



**The Episode of the Year**

**Guest: Brad Birzer**

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*[start 00:02:42]*

**WOODS:** I know that some listeners might be inclined not to listen to this episode, but I told them in the intro you've got to listen. This is going to be—although maybe this is a bad analogy. I was going to say this is going to be like the Beatles TV movie *Magical Mystery Tour*, where McCartney didn't plan it out. They just rode around England and saw what would happen, and it turned out nothing happened. I hope this doesn't turn out that way.

**BIRZER:** That's right. I'll follow your lead, Tom.

**WOODS:** First of all, I told everybody about Progarchy—which, I'm sorry to say, I didn't even know about. This would be like a politics junkie not knowing about the Drudge Report.

Tell us what makes music progressive rather than not progressive. And let me say at the outset that somebody like Billy Joel—I respect him for what he does. When it comes to what he does, he's great at it. He comes up with great melodies, good three-, four-minute songs that you can tap your foot to. But I would feel sad if somebody went through his whole life thinking music is Billy Joel. I would feel like you missed out on something that is so life enhancing. So what is it about progressive rock that makes it progressive, in the non-Rachel Maddow sense of the word?

**BIRZER:** The non-Rachel Maddow. I like that. First of all Progarchy, our website, has only been around for about a year and a half, so there's no reason you would know about it. Of course, I know you're a progger. That would give you some incentive to look at it, but it's still a pretty niche form of music, I think. Progressive music, the term "progressive rock," didn't really come about until the late 1960s. It was used as a derogatory term at the time, but the people who were involved in it were really thinking more along the lines of jazz from the 1920s and 1930s. That is, they were trying to break out of typical four/four time, refrains, and so forth. And in some ways your Billy Joel example is really interesting, because you can have something like "Piano Man," which is incredibly complex in terms of song structure, but then you have something like "Uptown Girl" which is not really complex at all.

I think a lot of what progressive rock has tried to do over 40 years is to really consider rock as an art form rather than just an emotional outlet. Probably Sgt. Pepper versus "Hard Day's Night." Or we might say it could be something like the Moody Blues rather than Rolling Stones. Not that there's anything wrong with the Rolling Stones, but the Moody Blues were doing much more complicated things: bringing in string instruments, orchestras, and so forth and really trying to create long, involved songs. My friend says anytime I recommend a song to him, "If I start it, am going to miss dinner."

**WOODS:** That's right, that's right.

**BIRZER:** That was one of my favorite comebacks ever about prog.

**WOODS:** I think another feature of it is that you're much, much less likely to get tired of it. It's going to take you longer to get to appreciate it. After you first hear it, you think there's nothing here. Or I just can't get into this. You have to make some effort. You have to sit there and listen, but once you've done that....

**BIRZER:** It's not wallpaper music. It's not background at all.

*[time 00:06:27]*

**WOODS:** No.

**BIRZER:** It definitely takes involvement on the listener's part, I think both lyrically as well as in terms of whatever story is being told just through the music itself. So I agree, Tom. You think about something like Thick as a Brick from Jethro Tull. Obviously that's not something you just put on for five minutes and walk away from. It demands some attention.

**WOODS:** Yeah, it draws you in. I don't want my listeners thinking, well, I don't have time for this music. You will. I'm telling you, you will.

I would be sad if somebody went through life and had never listened to the following things. I'm going to give you a list of things. I didn't plan this ahead of time. This is like Magical Mystery Tour. We have no idea what's going to happen. But I'm telling you these are the things I would be sad if people hadn't listened to. If you haven't listened to them, then this is a homework assignment for you, too, Brad Birzer.

**BIRZER:** [laughter] I'm listening, Tom.

**WOODS:** People think Aqualung with Jethro Tull, and that's great. No problem with that. But I think their best work ever was A Passion Play. And Ian hates it. And that time that I got to meet him after the show, I thought, well, if there's one thing he takes away from our conversation, I want it to be that the fans love Passion Play. He still just disparages it. "It's too much going on," and he just didn't really care for it. But they are remastering it. I don't even know if it will be a remix. I don't know.

**BIRZER:** I think it is a remix, yeah.

**WOODS:** And it's Steven Wilson remixing it, and Steven Wilson likes Passion Play. Ian was actually saying to him, "Let's see if we can get rid of those terrible saxophones that I was playing," and Wilson said, "What are you talking about? The saxophones are the whole thing!" So he's keeping the faith on that. You listen to that and listen to it, and then you say wow, that's a great piece.

