

The 50th anniversary remaster of *Tales from Topographic Oceans* by progressive rock band Yes

Kevin Reed
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Tales from Topographic Oceans, the double album by the British progressive rock band Yes originally released in late 1973, was reissued on February 6 by Rhino Entertainment as a new 50th anniversary remastered edition and super deluxe box set.

The original recording—the culmination of the band’s early 1970s ascent and a polarizing musical production—has proved to showcase the artistic ambitions, challenges and contradictions of the progressive rock music genre.

As part of a series of early Yes 50th anniversary releases by Rhino, the *Tales* project was originally scheduled to be available in early 2024. However, production delays and extensive content preparation of the 15-disc deluxe edition required more time for archival research and manufacturing than anticipated.

Heard today in its expanded form—including audio engineer Steven Wilson’s new 5.1 and Dolby Atmos mixes—*Tales* emerges as an example of a band testing the limits of the LP form in the period following the tumultuous 1960s social and cultural movements.

Tales from Topographic Oceans was Yes’s sixth studio album and the follow-up to *Close to the Edge*, extending that record’s side-long suite format into a double-LP containing four tracks, one per side, each around 20 minutes long.

Conceived primarily by Yes vocalist Jon Anderson, with Yes guitarist Steve Howe as collaborator, the album’s concept is drawn from Anderson’s reading of Paramahansa Yogananda’s *Autobiography of a Yogi*. Taken from a footnote in the book on Shastric scriptures, Anderson interpreted the four stages of spiritual development.

The pieces—“The Revealing Science of God,” “The Remembering,” “The Ancient” and “Ritual (Nous Sommes du Soleil)” —map out a cycle of revelation, memory, archaic power and ritual, which Anderson described in a 1974 radio interview as “four basic atonements and scriptures that everything can be related to.” It can be linked to light, thought, power and love, he said, as “fundamental developments of life.”

Musically, *Tales* pushed Yes’s characteristic complex rhythmic structures, extended instrumental passages and harmonized vocals into more elaborate territory with constantly shifting sections that move within the four contrasting chapters.

The album’s significance lies not only in its ambitious length and grandiose concept but in its timing: released in the UK on December 7, 1973, and in the US in January 1974, it arrived when Yes had just been voted “Band of the Year” by Melody Maker readers. The band—Jon Anderson on lead vocals, Chris Squire (1948-2015) on bass, Steve Howe on guitars, Rick Wakeman on keyboards and Alan White (1949-2022) on drums—was recognized by their label, Atlantic Records, as a vehicle for conquering the large and lucrative US rock music market.

While the Turkish-American founder of Atlantic, Ahmet Ertegun, was

reported to be surprised when he received a double album containing just four tracks, he backed the release enthusiastically and said to Anderson, “Do whatever you want. I love Yes!” Remarkably, *Tales* hit number 1 in the UK, reached number 6 in the US, confirming the degree to which the audience for progressive rock—supported by FM radio, arena tours and elaborate gatefold packaging—could support the most demanding works.

In interviews at the time, Anderson emphasized that he did not claim expertise in Sanskrit scriptures but was inspired by the idea that ancient texts provided an ordered insight into life and spiritual development. For Anderson, *Tales* was a personal statement and a way of using the extended rock album form to explore revelation, memory and ritual outside of religious dogma.

The attraction to Eastern spirituality was considerable among rock musicians in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in Britain and the US. George Harrison’s involvement with Indian music, his study of texts such as *Autobiography of a Yogi* and Raja Yoga and his championing of Indian musicians through his Dark Horse label helped popularize Hindu among rock audiences.

The Hare Krishna movement, Transcendental Meditation and other currents influenced figures as varied as Bob Dylan, John McLaughlin’s Mahavishnu Orchestra and members of the broader progressive and jazz-rock milieu, mixing spiritual seeking with the sounds of Eastern acoustic instruments within the format of amplified rock music.

Anderson’s engagement with Yogananda and Sanskrit texts reflected both his own personal searching and a broader tendency of artists to look to non-Western philosophies for ideas and alternatives to the commercialism and disillusionment that accompanied the post-Vietnam War, post-May-June ’68 world.

One might also see in this an unhealthy, evasive reaction to the convulsions and contradictions of the time. One thinks of art historian Meyer Schapiro’s description of certain French artists of the late 19th century, who

often expressed demands for salvation, for order and fixed objects of belief ... But since the artists did not know the underlying economic and social causes of their own disorder and moral insecurity, they could envisage new stabilizing forms only as quasi-religious beliefs or as a revival of some primitive or highly ordered traditional society with organs for a collective spiritual life.

Tales embodies Anderson’s yearning for human brotherhood and world peace in the lyrical invocations of oceans, ancient suns and spiritual journeys, and in the rejection of conventional song structures in favor of

long, suite-like forms intended to approximate meditation.

Anderson—who founded Yes with Chris Squire in 1968—has consistently maintained his belief in spiritual growth, universal love and the transformative power of art, drawing heavily on Eastern philosophy, mystical texts and a sense of “cosmic interconnectedness.” From his early days with Yes through to his departure from the band in 2004, he framed music as a vehicle for higher consciousness rather than just entertainment.

In his solo projects and collaborations since leaving Yes, he has sustained the same optimistic, visionary stance and still speaks about light, energy, and spiritual evolution in essentially the same terms he used in the 1970s.

