

A LITERAL CAST OF DOZENS

Prolific Progtoberfest III exemplifies progressive music's evolutionary flow

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JENNIFER FISHER

I have attended numerous progressive music concerts and festivals over the last 40-plus years. Some have inspired and stimulated, fueling a craving for more; others have left me reticent and questioning.

I could write the customary festival review describing the bands and extolling this or that musician's virtuosity. There is ample description here, but also a wider context for this report: "Prog" is at an evolutionary crossroads (again) and Progtoberfest III at Reggie's club in Chicago, Oct. 20–22, illustrated as much.

We recently have lost genre icons Royce Albrighton, Keith Emerson, Edgar Froese, Allan Holdsworth, Greg Lake, Chris Squire, John Wetton, Richard Wright and, if prog encompasses avant-garde and art rock (which it does, unless you're a conservative stickler), then David Bowie as well. Who will join "The Great Gig in the Sky" next? Will any outstanding contemporary musicians and bands evolve to the eminence of genre founders? Will a younger generation engender live spectacles akin to those of Emerson, Lake & Palmer, Genesis, Pink Floyd or Yes? Or is this even important? I don't think so. More thoughts on this later.

Entertaining some 200–300 enthusiasts at a given juncture (attendance was difficult to estimate), Progtoberfest III was expertly managed and coordinated by Kevin Pollack in collaboration with club owner Robby Glick. Staging a whopping 36 bands in three days was an impressive feat, attesting to Kevin's determination and ability. There was much to see and hear in the event's third edition—perhaps too much!

Main stage (Rock Club) notes ...

Friday: Missouri group Echoes of Giants kicked things off with a linear symphonic style comprising plaintive vocals amidst cinematic instrumental passages riding guitars and synths ... Schooltree presented excerpts of its symphonic dystopian rock opera *Heterotopia*, admirable keyboard and vocal skills distinguishing the band's presence ... Captivating the crowd through sheer dynamism, Chicago's own District 97, with vivacious vocalist Leslie Hunt, played a tribute to Wetton (who had performed with the band) including a rendition of King Crimson's "Starless" ...

The Dave Kerzner Band worked through a complete performance of new album *Static*, a thematic rumination on life's disorder and chaos. A decidedly bolder progressive work than Kerzner's prior outings, the live version was enthusiastically received ... Closing out Friday's schedule, the Alphonso Johnson Band (with star drummer Chester Thompson)

Vidales (for nearly 40 years), is known for its lengthy symphonic workouts and this classy show followed suit. Vidales' dominant keyboard leads received support from Claudio Cordera (guitar) and Roberto Izzo (violin), who remarkably mirrored each other's lines almost as one ...

... Mike Keneally and Beer for Dolphins performed typically complex material while Gentle Giant alum Gary Green briefly and humorously noodled on drums ... Karmakanic/The Tangent (Tangekanic) played material from both groups' repertoires in their highly anticipated appearance. Throughout their long and intricate pieces the required proficiency was well articulated. Very impressive ...

Sunday: Neu!, a band inspired by classic krautrock act Neu!, featured improvised guitar and jagged industrial rock timbres ... Kinetic Element, with the gifted Mike Visaggio on keyboards, delivered a traditionally purist form of progressive rock sparked by interesting time signatures and transitions ... Then emerged front man Matthew Parmenter with his group Discipline, playing its unique brand of refreshingly unusual, darkly dramatic prog. Drawing upon tracks from a new album plus well-known older material, the band put in an entrancingly theatrical presentation ...

... Teenage musicians from the School of Rock delivered a brace of Yes tunes with skill and vigor ... The Chicago Zappa Collective was a true oddity, three "front people" dressed in jump suits reciting scat poetry over a drums/bass/guitar musical backdrop. Some in the crowd didn't know what to make of this and left ... Thank You Scientist was difficult: The funky/jazzy sensibility, falsetto vocals, brass and complex arrangements are enjoyable on studio albums but seemed disjointed in this live performance ... Finally, ex-Jethro Tull guitarist Martin Barre pulled at the heartstrings ushering audience members back through history in thoroughly enjoyable, blues-rock fashion ...

Second stage (Music Joint) notes ...

