

# Porcupine Tree—The '90s Era (Phase—II) [Finely Tuned]

**Signify (1996)**

*By: Afridi Majeed*

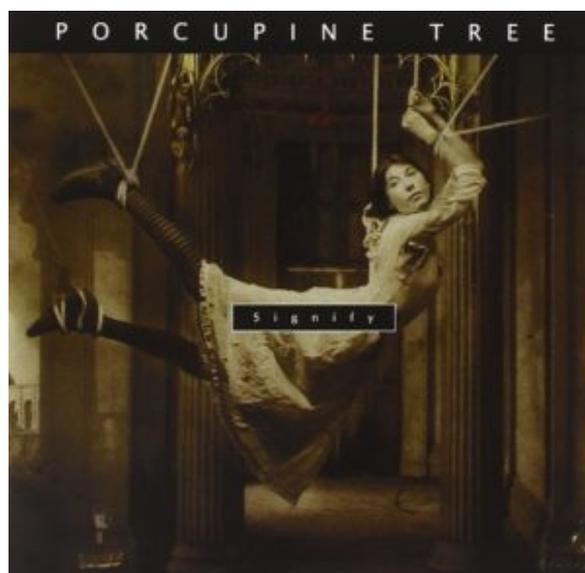
True to its name, 'Signify' foretold a shift in tides for Porcupine Tree—not only in terms of musical direction— but also in the songwriting process as a whole. No longer was it merely a moniker under which Steven Wilson released albums that were all but solo projects. This was the first record where all instruments were not played by him, making it an iconic landmark in the band's history.

He even loosened the reins of creative control enough to allow inputs from his accompanying musicians. The presence of flesh and bones behind the drums, as opposed to a drumming machine used prior, infused it with a burst of life in more ways than one.

Though nothing may have been found wanting in refinement of musical composition in previous albums, the precisely-timed drum work struck the listener as being robotic and devoid of tangible emotion. There is an irrefutable allure given to a bass line when someone as well-versed in his craft and who knows his instrument inside and out as Colin Edwin plays it. Someone accustomed to playing the guitar simply cannot replicate the grace with which each string of a bass is plucked and slapped, or the sheer panache of sliding along the length of its neck.

Although listening to an album from start to finish has now become a lost art, those of us who still do, are aware that the opening track is usually the strongest. The intent is to

impose a lasting impression on someone casually listening to it in a record store, promising them more such delights in the songs to come. Steven Wilson on the other hand, never seemed to fret over such things, choosing instead to use the opening track to craft the backdrop for what lies ahead.



I suppose there are times in life we all feel this way.

'Sleep of No Dreaming' has a beginning that is as eerily calm yet unsettling as its title. The keyboards, combined with the gentle timed swishing of cymbals, emanate an aura of pure jazz. Enter Steven Wilson, a maven at capturing the intensity of man's most profound and stirring emotion – one we all wish we could do without – melancholy. The lull in his voice accentuates the grief laced with each word. His bemoaned singing tells of what it feels like to emerge from the blanket of blissful naivety under which we lived our childhood. The lustre of optimism that once blinded us, fades away into a gaping void of despondency, unveiling the truth behind the ways of the world.

Saving the best for last, 'Dark Matter' is a stellar closer to the celestial experience we have been taken on thus far. Driven by a muscular drum beat, dashed with a flourish of the cymbals now and then, an undecorated yet potent riff plays.

This is a recurring theme in Porcupine Tree's guitar parts. The riff may not require one to fashion webs of labyrinthine patterns with their fingers, but creates the intended atmosphere just the same.

This song deals with the more forlorn aspects of touring in a band. To the high school kid lying in his room, guitar resting on his lap, it seems like the idyllic life to have. Travel round the world, take in sights, sounds, and cultures unknown. Play for a roaring crowd of people intoning your name, as a stadium full of heads bang in unison to the music you have written.

However, the lyrics of this song tell a different story. "Inside the vehicle, the cold is extreme. Smoke in my throat kicks me out of my dream." The snow-capped mountains of Europe roll by. You're on your way to the next show in some remote town, trying to garner a cult underground following for your upcoming yet promising band.

As luck would have it, none of you are heirs to any portion of money significant enough to buy you a sprawling Mercedes tour bus, so you make do with a rickety box on wheels. The ventilation system is faulty, robbing you of what few winks of sleep you can catch between back-to-back shows. You spend every night with your teeth chattering and arms wrapped around yourself for warmth, inhaling nauseating exhaust fumes coming in through the gaps.

"This has become a full-time career. To die young would take only 21 years." If these abhorrent conditions continue to persist, he cannot envisage his body being able to persevere through them for much longer. "Gun down a school or blow up a car. The media circus will make you a star." The dream of being famous someday starts to feel a little daunting when you realize that four spectacular albums into your career, you're just another face in the street. And yet, if someone were to commit the most horrid of crimes, they'll gain instant

notoriety, because that is what people are more interested in.

