

British progressive rock isn't dead

By JAMES SIMON

Associated Press

BOSTON — British progressive rock was supposed to be dead and gone by now, joining acid rock, glitter and disco as a musical footnote of the 1960s and '70s.

Yes and ELP disbanded, Eric Clapton returned to the blues and King Crimson updated its sound for the '80s. But the quick acceptance of the new band Asia shows there's still a strong market for the soaring instrumentation, abstract lyrics and abrupt changes of pace used by the British progressive rockers — especially if the songs are tailored to needs of FM rock radio.

"We made a conscious effort that we shouldn't sound like an afterthought of the '70s," says John Wetton, bassist and chief songwriter for the band, whose debut album topped to No. 1 on the charts after only seven weeks. "The way to do that was to come out of the box very strong with songs people could play and listen to and enjoy."

"Instead of nailing together three songs that didn't fit, like most progressive rockers, we made a conscious effort to make each song separate and have it stand on its own," Wetton said.

Those lengthy "nail-together" songs were five 10 years ago for underground FM radio stations that wanted to distinguish themselves from

AM pop music stations. But today's album-oriented FM ... stations want tight five-minute tunes. Asia's approach quickly paid off.

Songs such as "Heat of the Moment," "Soul Survivor" and "Only Time Will Tell" were added to playlists throughout the country. Asia was soon able to headline at 3,000-seat theaters.

Much of Asia's early appeal stemmed from the impeccable credentials of the four musicians, each of whom had played in British progressive rock bands known for their swaying musical epics.

Steve Howe supplied the long guitar solos that drove Yes at its peak, while Geoff Downes added his keyboards to that group's last album. Carl Palmer powered ELP with his bombastic drums, while Wetton played with King Crimson, Family, Roxy Music and UK.

"It's been refreshing that nobody has been calling out for the old bits," said Wetton, who wrote almost all of the lyrics for the new songs and 50 percent of the melodies.

"We made a conscious effort not to sing older songs, because it would be a real drag if one of the pieces we played from the old days went down better than the new Asia songs."

"Really, it's difficult enough to attract an

identity with a new group," he says. "And if you give people past associations, it makes it even more difficult for people to realize it is a brand new band."

There are a few throwbacks to the old days, mostly during the solo spots given to each musician.

Howe dusts off "The Clap," an old acoustic guitar tune he used to play with Yes, while Palmer uses the same revolving drum kit, strobe lights and Oriental groups he used on the last several ELP tours.

Otherwise, it's all new material from the band, which is reluctant to open up the tightly crafted songs even in concert.

Howe, one of the most gifted and underrated guitarists in rock, has done only during the band's first encore, "Heat of the Moment."

Still, Asia has problems with music critics, many of whom say that the band's sound is just a sanitized rebash of what ELP, Yes and other classical rockers were doing a decade ago.

"I would get more upset about bad reviews if we weren't doing so well," Wetton said. "The press loves to build up new groups and then knock them down. With us they didn't even build us up before coming after us."

Best bets

Zaniness

Robin Williams, comedian and star of the television show "Mork and Mindy," will present his own brand of stand-up comedy at 8 tonight in the UT Performing Arts Center Concert Hall. Singer John Sebastian will also appear. The performance is not recommended for children. Tickets are on sale at the Erwin Center, Performing Arts Center box office and Northcross Mall ticket office.

Great performances

"Live from Lincoln Center" features Zubin Mehta conducting the New York Philharmonic and the Israel Philharmonic in a joint concert at 8:30 tonight on KLRU, Channel 18.

Live sounds

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