The smaller stage at Reggie's offers a more intimately casual, pub-like atmosphere. On this occasion it was the destination for acts

PROGTOBERFEST III
OCTOBER 20/21/22
2017

MARTIN BARRE (OF JETHRO TULL)
PLAYS AN EVENING OF JETHRO TULL MUSIC INCLUDING "STAND UP" IN ITS ENTIRETY

THE DON & BUNK SHOW
FEAT. FRANK ZAPPA ALUMS DON PRESTON + BUNK GARDNER
W/SPECIAL GUESTS IKE WILLIS, MIKE KENEALLY, & NICK D'VIRGILIO

THE ALPHONSO JOHNSON BAND FEAT. CHESTER THOMPSON

THE TANGENT KARMAKANIC

BRUCE SOORD (OF THE PINEAPPLE THIEF)

CAST AISLES WOBBLER

DAVE KERZNER BAND NECROMONKEY
(WITH A SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO GREG LAKE & JOHN WETTON)

MIKE KENEALLY & BEER FOR DOLPHINS

THANK YOU SCIENTIST DISTRICT 97 KARCIUS
(WITH A SPECIAL TRIBUTE TO JOHN WETTON)

LUZ DE RIADA RANDY MCSTINE (SOLO) FROGG CAFE

DISCIPLINE XMARSX JOE DENINZON & STRATOSPHEERIUS

KING LLAMA WAVE MECHANICS UNION EYE

ABACAB: THE MUSIC OF GENESIS PERFORMING "SECONDS OUT"

SCHOOLTREE KINETIC ELEMENT ECHOES OF GIANTS

IN THE PRESENCE OF WOLVES FIVE OF THE EYES AGORI TRIBE

NEU! PERFORMING THE MUSIC OF NEU! PROGGER LOST WORLD BAND

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INSIDEOUT

played fusion covers of intriguingly rearranged pieces by John Coltrane, Santana and the Grateful Dead ...

Saturday: Veteran act Frogg Café, was entirely enjoyable with elements of fusion, jazz, bluegrass, avant-garde and clever improvisation ... ABACAB, a Genesis cover band, played the complete *Seconds Out* album coinciding with the 40th anniversary of its release ... Wave Mechanics Union followed with expertly performed versions of Gentle Giant, King Crimson, Pink Floyd and Yes pieces, ending with a Jethro Tull medley ...

... Mexican group Cast, anchored by classically grounded keyboard player Alfonso

LIVE
FESTIVAL
REPORT

ALFONSO VIDALES



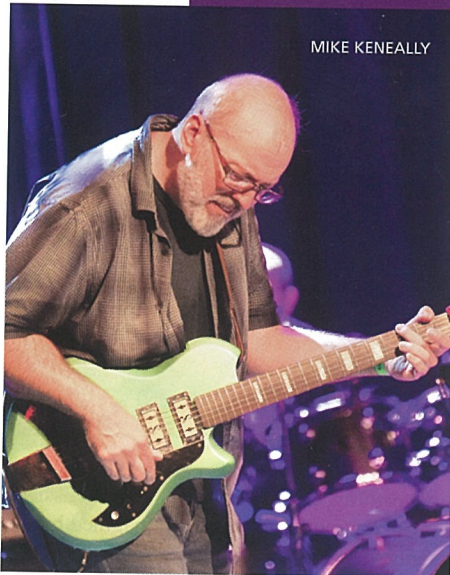
MATTHEW PARMENTER



ALPHONSO JOHNSON



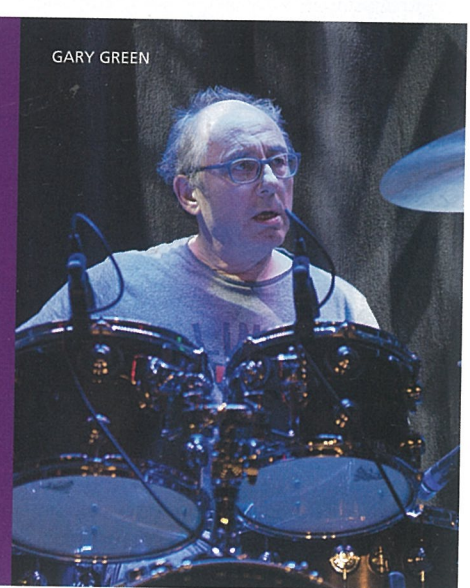
MIKE KENEALLY



BUNK GARDNER



GARY GREEN



of more wide-ranging styles and perceptibly younger audiences.

