



CRONY ISLAND

For **LIVE IN GDANSK**, David Gilmour combines the best of Pink Floyd with his solo record **ON AN ISLAND**, and performs for one last time with his friend and Pink Floyd collaborator, the late Richard Wright.

BY GARY GRAFF



It is, of course, the inevitable and delicate issue that has arisen in recent years whenever David Gilmour is on the other side of the microphone or the telephone line. He braces for it, and the interviewer plots a way to bring it up. Both know that the question of a Pink Floyd reunion must be broached, especially after the band regrouped for the 2005 Live 8 concert. That show, Pink Floyd's first in 24 years with estranged bassist Roger Waters, generated nearly as much anticipation as Led Zeppelin's 2007 get-together in London.



But the matter has been rendered moot by the death of Richard Wright on September 15, 2008. Floyd's founding keyboardist, Wright had performed on Gilmour's 2006 album, *On an Island*, and the subsequent world tour which resulted in Gilmour's new *Live in Gdansk* CD-and-DVD set. But as far as the guitarist is concerned, a Pink Floyd reunion was out of the question even before Wright died.

"People want me to respond to the matter of playing with Roger again, the whole 'Pink Floyd—shall we do it again, will we not do it again?' " Gilmour acknowledges with a resigned sigh. And although he and Waters "are at least now on speaking terms" after Live 8, "thinking about [*Pink Floyd*] is so far from my mind. I've kind of left that behind. I'm very happy and satisfied with the little team I've got around me these days, and I don't see myself going back to Pink Floyd."

The group was courted with generous offers to tour again after the Live 8 show. "But touring without making a new record is just cashing in, isn't it," Gilmour says. "Riding that gravy train, to coin a phrase. I mean, I wouldn't want anyone to get the impression that I'm not 100 percent happy and artistically satisfied with the work I've done in Pink Floyd over the years. I am. But my focus is different now. *This* is what I'm doing."

"This" actually amounts to the establishment of a true solo career for Gilmour after a couple of tentative steps in that direction many years ago. A Cambridge native with a playing style drawn from blues, R&B and psychedelia Gilmour joined Pink Floyd in 1968 to bolster, and ultimately replace, frontman Syd Barrett, who was declining into mental illness. With Gilmour, Floyd released the albums with which they made their legend, including *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here* and *The Wall*. Gilmour stepped out first with a self-titled set in 1978, then released *About Face* in 1984 during Pink Floyd's prolonged hiatus. There are, he says, "some good things" on both albums, but neither achieved the standard he desired.

He hit pay dirt with *On an Island*, however. Coming 22 years after *About Face* and 12 years after Pink Floyd's last studio album, *The Division Bell*, "it was the most satisfying and enjoyable experience," he says. Whereas he had studiously avoided sounding like Pink Floyd on *About Face*, he felt no such pressure when making *On an Island*. "I finally got to a place where I felt free from any pressure. It's allowed me to be very free with working out exactly what I wanted to do, not feeling I had to live up to any Pink Floyd thing and not feeling like I *had* to avoid sounding like Pink Floyd. I think I'm finding my

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Performing in Vienne, July 2006



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Richard Wright performing with Floyd at Live 8, July 2005

feet as an artist after all these years—or finding new feet.”

Obtaining fresh collaborators was vital to that development. Chief among them was Phil Manzanera, the former Roxy Music guitarist who resides near Gilmour in Sussex and became both coproducer of *On an Island* and a member of Gilmour’s touring band.

“Phil’s an old friend,” Gilmour says. “Phil is a rock. He’s a really solid guy, and he’s just full of boundless enthusiasm. He has great taste; I can bounce ideas off him and he’ll always come up with good suggestions. It’s nice to have a sounding board that sort of helps convince you that you’re right about some of the things you’re going for—and sometimes that you’re not right about some of those things.”

