Founder of Pink Floyd dies aged 65

Ben Quinn

Richard Wright, a founder member of Pink Floyd, the iconic British rock band, died of cancer yesterday at the age of 65.

David Gilmour, Pink Floyd’s guitarist, used his online blog yesterday to pay tribute to Wright, telling fans: “I really don’t know what to say other than that he was such a lovely, gentle, genuine man and will be missed terribly by so many who loved him. And that’s a lot of people. Did he not get the loudest, longest round of applause at the end of every show in 2006?”

He added later: “No one can replace Richard. He was my musical partner and my friend. I have never played with anyone quite like him.

“In my view all the greatest PF moments are the ones where he is in full flow. After all, without Us and Them and The Great Gig in the Sky, both of which he wrote, what would The Dark Side of the Moon have been? Without his quiet touch the album Wish You Were Here would not have quite have worked. I loved him and will miss him enormously.”

A flood of tributes from fans, who were unaware of his illness, also appeared on the web. “He is by far one of the most underrated musicians in rock and his keyboard work will never be forgotten,” wrote Howard Bayliss.
Highly distinctive keyboard player with Pink Floyd, the band which introduced 1960s youth to psychedelia and progressive rock

Richard Wright's keyboard playing was a vital ingredient of the sound that made Pink Floyd one of the biggest-selling acts in the history of rock music. A founder member of the band, he also sang lead on several tracks on the group's early albums and co-wrote music for several of their best-selling albums, including The Dark Side of the Moon and Wish You Were Here.

He later fell out with the band's Roger Waters, who fired him from the group during the recording of The Wall. Wright continued to work with the group as a hired musician, but was reinstated to full membership after Waters left the group in the 1980s.

Richard William Wright was born in 1943 in Pinner, Middlesex. His father was chemist at Unigate Dairies, and he was brought up in a large and comfortable house in nearby Hatch End with his two sisters. Educated at Haberdashers' Aske's school, he played piano, trumpet and trombone as a boy, adding the guitar to his repertoire at the age of 10. His first musical passion was jazz and by the time he was in his mid-teens he was playing at London clubs watching Humphrey Lyttelton and Kenny Ball.

In 1962 he enrolled at the Regent Street Polytechnic to study architecture and the following year joined a band called Sigma 6, which included his future Pink Floyd colleagues Roger Waters and Nick Mason. In 1964 he joined the band the Abadabs (sometimes the Screaming Abdabs) and with Wright's girlfriend, Juliette Gale, sometimes singing with them. By the summer of 1964 the couple had married. Wright dropped out of his course and went travelling around Greece before returning in 1964 to enrol at the London College of Music.

With Syd Barrett (obituary, July 12, 2006) now added to the line-up and with Wright restored alongside Waters and Mason in a group now known as the Tea Set, they played in a style similar to the early Rolling Stones. By late 1965 they had been experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs, and the experience was reflected in a more experimental style to their work with Syd's band, before moving on to the psychedelic sound that characterised an early Rolling Stones.

Their debut album, The Piper at the Gates of Dawn, followed later that summer and was a landmark in the development of British psychedelic music, featuring the whimsy of Barrett's songs with a free-form sound in which Wright's keyboards featured prominently, the avant-garde quality enhanced by the use of stereo panning and other studio techniques which are old hat today but at the time were groundbreaking. Wright also sang lead on a number of tracks, including Astronomy Domine and Matilda Mother.

By the time of the release of their second album, A Saucerful of Secrets (1968), however, Barrett had become one of rock music's first acid casualties and was replaced by the guitarist David Gilmour. If they missed Barrett's songs they did not miss his LSD-induced unreliability, and the increasingly complex structures of their compositions helped to define the new notion of "progressive rock" far removed from the three-chord, three-minute-single format of pop music.

The band's next major release, Ummagumma (1969), featured all four members on extended, solo compositions, Wright's contribution being a four-part, 13-minute avant-garde instrumental suite called Syrinx. Atom Heart Mother (1970) found the band recording with an orchestra for the first time on the title piece, a 22-minute-long "rock-orchestral" suite, while side two of the album included Wright's nostalgic Summer 68. It was the band's first No 1 and was followed by Meddle (1971), which, minus the orchestra, cemented their sound.

Wright, right, with Roger Waters, Syd Barrett and Nick Mason, the founders of Pink Floyd, to whose sound he contributed his wild keyboard playing

Richard Wright, rock musician, was born on July 28, 1943. He died of cancer on September 15, 2006, aged 65