

AND IT'S GOODNIGHT FROM...

# RICHARD WRIGHT

1943–2008

Richard (Rick) Wright, the keyboard player in Pink Floyd, who died on September 15, was that rarest of creatures: a rock star with no public profile whatsoever. When the news broke that he had lost a short battle with cancer, television and radio stations around the world suddenly found themselves paying tribute to a man they knew nothing about. One or two obituaries recalled a curious fact about Live 8 in 2005, when Wright was almost completely ignored by TV cameras during Floyd's headline performance. Rumour has it the director didn't realise that the silver-haired, unassuming man standing next to the keyboards was a member of the band.

Yet, in musical terms, Wright was just as important a Pink Floyd member as David Gilmour, and was arguably more essential to their sound than Roger Waters. A founder member of the group in 1965 (he'd been playing with Waters and drummer Nick Mason since 1963, when all three were architecture students at London's Regent Street Polytechnic), Wright went on to compose or co-compose many of their landmark songs. In their earliest days as a psychedelic force on the London club scene, his Farfisa organ was the principal solo instrument, and along with guitarist/singer Syd Barrett he helped to create their hallucinatory, 'freak-out' style. Wright took the solos on their debut single, "Arnold Layne", and its B-side "Candy And A Currant Bun" (1967). Their first album, *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, a few months later, saw Wright play a significant role. Aside from his hugely atmospheric keyboards, he sang lead vocals on "Matilda Mother", as well as 'lead harmonies' on "Astronomy Domine" and "Chapter 24".

Even before Barrett, their main songwriter, left the band in 1968, Wright had been contributing the occasional song ("Paintbox", "Remember A Day"). Described by *Disc* magazine as "the musician of the group, but also very moody," Wright tended towards nostalgic, wistful melodies, often making reference in his lyrics to carefree childhoods and long summers. His own childhood in north London had been a comfortable middle-class one (he was the son of a biochemist), and at school he had learned several musical instruments. He plays the trombone, for example, on the Floyd track "Biding My Time" (*Relics*, 1971).

Wright's keyboards remained vital to Floyd's music throughout 1968-'71 ("A Saucerful Of Secrets", "Careful With That Axe, Eugene", "Cirrus Minor", "Atom Heart Mother", "Echoes"). Although he was never a fast-fingered virtuoso like Keith Emerson or Rick Wakeman, nevertheless Wright's organ-playing could be as impressive (just listen to "Quicksilver" on *More*) as any terrifying kosmische Tangerine Dream excursion, while his jazz-influenced electric piano could display a cool lightness of touch even as it warned of approaching danger ("Sheep", *Animals*). His singing voice—light, pleasant, very English, and often heard in conjunction with Gilmour—was also a key component of the languid, plaintive Pink Floyd sound.

By the early-to-mid '70s, the grand piano and electric piano, as well as Hammond organ and the first sightings of synthesiser, had become the major

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instruments in Wright's artillery. All were suited to Floyd's slow, stately, dramatic music, as well as the serious subject matter that was now being brought to the band by Waters. For their multimillion-selling *Dark Side Of The Moon* (1973), Wright composed "The Great Gig In The Sky", wrote the music for "Us And Them", and shared lead vocals with Gilmour on "Time". On the follow-up, 1975's *Wish You Were Here*, Wright's keyboards dominated the first side. For the first two minutes of "Shine On You Crazy Diamond", he is the only musician we hear.

On *Animals* (1977), he was inexplicably placed low in the mix, and the album was dominated by Gilmour and Waters. Worse followed for Wright during the making of 1979's *The Wall*, when his cocaine problems saw him clash disastrously with Waters, who instigated his removal from the band. In a strange turn of events, Wright toured with Floyd as a hired session musician in 1980-'81, but didn't play at all on their last album with Waters, 1983's *The Final Cut*. But Wright was reinstated behind the keyboards in 1987 when Floyd, now led by Gilmour, returned with *A*

*Momentary Lapse Of Reason*, and began a new era of prosperity. Wright remained a member of the band until his death.

In the mid-'80s, Wright had teamed up with Dave Harris, the frontman of New Romantic act Fashion, to form a duo called Zee. Their only album, *Identity* (1984), was unsuccessful. Wright also released two solo albums, *Wet Dream* (1978) and 2006's *Broken China*. The second was dedicated to his third wife, Millie, whom he'd married in 1996.

Content to leave public pronouncements (and internecine backbiting) to Gilmour and Waters, Wright had a reputation as a nice—if rather nervous—man who took a modest view of his achievements. He seemed an unlikely "Rick", and many Floyd fans refer to him by his full name. A limelight-shunning soul, whom circumstances conspired to push further into the shadows, Wright remained a man of mystery to the end. Rock reference books had always stated his year of birth as 1945. It transpires he was two years older than everybody thought.

DAVID CAVANAGH

**The limelight-shunning Rick Wright: a superb, understated musician**