





# Accrington Stanley FC's loss was prog rock's gain when **Jon Anderson** found his inner **Art Garfunkel** and said 'yes' to **Yes**. Through spats and schisms he's soldiered on, unbeaten, unbowed. How so? "I'm from the North, mate. Don't mess with me."

Interview by **MARK BLAKE** • Portrait by **ROGER KISBY**

**I**F YOU HEARD A DISTINCTIVELY LANCASTRIAN voice shatter the hill-sheltered California idyll of San Luis Obispo one evening in November 2023, the chances are it was Jon Anderson watching the football. The former Yes vocalist has lived in this old Spanish mission town since the mid-'90s, and still follows his childhood team, Accrington Stanley FC, albeit from afar.

"I found a TV channel that was showing their game against Wrexham," says Anderson, in his soft North-western burr. "And we beat 'em two-nil," he adds triumphantly.

Anderson speaks in the same breathy high-tenor heard on all those vintage Yes LPs. He's approaching his eightieth year, wants to "keep the energy moving" and claims to have "10 projects on the go."

His parents, county champion ballroom dancers Albert and Kathleen, christened their third son John Roy, after a music hall turn called 'John Roy The Melody Boy'. Anderson later dropped the 'h' because, "In my dreams, my name was always Jonathan."

In the early '60s, he played Hamburg with his first group, The Warriors, before moving to London and sweeping floors at a Soho club, La Chasse, where he made connections and hustled his way into what soon became Yes. Their landmark third release, 1971's *The Yes Album*, has just been reissued, and spotlights Anderson's choirboy voice and famously fanciful lyrics: "Shining, flying, purple wolfhound, show me where you are," anyone?

Anderson was arguably *the* voice of '70s progressive rock. Alongside band mainstays, bassist Chris Squire, guitarist Steve Howe and keyboard player Rick Wakeman, his energy helped propel Yes through the gold and platinum-selling *Fragile*, *Close To The Edge* and *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, and into American arenas. The singer's space-cadet persona made him a sitting target during the punk wars. But Yes's eco-friendly 1978 hit *Don't Kill The Whale* and Anderson's 1976 solo debut, *Olias Of Sunhollow* (about a beleaguered race fleeing a dying planet), now seem prescient.

Anderson left Yes in 1980 and made electro-pop hits with the Greek composer Vangelis, before returning for 1983's *90125* and its US Number 1 single, *Owner Of A Lonely Heart*. Since then, he's made solo records, collaborated with numerous musicians (including ex-Zappa violinist Jean-Luc Ponty) and fallen in and out of Yes.

In 2008, he suffered respiratory failure, but Yes continued in his absence, presently with the American vocalist and soundalike Jon Davison. "I don't blame them," he insists.

"They have to make it sound like the real thing."

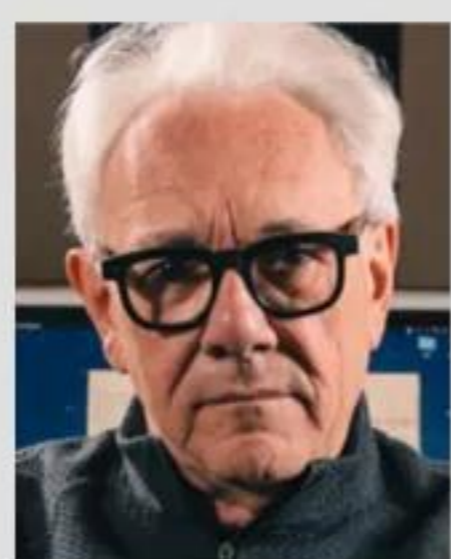
However, his old group are rarely far from his thoughts. Shortly before his death in June 2015, Chris Squire visited Anderson in a dream. He wasn't surprised. "You never know when you're interconnected with the cosmology of life," Anderson shrugs. "But I know people will say, 'OK Jon, no more magic mushrooms for you.'"

