And this is Me...

Pink Floyd - psychedelic adventurers who lost their leader to LSD only to emerge reborn as an inscrutable '70s rock monolith split asunder by warring egos...

David Gilmour - the sensitive teenager with a fear of death who emerged as a singular British guitar hero and piloted Floyd into the '90s.

As he releases On An Island, his first new recordings in 12 years, Gilmour talks candidly about Syd, Roger Waters and the "carnage" of the last decade.

Words: Phil Sutcliffe
Portrait: Ros Halpin
Mortality has been on my mind since

TRINGS SHIMMER, A BOWED DOUBLE-
bass growls, a saxophone sighs. Heads bowed
before the sound desk, David Gilmour and his
and two engineers listen. Again and again and
again. Red Sky At Night, a short instrumental
from his just completed solo album, On An Is-
land, is his recording debut on sax and the
bloke who does the mastering reckons there's
something off about it. Not Gilmour, perish
the thought, it's the orchestra that's flat, he
says. They run it again...

"I can't hear anything wrong," Gilmour
decides. "Time to print the fucker."

He turns and joins MOJO on an up-
holstered bench at the rear of the control
room, which is also the stern of the good
ship Astoria, the Thames houseboat studio
that Gilmour has owned for 20 years. Al-
though it's never moved since impresario Fred
Karno bought it in 1986, it's a handsome vessel, sum-
tuous with dark wood paneling and panoramic views of the river.

Apart from when the speakers thunder, it's quiet, it's decorous
d and as well-mannered as its proprietor. Nothing to proclaim
the enormity of Pink Floyd — massive artistic weight and overreaching
aspiration matched, remarkably, by huge commercial success al-
most everywhere for four decades. Nothing to reflect the fierce,
only occasionally savage, under which with the band members
tormented themselves for the last 20 years until last summer's re-
union at Live 8 which saw David and sparring partner Roger Waters
on the same stage together with Nick Mason and Richard Wright
for the first time since their final performance of The Wall on June
17, 1981 at Earl's Court.

David Gilmour (guitar, vocals) grins at MOJO. MOJO (tape re-
corder, questions) grins back. Halfway through a five-hour interview
in two locations and still, off-duty, English awkwardness and
restrains itself. On both sides. It's not that Gilmour's manner is
forbidding. Far from it. Small talk is not easy. Interviewing is rather
easier. Gilmour appears focused and, during our conversation, his
commitment to doing the best he can proves remarkable — almost
touching from a man of such innate public reticence that, in
another MOJO interview 11 years ago he told me, "It's not that I
want to talk. Maybe I'm not that verbal. My best form of ex-
ression is playing the guitar and singing.”

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ODAY GILMOUR LOOKS PLAIN-TO-SLOPPY IN JEANS
and sweater, appearing fit and well. While his face has settled
into sculpted middle-age — he's 60 on March 6, the date of the
album's release — his receding grey hair conceals a last-ditch youth
rebellion, sticking out at unkempt angles in punkish tufts. He leans
well forward, deliberate concentration combats a natural reserve.
Then, his accent lightly, his speech full of those different hesita-
tions patented by the royal mutes, he starts to explain 12 years of si-
ence since the Pink Floyd Division Bell tour ended in 1994. His ab-
sence, it transpires, is primarily down to domestic bliss; his second
marriage, to fiction writer Polly Samson, and, in short order, four
children adding to the four he had with his first wife, Ginger. So
Gilmour has been parenting young children for 30 years (his young-
est, and mobile phone screenaver, Romany, is not yet four). "The
first time around I was an ambitious rock musician," he says. "The
consequence is you're often not there. I vowed that wasn't going to happen again."

Willingly, he took to early rising and the school-run routine. He picked up the sax-
ophone, which he'd long fancied, to comple-
mentarily encourage his son Charlie, now
16. Together they went to a village hall near
his Sussex home to pass their Grade 4s be-
fore an examiner who had no idea who Gilm-
our was, or at least not yet.

And he got out more too, into the coun-
tryside. Becoming part of the scenery: so that deer, kingfishers and herons ignored
him and paraded for his pleasure. "A bit of
me feels like an old... you know," he says,
with a nod to his former hippish self. He
exercised his proclivity for "chainsaw car-
pentry" by building a treehouse and a boat-
house beside the lake he owns. Yet music
still did have a kind of amiable visceral hold on him: "Sometimes I'd
lie awake at night with a tune going round in my head and somehow
your brain knows that if you go to sleep you'll forget it so it won't let
you go to sleep until you get up and pop it onto a tape machine." It was Robert Wyatt who first got him going again, with an invita-
Gilmour got a top band of friends together for it, then much the
same combo played a few gigs the following year with guest turns by
Kate Bush and Bob Geldof. Finally, he decided to take a serious look
at the mini-discs he'd been storing ideas on throughout his years of
domestic retreat. He found he had starting points for 150 songs. He
didn't know where to begin. In May, 2004, he called in his neigh-
bour, Roxy Music guitarist Phil Manzanera, to lend a hand — just "on
Mondays in term-time" at first. By last spring he was still dithering,
in his wife's opinion: "She thought I'd go on waffling about it forever.
She said, 'You've got to decide on 10 or 12 songs and finish them.'"
So he did. With help from the missus, making On An Island a
remarkably personal statement from one of the few rock stars who
doesn't just do 'Look at me!' As we are about to find out...

Let's start with the songwriting on the new album. Your wife Polly has
written or co-written most of the lyrics...

This is the new partnership. Newish. She wrote some words for The Division
Bell. She's so much better at expressing things than I am. Whatever she wants to do
is to write something that's relevant for me... whereas I don't think that was
really the case with Roger [Waters]. So this is more me than it would ever have been with Roger. You couldn't have got more personal than a song like This Heaven, where you're singing, 'When we walk these fields/And I reach out and touch your face/This heaven is enough for me'. Did you think twice about admitting such sentiment in a song?

Um, you know, that is my life. Down the years, along with everyone else, I
have despised songs about happiness. But, to me, this works. There's an
emotional depth within an essential feeling of contentment.

And yet this album is also full of intimations of mortality.
There's a few scattered around. It's always been there in my songs.

The booklet illustration for the last track, Where We Start, has you and
Polly walking into the sunset, and the first two, Castellorizon and On
An Island, are reflections on good times with friends who have since
died, namely orchestrator Michael Kamen and Tony Howard (who
worked in agency and management for Pink Floyd for 30 years).
Yes, well Tony was older than me and Michael was in his middle fifties... it's been
carnage the last 10 years for me. My sister died. My mother died a couple of years ago. An awful lot of friends and family have... popped their clogs. It's affected me and Polly deeply. One of the songs, The Blue, with Polly's lyrics, is a sort of dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Only it's not dust, it's the sea, it's merging with the sea. We'll all end up there one day, some of us much quicker than others, and it's as real and valid a possible conclusion as... I don't want to go there really.