

David Gilmour  
'I don't want to  
listen to the  
Arctic Monkeys'

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Still wearing these? Oh dear.

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Shakira  
Great album,  
but what  
is she on  
about?

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The Condi Rice workout

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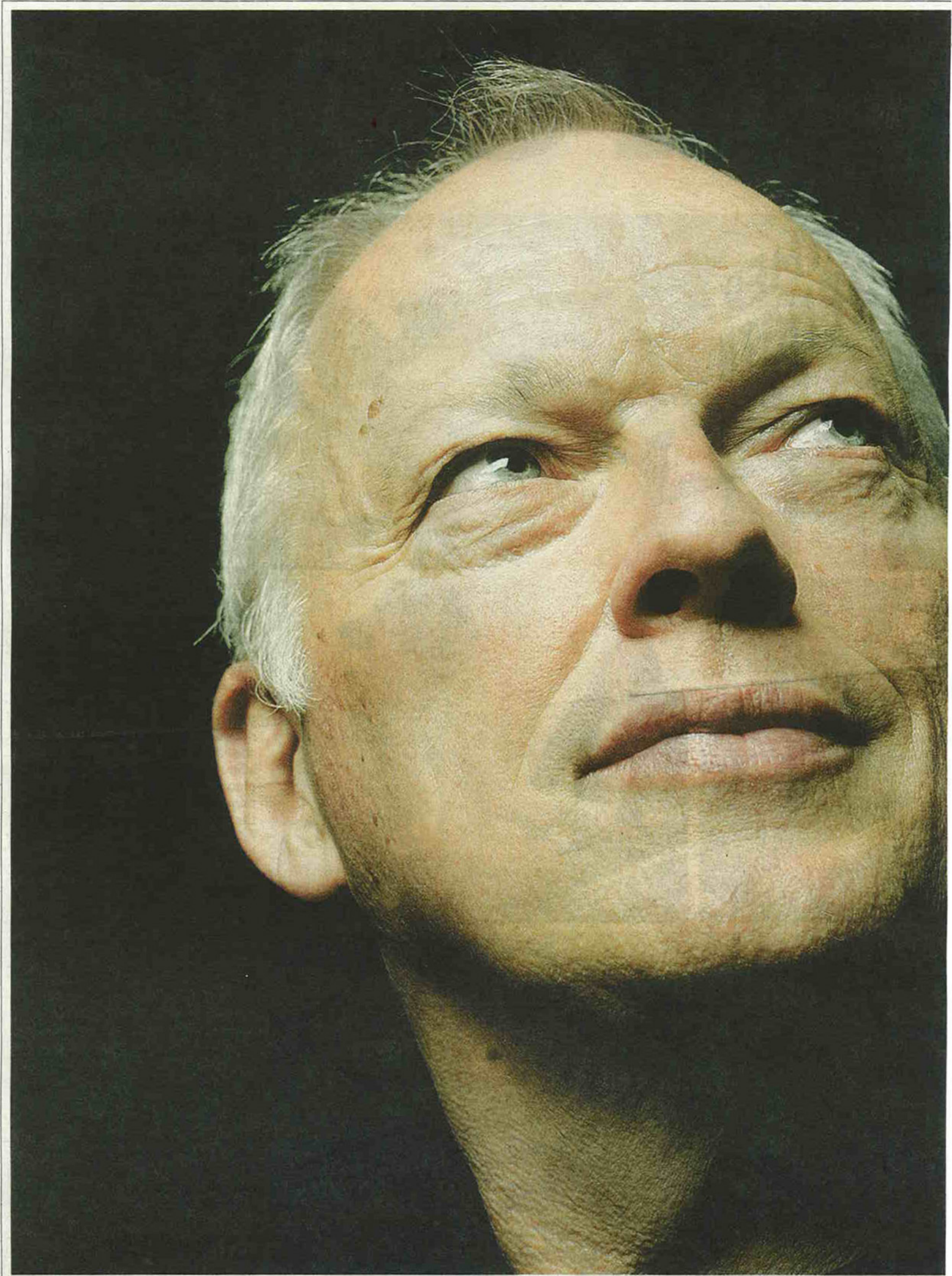
# the guardian

