Any squabbles the band have had in the past are so petty in this context ... if re-forming for this concert will help focus attention, then it's got to be worthwhile.

Mark Hunisgsbaum

Unlike Bob Geldof, Bono or even Elton John — one of the few British rock millionaires with a fortune larger than his own — David Gilmour has never shrouded his contribution to charity. On the contrary, the legendary Pink Floyd guitarist gives the impression that he would go to almost any lengths to avoid being in the public eye. Even when he sold his London home to Earl Spencer for £3.6m two years ago and handed the cash straight to Crisis, the charity for the homeless, the reticent Gilmour refused to make a fuss about it. "I have a bugbear that there's a lot of conscience-saving (that) goes on with putting on charitable events as vanity projects," he said at the time, "Why can't they just write out a cheque?"

Gilmour's sentiments are all the more surprising then that this week Gilmour agreed to set aside his long-standing feud with Roger Waters, Pink Floyd's bass player and the lyrical force behind The Wall and other bestselling albums, so that the band could reform to play Live 8, a gig considered by some critics to epitomise conscience-saving on an epic scale.

Gilmour and Waters have hardly spoken since Waters famously quit the band in 1985 in a row over songwriting credits and then sued his former colleagues for continuing to tour as Pink Floyd. Ever since, the four band members — Waters, Gilmour, drummer Nick Mason and keyboard player Rick Wright — have conducted business via lawyers and facsimiles, often meeting when it is absolutely necessary.

Indeed, diehard Floyd fans thought there was more chance of one of the band's inflatable pigs sprouting wings than of Gilmour and Waters ever burying the hatchet. That they have done so speaks volumes for Geldof's powers of persuasion, and possibly the implications of Live 8 to which both of the band's back catalogue ("The cynics will scoff," acknowledged Waters on Tuesday, "Screw 'em!")

But it is also demonstrated what friends of Gilmour, presumably Geldof included, have long known — namely that for all that the 59-year-old rock millionaire doth protest, it doesn't take much to prick his conscience.

"He's passionate about the homeless, but you wouldn't know it to meet him."

Mark Hunisgsbaum

Pink Floyd's guitarist has a history of generous, understated philanthropy. Now the man who sold his £3.6m house to fund a project for the homeless has gone one further: ending a bitter 22-year feud to perform at Live 8 in the US, where Dark Side spent a record 1,300 weeks on the charts.

But for all that Gilmour is now feted, he is only made it into Pink Floyd as a replacement for its founder, Syd Barrett, his friend who was forced out of the band after one attempt at reform. Gilmour got to know Barrett when they were students at Cambridge College of Arts and Technology in the early 1960s. But when Barrett moved to London, Gilmour stayed behind. In 1967, Barrett invited Gilmour from London to see Floyd record their second single, See Emily Play. The following year, with Barrett's health deteriorating, Mason invited Gilmour to replace him.

In a 1994 interview, Gilmour admitted: "I feel a debt to Syd. His bad luck was good luck for me. Of course, one can not possibly know what would have happened. But I don't have to ponder that too deeply."

But according to Mark Paytress of Mojo magazine, ponder it he does. Paytress has twice interviewed Gilmour at the farmhouse he shares with Samson and their eight children and on both occasions has been struck by how eager Gilmour has been to talk about Barrett. "He's a great evangelist for Barrett, bearing in mind that some fans have never forgiven him for replacing him," he says. According to Paytress, Gilmour also makes sure Barrett still gets regular royalty cheques.

Although Gilmour has subsequently been seen at Barrett's home in Kent and has even seen his former bandmate again on occasion, he has not spoken to the ex-Floyd member times over, he never quite escaped the label of being the fifth member of Floyd. And with his differences with Waters became public, after the band's success with 1979's The Wall, Gilmour found himself less and less in the spotlight.

The group's differences revolved around Waters's insistence that he was Floyd's creative force and Gilmour's equal standing, which he insists was the superior musician. The dispute ended badly. Waters called Floyd's first album without him "a despicable forgery." Gilmour responded that Waters was "extremely arrogant."

The Guardian's rock critic, Alex Petridis, describes it as a "very English feud." When he interviewed Gilmour in 2002, the guitarist stupefied him by saying anything that could be interpreted as a negative. "Oh, you're right," says Petridis. "However, the vitriol emerged. "When he lets the mask of English politesse slip, you can see there's a cold, quiet acrimony there," says Petridis.

After the split, instead of "hanging on in gentle degradation", as Waters put it in the lyrics to Time, Gilmour got on with his life. He released a solo album and played alongside Bryan Ferry at 1985's Live Aid — the only member of the Floyd to appear.

But the event which really transformed his life was his marriage to Samson. They met before the release of Division Bell in 1994, and she has been at his side ever since. Not only did she help him with the lyrics to that album, but she helped develop his solo project. Samson is "of great naughtiness," and encouraged Gilmour to sell it and give away the money.

But even she could not heave the rift with Waters, a "loath Gilmour, playing Cupid, to do that."

"Any squabbles Roger and the band have had in the past are so petty in this context... If re-forming for this concert will help focus attention, then it's got to be worthwhile."