

# *The* **WORD**



*Intelligent Life On Planet Rock*

On life, art, Syd  
and Pink Floyd –  
the band you can  
leave but you  
can't leave behind

**DAVID  
GILMOUR**

*Special  
Edition*



# A Charmed Life

This coming January, **David Gilmour** will mark his fortieth year as part of Pink Floyd. Here he talks to Jim Irvin about the hidden chemistry of the truly big bands, his regrets about his friend Syd Barrett... and why Live 8 provided final closure for the band you can leave, but can't leave behind

WORDS BY JIM IRVIN PORTRAIT BY RANKIN

**A**S THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF PINK Floyd's debut album, *Piper At the Gates Of Dawn*, rolls around, it's interesting to ruminate on what became of the plucky psych-pop-pers who made it. For the clearest gauge on the current state of Floyd, look no further than *Remember That Night*, a new DVD by David Gilmour, the man often billed as "The voice and guitar of Pink Floyd", who, of course, had yet to join the band when *Piper* appeared.

The DVD commemorates a show staged at the Royal Albert Hall in 2006 when Gilmour was touring his chart-topping solo album, *On An Island*. It features the whole of that album and a clutch of Floyd-favourites: *Time*, *Echoes*, *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, and a few you might not expect, like *Fat Old Sun*. Gilmour is joined by Roxy Music's Phil Manzanera (who co-produced the album), longtime Floyd collaborators Dick Parry, Guy Pratt and Jon Carin, special guests David Crosby and Graham Nash adding their otherworldly harmonies, Robert Wyatt playing cornet, David Bowie acting as Syd Barrett on *Arnold Layne* and paraphrasing Roger Waters on *Comfortably Numb*, plus, receiving a standing ovation from the crowd, the Floyd's underrated keyboard maestro, Rick Wright, clearly having the time of his life. "The difference between this and a Floyd tour is I actually hear every note he's playing," Wright says of Gilmour in the documentary. "It's like the first time I've really heard him play."

In the same film there are glimpses of Nick Mason – who appeared on some encores but declined to be in the DVD – and also, incredibly, Roger Waters. Gilmour's production rehearsal at Bray Studios coincided with one for Waters, and the two old adversaries found themselves neighbours for a day. There's a slightly uncomfortable summit meeting in the car park where

they shoot the breeze about touring and embrace. It all helps answer the inevitable question: will Pink Floyd ever reconvene? The answer on screen is: there doesn't seem to be much point. Everyone's happy the way things are.

Watching all this threw up one other question for me. What if Syd Barrett hadn't fried his mind and had continued to lead Pink Floyd after *Piper*: where might he have taken them? Would they have become a superior pop band with a tinge of posh-boy blues – a more whimsical Rolling Stones – either getting heavier as the '70s lengthened or straying into the territory inhabited by glam rock

**"Even after 40 years in the business, there's a slight sense of 'Do I belong here?'"**

and Bowie? Or would they just have become irrelevant when psychedelia fell out of fashion? To hear again the wit, craft and precision of *Arnold Layne* and the spooky expansiveness of *Astronomy Domine* played by Gilmour's all-stars, it's hard not to believe that Pink Floyd would have been important whoever was steering them.

But then what would have happened to Syd's beautiful friend from Cambridge who played guitar and sang and was asked to help out when his old mate began to falter at the helm? A lapsed contract with Decca and an unreleased cover of Sam and Dave's *You Don't Know What I Know*, with his group Joker's Wild, was only one of a string of false starts that were David Gilmour's lot until October 1967. He was prac-

tically starving in Paris when he heard *Arnold Layne* playing on the radio, and driving a van for a boutique in Chelsea when Mason invited him in to shore up the Floyd. Not for the last time. His friend Syd's misfortune triggered the onset of Gilmour's apparently charmed life.

