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Which One's Nick?

With David Gilmour and Roger Waters continuing to fire Floyd's big guns, **Nick Mason's Saucerful Of Secrets** have set the controls for the heart of early Floyd and achieved lift-off.

Words: **Ian Fortnam** Photos: **Jill Furmanovsky**

Somewhere along the line, an enormodome-based arms race for the hearts, minds and hard cash of the ever-faithful Pink Floyd fan base came into being. Over recent years, Roger Waters and David Gilmour have both taken to the road seeking to accentuate the titanic scale of the Floyd's most epic incarnation alongside contemporary solo material; interlacing lasers, troubling inner-city airspace with flying pigs, shining on into infinity, building bloody great walls and generally trying to out-*Comfortably Numb* each other at every turn.

Which is all very well if dizzying enormity is your thing. On Planet Floyd, mind-blowing scale has been written into their modus operandi since *The Dark Side Of The Moon* toured its inexorable way from Rainbow Theatre rehearsals to 741 consecutive weeks (that's 14.25 years, statistics fans) on the US *Billboard* chart. But prior to their *Dark Side*-driven promotion to the mid-70s' techno-flash super-league, Pink Floyd were something else entirely.

"Before Syd [Barrett, founder member, singer, songwriter, guitarist] became a writer, we – like every other long-haired band – wanted to play the

blues," chuckles founding Floyd drummer Nick Mason over his second Kensington coffee of the morning. And understandably so – being raised by film-industry sharecroppers in the harsh cotton-fields of Hampstead was bound to make its mark.

"The sharecroppers of North London," Mason says, laughing. "Riding those London and Midland Railway boxcars from Watford down to Euston."

"It's unnerving as I find myself in a slightly more senior position after all these years of being the ship's cook."

Nick Mason

Following a quantum leap from the stinging 1966 blues of *I'm A King Bee* to Syd Barrett's inspired multi-purpose psychedelia (whether fashioned into the sharp, if characteristically eccentric, pop genius of *Arnold Layne* or the extensive jazz-inspired instrumental improvisations of *Interstellar Overdrive*), Pink Floyd were rapidly adopted as the house band by London's scene-leading UFO club: underground-defining purveyors of intimate

happenings under the ego-negating anonymity of Mike Leonard's pioneering light shows.

But then, as they sat primed to conquer America, Syd suffered his much speculated upon hallucinogen (most probably, STP)-induced psychological 'breakdown'.



Nick Mason's Saucerful Of Secrets: (l-r) Guy Pratt, Lee Harris, Gary Kemp, Dom Beken, Nick Mason.

"We certainly dealt with it very, very badly," Mason admits. "We thought Syd was mad because he didn't want to be a pop star any more, whereas it's actually highly likely that's the most sane thing he did feel, but we just assumed it meant he was ill."

With Barrett, their primary creative force, out of the picture, Mason, Waters (bass), Rick Wright (keyboards) and relatively recent recruit Gilmour (now promoted, by default, to a guitar and vocal role) set to work reinventing and repurposing the Pink Floyd sound. And over the course of the next four years – while stretching boldly in a variety of new and pioneering directions – they made some of the most genuinely progressive, startling and ultimately enduring music of the band's entire career.

But with their relentless forward momentum finding fruition with, and latterly defined, by the world-beating conceptual immensity of *Dark Side Of The Moon* and its similarly bankable successors (*Wish You Were Here*, *Animals* and *The Wall*), it was a formative period that was largely forgotten.



The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn Floyd: (l-r) Roger Waters, Nick Mason, Syd Barrett, Richard Wright.

Especially when mega-gig set-lists were being compiled. These were compositions crafted with clubs, theatres, concert halls and Odeons in mind. When you're playing a Wembley, you play your brightly shining *Crazy Diamonds* rather than your subtler, more experimental selections.

Ironically, this commercially modest era of creative metamorphosis came to secure its own constituency when bundled with the cream of the Barrett era on 1971's budget-priced *Relics* compilation album. While cash-rich 70s sixth formers and gainfully employed heads could pore relentlessly over their dope-burn-scarred *Dark Side*, their cash-strapped younger siblings passed the interminable down time between glam dying and punk happening listening to *Bike*, *See Emily Play* and *The Nile Song* on *Relics* (re-released toward the middle of the decade by Music For Pleasure for less than a quid).

And so, as vast arenas of exultant punters down the decades echoed to 'Is there anybody out there?' a rich, untapped vein of timeless classics lay half-

forgotten in the memory banks of literally millions of Floyd-hungry punters: unplayed, frozen in time... *Relics*.

But now, thankfully and at last, a new band are here to change all that: the appropriately-named Nick Mason's Saucerful Of Secrets.

