

Pink Floyd

The history of Pink Floyd is truly fascinating. How did a group formed in 1965 in Cambridge, England to play British progressive rock band become one of rock's most successful acts, having sold 73.5 million albums in the US alone (The group is also believed to have sold an estimated 175 to 200 million albums worldwide.)?

To begin with, one has to acknowledge that the members of the band were true products of their era. They were a group of talented teenagers from academic backgrounds in Cambridge — Roger 'Syd' Barrett, Roger Waters and David Gilmour — who all happened to be keen guitarists who moved to London to further their education in different fields such as studying the arts, architecture, music, etc. They would all have a huge impact on the evolution of the group and the sound that would define a genre and a time in music.

Syd Barrett led years: 1965-1968

Roger 'Syd' Barrett, was the son of a university don who was the original creative force behind the group. He would lead the band to its first precarious fame, and damage himself irreparably along the way. And though the Floyd's Barrett era only lasted three years, it always informed what they became.

The origins of Pink Floyd came from the implosion of an earlier band, formed in 1964, which was at various times called Sigma 6, The Meggadeaths, The Screaming Abdabs, and The Abdabs. When this band split up, some of its members — guitarist Bob Klose, bass player Roger Waters, drummer Nick Mason, and keyboardist Rick Wright, who played primarily wind instruments at this point — formed a new band called Tea Set and were later joined by guitarist Syd Barrett, who also became the band's primary vocalist. The name was dropped when they found itself on the same bill as another band with the same name. Legend has it that Barrett came up with an alternate name on the spur of the moment, choosing The Pink Floyd Sound (after two blues musicians, Pink Anderson and Floyd Council). For a time after this they oscillated between 'Tea Set' and 'The Pink Floyd Sound' but the latter name eventually was chosen as the main one. The word Sound was dropped fairly quickly.

They were mostly known for covering rhythm and blues staples such as "Louie, Louie", but gained notoriety for their psychedelic interpretations, with extended improvised sections and psychedelic solos. They quickly lost the heavily jazz-oriented Klose and Barrett started writing his own pieces influenced by American surf music and British psychedelic rock mixed in with his own brand of whimsical humor. Pink Floyd became a favorite in the underground movement, playing at such prominent venues as the UFO club, the Marquee Club and the Roundhouse.

They released their debut album *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* in August 1967, (originally called "Projection") which is considered to be a prime example of English psychedelic music. The album's tracks, predominantly written by Barrett, showcase poetic lyrics and an eclectic mixture of music, from the Avant

Garde free form piece “Interstellar Overdrive” to whimsical songs, such as “The Scarecrow”, inspired by the Fenlands, the rural region north of Cambridge, Barrett, Gilmour and Waters’ home town. During this period, the band toured with Jimi Hendrix, gaining them further popularity.

As the band became more popular and the stress of life on the road mixed with a significant intake of psychedelic drugs took its toll on Barrett. In January 1968, guitarist David Gilmour joined the band to carry out the playing and singing duties of Syd, whose mental health had been deteriorating for several months. Nevertheless, it was intended that Barrett would remain as the band’s figurehead and main songwriter. With Barrett’s behavior becoming less and less predictable, and his use of LSD almost constant, he became very unstable, often staring into space while the rest of the band performed (refusing to speak, playing one de-tuned string all night, writing material like 'Scream Thy Last Scream, Old Woman with a Basket'). The band’s live shows became increasingly ramshackle until, eventually, the other band members simply stopped taking him to the concerts.

Thus in April 1968, Barrett’s departure was formalized and the band adopted a new manager to finish their second album, *A Saucerful of Secrets* (begun the previous year). The album contained was a harbinger of things to come with the center-piece being the 12-minute title track.

Searching for a sound

The next few albums were experimentations in trying to find their sound and concept. It started with the album *More* which was the result of Pink Floyd being recruited by director Barbet Schroeder to produce a soundtrack for his film of the same name. It was seen as less a soundtrack than an accompaniment to this film about a group of hippies on the drug trail in Ibiza. The same month, they played live 'atmospherics' to the BBC's live coverage of the first moon landing. Then came double album *Ummagumma* which was a mix of live recordings and unchecked studio experimentation by the band members, with each recording half a side of a vinyl as a solo project (Mason’s wife makes an uncredited contribution as a flautist). It made for a growing reputation in both Europe and the alternative scene in the US and allowed them to play some of the key festivals of their time — Bath, Antibes, Rotterdam, Montreux. This led to *Atom Heart Mother* which was a collaboration with avant-garde composer Ron Geesin. One side of the album consisted of the title piece, a 23-minute long rock-orchestral suite. The second side featured one song from each of the band’s then-current vocalists (Roger Waters’ “If”, David Gilmour’s “Fat Old Sun” and Rick Wright’s “Summer 68”). Another lengthy piece, “Alan’s Psychedelic Breakfast”, was a sound collage of a man cooking and eating breakfast and his thoughts on the matter, linked with instrumentals. The popularity of the album allowed Pink Floyd to embark on their first U.S. tour and to develop a device called the azimuth coordinator, a joystick used to pan sound around their quadrophonic PA system.

