



Episode 310-The Year in Progressive Rock

Guest: Brad Birzer

December 22, 2014

WOODS: I was going back and looking over the whole year, 2014, all the episodes I did. I actually created a list of them—tomwoods.com/episodes. And you and I talked about Russell Kirk last year, and we talked about music—I think it was five days into the new year, and the official title of that episode is The Episode of the Year. Five days in I knew this was going to be the episode of the year. So I thought how totally over-the-top that was, let's close out the year. I've got one more episode tomorrow until I go on my hiatus until January 5th, but I thought let's bring Brad on here, and let's have another episode of the year.

BIRZER: Well, if we can't be over the top with prog rock, we're in big trouble.

WOODS: Darn right, and that's what it's all about. Right?

BIRZER: That's right. What would Russell Kirk say?

WOODS: (laughs) Exactly, actually, you know what? I'm a little terrified to know what he might say about this particular topic. Although, I have a funny feeling that if you and I were sitting around with him, we might be able to bring him around.

BIRZER: Well, I don't know what Russell Kirk would say. I know that he was not a fan of his daughters having any kind of rock albums at all. He famously threw a Metallica album in the fire.

WOODS: Oh, that's funny. That's funny.

BIRZER: But I could picture him. I think he would be a great keyboardist for a prog band.

WOODS: (laughs) You're darn right. All right, what I want to do on this particular episode is to have you take me and the listeners I suppose, but mostly me, I just want to know what was some of the music that came out in 2014 that I missed that's worth listening to? And I'll tell you: I missed everything. Just so that you know going into this I missed it all. I was basically trying to catch up on music from previous years. The only album I bought this year was *Homo*

Erraticus by Ian Anderson. I bought that because it's Ian Anderson and I love him, and I had him as a guest on the show, and I'll link to that in the show notes. The show notes for this episode—very important by the way, everybody; you get links to every piece of music mentioned—will be linked at TomWoods.com/310 because this is episode 310. But I found, Brad, I found it hard to get into that album. Maybe I need to revisit it. I find that in his more recent work, Ian just doesn't have those catchy melodies, those interesting hooks that he used to have. I wasn't drawn in, and what didn't help was I was just getting into *English Electric* by Big Big Train at the same time, and that was just so much more compelling on every level that maybe I just wasn't fair to Ian.

BIRZER: Well, no, I am the same way. It didn't even make my top 20 list. As I tried to narrow things down, of course, it's a great album in so many ways. Some of the people I have written with at Progarchy have really, really praised it. And they are people I respect a lot, but for me, I am exactly with you, Tom. There just weren't enough hooks. It's almost too progressive and too experimental without it ever kind of pulling things together and telling a coherent story, and that is what I think makes something such as *Thick as a Brick* or *Thick as a Brick 2* so compelling, *Aqualung*, and that just doesn't seem to be there on the new album, but it's one of those, and I don't know if you do this, Tom. It's one of those that when I got it, I put it aside, and I thought, okay, at some point I want to give this more time, and I just haven't had a chance to do that. There are too many other things I have been focusing on.

WOODS: Yeah, exactly. I bought the electronic version, but I think it comes with an electronic version of the huge booklet that he produced, and that seems great because the idea of the album is it's an epic tale of the history of England, basically—very, very interesting, but as you say, in this day and age, especially, there's so much else that I could be listening to that even Ian Anderson, who has basically produced the soundtrack of my life from the time I was 14 on, it's hard for me to make the time even for him.

BIRZER: Yeah, well, and of course, we do so many other things, too. Music just has to be a hobby more than a profession, obviously. But yeah, you've got to pick and choose, and hopefully we can come back at some point to Anderson and find something great in that new album. I am sure there are good things.

WOODS: No doubt. No doubt.

BIRZER: And I think he—I love the concept. The idea of an erratic man and trying to figure out all the different types of man, and it really is kind of an anti-ideological look at the complexity of man. So there are great things about it definitely.

WOODS: Oh, yeah, there's no question about it, and I am told that it lent itself to a great concert—that it was performed live very, very well. But the difference is when *Thick as a Brick 2*

came out, and I didn't know if he was ever going to make it to the Kansas City area, I got on a plane and flew to Chicago to see him there because I wanted to hear that performance. Plus, I wanted to hear all of the original *Thick as a Brick* performed. And then it turns out the next year he came to Kansas City anyway. But I have no regrets. Whereas this time I didn't feel like I've got to hop on a plane and go hear this. So, it's too bad.

