

Intensity Rescues Progressive Rock From Itself

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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Progressive rock has never been cool. It has sometimes been respected, but those periods have been fleeting and hastily apologized for. The genre had many practitioners in the early 1970s, bands unafraid of releasing 30-minute pieces (they can't properly be called songs) rife with self-indulgence and pomposity. Most acts faded away, while a few (such as Yes and Rush) began shedding most of the affectations of prog rock and recording albums more palatable to the buying public.

And then there is King Crimson, a band that was disbanded twice (in the mid-'70s and -'80s) in its 30-year-plus history and whose family tree is hysterically convoluted; the only constant has been the cerebral wanker Robert Fripp.

It sounds to me, on the evidence of its new record, that the local group INTENSITY! (emphasis given) worships Fripp. The improvisational outfit's new full-length, two-song album is called *The Stone of Madness*, and that information alone should scare off a good many people.

That's a shame, because as much as the title borrows from H.P. Lovecraft (who wrote "At the Mountains of Madness" and inspired such misspelled art-metal symphonies as Metallica's "The Call of Ktulu"), and as much as the sound recalls Crimson's artful opuses, INTENSITY! has created a subdued, atmospheric record that successfully blends experimental jazz and rock.

The album opens with about 28 minutes of "Fermi's Paradox" and concludes with the relative brevity (about 20 minutes) of "The Extraction of the Stone of Madness."

Personally, I like the first track a lot, while the second left me wanting. But fans of King Crimson's multi-part "Larks' Tongue in Aspic" or that band's early-'90s classic *Thrak* will appreciate *The Stone of Madness* for its nontraditional instrumentation (and its skill with disguising instruments), its willingness to stretch boundaries, and its nicely layered textures.

INTENSITY! is hardly a clone, though. It draws just as heavily from ambient music and Grateful Dead spaciness, and for that reason you'd be wise not to hope for a quick reward. The music drifts as much as it drives, and while it seems to be headed somewhere, it's not getting there anytime soon. (A demo copy of the record warns, threatens, and promises, "Remember: This is improvised in real time, recorded, and mixed." Duly noted.)

INTENSITY! has been around as a collective since the 1970s, and in the mid-'90s solidified into a fixed-lineup outfit. The band members are clearly comfortable with one another, because the music never sounds like it's being made up, and they never intrude on each other.

All the players – Jim McFarlen, Pat Ross, Steve Rose, Butch Karn, and Sergei Czerewko – play multiple instruments, but the sound is dominated by mutated string instruments (à la Fripp) and percussion.

And yes, there's a certain snob element involved, a refusal to bow to audience expectations or musical strictures. Many people won't have the patience to get it, but INTENSITY! has plenty to offer to those who don't think "progressive" is a bad word.

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The Stone of Madness is or will soon be available at Co-op stores in Moline and Rock Island. INTENSITY! will be performing at Rock Island Rapids on November 10 as part of the Gallery Hop.