This was followed by the considerably more focused music on *Meddle* (1971), with the 23-minute epic “Echoes” on the B side of the LP. David Gilmour

considered it to be his first “real” Pink Floyd album where the sound is their own and they have stripped away the orchestra that was prominent in Atom Heart Mother. It was followed by the release of Obscured By Clouds in 1972 as another soundtrack to a film by Barbet Schroeder and was the band’s first U.S. Top 50 album (where it hit #46),.

Breakthrough

What was to become the biggest selling album for the band started out a project entitled 'Eclipse' that was honed through an extensive world tour. The Dark Side of the Moon was released in March 1973 and was the demonstration of Waters' talents as both lyricist and conceptualist (the first Pink Floyd LP to feature lyrics exclusively written by Roger Waters) and a musical tour de force by Gilmour. It was the first of five concept albums, described the different pressures applying in everyday life. The concept (conceived in Nick Mason’s kitchen) proved a powerful catalyst for the band and together they drew up a list of themes: “On The Run” was dedicated to travel; “Time” depicted the encroachment of old age; “The Great Gig In The Sky” (originally named “Mortality Sequence” and “Religious Theme” during development) dealt with death; “Money” satirically spoke of the corrupting influence of money that often comes with fame and power; “Us And Them” entailed violence, and futility of war (a theme to which Waters would return, throughout his career) and “Brain Damage” touched on themes of insanity and neurosis. This was also the album where they used the brand new 16-track recording equipment at Abbey Road Studios. There was also the investment of an enormous amount of time by engineer Alan Parsons which made the album set new standards for sound fidelity.

Then came Wish You Were Here, released in 1975, that carries an abstract theme of absence: absence of any humanity within the music industry and, most poignantly, the absence of Syd Barrett. In addition to the classic acoustic title track, Wish You Were Here, the album includes the majestic, mostly instrumental nine-part “Shine On You Crazy Diamond”, a tribute to Barrett in which the lyrics deal explicitly with the aftermath of his breakdown. The album also includes the songs “Welcome to the Machine” and “Have a Cigar” (Roy Harper sang the latter), both of which harshly criticize the music industry. It would be their first transatlantic #1 album reaching the top spot in both U.K. and U.S. The album eventually sold over 10 million copies worldwide. Famously, Barrett briefly appeared unannounced at Abbey Road during the recording of 'Shine On' and shocked the band by his appearance and demeanor. It would be the last time any of them saw him. This album also marks the beginning of their growing away from each other thanks to personal and musical differences even though it would be several years until these became unbearable.

Roger Waters-led era: 1976-1984

By January 1977, with the release of Animals, the band’s reputation came under increasing criticism from some listeners (especially fans of the new punk rock genre) as being too pretentious with their complex arrangements having

lost the simplicity of early rock and roll. *Animals* contained lengthy songs tied to a theme, this time taken in part from George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, using pigs, dogs and sheep as metaphors for members of contemporary society. For the cover artwork, a giant inflatable pig was commissioned and floated over Battersea Power Station. This became one of the enduring symbols of Pink Floyd and inflatable pigs were a staple of Pink Floyd's live shows from then on. Pink Floyd's market strategy for the 1977 *Animals* tour was to play 'Animals' in the first half of the show with 'Wish You Were Here' in the second. The show, called Pink Floyd – In the Flesh tour was the last time Pink Floyd performed a major tour with Roger Waters. The tour featured the famous inflatable puppets, notably a 40 foot pig balloon, and a 'Nuclear family' with Mother, Father and two and a half children, later the band added a Cadillac, a television and a fridge. It also had a pyrotechnic 'waterfall' and featured one of the biggest and most elaborate stages to date. In Chicago, the band played to an estimated audience of 95,000 and set an attendance record, in Cleveland, of over 80,000 people. They helped set another attendance record on the final night of the tour, in Montreal, where a festival that also featured Emerson, Lake and Palmer drew another 80,000-strong audience. That night, Roger Waters spat in the face of a disruptive fan; *The Wall* grew out of Waters' thoughts about this incident, particularly his growing awareness that stardom had alienated him from his audience.

All this resulted in 1979's epic rock opera, *The Wall*, conceived mainly by Waters, developed themes of loneliness and failure of communication, inspired by Waters' feelings of having constructed a metaphoric wall between himself and his audience. This album gave Pink Floyd renewed acclaim and their only chart-topping single with "Another Brick in the Wall (Part 2)". *The Wall* also included the future concert staples *Comfortably Numb* and *Run Like Hell*, with the former in particular becoming a cornerstone of album-oriented rock and classic-rock radio play lists as well as one of the group's best-known songs. *The Wall* spent an astounding 15 weeks atop the U.S. charts during 1980. It sold well over 20 million copies worldwide and is often regarded as the best-selling double album ever. It has been certified 23x platinum by RIAA, for sales of 11.5 million copies in U.S. alone. The huge commercial success of *The Wall* made Pink Floyd the only artist since the Beatles to have the best-selling albums of two years (1973 and 1980) in less than a decade. The show — in which the band were slowly obscured by a giant wall of cardboard 'bricks' — was the most ambitious the rock world had ever seen, and was also turned into an Alan Parker film, starring Bob Geldof (who would return to the Floyd story 25 years later). The album sold 20 million, and spawned the band's only Number One single, the anti-authoritarian 'Another Brick in the Wall, Part 2'.