Now, I shared an email I got from one of the supporting listeners of the show who make the show possible, and this was somebody—I won't say her name because I haven't gotten permission—she's in New Hampshire, she's a supporter of the show, and she says that she's never really gotten into progressive music before and she said: forgive me, but I think of music as something to put on in the background. And so I am not sure this is the type of music for that, but I was making an offer that if you're at a particular support level of the show—supportinglisteners.com, by the way—I will send you the double album of Big Big Train *English Electric Full Power* because you've got to get the hard copy here because it comes with this beautiful booklet with the lyrics, with the explanations of the songs. I just cherish this thing. So it turns out I ordered the entire stock they had on Amazon to give to people, so they were out of—you get that awful skull and crossbones thing basically of “temporarily out of stock,” which means maybe we'll never have it. I bought the whole stock. So I ended up tweeting Greg Spawton: Greg, you've got to replenish the supply over at Amazon! Well, she got it, and I said I want you to start off with these few songs and just listen to them carefully. She wrote back and said, boy, that guy has got such a voice. What do I listen to next? I'm going to send her on a completely different path. I'm going to send her to *Going for the One* by Yes.

BIRZER: Oh, that's great. That's a great album.

WOODS: Of course I welcome your suggestions. But how about from 2014 in particular? I am telling my listeners all the time: you've got to get *English Electric* by Big Big Train. You just have to. And I know that Big Big Train sounds like a hip-hop group. You've got to take my word for it. They are the best of the best. You are going to say to yourselves: I thought the show was making me a better person on an intellectual level, but spiritually, it's making me a better person because of this music. What happened, though? Tell me what happened in 2014?

BIRZER: Well, just a quick note on that, Tom. I was so glad you forwarded that note. I forwarded it on to Greg as well.

WOODS: Oh, wonderful!

BIRZER: As far as I know, Greg's favorite album is *Going for the One*.

WOODS: Oh, that's incredible.

BIRZER: Yeah, it's either that or it's an early Genesis album.

WOODS: Okay, well, you can't go wrong.

BIRZER: That's right, so it's one of the two, but I know for a fact that's his favorite Yes album. So that's a great joy, and David Longdon, the vocalist for Big Big Train, of course, just has I think the best voice in rock right now.

WOODS: He is such an incredible singer, and it is an outrage, I am telling you people listening right now it is an outrage that these people aren't a household name and that he isn't better known. What a voice this guy has. It just won't quit. And he's not ridiculously over-the-top with it.

BIRZER: Oh, not at all.

WOODS: He's so disciplined with it. He uses it just the way it should be used. As I say, I'm just so drawn to these guys.

BIRZER: Yeah, me too, Tom, and I think David just—he has a perfect idea—he has a perfect understanding of knowing exactly what a lyric means and what should be emphasized, and he's a real writer. He and Greg are both serious writers.

WOODS: Oh, they are beautiful things.

BIRZER: They're not—hey, baby, baby.

WOODS: No, that's right.

BIRZER: It's just poetry.

WOODS: Yeah, such beautiful things about England and about localism and neighborhoods and flesh-and-blood relationships, and then it turns out I started to get into *The Underfall Yard*, the album right before this one, and there are a couple of songs—

BIRZER: They are just as good.

WOODS: Yeah, where Greg Spawton is talking about his complex relationship with his recently deceased father. I mean, just blowing me away on every level. All right, but listen, we could talk about this forever, and I am in your debt on this because you introduced me to them on this show.

BIRZER: (laughs) Well, that's great, Tom. That means a lot. So for 2014, there was just so much. Some of the other prog artists were kind of overwhelmed—how do we deal with so much coming out this year—far more than 2013, 2012, 2010, 2009. We really hit something different

here in 2014. So how do we even narrow down what came out. I have tried, and I have this on our website, Tom, at progarchy.com. I have listed what I think are the best eight albums of the year, and I know eight is an odd number, but it was really—it was hard just to break down. There were probably 30 or 40 really good releases this year, and with our move to Colorado, I was having a difficult time keeping up, and so were the other prog artists. So I just tried to narrow it down to eight, and what I found, Tom, and this is just—I am still kind of working through this—but 2014 seems to be a very different year in terms of prog than the previous years.

Almost everything—and Andy Tillison of *The Tangent* has argued that we really started a new phase of prog rock—what he called the third wave—around 1994, and I think that's probably true with Marillion, the Flower Kings, a number of other groups—Spock's Beard—that were really coming out at that time. But I also think that in 2014, I think we've entered maybe a fourth wave, and the reason I say that is because the music that came out this year tended to be not necessarily instantly recognizable as prog. A part of that is probably because there is so much, but there is a lot that's coming out that's very diverse, very interesting. It's extremely intense, and it is progressive in the sense that I think people are really exploring new sounds in ways that before maybe they were trying to better Genesis, and that doesn't seem to be the case now.

So, Tom, my top eight, and the first seven are in no order, and stop me any time here. The best of the, again, top seven, and then the number one—so I guess we'd say, what? Eight through number two. I would put at the very beginning of this list a Polish band who is probably even less known in America than Big Big Train, and this is a band called Newspaperflyhunting—a strange—it's a real name.

WOODS: The only Polish band I know is Riverside.

BIRZER: Yeah, and these are nothing like Riverside, and yet they are all—and I've only gotten to know them a little bit—they are all scholars at the University of Warsaw.

WOODS: Awesome!

BIRZER: Now, this is a hobby for them, and I don't know their politics, but they're certainly not crazy.

WOODS: Okay, that's good.

BIRZER: They are probably more or less on our side of things. But what they've done, and I don't know if you remember this, Tom; you're a little younger than I am. But right around the turn of—the move from 1980s into the 1990s—there was a huge movement—a kind of a

revival of The Doors and kind of neo-psychedelic movement, and I think what these guys in Poland have done is they have mixed—if you could imagine a super-progressive version of The Doors with really intelligent lyrics, that would be this band. In some ways I think they've done the most interesting stuff of the whole year not necessarily in creating beauty, but in doing some new things. So, again, Newspaperflyhunting—all one word—crazy name. So many prog band names are.

WOODS: What's the name of the album?

BIRZER: The name of the album, which fits perfectly with the name, is called *Iceberg Soul*, and it's a very introspective kind of existential—and that's another thing I've noticed. Almost everything this year has been very existential in the way—kind of in the old Pink Floyd kind of way. Not navel gazing, but definitely existential—prominent questions: What's man? How does man get along with other men? And so forth. So, yeah, Newspaperflyhunting and the name of the album is *Iceberg Soul*—so well worth owning.

WOODS: Okay, now, before we go to the next one, is the Pink Floyd album in your list?

BIRZER: It's not. No, I didn't put it in the top eight, but I think it's a great album.

WOODS: Yeah, can you say something about it even though it's not in the list? I haven't heard it yet so I can't comment, but what I have heard are a lot of the complaints and that it's just leftover stuff. Or when I hear that something is—and I know you've used this word, Brad—atmospheric, I take that to mean droning and boring. So help me out of this.

BIRZER: Well, I kind of like droning and boring. It depends on how it resolves.

WOODS: (laughs)

BIRZER: I like walls of noise, especially when I can put my headphones on. The new Pink Floyd I think is very good. They are always—ever since Roger Waters has left there is always the complaint, well, it's not really Pink Floyd.

WOODS: Yeah, right.

BIRZER: But I just don't find that a compelling argument. Roger Waters was fantastic, but of course, you always want to commit suicide after listening to his albums, too. So I think there's something Gilmour brings, a real joy, that was not really there, not really even close to being there in the old Pink Floyd, and this album—which they say is their final album, and I believe that; they haven't had one for 20 years—is a sequel to what they did in 1994, which was a huge hit at the time.

WOODS: Which was the better of the two albums they did.

BIRZER: Oh, absolutely. *Division Bell* was, I thought, very good. But this is even better, I think, and in large part because there's no ego. This is Pink Floyd honoring Rick Wright, who has passed away—their keyboardist. And what they did—the reason they didn't write new music is because they wanted him to be a part of the album, and this is all stuff they recorded with him, and now what they've done is they've gone back and augmented it with new playing—new techniques—20 years—technology advances, and I think it's a gorgeous tribute to their keyboardist. So is it radically innovative? Not at all. Is it a statement of beauty and friendship? Absolutely. So if you go for that, it gets high marks from me—very high marks.

WOODS: I appreciate that. See, I always felt like Gilmour, who could make a decent solo album—it's not going to be super-innovative or anything, but he can make a decent solo album—I felt like when he felt that he now was the driving force of Pink Floyd, I felt like he was trying too hard. He was thinking, well, I can't just make a David Gilmour solo album, so it has to start off with three minutes of weirdness. It became formulaic, you know? And then it has to be—and it was just too much of “I have to make a Pink Floyd album.” Whereas when they were all together I think it was just let's make some music.

BIRZER: Right, no, I think that's an absolutely fair statement. What I don't get in this new album is that it has to be a Pink Floyd album. I think it has to be a tribute to Rick Wright.

WOODS: Yeah, and that's very sweet. Yeah, yeah, yeah—that's very good. Okay, go ahead.

BIRZER: The next album is from an English band, and it's actually a double album. They released one and then the other, and the band—I don't even know how to pronounce it though I've gotten to know one of the guys. It's just two guys named Dave, and I've gotten to know one of the Daves pretty well online. The name of the band is called Salander. And their two albums are called *Crash Course for Dessert* and *STENDEC*. Those are the two albums, and what I really like about them. First of all, you can tell these guys are probably in their 50s from what I know, and they have been listening forever, and I think they both have businesses on the side. They are entrepreneurs. This is just their hobby. But they've done in kind of pulling together almost 40 years of prog is they have made two albums, or one album, that comes in two different packages. They have made an album that is eclectic as you can possibly imagine. So they go from kind of a Pink Floyd atmospheric to, and it's not cheesy at all, they go to kind of a Bryan Ferry, Roxy Music glam, and then suddenly you're in a dance studio—in an actual dance—decadent place disco. And then it switches again in a Moody Blues tune, and it's amazing the flow of it just to go from one genre to another, and yet it ties altogether and really beautifully done. These guys clearly are audiophiles. They have just engineered a great thing—and they are also great lyricists, again, very poetic, and no one's heard of them, but still very, very good—extremely good.

WOODS: Okay, let me mention in between here that I went to see Yes this year, and it's the second time I've seen them without Jon Anderson, and they were better this time than they were with the earlier vocalist, I thought. But to me, having been a veteran of dozens of shows with Jon Anderson, I am not just grouching that the original guy isn't there. It's that he brought to it a whole other dimension. I don't know how to describe it. Jon Davison does a creditable job, and he has the pipes, and he's very likeable, and he's a humble guy. There's a lot to like there. The new music struck me as inoffensive, but my gosh, for Yes to strive for inoffensive is not good, but the reason I bring them up is that their opening band was a band I've heard mentioned in progressive circles for some time. It was Syd Arthur.

BIRZER: Okay, sure.

WOODS: Now, when they played, though—unfortunately this happens with a lot of opening acts—they were so loud that everything got lost in the mix. It was just a cacophony. I couldn't make anything out of it. And it's too bad because I think they're decent. Are they any good?

BIRZER: I know the name, but I never delved into them.

WOODS: Oh, okay, I thought you might.

BIRZER: No, Tom, but I should definitely.

WOODS: Okay, as soon as you finish going back over that Ian Anderson album, you can look into them.

BIRZER: Yeah, I will. Syd Arthur, absolutely.

WOODS: All right, tell me your next one.

BIRZER: All right, the next album is an album that you would like very much. It comes out of a group of fans that really like Big Big Train. In fact, they met on the Big Big Train website, and it's a group called Fractal Mirror, and you may know their producer is Larry Fast, who is a very famous jazz guitarist, and it's two Dutch guys, two great guys, and an American—a really good guy from Pennsylvania, in fact, a guy that I think the world of. And he's their drummer, and they've done most of this online, and they—this is their second album—it's called *Garden of Ghosts*. So the title of the band is Fractal Mirror, and the name of the album is *Garden of Ghosts*. And, again, this is not your normal prog. I don't know if you even remember this, Tom, because I think you'd be way too young, but in the early 80s there was a pretty interesting goth band related to The Cure, but much more gothic than The Cure—a band called Bauhaus. And Love and Rockets was an offshoot of that, and they had a kind of fell—a gothic feel—but then they go into very different progressive directions and just a beautiful album, especially with

Larry Fast, this famous jazz guitarist doing so much of the engineering for it—but really great album in all kinds of ways. So it's something well worth checking out.

WOODS: I am going to listen to it, absolutely, okay, all right, give me your next one.

BIRZER: Yeah, the next band is huge, and they should be. They are not big here in the U.S., but they are huge in England, and Australia, and New England. This band is Tin Spirits, and I love this album. This is their second album, and it's called *Scorched*. And Tin Spirits is the brainchild of, again, an Austrian/English mix, but they brought into the mix the XTC guitarist, also the Big Big Train guitarist, Dave Gregory. So this beautiful guitar prog with a beat of a Tears for Fears sound, a Beatles sound, an XTC sound, but if you could take, say, XTC or the Beatles and make it really prog, that's what Tin Spirits are. And their lead singer—their first album would certainly rank as one of my ten favorite albums of all time. Their first album, which is called *Wired to Earth*, has a 14 minute song called *Broken* that's based, in terms of the music, it's based on the Allman Brothers, but the lyrics are all about almost losing a child and then basically forgiving God for all of that. I don't think they're really religious, but they have a great sense of grace and of forgiveness, and that song *Broken* from the first album, I can't make it through without tearing up. It's that powerful, and I don't cry that easily. It's a really—but this new album, *Scorched*, is a little bit poppier than the first album, but just beautiful. There's a video out called *Summer Now*, and I guarantee you if you just listen to that Tom. Just put the YouTube video *Summer Now* by Tin Spirits, you can't not be happy afterwards.

WOODS: All right, I'll embed this video. It's great to have the show notes page tomwoods.com/310. I will embed that YouTube, and I'll also embed the *English Electric Part 1*, which is on YouTube to whet people's appetites, but yeah, I'll definitely do that, and of course, I'll listen to it myself.

BIRZER: Yes, good, you know, if we had to—if you wanted to think of a Big Big Train song that it's related to, it would sound a little bit like *Hedgerow*.

WOODS: Which I think is one of the best songs ever. I just love that.

BIRZER: Yeah, just amazing. Okay, next band—a Chicago band—Fire Garden. These guys are also just incredible. Zee Baig is the leader of it. He does the most of the writing of the lyrics as well as the music. They kind of started off as a Dream Theater tribute band, but I think they are a thousand times better than Dream Theater—so a Chicago band called Fire Garden. And the name of their album, which I think fits, it's pretty heavy. Of all the albums I am listing here, this is by far the heaviest and the one that tends towards metal, but the name of the album is called *Sound of Majestic Colors*. And their leader—a Chicago guy named Zee Baig—just a great band. So if you like Dream Theater, this is better. It's a lot better.

WOODS: Let me tell you. I almost posted this on your Facebook the other day, but no kidding, I went into the local, mainstream grocery store the other day, and in the grocery store I hear *Surrounded* by Dream Theater from the *Images and Words* album. It was 1:00 in the afternoon, so it's all old ladies shopping, and I thought to myself: I am the only person who recognizes the significance of what's happening right now.

BIRZER: (laughs) That's great.

WOODS: Because what is the explanation?

BIRZER: It wasn't a Muzak version?

WOODS: No, it was the actual song. So there's got to be somebody on the inside at Dillon's. I don't know what else to say.

BIRZER: I just found out yesterday, Tom, you'll get a kick out of this, that someone has put out a lullaby album of Rush songs. (laughs) I actually listened to it on Amazon yesterday. It's not bad.

WOODS: That's funny.

BIRZER: Imagine mixing Veggie Tales and Baby Mozart with Rush.

WOODS: I was going to say I could imagine Jon Anderson being kind of lullabyish, right? But I wouldn't think of Geddy Lee in that way.

BIRZER: Well, the opening song is *2112* (laughs).

WOODS: (laughs)

BIRZER: And it's all done with Baby Mozart instrumentation. It's really pretty funny.

WOODS: I am going to lull you to sleep with this dystopian tale.

BIRZER: Yeah, exactly. (laughs)

WOODS: (laughs)

BIRZER: What a great way to indoctrinate the children. Oh, okay. I've got three left.

WOODS: Okay.

BIRZER: So my third from the end, but again, in no order, is another Englishman. I think this guy is an incredible musician, a great bard. And I mean that in the best sense. He's got a traditional bardic sense, and he loves commenting on social things, on cultural criticism. I don't know if he would agree with us, Tom, on politics, but he certainly has a very insightful view on the world.

His name is John Bassett, and he's got—his main band is a bizarre name—King Bathmat. But this year he actually released two albums, and they really fit perfectly together. The first album—so John Bassett—the first album is called *Unearth*. And I am not even sure how we would describe it—maybe a more progressive, harder version of Donovan from the late '60s.

WOODS: Wow! Okay.

BIRZER: It's got a bit of a psychedelic feel, but it's acoustic essentially. It's John sitting down singing to us. Telling us—criticizing TV, criticizing government, criticizing communities, and also talking about the good, the true, and the beautiful. He's got a really interesting sense about things, and so I love it. Great album—*Unearth*. On the other side, he just released about a month ago what can only be described as progressive metal. Not quite as hard as Fire Garden, but pretty hard, but it's without vocals. So what an interesting mix. You get his acoustic, psychedelic album at the beginning of the year, and at the end of the year, this very kind of gorgeous but in a strange way, this progressive metal album, and that is not under his name. He instead released it under the name Arcade Messiah. And he's been kind of laughing on Facebook. It sold better than almost all of his other albums, and here he is not singing, and he has a great voice. If you like David Longdon from Big Big Train, you're going to absolutely love John here. He's great.

WOODS: Wow! Okay.

BIRZER: Absolutely great. Okay, the second-to-last album, and again, this collection of the top seven albums before I get to number one, and this is from one of my all-time favorite guys. In fact, he's coming to Colorado at the end of February to lecture and perform at CU. This is the lead singer and the founder of The Tangent—Andy Tillison—great guy. And this year he didn't release a Tangent album, which is his—they are big in England—not as well-known here in the U.S. as they should be. But he released what could only be called a jazz fusion, progressive rock, progressive jazz album under the name The Andy Tillison Multiplex, and the name of the album is *The Electric Sinfonia Number 2*. And it feels a lot like an old Weather Report album—a lot of things that were released in the early '70s. But if we look at some of these other albums we've been talking about—the kind of the progressive rock, the heavy metal, the pop—this would be probably one of the best jazz albums of the last year as well as one of the best progressive rock albums. But it just defines tasteful. The entire album is not over the top. It's quite the opposite of over the top, but not droning either. It's just a kind of beautiful—it's a kind of thing you'd want to put on after dinner and with a glass of wine—just a gorgeous album. And that just came out about a month ago.

WOODS: Yeah, you mentioned him.

BIRZER: Andy Tillison Multiplex.

WOODS: You mentioned him when you were on in January because you were telling me about The Tangent.

BIRZER: I love Andy Tillison.

WOODS: You were saying he'd be a very interesting guy to talk to.

BIRZER: I can't wait to meet him in person. He is a former Labour activist in England. He now is kind of turned against all of that, and he calls himself a good-guy anarchist. So I am pretty interested—

WOODS: Well, how about that? Okay.

BIRZER: Yeah, great guy. Even if we had radically different politics, I'd still like him a lot. I think he's mischievous. He's fun. He just does some really interesting stuff, and he's one of these guys, he's a Neil Peart kind of guy: he does whatever he wants, and you've got to respect him for that.

WOODS: So what's number one?

BIRZER: All right, are you ready for this? Hopefully, I haven't been talking too long here.

WOODS: No, no, no. That's impossible, Brad—not possible.

BIRZER: Okay, well, here—this is my favorite album of the year, and I think it's truly one of the best albums of the last 20 years. Another Englishman who again, and this—this is neither here nor there in the way that I judge him, but he would be a Tom Woods fan without question. He's a self-made entrepreneur. He is a genius at watchmaking, watch repair, and watch sales. That's what he does in his real life. He has a watch business and just an incredible guy. This album is called *Capacitor*, and the name of the band is Cosmograf. This is their fifth album, and it's really just this guy. His name is Robin Armstrong. I can't even begin to describe how beautiful this album is. It is dark, but it's an album based on a story, and if you can imagine for a moment, Tom. Instead of steampunk, which of course is kind of a fad and all the rage right now in science fiction, this is what I call séance punk. It is a mixture of progressive era revivalism, but mocking it, with the possibilities of eugenics and scientific discoveries of energy that you could basically create a utopia, and Robin is—he's no utopian. Mix Arthur Conan Doyle, Ray Bradbury, and put a lot of dystopia in it. This was an incredible album. And the music is beautiful, too. I don't even know how you would describe it. It probably comes closest to middle '70s Pink Floyd, but it's so much better than that, and it goes so much beyond that. It's too dramatic for Pink Floyd. But I am sure that's where Robin takes a lot of his inspiration from, but what an incredible album. To me, *Capacitor* is a must-own. Anybody who likes Big Big Train—it's kind of the dark side of Big Big Train.

WOODS: Whoa! Okay.

BIRZER: So imagine a *Hedgerow*—here you just feel great. *Capacitor* really makes you think. It's the kind of album—it's the way you would feel after reading *Fahrenheit 451* or *Martian Chronicles*—that kind of bittersweet element to the soul. That's what Robin does with his *Cosmograf*.

WOODS: Okay, you've definitely piqued my curiosity.

BIRZER: Yeah, it's a must-own. Absolutely.

WOODS: Now, Brad, having gone through all of these, I want to ask you how you get to a point where you're able to digest so much music in the course of a year. And it's not simple music that you get into after one listen. You have to give it some attention. I myself—you know, you and I are both pretty busy. We have different types of work we do. Sometimes you're teaching, sometimes you're writing, but when I'm sitting in the office, I put music on. I can't give it my 100% attention. So it takes me longer to get into it, but what happens is after a while, let's say the most catchy parts of it begin to stand out to me, and I say, oh, you know what? I think I like track number 5, and I go back and listen to that a few times. It's very rare that I say: I've got something I am so excited about, I can't wait to listen to it; I am going to sit down and give it the attention it deserves. How are you actually going about listening to the music?

BIRZER: Well, I have been doing this, as have you, Tom, since I was a kid. I can remember the very first prog being played in my house was Jethro Tull and Yes. This would have been about 1972, when I was four. I had two older brothers. So I have been listening to it a long time. I do not, however, have a musical sense. I know what I like, but if someone starts explaining to me why they chose this time signature or not, I would be lost.

WOODS: Exactly, no idea.

BIRZER: So one of the great disadvantages I have as a reviewer is I pretty much have to lock onto the lyrics, and if I don't like the lyrics, that's the first thing for me. And if I like the lyrics, I am usually willing to listen to the music and kind of figure out how well the music fits the lyrics, and I know for many people, especially in rock, that's just completely backwards, and they could care less what the words say, and they will repeat them whether they would agree with them in real life or not, it's just that they disassociate themselves from them. I can't do that. So every time I get an album, I listen to the lyrics. First and foremost I give it a really good run through. I look at the booklet. I don't like downloading. So that's—when I review something, I love this Arcade Messiah, which is all instrumental, it's really hard for me because I know I love it, but it's hard for me to review just because I can't latch onto it. I need the words. And so, Tom, what I do—I actually am one of these very strange people. I don't—you and I both are

obsessive about writing. I really can't write without music playing, and I am able to kind of do both and digest both at the same time. I also go for an hour walk every day. I go for four miles every day regardless of weather, and I usually alternate.

So one day I listen to a new album or an album I've listened to a couple of times maybe, and the next day I listen to books on tape, and plus I have a bit of a commute into CU and back. So there's really never a moment that I don't have music playing unless I am watching a movie or something with the kids. So that's how I try and do it. Sometimes some weeks it's easier than others. Sometimes I'll go for a couple of weeks where I haven't listened to anything new. I haven't digested anything. And it has—I won't say it's taken the joy out of it. In fact, it hasn't at all, but since I've started reviewing prog, and I have been reviewing now for about five years, it definitely changes the way that I think about it. So I don't just buy an album every once in a while, and then they just delve into it. Now I am getting two or three a week that I have to kind of think about, vet, and make a decision do I want to listen to it? Do I not? And most of these guys are non-professional in the sense this not their primary job, and they take the time to send me a CD and to do so free, I feel I am obligated to at least give it some attention—as much as I can. I am sure you feel the same with books and anything else you writers write. People—you're Tom Woods. You get emails all the time I'm sure from your fans, and you don't dismiss them. You can't deal with every one of them perfectly. Certainly you're going to deal with them.

WOODS: Yeah, I do my best. These days I am just so buried with this work that I've got. But yeah, I always appreciate it. I warn people on my website that I can't guarantee I'm going to be able to respond anymore. It used to be I would at least say hello or something. Now, it's basically come down to, it's either that or I see the kids, and only at that point do I intervene and say something has to give here.

But what does it say about the music industry that what appeals to us is music by people who aren't even doing this full time?

BIRZER: That's right. This is just their love, and how interesting. And part of this, too, is you know, Tom, you're a bestselling author, you know how this works. Everything has become so decentralized over the last 20 years: book publishing, record labels. And a lot of people this year, if you look at *Classic Rock* magazine, even my friend Robin Armstrong: I just named his album the top album of the year. But he and I disagree on this. There are a lot of people who really believe rock is dead, and they are equating the death of rock with the death of record labels, and frankly, I am fine having those labels go.

WOODS: Yeah.

BIRZER: They are not promoting stuff I like. They always have promoted a kind of sameness rather than a real interest. This is one reason progressive rock is so interesting to us. It doesn't fit the mold of what Sony wants us to hear or Capitol Records or whatever it is. They are doing interesting stuff. If you get two guys like these Daves who do Salander in England, they are not going to care what anybody thinks. They are doing this because they love it.

WOODS: You know what? Let me translate this into libertarian terms.

BIRZER: Sure.

WOODS: A group like Big Big Train is like Ron Paul. Whereas what Sony is putting out is Rudy Giuliani, John McCain, and Bob Dole. And if that's what you want, then go ahead. I can't stop you. But you're depriving yourself of a source of happiness in your life, and I say that not jokingly in any way. This stuff improves my life in substantial ways. I am a happier, more contented person because it exists.

And by the way, I also listen to music when I write, as a rule, and I can even remember—and a lot of times just out of laziness—even before I would have an iPod or something, I would just listen to the same CD over and over again. I can remember what CD by and large I was listening to through a particular project like *The Politically Incorrect Guide to American History*. I was listening to an album that's not even really all that progressive, and it's not one of their best, and I am not even a huge fan of the group. It was *Two Against Nature* by Steely Dan.

BIRZER: Oh, sure.

WOODS: Because there were a few good tracks like *Jack of Speed*.

BIRZER: Oh, absolutely.

WOODS: That I liked on that album.

BIRZER: Absolutely.

WOODS: And *Gaslighting Abbie* was so disturbing I just couldn't help listening to it over and over. So when I see that book, I actually see Steely Dan, oddly enough. But yeah, I do the same thing. I can't—who wants to work in absolute silence? I feel like I'm in prison.

BIRZER: Yeah, no, I am with you, and, Tom, I do the same thing. I look at the stuff I've written, and it's always related to something I'm listening to at the time, but I think about even bands. You and I have never really talked Rush or Neil Peart, but even Rush, when you think about how they did and how they built their reputation, their label was a hindrance to them. It was not a help. And I think that when we're looking at how really great bands have emerged, they have often done it in opposition to the label and gone out on their own and taken chances and made

choices. And Big Big Train: I wish them all the luck in the world. I hope they make millions of dollars. I hope they are millionaires, but I hope they do it without becoming corporatized in some way.

