THE A-Z OF PROG GUITAR
JETHRO TULL
Knights of the sound table
"I never listened to other guitar players," Martin Barre once noted, "or I'd play the same style." Rather than follow the blues-rock pack, Jethro Tull's multi-instrumentalist had his own palette, mixing up jazz with European folk and medieval whimsy (and selling millions of records along the way). If you're arching a dubious eyebrow, just listen to the guitar work on 1971's Aqualung, including a solo of such fiery eloquence that it's astonishing to learn that it was played off-the-cuff.

J is also for...
Jarzombek, Ron

LIFESON, ALEX
Making permanent waves
Of all the monsters of prog, Rush have now been striding across the Earth the longest. A whopping 19 studio albums and countless breathtaking live shows have earned them an army of dedicated fans, and they've done it all as a trio on their own terms. Lifeson's guitar sound is a vital part of this huge sound and legacy with shimmering cleans, righteous heavy riffs and leftfield moments of genius (hear the solo in Limelight - who needs the Edge and Page?). Lifeson has shown a great ability to move through eras while never losing sight of serving the overall composition, while retaining an inherently personal and frequently emotive touch. Indeed, his style is so immediately recognisable that even his chord voicings have a signature stamp...

L is also for...
Lake, Greg (King Crimson, ELP)

KRAUTROCK
A healthy side of Powerkraut
The British press coined the term circa 1968, in a doomed attempt to contain West Germany's wildly experimental alt scene in a pigeonhole. Rejecting rock's prescribed three chords for sprawling psychedelia and free-roaming jazz inflections, Krautrock had a strong electronic bent, but guitar players such as Michael Karoli and Rudolf Sosna still sprinkled serious improvisational chops over their 16-minute marathons on albums such as Can's Tago Mago and Faust's eponymous debut. Sneeer all you want at Germany's miserable contribution to modern rock, but the vision of the Krautrock brigade lit the fuse of everyone from David Bowie to Radiohead.

K is also for...
Karnivool; Katatonia; King Crimson; King's X

MUSE
Supermassive
When a passing moron declares prog to be sexless noodling for geeks and anoraks, Muse are the perfect one-word comeback. Back in 2010, TG crowned Matt Bellamy the Guitarist Of The Decade, and with good reason. It's not just that he's taken the instrument to the outer limits, juggling neo-classical motifs with metal heaviness, or that in his Manson signature models, he officially owns the world's ultimate boys' toys. It's also that Bellamy made ambitious guitar playing cool, managing to sell out Wembley Stadium without bending his vision. All that, then, plus he smashed 140 guitars on the Absolution tour: Respect.

M is also for...
The Mars Volta; Mastodon; Meshuggah; Moog

*THE A-Z OF PROG GUITAR*

A Lifeson Less Ordinary
Essential chord shapes as used by the Rush man himself

Those classic mid-to-late 70s Rush albums introduced many a rock guitarist to Alex Lifeson's chiming sus chords and open string shapes. Notice how Badd11 and F#11 (from Cygnus X-1 Book II: Hemispheres and The Spirit Of Radio respectively) use the same shape. By moving the shape around, you get different chord types as different relationships develop between the fretted notes and the unchanging open strings. The sus2 chord, found in loads of Rush songs, has an ambiguous sound, which means you can move it around the neck, almost like a powerchord. The jangly Cadd9 chord from La Villa Strangiato is simply an open G chord moved up the neck.
UNSUNG HEROES
Under the radar
Originality is one of the things prog rock players have in common, and with so many unique players it's inevitable many don't get the widespread attention they deserve. Take Andy Latimer, a cult figure who’s influenced Mikael Åkerfeldt, and is back touring with Camel this year. Then there's the highly experimental Steve Hillage who brought psychedelia and fusion to a space-rock feast, pioneering riffs built around waves of delay and blurring the divides with electronica in System 7.

U is also for...
UK, Uriah Heap

Representing the younger set is Mike Vennart of now-defunct indie progressives Oceansize, an underappreciated but fascinating band with three talented guitarists. Mike can still be found on stage as Biffy Clyro’s touring guitarist.

VAN DER GRAAF GENERATOR
Hard graf
In the early 70s, the Manc proggers' output tanked everywhere except – weirdly – the Italian market, but Van Der Graaf Generator's jet-black beauty and gothic vocals have since won tributes from 'ariet' axemen, including John Frusciante and Graham Coxon.

Founding member Peter Hammill was no slouch on acoustic and slide, Robert Fripp mad cameos on Pawn Hearts, and although Hugh Banton was technically an organist, he played the instrument like Hendrix (“He wanted his organ to have a wahmy bar and six Marshall stacks,” noted Hammill).

V is also for...
Vildhjarta

Genesis in 1973
peaked with a flurry of puns and visionary guitar
WILSON, STEVEN
Top of the tree
Percupine Tree, No-Man, IEM, Bass Communion, Blackfield, Storm Corrosion, producing, mixing and now a solo band... Steven Wilson never stops creating music. As one of the most talented progressive rock musician today, he's an incredibly self-effacing guitarist, seeing it as just part of what he does as an artist who draws from influences as diverse as ABBA and Meshuggah.

W is also for...
Wesley, John

X
'XANADU'
X marks the prog

If you wanted to show an alien how glorious prog rock can be, play Rush's 'Xanadu'

Y
YODELLING
Focus on a kind of magic
You should be getting the gist by now that when it comes to prog, the limits are only in your imagination. The idea of mixing unhinged yodelling with riffage and polka beats, then, seems perfectly reasonable, even if the fact it became a Top 20 hit in 1973 is much less expected. Such is the brilliance of Focus's classic song Hocus Pocus. Written in a castle (of course) shortly before leaving for England to record their second album, the Dutch band's guitarist Jan Akkerman kicked off the whole idea with an improvised riff because drummer Pierre Van Der Linden jumped in with a two-bar drum solo. Hyperactive flute solo, accordion and Thijs Van Leer then chimed in to create a very odd but thrilling classic.

Y is also for...
Yes

Z
ZAPPA, FRANK
Frankly brilliant
"Frank would write music for me to play that just had no business being performed on a guitar," Steve V told TG of his years as Zappa's 'stunt guitarist'. Jumping from classical-inspired sound collages to extended jazz-fusion improvisation, this was a band who lived without rules, helmed by a songwriter who played without limits. Though the moustached one died of prostate cancer in 1993, his son Dweezil's Zappa Plays Zappa tribute tours bring that questing spirit back from the grave.

Z is also for...
Zappa, Dweezil