g2

## Emma Brockes meets David Gilmour

**12 David Gilmour** Why is the Pink Floyd legend rehearsing in a village hall in Surrey? Emma Brockes finds out







# 'Even at your most content, you can take yourself back to your worst times'

As a member of Pink Floyd, David Gilmour became a rock legend – and famously fell out with his bandmate. But, he tells **Emma Brockes**, today he is happy to live a less eventful life

**C**hiddingfold Ex-Serviceman's club is gloomily upholstered and as quiet as only commuter-belt Surrey on a weekday can be. On alternate Thursdays the over-60s meet here for bingo and slide shows. On Tuesday mornings there is a toddler activity session (the gold paper stars they made for Christmas are fading on the walls). Today, Friday, there is band practice, led by a 59-year-old bloke with a laconic air and the perimeter of a darts player.

"Are you doing that, Phil – the dow-wow-wow bit?"

"Yeah."

Phil lifts the neck of his guitar and plays a few notes: dow-wow-wow. There is a lull while the sustain tapers off and then – "All right?"

"Yeah."

– boom! The band comes in with such a thunderous swell, such a stadium-sized surge of late-70s rock, the beer mats lift clean off the tables.

David Gilmour, former guitarist for Pink Floyd and a man whose last performance was before a global audience of millions at Live 8, lives just around the corner. So does Phil Manzanera, former guitarist for Roxy Music, which is why they and the rest of the band are rehearsing in a small village hall that smells vaguely of school. Gilmour is about to embark on a promotional tour of his third solo album, *On an Island*, but he will be obliged to perform some Pink Floyd classics. In the 40 years since forming, the band

has sold more than 175 million albums; one in four households in Britain is said to contain a copy of *Dark Side of the Moon*.

It is easy to overlook this when talking to Gilmour, who is modest and a little diffident, shirking eye-contact, although in a shy rather than a shifty way. He says that his wife, the writer Polly Samson, thinks he is "a bit autistic" and that he can only truly express himself through music. The most rock'n'roll thing he has done to date is to have had eight children, four with his first wife, four with his second. Eight children is ridiculous, I say, and he smiles ruefully and says, "I agree. I'm really sorry."

The band, which formed in Cambridge in 1965, was always characterised as posh, partly because of its members' backgrounds – Gilmour's father was a zoology lecturer – and partly because it was thoughtful and musically ambitious and in the 70s championed the idea of the concept album, which one imagined its members sitting around discussing in terms of "narrative arc". They wrote fine, literate songs with misanthropic themes and the kind of heavy-weather integrity that endeared them particularly to teenage boys. Before meeting Gilmour, I asked a male friend to explain "the Floyd's" appeal. A look of excruciated reverence came over him and he whispered: "So you run and you run to catch up with the sun but it's sinking / Racing around to come up behind you again. / The sun is the same in a relative way but you're older / Shorter of breath and one day closer to death." These are the lyrics to ▶



◀ the song Time, a sort of gruff rock version of TS Eliot.

"I'm very relieved not to be carrying the burden around, the big snail shell," says Gilmour, of performing outside Pink Floyd. "Because it sometimes does feel like a big weight. The pressure of expectation is just too big. The whole Pink Floyd name, carting it around... I don't want to be there at the moment."

Gilmour is 60 on Monday. He is still startlingly good-looking, in a Leonardo DiCaprio kind of a way, with full lips and a soft, unlined face. Pink Floyd famously lowered their personal visibility by having artwork on their album covers rather than photos of themselves. Unlike so many of their peers in the music business, fame didn't make them monstrous, says Gilmour, because they were too ambitious about the music, and anyway, "We were sort of rather part-time at it. You know. Going back a long way to the early 70s, we would do a three-week little tour and then take a month or two off, and then another three-week tour. So there was an awful lot of down time, which was home time for all of us. In the country, or... I don't think any of us became fully-fledged rock'n'roll people. But we've all been through elements of messing ourselves up, or allowing ourselves to be messed up."

