



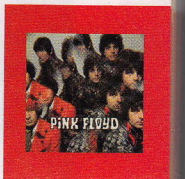
THE PIPER AT THE GATES OF DAWN

By Will Simpson

# Follow The Piper

*Riding high on the 60s Zeitgeist, Pink Floyd's debut album captured the psychedelic spirit of the era with Syd Barrett leading the charge.*

PHOTO: PINK FLOYD MUSIC



**“I WASN’T THAT KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT THE SORT OF MUSIC THEY WERE PLAYING, PSYCHEDELIA DIDN’T INTEREST ME”** *Norman Smith*

**O**ne remarkable aspect about the late 60s psychedelic explosion was how quickly it all happened. 1966 was a key year when a monochrome music scene almost overnight became flushed with colour. At the centre of this sudden explosion was a group of architecture and art students

that had started the year playing blues as the Pink Floyd Sound but would evolve into the toast of underground London, dragging along an entire subculture in their wake. Like punk 10 years later, others would be left playing catch-up to the next big thing.

#### LEADERS IN SOUND

EMI, as the most prestigious British label, understandably wanted to nab the UK leaders of psychedelia. There was a brief dalliance with Polydor but both band and management chose EMI after their booking agent Bryan Morrison received a letter from the label’s in-house producer Norman Smith intimating that he was looking for bands to sign. The deal was concluded for an advance of £5,000

(not much these days, but in the 60s EMI was not used to giving advances to unknown groups). When Pink Floyd (the ‘Sound’ had been jettisoned at some point during 1966) entered the studio with Smith to start recording their debut album in February 1967, it was as the leaders of an underground movement that needed to be interpreted to mainstream pop consumers. There was a lot at stake.

Smith and Floyd made for unlikely bedfellows. Twenty years older than his charges, Smith was an ex-RAF man who had engineered The Beatles records up to *Rubber Soul*. “I wasn’t that knowledgeable about the sort of music they were playing,” he later confessed. “Psychedelia didn’t interest me.” Smith was a jazz head – one of his

# Innocence Lost

*The tale of the sad demise of Syd Barrett is legendary in rock's history, as the wonderkid fell from grace into obscurity.*

**R**oger Keith Barrett was rock's quintessential lost boy, the too-fragile-for-this-world star that flies too close to the sun and falls to earth. Unlike the other casualties of the late 60s – the Morrisons, Joneses and Joplins – Syd didn't burn out, he fell gradually. After departing public life, he spent his remaining 30 years as a living ghost.

The pre-stardom Syd was charming and convivial, but also a little bit elusive. His talent though was beyond dispute. His Cambridge friend and later Pink Floyd artist/designer Storm Thorgerson said: "his ability to free associate verbally was of a different order. He wasn't as verbal or as academic as others, but he had a way with words". Early on it was clear he was the star of the group. Sometime flatmate Duggie Fields described him as "charismatic, handsome, witty, fun to be around. There would be an incredible number of very attractive women knocking on Syd's door with great regularity".

What happened next is the matter of much record. Syd's problems were noticeable by those in and around the group from the time they first tasted commercial success in the summer of 1967. Meltdowns on US TV and gigs where he is virtually catatonic ensue. By the end of the year the group are at a loss at what to do. Various solutions are tried. Dave Gilmour is recruited as a second guitarist to 'fill in' for Syd. The idea of Syd as a Brian Wilson-type, non-touring songwriter is mooted. Then in late January 1968 the group simply decide not to pick up Syd on a way to a gig in Southampton. A settlement is negotiated and by April it's official: Syd Barrett has left Pink Floyd.