**Of those 10 current projects, which is the one you're working on most?**

*Zamran*, the follow-up to *Olias Of Sunhollow*. ➤

## WE'RE NOT WORTHY

**90125 producer Trevor Horn on a master singer.**



"When I first heard Jon it was a revelation – that you could sing that way in a rock band. But his voice is also deceptive. It's high but it has a lot of breadth. And the writing. *Your Move* – lovely. And *Turn Of The Century*: it sets the scene and tells a story, and has a beautiful ending. I think he's terrific."



◀ But I started it in 2000. A couple of record companies are interested, but how interested are they really in a piece of music that's over four hours long? (*laughs*) I listen to it every morning, though, when I walk up and down the hills around here.

**You recently performed classic Yes on tour with a group who sound more like Yes than Yes.**

They're called The Band Geeks. A friend of mine sent me a video of them playing Heart Of The Sunrise [from 1971's *Fragile*]. It freaked me out because it sounded so much like 1952 or 1972 or whenever it was. I got in touch with the bass player Richie [Castellano] and said, "Why don't we go on the road together?" We did the Yes classics and audiences loved them all. So I said, Why don't we make an album together? So we are in the middle of creating that.

**What was the first music that made an impression on you?**

BBC radio – anything coming out of that magic machine, when I was around six years old. It would have been the music of the late '40s and early '50s, like Doris Day and Bing Crosby. But then you'd suddenly hear a symphony by Dvořák. Then, later, The Everly Brothers, Elvis Presley and one of my favourite people, Lonnie Donegan.

**You played the washboard in a schoolboy skiffle group, before joining your brother Tony's band, The Warriors. But at the time you were working on a farm, delivering bricks, doing a milk round...**

My brother told me The Warriors' singer was leaving and did I want to join them? My mum and dad were very supportive, but my mum used to say, "You're going to have to get a real job soon, though." Tony and I used to do the Everlys, then Tony would do Elvis and I'd do Roy Orbison. Suddenly music took over.

**Weren't you also serious about playing for Accrington Stanley?**

Yes, they were my life. Just up from our house was Peel Park football ground, and every night a few of the local kids would kick a ball around the car park. I played a lot against David Lloyd, who later became a famous cricketer. One time we started playing with some of the professionals, but I realised I could *either* be a football player or sing in a group.

**What made you decide?**

Les Cocker, who'd played for Accrington Stanley and became the trainer for England, said to me one day, "Jon, you're too small, you're gonna get kicked here, there and everywhere."

**You're famous for your lyrics with Yes. Where did all those words come from? Were you a big reader as a child?**

No, I was terrible at school, apart from painting and geography. But reading wasn't a consuming pastime until the '70s when I discovered Hermann Hesse, and read *The Finding Of The Third Eye* by Vera Stanley Alder, which opened up my state of consciousness.

**You left The Warriors in 1967, and released two solo singles, *Never My Love* and *(The Autobiography Of) Mississippi Hobo*, as 'Hans Christian' a year later. Were you committed to being a solo artist?**

Not really. It wasn't happening with The Warriors, but *Never My Love* only happened because the guy living in the next apartment to me heard me singing. He was [Paul Korda] the son of the film-maker Alexander Korda and just said, "Do you want to make a record?" So I went to Decca to record it, and the next thing I'm 'Hans Christian'. I thought, I don't care as long as I can feed myself and survive. About a month or two after that I met Chris Squire in La Chasse. But before then I was in The Gun [with brothers Paul and Adrian Gurvitz] for about 10 minutes.

**What happened with The Gun?**

I got them a gig at the Marquee, and halfway

through they asked how much we were getting and I realised I'd never asked [Marquee manager] John Gee for any money. So much for being the hustler. By then, though, I was itching to work in any band. Chris Squire and I liked the same music – things like Simon And Garfunkel. It was meant to happen.

**Yes's original guitarist Peter Banks later described you as "not backward about coming forward" and their first keyboard player, Tony Kaye, called you "Napoleon". Would you agree that you were pushy?**

Oh yes, I'm from the North, mate. Don't mess with me. I was so driven. Chris was kind of posh, a Londoner, and [original Yes drummer] Bill Bruford was straight out of some university, a very intelligent man. Then there was me, speeding away like a lunatic – "Come on everybody, let's try this!" We opened for The Who and I got Pete Banks to smash a plastic guitar at the end, like Pete Townshend did. But it wouldn't break and we all fell about laughing.

