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Album Review: Yes – Magnification



It's little overstatement to point out that by 2000, most listeners had given up on **Yes**. The group had its commercial and creative apex through a large portion of the 1970s, but stumbled into the 80s (*Drama* was an excellent album that has worn quite well, but at the time it confused and divided fans). As the 1980s wore on, Yes reinvented themselves and enjoyed renewed commercial fortunes, but some core spark of what had made them special was sacrificed in the process. This isn't to say the music wasn't good; but it simply didn't resonate with the fan base that had bought *Fragile* and *Relayer*. The calculus that led to that change is what kept the group going, though, and as the saying goes, you can't argue with success. (Unless you're a critic, of course.)

But by the 1990s Yes seemed to be flailing, lumbering from one project to another. Sometimes it felt like this: "Okay, boys. Another album is due. Who's in and who's out? Who can we bring in? What gimmick shall we use?" In that decade Yes released five albums of varying quality; *Talk* and [Open Your Eyes](#) are generally considered the weaker of these, and *Keys to Ascension* (which not coincidentally aims for the sound and feel of vintage Yes) is considered the decade's high point for the band.

But in 2000 when it was time for a new record, when they did the Yes roll call, the group – for the first and only time in its storied history – found itself without a keyboard player. The remaining quartet included founding members **Jon Anderson** (vocals) and **Chris Squire** (bass/vocals) plus long-long-time members **Steve Howe** (guitar) and **Alan White** (drums) so most of the ingredients were there for something that captured the classic Yes vibe. And the group had some good songs written. But still: they had no keyboard player, a kiss of death for a progressive rock band of Yes' ilk. What to do?

Well, someone came up with the bright idea to do something Yes hadn't done since their second album in 1970: record with an orchestra. And so it was that work on 2001's *Magnification* began.

There's nothing on *Magnification* as over-the-top melodramatic as the orchestral parts on *Time and a Word's* [Richie Havens](#) cover, "No Opportunity Necessary, No Experience Needed."

The seven-minute title track combines all of the classic Yes elements – soaring harmonies, throaty, propulsive bass, interesting, exploratory guitar work and solid, precise drumming – with a catchy tune and some lovely orchestral work that makes a very good tune even better. The sweeping orchestra doesn't attempt to replace keyboard; it goes different, more subtle places. The band and the orchestra never seem to be competing; this is a happy musical marriage. The song's fadeout may or may not be a nod to *Sgt. Pepper*.

"Spirit of Survival" may elicit a laugh or two from long-suffering Yes fans. Remember that ubiquitous "orchestra hit" keyboard patch that was the hallmark of 90/25's "Owner of a Lonely Heart"? Well, here it is again, but this time it's played by...an actual orchestra! The track is the most aggressive, muscular and rocking tune on *Magnification*.

"Don't Go" is another strong, accessible composition, credited (like all the tunes on *Magnification*) to Anderson/Howe/Squire/White. It's among the least "progressive" of the tunes, suggesting that Jon Anderson was the primary composer; his pop sensibilities – lyrics sometimes notwithstanding – have long been the strongest within the group.

On "Give Love Each Day," the orchestra finally comes front and center; Yes proper are absent for the first few minutes of the song. Of course this means that listeners must be forgiven for thinking they're hearing a [Moody Blues](#) cut. But when Anderson's voice and Squire's bass come in, it's clearly Yes. The track has a decidedly cinematic feel, nicely balancing the orchestra with a straight-ahead midtempo rocking approach from the band.

For "Can You Imagine," Chris Squire takes a relatively rare lead vocal, backed by a rare instance of piano (by drummer Alan White). "We Agree" starts out sounding as if it's going to be Steve Howe's customary classically-flavored acoustic guitar spotlight, but here it's a lyrics-heavy song. Still, Howe's guitar flourishes – both electric and acoustic – are among the song's highlights. When the orchestra cranks up and Howe runs his lead guitar lines over the top, it's truly exciting, and the anthemic vocal chorus only improves it. The brief "Soft as a Dove" is unremarkable; not bad in any way, it's not up to the quality of *Magnification's* other tracks.

"Dreamtime" weds progressive musical structure to a classical motif, with a solo violin initially out in front along with Howe's acoustic. That melodramatic movie-music approach again appears, and it's quite effective. The verses are supported by the orchestra, and the band (especially Squire's bass) comes to the fore for instrumental passages. But the orchestra always plays a key role even when Howe's electric sitar is picking out leads, or when Anderson is singing ("Dreamtime" is another lyrics-heavy track). Overall, the track veers on the edge of being a grab-bag, stuffed as it is with a wide array of sounds. But everything comes together, and unless one makes a point of counting how many different guitars Howe uses on the tracks, it's an asset rather than a problem. The last few minutes of the track are given over completely to the orchestra.

The album continues with a four-part track called "In the Presence of..." and it's in that grand epic tradition of suite-like Yes works. Opening with White's piano, the song unfolds with some lovely choral vocal overdubs (lots of Squire, it sounds like) and Howe on mandolin and electric guitar. Musically, the track conjures the feel of the more melodic moments from back in the *Close to the Edge* days. As it journeys through its movements, the track offers plenty to hold the listener's interest. The brief "Time is Time" closes the album on a plaintive, melancholy but hopeful note.

In 2001, few were all that interested in the sort of ambitious work that Yes turned in with *Magnification*, so the album met with limited commercial success (a brief #186 on the *Billboard* 200). It had the misfortune of being released on September 11, 2001, a day when the world had other things on its collective mind (released that same

day, **Ben Folds**‘ superb *Rockin’ the Suburbs* suffered a similar misfortune). But for fans of the band, it’s an overlooked gem that stands up well alongside their prime-era output, and beats the hell out of much of what Yes did in the 90s.

In 2013 *Magnification* was reissued on 180-gram vinyl, in stunning lavender. The gatefold sleeve contains two discs, but the second is one-sided (don’t ruin your needle by typing to spin the groove-less fourth side).


Having turned in their best album in ages, Yes once again fell apart. Touring and whatnot would continue sporadically, but the group would issue no new music for a decade. Luckily, the wait would be worth it: building on the *Drama*-era sound and feel, in 2011 Yes released *Fly From Here*, their first new work in a decade, and perhaps the best thing they had done in nearly 30 years. [But that’s another story...](#)

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One Response to “Album Review: Yes – Magnification”

-  *Warren Hawk* says:
[June 17, 2013 at 5:29 pm](#)

Thanks Bill. Another great review. Actually makes me want to check this and “Fly From Here” both out. I’d really known little to nothing about either album. Thanks again.

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