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Yes Open Your Eyes (1997)
Sireena Records SIR 4018 (2012)
Double 180 gram vinyl record set.
Review By Claude Lemaire


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Yes
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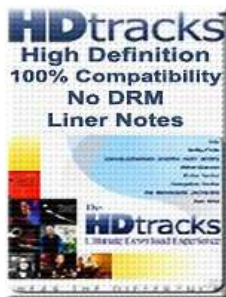
Question: what do disco, heavy metal and progressive share in common? **Answer:** all three are musical genres generally loathed or dismissed by "The Establishment's" music critics. As disparate as it may seem, like the Energizer Bunny, the keepers of the flame just keep going and going, integrating new musical elements within the genre's structural boundaries; dispensing with good reason the politically correct confined version of sex, drugs and rock & roll; where Clapton, Thompson, Springsteen and Costello reign supreme ad aeternum. Thankfully, now with the internet, the Summer's, Sabbath's and Rush's can hold their rightful place within the *real* musical universe. On that note, not to take anything away from the fine Canadian 'power trio', but as far as combining rock, blues, classical and even a hint of jazz into the progressive form(at), one need not look any further than another one syllable bunch of virtuosos: Yes!

Without discarding symphonic rock pioneer's Procol Harum and The Moody Blues for planting the seeds in the turbulent but fertile grounds of London, Birmingham et al; within the 'first wave' septet of progressive oriented bands — The Nice, Genesis, Yes, Van der Graaf Generator, King Crimson, Emerson, Lake & Palmer and Gentle Giant - Yes fell under a more 'accessible' prog-rock category than the purer progressive music genre and hence reached a wider audience than its British compatriots.

Formed in 1968, the affirmative artsy British quintet, initially comprised: singer Jon Anderson, drummer Bill Bruford, keyboardist Tony Kaye and former The Syn teammates: bassist Chris Squire and guitarist Peter Banks. This line-up held for two albums only, the self-titled debut [Atlantic 588 190] along with *Time and a Word* [Atlantic 2400 006] both enjoying limited success. Nineteen seventy one's breakthrough release *The Yes Album* [Atlantic 2400 101] changed all that with guitarist Steve Howe replacing Peter Banks and the band finally finding their style. To me this album features the band at its peak in composition and performance while recorded in superb sound with deep bass and typical early 1970s analog warmth. The musically excellent but fairly good sounding *Fragile* [Atlantic 2401 019] soon followed with Kaye being replaced by keyboardist extraordinaire Rick Wakeman and sprouting the 'classic hit' "Roundabout". *Close to the Edge* [Atlantic K 50012] in 1972 was the first to dedicate a full vinyl side to one song only; in this case the 18 minute title track subdivided into four parts and the last to feature Bruford who would pursue greener pastures in King Crimson after accepting Fripp's invitation. The live triple-LP *Yessongs* [Atlantic K 60045] marks in a way the partial drummer transition; paving the way for Alan White on the 1973 double-LP *Tales from Topographic Oceans* [Atlantic K 80001] featuring only one long song per side forming a large scale epic.

Like many of the prog pioneers, the band did not escape the slow erosion of 'mainstream' appeal for such works of grandeur and felt no doubt the need to downsize as the decade passed the halfway point of no return. With punk and new wave on the rise, lowering the bar for musical complexity, the classically oriented genre simply went out of favor with the majors, FM radio and the public in general. Fast-forward to 1980 and the *Drama* [Atlantic K 50736] unfolds as the band is now fronted for the first time by someone other than Anderson - The Buggles' Trevor Horn accompanied by keyboardist Geoff Downes taking Wakeman's place. The New Wave duo were long time Yes fans and both bands were managed by the same Brian Lane. Surprisingly it was a good but short fit; the original band members recording a tight edgy modern prog rock album with New Wave flavoring twists. It is all the more unfortunate that like Rush and so many others, Yes would also succumb to alienate its core audience - the true believers in all things prog - with the 1983 release of *90125* [ATCO 79-0125-1], thus the LP title. Successful in sales as it may be and not unlike Rush's *Signals* [Anthem ANR-1-1038], the older fans felt let down and for good reason. Gone were the progressive, organic textures; replaced by shorter songs, electronic drums, digital samples and thin compressed sound. Even the return of Anderson and Kaye on keyboards could not





salvage what sounded at best as a band that did not fit in the new Alternative universe.