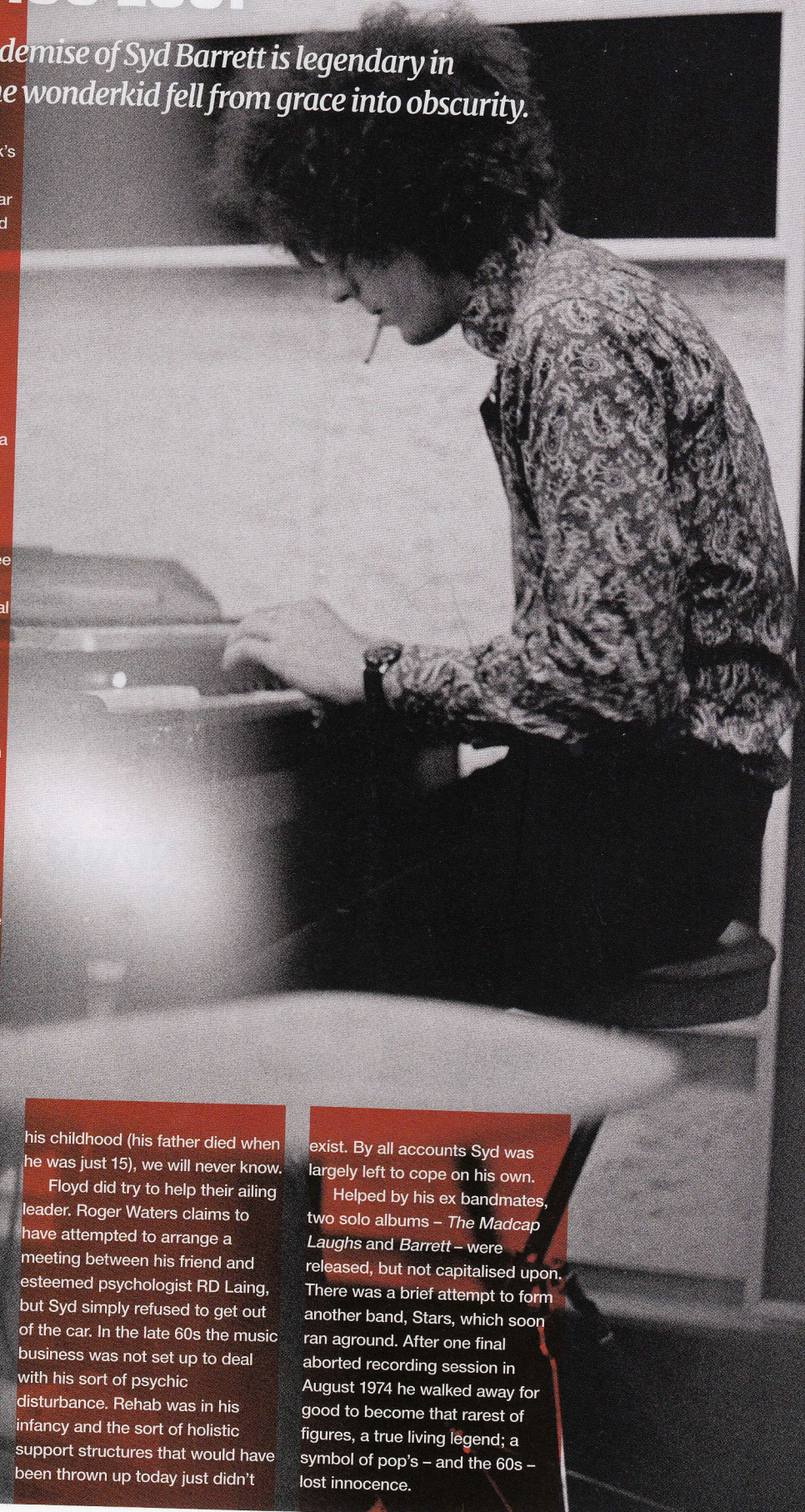
To what extent Syd's decline was due to simple over indulgence in LSD, how much an allergic reaction to sudden fame, or linked to psychological trauma lurking in

his childhood (his father died when he was just 15), we will never know.

Floyd did try to help their ailing leader. Roger Waters claims to have attempted to arrange a meeting between his friend and esteemed psychologist RD Laing, but Syd simply refused to get out of the car. In the late 60s the music business was not set up to deal with his sort of psychic disturbance. Rehab was in his infancy and the sort of holistic support structures that would have been thrown up today just didn't

exist. By all accounts Syd was largely left to cope on his own.

Helped by his ex bandmates, two solo albums – *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett* – were released, but not capitalised upon. There was a brief attempt to form another band, Stars, which soon ran aground. After one final aborted recording session in August 1974 he walked away for good to become that rarest of figures, a true living legend; a symbol of pop's – and the 60s – lost innocence.



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# Oh, What A Trip!

The cover image used on *Piper* encapsulated the colourful mood of the psychedelic 1960s.

The debut album from the leading lights of the UK psychedelic scene needed a suitably psychedelic sleeve and so it fell to an Anglo-Asian photographer, Vic Singh to provide the memorable kaleidoscopic cover image of *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn*. It was one of the few occasions when a band photograph has graced the cover of a Pink Floyd record.

Singh shared studio space with David Bailey before striking out on his own, thanks to a loan from Vidal Sassoon. A well-connected fellow, Singh was also friendly with George Harrison and his wife, the model Patti Boyd. It was they who had given Singh a 'prism lens' that splits an image up into three or four segments, weathering them against each other.

So when Pink Floyd's management got in touch with Singh in 1967 about the cover of *Piper*, he knew he had something perfect for the band: "I thought, 'BANG! That lens is perfect for them', it signified them, the kind of psychedelic music and trip they were on." Neither the band nor Jenner and King had any alternative ideas of what they wanted from the cover so it was left to Singh himself to come up with the cover.

"What I asked them to do was to bring really bright clothes to lift the colour a bit and shoot two or three reels on a white background. It was perfect for that session and for them at that time. They seem so abstract and undefined, transparent. They're very like that lens: there, but not there."

earliest encounters with the band at Abbey Road involved an ice-breaking jamming session where he played jazz piano "bashing away while the band joined in".

Nevertheless, an understanding developed between both parties. Smith saw his role as curbing the meandering excesses of the band's live show; sweetening them for public consumption. It was a tricky balancing act for the 40-something music biz veteran, though Andrew King, the band's then co-manager recalled that: "He was not all conservative. He'd never said, 'You can't do that because that's not the way we do things'. Norman did it with a very light hand."

