



“Live 8 was a great thing but it was closure. It was like sleeping with your ex-wife”

David Gilmour escapes from beneath the shadow of Pink Floyd – by Toby Manning

“The Live 8 thing
was great, but
it was closure.
It was like sleeping
with your ex-wife.
There’s no future
for Pink Floyd”

David Gilmour stands in splendid isolation on the upper deck of his houseboat studio while a discreet troupe of retainers busy themselves below deck.



The Captain's Log

David Gilmour has abandoned the ocean liner of Pink Floyd to oversee a houseboat studio on the Thames and record a reflective 60th birthday solo album. It was time to take stock: of friends, family, beliefs, philosophies – and of devious drummers and belligerent former band leaders. Feature by **TOBY MANNING**

THERE IS NOTHING to announce David Gilmour's houseboat recording studio, the Astoria, moored on the Thames near Hampton Court. By a very English, very Pink Floyd piece of evasion, the entrance to this rich man's toy is concealed across the other side of the road to the river and you walk through a pebbled, ivy-hung Edwardian grotto to get to the gentleman rock star of a certain age's version of a garden shed: a river palace built in 1900.

And there is David Gilmour on the upper deck – we recognise him now, after Live 8 – every inch the understated English gentleman: expensively crumpled in slacks and sweater, newly, briskly trim but far from buff (you can imagine him snorting at the expression), splendidly isolated but with a discreet troupe of retainers below deck, busily mastering his new album. He waves a warmly impersonal hand, and – still strikingly handsome even if the male-model prettiness is long gone – smiles his model's smile. He is quietly charismatic, but entirely inscrutable. Self-effacing but very far from humble, this is a man who knows his worth and who, whilst gracious, can discomfit you by the simple, insouciant act of behaving as if you haven't spoken at all.

He guides me around the opulently

appointed houseboat once used for the sexual assignations of its original owner, a music hall promoter. He points to a chair in an Edwardian sitting-room that's quite impossible to imagine doubling as Gilmour's live band room, offers tea and has a factotum fetch it. He is captain of his ship.

And David Gilmour, CBE, is also very much captain of Pink Floyd's ship. Even now we've had 20-odd years to get used to it, this still seems odd. Three years Roger Waters and Rick Wright's junior, and the last to join, it's comparable only to George Harrison taking over the Beatles over Lennon's breathing body, the prefects getting mugged by the new boy.

"Yes, I feel like I did stay the new boy for some time," he says, in a voice you could roll lawns with. "And Roger likes to keep people feeling like the new kid forever."

Gilmour can afford himself one of his slightly challenging, mildly mocking smiles, as Roger – Roger Waters – has long been outmanoeuvred. Gilmour is now uncontested custodian of Pink Floyd's catalogue, vetoing Waters's votes for the 2001 *Echoes* compilation; dictating the song selection at Live 8 over Waters's objections; quietly quashing the planned release of the *Pulse* DVD to avoid clashing with his album. Gilmour is crucially,

alongside drummer Nick Mason, owner of the Pink Floyd name. With Mason providing deafening hints about his availability, it is in Gilmour's gift whether the good ship Pink Floyd will ever sail again.

Pink Floyd's performance was so much the story of Live 8 that it came close to eclipsing the actual purpose of the event. The offers to reform again have been famously absurd, while the band's already monopolistic catalogue has annexed what little of the world eluded it, or just annexed it *again* – because it could.

But we are not here because of Pink Floyd, but because David Gilmour has a new album out, the solo album he initially refused to set aside to play Live 8, before more philanthropic instincts prevailed. "The whole Pink Floyd thing is a bit in my past," he says. His first album of new material since 1994's Floyd album *The Division Bell*, his first solo album since 1984's *About Face*, it is not quite the obvious step it might seem. For Gilmour's very reformation of Floyd in the '80s was due to the self-confessed lack of profile of "David Gilmour" compared to "Pink Floyd", a cottage industry pitted against a multinational brand.

"I'm not in it for career any more," he says. "I'm in it for my own personal satisfaction."