Friday afternoon convened with instrumental trio Sons of Ra playing its version of metal/jazz fusion ... Wisconsin act Conscious Pilot followed with a performance of cover songs ... Five Of The Eyes played straightforward ballsy alternative rock ... The evening's fare opened with a heavy set by In The Presence Of Wolves, whose raucous stage presence careened toward odd-metered metal carrying songs from newest album *Of Two Minds* ... Chilean group Aisles concluded events Friday with a very polished show of Latin-tinged symphonic prog featuring material from new sci-fi concept album *Hawaii*. The ensemble's command of contrasting dynamics was invigorating, and left one wondering why Aisles wasn't a main stage entry ...

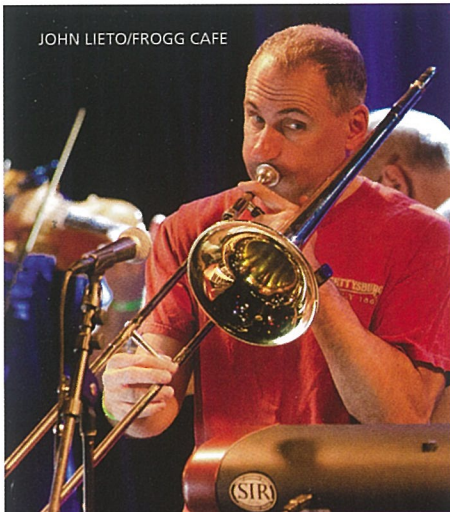
Opening Saturday, The Pneumatic Transit

offered inspiring takes on Mahavishnu Orchestra material (not an easy task) ... The Renegades proffered fusion-y Holdsworth-like guitar work bolstered by a sharp rhythm section ... Power trio King Llama laid down heavy fusion grooves ... Led by its affable namesake violinist, Joe Deninzon and Stratospheerius was a special treat bringing a melodic jazz-rock style that included tracks from new album *Guilty of Innocence* ...

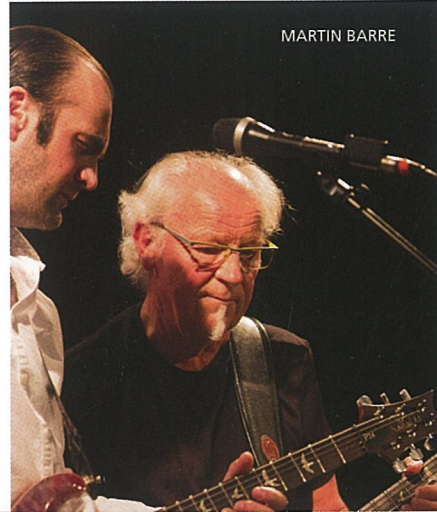
... The Dave Kerzner Band played a second set, Durga McBroom powerfully singing Pink Floyd classic "The Great Gig in the Sky," her family in the audience. The band was tight, animated and ended with a medley from classic King Crimson album *In the Court of the Crimson King* ... Featuring well-traveled Swedish drummer Mattias Olsson, Necromonkey was powerfully bombastic and wowed the audience with what essentially was an improvised set ...

In stark contrast, Pineapple Thief front man Bruce Soord closed the evening with a gentle, evocative solo acoustic performance ...

Sunday's small-stage entries began with Ohio group EYE playing an atmospheric blend of post-progressive rock, psychedelia and spacey interludes with heavy accents ... Colorado act Amalgam Effect featured interesting interplay between flute and guitar in a rock 'n' roll context ... Agori Tribe, with long tracks of flowing improvisation, compelled listeners to kick back and soak it in ... The Lost World Band provided an interesting changeup via tracks built on ethnic/folk/world music motifs incorporating violin and pennywhistle ... Progger, which bills itself as purveyors of "nasty beats, pretty chords and infectious melodies," brought all to the table and more in an ambitiously executed, well-received show ... The jazz trio Moulder,