**Banks was asked to leave after the first two LPs, *Yes* (1969) and *Time And A Word* (1970). Did you worry Yes would lose momentum?**

No, because we were aggressively trying to evolve. We were trying to get on with it and Pete was lagging behind. At the time I didn't feel like we had a complete energy.

**Ex-Tomorrow guitarist Steve Howe replaced Banks for *The Yes Album*. Was that the beginning of the classic Yes era?**

Yes, because I wasn't comfortable with my voice on the two albums before. Before *The Yes Album* I suggested to Chris we get away from London, so we rented a farmhouse in Devon for three weeks. It was a great time. Steve and I started writing together and then I asked Eddy Offord, who'd engineered *Time And A Word*, if he wanted to help produce. He said (*puts on a stoned-sounding voice*), "Yeah, OK, Jon... here's another joint." It was a glorious moment looking back,

**A LIFE IN PICTURES**

**Yes he can: Anderson through the years.**

- 1 Pride of Accrington: Jon Anderson aged five.
- 2 Wild at heart: Anderson (standing, second left) with The Warriors, 1964.
- 3 In the affirmative: the original line-up of Yes in 1968 (clockwise from left) Peter Banks, Tony Kaye, Jon Anderson, Chris Squire, Bill Bruford.
- 4 Getting closer: Yes play the Crystal Palace Garden Party, London, September 2, 1972 (from left) Steve Howe, Anderson, Squire, Alan White, Rick Wakeman.
- 5 One from the heart: Anderson on-stage with the new model Yes, 1984.
- 6 Find the way home: Vangelis and Jon Anderson at Polydor Records, London, December 7, 1981.
- 7 Don't say yes: (from left) Anderson, Howe, Bruford and Wakeman, otherwise

known as Anderson Bruford Wakeman Howe, 1989.

8 Still hearing those wonderous stories: Jon and Rick on-stage with Yes Featuring Anderson, Rabin & Wakeman at Cirque Royal, Brussels, March 27, 2017.

9 "Music is a driving force to me – I have to keep moving": Anderson enjoys his state of independence, 1974.



Courtesy Jon Anderson (2), Getty (6), Shutterstock



because *The Yes Album* felt like the next step.

**The Yes Album became a UK Top 5 hit, and the 9:41 minutes of Yours Is No Disgrace cemented the band's reputation for lengthy songs. Where did that come from?**

It was all about evolving. But I also started listening to Sibelius' 7th Symphony, and it didn't stop. Normally, classical symphonies are broken into three sections, but this was a continuous 25-minute piece of music. I suggested to Steve we try something like that.

**Longer songs weren't always ideal for a support group, though...**

It was exciting in the studio, but when we opened for The Kinks in America [in winter 1971], Ray Davies told us not to go over our time slot – "Don't forget, Anderson." It was our first time in New York and we were going down well. We had four minutes left and I suggested we play Yours Is No Disgrace. Halfway through, the power goes and Ray is at the side of the stage, holding the plug – "I told you, Anderson, you fucking idiot!"

**Yes went 'full Sibelius' on the side-long title track for 1972's *Close To The Edge*. By then Rick Wakeman had replaced Tony Kaye. Was this another energy issue?**

Yeah, the energy wasn't moving. We'd been touring America, and I spoke to Chris and Steve on the plane home. Tony was a great keyboard player but I'm not sure he was into the idea of Moogs. I'd mentioned many times before that we needed to get extra sounds – I need a full orchestra, and could I have a choir, please? You'd listen to King Crimson and think, My God, there's so much going on. So we needed Rick.

**Were King Crimson the competition?**

No, the best band in London were Family. All Yes wanted to do when we started was be as

famous as Family. That whole time was all about getting noticed. Then you get the front cover of Melody Maker and you think you've made it, but you realise you've still got a long way to go.