He certainly can't need the money: >>

apparently he's made this album just because he *can*. Still, he says, he needed Live 8's reaffirmation of Pink Floyd™ "like a hole in the head."

In fact, Live 8 actually *raised* Gilmour's personal profile inestimably: the human story of the Waters reconciliation makes it likely that *On An Island*, released on Gilmour's 60th birthday, will be by far his most successful solo release. While it won't disappoint Pink Floyd fans, it's somewhat quieter than past efforts, and—in a patently vague way—more personal, an album hazed with nostalgia and intimations of mortality, a real life-stage record.

"I've always had a thing about mortality," he says, "since I was 13-years-old. But I've compartmentalised it now so I can be the happy person I am," he adds with another of those Gilmour smiles.

In actual fact, in the musical equivalent of compulsively telephoning ex-girlfriends to assess the meaning of it all, Gilmour has pulled in a varied cast of people from throughout his life to help. There's a sense of stock-take, indeed conversation seems never to stray very far from *people*, the relationships that have affected David Gilmour's life for good or ill over the last 60 years. From strop bass players to the love of his life, from reclusive ex-colleagues to bearded, wheel-chair bound art-rock legends, all the gang's here.



ROBERT WYATT

Former Soft Machine drummer and vocalist; solo artist; friend since 1968; plays on *On An Island*: "It was Robert's invitation to perform at Meltdown in 2002, when

he was the curator, that got me started on this musical phase of my life," says Gilmour, affectionately. A curious pairing, although they've known each other since the Floyd and Soft Machine were touring the States in 1968, the Floyd staging a benefit in 1973 to raise money for Wyatt after his paralysis, and Nick Mason producing his classic *Rock Bottom*, it's practically impossible to imagine there being room for the delicately radical Wyatt on, say, *The Division Bell*. But with *On An Island* being an artier album than Gilmour has made in decades, Wyatt fits in perfectly, tootling away on a cornet on the instrumental *When I Close My Eyes*. "His cornet playing is as moving as his singing," says Gilmour. "I'm so pleased to have him on the album."



ROGER WATERS

Former Pink Floyd bass player and conceptualist; now solo artist and opera composer. Despite my being warned not to ask about "the rows with Roger", Gilmour's former



Four men who have been attached to each other, sometimes reluctantly, since the late '60s (above): in the summer of 2005 at Live 8 (left to right) David Gilmour, Roger Waters, Nick Mason and Rick Wright

"Roger has said since that he 'rolled over' and let me make the decisions at Live 8. But they were the right decisions"

band-mate is never far from his conversation. As he signs my *Meddle* CD sleeve, for instance, he says, "oh the credits seem to have gone alphabetical." Given that things in Pink Floyd world don't "go" anywhere without Gilmour's say-so, and that, as he serenely admits, "G seems to come before most things", this is plainly telegraphed disingenuousness. "Roger's obviously not noticed yet," he chuckles. Just to recap: back in the '80s, Waters, having decamped from the band he'd steered since Syd Barrett's departure in 1968, was infuriated by Gilmour's decision to revive Pink Floyd without him, correctly fearing the Pink Floyd conglomerate would engulf his own comparative cottage industry of a solo career. And suddenly, without my even asking, Gilmour has gone right into it.

"I was too young to be retiring. Having your career plucked away from you at the age of 37 seemed a little impolite to me. Pink Floyd was what I *did*, that was my main job. To be forced out of it by one person's decision seemed... not right."

There is still real ire amidst the diplomacy here. So was it the prospect of working with

this "one person" again that was Gilmour's *real* sticking point for Live 8? Gilmour isn't saying, but he does remark, "if we'd done it with Guy [Pratt] playing the bass and without Roger, it wouldn't have sounded any different."

When I protest how moving it was to see him and Waters on stage again together, he murmurs, "Yes, maybe. But there's elements of it all which are within people's psyches, which aren't necessarily real."

Gilmour has, of course, already notably flattened the champers of this particular celebration, describing it as "like sleeping with your ex-wife." Prodded, he now expands for the first time on what exactly went on behind the Live 8 scenes.

