



By Andy Gill

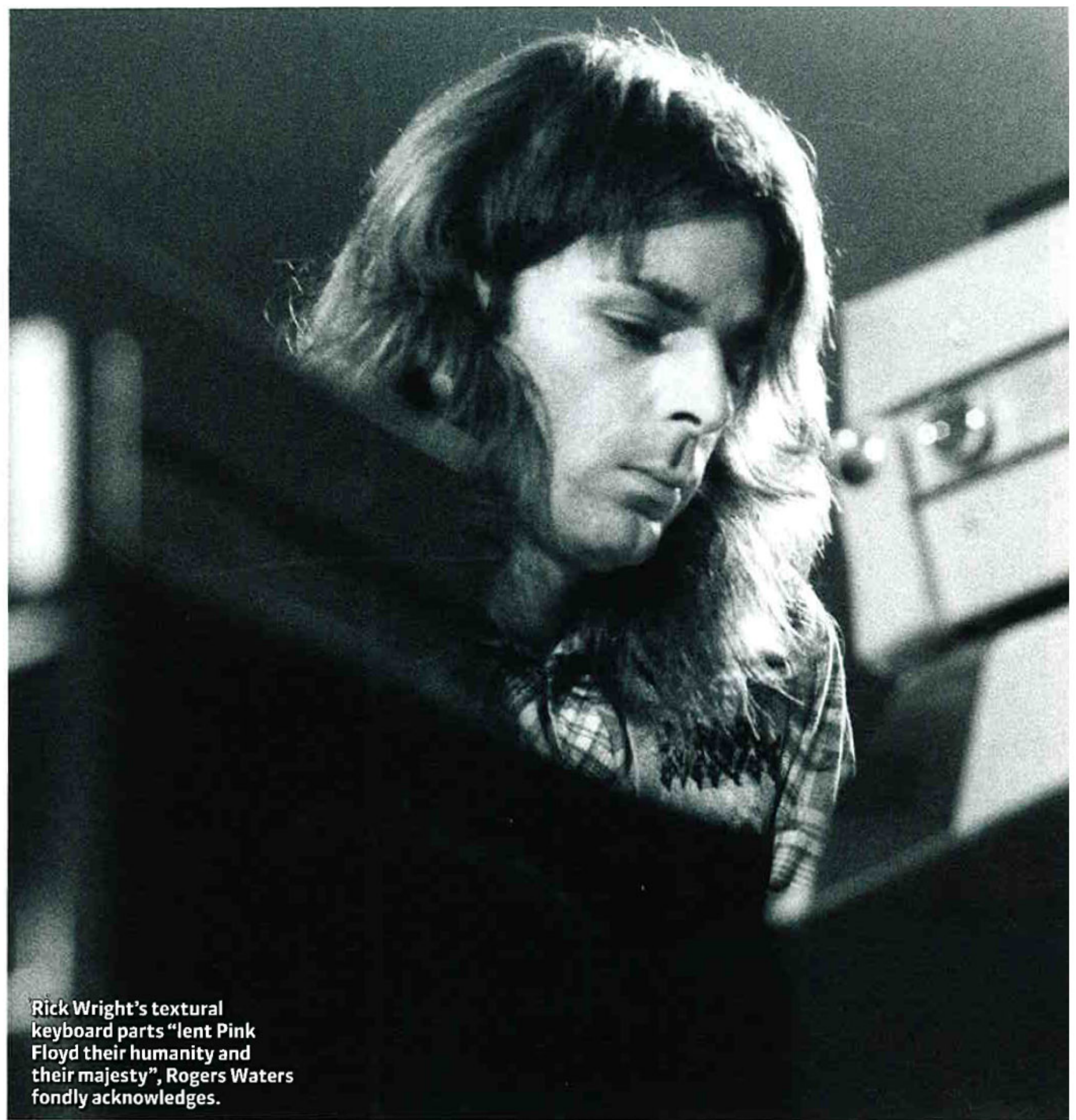
WITH THE DEATH from cancer recently of Rick Wright, the faint lingering hopes of another Pink Floyd reunion have been finally dashed.