**Bill Bruford left to join King Crimson in 1972 and was replaced by ex-Plastic Ono Band drummer Alan White. Yes's audience have always retained a great affection for that '71-'72 line-up though...**

I understand why – *The Yes Album*, *Fragile* and *Close To The Edge*. But then there was [1973's

**"There was me, speeding away like a lunatic – Come on everybody, let's try this!"**

double concept LP] *Tales From Topographic Oceans*, which was a very challenging idea – like we were asking too much of the audience.

**The stories of Yes making that album are legion. Is it true you originally suggested recording it in a tent in a bluebell wood using a generator buried underground?**

Yes, and the band refused (*laughs*). So I put up plants and cut-outs of sheep, cows and ducks in the studio instead. The general consensus was, "This is just Jon doing what Jon does."

**What were the problems with *Tales From Topographic Oceans*?**

It never felt very comfortable as a whole piece of music, especially on tour. The reason for this, again, was an imbalance within the band. Some

people were into it and some weren't.

**Rick Wakeman has always been critical of the album...**

Well (*briskly*), he was busy making *The Six Wives Of Henry VIII*. That's a lovely album. But... it's a delicate matter. When a guy's not around in the studio then he doesn't know the piece, and when you go off on tour you have to hope he knows it...

**Yes didn't back down after that, though. Parts of *Relayer* [1974] were more challenging than anything your prog contemporaries were doing. Did you ever go too far?**

Oh gosh yeah, of course. But I discovered two albums in the mid-'70s that opened my consciousness – Vangelis's *Création Du Monde* and *Wings Of The Delirious Demon...* by [Turkish electronic musician] İlhan Mimaroğlu. On *The Gates Of Delirium* from *Relayer* we were trying to create the sound of a war, so I was jumping up and down on Alan White's old cymbals, hitting bits of scrap metal. It was meant to be challenging.

**Did Vangelis nearly replace Rick Wakeman at this time?**

I knew at the end of the ['73] tour that Rick was going to leave and become a megastar. I'd already met Vangelis, and was so impressed. It was like watching a magician. So I went to Paris and dragged him to London to join the band. But the rest of Yes didn't understand him and he didn't understand them. First thing he said to Steve Howe, who was stood there with a beautiful new electric guitar was (*puts on a thick Greek accent*), "The electric guitar is not a proper instrument, you know." That was the first and last day Vangelis worked with Yes.

**Each member of Yes then made a solo LP, with *Olias Of Sunhillow* the only one to reach the UK Top 10. Then *Going For The One* ➤**





◀ (1977) saw Wakeman back in the band and restored some equilibrium. Was this a happier time?

Yes, because *Going For The One* was a good album. I felt like I'd been out there in a lifeboat and I was able to pull myself back to reality. There's a song on there called *Awaken*, and the way I think of it is, we did *Topographic Oceans* so we could make *Awaken*.

**But you and Rick Wakeman both left after 1978's *Tormato*. What was going through your mind then?**

It was a tougher time for bands like us. Yes wanted to make more commercial music, I just wanted to make good music. Drugs had come in too. Cocaine's a bitch. I tried it once and didn't like it. But others did. It was the food of choice, and not just in the band, but everywhere in the business. It was a very upside-down world.

**There are also stories of you butting heads with Yes's manager, Brian Lane, who was frustrated by you putting the music ahead of the money. Is this true?**

For me, it's never been about being rich and famous. I used to tell him, I have work to do. "Really? You must be mad then." Brian's famous statement was, "I didn't make the rules, I just play the game." And that's what he does. He plays the game, and it's a horrible game. But I understand it. There's a dark side to everything, including rock'n'roll.

**After Yes, you signed to Virgin as a solo artist.**

I met Richard Branson on his boat and he signed me the same week they signed Phil Collins. All of a sudden there's Phil making *Face Value*, one of the greatest solo albums of all time, and Virgin are sending two punks with dyed black hair and eye make-up down to the south of France to see what I was doing.

**What were you doing?**

Writing music for an album about the great [French-Russian] artist Marc Chagall, and another piece based on a book called *A True Fairy Tale* by Daphne Charters. These guys didn't like what they were hearing. There was nothing wrong with the music, but they just weren't interested. I said, "OK, but this is what I want to do." So I paid the advance back.

