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Porcupine Tree's Steven Wilson Soars Without Voice at Heroic NYC Show

Unable to sing, prog torchbearer pulled off stirring Beacon Theatre show with help from harmony singer Ninet Tayeb

■ BY DAVID FRICKE | March 7, 2016



At the Beacon Theatre on Saturday, Porcupine Tree's Steven Wilson lost his voice but put on a captivating performance. Frank Hoensch/Redferns/Getty

A few minutes before the start of his March 5th show at New York's Beacon Theatre, the British progressive-rock artist Steven Wilson — founding singer-songwriter-guitarist of the band Porcupine Tree; remixer of choice for reissues of classic albums by King Crimson, Yes and XTC;



SIDEBAR

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Wilson also said in his note that the show would go on. This was progressive rock, so there would be extended instrumental passages. But Wilson was handing most of his lead vocals to his harmony singer and duet partner Ninet Tayeb, who appears on Wilson's latest records — 2015's *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* and the new *4 1/2* (both KScope) — and had 40 minutes backstage to learn all of *his* parts as well.

When Wilson finally took the stage to begin the first half of the program — a complete, live rendition of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* — he promised the audience a "unique evening." That he barely got the words out, in a scraping-the-pavement whisper, was proof enough of Wilson's handicap. But he was better than his word: Wilson's headlining solo debut at the Beacon was a cheerfully heroic lesson in fighting spirit (he was forced to cancel his next show in Chicago) and his truly progressive ideals in rock composition, group improvisation and emotionally authentic storytelling. Wilson is a star in a fiercely partisan, niche genre; but even without a voice, he proved here that he deserves much broader renown.

Owner of a Lonely Heart

Tayeb's unplanned star turn during the opening set was, in fact, dramatically appropriate. Wilson based the conceptual heavy weather of *Hand. Cannot. Erase.* — paralytic isolation and complete surrender of the spirit in a tech-mad, superficially connected culture — on a true story: the death of a young woman, alone and undiscovered in her London flat for three years. On the album, Tayeb is the grieving center of "Routine," Wilson's examination — via titanic-ballad Crimson in a darkness as thick as the *Faith*-era Cure — of a mother's struggle to live through the sudden, harrowing loss of her children.

But at the Beacon, Tayeb also carried the full, desperate reach and defeat in "Hand Cannot Erase," "Transience" and the protracted, thundering "Ancestral" ("When the world doesn't want you/It will never tell you why") as if giving the final word to that body in the apartment — a last testament of abandoned will and our failed moral obligation. Wilson wrote the poignance and scored the fury; Tayeb, who earned and got several standing ovations during the night, put a woman's face to that loss and the lesson-too-late.



Carl Glover

His Dark Materials

Wilson's new album, *4 1/2*, is relatively modest in scope and length: six tracks in just under 40 minutes. It is an effective entry for newcomers, a compact showcase — half instrumentals, half vocal pieces — for the pop determination that runs through Wilson's dense layers of shadow and rhythmic restlessness. He cut much of the record with his current touring band — guitarist Dave Kilminster, bassist Nick Beggs, keyboard player Adam Holzman and drummer Craig Blundell — and at the Beacon, in the second set, they reprised the epic intentions in "My Book of Regrets" and "Don't Hate Me," the latter a Porcupine Tree cover from the 1998 album, *Stupid Dream*. The take on *4 1/2*, drawn from a 2015 live performance with additional studio sculpting, is sung by Wilson with Tayeb. Tonight, he abstained, and she killed it on her own.

The rest of the show veered from hardcore-fan time — "Dark Matter" pulled from Porcupine Tree's 1996 release, *Signify*; "Sectarian" and "Index" from the immersive mourning of Wilson's great 2011 double album, *Grace for Drowning* — to further surprises. For the encores, Wilson — gamely playing MC with nothing left in his throat — introduced his tribute to David Bowie, the late starman's "Space Oddity," noting that he usually does it as a duet with Tayeb. This time, of course, it was all hers, and she took it into full gospel-rock orbit.

Then Wilson asked the crowd to do full diligence for him in one more Porcupine Tree number, "The Sound of Muzak" from 2002's *In Absentia*. It was hard to miss the irony in that album title as Wilson stepped back from his mic again — and easy to hear the hearty affirmation in Wilson's rough chorus of passionate loyalists, carrying his rage at a "music of rebellion" reduced to "elevator Prozac/Stretching on for miles." Wilson couldn't sing the words, but he made his point — the progression in rock only dies if you let it — in every other voice.