Allaying any uncertainties about his abilities as a lead guitarist, Steven Wilson brings this timeless classic to an end with a solo that lasts for nearly two minutes. He is someone who believes that three notes could convey the same – if not plentiful heaps more – emotion when bent and expressed prodigiously, as compared to a hundred such notes played in quick succession.

Never has it bothered him that his audience might rather watch him do finger exercises than use his instrument as an outlet for his feelings. That isn't the type of fan following he, as a true artist, would have been wanting to amass anyway. The album concludes with a spellbinding silence, leaving us eagerly anticipating what could be next in the works for these budding progressive rock virtuosos.

## **Stupid Dream (1999)**

*By: Afridi Majeed*

Standing the test of time, 'Stupid Dream' has cemented its place as an album that contains some of the most soul-stirring and unrestrained displays of emotion ever written. The lengthy instrumental pieces they had garnered a reputation for, gradually started to make themselves scarce since 'Signify'. Instead, they opted to revolutionize the style of songwriting aficionados of progressive rock had grown attuned to.

Shunning the frills and hassles of writing needlessly intricate song structures, the tracks on 'Stupid Dream' have a rustic flair to them. They are devoid of trademarks that Porcupine Tree's contemporaries had at the time – such as cramming ten riffs into one song, or arbitrary changes in time signatures to appease the music theory enthusiast.

The most notable aspect of these pieces is the graceful ease with which they get etched into your memory and carve a niche

in your heart. Steven Wilson shows us how eloquently one can evoke the most profound of sentiments through a song stitched together with just a simple chord progression and heartfelt lyrics. His vocal delivery is as top-notch as it has ever been, bringing to life the diverse range of tear-jerking themes being discussed in each song.

Getting signed on a more prolific label granted them the means to dabble with orchestral instruments, such as the saxophone and flute. This had been a desire Wilson had always harbored but lacked the financial means to see through to realization.



Steven believed, way back in 1999, that the music industry was up for sale. Twenty years later, we look back on music from that era as being iconic. It really makes you wonder...

'Even Less' gives us a taste of the motif around which the rest of the tracks in the album revolve. Getting off to a sluggish start on the slide guitar, the entire band chimes in like clockwork about a minute in, barraging the listener with a wall of distortion.

An aura of tranquility washes over everything, much like waves along the shore of the beach being described here. A man is treading along the sands he was once all too familiar with as a child, but that had now become a distant memory.

His town is a shadow of its former self after calamity befell, lives were taken, and homes reduced to rubble. All that remained were pallid ghosts of places that served as stark reminders of a stolen moment with a close friend, or an area which once echoed with the laughter of children.

Steven's motivation for the album stemmed from the banana republic that the music industry has become. People without even the faintest of an idea about what constitutes good music treat it as a product to be manufactured and marketed to the public. Going by this, 'Even Less' is an allusion to him trying unsuccessfully to bring about change in the prevalent climate of the industry.

He loved working in this field, and the desire to present the world with as much art as his imagination was capable of conjuring was the only driving force he had. As anyone would, he felt uninspired by the amount of frivolous things needed to be done in order to get recognition for his work. As a band that refuses to conform to the mainstream – their survival mandated indulging in a few things they did not like – in order to have financial stability to give their best effort towards what it is they do.

He may have never written songs with the goal of making music that would sell the most copies, or worrying about how many singles could be released from one album. However, he has always maintained that any musician – even one who has no intent of profiting off their work – would feel disheartened by a poor show of album sales.

The reason for this is that when you create a magnificent piece of art, you'd naturally feel inclined to share it with as many people as possible. When it doesn't turn out that way, and the public instead would rather spring for something that was much less complicated to make or not even originally done by the artist selling it, it causes one's spirits to sink.

'Piano Lessons' is the most memorable track, both for its inherent catchiness as well as how it polarized Porcupine Tree's minuscule but zealous fan following. It is deceitful in that although the music has an upbeat appearance, the lyrics are haunting recollections of being compelled to take piano lessons from a sadistic teacher. This was about someone who

tried to tarnish his self-esteem by ridiculing his ability and took pleasure in watching the dreams of others crumble.

The presence of a chorus, as brilliant as it was, made it appear to be a radio single with its harmoniousness making you want to jive along to it. That, combined with the considerably shorter length of the song than usual, led chants of “sell-out” to be shouted at Porcupine Tree’s direction for the first time in their career. They had thus turned a corner that was new to them, but one that every band of their distinction sees at some point.

A solo plays on until the end, followed by thirty seconds of the same sound played briefly at the beginning of ‘Even Less’. It gives a sensation of being lost in space while drifting aimlessly about in a space shuttle. This brisk spell of stillness provides just enough time to regain one’s composure for the myriad melancholic and ruminative tracks that lie ahead.

‘Stupid Dream’ was a watershed moment for Porcupine Tree, as Wilson indulged himself in the pop side of his diverse range of influences. The highlight of albums like these, that go on to be remembered as classics of their time, is that they lack any filler tracks. Whatever be your fancy – whether invigorating hard rock, pleasant acoustic guitars, or mournful subject matter – there was something in it for everyone.

