

Prog Rock of Epic Ambition

BY JIM FUSILLI

"Insurgentes" (K-Scope) by Porcupine Tree's Steve Wilson connects the dots between progressive rock, industrial noise and ambient soundscapes, resulting in majestic new music that's thoroughly of the moment yet unabashedly proud of its roots. Featuring Mr. Wilson's voice and guitar, Tony Levin of King Crimson on bass, Jordan Rudess of Dream Theater on piano, Gavin Harris of Porcupine Tree on drums, as well as a host of international avant-garde musicians, "Insurgentes" has a scope and intensity that reflect Mr. Wilson's out-sized musical ambitions.

As the 31-year-old Mr. Wilson reminded me when we spoke by phone last month, contemporary bands like Radiohead, Nine Inch Nails, Mars Volta and Flaming Lips embrace experimental and progressive rock. But, he said, "There really was a period there when ambition and experimentation were dirty words. Art rock had a negative connotation. I always thought that music that aspires to be pretentious was valuable."

As a teen, Mr. Wilson couldn't find musicians in and around Hertfordshire, England, who shared his opinion. "The people I knew wanted to be U2 or Simple Minds. Then it was Nirvana and Soundgarden," he said. "I wanted to make epic records."

His influences were 1970s acts—such as Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, Mike Oldfield, Yes and King Crimson—that found streams of influence in classical music, the Beatles, Frank Zappa, orchestral jazz, soundscapes and elsewhere. "The fear of being pretentious wasn't there with them," he said. "Smashing ideas of genre—you have to risk being labeled pretentious or overly ambitious."

He faced another handicap as a young musician: Back then, he couldn't play guitar very well. But his father, Mike, an engineer, built him a multi-track tape machine that allowed him to experiment with sound technology while he was finding his instrumental voice.

"My dad had to figure out how to make these things like synthesizers, vocoders and multitracking equipment. It was a real privilege for me to have that kind of education. Since no one wanted to make the kind of records I wanted to make, my passion was for developing expertise to make them myself," he said. "My interest wasn't in performing. I

wanted to be the person in control."

In the late 1980s, he began recording by himself under the name Porcupine Tree, overdubbing the instruments while insisting to anyone who cared that the music was played by a group for which he created a fictional biography and discography. In 1991, Mr. Wilson released his first full album as Porcupine Tree, "On the Sunday of Life," a blend of progressive rock, pop and ambient music. Two years later, he released "Up the Downstair," which was hailed as a psychedelic masterpiece. When fans demanded to see Porcupine Tree in concert, Mr. Wilson put together a touring band of like-minded musicians. Since then, seven full-band Porcupine Tree albums have appeared and guests have included guitarists Robert Fripp and Adrian Belew of King Crimson, both influ-

off among his recorded work. "Salvaging" is awash with layered guitars until the arrival of a gorgeous orchestral interlude that's too rich to be called ambient music. With this playing and writing, Mr. Wilson meets the challenge of the talented international cast and prog-rock veterans.

Mr. Wilson has a quarrel with the way music is distributed and listened to these days. He scorns what he calls "the playlist mentality" that encourages the perception that an album is a series of songs rather than a cohesive work. To combat the disassembling of "Insurgentes," he divided each track into short snippets. The cuts aren't audible when you listen, but you can't put an entire song into shuffle mode on an MP3 player.



Porcupine Tree's Steve Wilson.

ences on Mr. Wilson's music.

Though he remains a member of several groups, including Porcupine Tree, Bass Communion and his long-running project No-Man, Mr. Wilson decided to record "Insurgentes" under his own name. He said it encapsulates his growth as a musician, composer and producer.

"For the first time, I was able to create a complete picture," he said. "Five or 10 years ago, I wouldn't have been able to pull together all the eclecticism. It would've been beyond me. When I was writing these songs, I thought I was doing things off the wall. But my friends said, 'No, it sounds like you.'"

"Insurgentes" opens with its most accessible number, "Harmony Korine," which finds a midpoint between Pink Floyd and Radiohead, while "Abandoner" sounds like it was culled from Thom Yorke's solo work until guitarist Sand Snowman enters with a twinkling countermelody. Clodagh Simonds sings along during the interludes in the tumult of "Significant Other." "Veneno Para las Hadas" unfolds like a Pink Floyd number, and the title track, featuring Michio Vagi on koto, is a stirring piano ballad that Mr. Wilson concedes is a one-

"An album isn't made to be listened to in bits and pieces," he said. "You don't do that with 'Sgt. Pepper' or 'Pet Sounds.' One of the advantages of being underground like I am is that my fans are passionate. The majority listen to my work as a whole. Most people who listened to Zappa were passionate. I have a similar situation."

By its grand, demanding nature, Mr. Wilson's school of prog rock has a limited audience in an era when music can be accessed so effortlessly and continually that contemplation seems an anachronism. But rock fans would do well to try Mr. Wilson's work, which is fiery, intelligent and satisfying.

"When I'm making music, I don't think it's inaccessible," he said. "There are accessible moments if they have the patience. It's not going to reach a critical mass. People aren't as focused as they used to be. Maybe in the '70s..."

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