Pink Floyd are one of the biggest bands in rock history. They are also regarded as dour and grumpy. David Gilmour wants to put the record straight. By Alexis Petridis

‘WE HAD VAST AMOUNTS OF FUN. NO ONE SEEMED TO SPOT THAT’
of rock stars have become rich and famous, but—at least until Radiohead, to whom Gilmour chucklingly refers as “poor old Radiohead”—only Pink Floyd have become rich and famous by selling alienation, madness, misery and death.

The end of the 1960s, Pink Floyd were a jobbing progressive-rock band, who had some lofty ideas involving quadrangular sound, collaborations with orchestras and choirs and playing live in ruins. More often than not, the ideas didn’t work, as 1970’s symphonic Aenigma Mother, an album Gilmour succinctly described as “shit”. Their genius leader Syd Barrett had long since left not just the band but the planet, thanks to his prodigious appetite for LSD.

One theory suggests that Barrett’s breakdown lent Pink Floyd a melancholy and a gimlet-eyed ambition lacking in their more idealistic hippy contemporaries. Gilmour is less sure. “Maybe we’re confusing two things here. I don’t think hippy idealism is the same thing as taking lots of LSD and partying. We were all ambitious as musicians. I suppose the hippy movement seemed rather anti-ambition, anti-material gain. I certainly don’t think I’m motivated by rampant materialism. I can’t say I’ve ever objected to earning a few quid, but it’s not my primary motivation.”

Whatever the reason, melancholy and gimlet-eyed ambition were much in evidence on 1973’s Dark Side of the Moon. State-of-the-art production and Gilmour’s note-perfect playing colluded with bassist Roger Waters’ grimly lyrical voice, which fretted about materialism and age creeping up on you. A lot of people were clearly fretting about the same things: Dark Side of the Moon spent 14 years on the US album chart, making Pink Floyd one of the biggest rock bands in history and continuously popularising them as hopelessly dour.

The band did little to refute the latter charge. The more successful they became, the grumpier their records got: 1979’s The Wall complained about virtually every aspect of being in a rock band, went on 23 times over and spawned concerts during which a polystyrene wall was constructed between band and audience. Life in Pink Floyd never looked like a barrel of laughs.

“Yeah, you know, you’re right,” says Gilmour. “There are trade-offs, but we did have good times. We were quite a good band, you know.”

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“Do I keep up with current trends?” Gilmour chuckles. “No. He thinks for a minute, and comes up with something unexpected. I think that like fellow Mike Skinner, the Steers. Being an incredibly advanced age, I don’t understand these labels, industrial garage or whatever, but that track Let’s Push Things Forward appealed to me. Why? It’s rhythmically and musically interesting, and philosophically interesting as well.”

David Gilmour’s Live in Concert DVD is out now.

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