**A concept LP about fairies or Marc Chagall was probably a hard sell in 1980, though?**

It's probably a hard sell now! I'm working on it again, though, and we're looking at a possible musical or film, *The Story Of Chagall*. [Frasier actor] Kelsey Grammar is interested, and has talked about directing it.

**Meanwhile, you'd teamed up with Vangelis and scored two Top 10 singles, *I Hear You Now* and *I'll Find My Way Home*, and wrote *State Of Independence*, a hit for Donna Summer. How do you view that collaboration now?**

A happy time. I remember watching Vangelis doing the *Blade Runner* soundtrack around then too. He'd work on the score in the morning and then write a symphony in the afternoon. He was so spontaneous it was unbelievable. But we were having hits without trying to have hits, and that was different to Yes. *State Of Independence* is one of my favourite songs.

**What do you like about it?**

It was an instant piece of music. I walked into the studio in Paris where Vangelis was playing this rhythm, saw that the microphone was on and just started singing: "State of life, may I live, may I love..." The words and the melody poured out.

**What other singers have inspired you?**

Randy Newman, Elton John, Sirius XM have a Frank Sinatra channel, which I like to listen to.

He used to have these introductory vocal ideas on his records, which is something I've always wanted to do. I like musicals too – *South Pacific*, *My Fair Lady*. I was watching [animated movie musical] *Sing!* last night.

**90125 [1983] started as a non-Yes project by ex-Yes members, before you returned and Yes were reborn. What was it like coming back?**

I'd been a bit lost out there in the world and wondering what I was going to do [Anderson's 1982 solo LP, *Animation*, had sold poorly]. Then I got a call from Chris Squire. Thank God, thank you Chris. I remember sitting in his Rolls-Royce outside my house listening to their new songs.

**What did you think of them?**

It all sounded great. I didn't challenge anything. I just went into the studio, sang and got out.

**That's very hard to believe. It must have been strange working with Trevor Horn, your replacement in Yes [on *Drama*, 1980]?**

## YES PLEASE!

Three LPs of "Jon doing what Jon does," by Mark Blake.

### THE BIG BANG

Yes

★★★★★

The Yes Album

(ATLANTIC, 1971)



After the uneven *Yes* and *Time And A Word*, Anderson helps steer their third album's dazzling amalgam of driving rock, whimsical folk, classical grandeur and clever-clogs jazz.

Includes the staggeringly epic *Yours Is No Disgrace*, Anderson's charming Simon And Garfunkel-go-prog routine on *I've Seen All Good People* and his great forgotten Yes single, *Your Move*. Signposted the way to *Fragile* and Yes's evergreen hit, *Roundabout*.

### THE POP PINNACLE

Jon And Vangelis

★★★★★

The Friends Of Mr Cairo

(POLYDOR, 1981)



After Yes, Anderson threw in his lot with keyboard magus Vangelis. Their second LP collaboration showcased a singer unencumbered by earthshaking bass and fancy time signatures. Named after Peter Lorre's character in *The Maltese Falcon*, the title track, especially, has a lovely cinematic quality. Also contains the hit *I'll Find My Way Home*, and Donna Summer's future hit *State Of Independence*. "Someone sent it to her producer Quincy Jones," recalls Anderson.

### THE MIGHTY MAKEOVER

Yes

★★★★★

90125

(ATCO, 1983)



In 1983, Yes needed Anderson, but Anderson also needed Yes. His recent vocal replacement, Trevor Horn, turned producer and with the help of new guitarist Trevor Rabin, dragged the band out of their '70s comfort zone. Horn applied the production tics and electronic squiggles he'd just used on ABC's *The Lexicon Of Love* and the *Into Battle With The Art Of Noise* EP to future hits *Owner Of A Lonely Heart* and *Leave It*. But the fancy chords and Anderson's peerless vocals made it sound like Yes.

"There are times you look back and ask, *What were you thinking?*": Jon Anderson at Lightning Joe's Guitar Heaven, Arroyo Grande, California, December 8, 2023.