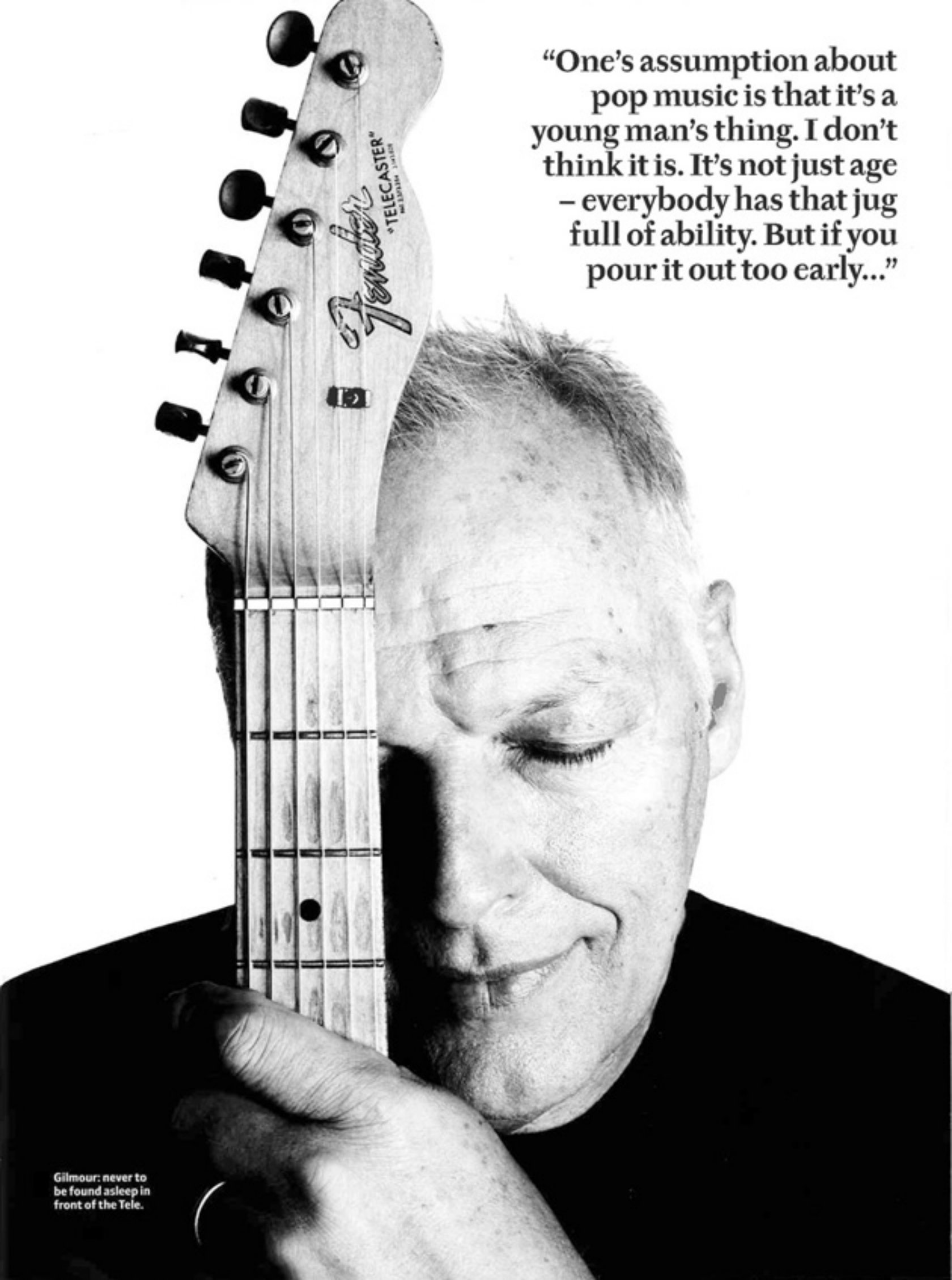
Today, he is 13 years into a very happy second marriage to writer Polly Samson, with whom he has sired four children and a score of songs. When they married, the couple moved out of London to a 15th-century farmhouse in West Sussex, a rambling beauty – all Agas and oak beams, outbuildings and stables – teeming on this warm August morning with dogs, children, staff and friends.

David (never Dave, by the way), opens the door when we knock. He's dressed in a plain black T-shirt and blue jeans. He is barefoot. He makes a cup of tea and leads me across golden gravel to the upstairs studio space where all his music begins, a room any musician would love to be let loose in, with windows on all sides through which Sussex unspools in verdant splendour, and the aromas of pollen, horses and late morning rain waft in. Yes, up here it's tempting to get comfortably numb. There's just the small matter of an interview...

**This is the only print interview you're giving for this project. Is there any particular reason for that? Are you a reluctant interviewee?**

I am, yes. I did the album, I talked, I did the tour, I talked, and now here I am putting out a DVD. There doesn't seem much to say except it's fantastically good, I reckon, and I want people to see it...