Ironically for a group that not once but twice managed to successfully replace its leading songwriter from within the band's ranks, the loss of Wright's distinctive keyboards leaves a more insurmountable gap in the band's sound.

"He's probably the underrated one really," drummer Nick Mason told me, "because a lot of the band's sound has to do with the way that Rick used the keyboards. Whether it was the piano – that ghastly Farfisa – or the Hammond, the way he would layer things underneath was an important part of the sound, I think, and it tends to get forgotten amongst the welter of guitar solos, which are of course the mainstay of rock and roll. It's that layering that actually connected the different elements of our music together; it was perhaps the most important part."

"I was very sad to hear of Rick's premature death," Roger Waters told me in an email (he and Wright had a sometimes stormy relationship). "I knew he'd been ill, but the end came suddenly and shockingly. As for the man and his work, it is hard to overstate the importance of his musical voice in the Pink Floyd of the '60s & '70s. The intriguing, jazz-influenced modulations and voicings so familiar in *Us And Them* and *Great Gig In The Sky*, which lent those compositions both their extraordinary humanity and their majesty, are omnipresent in all the collaborative work the four of us did in those times. Rick's ear for harmonic progression was our bedrock."

Born in Pinner, Middlesex in 1943, Wright was educated at Haberdashers' Aske's, and became a precocious enthusiast for all forms of music. Before he was in his teens, he had mastered piano, trombone, trumpet and guitar, and only a few years later could be found at Soho jazz clubs, eagerly soaking up some of the influences that would colour his own



Rick Wright's textural keyboard parts "lent Pink Floyd their humanity and their majesty", Rogers Waters fondly acknowledges.

RICK WRIGHT

1943-2008

Selfless psychedelic sound pioneer

approach to music. He first met the other future members of Pink Floyd in 1962 at Regent Street Polytechnic, where Roger Waters, Nick Mason and he all enrolled to study architecture.

"I have no idea why Rick even turned up," muses Mason. "He wasn't the least bit interested in architecture! I suspect someone must have said to him, 'You can't make money in music, you'd better do architecture!' They booted him out at the end of the year, and he went off to music college – a lot more sensible for him."

The three were drawn together in a curiously non-volitional way, at the behest of a third party. "Someone asked us if we knew anyone in that year who played an instrument, because they wanted to do a demo for some publishers