"It *was* awkward and uncomfortable. There were a lot of tensions in the rehearsal. Roger was holding himself back from saying things he wanted to say. And there were things I was forced to say which I thought shouldn't have needed saying."

Such as? "Oh, I don't know it's very valuable to go there... The songs that Roger wanted to do were not the ones that I thought we should do. The arrangements of the songs



An Englishman's home is his floating studio on the Thames.

were not the way that Roger wanted to do them. But I kind of insisted on the set list and the arrangements and Roger has said since that he 'rolled over' and let me make those decisions." He adds, with a smirk that suggests self-deprecation but is actually anything but: "They were the right decisions."

Specifically Waters wanted them to perform their best-known song *Another Brick In The Wall*, but Gilmour thought a song about not needing education at an awareness-raising event was "was way off-message. Anyway, I don't like it much, that song. It's all right. It's not part of the great ... how would you put it? — emotional oeuvre."

As a result of all this, Gilmour says, "I thought, God, this was three days in a rehearsal room. The idea of going through that sort of thing every day for the six months or a year that an album takes — forget it! Roger's said in interviews that he wouldn't have rolled over afterwards... and I believe him. *I've mellowed a bit* but I don't think people do change very much, and I'm sure if we were still working together I'd recover my old ways and there'd be more arguments."



NICK MASON

Pink Floyd drummer since 1965; motor racing enthusiast; Pink Floyd biographer. Considerably less well-known, but arguably just as crucial in the Pink Floyd story is

Gilmour's little-recorded '90s fallout with Nick Mason. We shall, in the closed circle of Pink Floyd, probably never know the full details, but it seems that Mason's Pink Floyd 2003 biography *Inside Out* was originally submitted for publication right back in the middle of the last decade.

"There was a period of sort of minor deception," Gilmour says now. "There was a chap taking pictures on the *Division Bell* tour without me knowing anything about it. Then the book seemed to be being advertised initially as the official history, and I *did* object to him saying that." Gilmour didn't just object: it's said that copies already at a printer were pulped. You get the impression that despite his avowed idleness, Gilmour quashes several

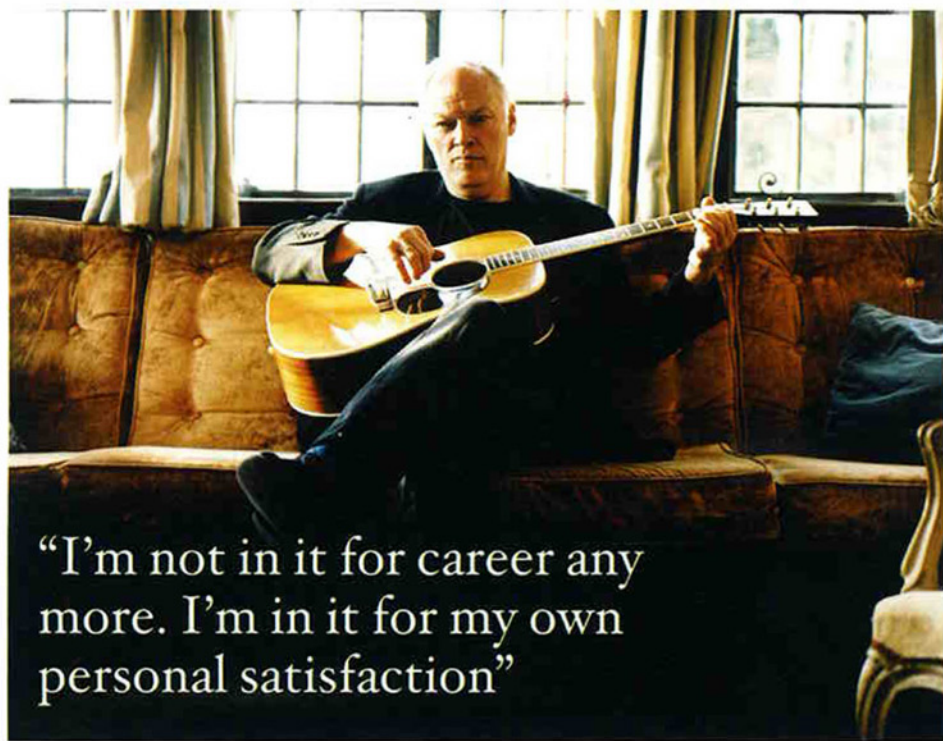
Pink Floyd projects before breakfast.

