BILL BRUFORD

OUR PROG FOREFATHER

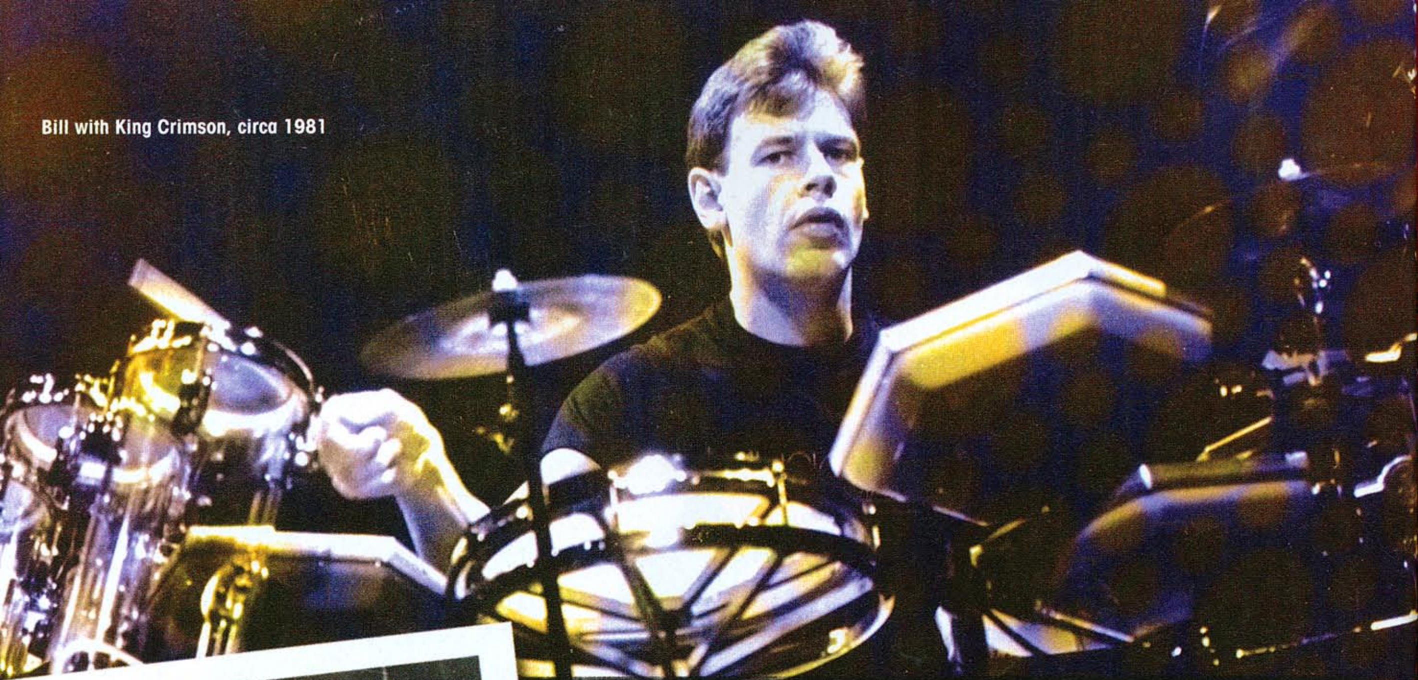
by Ken Micallef

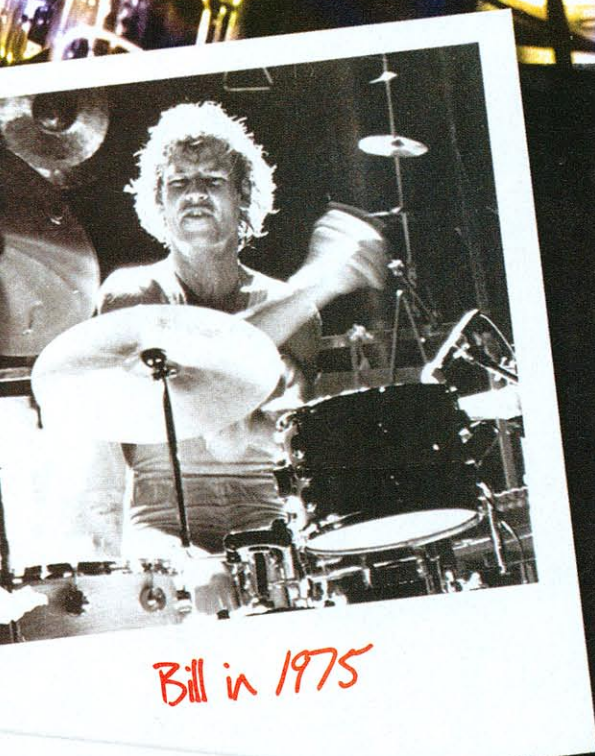
Progressive rock's evolution from its nascent days in London's university halls and local clubs to stadium-filling global phenomenon has its roots in the tumultuous melting pot of 1960s rock and psychedelia. Upon the release of The Beatles' groundbreaking 1967 epic, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band*, groups like Soft Machine and Pink Floyd, followed later by Yes, King Crimson, Jethro Tull, Genesis, and Emerson, Lake & Palmer, realized that anything was possible.

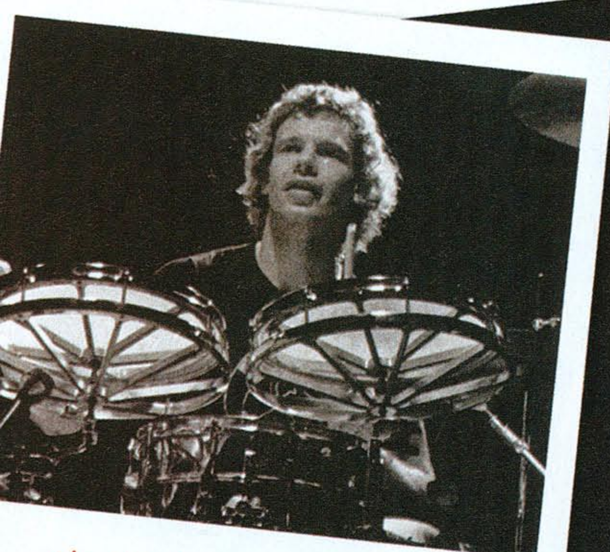
This spirit of discovery and instrumental exploration spread throughout Europe, resulting in progressive bands of every stripe: Magma (France), Focus (Holland), Premiata Forneria Marconi (PFM, Italy), Can, Jane, and Eloy (Germany), and back to England (Camel, Caravan, National Health, Gentle Giant, Hatfield And The North). Though decidedly British in origin, progressive rock fanned the flaming ears of adventurous listeners the world over.

Thirty years past the genre's supposed "golden era," progressive rock continues to be "the most unloved but most popular music known to mankind," says none other than Bill Bruford, whose performances on Yes's *Fragile* and *Close To The Edge* and on multiple King Crimson records qualify him as an elder guru of the genre.

James Cumpsty


Bill with King Crimson, circa 1981


Bill in 1975


His first RotoTom kit

"Prog rock is extremely popular, but nobody likes it," Bruford explains from his home northwest of London. "A lot of the guys who grew up with it are now in positions of power at magazines and radio stations. They loved it. And though it is intensely unfashionable, these things always revert. Right now you can take university degree courses in progressive rock."

And as the reissue machine rolls out umpteen titles featuring Bruford (including CD and DVD releases from Genesis, Earthworks, and his own Bruford band), as well as seemingly endless vault material from every prog rock band to ever record (including ELP's *Pictures At An Exhibition* and *Trilogy*, and *The Collectible King Crimson Volume Two: Live In Bath, 1981 & Live In Philadelphia 1982*), one has to wonder where and how did the music begin? How did this mutt of rock, classical, and avant-garde get a foothold in a world previously ruled by heavy blues bashers like Black Sabbath and Cream?