Having Manzanera out on tour, however, was something Gilmour never expected. “I felt it was possibly a little bit beneath his dignity coming out as a *rhythm* guitar player, but he really wanted to do it. He said ‘Could I come?’ and I said, ‘Sure, come, that’d be great.’

“And he is actually the best rhythm guitar player—I don’t know if that’s how one puts that as a compliment. But as part of the engine room of what we were doing—drums [Steve DiStanislaio], bass [latter-day Floyd cohort Guy Pratt] and rhythm guitar—those three guys were rock solid and steady all the time. I’d been so used to trying to be the rhythm *and* the lead guitar player always. With them I didn’t feel I had to keep that thing going all the time. I could just stay out and do my thing.”

A case in point, Gilmour notes, is the guitar solo on “Comfortably Numb,” which never ceases to levitate the song and overall performance and does so to even greater effect on *Live in Gdansk*.

“It’s very hard to pin that sort of thing down,” he says. “It has a moving chord structure, but I can play the whole thing in B minor without worrying about any chords at all. Anything that works in B minor will work on that whole thing, even though there are three or four other chords involved in that sequence. It’s one of those lucky sequences that’s just a great vehicle for playing over.”

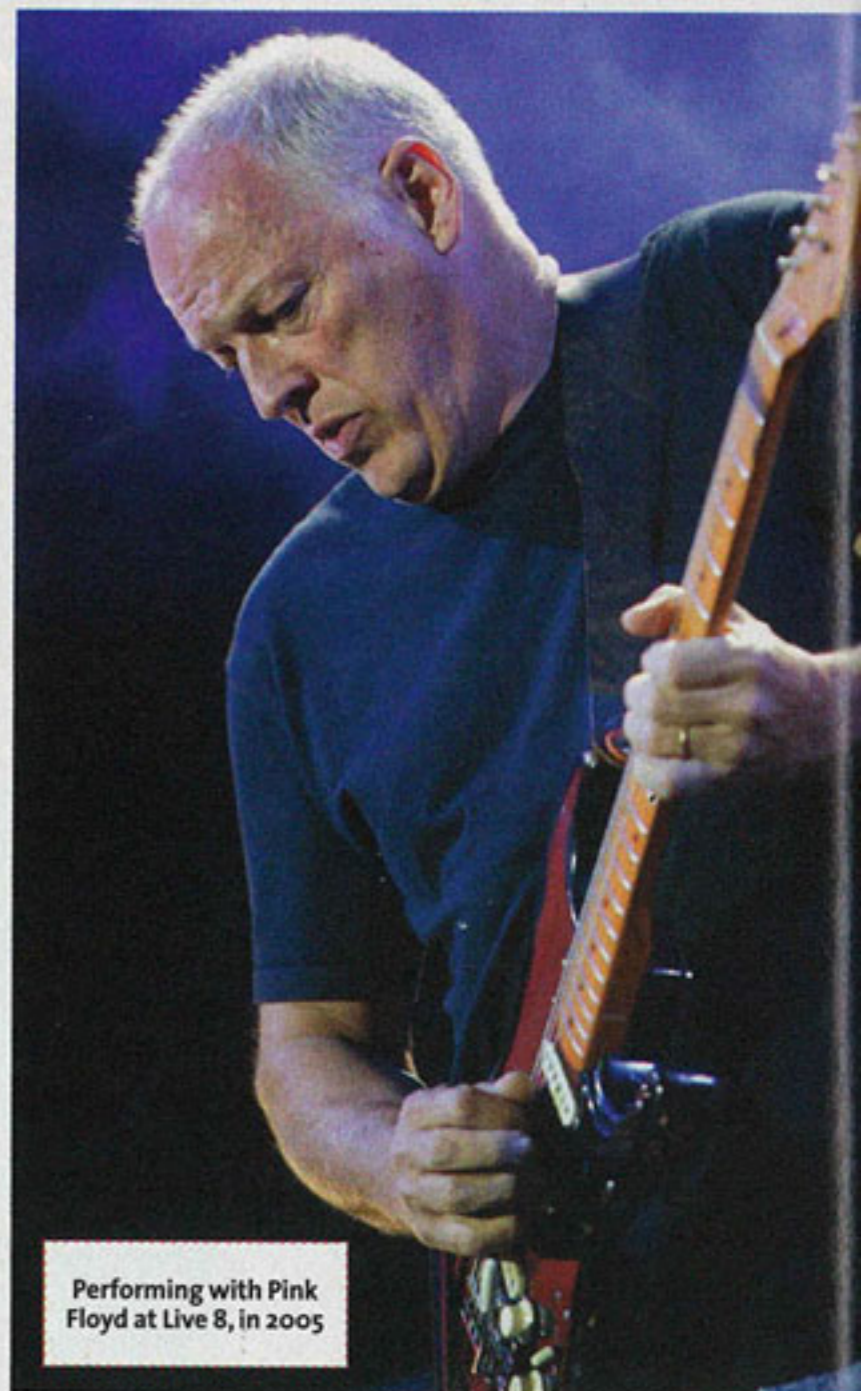
“I SAW PEOPLE DOWN IN THE FRONT ROWS HEARING ‘ECHOES’ FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THEIR LIVES, AND THERE WERE TEARS IN THEIR EYES.”

