

How Rick made the Floyd fly

Guitarist David Gilmour recalls the joy of working with the Pink Floyd keyboard player Rick Wright who died this week. By Neil McCormick

Keyboard player Rick Wright died on Monday, aged 65, bringing the long saga of Pink Floyd to a sad and conclusive end. Yet music, as ever, remains a potent force of life, even in the face of death. Next week, by complete coincidence, the last ever live appearance by this most elegant and inventive of musicians is to be released on CD and DVD. Here Wright can be found singing and playing with real joy and creative exuberance on such Floyd classics as *Breathe, Time, Astronomy Domine* and *Shine on You Crazy Diamond*.

The album is Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour's *Live in Gdansk*, recorded in Poland on Aug 26, 2006 for the final date of Gilmour's *On an Island* tour. After a long spell in the musical wilderness following a dramatic loss of confidence (perhaps brought on by the conflict with bassist Roger Waters during the making of *The Wall* that led to Wright's sacking from Pink Floyd), Wright seemed to have recovered his old self again as a collaborator and guest on Gilmour's acclaimed solo project. "It's probably the most fun, most professional and easiest tour I've ever done in my life," Wright said in 2006.

"Rick wanted to come and play on the record, to be part of what I was doing," Gilmour told me last week, speaking with no hint of what was to come. Although it was known that Wright had been ill, his outlook had been optimistic and his friends generally hopeful of a positive outcome in his battle with cancer.

"He was very happy to be a sideman, and that was a fantastically good decision for him and for me. We

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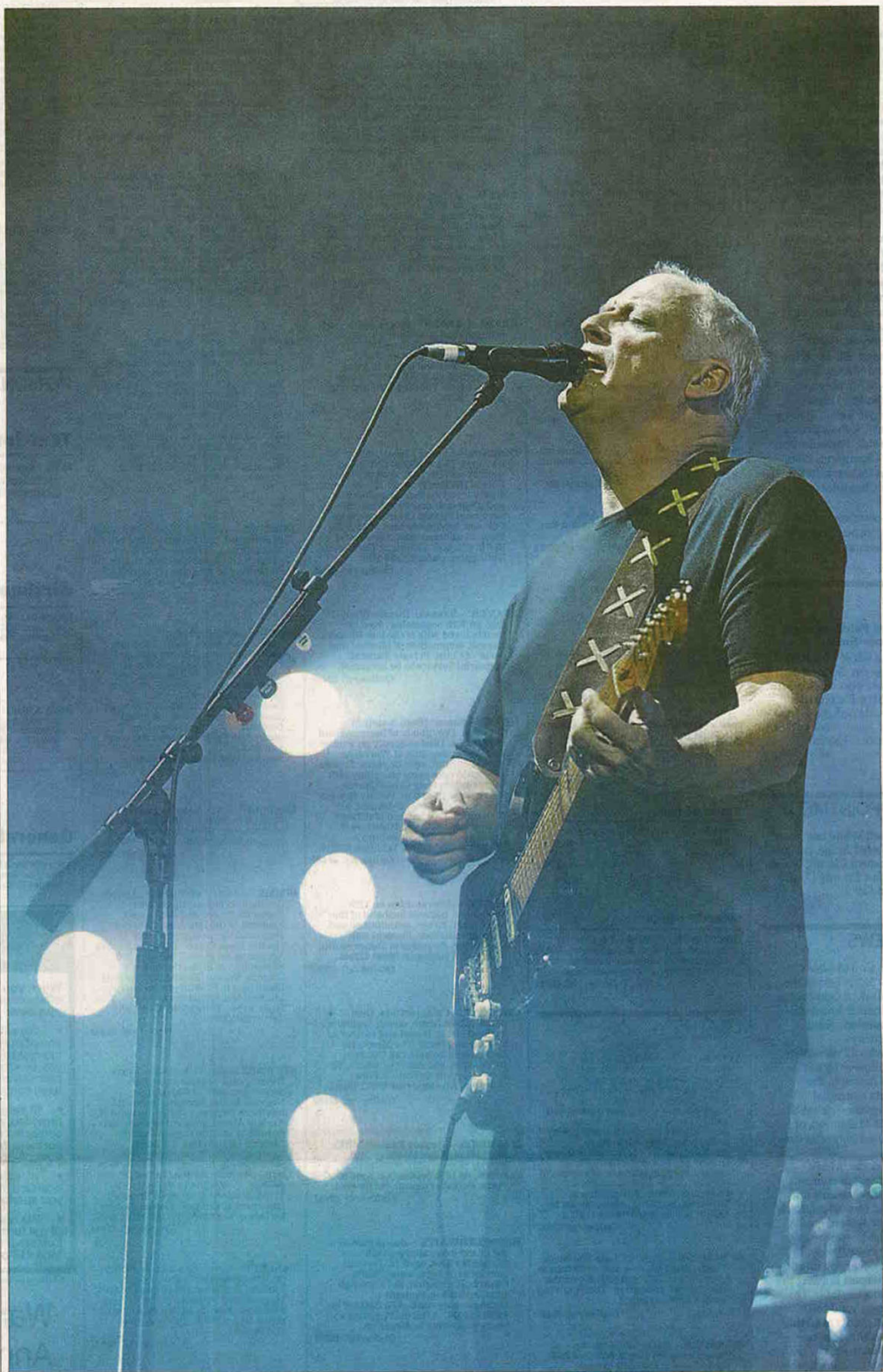
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both benefited enormously, and he grew back into himself. His confidence had taken some poundings over the years but he was an absolutely vital, essential part of what Pink Floyd was. Whether through familiarity or serendipity we have a musical telepathy and vocal blend that is a little bit magical, I think. It was an absolute joy to have him along."