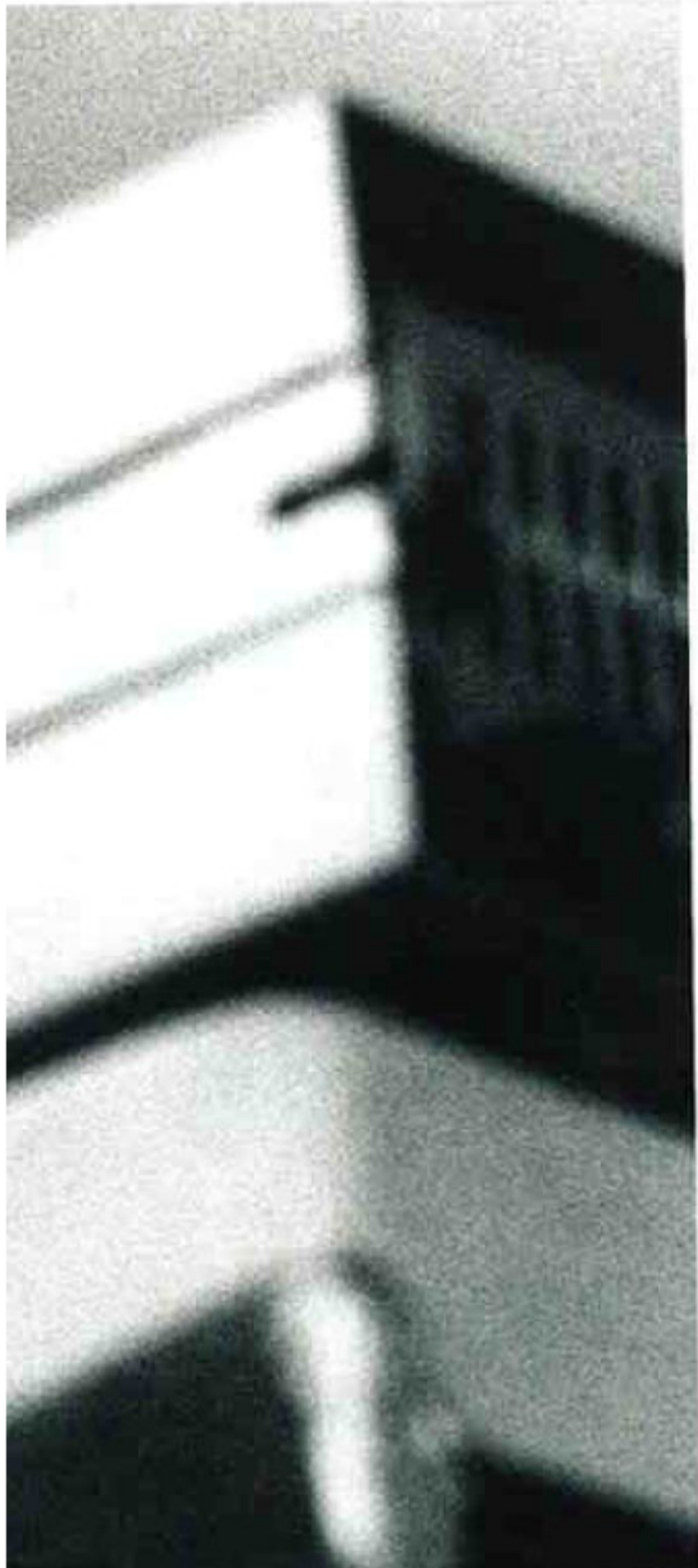
– and a few of us muttered that we did," recalls Mason. "That's how Roger, Rick and myself first got together. There's another, more famous story – which is true – of Roger meeting me for the first time and wanting to borrow my car, and of Roger meeting Rick for the first time and trying to get a cigarette off of Rick, who wasn't having it!"

This was probably the source of Wright's apocryphal reputation as something of a skinflint, which provided the band with much amusement through the years. "He wasn't really a skinflint, but I think we then decided to turn him into the Jack Benny of the group," chuckles Mason. "We went to enormous lengths to ensure that it was his mini-bar that was raided first, and there were one or two tours where we

took to signing his name on every bill in the hotel! But there are fantastic stories of the band on tour, eating out in Japan, and Rick arguing about how many prawns he'd had. Quite large prawns, admittedly, but still prawns."

With other musicians including Rick's future wife Juliette Gale, the three future Floyds first began playing together as Sigma 6, which subsequently became The Architectural (and sometimes Screaming) Abdabs, and with the addition of Waters' Cambridge friend Syd Barrett, The Tea Set, before the group ultimately settled on its classic first lineup as Pink Floyd, a name derived from two obscure blues musicians, Pink Anderson and Floyd Council.

Managed by a couple of vicars' sons, Peter Jenner and Andrew King, the Floyd started playing seriously around London and the provinces – though "seriously", in their context, was a matter of taste rather than fact, as they indulged their interests in the musical avant-garde through onstage experimental jams and the earliest effects devices.



playing "wasn't music". Their managers took the promoter to court, but to the group's chagrin they actually lost the case. They did, however, secure a recording contract with EMI and were immediately successful with the singles *Arnold Layne* and *See Emily Play* and their first album *Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, the bulk of which was written by Barrett. With Barrett's well-documented drug use taking its toll, he was replaced by guitarist Dave Gilmour, and Rick Wright's keyboards took on a decisive role in the band's new direction, establishing atmosphere and three-dimensionality.



(From left) Gilmour, Mason, Waters and Wright – "lovely, gentle, genuine" – in 1968; (above) the brief, tantalising reunion at Live 8, 2005.

In London, this kind of thing was readily accepted by the cool hipperati of the burgeoning counterculture, but was roundly scorned by provincial audiences. Eventually, a low point was reached when the group played a Catholic youth club, after which the promoter refused to pay them on the grounds that what they were

"It's been the Floyd's thing, ever since we started, to have a more subtle balance between quiet and loud," Wright told me a few years ago. "That's not a trademark of the Floyd, but it's certainly something we do very well. For me, that might possibly have come from being brought up on classical music, in which the symphonies have huge

dynamics." Other keyboardists in the rising progressive-rock scene were more concerned with virtuoso displays and theatrical bombast, but the classically influenced pads, washes and progressions favoured by Wright would ultimately be more influential on subsequent generations of mood-orientated ambient/house musicians, as would the characteristically brooding, melancholy tone he brought to the band's sound.

On their 1969 double album *Ummagumma*, the four members each contributed their own section: Wright's was a four-part piece influenced by Stockhausen, called *Sisyphus*. His input was also crucial to 1971's *Meddle*, whose side-long track *Echoes*, built around a Wright piano part, set the tone for their future direction, which would peak two years later with the understated global blockbuster *Dark Side Of The Moon*, undoubtedly the world's most popular artwork about madness and estrangement.

"Sometimes," explained Wright, "I'll sit down at rehearsal or soundcheck and play something, improvise a little, and David will come over and say, 'What was that? It's really good!', and I'll say, 'I have no idea, I can't repeat it.' Sometimes I play something, and I haven't recorded it, and I don't know where it came from, why the hands did what they did, what key it was in, anything. Sometimes, for me, playing music is like meditating – and those moments can be really, really precious."

However, as *Dark Side Of The Moon* and its follow-up *Wish You Were Here* propelled the Floyd to global stardom, and their staging strategies grew more and more grandiose, tensions started to grow within the band, as the others bridled at Roger Waters' domination of its creative direction. Wright sought refuge in his first solo album, *Wet Dream* (1978), but things came to a head while they were working on Waters' magnum opus, *The Wall*, eventually resulting in Wright's removal from the band.

"He was negotiated out of the band in 1979," recalls Mason. "It was Roger, really, beginning to wonder why he should bother being in a band with other people, and why he shouldn't just get on with it by himself. He and Rick had a huge falling-out, over Rick not wanting to work over his holiday while everyone else was working flat out to get the record finished. I think Roger just saw red at that point. And to keep the record straight, I should just add that Dave and

Gilmour would say, "What's that? It's really good." And Wright would reply, "I have no idea, I can't repeat it"

I were too mealy-mouthed to do anything about it, and decided to gang up with the school bully, rather than fight for truth and justice!"

When Waters subsequently carried through his threat to quit the Floyd, Wright would be drafted back into the band in 1986,

but there was a contractual arrangement preventing him from rejoining as a full member. Accordingly, he appeared on 1987's *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason* as a session player, before taking a more proactive part in the final Pink Floyd album, 1995's *The Division Bell*, co-writing over half of the 11 tracks and taking lead vocals on *Wearing The Inside Out*, a track he co-wrote with former Slapp Happy member Anthony Moore. It was this alliance with Moore that would furnish the material for Rick's second solo album, *Broken China*. "I wrote the tunes and sang only nonsense words," explained Wright, "then Moore came and dressed them with the lyrics."

The final chapter to the Pink Floyd story came with the band's reunion to play the Live 8 concert, an emotional affair for band and audience alike, though Wright did have some reservations about its more corporate aspects. Since then he played on *On An Island*, the 2006 solo album by Gilmour, who said of his friend and colleague, "He was such a lovely, gentle, genuine man, and will be missed terribly by so many who loved him." He is survived by his third wife, Millie, their son Ben and Jamie and Gala, his children from his marriage to Juliette Gale. ■