Anderson has also long woven environmentalism into his worldview, repeatedly describing humanity as “connected so much to Mother Earth” and insisting that “whatever we do to Mother Earth, we do to ourselves.”

From the ecological themes in his 1970s lyrics through later interviews where he calls humanity “the gardeners of the earth” whose mission is to “share the world” and change our perception of climate and environmental crisis, he has framed ecological responsibility as a core theme of his music and public commentary.

If *Tales* was successful, its reception among critics and fans was divided and it became the subject of debate about the pros and cons of progressive rock. Early reviews in the British press oscillated between admiration and bemusement; *The Times* coined the term “rockophonic” and singled out “The Ancient” as a work that would be studied as “a turning point in modern music,” while other outlets mocked the album with headlines such as “Wishy Washy Tales from the Deep” and “Adrift on the Oceans.”

It is important to note that within the band itself, keyboardist Wakeman was a prominent critic of the project. He nicknamed the album, “Tales from Toby’s Graphic Go-Kart,” and said it involved too much musical “padding” to fill out four LP sides.

Wakeman further expressed his dislike for the project by objecting to playing it live in its entirety and, during the tour, was served an elaborate Indian meal atop his keyboards mid-performance as a public gesture of boredom and dissent. Wakeman left the band shortly after the tour to pursue a solo career.

He would later explain, “To play music, you have to understand it. I didn’t understand *Topographic Oceans*. That’s why I hardly played on it,” adding that he grew “farther and farther away from it” on tour. He said he “felt sorry for anyone who saw us for the first time on that tour” because “all they got was *Topographic Oceans* shoved down their throats.”

At the same time, Wakeman acknowledged there were “very nice musical moments” such as “Nous sommes du soleil (We are of the sun),” which he called “one of the most beautiful melodies.” Steve Howe’s acoustic guitar on “The Ancient (Giants Under the Sun),” is nothing short of remarkable.

Chris Squire considered the album a positive achievement for the band despite its difficult and arduous recording process. Squire believed the album was a piece of art that “contributed to the longevity of our career as well, because I guess we established ourselves as artists who were very capable and wanted to take risks and I think that won us a lot of favor with our audience.”

For a portion of the audience, the decision to devote an entire double LP to four pieces symbolized a departure from rock music’s popular roots in succinct melodies and direct lyrics. Among Yes fans, some regarding it as “self-indulgent crap,” while others see it as “the most brilliant album that prog ever witnessed.”

By 1973, progressive rock had reached extraordinary success worldwide and a series of ambitious concept albums were released that tended toward symphonic length, thematic unity and studio experimentation. Pink Floyd’s *The Dark Side of the Moon* was to some extent the quintessential

progressive rock product, while King Crimson’s *Larks’ Tongues in Aspic*, Jethro Tull’s *A Passion Play*, Emerson, Lake & Palmer’s *Brain Salad Surgery* and in 1974 and Genesis’s *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway*, each pursued their own syntheses of allegory, music genres, electronic experimentation and extended form.

Within this context, *Tales from Topographic Oceans* stood out for its assertion that a rock album could consist entirely of multi-movement suites, abandoning singles entirely in favor of four side-long works. Alongside it, Jethro Tull’s *A Passion Play* provided another example of a dense, single work on an entire LP that did not receive widespread critical acclaim yet proved extremely popular with listeners, topping the album charts in both the United States and Canada, an achievement that parallels *Tales*’ popular success.

Rhino Entertainment’s new 50th-anniversary super deluxe edition of *Tales* takes the original album’s excess to new levels and reintroduces it through the lens of archival restoration and immersive audio. The set comprises 12 CDs, 2 LPs and a Blu-ray disc, including a newly remastered version of the original 1973 mix (cut for vinyl by Bernie Grundman), a complete new stereo remix by Steven Wilson, instrumental versions, studio outtakes and a substantial selection of live recordings from the 1973-74 *Tales* tour. The Blu-ray disc adds Wilson’s 5.1 surround mix and a new Dolby Atmos version of the entire album, along with high-resolution stereo and additional alternate mixes.

The new release is a qualitative leap in how the album can be heard. Earlier concerns by listeners about the “muddy” quality of the original—an issue often cited in discussions of the record’s controversial status—are addressed in the remaster. The intricate guitars, keyboards, percussion and vocals have been more effectively layered without sacrificing the density that is central to the album’s sound.

Reviews of the super deluxe edition have emphasized the “widescreen-sounding” nature of the new vinyl cut and the way Wilson’s 2026 Atmos mix offers “a new way to experience this music,” with percussion, synthesizers, guitars and gongs placed discretely in three-dimensional space.

The improved quality of the remastered recording is notable, and, like many anniversary releases of progressive rock works from the 1970s, the 5.1 surround and Dolby Atmos mixes provide an entirely new listening experience. Listeners can also find the new mixes on a variety of streaming services.

The popular success of *Tales* depended on the platform of album-oriented rock and stereo FM broadcasting, which, in the early and mid-1970s, aired long tracks and complete album sides and encouraged listeners to experience concept albums as a unified whole.

The elaborate cover art by renowned illustrator Roger Dean, gatefold packaging and lengthy liner notes reinforced the sense of the LP listening experience as an environment of sound, text and image. In this sense, the 50th anniversary edition of *Tales from Topographic Oceans* is a reminder of a moment in the 1970s when rock musicians, under conditions of mass popularity and label support, took their work very seriously and produce large-scale experimental projects that required of listeners a commitment of concentrated attention.



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