Well, I do remember telling Chris that the chorus for *Owner Of A Lonely Heart* was a hit, but the verses were a bit blah. I suggested making them more staccato – (*sings*) "Da-da-da... da-da-da-da-da-da..." I'd loved Trevor Horn's production for Malcolm McLaren [on 1982's *Buffalo Gals* hit] so it was exciting getting to know the guy. Also I'd been in the doldrums, not sure where to go. The rest is history, but the next LP, *Big Generator* [1987], was a big pain in the butt.

**Owner Of A Lonely Heart went to Number 1 in the US. You must have sensed the record company wanted more like that?**

You have to ask yourself, though – do you make music to make money? There are certain times when you do, because you need to survive. But there are certain times when it gets in the way.

**You formed Anderson Bruford Wakeman Howe, before Yes reconvened for 1991's *Union* and '94's *Talk*. Rebooting your solo career proved challenging, though?**

After ...*Lonely Heart*, my record company asked what I wanted to do and I suggested an LP of Latin American music, and they stopped the cheque (*laughs*). So I made *In The City Of Angels* instead [with songs written by Lamont Dozier and members of Toto]. I thought I was going to become a pop star again but it wasn't a big hit. There are times when you look back and ask yourself, *What were you thinking?* And other times, *Why didn't more people like that one?*





## “When I’m out there singing on my own I still think I’m part of Yes. They still feel like my songs.”

### Is there a great lost Jon Anderson solo LP?

I’d say *Toltec* [1996]. There were many different styles of music on there, but I was also chasing Carlos Castaneda, who wrote books about a Yacqui shaman [including 1968’s *The Teachings Of Don Juan: A Yacqui Way Of Knowledge*]. I like the idea that we’re all connected to a divine energy, we are all indigenous people but Native Americans grew up adoring mother Earth and we went the other way.

### You were writing songs with an ecological message in the ‘70s. Is there a part of you that now feels vindicated?

No, but I like that the idea of saving the planet isn’t crank thinking any more. It’s about saving us. We are all one collectively on the planet, and we are all refugees.

### You mentioned opening up your state of consciousness after reading *The Finding Of The Third Eye* in the ‘70s, but when did you start practising meditation?

Roger Kisby I always knew meditation was good for you, but I didn’t start until the mid-’80s when I met my spiritual teacher. I’ve been writing a memoir but I only got as far as ‘86 when I discovered my

teacher. From then on, I’ve just been spinning around the world, doing my work.

### Will you ever finish the book?

I hope to. I have a guy who’s helping manage me and I sent him what I’d written and he said, “Do some more!” But I’m busy. I used to paint a lot and I haven’t done any of that for a whole year.

### Chris Squire died in 2015 and Alan White in 2022, but you were estranged from Yes by then.

Life is full of experiences and meeting people, and you look back and think, I used to know him so well, but not any more. Alan was best man at my wedding [to second wife, Jane, in 1997]. I’ve had dreams about them both. I was in Maui when I dreamt about an angel pointing upwards and there was Chris looking up into the sky with tears running down his face. I found out the following day he’d left the earth.

### You joined Yes for their induction into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2017. But has communication between yourself and Steve Howe stopped now, too?

Yes. We’re still friends but we’re not connected.

The first time I realised it wasn’t going to continue was when I discovered you could send MP3s on the computer. So I e-mailed Steve and Chris, saying, “Why don’t we send music to each other – we’re on the same planet?” And they never replied. Maybe they never got the e-mail.

### Could you see yourself performing with Yes again?

I was talking to The Band Geeks and said, “Hopefully we can play in London and Steve will get up and do a couple of songs with us, maybe Rick too...” It just means *talking*. When I’m out there singing on my own I still think I’m part of Yes. They still feel like my songs.

### Do you have any plans to stop making music?

No. Just before lockdown, the day we were told we couldn’t go out any more, I was making a barbecue, slipped and broke my foot in two places. So I spent the next three months on crutches, in the studio. It was a revelation. Music is a driving force to me. I have to keep moving.

*The Yes Album (Super Deluxe Edition)* is out now on Rhino Records.