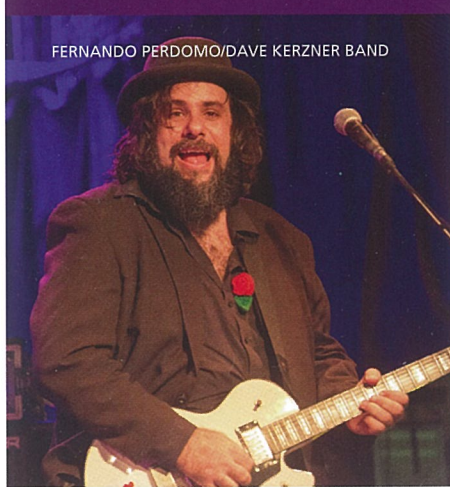
JOHN LIETO/FROGG CAFE



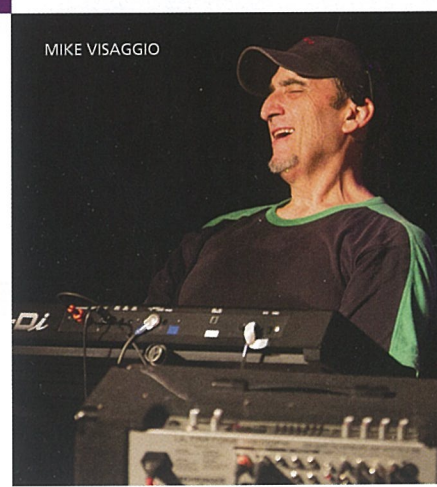
MARTIN BARRE



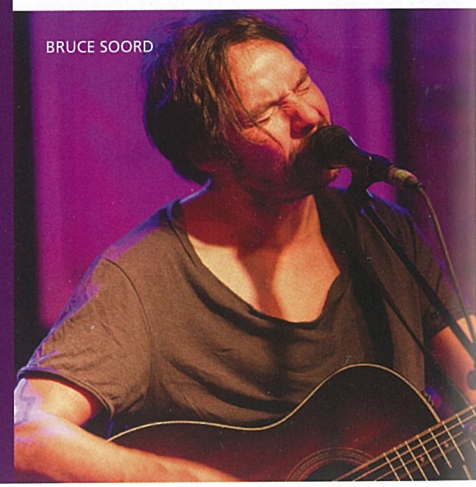
DURGA McBROOM



FERNANDO PERDOMO/DAVE KERZNER BAND



MIKE VISAGGIO



BRUCE SOORD

Gray & Wertico brought an enjoyably deft sense of melody to smoothly wrought grooves ...

... The festival closed with legends Don Preston and Bunk Gardner (both in their mid-eighties) from the original Mothers of Invention, offering their spin on Frank Zappa's legacy for those desiring more grist of nonconformist/avant-garde persuasion ...

Portending a proggy quantum shift

Reflecting on the weekend during my return flight home to Canada, I felt conflicted. The only obvious criticism of this event was too many bands making it difficult to catch full performances on either stage. But admittedly ecstatic to witness live performances of "Supper's Ready" "Aqualung," "The Great Gig in the Sky" and being spirited back to the Court of the Crimson King, I also felt haunted from lingering in "the bygone." The audience's age diversity notwithstanding, I questioned whether Progtoberfest foremost was a nostalgia trip down memory lane. For many, I think it was.

In chats with musicians and attendees I explored the notion that nostalgia grows during times of change. Some agreed that reprocessing the past was passé, that nostalgia is comfy but also denotes stagnation. Yet, acknowledging the past with a sprinkle of irony definitely can be progressive. I was not alone in these thoughts.

Progressive music emerged in 1960s-era British clubs just like Reggie's, where musicians gathered, learned from one another and stoked each other's artistry. Rock 'n' roll dominated but individual works were very temporal. Robert Fripp wished his music to last and Jon Anderson wanted it to be "art." Once dismissed as pretentious and pompous, "prog" has endured countless reproaches and points of reckoning. Its original, historical penchant for spectacle and extravagance will be recalled as magnificent but since has proved nonessential.

In this 21st century, the Creative Commons/lateral sharing networks and social media are essential tools. Copyright becoming meaningless is the new reality. Music-related

connectivity, cross-pollination and discussion now occur in places/spaces unimagined by the originators. These are the "new clubs" of the new creative age.

With the passage of time, progressive music's founding artists as well as their faithful devotees will fade into history and legend. The new will emerge with ever-distancing nods to the architects.

Jazz, the Beatles, the classics of Bartok, Liszt, Stravinsky and Vivaldi, etc., were among pillars of influence on progressive's first wave. The '70s originators—Yes, ELP, Pink Floyd, Gentle Giant and others—in turn are the pillars of influence on a new transformation. These are the coming changes and challenges facing progressive music today. It is as though we have come full circle to a new beginning.

Events like Progtoberfest are a barometer for however these changes manifest. Certainly, nothing will substitute for the efforts of individuals like Kevin and other festival organizers working on shoestring budgets, bringing creators together and "the new" to the fore.