"If you say to people that rock music is made up of three chords," Bruford ponders, "there will always be guys, especially in the UK, who say, 'What if we added a fourth chord and put it into 5/4?' Those people fell into something called progressive rock. The British working class guys who assumed that rock 'n' roll was their property got very pissed off at these art school guys who brought in all the nuts and bolts of progressive rock and added classical music, vocal harmony, poetry, and art. The Black Sabbaths of the world were very pissed off, and then the punks came and trashed it. I was fortunate enough to grow up in an era where everything went on. It was great. People even cared what the drummer thought!"

Before Virgil Donati and Simon Phillips, before Neil Peart, Marco Minnemann, and Thomas Lang, Bill Bruford was innovating at the first flash of prog's big bang. Currently resting up between tours with Earthworks and the Borstlap/Bruford duo, Bill recalls prog's early years as ones of exhilarating possibility, and not a little confusion and chaos. Who better to interrogate about the history of prog rock: its meanings, its methods, and its possible future. Bill Bruford—definitely one of a kind.

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MD: What sparked that original creative spark that became prog rock?

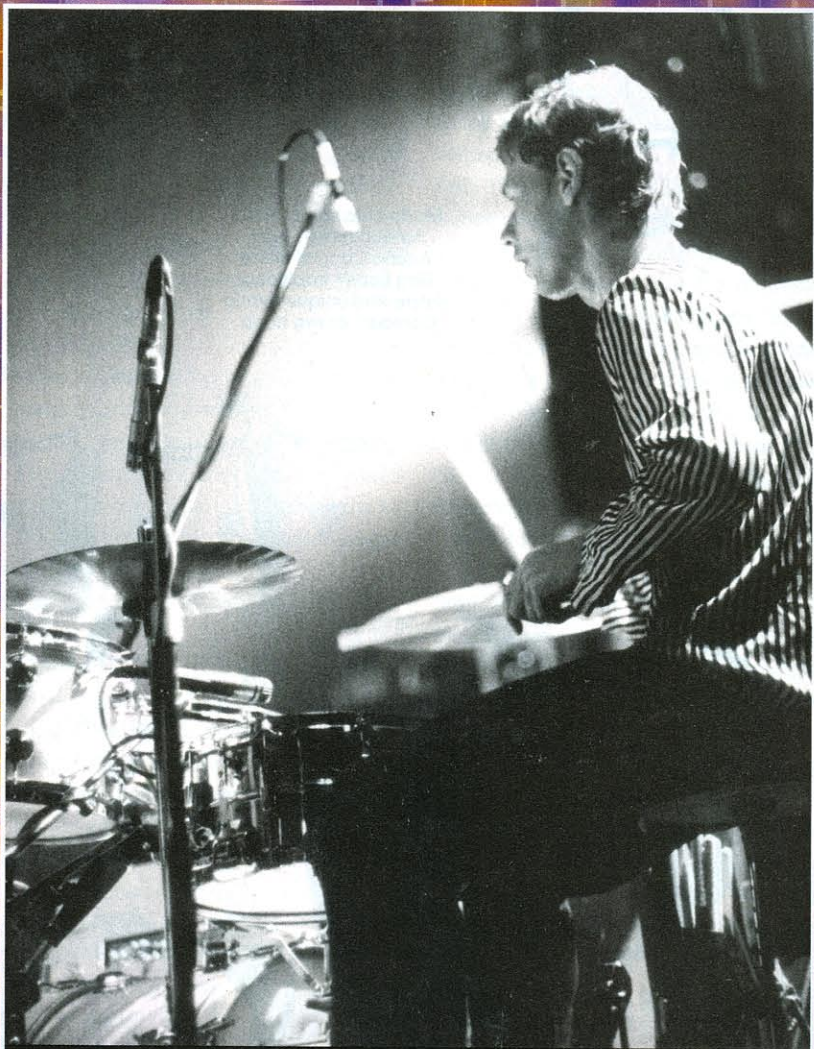
Bill: The Beatles. They broke down every barrier that ever existed. Suddenly you could do anything after The Beatles. You could write your own music, make it ninety yards long, put it in 7/4, whatever you wanted.

MD: How did that translate to the musicianship of yourself and someone like [Yes bassist] Chris Squire?

