Jon Anderson claims will usher in a "freer" Yes.

Yet *Yessongs* proved to more than one close Yes associate that Anderson will need to struggle ferociously to break away from the lyrical bent he has followed for the past five LP's. For Anderson's determination to write songs about the swirling cycles of the green globe earth, the shadowy god who hovers over it, and the men who walk its surface with the sunrise bursting upon their inner eyes would appear to be carrying Yes far from the funkiness of The Band—and closer toward the spirituality of the Mahavishnu Orchestra.

A musical journey: From the crescendo-building snatch of Stravinsky's "Firebird" that opens *Yessongs* to the last splashy chords of "Starship Trooper," the visual intensity of Yes' throbbing music is balanced by the slamming impact of Anderson's intense lyrics. And the stories behind those mystical, personal lyrics were only recently revealed by the writer himself.

The strangely mystical nature themes began to grow early in 1970, when Yes was still a young and struggling band with two LP's that had gone just about nowhere. "We were in Devon rehearsing *The Yes Album*," recalls Jon Anderson, "staying in a beautiful valley. Nature was all around us and it was amazing. I was thinking how we zoom up to the moon when our own environment on this planet is all fouled up. The one thing that sparked me off was the fact that they'd been to the moon a few days earlier, and when they left, they sent something back to blow it up to see how thick it was. At the same time we started having the Pakistani flood disaster. So I was thinking, o.k. you knock the moon off its axis and you're going to mess up the world."

As he looked out over the green fields that spread beneath his window, Jon penned the words to "Perpetual



Chris Squire, bassist: Those close to the band reveal that Chris isn't totally happy about the new "earthy" bent to Yes—and if he left, Yes might collapse.

Change," the first song on side two of *Yessongs*:

*And there you are  
Saying we have the moon  
So now the stars  
When all you see  
Is near disaster . . .*

Into the heart of "Heart:" "Perpetual Change" became the first song in the journey through nature and the frontiers of the spirit world that would culminate in the creation of *Yessongs*. But it would not be the last. One year after Anderson's growing spirituality had touched the lyrical bent of *The Yes Album*, he sat down in his London flat to pen a love song for his wife, Jenny. Yes was riding a non-stop rocket to fame with a hit LP, *The Yes Album*, and a smash single ("Your Move") fueling its

rise. Yet the new lyrics Jenny hummed with her husband had little to do with their newly acquired fortunes. "I was thinking about the sunrise being something you cannot fully grasp," he says. "Scientists call it a ball of fire, but they don't really know what it's all about. After all, scientists think that we are a super-advanced race compared to trees. But maybe we're not. Maybe the trees have gone through the same trip as we have and have finally perfected themselves into a form where they don't want and don't need to have things." Ramming their way abruptly into the lyrics Jon wrote about waves, the streaming rays of the sun, and "the wind with its arms all around me," were words about the "excitement and friction" of the London streets around Jon's apartment and the men who walked quickly past



Alan White, drums: He's the man producer Eddy Offord feels is "bringing Yes back to their roots."

"lost in their eyes/counting the broken ties." And the key line probably described Jon himself, a man "lost in the city," a man who regarded nature with worshipful awe, and man with a frightened confusion. The resulting tune? "Heart of the Sunrise," one of *Fragile*'s most memorable songs.

Final nature touch: But if Jon had dabbled in spiritual, nature-oriented tunes before, they represented only a giant step leading toward the acclaimed masterpiece, *Close To The Edge*.

The tune was originally started during Yes' second U.S. tour in 1972. "About the time that I wrote the lyrics," Jon recalls, "I had been reading Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, *Journey to the East*, *Demian*, and so on. They reflected a feeling that had been growing inside me for the last few years, the need to examine reality



Steve Howe, guitar: The philosophical words of Herman Hesse ground their way into Steve's head. And he sat in the Devon countryside furiously writing lyrics to "Close To The Edge."