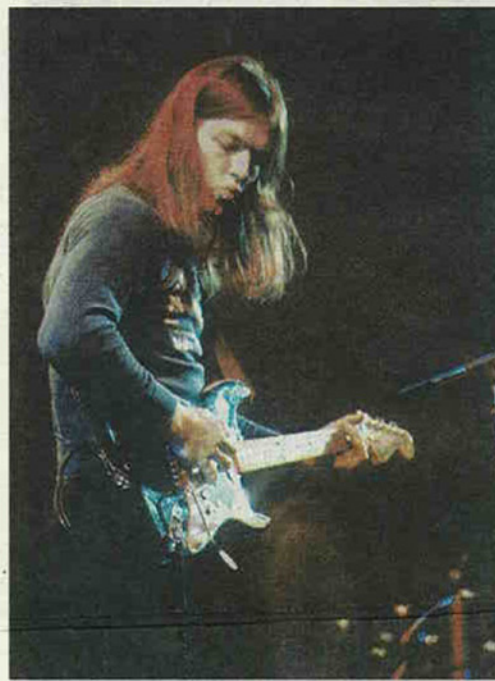
Gilmour uses his words advisedly. His fall-out with Pink Floyd's bassist, Roger Waters, was a very English affair that involved almost two decades in which the men did not speak to each other after Waters walked out of the band in 1983. (Waters declared the band defunct shortly afterwards, but it continued to operate successfully without him.) Things came to a head over a row about song-writing credits, but the real cause of the fall-out, says Gilmour, was a straightforward personality clash; they wound each other up just by being the people they were – Waters's "bossy" assertiveness versus Gilmour's resentful unassertiveness, his "allowing" himself to be "messed up". One imagines that, when it comes to a fight, he does a good line in passive aggression.

It amuses Gilmour greatly that even after all these years, when the band reconvened for Live 8 in July, neither he nor Waters had changed enough to entirely dissolve the tensions. Gilmour turned Bob Geldof down the first couple of times he asked him to take part in the concert. "Not because I didn't think that it was a very good cause. But I just felt it would get along fine without us." He eventually gave in and a meeting was brokered between Gilmour and Waters at a hotel room in London. "And it... it was pretty weird, obviously, going into that same room. But within two minutes the old dynamic was there. Roger was being bossy. I don't say that in a disparaging way; people just have their own natural personalities. And Roger just is the way he is and he can't help it any more than I can help the way I am. So the first meeting was pretty stilted and cagey. Then we had three days of rehearsals together; I did a couple of weeks of hard rehearsing myself at home to get my fingers and my throat into shape."