Jumping in time to 1997 leads us to the current review - Yes' *Open Your Eyes* - available for the very first time on vinyl. Featuring Anderson, Squire, Howe, White and 'newcomer' Billy Sherwood - on keyboards, guitar and vocals - stepping in after Wakeman's second departure. In fact, Sherwood was already part of the larger Yes family hiding in the background as either studio musician, mixing engineer or producer as far back as 1991's (re)Union [Arista 211 558] album. Originally conceived as future song material for the Squire-Sherwood collaboration a.k.a. The Chris Squire Experiment turned Conspiracy; the addition of Anderson to the mix sealed the fate of this present project under review.

Enter Sireena Records, an independent German label dedicated to reissuing or in some cases releasing for the first time older unorthodox material from the vaults. Established by Tom Redecker and Lothar Gärtner at the turn of the millenium, the latter's passing away in 2008 has since led to a new partnership with Bernd Paulat. Just a glimpse at their catalogue reaffirms that this is not just another of your typical audiophile reissue label. That's right you won't find the nth pressing of *Kind of Blue*, The Doors collection or any Van Gelder Blue Notes here. Instead, think Stone the Crows featuring singer Maggie Bell or perhaps Atomic Rooster featuring a young 18 year old drummer named Carl Palmer.. and a myriad of rock bands many of you have never even heard of no doubt. Which makes this particular Yes release all the more surprising given the international fame of the band and the odd fact that no vinyl pressing was ever considered before now. Composed of 11 tracks, the 74 minute album was tailor made for the original Red Book CD standard maximum time spec. It goes without saying that at 33.3 rpm, a double-LP set was the minimum to expect whoever would release it, averaging just below 19 minutes per side and typical of the great majority of LPs. Most of the songs are around the 5 to 6 minute mark, with the shortest lasting less than 3 while its opposite clocks in near a lengthy 24; though on the CD track list, the latter is subdivided in two parts (11a: 5.25 and 11b: 16.22).

Contrary to the leading audiophile labels who protect their LP jackets with a loose reusable pre-perforated polyethylene outer sleeve, the Sireena release came in a tight disposable shrink wrap that does not protect against long term wear and dust and in some extreme cases, may contribute to factory vinyl warpage, especially when dealing with thinner pressings than this 180 gram edition. The Fuego/Friedel Muders outer cover design draws inspiration from the band's 1969 debut. It is presented in a gatefold sleeve that houses each record individually, themselves protected by a nice white top-corner-angled thick paper. This is rougher than flexible anti-static 'rice paper' or plastic-type inner sleeves, so exercising more care when 'outserting' and inserting the vinyl will be important. The non-glossed carton stock is of good quality, well sized, folded and glued; making it superior to the many Analogue Productions' double 45 series of the past. On the other hand, do not expect MoFi or Music Matters, Ltd. caliber either. With no inner booklet or heavier carton, I would certainly not qualify it as 'deluxe packaging'. The front cover is rather minimalist with longtime Yes collaborator - artist Roger Dean — using his classic 'bubble' logo in orange-red, taking up much of the space over a plain black background that permeates throughout (fingerprint alert). Unfolding the inside, reveals the song's lyrics and the usual credits printed in hues covering the color spectrum from red to blue. Interestingly, the band produced the album themselves while Sherwood recorded and mixed it with Randy Nicklaus at "The Office" in Van Nuys, California. The original mastering was done by Joe Gaswirth at "Oceanview Digital Mastering" but this vinyl was (re)mastered(?) and cut by Marlon Klein of Dissidenten fame, famous for their Moroccan-inspired 1984 hit "Fata Morgana".

