

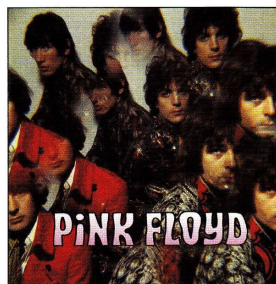


# The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn

Honing down their mammoth psychedelic live jams, **Pink Floyd's** debut album helped lay the foundations for prog rock. But it came at a cost...

Words: Mark Blake

THE PIPER AT THE GATES OF DAWN	
RELEASE DATE	4/8/67
CHART POSITION	6
BAND MEMBERS	Barrett, Mason, Waters, Wright
TRACKLISTING	Astronomy Domine, Lucifer Sam, Matilda Mother, Flaming, Pow R. Toc H., Take Up Thy Stethoscope And Walk, Interstellar Overdrive, The Gnome, Chapter 24, The Scarecrow, Bike
STAND-OUT TRACKS	Astronomy Domine, Lucifer Sam, Interstellar Overdrive, Chapter 24, Bike



Four lively lads out on the town, before chemicals and record cos got in the way.

It's a great image. What a shame there wasn't a photographer there to capture it. In the small hours of one Friday night in early 1967, The Who's Pete Townshend was at London's hippest club, looking visibly distressed while crouching down and pointing at the band on stage. Every Friday, The Blarney on Tottenham Court Road hosted UFO, an all-night psychedelic extravaganza of live music, poetry readings and performance art. That night, just feet away from Townshend, UFO's house band Pink Floyd were thundering through their repertoire of freeform jams and warped pop.

It was all too much for Townshend. The Who's songwriter was tripping on LSD – and terrified. The source of his fear: Pink Floyd's bassist, Roger Waters. "I thought Roger was going to swallow me," said Townshend in 2004. "Roger was very scary. I was weakened by acid." But there could have been another underlying reason for Townshend's paranoia. In 1967, the daringly experimental Pink Floyd presented a challenge to the established pop order. They were a group that Townshend feared might even swallow The Who.

Pink Floyd released their first album, *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*, in August that year. It showed impeccable timing. LSD had infiltrated the pop community, and The Beatles' latest, *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, was clearly inspired by their own lysergic adventures. Psychedelia – sounds and images that reflected an altered mind state – was all the rage, and Pink Floyd's new paymasters, EMI, saw the band as their entry to this strange new world.

In '67, Roger Waters described Pink Floyd's sound like so: "It's pop but very free and full of improvisation." That description explains why their debut album was so groundbreaking, but also why it helped map the way for progressive rock in the 70s. The songs fused pop, jazz, even Eastern musical influences. But, like Kenneth Grahame's children's story *The Wind In The Willows*, chapter seven of which gave the album its name, *Piper...* is a very English affair. The poetry, the whimsy and the echoes of old Albion that would later inhabit Caravan's early work or Genesis's *Nursery Cryme* have some of their roots in Floyd's debut.

By the time they signed to EMI, Pink Floyd's line-up had settled on guitarist/vocalist Syd Barrett, his Cambridge school-friend Roger Waters, drummer Nick Mason and keyboard player Rick Wright. Barrett was a mercurial character; good-looking, artistic, a bit mysterious and much admired around Cambridge. That he was two years younger than Waters didn't matter: the 23-year-old Roger deferred to Syd, who wrote most of their songs and fronted the band.

In February '67 Pink Floyd arrived at Abbey Road studios to start work. Despite having just recorded their first single *Arnold Layne* with UFO club co-founder Joe Boyd producing, they were assigned EMI's in-house producer, a 43-year-old former jazz musician named Norman Smith. But Norman had some reservations. "Pink Floyd's music did absolutely nothing for me, but I could see they had one hell of a following," he told me in 2006. "So I put my business head on and figured we could sell some records."

What had first attracted Floyd's managers Peter Jenner and Andrew King to the band was partly Syd Barrett's role as an anti-Eric Clapton-style guitar hero, playing "cosmic shit" instead of the usual blues. The managers visualised Pink Floyd as "an avant-garde pop group", but they understood the need for compromise. "Norman was there to curb their excesses," explained Jenner. "He was there to discourage the live ramble."