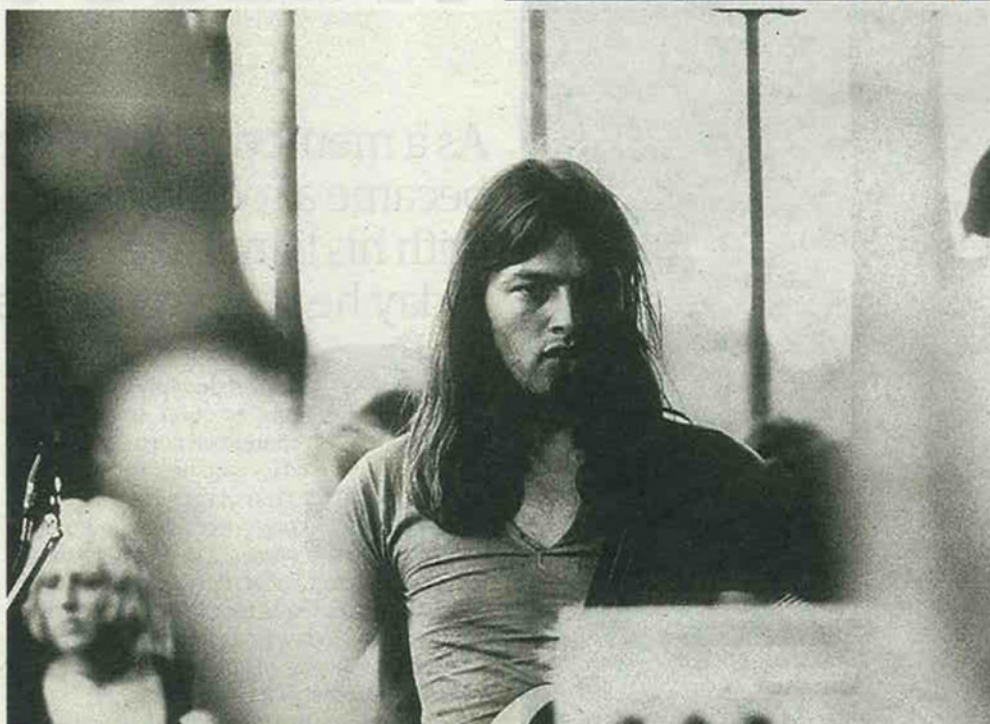
During rehearsals, the same old awkwardness between the two men sprang up. "It was a struggle for us. It was a struggle for me sometimes to assert myself, because I'm fairly laid back and reticent. And Roger is very assertive and there were times when he wanted something to happen, wanted to make a decision, and it wasn't the way I wanted it to be; so we got into a few minor arguments."



Pretty in pink... (left) a promotional photograph of Pink Floyd from the early 70s (clockwise from left) Nick Mason, Gilmour, Roger Waters and Rick Wright; playing guitar in the mid-70s



'The whole Pink Floyd name, carting it around, I don't want to be there at the moment'... at Hyde Park in the early 70s



Reaping the rewards... receiving his CBE in 2003 with family, l to r, daughter Alice, wife Polly Samson (with whom he co-wrote his new solo album) and son Charlie (left); shaking hands with Rick Wright as Pink Floyd salute the audience after they reformed last July to play at the Live 8 concert



Photographs: Michael Putland; Rex Features; Andy Paradise



Gilmour laughs now at how painfully keen they were to stop this from happening, and how their own dispositions kept derailing their efforts. "How hard he tried not to be himself, not to push!" he says. "And how hard I tried not to be myself, to insist on things!" They bumped into each other in a restaurant shortly after Live 8, but haven't seen each other since. Did it at least lay some of the ghosts to rest?

"It cleared the air a little bit. And hopefully... yeah, I think some of the vitriol has evaporated."

**G**ilmour's new album sounds partly bluegrass, partly Hawaiian and partly, through the use of weird sound effects, like some kind of mermaid song. He shares writing credits on many of the tracks with his wife, who also plays the piano and sings backing vocals. Although she has co-written with Gilmour before, on the 1994 album *Division Bell*, the extent of her collaboration this time will ignite a certain nerdy ire among Pink Floyd purists. "Yup, she's very nervous of being the Yoko/Linda McCartney [figure]." But the album is good and Gilmour has a nifty defence for amateurism (his wife only started learning the piano a year ago): "I'm a rotten piano player. But I write songs at the piano quite regularly and I find that often a piece of music will come out of my disability. Lack of skill forces you to do things in a more primitive way, and the primitive way is often where you find something."

Most of the album was written in Gilmour's home studio. He loves to work there because he can do everything himself. "There are," he says drily, "fewer opinions flying around than making a record with Pink Floyd." He and his four children with Polly live at home – the youngest is nearly four, while Gilmour's oldest daughter, by his first wife, is nearly 30 – and most mornings he gets up to take his 16-year-old son to catch the school bus in the village. The stability of his home life is, he says, "absolutely fundamental to everything".

