

The Wright side of

Pink Floyd's keyboard player Rick Wright, who died of cancer last week, gave his last-ever interview to Paul Sexton, in which he spoke about the band's glory years and their conflicted Live8 reunion

THE ROCK revolution of the Sixties and Seventies produced some of the biggest stars and best-selling records in history. However, not every member of a multi-platinum band had to spend their lives wondering what the tabloids would say about them or wear a disguise every time they left the house. The life of Rick Wright, which ended last Monday when he died of cancer at 65 was one of happy anonymity.

"All these people that complain, 'Oh, we can't go out because we'll get recognised or be hassled'. It's this celebrity thing," he told me. "You're asking for it. I don't want to prove anything. I don't need to go out and advertise myself."

Few bands have inspired such devotion among millions of fans worldwide as Pink Floyd but their keyboard player confessed to being mystified about such obsessiveness. His job, as he saw it, was simply to show up and contribute his creativity, whether as a keyboard player, co-writer of such Floyd classics as *The Great Gig In The Sky* and *Us And Them*, or occasionally as an atmospheric lead vocalist.

"I don't know what makes Pink Floyd what they are," he said, continuing with one of the greater understatements you're likely to hear. "*Dark Side Of The Moon* touched a nerve in lots of people, musically



TOGETHER AGAIN: Dave Gilmour, Roger Waters, Nick Mason and Rick Wright at Live8 in 2005

and lyrically. It was a fine album. When you put it on, whoever listened to it needed to listen to the whole thing."

In July of last year, I did what turned out to be the last interview with one of rock music's most softly-spoken figures. His death after a relatively short, nine-month fight with cancer deprives us of someone who always wanted his music to do his talking for him.

The man I met, slight of build and long since grey of hair, may have had lines on his face that hinted at a rock 'n' roll past. He exuded a quiet contentment, though, tempered only by a slight unease at being in the rare spotlight of a retrospective interview.

Wright, the epitome of the jobbing musician, was the war baby from Pinner, Middlesex who played piano, trumpet, trombone and guitar as an adolescent and let his love of music rule his head.

"My first passion was jazz," he said. "Miles Davis, John Coltrane, the be-bop jazz musicians, not necessarily pianists. And there was an eastern influence. I always remember Miles Davis said, 'Notes aren't important, it's the spaces in between.'"

That perceptive enthusiasm was Wright's compass even when his career seemed headed elsewhere.

"I was in architecture school but I was determined to be a musician. When I was at polytechnic, I had private lessons in composition then went to the London School of Music. Thank God I went there, because that's where I met Roger [Waters] and Nick [Mason]."

When Syd Barrett, a friend of Waters, arrived the equation changed dramatically. "We weren't regarded as a pop band," said Wright. "We were playing long, experimental pieces. When it came to the first album [1967's *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*], Syd just came up with all these wonderful songs very quickly.

"I'm playing these esoteric chord progressions on it and it made me feel very good, because we were

totally experimenting, we weren't playing to a formula. That's what's so great about that album."

Piper was made at Abbey Road. "The most amazing thing was to have the Beatles next door recording *Sgt Pepper*," he recalled. "Paul McCartney came in to see us a few times. We were all saying, 'We'd love to go into their session', and we were invited one day.

"Paul was very nice, so was Ringo and George was wonderful but Lennon... didn't want to know. John Lennon was my hero. Maybe he was totally focused, thinking, 'What is this ridiculous psychedelic band doing?'"

The first flush of Floyd would see them charting with Barrett's psychedelic pop creations such as *See Emily Play* and *Arnold Layne* but their future lay in album experimentation. Barrett's, sadly, also lay in chemical experimentation and his acid excesses would eventually render him unable to play.

"There was a terrible time where I was sharing a flat with Syd in Richmond. I think *Ally Pally* [where Floyd played at the International Love-In of May 1967] was when we realised he'd really lost it.

"[Co-manager] Andrew King had a flat in Richmond, he said, 'You live with Syd and see if you can help him'. It was very difficult, we were doing a gig and the band had decided there was no way Syd could play. So I had to tell him, 'I'm going out to get a packet of cigarettes'. I went out, did the gig, came back and he said, 'Have you got the cigarettes yet?' This was about 12 hours later. It was very sad."

AS FLOYD grew into one of the first bands of the stadium rock era with ever more ambitious live shows, Wright was an integral part of their sound. He helped to shape historic albums such as *Dark Side* (which went on to log an astonishing 741 weeks on Billboard's US album chart) and *Wish You Were Here*.

However, by the late Seventies the battle for artistic control of the band between Waters and guitarist David Gilmour left Wright as the injured passenger. His role was downgraded by Waters, who eventually ousted him altogether before himself leaving in poisonous acrimony in 1983. "The Wall is a brilliant record but I wasn't on *The Final Cut*, that's when they all came to blows. Then David, myself and Nick decided to carry on Pink Floyd."

Wright told me that as much as he enjoyed the quartet's memorable reunion of 2005 for Live8, it proved to him that they could never tour again. "Our ideas are so different musically," he said with great tact.