So behind-the-scenes was this row between the co-owners of the Pink Floyd name and thus core of the band for 10 years, that few noted that Mason was out in the cold at the 1996 Rock'n'Roll Hall of Fame ceremony, sitting in the audience watching while his colleagues played with Billy Corgan. The song? *Wish You Were Here*.

So what did he think of Mason's book?

"It's quite entertaining," he says carefully. "But the artistic achievements are rather glossed over so I think it's rather a lightweight book, a bit flippant."

This is as close as Gilmour will get to saying that he detests something. And it's hard not to feel that the bad feeling about the book has gone deep. There has been no hint of a Floyd album or even Floyd performances since that *Division Bell* tour. And although Mason has been by far the most enthusiastic about reformations, Mason neither plays on *On An Island* nor will he appear on Gilmour's tour — the sole core member of past Pink Floyd line-ups who doesn't. Add Mason and this, Roger Waters notwithstanding, as co-owner of the >>



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name, would be the Pink Floyd tour everybody wants. But Gilmour says:

"It would be... immoral to go and do a tour for the money without having made new material. Never have ridden that particular gravy train ... wouldn't want to do so now."

The brisk telegram-ese doesn't disguise the fact that Gilmour *does* have new material, and that he has, indeed, taken a more-or-less solo album out on tour under the name Pink Floyd before now. Could it be that his decision not to do so this time is a deliberate snub to his former colleague?



BOB "RADO" KLOSE

Original guitarist in Leonard's Lodgers and Pink Floyd, alongside Syd Barrett; plays on their first demo (*I'm A King Bee/Lucy Leave*). Gilmour

and Klose's fathers worked with each other at Cambridge University. "I've literally known Rado since I was born." Gilmour's brother Peter lived with the Klose parents in the States for a year, and Gilmour viewed their house as his second home.

He now reveals that, "Rado taught me a lot of guitar stuff, 'cause he's a couple of years older than me and he was always damn good."

They meet up once in a while, and given Klose's jazz chops, Gilmour thought, "Rado might be just the chap" for a jazzy number he'd written. As it happened, this selection didn't make it to the final running order, but Bob Klose added further parts to the title track and *The Blue* while he was on the floating studio.

"It's nice to have your friends playing on these things," says Gilmour.

JOHN "WILLIE" WILSON

Drummer in Gilmour's first band, Joker's Wild; on Syd Barrett's solo albums; on Gilmour's 1978 solo album and on *The Wall* tour. Gilmour recalls how he and his teenage pal Wilson's shark-like manager in the '60s kept getting their band to change their name according to the swing of fashion.

"For a while we were Flowers, doing psychedelic stuff, then we were Bullitt doing Hendrix covers."

He chuckles at the opportunism that kept them in gigs in France for a good year.

"We're still good friends," he says of Wilson. "Good old Willie – he came down from Cornwall to drum on *Smile*."



SYD BARRETT

College friend; leader of Pink Floyd's first line-up; retired from music in 1972. An always generous champion of the man who some Floyd fans have never forgiven him for

replacing, Gilmour's friendship with Barrett went back to technical college in Cambridge. They used to swap Stones riffs at lunch hour, went off busking in the South of France in 1965. After Gilmour replaced him in the Floyd, he penitently produced both Barrett's solo albums, *Barrett* and *The Madcap Laughs*.

With all these visitors from the past playing on the record, did he consider asking Syd?

"No, I leave Syd alone, I respect his family's wishes for him." Gilmour pauses, and looks distinctly wistful for the only time during our conversation. "I'd love to go and see him one of these days and maybe I will – before it's too late."