**So it's not just a question of you scaling things back? Watching the film there's an emphasis on the relative intimacy of the project, so I wondered if that was important to you, to do things on a smaller scale.**

A black and white photograph of David Gilmour. He is shown from the chest up, holding a Fender Telecaster guitar. His eyes are closed, and he has a serene expression. The guitar's headstock is prominent in the foreground, with the 'Fender' logo and 'TELECASTER' text visible. The background is plain white.

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Gilmour: never to  
be found asleep in  
front of the Tele.



It's the way I'm looking at my future and my life in music, as something I want to be easier to do, easier to maintain and be enjoyable. Everything I've done within Floyd has been fantastic, couldn't have had more satisfaction, but at 61 I want to scale down a little. I don't want to play stadiums. I don't have any relish for it... A Floyd gig has an element of becoming a jamboree, with people on the periphery turning up just for the party, another element that hasn't necessarily come for the music.

**When you started making *On An Island*, what were you thinking about?**

I never really started, as such. I have this room, this studio, and over the years technology has become so wonderful I can sit here and make whole records without anyone else being here, do everything myself... four-fifths of the album was done in here. When Phil Manzanera – who lives next door, a mile away – started getting involved, a lot of it was already done.

It's a constant battle with me, thinking that I can do it all and also thinking that I ought to have, and enjoy, an interaction with other musicians. But I do get very specific ideas, so when you do have musicians here, there's a tendency to say exactly what you want instead of just throwing a tune at them and saying let's go....

**It's a strong cast of musicians. Why is Nick Mason visible in the DVD but not playing in the actual live shows?**

It's just getting too close. That would have been Pink Floyd and I would have lost my objective then.

**How on earth did you happen to be rehearsing next to Roger?**

Pure coincidence. We've tended to use those film studios because they have huge soundstages where you can rehearse a whole production. Bray, Pinewood and Shepperton are about it, so it was bound to happen, I suppose.

**The meeting looks a little awkward.**

It's a funny old thing. It's nice that it's as frost-free as it is now.

**Is it really frost-free?**

I don't think anything has changed in terms of our different views on things. I'm sure he's had some therapy. I have. We've got to a point where we can look on it and laugh, but it's not completely relaxed and free. There's not much future in it.

**Before Live 8, was there ever a chance that you might have reconvened?**

I never saw the point. I can appreciate other people's passion for it. The fans want to see that happen but I think I've earned the right to be thoroughly selfish, to do exactly what I want to do at my advanced stage in life, and in

essence [Floyd] isn't what I want to do, what I did on this tour is exactly what I want to do.

**The Floyd came up in age where mystique was important. Bands like you and Led Zeppelin were unreachable. These days it's the complete opposite. Anyone coming up now has to give the impression they're accessible with MySpace and blogging. Does that new relationship with the fans excite you or make you uncomfortable?**

It doesn't make me uncomfortable, I enjoy the whole idea of that, but it doesn't make me able to be the nice genial person that I appear to be [on my website] all the time. When I'm rushing from a car to backstage at a theatre, I still am uncomfortable enough to not want to chat to all my lovely fans and give them all autographs to sell

**"A mysterious thing happens to bands over the years. The people that tend to be labelled the 'lucky buggers' become very important – like, The Beatles wouldn't have been the same without Ringo"**

on eBay, so you could say I maintain a little bit of – not aloofness – but discomfort, I suppose, in too crowded a public situation. There's always been a slight sense of, "Do I belong here?" After 40-something years in the business.

**That's fascinating, that you retain that kind of feeling, I suppose its ultimate expression was something like *The Wall*.**