Wright, for his part, was clearly delighted to be back on stage. He was a real musician's musician, an unshowy but sublime player whose tasteful interjections and flowing chord sequences allowed other musicians the freedom to fly. As the tour concluded, Gilmour recalls that the band (featuring musicians from later Floyd ensembles) were performing with exhilarating confidence. "When you are having a great night, everything just sings, and you have the confidence to let it all go. There are enough cover bands doing karaoke versions of Pink Floyd music where they stick exactly to the arrangements but I don't feel so constrained, whatever I play it's going to sound like me anyway. If you are in the mood, there is a moment when it feels as if the brain is bypassed. You want to feel the note and let your fingers find the way."

I met up with Gilmour in West Sussex, where he lives amid acres of manicured grounds in a surprisingly modest farmhouse, crowded with all the signs of active family life. Gilmour's wife, Polly, pottered about in a kitchen decorated with children's paintings. She has become Gilmour's songwriting collaborator, her poetic lyrics lending a gentle, feminine quality to his solo work in contrast to Waters' angrily political intellectualism. Gilmour has a small studio above adjoining stables, where he recorded most of *On an Island*. Pianos, keyboards, microphones and racks of guitars are arrayed around comfortable chairs. There is a large oil painting of the Battersea power station (famously featured on the cover of Floyd's *Animals* LP), and a shelf with a small library of Floyd books, recordings and videos.

"I was 21 when I joined Pink Floyd," Gilmour points out. "My entire adult life was spent on the music we made together. There's enough there that I still love." The new live album features over an hour of Floyd classics, but the emphasis has shifted since the early, experimental days that established them as the most ground-breaking rock group of their era. "There was an awful lot of stuff we did



Space rock: David Gilmour during his *On an Island* tour. Left: Pink Floyd in the Seventies, from left, Rick Wright, David Gilmour, Roger Waters and Nick Mason

that made me cringe with embarrassment when I heard it afterwards. These days, I suppose I would be prepared to sacrifice the occasional nirvana-like few seconds to get rid of the dross, because there was a lot. I want it to be more of a joy."

Gilmour enjoyed the brief reunion at Live8, though the experience convinced him there was no future in the band. "There's a trade-off, whether you think something artistically viable and fantastic would make it worth the aggravation of putting it together, but it's very unlikely we could ever reach the heady heights of *Dark Side of the Moon*. We did achieve an enormous amount, but we have done what we have done together."

It is academic now. Yet the new album offers an

enthraling 25-minute performance of Floyd's space-rock masterpiece *Echoes*, with Wright taking lead vocals and trading jazzy, improvised flourishes with Gilmour, concluding with a final, fading synth note. "*Echoes* was magic. It really came to life. We were having a whale of a time playing it, and it became the highlight of the show every night."

Just four days after our encounter, news came through that Wright had died. In his tribute to his friend's gentle, unassuming character but soulful voice and playing, Gilmour has noted: "The audience reaction to his appearances on my tour in 2006 was hugely uplifting, and it's a mark of his modesty that those standing ovations came as a huge surprise to him (though not to the rest of us). I loved him and I will miss him enormously."

Obituary: Page 31

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Rick Wright

Keyboard player whose inventive use of electric organ and synthesiser helped to define the music of Pink Floyd

RICK WRIGHT, who died on Monday from cancer aged 65, was keyboard player and occasional singer and song-writer with the rock band Pink Floyd; although he kept a low profile, he established a reputation for his inventive use of electric organs and synthesisers and was responsible for the richly-textured, dreamy keyboard layers that underpinned and defined the mature Floyd style.

Wright had met fellow band members Roger Waters and Nick Mason while studying architecture at Regent Street Polytechnic. They went through various changes of name (including the Architectural Abdabs) until 1965, when they were joined by the charismatic Syd Barrett and became Pink Floyd. Wright played on the group's pioneering first album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967), alongside Barrett, Waters and Mason.

By the time the album was released, however, Barrett's behaviour had become worryingly erratic due to his prodigious appetite for LSD. In 1968 David Gilmour was drafted in, initially to hold things together, then, as Barrett's psychosis took hold, as a full-time replacement. It was Waters who took the lead in driving Barrett out and subsequently took over as de facto band leader.

In the early days of Pink Floyd, Wright was seen as second only to Barrett as the musical force in the group. As well as singing several of his own compositions, such as *Remember a Day* and *Paintbox*, he also sang the lead on Barrett compositions such as *Astronomy Domine* and *Matilda Mother*.

Under Waters's direction Pink Floyd began to chart a new artistic course. Instead of the whimsical psychedelic mess of blues, fairytales, novelty songs and space-age riffs characteristic of the Barrett era, the group began to set a more solemn tone with slow, dreamy, portentous pieces which sometimes filled entire sides of LPs. The band's next major release, *Ummagumma* (1969), featured a 13-minute instrumental suite by Wright called *Sisyphus*. *Atom Heart Mother* (1970) included a "rock-orchestral" suite lasting more than 20 minutes, while Wright contributed the dreamily nostalgic *Summer '68*.

The new formula proved wildly popular, and in the early 1970s Pink Floyd "concept" albums broke records effortlessly. One in four British households is said to own a copy of *Dark Side of the Moon*, released in 1973. Wright co-wrote much of the album, including *Breathe*, *Time*, *Us and Them*, and most notably the piano-led *The Great Gig in the Sky*. *Wish You Were Here* (1975) was almost as successful.

But Wright's relationship with Waters had never been an easy one, and as Waters consolidated his hold over the group's musical direction tensions rose to the surface. In 1979 Waters fired Wright and allowed him to play only as a sideman during live concerts for the album *The Wall*. Ironically, Wright became the only



Wright: one in four British households is said to possess a copy of *Dark Side of the Moon*, much of which he co-wrote

member of Pink Floyd to profit from these hugely spectacular but ruinously expensive gigs, since they resulted in a net financial loss that had to be borne by the three remaining members of the band.

In 1981 band members learnt that the company which managed their wealth was heading for collapse through a combination of inept management and fraud, leaving them facing potential tax bills for 83 per cent of monies which they no longer had. Wright claimed that Waters used the crisis as a pretext to remove him altogether: "What he said was 'Either you leave or' – because he'd written *The Wall* – 'I'm going to scrap everything

we've done'," Wright recalled. "There was this big personality clash between me and Roger, and at the end of the day I realised that I couldn't work with this person anyway – so I left."

Without Wright, the band recorded one more album (*The Final Cut*, 1983) and limped on amid growing acrimony until 1985, when Waters himself resigned, whereupon Pink Floyd promptly re-formed as a trio with Wright and Mason under the leadership of David Gilmour for the 1987 album *A Momentary Lapse of Reason*. In fact, Wright performed as a session musician on the album, but by 1988 he had

resumed his place as a full band member.

The group continued to record and tour as Pink Floyd – after winning a lengthy legal battle over the rights to the name with Waters. They made two more albums, including the massively successful *The Division Bell*, for which Wright co-wrote five songs and sang lead vocals on *Wearing the Inside Out*. The subsequent tour was the most lucrative in rock history up until that time.

Richard William Wright was born on July 28 1943 at Pinner, Middlesex. His father was chief biochemist at Unigate Dairies. He was brought up in Hatch End and

educated at Haberdashers' Aske's school, where he played piano, trumpet and trombone, and later the guitar. He went on to study architecture (by mistake, he later claimed) at the Regent Street Polytechnic College of Architecture, dropping out when his musical interests took over.

In the early days of Pink Floyd Wright dabbled with brass – saxophone, trumpet and trombone – before settling on the Farfisa organ as his main instrument on stage (as well as piano and Hammond Organ in the studio).

In 1984 Wright formed a new musical duo with Dave Harris (from the band Fashion) called Zee. They signed a record deal with Atlantic and released one album, *Identity*. But it was a commercial and critical flop, and it was with some relief that Wright rejoined Pink Floyd after Waters's departure.

In 1978 Wright had released a solo album, *Wet Dream*, a timid affair which he later admitted had been "an experimental mistake". After the *Division Bell* tour, Pink Floyd fell dormant and Wright returned to solo work, releasing an album, *Broken China* (1996), featuring contributions from Sinéad O'Connor and Sting's guitarist, Dominique Miller.

Dedicated to the subject of clinical depression, it was well received and seemed to mark a new phase in Wright's musical development, with extensive use of computer-based recording and production techniques. It sold poorly, however: "There are a few million people out there who'll go out and buy the next Pink Floyd record without hearing a note," Wright observed. "There may be a few diehards who'll buy my solo records, but not many."

Pink Floyd fans became excited when, in July 2005, Roger Waters agreed to rejoin the rest of the band for Live 8 in Hyde Park, the first time the classic line-up had performed together in public since the June 1981 *Wall* concerts at Earl's Court. When Waters told the crowd: "It's actually quite emotional standing up here with these three guys after all these years," hopes were raised that they might patch up their differences and embark on a tour.

Wright was quick to prick the balloon. "Everyone who loves Pink Floyd wants it to happen. But I don't feel I need it, not musically and not personally," he remarked. "Maybe if Roger comes back as a different person – charming and nice, with really good ideas."

Wright was happy, though, to continue collaborating with David Gilmour. He contributed keyboards and backing vocals to Gilmour's solo album, *On an Island* (2006), and performed with his touring band in Europe and North America.

Rick Wright owned a house in France and enjoyed relaxing on a 65ft yacht which he kept in the Virgin Islands.

His first two marriages were dissolved. He is survived by his third wife, Millie, by their son, and by a son and daughter of his first marriage.