

# RICHARD WRIGHT

## Keyboard player with Pink Floyd

**A**LTHOUGH RICK Wright played keyboards for Pink Floyd, he never played the star. With his melancholy looks and gaunt features, Wright would be lost in a crowd, and he was happy that way. Making music as creatively as possible was what mattered to him and there are few moments more sublime than his measured playing on "Us And Them", his composition on *The Dark Side Of The Moon* (1973).

Richard William Wright was born in Pinner, Middlesex in July 1943, the son of the chief biochemist at Unigate Dairies, and was raised with his sisters in nearby Hatch End. He was educated at the independent Haberdashers' Aske's School in Elstree, and he studied music determinedly, playing piano, trumpet and trombone as well as the guitar at home. He developed an interest in jazz and as soon as he was old enough, he frequented London clubs.

In 1962, Wright enrolled as an architectural student at Regent Street Polytechnic and befriended two other students, Roger Waters and Nick Mason. With other friends they formed a rhythm and blues group, Sigma 6, whose female vocalist, Juliette Gale, Wright married in 1964. The group went through various name and personnel changes, but Wright, Waters and Mason remained constant. Wright dropped out of the college in 1964 and enrolled at the London College of Music.

Waters was keen on working with his neighbour Syd Barrett, and the quartet formed a new band, called at first the Tea Set and then, at Barrett's suggestion, the Pink Floyd Sound. The name came from two bluesmen, Pink Anderson and Floyd Council, and they soon shortened the name to Pink Floyd.

As the group became more adventurous, Wright's talents were appreciated. He could play all manner of keyboards, as well as on his childhood instruments. He knew jazz and classical repertoires and so contributed in many ways to the group's development, notably in the extended instrumental "Interstellar Overdrive", which became their first anthem. He was a good harmony singer and a competent, if uncomfortable, lead vocalist.

By 1966, Pink Floyd were gaining a reputation around London for playing the experimental music which came to be known as psychedelia. They had a

residency at the Marquee's Spontaneous Underground sessions and played at the Roundhouse and UFO, their performances incorporating film and innovative light shows. In August 1967, they starred in the "14 Hour Technicolor Dream" at Alexandra Palace, an event which helped define the Summer of Love.

Syd Barrett was the dominant songwriter in the band and his "Arnold Layne" was their first single. An EMI executive memorably asked, at an early meeting with the band, "Which one's Pink?" They made the Top 10 with another Barrett composition, "See Emily Play", and although the DJ Pete Murray derided the group as "a con", their first album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, its title taken from *Wind in the Willows*, was a success.

With his increasing drug dependency, Barrett became unreliable, however, and Waters recruited David Gilmour on guitar. Although it was intended that Barrett would continue writing for the band, he soon quit. Wright played on his solo albums, *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett*, both released in 1970.

With their new line-up, Pink Floyd made *A Saucerful of Secrets*, released in July 1968. Wright wrote "Remember a Day" and "See-Saw" and contributed to the 12-minute title track, which became a staple of their repertoire. Pink Floyd headlined at a concert in Hyde Park and featured in Peter Whitehead's 1967 documentary about the swinging capital, *Tonite Let's All Make Love In London*.

In 1969, Pink Floyd scored *More*, a film about heroin addiction by the French director Barbet Schroeder, and the following year they scored Michelangelo Antonioni's dreamlike *Zabriskie Point*. For Christmas 1969, they released a double album, *Ummagumma*. The live record featured the band in Birmingham and Manchester, while the studio record showcased individual members for half a side each. Wright's contribution, "Sisyphus - Parts 1-4", was influenced by Stockhausen.

In June 1970, the band premiered a new suite of songs, *Atom Heart Mother*, at the Bath Festival, complete with a choir, orchestra and fireworks. Although a little pompous, the resulting album topped the album charts and elevated Pink Floyd to major stardom.

The next album, *Meddle*, combined



**'Which one's Pink?': Pink Floyd in 1967, from left, Rick Wright, Syd Barrett, Roger Waters, Nick Mason** DEZO HOFFMAN/REX

a suite of songs, "One of These Days", and the atmospheric, 23-minute "Echoes". This was featured in the 1974 film, *Pink Floyd at Pompeii*. This was followed by another Schroeder film, *La Vallée* (1972), whose score the band released on the album *Obscured by Clouds*.

In 1973, Pink Floyd, now working with the bright, young engineer Alan Parsons, but producing themselves, created their best-known work - and technological masterpiece - *The Dark Side of the Moon*. Its songs were about madness and the pressures of modern living, and the music and sounds complemented the lyrics. Wright wrote "The Great Gig In The Sky" (later used for a Nurofen advertisement) and co-wrote "Breathe", "Any Colour You Like" and, utilising an unused melody from *Zabriskie Point*, "Us And Them". His electric piano featured prominently on "Money".

Although the album did not top the UK chart, it made No 2 and remained on the listings for six years. By then they were ignoring singles and the album sold 20m copies worldwide.

In 1975, Pink Floyd premiered *Wish You Were Here* at the Knebworth Festival, with quadrasonic sound and Spitfires flying on cue. The album was a tribute to Syd Barrett, including

"Shine On You Crazy Diamond". It also topped the UK album charts.

During 1976, during the photoshoot for their next album, *Animals*, a 40ft inflatable pig attached to Battersea Power Station drifted away from its moorings. The aviation authority had to issue a warning to pilots to beware of a flying pig. *Animals* was another chart-topping album, but Wright's solo project, *Wet Dream* (1978), only sold to dedicated fans.

The band's most lavish and ambitious project was *The Wall*. On tour, Waters had been experiencing a gulf between himself and the audience, and planned to erect a real barrier on stage. After Wright returned late from holiday, however, he clashed with Waters, who demanded his dismissal. Wright left, but the album was a huge success and a rare single, "Another Brick In The Wall (Part II)", topped the UK charts for five weeks over Christmas 1979. Wright was contracted as a musician for the world tour of *The Wall*. The lavish production was crippling expensive, and as Wright was salaried he did not suffer the financial losses sustained by the others.

From 1983 to 1985, Wright worked with Dave Harris, of the post-punk band Fashion, under the name Zee. Their album *Identity* failed to find an audi-

ence, however. Meanwhile, Waters had left Pink Floyd and he took unsuccessful legal action to prevent Gilmour and Mason from using the band name. Wright rejoined in 1987 but was not reinstated as a full member until the following year. He appeared as a guest on *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* (1987) and was back writing with the band for the soundtrack of *La Carrera Panamericana*, a 1992 film about the Mexican classic-car race.

In 1994, Wright wrote five songs and sang lead vocals on "Wearing The Inside Out" on Pink Floyd's final studio album *The Division Bell*. In 1996, he made another solo album, *Broken China*, a computer-based suite of songs about depression featuring Sinéad O'Connor on vocals.

In July 2005, Wright, Gilmour, Mason and Waters reunited triumphantly for the Live 8 concert in London's Hyde Park. Wright played on Gilmour's album *On An Island* (2006) and he was working on a solo album at the time of his death.

**Spencer Leigh**

*Richard William Wright, musician: born London 28 July 1943; married 1964 Juliette Gale (marriage dissolved 1982; one son, one daughter), secondly 1984 (marriage dissolved 1994), thirdly 1996 (one son); died 15 September 2008.*