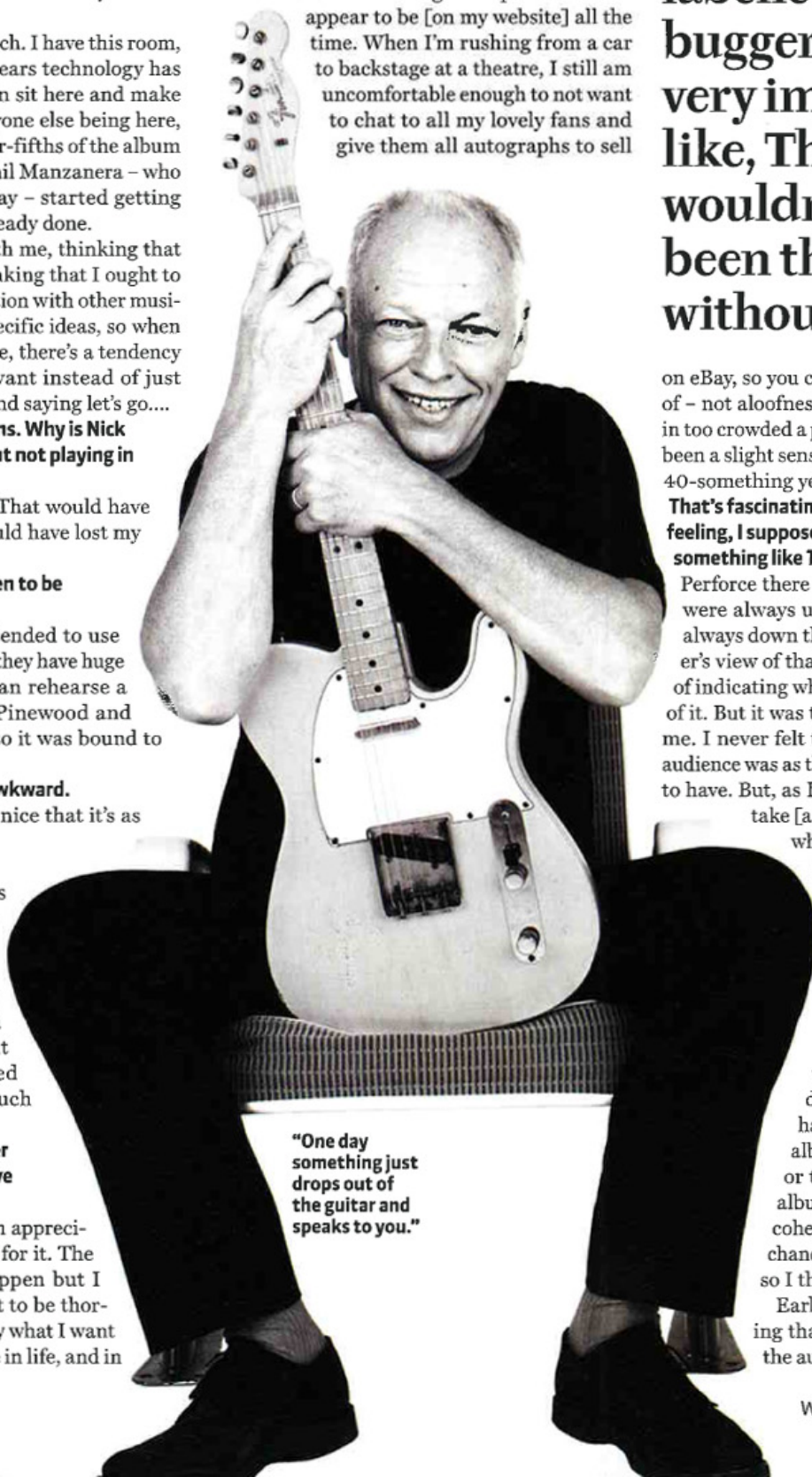
Perforce there was always that situation: we were always up on the stage and they were always down there in the audience, and Roger's view of that wall was a fairly radical way of indicating what that was like – a caricature of it. But it was truer for Roger than it was for me. I never felt the wall between me and my audience was as thick as the one Roger appeared to have. But, as I said earlier, if you manage to

take [a show] down in size, the people who are there, I am fairly certain, are there to hear me sing and play, they're not gatecrashing. You're already on a winner, intimacy wise.

**Even so, it seemed a bold move to play the whole of *On An Island*.**

Throughout the Floyd that would be the normal routine: do the new album as the first half of the show and the previous album as the second half, plus one or two encores. I thought, "This album seems to hang together as a cohesive whole and this is the only chance I'll get to do the whole thing", so I thought I'd brave it.