Told of tabloids door-stepping Barrett on his own 60th birthday, Gilmour says quietly:

"Oh, just leave him alone – God."

It was rumoured you discussed Syd's participation in Live 8.

"That's rubbish. We never discussed that at all."

The last time Gilmour saw Barrett was on the famous occasion in 1975 when they were recording *Wish You Were Here*.

"My memory of it is that there was this guy wandering around, and none of us quite recognised him. My memory is that I recognised him first. The strange thing is that he was unrecognisable 'cause he was bald and he'd put on a lot of weight. I scarcely talked to him. It was a bit awkward, but you just get on. I'd be lying if I said I'd gone home and wept. His situation long before then did upset me. But I think of him quite often. And whenever I sing *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, he comes right back to me."



PHIL MANZANERA

Roxy Music guitarist; neighbour; co-producer of *On An Island*. "I remember back in the '60s I knew this guy who asked me if I'd meet his kid brother and give him

some advice on how to break into the music business. That was Phil."

What did you tell him?

"I don't know but it obviously worked."

Gilmour became virtually Manzanera's replacement when he joined Bryan Ferry's band for two albums – and Live Aid – in the mid-'80s. In turn, Manzanera contributed music to the track which lent *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason* its title, *One Slip*. The two subsequently become neighbours in the rural Sussex commuter belt, while Manzanera is also married to Gilmour's publicist. "Oh, it's all quite incestuous," he says.



CROSBY & NASH

Former Byrd and Holly; West Coast royalty; arch harmonisers. Gilmour has had a lifelong West Coast fetish, his love of Californian harmonies infusing the Floyd's classic '70s sound. "I've always liked a little bit of harmony."

But if the appearance of the ultimate West Coast harmonisers on his album is a career peak, he's not letting on.

"I'd known Graham a bit, 'cause the Hollies always used to record at Abbey Road. I can remember being in New Orleans on the *Atom Heart Mother* tour. We had a few days in New Orleans doing nothing 'cause our gear got stolen. So were sitting around in this lovely hotel, the Royal Orleans, with a great big room

and a pool on the roof and listening to Crosby Stills & Nash's first album."

Friendly with Graham Nash for years, stopping by after a Crosby & Nash show last year, Gilmour asked them to sing, "dragged them down here to the boat" and presto: the wondrous mesh of Floyd and CSN that is *The Blue*.

"Yes, unmistakable, isn't it? We call it Crosby, Gills and Nash."



RICK WRIGHT

Pink Floyd keyboard player since 1965. "Rick? Oh, I get on pretty well with Rick these days," says Gilmour, in a joshing tone which accompanies everything he says about his

long-term colleague. The two musicians, as opposed to architects, in the band, it is this relationship which – despite Wright being sacked by Waters in 1979, barely contributing to *A Momentary Lapse Of Reason*, and remaining on a lower royalty rate than Gilmour – has become Pink Floyd's core.

"Rick's got his character flaws," says Gilmour, "he can be a bit of a grumbler, but we get on. Rick's got soul. A real soul – a complete relationship with his playing."

Having appeared at Gilmour's pivotal Meltdown concert, Wright plays organ on the title track. He also sings on *The Blue*.

"I spent a long time trying to persuade him to come down here and sing," Gilmour says, with amused indulgence over Wright's dithering. "I always think that his voice in harmony with mine works very well, but the sound that I imagined in my head didn't quite happen. It's not quite as clearly Rick as I tried to get it. He *claims* he can't get anywhere near the notes he used to get. I don't know if it would just take more practice or effort." Gilmour allows himself some self-congratulation on his ability to sing the same notes he always could. Rather beautifully, as *Live 8* and *On An Island* both attest.

Later Gilmour's PR asks Gilmour whether to include Wright in the press release announcing Gilmour's touring band.

"He's having marital difficulties, so he's dithering," he explains to me. And then, summing up his relationship with the man once touted to be Pink Floyd's leader after Syd Barrett, he waves a lordly hand.