### **Lightbulb Sun (2000)**

*By: Adhiraj Ghosh*

Great poets of yore have all echoed a similar sentiment – the most inspired works of art have always been about sadness and distress. One of them even famously said, “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought.” Never really known for joyous moments with a smile on his face, Steven Wilson is the 21st Century poet taking this legacy forward. He elegantly weaves a tale of pain and depreciation over the course of

Porcupine Tree's late albums – a concept that blossoms in the riffs and melancholy of Lightbulb Sun.

While not explicitly a concept album, Lightbulb Sun toggles between various emotions that Steven Wilson experienced around him and a bit of his personal stories. Two parallel stories run through the album, both of which inflict a lot of pain and dissatisfaction to the protagonist. With simple lyrics and complicate guitar riffs, the band paints a picture of a sick, bed-ridden child who has to accustom himself to a pill-popping indoor lifestyle. The life he misses is adequately explained by the title track of the album itself – where the lightbulb flickering on and off in his room is synonymous with the sun, an energy source that is responsible for the sustenance of life on earth. Another parallel drawn here is what happens to the kid as he grows up and falls in love. Rosy in appearance but prickly in reality, he feels the pangs of love and that leaves him bitter as “each second seems like a lifetime”. Indulge in an advanced soundscape as these two parallel story-lines elegantly merge in this discography-defining album.



Undoubtedly the greatest album Steven Wilson has released till date.

From the very beginning, the character development of the young boy is seen. The title track deals with the solitary life he, forcibly, has to embrace. He looks at the world through the window pane due to his bed-ridden condition. An addiction to cough-syrup is evident in the lyrics, as “a sickly pink liquid” sends him off to sleep every day. It is his mother who tends to his every need, while his friends would come to meet him occasionally. Western medicine always provides instant relief as the pain slips away during the night and he perceives a heavenly moment of unprecedented relief. We see this character develop further in “Fear of a

Blank Planet”, which goes to depict how a troubled childhood still affected Steven after so many years.

The doleful angle of the album takes its peak in “How is Your Life Today?” – a question the now-adult protagonist asks his lover who left him. Suffering from mental breakdown, the lyrics strongly suggest suicide, with the ever-increasing pile of letters by the door. Neighbours have understood what was going on and had called a taxi to do the needful – act as a “getaway car” to heaven. Steven makes an occult reference in “I was kissed on the cheek by a cold mouth” – referring to the kiss of death.

While not particularly adding to the storyline the album attempts to traverse, “4 Chords That Made a Million” deals with tongue-in-cheek irony. The deplorable state of modern day pop music, which is controlled by rich and shallow executives, is criticised in this song. Fame engulfs the senses of a success in the industry which is deceitfully temporary. This song is sure to stand the test of time simply attributing to the veracity of the message it conveys.

Getting back on track with a personal favourite, “Shesmovedon” is a prelude to “How is Your Life Today”, explaining the Janusian nature of the character’s lover. Initially, it seems as if he admires her cunning nature, while later he laments on a wider spectrum on how she has ruined the lives of many other men. Planting its footsteps firmly on the eternal shores of heartbreak tracks, scintillating guitar solos by Wilson, accompanied by his lyrics prompts great appreciation for this song.

In direct contrast amidst the banjo tunes, “Last Chance to Evacuate Planet Earth Before It Is Recycled” deals with blossoming love and the long summer days the two spent together. This happy segment is justly titled “Winding Shot (Summer 1981)” referring to the street where Steven lived as a child. The latter half of the song comprises a speech by Do,

the leader of an American religious fundamentalist cult called "Heaven's Gate", which was the final speech performed by him before committing suicide.

Pretending he doesn't need anyone yet finding the "angel" who makes everything happy for him, "The Rest Will Flow" is that rare happy song by the band. "I don't feel low" from the song is a pre-cursor to "Feel so Low", the final track of this album. Happy sentiments are replaced by feelings of resentment and hostility where he finally submits to his lover, claiming how she "won", leaving him to rot in depression.

Tales of the little child with big dreams is the core premise of "Where We Would Be". Birds chirp, cycles bells ring in an attempt to make the listener reminisce the days of uncertainty during their childhood. Dubbed as "Porcupine Tree's antidote to all the boybands...", "Hatesong" seems angry in its complete sense, both musically and lyrically. Steven followed the policy of simplistic lyrics in this song whose wording seems to be inspired by messages sent by the angry lover after a relationship has suffered its bitter end. This depressed lover then admits his own mistakes and unmistakably finds solace in alcohol – where "Russia on Ice" kicks in. Defining the term Progressive Rock in the best possible way, this particular song is a combination of dark analogies and slow instrumental pieces orderly scattered to perfection.

Steven once famously said that he believed in change and the development of music. The Pink Floyd-esque psychedelic music disappeared near the turn of the millennium– with the band slowly transitioning into their popular image of being a progressive rock band. Lyrical modifications have been noticed too. Gone are the days of metaphors referring to Hallucinogenic drugs and lyrics with their roots buried deep into history and philosophy. Lyrics were constructed to echo the thoughts of a child in the technology age and emanate misery and pessimism – the stereotype generally associated with the band now.