Klein chose a groove lateral spacing of 2 5/8 inches for sides A and B, and just under 2 3/4 inches for side C and 2 9/16 inches for side D equivalent to 6.7 min./inch, 5.6 min./inch, 6.5 min./inch and 9.3 min./inch of linear cutting displacement respectively leaving approximately an inch of dead wax per side. The latter is a bit larger than the norm given the roughly 15 to 18 min of music to accommodate and even more so at first thought, side D's 24 minutes; but by the look of the grooves, there appear to be many quiet passages on the track's second part. By going this route, the mastering + lacquer cutting engineer placed a heavier emphasis on maintaining cleaner treble at the expense of ultimate bass. As always, the music spectrum, bass peaks and general cutting level will come into the equation. Stampers used for this German pressing were A1, B1, C1 and D1. 'MK' is machined inscribed also, thus confirming the engineer. The 180 gram heavy weight biscuits were both rigid and straight. All four sides were flawlessly black with no scratches, blemishes or scuffing whatsoever — always comforting to the eyes and wallet.

Opening up side One with "New State of Mind", the cutting level was pretty average for a 33 1/3 rpm LP. A slow 'heavyish' syncopated tempo establishes the mood. Vocals are presented in many registers simultaneously. We can sense some mid-1980s stylistic touches in the production values. The sound is quite compressed dynamically and limited in bandwidth, making for a disappointing 'entrée' altogether.

The title track comes in second. Better, warmer sound is the first thing that catches my attention. A bit less compressed, it displays good punchy rhythm on this 'happier vibe'. The vocals with their great harmonizing arrangements recall the *Fragile* era. Call it perhaps accessible prog-rock, the 'popish' chorus leads to some fun foot tapping.

Closing the side, "Universal Garden" introduces classical guitar, followed by - poorly recorded - panned acoustic guitar. The track lacks power and punch in the upper bass register and bottom. The kick is one dimensional with no harmonic texture reminding me of a 'Casio-type' cheap keyboard rhythm sample. Very 'plastic' sounding, compressed with digital highs akin to amateurish home recording, i.e. 180 degrees at odds from the professional standard of the big-budget studios of the 1970s that the band matured with. Composition lacks 'dynamic breathing' just like their prog-rock counterparts Rush since the mid-1990s and even more so with their latest *Clockwork Angels* [Roadrunner 1686-176561]. Some mild listener fatigue appearing. The vinyl was quiet the whole side but keep in mind there were very few soft passages also to expose it.

Flipping sides, "No Way We Can Lose" exhibits light reggae rhythmic influences, recalling past Police material. Very compressed and amateurish low resolution digital sound. Vocals and synths are protruding and peaky in the mix, thus resulting in dominant mids in the spectrum. The whole drum kit sounds like cheap digital with no impact whatsoever. Needless to say, listener fatigue came quickly. While we are presently in full Olympics fever, this track takes a double meddle for worse songcraft and sound quality of the album.



Fortunately "Fortune Seller" is way more musically interesting at least for the prog worshippers. The complex sounding meter definitely harks back to the early to mid-1970s prog structures, making it the most 'classic Yes' sounding song of the lineup. Strange abrupt coda. Too compressed especially in the vocals just like the rest of the LP up to now.

"Man in the Moon" gives "No Way We Can Lose" a run for its money; in terms of dismal sound at least. I know I sound like a broken record (no pun intended) but as usual the mids are compressed and predominate the spectrum; treble is hard and grainy and there is no warmth or finesse in the sound envelope. One keeps searching for the kick and bass guitar but to no avail - how come the drummers and bassists never complain to the producer beats me. For aspiring engineers, these unbalances in instrumentation and tonality are (un)natural by-products of over compressing/limiting and gain-maximizing software. The coda ends with a cheap digital delay effect. After all, this is the same band that composed "Roundabout"; now compare with that elegant coda. Need I say more.

Again no qualms with this side's surface noise.

Changing to side Three, brings us "Wonderlove". The intro has Howe's delicate mandolin open for Anderson. White's drum and Squire's bass impact are much better with added bottom. Sound is warmer and less compressed up until the lead guitar comes in on top and the 'comp ratio' triggers on, spoiling the balanced recipe 'til the chorus reappears. Nice trebly tambourine-like sound and seems as if it is a different engineer. Finally, high compression returns hand in hand with the second guitar lead. Yes, Rush comes to mind engineering wise during the louder passages. The latter aside, in general this is one of the better sounding and musically interesting songs of the album.

