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Fantasisists

How does fairy-tale rock sound in the third millennium? By Jim Irvin.

AS THE '70s progressed, naivety drained out of pop music. The 1973 winter of discontent coincided with the peak of escapist prog rock, but the arrival of punk indicated that a more pragmatic, far less fanciful era was dawning. No one told **Genesis** though. They were still writing songs called All In A Mouse's Night in 1976. *Wind And Wuthering* was their final prog hurrah, as muted, meandering and romantic as its misty grey sleeve artwork, and something of a letdown after *A Trick Of The Tail* (1976), their post-Gabriel, pre-pop *tour de force* with the Dickensian storybook vibe, packed with rousing melody and the nervy feel of a band uncertain if it can survive the departure of a totemic singer. They went from strength to strength commercially, but the storytelling aspect of their work was doomed by the time of... *And Then There Were Three* (1978). These records plus the more energised *Duke* (1980) and the determinedly modernistic *Abacab* (1981) are out again on robustly remastered DVD-Audio (Virgin/EMI) with excellent visual extras, including the In Concert movie and the rarely seen Three Dates With... TV documentary and *Trick Of The Tail* videos.

Less happy, and less successful, while in a state of flux were **Stackridge**, struggling to shake off their whimsical instincts and gain some gravitas on their 1974 album *Extravaganza* (Angel Air), and ending up with a bizarre collision of Zappa-like instrumentals, English cobblers (Benjamin's Giant Onion, anyone?) and – what else? – a cover of a song about earthworms. It's the most eloquent example of how an engaging live band completely lost the plot whenever they entered a studio, and an aesthetic that seems positively medieval today.

I'm fascinated by how the public's once voracious appetite for narrative, nonsense and fairy-tale rock vanished so completely from the mainstream and wonder whether it could ever return. Having said that, the enormous success of **The Alan Parsons Project's** 'you concept, I'll noodle' albums puzzled me even at the time. Hearing a new batch of reissues – *Tales Of Mystery And Imagination*, *I Robot*, *Eye In The Sky* and *Vulture Culture* (Universal) – flabby with synthy instrumental passages and guest vocalists like Chris Rainbow, Steve Harley and Eric Stewart who root the music firmly in its time, I doubt they'll find many takers today, even among furtive appreciators of soft-rock, outside people who already love them and fancy the generous portions of unreleased extras. This curious act, named after a former engineer for Pink Floyd and largely conceived by their manager, probably owe their huge success as much to American radio formatting of the time as to the quality of their material, which seems, at best, rather nebulous.

