

The Light Side  
Interview: Toby Manning  
The Big Issue

His reputation is of a misanthrope and his next project – an opera about the French Revolution – seems to confirm this. So why is Pink Floyd legend Roger Waters coming across all charming and cheerful?

It's an intimidating prospect, meeting one of rock's legendary grouches. The man who, in the 1970s, took over Pink Floyd with his miserable, misanthropic world-view, bringing them 180 million album sales worth of success, but driving a founder member out of the band and demoralising the others. The man who, having quit the band in the mid-1980s, flew into a 15-year fury when they had the gall to reform without him, hurling abuse and litigation into their path. The man who, when his third solo album, 1992's *Amused to Death*, again failed to even approach the reformed Pink Floyd's sales, truculently refused to tour for seven years and record for 13. And now, when he finally does release some music, it's *Ca Ira* – a mammoth, daunting opera about the French Revolution, of all things. 'Ha,' it seems to say, 'take that you moronic ingrates!'

At a swanky gentleman's club, Waters' handlers don't assuage my apprehension: "Oh no, he's not a charming person," and advise me to avoid questions about Pink Floyd. Er, right – avoid Pink Floyd mere weeks after they reformed on global TV at Live 8 after 22 acrimonious years, reigniting interest and making them, once again, a worldwide sales phenomenon.

I'm still mentally struggling with a sensible opera question when I'm ushered into The Presence. In his faded blue shirt, comfortable jeans, leather slip-ons and pink socks, topped with a shock of grey hair that appears un-thinned through sheer force of will, Waters looks neither like a rock'n'roll musician nor a man whose personal wealth is estimated at £78 million. After an ice-breaking chat about what it's like for a left-winger to live in George W Bush's America, I dutifully suggest we discuss the opera.

"Ah, fuck the opera!" he says in an accent that makes a commoner of the Queen, waving a regal hand and switching on a transistor radio. "What's the tennis score?"

Despite his handlers' disavowals, I'm immediately charmed. For although Waters doesn't bother with social niceties, he proves much warmer and more engaging than his frosty reputation. Obviously Live 8 wasn't a one-off, where his first performance with his bitterly estranged bandmates found rock's legendary grouch grinning uncontrollably throughout like a teenager offered a date with Jessica Simpson. "I was very happy," he agrees. "I definitely felt warm and cuddly towards everyone in the band. I decided," says this legendary control freak, "that if anything came up in rehearsals – any difference of opinion – I would just roll over. And I did." He looks quite serene at the memory. "People obviously love the work. And it was great to bask in the warmth of that affection." Was this all Waters wanted throughout those years of sulking and sniping: just to have his work appreciated? It certainly seems so: when I make an approving comment about his lyrics, he absolutely glows, regards me with new interest, and shows me a poem on his Scion. The poem is very good, suggesting that, in his 13 years away, Waters hasn't altogether given himself up to the more visceral pursuits of shooting and fishing.

With Waters gliding from topic to topic unprompted (“that hunting ban was a dreadful piece of legislation”), questions prove superfluous. Waters is a consummate conversationalist, and he can draw his themes together better than any journalist, thanks very much. “After Live 8, it was extraordinary to be so warmly feted by a press that’s always been so unpleasant and negative in the past,” he says. For Pink Floyd have never been a fashionable band. “Because my experience of England... is that there’s a deep-seated resentment – almost a hatred – of anybody who achieves anything. And, despite the neo-con policies that stand in the White House now, there’s something refreshing about being in the States where they go, ‘Wow, you did well – that’s cool’. Everybody’s very happy about it if you succeed.”