Like the previous track, the ballad "From the Balcony" starts off with strings, this time acoustic guitar. The latter plus vocals share stylistic influences reminiscent of the Renaissance period. Nice treble detail on the lighter strings. This is one of the three best sounding tracks of the LP.

"Love Shine" exhibits some compression but a bit more full-bodied in bandwidth compared to sides A and B. Repetitive multilayered high-pitched chorus gets on the nerves quite fast. Just a bit of low level surface noise between this track and the next one, which turned to be the only instant.

"Somehow, Someday" is an uninspired slow tempo composition. Awful artificial sounding drum rolls, not heard since the mid-1980s hair metal days. Some ancient Irish influences. This is the second worse song and sound of the LP.

Despite the track labelling, the last side comprises in fact two subdivisions (there goes that Rush association again). First off is "The Solution" that displays good attack and punch on the kick. Better sounding than the other sides with wider bandwidth. There is some compression but the vocals and guitar are better balanced - read lower - in the mix. Drum kit takes more presence in the whole picture. Modernly progressive, very syncopated rhythm, including many erratic time changes. Ends with short acoustic guitar. Clearly the most interestingly complex track of the album.

A long black silence passes before "The Source" - the hidden track on the CD - opens with wind chimes a la "Xanadu" from Rush's 1977 *A Farewell to Kings* [Anthem ANR-1-1010], followed closely by nature sounds such as ocean waves, birds, crickets and a host of a capella tracks of each song, many with variable added delay effect. The nature loop is relaxing over a very quiet vinyl surface. Nice detail in the highs and with the crickets; panning of ocean waves increase towards the finale. Strangely they decided to fade out on one of the vocal tracks instead of on the 'nature loop'. As an alternative route, they could have closed the side with an endless groove of the latter as encountered in the glory days of the LP.

Summing up, I have not had the chance to hear all of Yes' albums nor their latest additions to the repertoire but based upon listening to *Open Your Eyes*, I would tend to speculate that the British band are long past their expiry date. This should come as no surprise given that most of the original instigators shed their proud prog feathers around 1976 with King Crimson calling it quits the year before only to resurrect with new wings with the trio of *Discipline* [ELP - Polydor EGLP 49], *Beat* [ELP EGLP 51] and *Three of a Perfect Pair* [ELP EGLP 55, Polydor 817 882-1] in 1981, 1982 and 1984 respectively. Sadly, this was not the fate to await Yes, Genesis, ELP and others.

As for sound matters, clearly Sherwood would be better advised to stick to vocals and playing keyboards with or without the assistance of Nicklaus at "The Office". I suspect that like many musicians — who do not wear hearing protection while they play — he may suffer from hard hearing or what I call 'musician auto bias' whereas the musician naturally increases his track level 'in the mix' to approximate what he hears from his perspective when playing on stage together. That is why an 'objective' — non band member — recording/mixing/mastering engineer is a better choice to see the whole picture. If you have skipped the track by track evaluation and jumped to the conclusion, one word came back ad nauseum and that's 'compression'. It is common to hear it overused and abused with the younger bands who - growing up in the land of MP3 - do not know better but for a mature band of such deep experience, it does not make sense and is all the more reprehensible. Idem for Rush by the way.

Lastly, this was my first encounter with Sireena Records. Though I have criticized many of the tracks for the recording, mixing and original mastering choices, it must be noted that these three steps were out of their hands and that the vinyl pressing quality was near perfect. I do not know if Marlon Klein attempted to remaster the final two-track master or simply chose to do a 'straight cut' to lacquer but you can only improve so much when the original is poor to begin with. On the other hand, that they would choose to release this particular album is questionable in my opinion and may reflect the non-audiophile orientation of the label. To better judge their worth, I would suggest to try out a different title and give them a try.

Strictly recommended to serious Yes collectors for completeness sake only.

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