The BLACK STRAT
Gilmour’s legendary guitar tells its story
As the red Strat was to Hank Marvin, as Blackie was to Eric Clapton, so this black Stratocaster is to David Gilmour. Rick Batey meets Pink Floyd tech Phil Taylor to hear the story of a remarkable guitar

But there is one thing different about this Stratocaster – it was used on Atom Heart Mother, Meddle, Obscured By Clouds, Dark Side Of The Moon, Wish You Were Here, Animals and The Wall, plus Live At Pompeii and the solo projects David Gilmour and About Face. Yet despite its mind-boggling history, this is no museum piece: it’s still a tool for the job. Gilmour used it for the emotional Pink Floyd reunion at Live 8; it supplied some of the main electric parts on his recent solo album On An Island; and it can be seen and heard on Gilmour’s lavish double DVD/Blu-ray, Remember That Night.

For most of the past three decades, the Black Strat has been in the care of Pink Floyd/David Gilmour’s full-time backline tech, Phil Taylor. Taylor was invited to work for the band in 1974: since then, on countless occasions, he has delved into the Black Strat’s to keep it working, has tweaked it to suit Gilmour’s changing needs, and has handed it to him on some of the world’s biggest stages. And now, with the possible release of a Fender David Gilmour replica Stratocaster on the cards, he has written a book, The Black Strat, that documents the guitar’s life and times. It’s a fascinating read; it tells the Strat’s story in far more detail than we can go into here; and it contains enough Pink Floyd info and rare pictures to appeal to regular fans as well as guitar heads.
Guitar & Bass arrived at a secret location in North London, stacked to the rafters with priceless Pink Floyd equipment dating back to the 60s, to hear the tale of the Black Strat’s origins, the changes that were made in the search for improvement, and its return to full-time use in the hands of David Gilmour.

ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE

David Gilmour bought the Black Strat, a standard model with a maple neck, in 1970 in Manny’s music store in New York. It didn’t immediately become his number one, but after a period spent experimenting with others including a brown maple-neck Tele, a Lewis custom and a Les Paul Jr, he began using it in earnest: it would become his main guitar by 1971. This was an era when Pink Floyd was really beginning to push the boundaries of what could be achieved in a live setting, but technologically they were flying by the seat of their pants, custom-building both sound and lighting systems to achieve results that couldn’t be had with regular off-the-shelf gear – and the Black Strat was not spared in the search for sonic perfection.

Gilmour’s first modification, as Phil Taylor details, was to fit an edge-mounted XLR socket that sent the signal to an outboard fuzzbox, which was then routed back into the guitar to enable the Strat’s volume control to be used. It didn’t achieve the right result, and Gilmour removed the parts. Other mods followed, changing the tuners to Schallers and then trying a different volume knob for smoother operation.

Next, Gilmour added a second slider switch to allow the neck pickup to be added to the middle or bridge. (The mod remains, though since ‘78 the slider has been replaced by a mini toggle.) ‘It gives a more Jazzmaster-type sound,’ Taylor explains, ‘he doesn’t use it much, but it does come in useful for certain parts.’

Next, Gilmour began to wrestle with the practicalities of changing from regular guitar to slide guitar on stage.
At the Pink Floyd: Live At Pompeii performance he'd simply laid the Strat on the floor and applied a steel bar. He had a brilliant solution - a double-neck, one set for normal playing, and one set for slide. Gilmour delivered a thick mahogany plank to English guitar maker Dick Knight, and Knight sent back a huge Strat-shaped body. The donor necks were the Black Strat's maple neck and a 1963 pre-CBS rosewood neck from a sunburst Strat that had been a gift from Steve Marriott.

'As we know now, double necks generally aren't that great an idea,' Taylor says. 'The guitar was incredibly heavy and cumbersome, and it only lasted for a very short period. But the crucial thing was that David realised he preferred the rosewood neck to the Black Strat's maple one - it had a nicer feel, and he liked the smaller pre-CBS headstock.' The solution was simple: a swap. The sunburst Strat received the maple neck, while the Black Strat got the rosewood one.

Phil Taylor, still 18 months away from joining the Floyd as full-time backline crew member, caught the band at this fast-rising point in their career. 'Though I'd seen them in 1970 at the festival at the Bath Showground - the Black Strat was a debut, unknown to me - the Earl's Court gig in May 1972 was the first show I ever witnessed as a promoter,' he recalls. 'At this time, hardly anyone played big indoor arenas, and nobody had played at Earl's Court to 18,000 people. The predictions for the show were dire, based on the fact that David Bowie heard they were playing there and managed to slip his show in the week before - and it was a disaster I think 'seen by very few and heard by less in this huge echoey barn' was one report.