The second thing I would say that you absolutely got to listen to and listen to it until you see it, right? Listen to it until you see what's there. That's the Yes album Going for the One. You don't have to like every song, but I insist that you like two songs on there: "Turn of the Century," which is one of the most beautiful songs ever, and "Awaken." They will just blow your mind.

**BIRZER:** I'm still with you completely.

**WOODS:** Good, so you know these pieces!

**BIRZER:** Yes.

**WOODS:** I mean, this music improves the world. It stunningly improves the world. Maybe it's not for everybody, but I just find that hard to believe. I refuse to believe that. So off the top of my head, those are

two, but that's the kind of style that I have in mind. Then when it comes to Pink Floyd I like "Shine on You Crazy Diamond," and I like the long sorts of things. Although Rick Wright is not really a keyboard hero in the progressive tradition, really. He would be the first to admit it. "I can't play very fast," he said.

**BIRZER:** I think that's absolutely right.

**WOODS:** But he's very good at it and all that. But the other piece, though, that I think is lost in Pink Floyd is *The Final Cut* (1983). I'll let you talk in a minute—this is more of a conversation than an interview. A lot of people don't like that album, because really it's very introspective by Roger Waters. It's a reflection in part about his own father's death in World War II and a reflection on war in general. David Gilmour didn't like this album at all.

I myself was given a copy of it, and I just couldn't get into it. I finally said, look, I know there's something here. I was probably 15 years old. I got in bed one night with my headphones, and decided I was going to listen to this thing straight through. And I listened to it straight through and it blew me away so much that I got right out of bed and I started over, and I played it all over again, straight through.

So now tell me, if you had to pick three. And I'm not saying those are three best ever. Those are the three that recommend themselves to me right this second from the 1970s and 1980s. What are yours?

**BIRZER:** I agree with all of them actually, but on the Pink Floyd especially. So many people go to *The Wall* or *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Those are fine albums. Depressing, I think.

*[time 00:10:43]*

**WOODS:** Right.

**BIRZER:** Wonderful, but for me it's *Animals* and *The Final Cut*. I got *The Final Cut* when it came out, and it is so personal and intense. It never bogs down to pure naval gazing, because it always has applications. It's so much beyond. Roger Waters is a great critic. He's a great cultural critic I think in all kinds of ways, which is, I think, one of the great things about even what you just said here with *A Passion Play*, *Going for the One*, and *The Final Cut*. Every one of these in some way either offers a brilliant criticism of the world or like *Going for the One* what's beautiful about the world.

**WOODS:** Before I let you go on any further, I want to point out one thing that is so brilliant. One out of the many brilliant things about *The Final Cut*. In *The Gunner's Dream* there's that part where he screams out, "And hold on to the dream," and his voice gets drowned out to the point where it becomes the saxophone line.

**BIRZER:** Yes.

**WOODS:** And you can't tell when it goes from being his voice to being the saxophone. That's just killer. So go ahead. I'll shut up. You go ahead.

**BIRZER:** No, no, that's great. Okay, so I obviously did not plan this. These are just the things that came to my head right away. I was born in 1967, and my first memories of listening to prog rock would be about 1972, because I had two older brothers in Kansas as you probably know. Hard rock and progressive rock were everywhere. So I was introduced to it very young, and I was very taken with it very young. So when I look back, for me it would be Yes' *Close to the Edge*. That, I think, is a stunning album in all kinds of ways. Everything. Instruments, lyrics—which are a little psychedelic at times but I think a little obscure. Still great. Also, for me, Peter Gabriel, Genesis era, would be *Selling England by the Pound*.

**WOODS:** Oh yeah, absolutely.

**BIRZER:** Those to me are the classic, absolute classic prog albums of that era.

**WOODS:** So let's make sure everybody hears this, so they can take notes. Close to the Edge by Yes, Genesis Selling England by the Pound—which grabs you from the first. That album absolutely grabs you. By the way, Close to the Edge I think is one of those rare albums—well, maybe not totally rare—for which the live versions of the songs are much better than the studio versions. I'd much rather have people hear the live.

**BIRZER:** Yes, absolutely. Like on Yessongs.

**WOODS:** Or even into the 1990s they were blowing the roof off the place with those songs. Still, I don't care what version you have; the songs are great.

