

Alan White, drummer for the progressive rock band Yes, dead at 72

Kevin Reed
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English-born rock music drummer and song writer Alan White died on May 26 at his home near Seattle, Washington, at the age of 72. His family announced the death on Facebook and said, “our beloved husband, dad and grandpa” had passed away “after a brief illness.”

While he worked with many artists early on in his career—including John Lennon, George Harrison, Eric Clapton, Joe Cocker and Ginger Baker, to name a few—White was best known as the drummer for the progressive rock band Yes, with whom he played for nearly 50 years.

He joined Yes in late July 1972 to replace founding drummer Bill Bruford, who left the band to join another pioneering English progressive rock band, King Crimson. Yes had just finished recording their fifth studio album *Close to the Edge* in 1972 and the band was scheduled to begin touring the US when founders Chris Squire and Jon Anderson approached White. They convinced him to join the group, and he had just three days to learn the music before the first show in Dallas, Texas.

White’s ability to pick up quickly on the work of the jazz-influenced Bruford, who was an innovator in the early days of progressive rock, as well as learning the generally more complex and challenging music of Yes, testified to his talent as a drummer. At the time of his death, White was the longest serving member of Yes, which has had many personnel changes over the years. He shared this distinction with Chris Squire prior to the bass player’s death in 2015.

White can be heard on most of the tracks from the popular live 1973 triple album *Yessongs*. His first studio work for the group was on *Tales from Topographic Oceans*, a double album, in 1974. *Tales* received mixed reviews and was the subject of derision by some critics as an example of the excesses of

progressive rock. Conceived of by Jon Anderson as a recitation of four Hindu texts, the two LPs consist of four 20-minute-long tracks.

Nevertheless, the album was the first ever in the UK to reach gold status (sales of 500,000 copies) based on preorders and hitting the Number 6 slot on the US charts. Alan White is credited as a co-writer for one of the tracks on *Tales*, “The Remembering (High the Memory),” and he also played piano on the final track, “Ritual (Nous Somme du Soleil).”

Yes stayed relevant following the loss of progressive rock’s mass audience in the 1970s and moved in the direction of pop rock. In the face of the rising popularity of disco, punk rock and MTV, White made important musical contributions to several successful Yes albums in the late 70s, 80s and 90s. The band achieved a number one hit single in 1983, “Owner of a Lonely Heart.”

Alan White was born in Pelton, County Durham, England, into a working class family on June 14, 1949. His father had been a truck driver and bus driver and played piano in local pubs. His grandfather also played piano and was a drummer in local dance bands. Alan first learned piano at age six and began playing drums at 12. By 13, he was developing his own style, playing for local cover bands that played songs by The Beatles and Gerry and the Pacemakers.

White got his first real break in September 1969, when John Lennon called him to join his band for a concert that was being prepared in Toronto, Ontario. Thinking the call was a prank, as White would later explain, he hung up the phone. Lennon called back and convinced the 21-year-old drummer to join the Plastic Ono Band and perform in two charity concerts, one in Toronto and the other in London, the former of which became a hit album *Live Peace in Toronto*.

The success with the Plastic Ono Band led to other opportunities for White, who went on to work with John Lennon on several tracks from the 1971 album *Imagine*, including the hit singles “Instant Karma” and the title track. He also recorded with George Harrison during sessions for his first solo album in 1970, *All Things Must Pass*, that included playing both drums and vibraphone.

White played for 10 weeks in 1970 with Ginger Baker’s Air Force, a 15-piece band that also included Steve Winwood. In June 1972, just before he was contacted by Yes, Alan White was touring with Joe Cocker. In later years, he performed with Spencer Davis, Charlie Daniels, Eddie Money and Keith Emerson. There is also the impressive list of other musicians that he worked that were part of the Yes lineup over the years including Tony Kaye, Patrick Moraz, Trevor Rabin and Eddie Jobson.

By joining Yes, White had the opportunity to work with some of the most gifted rock musicians to emerge in the 60s-70s era. All the artists in the band—including keyboardist Rick Wakeman and guitarist Steve Howe—were so popular individually that Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records extended contracts to each of them for the recording of solo albums in the 1970s. They all took up the opportunity, including Alan White who released a jazz-influenced LP called *Ramshackled* in 1976.

White’s onstage presence with Yes had been restricted since 2016, according to a statement by the band, due to “a number of health setbacks.” That he was loved and respected by his fellow musicians and fans comes across in the numerous tributes posted on Facebook following news of his death. A particularly noteworthy comment was posted by a Facebook fan group page that said, “we will miss his friendship and warmth. A true gentleman. Always finding a way and the time to talk to us YES fans. Never pretentious, though Alan White really was a rock star. A master of time with true craftsmanship. But above all, the kindest of men. Caring, loving and with compassion for those who needed it.”



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