Early in the tour there was a feeling that we weren't connecting with the audience at the beginning of the

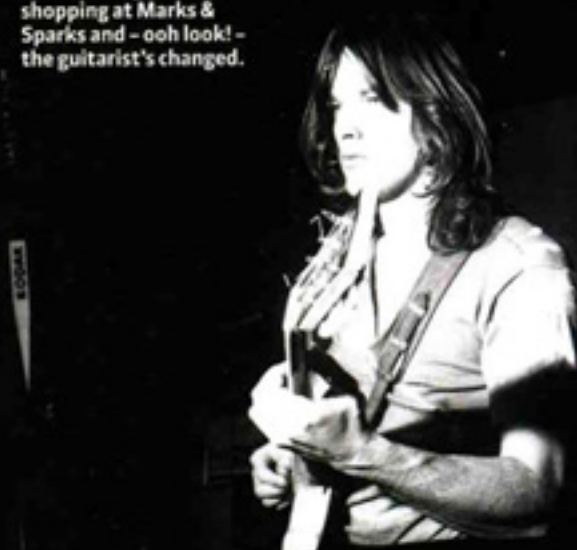


"One day something just drops out of the guitar and speaks to you."

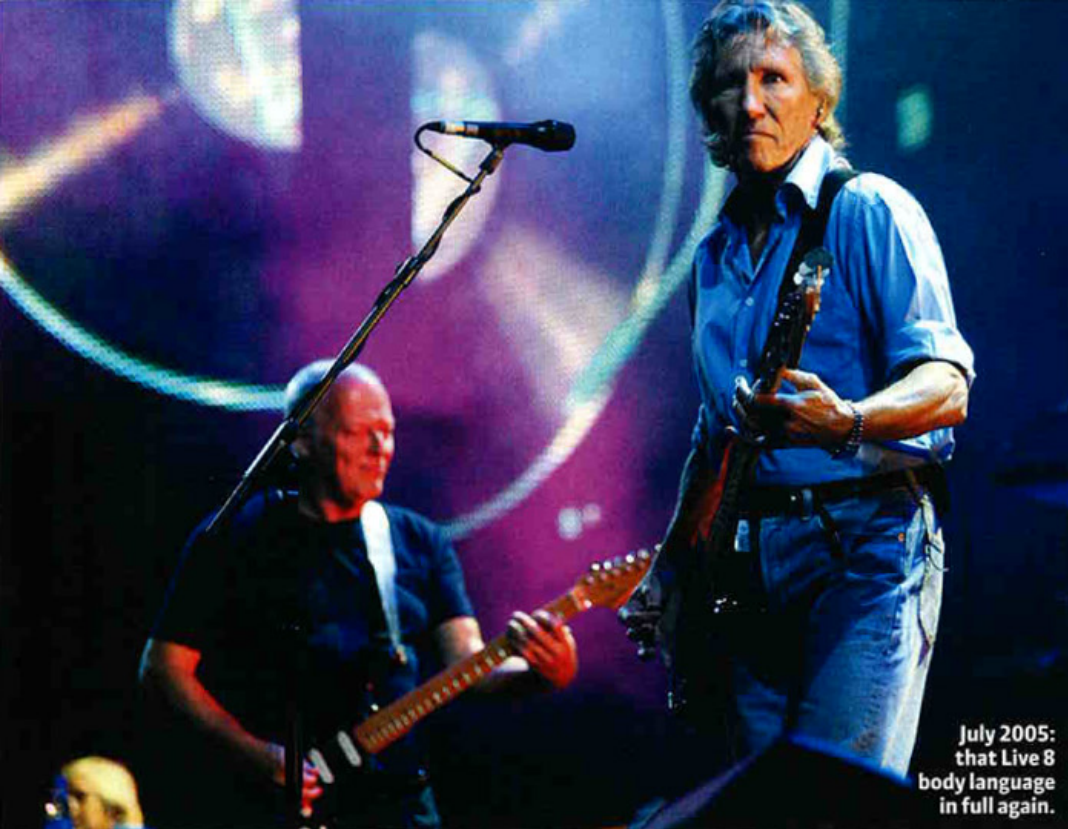




Pink Floyd '67 vintage (left) and '69 vintage: the hair's got longer, Roger Waters has gone scarf shopping at Marks & Sparks and - ooh look! - the guitarist's changed.







July 2005:  
that Live 8  
body language  
in full again.

set, so we started with *Breathe* and *Time* from *Dark Side Of The Moon* and that seemed to lift the whole thing up.

**The fly-on-the-wall documentary on the DVD is fairly candid. Did you get used to the camera's presence quickly?**

You get used to it much quicker if you know you have editorial control. If it were the BBC following you around I think you'd be a little more circumspect.

