Reinvented rock god shines on as 21st-century folk hero

John Bungey forgives David Gilmour his faults in an uneven show at Festival Hall

FOR fans of Pink Floyd a chance to see David Gilmour in the relatively intimate setting of the Festival Hall is a thrilling one.

This, after all, is the frontman whom many have only glimpsed as an ant-sized figure from row 2,001 at Wembley Arena, or separated by several acres of teeming humanity on the fields of Knebworth.

A blizzard of underpowered flashbulbs greets his appearance to sing a solo acoustic Shine on You Crazy Diamond. During Comfortably Numb the audience applaud before he starts his celebrated guitar solo as well as afterwards. Gilmour beams happily. A solid figure in blue shirt and sensible slacks, he looks less like a rock god than someone who has wandered out of a DIY advertisement.

The guitarist is presenting the first of three shows on the South Bank in which the psychedelic grandeur of stadium Floyd has been reinvented as 21st-century folk. It’s a semi-acoustic affair with cello, string bass and a nine-strong choir. There are famous Floyd songs (Wish You Were Here, Coming Back to Life), a less famous Floyd song (Fat Old Sun) plus Syd Barrett’s Dominoes.

One unlikely triumph is an aria from Bizet’s The Pearl Fishers, Je crois entendre encore, in which Gilmour’s tenor is buoyed to unexpected heights by the cello of Caroline Dale. The choir’s close harmonies are gorgeous. After High Hopes, Gilmour gets them to reprise their parts “without all this racket going on”.

Other aspects of the show are less well-drilled. Richard Wright, the Floyd’s keyboardist, appears to sing a track from his Broken China album (cue a further volley from the amateur paparazzi) but he forgets the words and Gilmour takes over. When a sax solo fails to appear, Gilmour turns to see that Dick Parry has wandered off the stage. We laugh as they restart but at £45 for a good seat we’re not here for an open rehearsal.

There are many moments of low-key beauty, but two thirds of the way through, the show drags a little. Without the traditional distractions of flying pigs and exploding light shows you appreciate just how many mid-tempo songs of a vaguely melancholic air the Floyd wrote in four-four time. (Drumming with the band was rarely a high-octane gig, which is probably why Nick Mason took to racing cars.)

But then we get the sublime Comfortably Numb, with Robert Wyatt singing the verses, and an electric reprise of Crazy Diamond, and much is forgiven. The night closes gently with a lullaby, Hushabye Mountain. So farewell David, see you again. But just make sure Richard learns his lines next time.