Reviews

Pink Floyd minus the inflatable pigs

David Gilmour
Royal Festival Hall, London

Last week, it was reported that David Gilmour had sold his London mansion, donating the £24m proceeds to the homeless charity Shelter. This news confirmed the suspicion that Gilmour is the nicest member of Pink Floyd. Of course, being the nicest member of Pink Floyd is a bit like being the most skilful football team in Antarctica — you're not exactly overburdened by competition.

Plenty of rock bands have been snooty and aloof, but only Pink Floyd built a wall between themselves and their fans. Their music made grand moral pronouncements: war is bad, greed is bad. The grandiloquent solemnity of their presentation suggested Pink Floyd thought they were the first people in history to work out these gleaming philosophical nuggets. Their success proved anything sounds profound if you dress it up with enough special effects.

In context, Gilmour's decision to perform two stripped-down, largely acoustic shows is startling. The term "striped-down" is used relatively here: Gilmour performs with a backing band, a nine-piece choir and special guests including Floyd keyboardist Richard Wright. But there are no flashy lights, films or inflatable pigs hovering overhead.

By Floyd standards, it's a skiffle pig in a school hall. It's also more challenging and invigorating than anything Pink Floyd have done in decades. Gilmour performs Shine On You Crazy Diamond solo on acoustic guitar. Condensed, stripped of its self-consciously epic synthesizer noodling, it is gently affecting in a way Pink Floyd never were: a sad smile rather than a furrowed brow.

Rendered in similarly stark fashion, Atom Heart Mother's Pat Old Sun is revealed as a fantastic song, rich with melody.

Guest Robert Wyatt, whose voice could make a Chinese takeaway menu sound heartbreakingly sad, works his magic on the horn, self-plying lyrics of Comfortably Numb. A version of Syd Barrett's idiosyncratic Dominoes captures the song's curiously languid menace. A balding man with a paunch, more like an affable chartered surveyor than one of the richest rock stars in the world, Gilmour is self-effacing and charming — not adjectives usually associated with Pink Floyd.

He occasionally fluffs notes, to the delight of the many balding, paunchy men in the audience. They go as wild as the sedate.environs permit. Every time Gilmour launches into a solo, lusty male voices shout 'Gowaaaaan Dave!' as if he's about to beat the keeper at Old Trafford.

Roger Waters still carries the banner for Pink Floyd's pomposity. Adverts for his forthcoming London Arena dates modestly describe him as "Roger Waters, creative genius". Meanwhile, Gilmour's unpretentious live show has done something quite remarkable: uncovered a warmth and humanity in the music of rock's least lovable megastars.

Alessio Petridis

'Gowaaaaan Dave!'... David Gilmour at the Royal Festival Hall Photograph: Angela Lubrano