**I liked the family atmosphere around Rick's birthday. You say at one point about him: "His abilities have returned to him and along with them, some of his strange attitudes." What did you mean by that exactly?**

As he becomes more confident, he becomes more capable, and also becomes more assertive.

**Remembers he's a rock star?**

Yes, that sort of stuff. Which is entirely the way it should be.

**He has such a distinctive sound, hasn't he?**

He's got soul, for want of a better word.

**If you wonder what exactly it is about bands who connect with great numbers of people, sometimes it's somebody who's considered a minor player who turns out to be a key element.**

Absolutely, I couldn't agree more. It's very strange, it's very easy for people who've been in those kind of bands to – with the help of people around them, advisers, managers, wives – start thinking that they are the key lynchpin of the whole thing. But there's a mysterious thing that happens over the years, like The Beatles wouldn't have been the same without Ringo, the people that tend to be labelled "the lucky buggers", become very important.

**There's a long line of grey-haired musicians on stage in this show.**

**With Floyd you started trying to move beyond the boundaries of pop music early on. Was that ever a conscious effort to avoid it being just a youth thing?**

None of us thought of our futures

beyond the age of 30, certainly not 40 – that was just some sort of grey point in the distance. But we loved old blues players. One's assumption about pop music is that it's a young man's thing. I don't think it is – there are a lot of people where age is not relevant to what they do. At the same time there are a lot who become ensconced in some security blanket that prevents them being as radical as they were and able to create as well as they did when they were younger. It's not just age – everybody does have that jug full of ability. But if you pour it out too early...

**How do you feel about the physical record becoming an endangered species?**

It's hard for someone from the era I started in to be as modern as I'd like to be: the 12in album sleeve is a wonderful thing. I'll even miss the CD when it goes. And I like to make an album. I've got over having a side one and side two, but the natural length of a vinyl album seems a very good one to me.

**You recently went on the climate change march in London and give links to climate change campaigns on your website. Floyd's carbon footprint must have been enormous. Does that embarrass you now?**



Gilmour with  
Polly Samson:  
writer, wife,  
collaborator.

The live concert with its associated juggernauts of equipment is still something that gives more pleasure than the carbon it produces takes away. But there are plenty of things that everybody can do. Twenty per cent of energy is used on light bulbs, and it could be four per cent. If every room had a switch that turned the mains off at the door like they do in hotel rooms that would be good.

**Downloads save on plastic and cardboard.**

**Could you see yourself turning to that?**

Yes. I can see it for recorded music but not for live music. I think the whole object of making music is to go out and play it to people.

**But applause is the most expensive drug in the world.**

Definitely, that's one of the addictions I've been fighting to get over.

**You do an unrehearsed performance of Syd Barrett's *Dark Globe* at one of the shows on the DVD, the first gig after his death. Where were you when you heard he'd died?**

I was here. His brother-in-law called me. I felt extremely sad about it, it was a tragic waste and I also felt a great sense of regret that I didn't go and see him in all those years. His family had said it would be better if people didn't, but I wouldn't have thought that would have applied to me. I do regret that I hadn't been more bullish about it; I did know where he lived, I could have invited myself in for a cup of tea. Syd and I were friends as teenagers and had a lot of memories that had nothing to do with Floyd. Some of that might have cheered him up.

**Did Live 8 feel like the culmination of Pink Floyd to you?**

Erm, it had a sense of closure. We got there and did it... pretty well, I think. It was great to feel how that felt on that occasion with Roger there. Hatred and bitterness are very negative things, it felt very good to have put all that into perspective and rounded it off nicely.

**Is there a particular thing you're looking for when you sit down to make music now?**

There is, but it's hard to verbalise. To me it's a sound in my head that I'm looking for...

**Do you achieve it?**

Yes, very much so. I'm very happy to get one thing in my head, it might be just one chord on a guitar, which some time later will become this whole thing which carries the essence of that little kernel. There's often an element of old '50s and '60s sci-fi electronica which I seem to like to add, a third dimension, a little request from a distance, little sounds which evoke something in me. I assume if they evoke something in me they'll evoke something in others too.

You can go for months, pick up a guitar every day and nothing can happen, then one day you put your hands on it and something just drops out of the guitar and speaks to you. Those are the moments you're looking for.

**Long may you have them.**

Thank you. ■