and spirituality lyrically." From the first germs of ideas realized on tour. Jon returned to his small basement flat off London's Earls Court Road to finish the lyrics with guitarist Steve Howe. While Jon wrote in the city, Steve was up on a farm in Devon, staring at the rural landscape reflecting upon Siddhartha's words, and writing down a phrase those words had inspired—"Close to the edge down by the river." Together, the budding spiritualists composed a theme revolving around Siddhartha's discovery that a river can give the answers to the mystery of life. Jon explained in his soft North Country accent, "Siddhartha just listened to it in the end, instead of rushing around trying to gather answers from other sources or trying to find a guru." Thus, like the novel's character, the composers realized that the river flows to the sea,

evaporates and drifts away as clouds, comes down as rain in the mountains, trickles down the peaks as a stream, and finally becomes a river again, renewing the cycle of life.

Messenger theme: And eventually, his "search for lyrical truth" carried Jon away from the river theme and toward a realization: "I came closer to realizing that there is a God, and that we are all instruments of God. And what drives me along is an awareness of my own capabilities."

But it often took man too long to recognize his own potential. "How old will I be before I come of age," he questioned in one lyric, then went on to add his own personal outlook on man's struggle against nature for supremacy: "The constant vogue of triumphs dislocate man so it seems." Shaking his tangled head, he explains, "We go to the moon and people are



The group's holed up in their new London studio for five months while they weave a new Yes tapestry. But a funkier, less structured, more driving sound is emerging from the keyholes.

Jon Anderson

## Ah So! Next Yes LP A Chinese Mystery

When vocalist/songwriter Jon Anderson insisted that Yes' next LP will be funky and "get back to the roots," most Yes watchers concluded that the band was going to turn from its ultra complex mini-concertos to a simpler brand of rock and roll. But now that Yes has taken time off from recording their new LP at London's -Advision Studios to talk about the radically different music they are creating, they've made it plain that their new breed of simplicity will be infinitely more exotic than anyone could have imagined.

Sitting in his London living room with a chunk of his wife's organic bread in one hand and a cup of decaffeinated coffee in the other, guitarist Steve Howe repeated Anderson's claims that the new LP will get back to the basics. And what basics are finding their way into the new double album? A voodoo chant, a touch of medieval philosophy and a set of Chinese scriptures which may be the oldest of man's written works! "Well," says Howe, "we felt the way to reach simplicity is to go through complexity."

Bathed in throbbing multi-colored lights, they weave their spell of magical enchantment behind the pulsating drum beats of Alan White.

still starving," then winces at the irony of the way he sees man "dislocating" himself. But the key to the tune, for Jon, lay in one single line, a lyric about a man who points the way, "revealing all the human race."

**Baffling ghost dream:** It was a vivid dream several years old that still haunted Jon's memory, and inspired the vague image. For during a restless sleep, Jon had unconsciously envisioned himself caught in a patch of quicksand, sinking slowly without help near. Accepting his fate calmly, he was rewarded by being transported to a hilltop overlooking the valley that would appear again and again throughout *Close To The Edge*. There, looking toward a distant river, he saw a tall old bearded man before

him, wrapped in flowing white robes. The man pointed down into the valley, and at the tip of his fingers, Jon saw his entire life "all laid out before my eyes. I started laughing, and I said, 'so that's what it's all about.'"

*Close To The Edge* became Jon's hand-painted mirror by which, hopefully, people could perceive the possibilities of viewing life in a new and different way. And in its entirety, the piece expressed, for the band, their movement "close to the edge of a little more awareness, a little more meaning to what we're doing, a little more enlightenment."

**New Yes? Says who?** Today, Anderson talks optimistically of a new Yes, one rooted in earthiness rather than in the nine-layered gobs of Moog

and mellotron madness that transports the unearthly lyrics into an enchanting never-never land. All members of the band claim drummer Alan White, who took over the throbbing drum beats from Bill Bruford last year, is bringing Yes back to its roots. But their manager claims they're finding it difficult to pinpoint what those roots are. With Yes now in their five-month hibernation weaving yet another musical tapestry, a looser sound with more drive and less technicality is reportedly emerging from the London studio. But one thing that staunch Yes fans hope won't change as Yes move into a "funky" era is the peaceful sense of optimistic spirituality that pervades their music. *That* is where their roots do lie.