I gave a speech in Philadelphia once, and the guy who introduced me said: if you had your choice, what song would you want to walk out to if you're being introduced? I told him "Siberian Khatru." Darn it if he didn't dig that song out.

**BIRZER:** [laughter]

[time 00:13:40]

**WOODS:** All right, what else?

**BIRZER:** That's great. Those would be from the early 1970s. In the 1980s I would say Talk Talk's either *The Colour of Spring* or *Spirit of Eden*; those would be for me the definitive albums at that time. Just brilliant in all kinds of ways. Then here we are now at this incredible revival of prog over the last 20 years. A lot of people are calling this the third wave, and that I think is probably true, but just incredible stuff as well. I know you haven't kept up as much with some of the more recent things, but there's some really good stuff coming out. Things especially out of England and Sweden right now.

**WOODS:** Let me jump in on that, because I want to give you a sense of where I am so you can make recommendations for me. For a long time, I got all the Yes albums. I got all the Jethro Tull albums. I got all the Pink Floyd albums. I got all the Genesis albums, all that. And then I kind of felt like that's it. There's isn't any more music that's going to appeal to me. Then one day I'm at a Yes concert with my wife. This was probably about ten years ago. And the opener was a group with the bizarre name Porcupine Tree. They were promoting their *In Absentia* album, which is extremely disturbing, and the images on the screen are disturbing. What a contrast between them and the elf-like Jon Anderson. Everything for him is "we're all one." Whereas this album is about serial killers. I was just appalled. I thought, who are these jerks ruining my spiritual experience at the Yes concert?

But darn it, I could not get these people out of my head. I went to iTunes, I got their album. I started listening, and I thought wait a minute, there's somebody producing interesting music in this day and age. I refuse to believe it. So since then, I discovered Dream Theater. Though I found the only album I've been able to get into is *Images and Words*.

I want to know: if I am attracted to that kind of thing, tell me in 2014 what awaits me? You guys over at Progarchy had a great review of all of what you said is the wonderful music that came out in 2013. I don't know any of this stuff. I didn't buy anything in 2013.

**BIRZER:** One of the great things that's going on right now, Tom, is that you've got all these bands of guys who are in their 40s and 50s, and they grew up on the same things we did. So they've got this incredible background, and as you know one of the nice things about progressive rock is it always honors those who came before it. It's a really important part of it that they can show a lineage. We come from here or there. We see these as influences. And so you've got these incredible musicians who are also very good lyricists. And I think that in some ways, and I realize this might anger some of the older listeners—and I've angered

people who are prog people before with this—some of the things that are going on right now are better than anything that was done by Emerson, Lake, and Palmer or even Jethro Tull or Yes. And it's not because necessarily what they're doing is so original. It's more that they have that to build upon, and they're using that as "here's our common language," and we're going to move forward from here.

There are a couple of American bands that are very good. One, in particular, out of Tennessee, Glass Hammer, is fantastic. More in the kind of ELP style, and the guy who runs it, Steve Babb, is one of two actually who've run this. The band's been around for 20 years or longer. They would be directly in line with you and me Tom in terms of our worldview as well. They're straight down the line. Really, really solid guys in all kinds of ways. Just great guys. Then in England right now my favorite band, which is just spectacular, is a group called Big, Big Train. They've also been around for about 20 years. Greg Spawton and Andy Poole, and they've also been around for about 20 years.

Greg Spawton and Andy Poole are really the guys who have been doing this for—I think their first album came out in maybe '92 or '93. What they do so beautifully is they really look—their music almost always deals with either late nineteenth-century or early twentieth-century England and a kind of real nobility of the entrepreneurial spirit. great look at sports, very interesting, but their characters, the people they sing about, are just so real. And just really stunning stuff, so I love what they're doing. And the other group that I think is really good especially right now is a group called The Tangents. The guy who runs that Andy Tillison is hilarious. I think he just turned 54, and he's an old leftie. But his leftism is pretty wonderful in terms of its great cultural criticism. It's hard to listen to him without agreeing with what he's saying. He likes to call himself—he says his band is the evil twin of Big, Big Train. Big, Big Train, these are the nice guys, and he's the kind of evil elfish guy. But just incredible lyrics as well as really, really good, interesting music. Those three bands, and there are a lot more, but those are the three I'd recommend right away, Tom.