Still, his music continued to speak for him, eloquently. Not just on the timeless Floyd albums but also in recent happy times. One of Wright's last performances is released tomorrow in the form of Gilmour's CD and DVD package *Live In Gdansk*.

"I think David said it was probably the happiest tour he'd ever done and it was for me. We were playing in small theatres. I do not like playing in huge stadiums. It's a money-making thing and you need to make money, I'm not putting it down. If the Floyd [were to] go out today, they'd have to play in stadiums, just to recoup the costs of huge light shows and so on, because that's what people expect.

"David went out and did an intimate tour and it was wonderful. I think we performed some of the Floyd stuff better than we'd ever done."

As a final memory of Rick Wright, it's a happy one. "Some musicians want to be the fastest and cleverest but for me that's not the point about music," he said. "For me it's all about feeling and emotion.

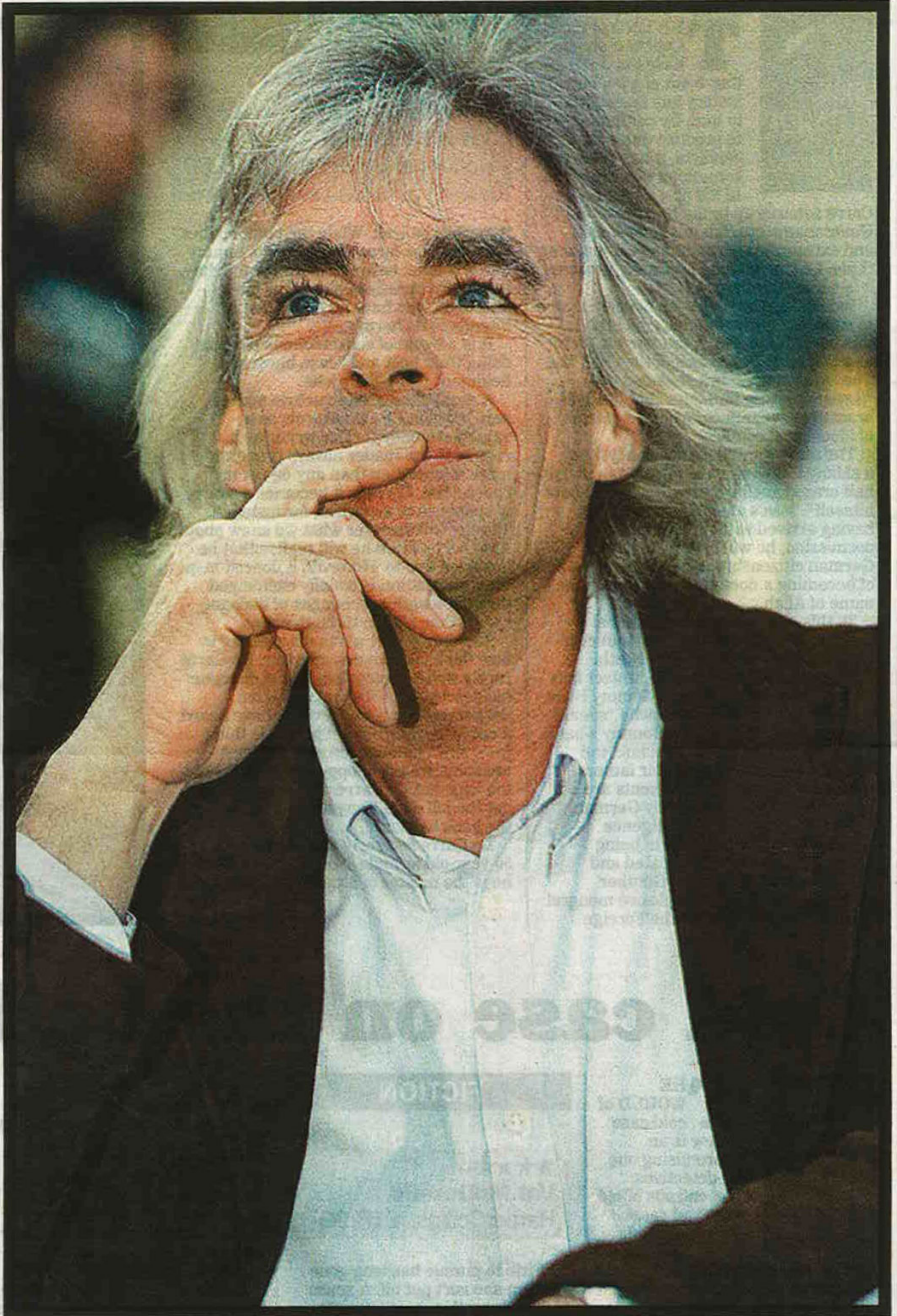
"You need technique and I'm always trying to develop that but in the end it's not what the hands do. It's what the head is telling the hands to do."

● *David Gilmour's Live In Gdansk CD and DVD, featuring Rick Wright, is released tomorrow by EMI.*

'For me, it's all about emotion'

the moon

Pictures: UPPA; REX



INFLUENTIAL: Rick Wright went from quiet London suburbia to global acclaim with Pink Floyd