

Chris Squire, founding member of Yes, dead at 67

Kevin Reed
30 July 2015

Chris Squire, the British-born bass player, song writer and vocalist for the progressive rock band Yes, died on June 27 at his home in Phoenix, Arizona. He was 67.

Squire, who founded Yes along with Jon Anderson in 1968, was the only member of the group to appear on all 21 of their studio albums and perform on each of the band's tours over the past 46 years (1969–2014). He announced in May that he would not participate in the 2015 Yes summer tour after being diagnosed with acute erythroid leukemia.

Best known for an unusually treble and melodic—and at times powerful, fuzzy and funky—bass playing style, Squire influenced many rock musicians over the decades and was held in high esteem for his creativity, energy and general good humor. In a testament to his contribution to rock music, many tributes to Squire following his death placed him in the company of Paul McCartney, John Entwistle and Jack Bruce as among the greatest bass players of the genre.

Born in the Kingsbury area of northwest London on March 4, 1948, Christopher Edward Russell Squire began his musical career as a choirboy. Like many working class youth of his generation—his father was a cab driver and his mother a secretary—Chris rebelled against school authorities as a teenager. He was expelled from school in 1964 for wearing his hair too long and never went back.

Squire picked up the bass without any formal training. It has been reported that a guitarist friend told him that tall people played the bass—Squire was 6' 4". Playing the Rickenbacker 4001 electric bass, Squire's musicianship is an ever-present part of the Yes sound. His name became so synonymous with the instrument that in the 1990s Rickenbacker produced a limited edition of their bass in Squire's name and called it the 4001CS.

Like many artists of his generation, Chris Squire was influenced by the Beatles as a teenager. By 1965, helped along by the Beatles' *Rubber Soul* and other such works, popular music underwent a transition away from the forms and sounds that had dominated in the early 1960s. Musical compositions became more experimental and song lyrics began to take on more sophisticated and abstract social and

even political subjects. This development expressed broader social concerns and dissatisfaction among the youth as well as wide layers of both the working class and middle class that came to a head in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Millions of young people were activated, or radicalized, in that period, but that took a variety of often very confused forms. Drugs were touted by certain artists and middle class intellectuals as “mind-opening,” and a means of escaping the daily drudgery of life or headlines about war and suffering. There is not the slightest evidence that LSD ever produced anything of artistic value; on the contrary, it merely created new illusions and fantasies, and directed people away from changing the world. Nonetheless, so-called psychedelic music emerged and that was not simply the work of musicians high on drugs.

(It might be put another way: the desire to go beyond the formulas of early rock ‘n’ roll was legitimate, but with what ideas in his head did the average musician pursue that goal? In most cases, musical skill or ambition far outran the level of actual thinking about the world. Various “spiritual” panaceas, including much nonsense and charlatanry, tended to fill the gap—or rather, failed to fill it.)

The “psychedelic” genre incorporated a great deal of confusion, and generated its share of personal tragedy. But some of the musicians who pursued it made an effort, on the one hand, to bring together folk and blues-influenced rock music with new electronic instruments and studio recording techniques. On the other, a variety of non-Western instruments came into play, as well as key and time signature changes that expressed a departure from traditional blues and folk sounds and structures.

Right around the time that the “psychedelic era” was ending, Chris Squire met Jon Anderson. The two talked of their mutual desire to take what they had learned from their experiences in London and create a band with great vocal harmonies, complex musical compositions and positive messages of hope for a better world. By 1968, they agreed that they needed a band name that expressed their optimism and settled quickly on “Yes.”

By 1971—after two commercially unsuccessful albums and several personnel changes, including the addition of Steve Howe on guitar and Rick Wakeman on keyboards—Yes became a central creative force in what would later become known as progressive rock. The albums *Fragile* (1971), *Close to the Edge* (1972) and *Tales from Topographic Oceans* (1973) were all top ten records in the US and UK and each has been certified Platinum or—in the case of *Fragile* — Double Platinum. All three of these records featured lengthy compositions (some a full album side of 22 minutes), obtuse lyrics, unusual time signatures and multiple key changes.

Squire's bass is distinct on every Yes track as rhythm, harmony or melody. Recognizing this may be counterintuitive as the bass is often present as a foundation—along with drums—on which the melody, lead vocals and/or lead guitar are the dominant musical element. Among the most popular tracks where Squire's genius can be heard are “Yours is No Disgrace” [an anti-Vietnam War song], “Long Distance Runaround,” “Heart of the Sunrise” and “Close to the Edge.”

In an online post following Squire's death, early Yes drummer Bill Bruford paid tribute to his bandmate's innovative bass-playing: “He had an approach that contrasted sharply with the somewhat monotonic, immobile bass parts of today. His lines were important; counter-melodic structural components that you were as likely to go away humming as the top line melody; little stand-alone works of art in themselves.”

While Squire's bass playing is something of a legend, his vocals were also important. With Anderson as the front man, Squire is equally responsible for the Yes nearly choral vocal sound, with his harmonies both above and below Anderson's lead.

Progressive rock music—associated with UK groups such as Pink Floyd, Genesis, Jethro Tull, Emerson, Lake & Palmer and King Crimson—became tremendously popular during the rise of FM stereo and album-oriented radio (AOR) in the early 1970s. Incorporating classical music themes and orchestral compositions, progressive rock groups rarely made singles and shunned traditional rock 'n roll and pop music beats. Meanwhile, progressive rock lyrics often dealt with complex themes, classic literature and poetry or folklore.

Yes was a favorite of AOR and few of their songs could be played on top 40 AM radio due to their length. As a compromise, some Yes tracks were reissued as singles following substantial edits. In 1976, at the height of their popularity, Yes, along with several other bands, played to a crowd of 130,000 at John F. Kennedy Stadium in Philadelphia—the largest-ever paid attendance at a rock

concert.

Into the late 1970s, progressive rock groups like Yes sought to maintain their relevance and popularity despite the changes in the social climate and the disappearance of the “counterculture.” Harsher economic and political circumstances, including the devastation of large swathes of industry in the UK and the US, along with the coming to power of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, seemed to many to make progressive rock “concept albums” and their lyrical and instrumental complexity pretentious and overdone. More straightforward and less bombastic forms such as disco and punk rock came into vogue.

To their credit, Squire and company persevered. No doubt, an aspect of the enduring appeal of Yes has been the virtuosity of its band members. Along with the contributions of Squire, Anderson, Wakeman, Howe and Bruford, fifteen other musicians have been in Yes over the past 46 years. The group has always stood out as being made up of exceptionally talented instrumentalists, performers and writers.

It is a fact of 1970s' culture that the anti-war and anti-establishment sentiments expressed by groups like Yes never rose above a relatively low level. Despite the claims of progressive rock that it was breaking a great deal of new ground, and its promise to introduce various historical, cultural, social and even political questions, the genre tended to be rooted in the end in prevailing currents in the media and entertainment world, with all the self-indulgence that implies.

Nonetheless, some fascinating music was made. Chris Squire was one of the finest representatives of the progressive rock generation. Despite the early fame and wealth derived from the commercial success of Yes, as well as the difficulties arising from the eventual decline in the band's popularity, Squire remained true to the creative aspirations of his youth until the end of his life.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact