

# testimony

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# Chapter 8



## come up breathing: the genesis of spock's beard

**I**n 1991, I had written three rather long prog pieces. It was the first time I was able to come up with anything blatantly progressive. I know I've already mentioned "prog" and "progressive rock," but for those who may be unfamiliar with those terms, perhaps a definition of sorts is in order. Loosely defined, progressive rock is a style of music that was born in the late '60s and early '70s that incorporates many different styles of music and breaks out of normal song structure. The writing style has more in common with classical music than pop, using recurring musical themes and complex melodies and counter melodies. The pieces are also typically longer than the usual three- to four-minute pop fare, much like a classical composition would be.

To me, this style of music was normal. I grew up hearing all different kinds of music played alongside each other. My dad's typical choir concert would consist of some classical pieces, a pop song, some jazz and some twentieth century music, as well as some Negro spirituals. So, when

I first heard bands like ELP, Yes, Jethro Tull, Gentle Giant and Genesis, I thought, “At last! With this kind of music we can have it all in one piece. The power of rock with the complexity of classical, the improvisational qualities of jazz, with the simple beauty of a great pop chorus!” It was all in there, and I loved it.

But loving it and *doing* it were two different things. I was never able to write any decent progressive rock music. I took a few stabs at it from time to time but, in my estimation, it was always rather lame. Then, after that fateful Landmark Advanced Course, I had an explosion of creativity that changed everything. After I made demo recordings of the first three songs (“The Light,” “Go The Way You Go,” and “The Water”), I asked my brother Alan if he would play on them. This was during my extreme vagabond days, and I brought my eight-track recorder over to Al’s house to record his guitar parts.

I was really excited about the material. Al seemed nonplussed. I gave him a cassette with the demo mixes and he had it for many weeks before he mentioned anything to me about it. I assumed he hated the stuff. Then, out of the blue, he called from somewhere on vacation just to tell me how great he thought it was! For him to get excited about music was a rare thing, indeed. After all the musical disappointments we’d been through, we were both jaded, to say the least. But Al was way into it! That was a real shock. It was Al who originally thought it would be a good idea to put a band together.



“MONDAY NIGHT OPEN JAM,” the sign read. The room was full of goatees. “Man, count the beards,” I said to Al as we walked into the Vine Street Bar and Grill in North Hollywood. Hiply-dressed young men and a scant few women filled the bar. There was an area on the floor that had a typical rock band setup: drums, bass, guitar and keyboard stations with a mic in the front for a singer. At that time, Al had quit his regular job and had committed himself to doing music full time. He loved to go to these places and jam. Improvisation was always his thing, not mine particularly. I was OK at it, but it was the water that Al swam in. He didn’t like to be hedged in by having “parts” to play. His style was more along the lines of “Just roll the tape and don’t even tell me what key we’re in and let’s see what happens ...”

The man in charge reached into a basket and pulled out four names. “Johnson, Cloiter, Budd and Shiner,” he shouted, and four guys would get up and play either “Crossroads” or “Cold Shot” or “Little Wing”; something that most rock musicians know. We arrived late and couldn’t get a seat, so I got a drink and stood at the back. It was amazing how good all these musicians were. There were some really excellent players there that night. The guitarists had technique and soul, every drummer seemed like he could hold his own with legends like Steve Gadd, and even the singers were quite impressive. Al and I put our names in the basket.

“Man, these guys are pretty good ... this might be a little embarrassing,” I said sheepishly.

“You’ll be fine,” Al assured me.

Since there were so many people there, the jam

sessions seemed to go on forever. Getting a little bored, I stepped outside to smoke a joint in the parking lot. As soon as I stepped back inside, the man yelled “Morse, Morse and ... D’Virgilio.” Al and I made our way to the bandstand and a very young and thin, good-looking dude joined us on the drums. We played a 12-bar blues progression of some sort and when it came to my solo I played in the wrong key, but I was so stoned I didn’t realize it until it was almost over. It was terrible and I was completely embarrassed. I slunk away from the stage hoping nobody noticed.

That was the first time I saw Nick D’Virgilio and he was quite impressive. He was young, must’ve been 20 or 21, had a full beard, and played like a master. Even then. *If he can be that impressive playing a 12-bar blues, then just imagine what else he can do*, I thought. And I didn’t even know about his *voice*!

We had gone there looking for players for our new band, so I wasn’t too embarrassed to talk to Nick afterward, no matter how poorly I played! He was very pleasant and personable. As we sat at a small table over drinks, I said, “Hey, we are putting a band together.”

“Yeah, what kind of music?”

“It’s progressive rock ... you know, like early Yes and Genesis, that kind of stuff.”

With prog, you always have to use some sort of reference that people can relate to, otherwise they won’t have any idea what you’re talking about.

Nick’s eyes lit up.

“I love that stuff! I was raised on Genesis. Phil Collins is my favorite drummer!”

This was a shock. I never would’ve guessed that

this young, stylish-looking L.A. cat would even know that Phil Collins had been a drummer before he made it big as a pop singer. We talked a bit further into the evening, but he had to go. I told him to come by my house the next day and pick up a demo tape. I figured I'd never see him again. There is none so unreliable as the L.A. musician. We were the poster boys of unreliability. But, lo and behold, Nick showed up the next day, got a copy of the demos, called back that night ecstatic about what he had heard, and joined the band straight away.

With drummer firmly secure, we now needed a bass player. Our first choice was Dave Meros, whom we had known for years because he had been playing with our mutual friend Steve Klong (the second drummer in our old band, Casanova) in Gary Myric's new band, but we figured it wouldn't be commercial enough for Dave. He was getting all kinds of prime gigs in town (or so we thought, anyway) and we didn't think he'd be into it. Plus, Dave was a tasteful player who exhibited a range of subtlety and funk chops; I was sure he wouldn't want to play rude, distorted prog bass in a band that would probably never make a dime. We were pretty sure that nothing would ever come of it. We just wanted to do it because we loved it. But would Dave *love* it? It seemed unlikely.

In those days, I was the naysayer and Al was the positive one. I was so full of bitterness and negativity that it was hard for me to entertain the notion that *anything* I put my hand to would *ever* be successful. My attitude was "I don't want to get my hopes up again just to have the rug pulled out. It's better just to stay down."

I was a barrel of laughs.

But Al was pushing the thing forward. He got a tape into the hands of Dave who immediately joined up as well. This was challenging reality for me! How could it be that in the town of dollar signs, you could find good players that would actually *want* to do something as obscure as “The Return of the Terrible Catfish Man?” It didn’t make any sense, and neither did the music, but that was the fun of it.



Alan was the manager in the early days. I still remember him showing up at my house in Culver City with a briefcase full of ideas of how to score a record deal. A record deal? With whom? He had a list of obscure labels with tons of bands I’d never heard of. Bands with names like Anglagard and Banco, really weird sounding stuff. The list went on and on. We had thought that, although the kind of music we were playing was strange and unpopular, at least we would be the only band doing it. When I saw Al’s list, I thought, “Bummer, I guess we aren’t the only fish in the pond after all.”

It was time to name the band now. To this day, how we eventually came up with our name is one of the most frequently asked questions we get. So here’s the story.

There’s an episode of Star Trek called “Mirror, Mirror” in which there are two U.S.S. Enterprises and they’re in parallel universes. The main way you know that you are in the weird parallel universe is that Mr. Spock has a beard. Everything else looks exactly the same (except for Sulu, who has a scar, and other minor details). The first time you see Leonard Nimoy in his fake little goatee, the orchestra

hits a big, dramatic chord, like it's a startling, frightening thing that Spock has a beard.

Alan used to sub in my cover band, Burlesque, when the other guitar player/singer couldn't make it. One night, we were playing at The Rafters in Mammoth Mountain, California, and there were a lot of strange people in the club. The room was an overgrown ski lodge with pine bar stools and an enormous fireplace between the restaurant and the bar. There was a steady stream of strange characters that haunted the place in the wee hours on the off-nights. There was the Vietnam vet who called himself "Flag," who wore nothing but George Thorogood T-shirts. There was the tough-looking bar-back named "Jock." There was the strange girl with black hair that hung in her face who kept asking the band to play Michael Jackson's "Annie are you OK," to which Flag would blurt out "Annie's the gook!"

Really.

Al and I were just sitting there trying not to take too much of it in, when he said to me, "Man, it's a weird night in here. It's like Spock has a beard ... you know what I mean?" He was referring to how the place felt like a scary, parallel universe. We laughed, and Al said "You know, that'd be a funny name for a band — Spock's Beard." Years later when we were voting on what to call the band (we were originally called "One," but someone contacted us and said we couldn't use that name), Al put together a list of names for us to vote on. A lot of them were serious names. One name I remember voting for was August, like the month. Experimental Forest was another. So we voted on our favorite three names with a point system and Spock's Beard won! We all looked at one another wondering if we

were really going to go through with it.

“Are we really going to call the band Spock’s Beard?” I chuckled.

“Well, it certainly fits with our motto of ‘forget it all; let’s do what we want,’” Al said.

So the name stuck.

Alan had sent out a bunch of “One” cassette tapes just before we changed the band’s name, and amazingly enough, a metal label offered us a deal. Somebody wanted to sign us! They gave us a 63-page contract in which we were going to give them our first album and commit to five consecutive albums after that. What they were going to give us for an advance was one ADAT machine (the popular recording device of the day) and a middle-of-the-line vocal mic. Scarily enough, we were fully intending to do it. It wasn’t a good deal at all. In fact, it was a terrible deal, but at least it was *something*. We weren’t getting any younger. We had no other offers on the table and it seemed like a legit company, so, why not?



The small commuter plane buzzed over the red cliffs of Arizona. From the air it looked like Mr. Spock’s idea of a perfect vacation spot; a sparsely inhabited red planet, perfect for him to be hit by the spores. With a paperback version of Richard Bach’s *Bridge Across Forever* on my knee and a cassette of New Age music playing in my ears, I was on my way to Sedona, Arizona, to lay down some piano overdubs for a friend of mine.

Paul Voudouris and his writing partner had some

success in the New Age market with a record called *Enchantment* (perfect title for a New Age record, isn't it?) and was now making a follow-up solo effort. Greg Westall (the guitar player in the Neal Morse Band), had introduced me to Paul, who liked my playing, so he bought me a ticket to Sedona to spend a few days working on his album. I had very little studio experience at the time so I was excited about it ... as excited as someone who was secretly wishing the plane would go down could possibly get!

While Alan and I were happy that a record label was interested in signing us, all was not necessarily well. They asked me to change some of the lyrics. While a word or two may have been objectionable, they actually had a lengthy list of additional lyrical objections. One that I remember was that they wanted me to change the phrase "reaching for a drink of wine." Apparently, this heavy metal label was sensitive about references to drinking alcoholic beverages. There were other peculiarities in the contract as well, and I was beginning to think that maybe it wasn't a good idea. But Al was gung ho for moving forward with it. He'd been talking on and off with them and working on this deal for two years.

On a crisp and dry Arizona morning, I went running into the red hills above the quiet town of Sedona. I walked all the way to the top of the highest hill I could find, sat and prayed.

"God, should we do this deal?" I asked.

I waited with only the sound of a lonesome breeze blowing across the cliff tops.

"Should we do it?"

And I felt a very confirming "no" inside. It wasn't

like a voice from without, but a voice from within. “No, absolutely not. Do not do this deal.”

What a disaster it would have been. We would have been tied up for years with those guys for an ADAT and a vocal mic. Crazy! It still amazes me that when I was so far from God and not really thinking of Him at all, that He would give me counsel that would impact my life for years to come. He would continue to do so in the years ahead.

We wound up not doing that record deal and making the first Spock’s Beard album with Al’s money. We borrowed ADATs and the gear we needed to do all the overdubs at home. We scrimped and saved and made the first album for around \$3,500. Our old friend, Skipper Wise, let us use his studio at a great price and we mixed the album in three seven-hour days. It’s funny because now it might take us that long just to *set up* to record, but that’s how we made our first album, *The Light*.