On stage, Floyd's signature tune *Interstellar Overdrive* – with Wright's Farfisa organ chasing Barrett's dissonant-sounding guitar – could ramble on for more than 20 minutes. It was one of the first songs tackled at Abbey Road, but Smith insisted on a more manageable 9:41 version. "I was trying to develop more melody in the music," he said. But he would meet with resistance later on. In March, *Arnold Layne* became a Top 20 hit after being banned by several radio stations who took



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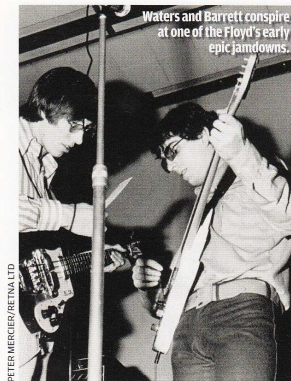
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Syd Barrett was the life and soul of the early Pink Floyd. But by the time they recorded their first album, the emotional cracks were beginning to show.



COURTNEY





Waters and Barrett conspire at one of the Floyd's early epic jamdowns.

PETER MERCER/RETNA LTD

against its lyrics about a sex pest who steals women's underwear. The pressure was on to deliver another 45. *Matilda Mother* was one of the first songs worked on, and was briefly considered for the follow-up single. But it lacked an *Arnold Layne*-style pop chorus, and featured Syd pining for the "dolls house and fairy stories" of childhood.

There was a pattern emerging. Songs such as *The Scarecrow* and *The Gnome* (Mason: "I do cringe at that one now") suggested Hans Christian Andersen or The Brothers Grimm's fairy tales being given a psychedelic makeover. "I always thought he [Syd] got stuck in some curious sort of protracted childhood," said the filmmaker Anthony Stern, who grew up with Barrett in Cambridge. "It was always there in the music. Childhood had been an idyllic time, and I think he found the idea of growing up frankly terrifying."

Perhaps Barrett's desire to regress came from his confused frame of mind. By now, Syd was regularly taking LSD. However much he was taking and how often (some say every day; many dispute this), it was still having an adverse effect. "I wasn't



MARK SHARRATT/RETNA FEATURES

“It’s pop but very free and full of improvisation.”  
Roger Waters

aware of the drugs,” said Norman Smith. “But I had my suspicions because of his attitude.” The happy-go-lucky Barrett of a few months earlier had been replaced by an often withdrawn version, albeit one still capable of moments of great creativity and clarity.

One of *Piper*’s... standout tracks was *Chapter 24*, a beautiful song inspired by the ancient Chinese text, *I Ching* (*The Book Of Changes*). “I remember Syd at the desk, operating the faders

Looking meaningful in extravagant shirts. Clockwise from top: Mason, Wright, Barrett, Waters.

for the final mix on that one,” recalled Andrew King. “He was totally capable of getting what he wanted.”

But Barrett could change just as quickly. “Sometimes it was like talking to a brick wall,” said Smith. “He would go in, do a take, come back into the control room and have a listen. I’d make some suggestion, and he would just nod, go back in, do another take, and it would be exactly the same as the first one. I eventually realised I was wasting my time.”

During some of *Piper*’s recording, The Beatles were at Abbey Road working on *Sgt Pepper*. Smith, who died in 2008, recalled Paul McCartney visiting a Floyd session, and the Floyd trooping next door to watch The Beatles recording *Lovely Rita*. Listening to *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* now it’s apparent how much freedom Norman actually gave his young charges, but also how much more experimental and left-field Pink Floyd were than The Beatles.

There’s little artistic compromise in the menacing *Pow R. Toc H.* or *Astronomy Domine*, where Peter Jenner can be heard reciting astronomical co-ordinates through

## “They were so out on their own they set standards few others could match.”

Selim Lemouchi, founding member of Dutch occultists The Devil’s Blood, delves into the strange magik of *Piper*.



“It was my sister who first introduced me to Pink Floyd, through *Wish You Were Here*. But I didn’t hear *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* until a few years later. By that time, I was into black metal and all sorts of grim sounds, when someone gave me a tape of the album.

