Dear Dairy

**Pink Floyd** washed their hands of **Atom Heart Mother**, calling it “absolute crap.” So what possessed **David Gilmour** to perform it again 38 years later?

In June 1984, **Pink Floyd**’s Roger Waters, unequivocal as always, told **Richard Skinner** on Radio 1: “If somebody said to me now, ‘Right... here’s a million pounds, go out and play Atom Heart Mother’, I’d say: ‘You must be fucking joking... I’m not playing that rubbish!’”

**David Gilmour** has generally taken a softer line about Floyd’s experiment with orchestrated long-form composition, the 24-minute title track to the band’s first Number One album. “A good thing to have attempted which didn’t come off very well,” he told **Rolling Stone** in 2001. But elsewhere he’s said, “All I’ve ever tried to do is play music I like listening to. Some of it now, like Atom Heart Mother, strikes me as absolute crap, and I no longer want or have to play stuff I don’t enjoy.”

And yet, on Sunday 15 June, Gilmour stepped onstage at the modest Cadogan Hall in Chelsea and played **Atom Heart Mother** one more time.

The event was billed as an evening with the piece’s co-composer, Ron Geesin, and formed the opening shows at this year’s Chelsea Festival. Always a bit miffed at having been uncredited on the album’s famously oblique sleeve (though listed as a co-writer on the label), Geesin partly saw this bracing of performances over a weekend as a gentle public reminder of his role in the album, but more pertinently as an opportunity to premier some new works for brass ensemble, choir and cello, the elements he used on the **Atom Heart Mother Suite**. The brass were gathered from the **Royal College Of Music**, the choir was Canticum with conductor **Mark Forkgren**, **Caroline Dale** provided the cello solos and the band was **Mun Floyd**, an Italian tribute band who’d once made an aborted attempt to stage **AHM** and met Geesin in the process.

After entering into discussions with the festival organisers, Geesin asked Gilmour to join in. He agreed. Geesin, a twinkly Scotsman who writes poems and aphorisms (“Fanaticism is enthusiasm without the humour”) as well as idiosyncratic music for films, radio and the concert stage, opened the show with a witty piece for the brass ensemble, gave us a solo piano improvisation that sounded like a schizophrenic silent film accompanist whose medication wears off in the middle of a chase sequence, a beautiful duet for Dale’s cello and Geesin’s banjo, a solo for bass marimba and a transfixing choral work harmonising with a slightly slowed recording of a blackbird. All of it pointed nicely towards the second-half finale of **AHM**. But first, a short talk on the genesis of the piece, known as **Epic** while Geesin was working on the score, though the Floyd had been performing a version prior to his involvement that they’d called **The Amazing Pudding**.

“The opening section is clearly a critical statement about the nature of so-called ‘progressive rock’,” Geesin declares from his lectern. “I’ve got very mixed feelings about rock music. I find my part embodies a dilemma for and against. The group’s drone is on the tonic note of E, my brass drones pull and twist that in tension, up and down, never...”
settling on it... It could have been called Argument In E Minor For Band And Orchestra."

During the hot summer of 1970, Geesin, who'd met the band through Nick Mason, laboured in his top floor studio in Ladbroke Grove on Epic and the score to The Body (with songs by Waters), clad only in underpants. His arrangement was composed to a spare backing track laid down by Mason and Waters, with melodic suggestions by Wright and Gilmour. While recording it at Abbey Road in June, Geesin quarrelled with the brass players of the EMI Pops Orchestra, who had trouble getting it right, and stood down as conductor in favour of choirmaster John Aldiss.

On Thursday 18 July 1970, Floyd and Geesin were at the BBC's Paris Cinema studios in Lower Regent Street preparing a session for John Peel's Radio 1 Sunday Concert series. Roger Waters didn't consider either of the working titles sufficiently interesting; they needed a better one before the afternoon's recording. During a break, Geesin pointed to that day's Evening Standard. "Your title's in there," he announced. Waters flicked through the paper and his eyes lit on a small story about a woman, Constance Ladell, who had just been fitted with a prototype pacemaker that contained traces of radioactive plutonium. The headline read: "Atom Heart Mother Named".

When the record appeared in October 1970, with its famous cover image of a cow, the Atom Heart Mother Suite had six sections. "On the score the piece was divided into sections A to Q, but we assumed it was one track," says Geesin. But Floyd manager Steve O'Rourke pointed out that, under American publishing rules, one track, no matter how long, would be treated as one song, a fifth of the record rather than half of it. So they divided it into six sections purely for commercial reasons. Geesin suggested some titles, such as "Father's Shout", sparked by his admiration for Earl "Fatha" Hines. The band came up with "Breast Milk and Funky Dung" after designer Storm Thorgerson delivered the cover. The cow, subsequently identified as Lulabelle III of Potters Bar, was a random idea.

Thorgerson came up with after the group confessed they hadn't a clue what the work was about, but wanted something "non-psychedelic". Yet to the consumer Atom Heart Mother seemed cohesive, summoning various aspects of the countryside, the rumble of thunderful skies, the whiff of freshly chewed grass and the impending clamour and stench of the slaughter house for its cover star.

Nicely enigmatic is how it all remains. Maintaining the Floyd's characteristic detachment, David Gilmour says nothing onstage at Cadogan Hall, except with his guitar and a bottleneck lap steel, pealing the lyrical, blues-marbled solos his fans come to hear. Geesin is at the grand piano. The choir sounds stunning. The show receives a standing ovation from a packed house of 900. Gilmour smiles and embraces Geesin, clearly having enjoyed the outing. There is a brief encore reprising the final section, Remergence, the crowd rises again and, as Geesin and the musicians take their bows, Gilmour slips out the back, leaving Chelsea before the applause has died down. JIM IRVIN