Lee Harris grew up with *Wish You Were Here*. His parents took him to see Floyd's *The Wall* show at Earls Court on their 1980/81 tour when he was eight. When his dad bought him a cassette of *Relics* he thought it was "sort of scary". Harris grew up to play guitar for The Blockheads, and upon leaving the band in 2013, decided to examine some of life's other possibilities. He married, moved to France and renovated property. He'd pretty much hung up his guitar for good. But a fortuitous call from an old chum, Guy Pratt (Pink Floyd's bassist since 1987), to say he was

playing locally with David Gilmour and inviting Lee to see the show, set unlikely conceptual wheels in motion.

"Coming home from the gig, I realised how much I loved David Gilmour's guitar," Harris recalls. "So I took a year out playing along to Pink Floyd records in my bedroom, working out how to use all these different pedals."

The following year, when Harris and Pratt met again at yet another local Gilmour show, Harris ➤



Mason is "having the time of his life" in his new band, says bassist Guy Pratt.



was determined to work with Pratt on suitable Floyd material. But what exactly?

"It couldn't be *Comfortably Numb*, that'd just be silly. Then a light bulb went off in my head: *The Early Years* box set's just coming out, and what's Nick Mason doing? So I said to Guy: 'I've got an idea of Nick playing stuff that isn't played live much – all the Syd Barrett songs and everything up to *Obscured By Clouds*. Do you think he'd go for it?' And Guy said: 'Write it out properly and I'll get it to him.' Which I did, he did, and here we are."

"If Lee had written to me cold, it wouldn't have happened," says Nick Mason, a warm, self-effacing, good-humoured sort, casually attired in a crisply ironed open-necked white shirt "I didn't know him, but that Guy was up for it made a big difference, because I've spent as much time playing drums with Guy as I did with Roger [Waters], and it tends to be quite bonding."

Timing was another contributing factor. Mason had just finished promoting Pink Floyd's *Their Mortal Remains* exhibition at the Victoria And Albert Museum in London and was starting to feel like a dusty museum exhibit himself. "I was beginning to feel as if I belonged to English Heritage, part of ancient history, and that slightly academic approach had to be balanced by some actual playing. I realised I'd done virtually nothing where I actually felt tired at the end of a show for years. It was always guest spots, two numbers or something, plenty of adrenaline then very little to actually release it on."

"When I was at school, Pink Floyd were *The Nile Song*," says Pratt, who went to school with Alex

Patterson later of The Orb, and future Killing Joke bassist and Pink Floyd producer Youth. After Pratt got a bass for Christmas and Youth a guitar, they formed A Nice Pair Of Three. "I've always wanted to do *The Nile Song*, but David's never been keen on it"

If you want to know what Pratt looks like, open a dictionary and you should find a picture of him next to the word 'garrulous'. Apart from the Floyd, he's played with a long-as-your-arm list of artists that includes Roxy Music, Madonna, David Bowie and Michael Jackson, and if you want an anecdote, then roll up, roll up, because he's got plenty to spare. His casual charm and easy wit is like catnip to musicians, so with an incomparable address book at his disposal, putting together a band

around Mason, Harris and himself was never going to present too much of a challenge.

"The first name I suggested was Dom."

Keyboard whizz Dom Beken and Pratt have enjoyed a working relationship for years, and it was through Pratt that Beken ended up working with The Orb and, most significantly, late Pink

Floyd keyboard player Rick Wright. "About thirteen years ago," Beken explains, "Rick asked Guy – who was his son-in-law – if he knew someone who could help him rebuild a home studio, work with him on some new material and buff up some old stuff."

Since Wright's death in 2008, Beken has continued to maintain Wright's extensive archive,

"It's so great to reconnect with the Pink Floyd when they were just finding their way, where everything wasn't so important."

Guy Pratt

so probably has a closer understanding of Wright's playing style than anyone else alive. He is even able to closely replicate his characteristic improvisational style.

"Being Floyd's sole properly trained musician, Rick was the only band member with a mastery of alternative modes and ways of adding character and interest to what Roger, David and Syd were doing in the early days," says Beken. "So by searching through the archive and listening to his multi-tracks, I've been trying to play in character, but not copy note-for-note what he did because the vibe was different every time they played."

"Rick was adorable," Pratt continues. "But very few people got to know him, so having someone who actually did is such a resource. So that's why Dom's in."

And to complete the team? On the face of it, a surprising choice, but examine all available evidence and Gary Kemp, founding songwriter/guitarist with Spandau Ballet and one-time Ronnie Kray, is a shoo-in for Syd.

"Gary's pretty much my best friend," says Pratt. "But he's also a friend of Nick's. So it was Nick that asked Gary. Which is just brilliant, inspired."