Bill: We took our time writing and studying music, and we wanted to get better at it. We thought we were electric symphony musicians. We wanted to make extraordinary confections of music. We were part Beach Boys, part Leonard Bernstein, part Sibelius.

MD: That was a decidedly British way of looking at things.

Bill: It was entirely a United Kingdom phenomenon. And also a white southeastern



"PROG ROCK: THE MOST UNLOVED BUT MOST POPULAR MUSIC KNOWN TO MANKIND."

United Kingdom idea associated with middle class guys.

MD: What was prog rock's contribution to music in general?

Bill: It had a prime era from '68 to '75. Maybe prog rock's contribution was to get us all to redefine what rock 'n' roll is. The incoming punks thought they knew what rock 'n' roll was—three chords, only louder and faster.

MD: I bet it also changed production values.

Bill: Prior to progressive rock was the birth of the stereophonic album, where you could record a whole side of music for twenty minutes. That had to be in place for prog to happen. Stereo production values, 24-track recording techniques, tape editing: This all became the order of the day. All the new keyboards and synths as well—it was a huge technological change. And the music was crying out to use all that stuff.

MD: [Yes keyboardist] Rick Wakeman was a Royal Academy trained musician. Did that raise the bar of everyone in Yes?

Bill: Absolutely. Suddenly you had a guy who could make all kind of modulation tricks and fancy harmony stuff, which made things sound much better. We were no longer an amateur band. [Yes vocalist] Jon Anderson surrounded himself with technicians who knew how to make something out of those melodies he invented.

MD: What big changes did prog bring to drumming?

Bill: It raised the bar. The drummer had to become not so much an improviser, but certainly an orchestrator of rhythm parts. There would be a whole measure of silence, then activity, some snare drum stuff, and it was all over the drumset. It wasn't necessarily the keeping of a steady beat from the beginning to the end of a popular song, which had hitherto been the case.

Ringo Starr's drums were beginning to color the music a bit with gated and compressed cymbals and muted toms. We were all aware of that. When King Crimson appeared, nobody knew that "rock musicians" could play like that: playing rapid tutti passages together, or repeating the same passage exactly the same but at half the dynamic volume. Nobody knew rock musicians could have that kind of technical control, so it shocked the hell out of everybody.

MD: Seeing yourself and percussionist Jamie Muir play "Easy Money" with King Crimson on YouTube is like hearing it for the first time.

Bill: Muir was a weird cat, with his bearskin coat. A man possessed. *Larks' Tongues In Aspic* was a leap forward. We all knew of jazz, and I certainly knew quite a bit about it. I was okay at rock because I knew about jazz. I knew what I could do with rock because I had heard Joe Morello, Max Roach, and Art Blakey. I just thought rock was a bit slow and behind. I was a keen student. I was listening to a lot of jazz and symphonic material like Stravinsky. I studied hard and I was keen to use this stuff. The basic rock rhythm was great, but everybody seemed to be doing the same thing.

MD: Today we have popular drummers with incredible technique, but sometimes they don't even play in a band. In Yes, King Crimson, and later in your band Bruford, it seemed that the chops were there to serve the creative ideas behind the music.

Bill: This is a hidden problem in the drum community. It's a kind of taboo subject. There are these over-qualified, hyper-kinetic, and hyper-athletic guys, and the nearest music they can have to accommodate this violent physical skill is thrash metal or something. That's okay, but it's as if that music has to be built around the style of the musicians. It should be the other way. You hear the music in your mind first and then you find the technique to play it.

Muir taught me that you exist to serve the music, the music does not exist to serve you. Until you can hear the music in which your drumming is applicable, why get started? Why would you acquire the fastest snare drum roll in the west for the hell of it? I'd rather read a good book.

MD: Did Yes jam to come up with song ideas?

Bill: No. We were all from totally different music and cultural backgrounds. We had no music in common at all. King Crimson could only play its own music. Jazz musicians can play a common language they all understand. But in Yes we couldn't play anything when we got together because there was no lingua, no shared language. I could barely understand what Jon Anderson was saying, his accent was so thick.

MD: It sounded like your parts were written and then set in stone.