Having the late Wright perform on both *On an Island*—he sang lead on “A Pocket Full of Stones” in addition to playing keyboards—and the subsequent tour was also special for Gilmour. “We just go back a helluva long way,” he says of Wright, who left Pink Floyd in the early Eighties but was reinstated by Gilmour for the group’s 1987 *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* tour. “Rick had some difficult years in the middle of our complicated career. But he’s got soul, I suppose you would say. He adds something to the music that gives it a greater depth of feeling. He’s a great Hammond [organ] player and a great piano player, and having him along definitely added to the whole flavor.”

It wasn’t easy to get Wright fully inte-

grated into the proceedings, though. “Well, I asked him if he’d appear on the album,” Gilmour recalls, “and play on a track or two, and I then asked him if he’d sing on a track. He said he would, but then he was always too busy or couldn’t make it. I kept ringing him and hassling him, and eventually I actually had to send a car around to his house and say, ‘Get in it and come to the studio now!’ That was when we were doing the last two or three mixes on the album and I had no time left, so I just kind of strong-armed him a bit...”

Nevertheless, Wright was “very keen” to go on the road with Gilmour and company, which the guitarist says “changed the whole way we were thinking about it and tempted



Performing with Pink Floyd at Live 8, in 2005

us to touch more of the old Pink Floyd stuff. We worked it around him a little bit and it brought him right out of his shell, and it made me appreciate him more for his great abilities.

“And it showed me once again things you can forget that are great about people and showed me again the sort of telepathy we had with each other. I know where he’s going; he knows where I’m going. It was really lovely having him along, and I know he loved it, too.”

Live in Gdansk ably captures the career overview Gilmour embraced during the *On an Island* tour, though he confesses that the package is “slightly not representative” of the tour. The original plan, he explains, was to do the usual kind of live album, with songs taken from various shows on the itinerary. But a special performance on August 26, 2006, changed his mind.

Gilmour was asked to play Gdansk to mark the 26th anniversary of the founding of the on Solidarity (Solidarnosc) Trade Union at the Polish city’s famous shipyards, where the movement started. The occasion agreed with Gilmour’s political sensibilities, which “tend toward the left side” even if he’s less publicly outspoken than Roger Waters. The setting, with its massive, long-dormant cranes hovering in the background, appealed to Gilmour’s still-Floydian sense for epic theatricality.

And the idea of using an orchestra conducted by film score composer Zbigniew Preisner, who had also worked on *On an Island*, sealed the deal.

“Zbigniew is Polish,” Gilmour says, “so it seemed like the natural thing was to have a chat with him. He reckoned he could get an orchestra out there and rehearse it for me, and I wouldn’t have to do very much. He said we could just get up and off it would go.