Waters was born in Cambridge in 1943, his father dying in the second world war a year later. This, and the influence of his Communist mother, were the formative experiences of his life. “I still think of myself as being left-wing, in terms of being attached to humanitarian principles, that everybody should get a fair crack of the whip.” There’s a pause, while he checks I’m paying attention (I am). “However: I wasn’t stupid enough in 1974 when the royalty cheques started to come in not to understand that the minute I left it in the bank, I was a capitalist. And so I sort of heart-searched a bit about that and made a compromise. Which was this: [Waters loves a conversational colon] a certain percentage of my royalties would go straight into a charitable trust. But I definitely took the decision that I wasn’t going to immediately divvy it out amongst the poor and needy. And I’ve lived very comfortably since that.”

Waters has lived more than comfortably: he still owns a mansion in Hampshire and a £6-million London house, as well as a place in the super posh Hamptons, New York, where P Diddy is amongst his neighbours, plus a Manhattan apartment. The writer of Money [Pink Floyd’s breakthrough US hit in 1973] wasn’t being entirely ironic about his love of the stuff then?

“When I was a townie in Cambridge, I coveted those sports cars those rich undergraduates were driving round in. I wanted a Lotus Elite. I’ve never not wanted things. However, the way the world is organised at the moment, where those of us who have so much and those of us who haven’t have so fucking little, is a deep concert.” And without so much as a nudge, he neatly returns us to the opera. “I believe that the French revolution was a microcosm – or a model – for what’s happening globally in the world now. Governments need to realise this, if we don’t want a blood bath.”

Many don’t understand what Waters is doing writing an opera – let alone one about the French Revolution. (“Oh, of course the knives are going to come out – people defend their own little islands of culture with great panache.”) This is the man, after all, who writes about drug-addled rock musicians behind walls and kids not needing no ed-u-cay-shun. But in fact, for all his past protestations about not rading and that defensiveness about being a “townie”, Waters is a proper renaissance man, as comfortable with opera as rock music, as informed about sports as politics. He originally set his since-deceased friend Etienne Roda-Gil’s French libretto to music back in 1988. But, succumbing to pressure, Waters has written an English version, characteristically pushing history around as much as he would people (“the real history was rather inadequate”), and putting forward his own preoccupations. With a flush of pride, he quotes:

“But soft, as ever in the ebb and flow, sweet reason deft and incorrupt

“Adoring of the human kind, illuminates man’s plight: Should he embrace the brute and base, tilt blindly at the carousel?”

“Or note at least that other voice and entertain the choice, Between the darkness and the light?”

This, says Waters, has been his lifelong theme. “What is special about human beings is that they have free will to choose... between the darkness and the light. There is something about being human that separates us from the beasts, that is connected to our capacity for empathy.”

Well, yes, but while there was an empathetic humanism to Dark Side of the Moon’s account of the pressures of modern life, it seemed to gradually give way to misanthropy on 1977’s Animals (the human race as Dogs, Sheep and Pigs) and The Wall (a howl of alienated fury at the Floyd’s arena audiences), while Amused to Death doesn’t paint a much prettier picture (a world zombified by television).

Waters nods thoughtfully, inevitably ahead of me. “It’s a weird thing, but y’know, you see those people in New Orleans and you want to help them but, at the same time, I imagine myself driving along and one of them’s in front of me, and I’m shouting [voice suddenly rises in regal outrage] ‘Get out of the fucking way! Jesus Christ, why are you driving at 20 miles an hour! What’s wrong with people?’”

Being helpless with mirth isn’t something I’d expected from an audience with Roger Waters. But there’s always been a mordant humour to his misanthropy; a pleasure in the way his disdain for social niceties has enabled him to say the unsayable. But so many have missed both the humour – and the humanism – in Waters’ work that his next project, a musical theatre version of The Wall, is intended to highlight the humour of an album regarded as one of the most miserable ever made. “I may have been pissed off,” he says, “but I was always deeply involved in the humour of all these situations.” Ah! So he was only joking. He didn’t mean all those nasty things all along. Welcome to the new, warm and cuddly Roger Waters. You’ll like him. Honest.

*Ca Ira (Sony BMG) is out now.*

<http://www.bigissue.com/bigissue.html>

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