When they got back in studio, they produced *The Final Cut* released in 1983 with an even darker in tone than *The Wall*. This album re-examined many previous themes, while also addressing then-current events, including Waters' anger at Britain's participation in the Falklands War ("The Fletcher Memorial Home") and his cynicism toward, and fear of, nuclear war ("Two Suns in the Sunset"). Although technically released as a Pink Floyd album, the interior sleeve specified "A requiem for the post war dream by Roger Waters, performed by Pink Floyd". The arguing between Waters and Gilmour by this stage was

rumored to be so bad that they were never seen in the recording studio simultaneously. Gilmour even had his name removed from the production credits in protest over some of Waters' decisions. There was no tour.

David Gilmour era: 1987-1995

After three years — during which all four band members had pursued solo projects — Waters announced he was leaving the Floyd and disbanding them. Wright had left the legal entity some time before, transferring to the payroll for The Wall tour and playing no part in The Final Cut, but Gilmour and Mason decided to continue Pink Floyd without its erstwhile 'leader'. A turbulent period followed, but agreement was eventually reached: Waters would continue to perform the songs on which he worked while he was with the band, as well as new solo material. Gilmour — now first among equals — and Mason would continue to record and perform with Wright as Pink Floyd.

Gilmour and Mason returned to the studio, in 1986 for the recording sessions of A Momentary Lapse of Reason album. Many critics say that A Momentary Lapse of Reason should really be regarded as a Gilmour solo effort; in the way that The Final Cut can be seen as a Waters solo album. Having usually worked in tandem with Waters in drafting lyrics, Gilmour received further criticism for bringing writers from outside the band to assist him. The subsequent world tour, which also spawned the live Delicate Sound of Thunder, was the band's longest and most successful ever. Over four years, 5.5 million people saw 200 shows, including one on a floating stage in Venice (which again earned them a venue-ban) while Thunder became the first rock album to be played in space, by the Soviet-French Soyuz-7 mission.

The band's next recording would also be their last original album. The 1994 release The Division Bell was much more of a group effort than A Momentary Lapse of Reason had been, with Wright now reinstated as a full and contributing band member. The album was generally received more favorably by critics and fans alike than Lapse had been, sounding more like the timeless Pink Floyd of old. Saxophonist Dick Parry, a contributor to the mid-70s Floyd albums, also returned to the fold. The "Division Bell Tour" became the highest-grossing tour in rock history to that date, with the band playing the entirety of Dark Side of the Moon in some shows, the first time they had done so since 1975. The concerts featured a very large stage, a large round screen, incredible special effects, and quadraphonic sound and powerful lasers. All in all, the tour required 700 tons of steel carried by 53 articulated trucks and an initial investment of US\$ 4 million. It paid off. The tour was the first to gross over US\$ 100 million in the U.S. with only 59 concerts and is still one of the top-grossing tours in the country. Worldwide, it played to 5.5 million people and grossed over US\$ 250 million. More than 10 years later, and despite the ticket price inflation, the Rolling Stones remain the only act, which managed to out gross Pink Floyd in worldwide terms. Since then, the Floyd has recorded no new material in the studio.

Pink Floyd has not released any new studio material or toured since 1994's The Division Bell, nor is there a sign of any forthcoming, however the band released

a live album entitled P*U*L*S*E in 1995. P*U*L*S*E hit #1 in U.S. and featured songs recorded during one of the record-breaking 14 presentations at Earl's Court, in London, which ended "The Division Bell" tour, and includes an entire performance of "Dark Side of the Moon" as well as other favorites from albums like "The Wall" and "Wish You Were Here". In 1996, the band performed Wish You Were Here with Billy Corgan at their Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction.

On 16 November 2005 Pink Floyd were inducted into the UK Music Hall of Fame, by Pete Townshend. Gilmour and Mason attended in person, explaining that Wright was in hospital following eye surgery, and Waters appeared on a video screen, from Rome. It was stated that the chance of a reunion album is practically nil, and that any future concerts would be in the same vein as Live 8.

They have also lost a few men along the way. In 2003, the band's most successful manager Steve O'Rourke died from a stroke, in 2006, Syd Barrett died from pancreatic cancer and in 2008 Rick Wright followed him.

We are thus left to wonder if Floyd's still exist. Will they perform or record ever again? It now seems highly unlikely that the surviving members will ever convene under the name chosen by Syd Barrett, but who can say? Pink Floyd has always been a source of wonder and somewhat of a mystery.