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"And so it did. Zbigniew is a brilliant chap, and if he tells me it's gonna work fine, then who am I to disbelieve him? We did a sound-check in the afternoon, and that was it—he had them all rehearsed and ready to go. It was a great, great show, so when it came time to [compile the live album] we thought, Oh, well, we'll just do the whole thing from [the] Gdansk [concert]."

In keeping with the concert's grand scale, Gilmour is offering *Live in Gdansk* in no fewer than six versions: standard (two CDs), three-disc (two CDs plus DVD), four-disc (adds a 5.1 surround audio disc with additional tracks), five-disc "Deluxe" (adds even bonus tracks), a five-LP vinyl edition and an iTunes edition.

Among the renditions of *On an Island* songs and an assortment of Pink Floyd favorites, *Live in Gdansk* has some significant treats for the Floyd faithful. The epic "Echoes," Gilmour explains, was included to reclaim it from what he felt were inferior treatments during the 1987–88 Pink Floyd tour.

"It never quite hit the spot, and I'd been left with a bit of a sour memory of it," Gilmour recalls. "Someone must have suggested we do it this time—I can't remember who—but it became the highlight of the thing. It was just lovely to play it, and all the guys really got to grips with it in a way we hadn't managed to before. They understood it much better, and it was really good to let Rick get

loose and out front there. I saw people down in the front rows hearing 'Echoes' for the first time in their lives, and there were tears in their eyes. It was quite strange—extraordinary, really."

His decision to include "Fat Old Sun" was quite possibly less altruistic. The song, the first he ever wrote for Pink Floyd, appeared on 1970's *Atom Heart Mother*. Thirty years later, when Gilmour suggested including it on the 2001 Pink Floyd best-of, *Echoes*, his bandmates vetoed the idea. "None of the other guys were having it," Gilmour says. Of the song's inclusion in the Gdansk set, he suggests, "maybe it was my way of saying, 'Fuck you. It's great.'"

The Deluxe five-disc edition of *Live in Gdansk* features Barrett's "Dominoes" as a nod to Gilmour's predecessor. For the concert, Gilmour also performed "Astronomy Domine," a song from Floyd's 1967 debut, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. "That's a song from before my time," he acknowledges, "but it's a song I performed many, many times with Pink Floyd when I first joined them and always really enjoyed it. I felt free to dig stuff out of our catalog going back to the very first days, to throw in anything from any era of our history and make it be something—to show where it fits within what we do now."

What Gilmour will do next is a logical question, but not one he himself appears to be considering. He's interested in pushing *Live in Gdansk* and has purposely not engaged in any discussion about *The Dark Side of the Moon*'s 35th anniversary. "You know," he says, "I hate to be reminded of my albums' birthdays. I just know that record companies and other people are going to want to celebrate it by promoting it again and try to get poor, unsuspecting punters to go out and buy yet another copy."

He does, however, have "a lot of material left over" from *On an Island* and is continuing to write more—some with his second wife, British writer Polly Samson, who co-wrote seven of *On an Island*'s 10 tracks. "I have got a lot of start points," Gilmour says. "That usually starts to get the creative juices flowing and then you start to write new material and away you go. It's always good to have bits of music to start with."