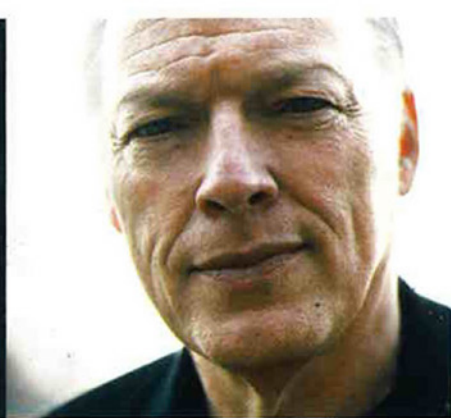
"Oh – put him on."

With that, Gilmour shakes his head and smiles to himself.

POLLY SAMSON

Former *Sunday Times* journalist; novelist; Gilmour's lyricist since 1992, wife since 1994, and mother of his three youngest children. He claims he has difficulty expressing his thoughts but David Gilmour is extremely articulate, although his tendency to choose his words

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with care can result in almost gnomish inscrutability. The "maybe... sometimes... no" formulation is amongst his favourites. Perhaps this explains why, lacking Roger Waters's "blurt and be damned" personality, Gilmour has never been comfortable expressing himself in song lyrics.

"Not, over-confident, no. Sometimes.... I would be very happy if that particular visit came more often," he says. "But somehow the harder I work at it, the more it eludes me. Polly says I expect to have things too easy. But it's fine, I've worked with a good lyricist in Roger and I've got, if anything, my best partnership now, with my wife Polly."

Polly Samson and Gilmour were introduced by mutual friends in 1992. "We sat next to each other at a dinner party or two and gradually became an item," he says insouciantly of what was actually a lengthy courtship. Gilmour certainly didn't get Samson easily, bruised as she was by a relationship with writer Heathcote Williams. But when they did finally unite Gilmour was, as usual, wrestling with lyrics for what was to become *The Division Bell*, none of the lyric writers he'd employed in the years since Waters ever having quite gelled.

"She was encouraging me. And that encouragement turned into help, and the help turned into contributing in a large way and every since then really, I've been forging a new writing partnership. Which is fantastic, to have your life partner your writing partner too."

In a typical creative day chez Gilmour, the pair sit down in the attic of their Sussex farmhouse and talk lyrics while the kids are at school, then go back at it after the kids have been put to bed.

Do you ever argue about it?

"A little bit... not too much. There are one or two songs which haven't been used on this album that didn't quite gel. But for the most part I start them off and then she goes off to the attic and practically completely rewrites what I've written."

In fact, this time four of the lyrics are Samson's alone.

"You couldn't get a better marriage of music and words than there is on *The Blue*, though I never said a word."

Do they worry about comparisons with Waters's words?

"Um, well, it's not something we've really thought about very much...he's been gone for an awful long time."

And what about Waters's accusations of *Spinal Tap-ism*, with the person he calls "the wife" writing lyrics?

"I think as a published novelist, she's every bit as qualified as anyone else. Roger's only qualification is experience and so maybe that's a bit of misanthropy on his part. I wonder why he would be insulting my poor wife, my lovely Polly. A bit of the old sour grapes perhaps?"

HIS EIGHT CHILDREN

Perhaps the most crucial relationships affecting Gilmour's career are with his children. With four by his first wife Ginger, all in their twenties, he now has a new family: Romany (3), Gabriel (8), Joe (10) and his adopted son Charlie (16). Rather touchingly, he and Charlie jointly passed their sax exams on the same day.

"Raising my children is my priority now and not missing their youth," he says. "That happened with my first children – it's inevitable when your ambition to succeed is like it is – and that's the way it should be. But I try to be a more active father now."

This has a direct effect on his creation of music. Months, even years can go by without him visiting the Astoria.

"I intend to work again, to make another record when the time feels right. But my sense of urgency and purpose is not what it was. I want to do this album and I want to do gigs, then I want to get back to my family and watch my children growing up and when there's time still doodle around in the studio. I don't think a follow-up will be particularly immediate." ■

On An Island is released by EMI



With wife Polly and two of his eight offspring.