



Richard Wright wrote *The Great Gig in the Sky* Photograph: Karl Grant/Retna

# Pink Floyd's Richard Wright dies

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**Robert Booth**

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Richard Wright, keyboard player and founding member of Pink Floyd, died of cancer yesterday at the age of 65.

Wright's most famous composition was *The Great Gig in the Sky*, on the album *The Dark Side of the Moon*. It begins with a voice saying, "I am not frightened to die" and is for many the band's most moving

song. The track was one of five Wright is credited with on the album, and he featured on every Pink Floyd tour, where he became famous for his ghostly sound.

"He was gentle, unassuming and private, but his soulful voice and playing were vital, magical components of our most recognised Pink Floyd sound," said guitarist David Gilmour.

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# Richard Wright

## Keyboard player and founder member of Pink Floyd

**T**hough Pink Floyd's performance at Live 8 in July 2005 prompted speculation about a more permanent reunion, the death from cancer of the band's keyboard player Rick Wright, at the age of 65, puts paid to the notion. Though Wright was even more publicity-averse than the rest of the Floyd, he was one of the group's founding members and, particularly in the early years, was regarded as one of its creative powerhouses, even if the spotlight tended to follow the erratically brilliant Syd Barrett.

Wright was born in north-west London, and after attending the independent Haberdashers' Aske's school, he met future bandmates Nick Mason and Roger Waters while studying architecture at what was then the Regent Street Polytechnic. Hence the first band they formed was named the Architectural Abdabs (having briefly been Sigma 6), though the addition of Camberwell Art School student Barrett prompted a name-change to the Pink Floyd Sound, in honour of American bluesmen Pink Anderson and Floyd Council. This changed into Pink Floyd.

Barrett's singular compositions such as See Emily Play and Arnold Layne became the Floyd's calling cards, and

he wrote 10 of the 11 songs on their 1967 debut album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, but Wright sang lead on some tracks and felt inspired by Barrett's influence on the music. "It became more improvised around the guitar and keyboards," he recalled. "Roger started playing the bass as a lead instrument and I started to introduce more of my classical feel."

Barrett was eased out of the band in 1968 following an alarming deterioration in his mental state, with guitarist David Gilmour being drafted in as replacement. The Floyd's music began to move away from conventional pop-song structure towards extended instrumental pieces, with Wright co-composing the 12-minute title track of their second album, *A Saucerful of Secrets* (1968), as well as chipping in a couple of other songs. "Everyone assumed we were doing drugs, but that wasn't the case," Wright observed. "It's a mistake thinking that drugs supplied Pink Floyd with the inspiration. The ones who took drugs were the ones who came to see the shows."

For 1969's *Ummagumma*, Wright devised the four-part instrumental piece *Sisyphus*, which suggested he had been listening to Stockhausen and other avant-garde composers. He remained prominent among the song-writing credits for *Atom Heart Mother* and 1971's *Meddle*, co-writing the latter's prog-rock epic *Echoes*, which filled the disc's second side. He was also in his element when the group were commissioned to write the soundtrack to Barbet Schroeder's film *Obscured By Clouds*, their recording of which went to No 6 in

the UK charts and cracked the American Top 50 in 1972. However, the Floyd were now moving into the Waters era, which brought them phenomenal commercial success at the expense of prolonged internal strife. *The Dark Side of the Moon* (1973) showcased Waters' lyrics set to music by various combinations of band-members – Wright composed *The Great Gig in the Sky* and *Us and Them* – and went on to sell 20m copies and spent an absurd 741 weeks in the American charts.

Wright contributed significantly to the band's elegy to Syd Barrett, *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, from *Wish You Were Here* (1975), but his relationship with Waters hit rock bottom during sessions for Waters' most bombastic brain-child, *The Wall*. Waters threatened to scrap the entire project if Wright stayed in the band, and when the Floyd toured *The Wall* in 1980-81, Wright was onstage merely as a salaried session musician. Ironically, this meant that Wright was the only one to turn a profit, since the shows were ruinously expensive to stage and the losses were born by the three full band-members.

Waters and the other members parted company after *The Final Cut* (1983), on which Wright did not appear, but he was back behind the keyboards for the band's first Waters-less album, *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* (1987). Wright had been pursuing some extra-curricular work, notably his 1978 solo album *Wet Dream* and a somewhat improbable collaboration called *Zee* with Dave Harris, from the New Romantic band *Fashion*, which resulted in an unsuccessful album, *Identity*. However,

he clearly felt more comfortable in the Pink Floyd environment, and co-wrote five songs from *The Division Bell* (1995).

In 1996 the group were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall Of Fame, the same year that Wright released his second solo album *Broken China*, featuring vocals by Sinéad O'Connor and lyrics by Anthony Moore, formerly with avant-gardists *Slapp Happy*. "I wrote the tunes and sang only nonsense words," said Wright, admitting to being a nervous singer. "Then came Moore and dressed them with the lyrics." The album was dedicated to his third wife, Millie, whom he had helped through a nervous breakdown.

Wright followed his appearance with Pink Floyd at Live 8 by playing on Gilmour's solo album, *On an Island* (2006), and he toured Europe and America with Gilmour's band that year, contributing vocals as well as keyboards. The concerts generated spin-off CD and DVD packages recorded at London's Royal Albert Hall and in Gdansk, Poland. At the time of his death, Wright had been working on a new solo album, which was thought to comprise a series of instrumental pieces. "He was such a lovely, gentle, genuine man and will be missed terribly by so many who loved him," said Gilmour.

Wright is survived by Millie and their son Ben. He also had two children with his first wife, Juliette Gale. He divorced his second wife Franka in 1994.

**Adam Sweeting**

*Richard William Wright, musician, born July 28 1943; died September 15 2008*



**Pink Floyd in 1973. From left: Nick Mason, David Gilmour, Roger Waters and Wright Photograph: Michael Ochs/Corbis**