'There was some apprehension as to whether Pink Floyd could pull it off, but as soon as the intro to Obscured By Clouds began, with that synth drone followed by the drums and David's great slide guitar, we knew it was going to be great. The feeling of euphoria in the audience was amazing, it was stunning, seeing Dark Side Of The Moon in this context with quadrophonic sound and spectacular visuals.

'Ever since I first saw the band in the late '60s, I knew that the quality of a Pink Floyd show, that incredible combination of sound and visuals, was the standard to aspire to. It's something that's remained a constant with them. Pink Floyd don't just go onstage and crank up the volume to please themselves. It's always been about relating to the audience, and they'll do whatever's necessary to accommodate that. They always try to get everything right.'

Indeed, David Gilmour was still trying to get the Black Strat right. In 1973 he had the body routed out and added a Gibson humbucker. It didn't take long to discover that he was, at heart, a single-coil player.

'David has tried humbuckers on various occasions, and he just can't get on with the sound,' Taylor confirms. 'I think that single-coils - not just Fenders, but Gretsches and Gibson P90s as well - are more to his taste. They let
him impart his own stamp and individuality to get his sound. It's interesting - some players who have used Gibsons and are known for their own sound have usually eventually settled on Strats... Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck, for instance. Jimi

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Hendrix, Mark Knopfler and of course Hank Marvin all get their instantly recognisable sounds and styles using a Strat. Perhaps humbuckers make people sound more sammy, whereas single coils are better at allowing the player's personality and style to come through.

BIRTH OF THE ALL BLACK
The next alteration to the Black Strat, in 1974, was cosmetic: a black scratchplate. Nothing was available off the shelf - Fender didn't offer black guards until 1977 - so the new, extra-thick one is probably the work of Dick Knight. 1974 was also the year that Phil Taylor joined the Pink Floyd camp. 'Having seen them play so many times, and with the Floyd being so far ahead of everybody else, being asked to work with them felt pretty unbelievable,' he says. 'The first thing I did was spend some time working in a small, grubby rehearsal studio in King's Cross, just the four of them and me. Two weeks later, they came out having written Shine On You Crazy Diamond, plus two tracks which later became known as Dogs and Sheep (on Animals).'

It wasn't until 1977 that the bridge pickup was replaced by one of the first drop-in alternatives, a DiMarzio FS-1. The DiMarzio performed well.

You might think that documenting the history of a well-known guitar would be easy: a few photographs, a spot of history, job done. But it turned out to be not so simple after all.

'It all started when Fender's Mike Eldred and Todd Krause visited to discuss the possibility of a David Gilmour Strat,' Phil Taylor begins. 'They had a lot of questions, so I started digging into the Strat's story and pretty soon ended up with a large pile of paperwork. Then Langley Iddeins, a book designer friend of mine, suggested that it should be published and he offered to do the design and layout. Naively, I let myself be talked into it, because I figured I'd done most of the groundwork. I was wrong! I was persuaded that it made sense because, if the replica Fender guitar does eventually come off, we can include the book with it, so people really will know the whole story.'

Central to the project's success, of course, was the approval of David Gilmour. 'I sat down with him with lists of questions,' Taylor says, 'and started to piece it together. One tricky thing was that David had bought the guitar four years before I'd come on board. But many photographs of the guitar in the early '70s are incorrectly identified. I discovered that there wasn't one Black Strat - there had been three... one with a rosewood neck that had been stolen in New Orleans; the maple neck; and another, the "bullet Strat", a later maple neck model with a bullet trussrod adjuster.

'I became an expert at dating pictures of Pink Floyd live! It was a lot of work and I ended up building a huge file on everything from the clothes the band wore to which heads were on Nick Mason's drum kit. It had to be researched properly, because there's a lot of wrong information about that gets repeated as fact. As an insider, I had to make sure that everything was 100 per cent correct.'

The book would not have been complete without a suitably Floydian cover dreamt up by Storm Thorgerson, the designer responsible for the band's classic LP sleeves. 'We eventually narrowed it down and ended up with two ideas,' explains Phil. 'One was a silhouette of a Strat made by a composite of many hands: that became the back cover. But Storm thought he should spend a load of money by sending the guitar with a couple of people to Northern Arizona, to a place called North Coyote Buttes National Park where the wind has eroded the rocks into these fantastic wave-like shapes. Apparently, it was 115 degrees in the sun and they had to walk for three miles to get there! They were shattered! But the end result was fabulous, and it certainly captured that surreal Storm feel.'
The Kahler seemed like a good idea at the time, but it dulled the sound of the guitar

Throughout the recording and touring of Animals, plus the artist's first solo LP, David Gilmour, in 1978. Later that year, the rosewood neck was showing signs of wear, so Phil Taylor made contact with Grover Jackson, who had just taken over the Charvel guitar parts company. Following his specifications - "I remember taking a close look at the neck on David's favourite Fender Esquire and giving him the measurements" - Jackson produced a '57-style birdseye maple neck for the Black Strat, and later a matching pair for two of Roger Waters' three Precision basses. Five years later, in 1982, Jackson made another neck, this time with 22 frets; fitting it meant cutting away a little of the scratchplate.