WOODS: Well, I would hope so to, but given how long they have been around, I think it's unlikely they are going to go down that road, and every interview I read—I read your interview with Greg Spawton, what he aims to do, which is to create extraordinary music. Well, that's great. That is wonderful, and that is exactly what he's succeeding in doing. And what's been fun about having my little show here is a couple of times I have been able to bring on as guests people I deeply admire, of course, Ian Anderson. I will link in the show notes, TomWoods.com/310, I will link to the interview with him, but then I also had Steve Hogarth of Marillion, and most of my listeners, I would say 99%, have no idea who Marillion is, but I mean, they have sold 15 million albums. That's nothing to shake a stick at. They are reasonably successful, and Hogarth turned out to be such a fun, pleasant guy to talk to and to really hit it off with him to the point where I actually made him laugh, I thought this is just too—all I have to do is have a microphone, a mixer, and a computer monitor, and I got Steve Hogarth on my show. It's fantastic.

BIRZER: Tom, that is great. And I had forgotten you had done that. I need to go back and listen to that.

WOODS: Oh, what fun it was, Brad, what a blast.

BIRZER: Yeah, that's fantastic, and I bet he—I got his two books he's just published this year.

WOODS: Well, he mentioned them on the show. I said I want you to tell us something that you're spilling the beans about for the first time on the Tom Woods Show that you haven't told anybody else. And so he came out with that, which I guess the super-duper fans knew about, but they didn't know it was coming out in two volumes until he said it on my show.

BIRZER: Oh, that's great.

WOODS: So they were all really excited, but I thought, well, you know, what am I here for? I am about giving you guys scoops.

BIRZER: Talk about a poet. That guy can write.

WOODS: Oh, *The Invisible Man*. I actually read those lyrics after he got off the line with me. I read them to people because that just blew me away when I read those.

BIRZER: *Marbles* is such a great—and I don't know if you know, Tom. There is a young libertarian—great young woman—at Georgetown. She's getting her Ph.D.—Gianna Englert, and I am sure you guys are probably Facebook friends.

WOODS: I don't think I know her.

BIRZER: I don't know anyone in America who knows Marillion more than she does. So you two definitely have to connect. She's a great person. I met her through a couple of Liberty Funds, and some other things; just a wonderful person.

WOODS: Well, I'll leave this—of course, I realize that at this point, I probably have lost some of the listeners, but you have to indulge the host for a couple of episodes a year. You know, I slave away for you people.

BIRZER: Absolutely.

WOODS: I want to talk music with Brad Birzer. But I am going to something that I think is unique for Marillion as compared to other bands, that every couple of years there is something called Marillion Weekend in several major cities around the world. There is usually one in—I guess there's one in the Netherlands, there is one in Canada, and there may be one in—is it England? Or some other place, but it's a weekend where for several days every single day you're getting a Marillion concert, and then during the day they have all kinds of events planned. Now, in Canada, it's more of a you're on your own during the day, but the idea is this band is there night after night to perform for people who come from all around the world for this experience. And I finally said to myself to heck with it, I am going to this thing because I believe that they are going to perform *Anarachnophobia* and *Marbles* in their entirety at this thing, and when my little daughter Sarah was born this year in March of 2014, and I am sitting there with her in the NICU where she had to be for 11 days after birth, I actually, I mean, what a weirdo. But I actually sang to her the fairly straightforward, not particularly progressive, but fairly straightforward Marillion song *Map of the World* about this young woman who is going through a sort of a workaday life.

BIRZER: Oh, it's a great song.

WOODS: But she aspires to one day break free of it all and go see the world and just not be—the city that she lives in is beckoning her to come in and spend money. But she's saving her money to just break free of it all and go and have a better life, and I thought: I hope that's you someday.

BIRZER: That's great. I love that. I hope that's true as well.

WOODS: All right, well, listen Brad, I am going to let you go.

BIRZER: Tom, it's wonderful talking to you.

WOODS: It's been an absolute pleasure. I am going to of course link to Progarchy. I know you're not with them anymore, but you do write for them.

BIRZER: That's right. I am editor-at-large. Yeah, and that goes back to asking how do I digest all of this. I got to a point where I just couldn't as much as I wanted to.

WOODS: Right, but just helping to found that site was such a service to all of us. So I'll link to that. I want to link to your piece about the Pink Floyd album and your top eight albums. So there'll be a lot of resources at TomWoods.com/310. Is there anything else involving anything you're doing? Is it TheImaginativeConservative.org?

BIRZER: That's right. Yeah, Winston Elliott and I founded that in 2010, and I think a solid, ecumenically right website. Yeah, I have a great time with that. Thanks, Tom.

WOODS: Okay, so I'll definitely link to that. All right, Brad, best to you in the new year. I hope we can talk again soon.

BIRZER: Yes, me too. Thanks, Tom, great talking. Merry Christmas.

WOODS: Same to you.