**WOODS:** Well, I'm going to check them out for sure. I want to add something that I like about a group like Jethro Tull and also Porcupine Tree is that they're not like AC/DC—once you have one AC/DC album you pretty much have them all, right? You don't really feel compelled to acquire the entire catalog. But with Jethro Tull Aqualung sounds totally different from Stand Up which sounds totally different from Passion Play

**BIRZER:** That's true.

**WOODS:** —which is different from Songs from the Wood, Stormwatch, etc. It's almost like a different band each time, and with Porcupine Tree, the Stupid Dream album sounds different from Signify.

**BIRZER:** Yeah, so different.

**WOODS:** Lately, I think, the last couple of albums they got into a bit of a rut, and it's a little bit predictable. The Incident left me a little cold. The concert was great. They were as tight as could be.

**BIRZER:** It was cold. I agree. I think cold is the best way of thinking about it.

*[time 00:19:53]*

**WOODS:** I think Steven Wilson feels that way, too, which is I think why he's not in such a rush to get back with Porcupine Tree. I know you have your own views on Steven Wilson. I think it would be too inside baseball to get into them here. I've considered actually inviting him on the program, but I don't know what I'd say to him. So maybe I'd better not do that until I think of something.

**BIRZER:** I think that'd be great.

**WOODS:** It could be fun. The other guy I'm thinking of inviting on though is Steve Hogarth from Marillion. [TW note: Steve Hogarth appeared on the March 5, 2014 episode.]

**BIRZER:** Yeah.

**WOODS:** The thing that I like about Marillion is: Marillion's this group from the 1980s on—I know you know this—but for the first four albums they had one guy as the lead singer, and then he left, and they got Steve Hogarth. So then the fans divided: wait a minute, it's not real Marillion if it's not the first guy, etc. I mean, I like the first albums. I sort of prefer the first guy. But the great thing about Hogarth is there's one song that if you listen to the live performance of it—in fact, that's your homework assignment as listeners of this show. After you've gone out and bought *Going for the One* by Yes—and don't put the first song on, because you might not like it; listen to the songs I told you about—I want you to go to YouTube and listen to the live version of Marillion playing "Neverland." [TW note: the performance I like is at [TomWoods.com/Hogarth](http://TomWoods.com/Hogarth).] Of all the songs, all the live performances, all the albums that I've heard in my life, I've never seen a song that just in live performance blows me away more than that thing.

Anyway, the reason I think they would be interesting to talk to is that they really exploited the Internet early on when they couldn't justify an American tour financially. For some reason they have European fans, and didn't have enough American fans. They needed money just to get back in the studio and record an album, so they put out a note saying, hey, fans, can you help spot us a little dough so we can record an album? They raised a ton of money, and they went and did it and Hogarth was blown away. Then they raised money to help us come out there to the U.S. even though the fans knew they would then have to buy a ticket on top of the donation. He said they were all just blown away by this. That's a great story.

**BIRZER:** That is amazing. Marbles, the album where *Neverland* first appears, I think is their best album. Just a stunning piece of work in all kinds of ways. Oh, that's great, Tom. I bet he would be very interested in coming on, and I think some of the guys I mentioned too. Greg Spawton, Big, Big Train, or Andy Tillison of Tangent, because we have good conversations.

*[time 00:22:25]*

**WOODS:** I've got to spread them out, though. I can't tire the listeners.

**BIRZER:** The Tom Woods Show cannot become the Prog Rock Show, I understand.

**WOODS:** That's right. But I'm not ruling this out, because every week I can't talk about another town that bought a BearCat for their police department. At some point, you've just got to live life and enjoy what's there. You can't let the SOBs get you down, you know?

**BIRZER:** I tuned in for nullification, not Steve Howe, damn it.

**WOODS:** But you know what's funny? I was so surprised. You know what? On second thought I'd better not say this. I'll just say that when I did talk to Ian Anderson, he very freely talked about a guitarist I like a lot. I didn't bring up his name. Ian just said, "You know, there are some players who just play to show off, and that annoys me. They're not playing for the music. They're playing to show hey, look how fast I am." So off the air I'll tell you who that was. But I was shocked to hear him say that.

**BIRZER:** I believe it.

**WOODS:** You've got this great website Progarchy.com. It's like a blog-style thing. Well who's blogging over there, and why should I care about these people's opinions?