The Black Strat finally found its bridge pickup around the end of recording sessions for The Wall in late 1979. "Seymour Duncan had sent David some custom wound pickups that he had made," Phil says. "It's actually a one-off, based on a SSL-1 model, and it remains in the Black Strat to this day."

THE BLACK STRAT IN EXILE

But the Strat's days were numbered: it was jinxed by the addition of a Kahler vibrato. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," sighs Taylor, "but it dulled down the sound of the guitar. It was one reason why it fell out of favour.

Another reason was that at this time, in 1984, Fender was really getting their guitar quality back together again - especially the '57 Vintage Reissue series. David and I went up to Arbiter's in North London one cold day and sat there in our overcoats, pulling one Strat after another from the racks, trying them acoustically. Among them were the red and cream '57s, which ended up being David's main Strats for the best part of the next 20 years. The black one took a back seat... and, really, we hardly gave it another thought."

A couple of years later, the Hard Rock Café asked if they could obtain a David Gilmour guitar for display, and the unemployed Black Strat was nominated and shipped off to Dallas, Texas, where it spent the next decade behind glass. "David was canny, though," Taylor points out. "He didn't give it to them; he said they could borrow it on loan if they made a contribution to charity."

Some 10 years later I was going through some papers, and said to David, "Maybe it's time we got the Black Strat back." He just shrugged, and said okay. It was all very casual. I contacted the Hard Rock, and to my surprise they claimed no knowledge of any loan, saying the Strat was theirs. I immediately faxed them copies of the original paperwork, and the guitar was returned!

The guitar arrived back in a sorry state, with a number of parts missing. Shocked at the guitar's condition, Taylor set about its restoration, and asked Charlie Chandler to remove the Kahler, to fill the hole with proper wood and to re-touch the finish, and to fit the old vibrato. The Charvel neck was replaced a neck from one of Gilmour's '57 reissues. The Black Strat was back, and playing better than ever... but perhaps its time had gone.

BLACK TO THE FUTURE

There was no guarantee that Gilmour would adopt the Black Strat once more. He'd become accustomed to the '57 reissues, and with the addition of EMGs and onboard boost electronics they were certainly efficient and quiet. Phil Taylor got into the habit of occasionally leaving the Black Strat out, ready to play, but it saw little use - at least, not until 2003, when...
Eagle Rock's 's made a 'Classic Albums' TV programme about the making of Dark Side Of The Moon, 'David was filmed with the black Strat at Abbey Road,' says Taylor. 'He didn't say anything about it, but at least he'd used it.'

Two years later came the great Pink Floyd reunion for Live 8. I had a telephone call from David, three weeks before the show, saying simply "we're doing it". I asked if he was joking. "We're doing it, with Roger. You're in charge. Sort it out!" So it was on with the production hat. I had three weeks - two weeks to rehearsals - with no crew, no equipment, and no place to rehearse. It was an incredible mixture of excitement, adrenaline, apprehension and nerves. It's Pink Floyd... it didn't have to be right, it had to be perfect!

'During the first day's rehearsals, he stuck to the red Strat with the EMGs. The second day was the same. But then, during the third day, he tried the Black Strat - and everything changed. It was that real single-coil thing once again. The sound just went into this whole different league. And it's funny, but I noticed - and so did a few of the other long-term Floyd crew - that when he put it on, his body language changed. It was quite an exciting thing to witness.'

Pink Floyd's Live 8 set in London's Hyde Park was the music event of the decade - perhaps of the last 25 years - for generations of Floyd fans. 'It was strange... too,' Taylor muses. 'Suddenly there was the Pink Floyd with David, Richard, Nick and Roger, just for that one time, proving to the world that they still were a great band - and here, once more, was the Black Strat.'

'Since then, it was both one of the predominant guitars for the recording of On An Island and his main guitar for the tour that followed. After all those changes, after hanging on a wall for 10 years... it's a weird thing. At the end of the day, though, it's just a guitar. When I sat down to write the book, David's reaction was that it was a daft idea... why write a book about an ordinary Strat that he bought nearly 40 years ago at Manny's in New York?'

'But it was a decent instrument back then: after all, he chose it. He's always been happy to make changes to it, and while some things haven't worked, others have. It's been well looked after, but it's never been treated with much reverence. It's simply a Stratocaster, his working instrument, and that's how he's always viewed it.'