“What struck me immediately was the way it sounded like nothing else I’d ever heard. There was an insane energy about it all, and the songs were original and inventive. While most of the tracks aren’t exceptionally long, they all come across as if they could be the start of a lengthy jam session. In fact, listening

to them, they encourage you to think in those terms. Something like *Interstellar Overdrive*, for example, has the potential to be over 20 minutes long - you can hear it in the way the band constructed it for the album.

“I believe Pink Floyd became increasingly mainstream as they went along, and there’s nothing wrong with that. But with *The Piper*... the band were so individual and out on their own that they set standards few others could ever hope to match.

“If you want music to play while smoking a joint, then this is the album to put on. *Astronomy Domine* is absolutely perfect for that sort of evening!” MD



a megaphone. The Bo Diddley-soundalike riff on *Lucifer Sam* illustrates Barrett's flair for taking a blues lick and turning it inside out, while the whole album spotlights Rick Wright's undervalued role, with his Farfisa organ often the lead instrument over Barrett's guitar.

Barrett and Wright made a perfect musical partnership on the Floyd's second single *See Emily Play*, which was included on the US version of the album. It may have had mystical lyrics ("about a hung-up chick," said Barrett) and featured Syd scraping a Zippo lighter — or possibly a ruler — along the frets of his guitar, but it also had a radio-savvy chorus. "I thought, At last! This is the one!" said Smith. *See Emily Play* was released in June and went Top 5. But its composer distanced himself from it almost immediately. Mason: "Syd was happy to chip in with catchy music ideas, but hated anything being commercial."

Barrett's friend David Gilmour dropped by the *Emily*... sessions and was shocked by what he saw. "Syd looked very strange, glassy-eyed," said Gilmour. "He didn't seem to recognise me." The drugs weren't helping. When Floyd performed the single on BBC's chart show *Top Of The Pops*, Syd deliberately messed up his make-up minutes before showtime. A week later, he turned in a lacklustre performance on the same show. "I told him he was going to destroy our career," said Smith. "But it just went in one ear and out the other." It was too late: Barrett was slowly withdrawing from Pink Floyd.

On its release *Record Mirror* applauded *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*'s "mind-blowing sound". The album reached Number 6 in the UK. There was, though, one dissenting



COLIN PRIME

voice: Pete Townshend felt the record didn't capture the powerful Floyd live show that had left him so distraught at UFO. "I thought it was fucking awful," he protested. Townshend blamed Norman Smith's production, but Peter Jenner was delighted with the end result: "Norman made a fantastic commercial record, without destroying the quirky nature of Syd's writing."

Before long, though, Barrett's quirkiness would lead to cancelled gigs and an infamous performance at the Christmas On Earth Continued

As Floyd's stock began to rise, Barrett began to become more distant from the rest of the band — and indeed the outside world.

concert at Kensington's Olympia in December. That night Syd stood on the stage, unable or unwilling to play. By the end of the year, David Gilmour had been asked to join. For a time, the two co-existed in the line-up, until in early '68, on their way to a gig, they took the momentous decision not to pick Syd up.

Some tracks on Pink Floyd's second album, *A Saucerful Of Secrets* included Barrett's barely audible guitar, while one, *Jugband Blues*, featured his plaintive sounding lead vocal. Even though, in one of his glibber moments, Roger Waters has said that he now "refuses to take the album seriously", it's far better to remember Syd Barrett on *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*.

In May 2007, Waters, Floyd, and devotees including Kevin Ayers, Chrissie Hynde and Damon Albarn, honoured the now late Syd Barrett with a tribute concert at London's Barbican. As a grand finale, all the performers, apart from Waters, returned for a ramshackle version of *Piper's* final track, *Bike*. Syd's idiosyncratic ditty about his favoured mode of transport, with its *basket, a bell that rings and things to make it look good* embodies the Floyd debut's eccentric homegrown charm. It was a fitting send-off. The record may not have the maturity or angst of great albums such as *The Wall* or *The Dark Side Of The Moon*, but it has an innocence that Pink Floyd would never display again. ②



Barrett looking lost and confused at the infamous Olympia performance.

MICHAEL HUTTENLOFF/GETTY IMAGES

“Syd was happy to chip in with catchy music ideas, but hated anything being commercial.”  
Nick Mason