He and Polly met when they were seated next to each other by mutual friends at a dinner party. Four years ago, at her suggestion, the couple gave the £4m proceeds of the sale of their London house to the homeless charity, Crisis. The tone of the new album reflects how happy and relaxed Gilmour is now. I wonder if he objects to the word mellow?

"Um. Mmmm, God. Probably. It may only be a fashion thing. I mean, it's a dirty word now, isn't it? I hope the album sounds quite chilled. I hope it has a feeling of contentment to it. Tied with elements of melancholy, nostalgia and regret... but indicating an achievement of some sort; that despite everything, a contentment."

Isn't pure contentment the enemy of art? "I suspect that however content you are, you're never without your memories of discontent. And your slight regrets at mistakes made. And you know, yeah." He frowns and looks at the carpet. "So even at your most content, it doesn't erase the memories of the worst times. And you can take yourself back into those worst times." Ah, that's more like it. Gilmour's melancholy is not to be confused with whingeing, however. He clarifies: "A lot of people do [take themselves back into the worst times] even when they have nothing really they should be complaining about."

The thing that annoys him most about

himself is his laziness. "I tend towards not really bothering, sometimes." The way Gilmour works is to build up slowly, over years in the case of this album, and only to become "fully obsessive and workaholic" at the final stage. "By the end I'm completely anal," he says. But: "I don't like the laziness that is inherent in me. I wish I was... but then again, I think sometimes that it's nice not to be too hung up on stuff. To be laid back. Particularly at my time of life. It's not unreasonable to sit around and want to enjoy yourself quite a bit. Have a relaxed existence." He smiles sheepishly.

The current music scene is of only mild interest to him. The last album he got really excited about was by the Streets – not surprising, really, since Mike Skinner has revived the credibility of the concept album. Back when Pink Floyd formed, Gilmour's influences were as diverse as "Hank Marvin with elements of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen and a bit of Leonard Bernstein thrown in as well. And Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie." He is never more animated than when talking about Dylan. His whole body snaps to attention, he sits up in his chair and says urgently, "I mean, to me, I was never one of the people who thought Dylan was a monster for going electric [with his guitar]. I liked the change. But I must say the power of the young Dylan as the acoustic-playing protest singer – which he's always denied, but sorry Bob, you were a protest singer – just to get his guitar and play to a crowd of people and it's like an arrow –" he shoots his hand out to illustrate, "– his words come out and the music... People underestimate his actual musical abilities. And the melodies and the

words just shoot out like an arrow. I think he was unbelievable. And is."

Gilmour has not bought the Arctic Monkeys album. He likes them, he says. "But it is a young person's thing and I can't pretend to be there. I don't want to listen to the Arctic Monkeys or the Kaiser Chiefs or Franz Ferdinand particularly." He exhales loudly and winces. "I've been there, and my poor old ears and brain just don't... I have changed, over the years. I probably would have loved that when I was in my 20s. But, you know, I like slower tempos and melody and stuff." He looks alarmed, suddenly, and says: "I don't want to become Neil Diamond or Barry Manilow or anyone."

We go back into the hall for rehearsing. The band is hanging out. A discussion takes off about over-exposure, anathema to Gilmour, who says how unfair it is that young artists these days get sucked into the big time so quickly. "... And everyone's like, ugh, fucking Norah Jones. You know, because she's been everywhere. And Norah Jones is great." He complains about his audience, how wound up he gets when people come backstage after a show and say "that was great" when he thinks it wasn't. He reads a review of the new album that appeared in the *Guardian* that morning. "I suppose I should be happy with four stars; old lags like me don't get five." Further down the page Neil Diamond has been given five. "Crappy old Neil Diamond." He talks about his plans for his 60th birthday. He will play a small gig for his family and friends and then Gilmour, the equanimous rock star, intends to go home gracefully ●

On *An Island* is released on March 6 by EMI Records.

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