Bill: Yes, we spent hours and hours debating and writing collective parts in recording studios and rehearsal rooms. It was very time consuming. It would be very expensive to do now, five musicians in a room rehearsing and creating indefinitely.

MD: So part of your incredible drumming with Yes and King Crimson was the result of time

spent considering what to play?

Bill: Yes, and often we had to figure it out in the studio if we hadn't finished rehearsing. *Close To The Edge* had never been played in its entirety prior to the recording. It was assembled sixteen measures at a time. We would play and record, stop, have some tea, then figure out what to play next. Then we would drive up country to play a gig and then return the next day to pick it up again at bar 33. The album was a tape edit every twelve seconds. Same process for *Fragile*, though "Roundabout" was mostly live.

MD: How did you develop those punctuations over the extended slower part in "Heart Of The Sunrise"?

Bill: That was Chris Squire's bass line, and I was just playing what was appropriate. It wasn't heavily thought out. It could change in each performance. I became an irritation, because as a jazz musician, I wanted to play it differently every night. That didn't make me friends. I thought I could play *Close To The Edge* differently every night. That didn't go down well. I thought Yes was going to be a jazz group; on the first record you can hear me swinging away on a cymbal, thinking, This must be jazz.

MD: King Crimson's "Larks' Tongues In Aspic, Pt. 1" is such an epic composition, melodically, rhythmically, with all the elements in the track.

Bill: That had insane dynamic levels, from inaudible to deafening. Crimson was more of an improvising group than Yes was. Crimson was familiar with modern atonal music, contemporary improvised music, free jazz—all those elements in Europe. It didn't involve itself with the blues pentatonic scale. We were a whole-tone kind of group, which made it very different from any blues-based band. Crimson was a happier place for me because I didn't have to discuss everything to death. We just played and joined in.

MD: What other prog bands of the period did you like?

Bill: I liked Yes and King Crimson. I thought Genesis had already missed the boat; they sounded a bit too derivative of Yes and Crimson, complete with a guitarist who sat down like Robert Fripp. And ELP wasn't really my cup of tea—shows what I know. But I had the pleasure of being in two of the great groups.

MD: What's your take on bands like Hatfield And The North and National Health?

Bill: I admired that stuff, it was academic: They played written music, written rock. Those bands were from a different part of England. That stuff about the Canterbury scene was very ephemeral. I suppose there was something happening there stylistically. It was also seen as a little too hippy dippy.

MD: What are your favorite recorded performances from that era?

Bill: *Close To The Edge*...*Fragile* is okay—"Heart Of The Sunrise" and "Roundabout," I'm proud of all that stuff. *Red* by King Crimson is good, because it was looking forward to the future.

MD: How have machines changed the landscape of prog, from click tracks to Pro Tools?

Bill: Real scary. But the upside is they have made us focus on what it is to be human. What can you and I bring to the music that the machine cannot? You can bring imagination, feel, and improvisation. If you want to play drums, you have to think on your feet and create a performance specific to that night, that room, that set of music.

MD: Are you the same drummer in your intellectual approach as you were thirty years ago?

Bill: I'm essentially the same guy. Trying to make a contribution. I'm thinking about what drumkits will become and what drummers may be doing tomorrow. Is there any way to point a direction in that sense? Do we all have to set up the drums in the same way? Do we all have to sound the same? I've been hacking away at that coal face for most of my career. By that I would include odd meters, electronic drums, progressive rock, and so forth. If I've moved things forward at all, even two inches, then that would have been forty years well spent.

MD: What advice can you give to drummers who are trying to develop a similar creative mindset of creativity over chops?

Bill: You exist to serve the music, the music doesn't exist to serve you. Get it in context. The music comes first, then you supply the drumming. And you have to hang out with like-minded souls. If you can find a couple of guys or girls with whom you can have this conversation and they understand you, then hang with them. It doesn't matter if they play oboe, Azerbaijani nose flute, or guitar. It doesn't matter about the instrument—that is irrelevant. It's the thought *behind* the music that counts. Just a little leap of imagination.

To hear some of Bruford's tracks, go to MD Radio at www.moderndrummer.com.