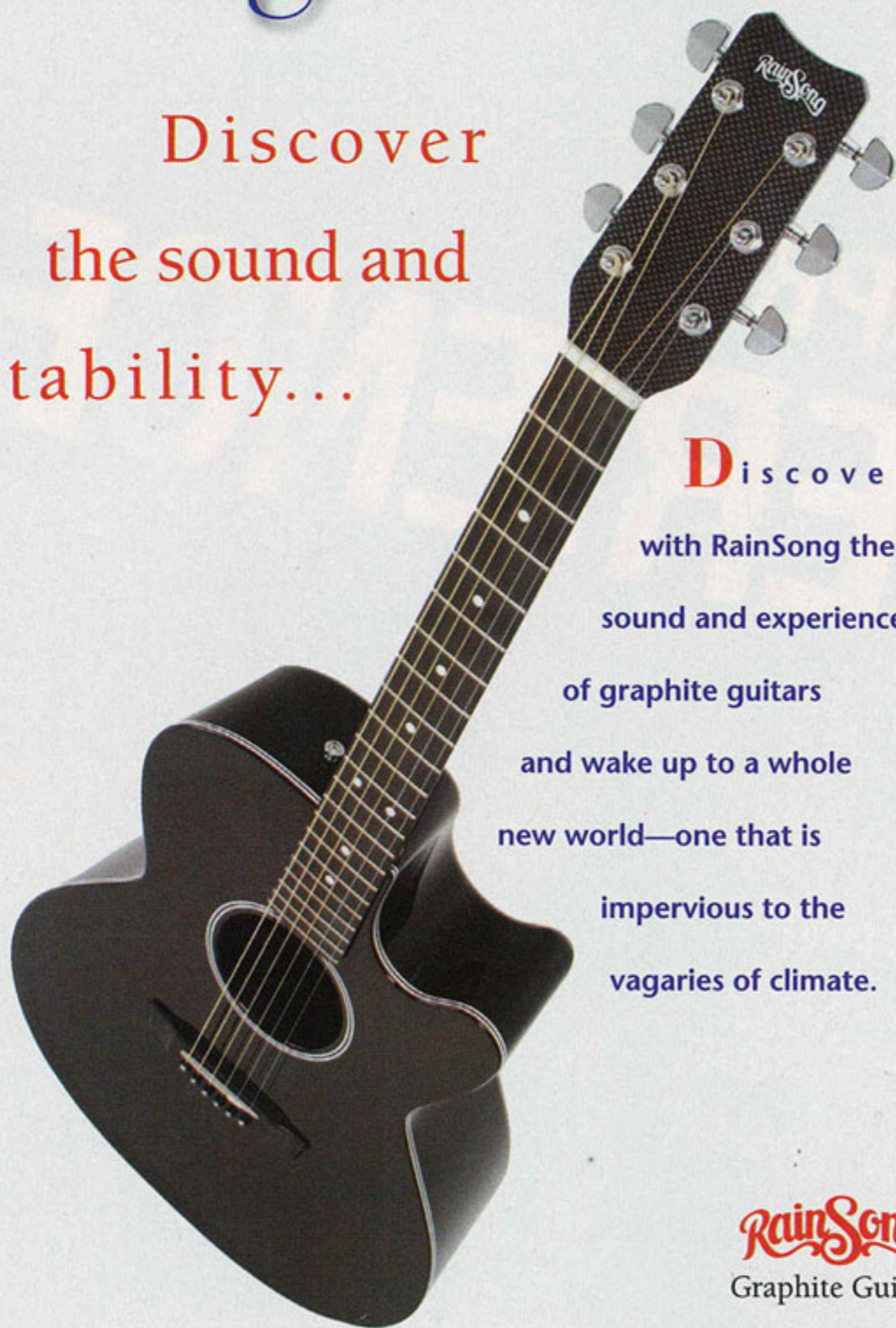
But even though he doubts there will be another 22-year wait for his next solo album—which would put him at a stately 84 years old—Gilmour won't be pinned down to any specific plans.

"I don't make any plans far into the future," he explains. "I just made [On an Island] and did some shows and enjoyed myself in a fairly relaxed sort of way, and I'll get 'round to doing something again before too long, I hope."

"But I have no idea. I haven't planned anything. I don't have a huge ambition anymore. I'm in this selfishly lucky position of having more than enough money and having had more than enough fame. I just don't need that stuff these days. I just want to do stuff for me. It's entirely selfish. I want to enjoy myself and do stuff that gives me pleasure and satisfaction, and that's what I'm going to do." ●

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