**BIRZER:** This is something we started about a year and a half ago—and Tom, I realize you're incredibly busy, but anytime you want to join in, you are more than welcome to. This was founded by Carl Olson.

**WOODS:** From Ignatius Press?

**BIRZER:** At Ignatius, yeah. And Chris Morrissey, who's a philosopher in Canada, he's up at British Columbia. A very good friend of mine, in fact one of my college roommates—I don't know if you knew this, Tom, but Jim Otteson [TW note: a well-regarded Adam Smith scholar] was my college roommate at Adam Smith College. Another one is Kevin McCormick, who's a professional classical guitarist but also really loves progressive rock. So the four of us started this just a year and a half ago, and we kind of felt when we first started it we thought we were just going to focus on North American progressive acts, but we realized that actually we were interested in more than that. I think the people who come and read us are as well. We're pretty divided. Almost half our readers are British, and the other half are either Canadian or from the United States. And then we get a smattering all over the world. Anybody's welcome, and we follow a lot, especially Scandinavian prog with the Flower Kings and some other bands. We do a lot with that. So it's been a lot of fun. We do try and stay away, and of course, you know I write for other things, like Catholic Vote and The Imaginative Conservative. But we do try very hard to stay away from politics and religion. Unless, of course, it comes up in the lyrics. We've got a number of people from Sweden and the UK who contribute who are editors as well, and I've never even asked what their views are.

**WOODS:** I don't even want to know. Half the time I don't even want to know. Let's just have some fun. Have you approached any of the acts you follow and chronicle there and asked for an interview for the site?

**BIRZER:** Oh yeah, this is one great thing about the prog movement as well. I think almost everyone, Steven Wilson's a very obvious exception to that. But almost everyone in the movement who's a musician, first of all they're smart guys. Very few people who listen to progressive rock are not going to be smart, and they're also intense guys. It's not a style of music you get into unless you have a fairly intense personality. These guys are very interesting. They do all kinds of things outside of music which they bring into the music as well, which makes them even more interesting. They're often very entrepreneurial like Marillion, so they want to meet the people who are listening to their music. It's great. I can write these famous people. They write me right back like, "Hey, Brad, let's talk."

**WOODS:** That's awesome.

**BIRZER:** It is awesome. So that's a lot of fun. I mean, of course, a lot of these guys are guys I've grown up with, at least in my mind. They're always out there. So that's been pretty neat to have contact with a lot of these people. John McLaughlin, some pretty famous jazz people, too, have gotten a hold of it. It really does mean a lot.

**WOODS:** Well, Ian Anderson—I'm sorry; I'm not trying to hold over your head that I met Ian Anderson and you didn't—but in our little chat he mentioned that he has a new album coming out in 2014 he hopes around Easter time. So here he is in 2014—the staying power of these guys is unbelievable. Their first album came out I think in 1968. That is so fantastic, and his flute playing is better than ever, even though, unfortunately, his voice is shot.

**BIRZER:** Yeah, well, that's pretty understandable. Is it going to be a solo album?

**WOODS:** Yeah, it's a solo album. I don't really know what the state of things is between him and Martin Barre, who's been really the only other member of the band who at this point would still be around and interested. I think it may have been an unpleasant parting of the ways. Somebody on Twitter called me on this and said, hey, Woods, you turned into a blubbery fanboy when you talked to Ian Anderson; you didn't ask him the tough question of what he did to Martin Barre. And I said, "Nobody's perfect."

**BIRZER:** No, that's right. There's certain things that are better not to bring up.

**WOODS:** You know what? It's really none of my business when it gets right down to it what his professional dealings are.

**BIRZER:** You had him on the show?

**WOODS:** I saw him in person, because I got backstage passes because of a nice review I had given. And then I actually had a whole episode of the show with him as the guest, yeah.

**BIRZER:** Okay, I need to get that.

**WOODS:** I put it on YouTube, so the YouTube dispenses with my opening banter and everything. Goes right to me talking with Ian. And by the way, this is the third show of the podcast.

**BIRZER:** That's fantastic.

**WOODS:** So the audio quality is still kind of low, and it sounds kind of like I'm speaking through a transistor radio. That gives you the raw Tom Woods Show experience.

**BIRZER:** That's great.

*[end of interview 00:29:00]*