Gary Kemp has the demeanour of a man who doesn't have to try too hard to be cool. His casual deployment of a polka-dot Dolce & Gabbana silk scarf speaks volumes. And when the subject of popular culture and tribal youth movements of the 60s and 70s comes up, so does he. He expounds

with an informed scholarly enthusiasm on the subjects of mod, psych, glam, prog, punk, Bowie, Bolan, Humble Pie, Kraftwerk, Middle Earth, The Roxy... That he and Pratt are best friends is quite astonishing.

When do either of them find time to breathe?

Kemp hasn't just studied the chapter and verse of London's underground culture, he's part of its history. The parallels between Floyd and Spandau Ballet's beginnings are clear, so it's no real surprise that Mason and Kemp find so much in common.

"When Spandau became the house band at The Blitz and found ourselves at the forefront of a new pop/rock wave or youth movement, it was exactly what happened with the Floyd at the UFO club on Tottenham Court Road. And that baton continued to be passed down through the years in London, different clubs, different scenes: Middle Earth and glam; The Roxy and punk; The Blitz club and new romantics. And it's not a long leap. I went to Billy's, Steve Strange's first club, in 1978, so that's only eleven years after Syd was playing at the UFO club. It's nothing, is it?"

With the five-piece line-up of Nick Mason's *Saucerful Of Secrets* finally in place ("A dream team, really," according to Pratt), certain essential logistics had to be taken care of. Not least, who – other than Mason and Beken – was going to be who?

"As far as who sang what went," says Pratt, "that just sort of happened. When playing with David and Floyd I tended to do Roger parts. And while I'm not the best singer in the world, because I've been around for a while at least there's a ring of familiarity. It's a voice people have heard on *Pulse* and *The Delicate Sound Of Thunder*."

Kemp was the obvious choice to interpret Syd's material. Again, the lineage was clear: "If it hadn't been for Syd there would have been no Ziggy, if it hadn't been for both of those guys there would have been no Johnny Rotten. There's probably only three degrees of separation between me and Syd vocally. Bowie's voice definitely echoes Syd's, and the first time I heard *See Emily Play* it was Bowie's version on *Pin-Ups*."

No surprise, then, that Kemp uses Mick Ronson's guitar parts when he plays *Emily*.

Divvying up Barrett and Gilmour riffs between Harris and Kemp also needed consideration.

"We had to become the Keith and Ronnie of Pink Floyd," Harris says. "We all eventually got in a room together last October, and at the end of that first rehearsal, Nick came over to me and said: 'Well done, thank you,' and I realised he'd really enjoyed himself, which was great."

Nick Mason's *Saucerful Of Secrets* made their live debut over four successive sold-out nights in London in May at Camden Dingwall's and the Putney Half Moon to packed and rapturous audiences.

Vintage material, long-since frozen in time by familiar studio recordings, breathed anew in invigorating contemporary arrangements. Half-century-old songs, some defined by period quaintness, snapped into sharp, vital focus, informed by glam, punk, trance and ambient elements. Years of dehumanising distance dissolved as Nick Mason faced an audience close enough for him to see the whites of their eyes for the first time in decades.

While Gilmour and Waters go for bigger and bigger bangs, Mason is going back to Floyd's roots.



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**"I was beginning to feel as if
 I belonged to English Heritage,
 part of ancient history."**

Nick Mason

"It felt great," Pratt says. "I've only played three of these songs live during my years with Floyd. A lot of them have *never* been played live and I can't really understand why. There's so much to love about it, not least looking back and seeing Nick grinning like an idiot. He's just having the time of his life. What's lovely is seeing that guy on the stage at a pub, reconnecting with that guy on the stage of the UFO. Because I've only ever known stadium Nick, and as long as I've worked with Floyd everything's been so *important*, and it's so great to reconnect with the Pink Floyd where it wasn't, when they were just finding their way, and their humour. Because Pink Floyd aren't exactly known for their knockabout humour."

So far, *Saucerful* have unveiled their *Arnold Layne*, their *See Emily Play*, *Bike*, *Interstellar Overdrive* (initially a snappy four minutes, already edging towards the epic), *Lucifer Sam*, *Obscured By Clouds*, *One Of These Days* (the whole set's all over the net for those who

need it). They're working on expanding their repertoire for forthcoming September dates, to include *Careful With That Axe, Eugene* and *Vegetable Man*. What, no *Scream Thy Last Scream*, the great, lost Syd-era single on which Mason took lead vocal?

"Sadly, no," Mason says with a twinkle. "I bring bad news to your readers. I'm not very keen on the song or having to try to sing and play it simultaneously. It was an experiment that gave clear indication as to why I probably shouldn't."

You seem to be having an awful lot of fun.

"I'm having a very different experience," Mason concludes with another broad grin, "because it's all about me rather than all about Pink Floyd, and it's rather unnerving as I find myself in a slightly more senior position after all these years of being the ship's cook." 🍷

Nick Mason's Saucerful Of Secrets' tour begins at Portsmouth Guildhall on September 23.