## SYD BARRETT TAKES CONTROL

Syd was firmly at the helm at this point. He wrote all but one of the songs on *Piper* and it is his guitar that dominates the album. "He really was in control," Norman Smith said in an interview with *Studio Sound* magazine in 1998. "He was the only one doing

any writing. He was the only one who, I as a producer, had to convince if I had any ideas, though the trouble with Syd was that he would agree with almost everything I said and then go back in and do exactly the same bloody thing." Nevertheless, the recording went remarkably smoothly, at least according to Nick Mason in his 2005 autobiography, *Inside Out: A Personal History Of Pink Floyd*. The album, the drummer explains, was recorded, "in what one might call the old-fashioned way: rather quickly". At this stage Floyd were still gigging up and down the country and had just released their debut single *Arnold Layne*. Quite often the band would be in Abbey Road for a 2.30pm - 6.30pm session before going out on the road for a gig.

The songs themselves divided neatly into two main piles. There were the 'band' songs, developed by the group for the live show - the likes of *Astronomy Domine* and *Interstellar Overdrive* - and there were Syd's own compositions, which with their

**"[SYD] WOULD AGREE WITH EVERYTHING I SAID THEN GO BACK IN AND DO EXACTLY THE SAME BLOODY THING AGAIN"** Norman Smith



childlike images and quizzical, elliptical lyrics were unlike anything that had been heard in rock music thus far. Most of these had been written by Barrett during the autumn of 1966 at his room at 2 Earham St, near Cambridge Circus; a richly creative and, by all accounts, contented period for the young singer.

## THE FRUIT OF CREATIVE FREEDOM

Halfway through recording (March 21 according to some) there was an encounter with The Beatles, who were putting *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* together next door in Studio Two. Accounts of this vary. Nick Mason writes of "sitting humbly as they (The Beatles) worked on a mix" of *Lovely Rita*. Norman Smith though recalled Paul McCartney bursting into Studio Three, introducing himself to the group and cheerily bigging up Smith to them, saying: "You won't go wrong with this chappie". What seems undisputed is that Floyd were deeply impressed by the freedom and level of control that The Beatles were given over their recordings. This artist-friendly attitude (still unusual in 1967) seeped into the *Piper* sessions. Mason

Rehearsals for the show, *Games For May*, that Floyd performed at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on 12 May 1967

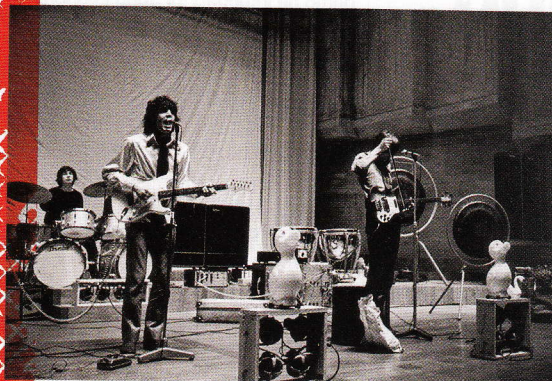


PHOTO: NICK HALE/BETTY IMAGES



[From left] Nick Mason, Syd Barrett, Rick Wright and Roger Waters pose in the studio control room

says that in this respect Smith was, “just brilliant, because he let us join in. Some of the studio staff, the engineering department, were extremely disapproving of that”.

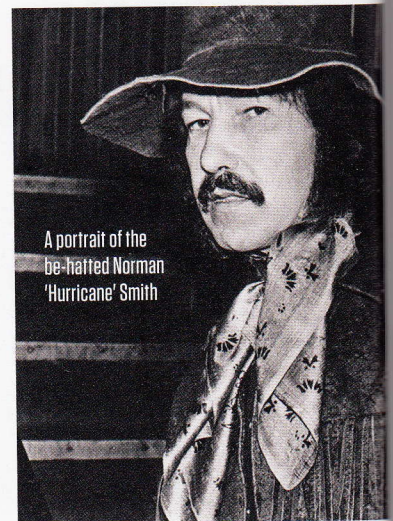
Like George Martin and The Beatles, a positive atmosphere developed where outside-the-box ideas could be batted back between producer and band. The opening track, *Astronomy Domine*, is one example of this – a whole four-hour session on 12 April was

devoted to its introductory section. The band convinced co-manager Peter Jenner to read planet names from Syd’s copy of the *Observer Book Of Planets* through a megaphone whilst morse code recordings were layered on top of a pulse effect from Rick Wright’s Farfisa and Syd’s Telecaster. Elsewhere, the Binson Echorec effects unit was utilised heavily, cropping up on virtually every track. Engineer Peter Bown recalled that Syd was “always

## A Man Called Smith...

*Pink Floyd producer Norman Smith discovered a second career when he turned his hand to the rather serious business of being a pop star.*

Norman Smith had already been around the block by the time his paths crossed with Pink Floyd in the late 60s. After his work on three of the first four Floyd albums, Smith recorded a demo he intended for John Lennon. However, when producer Mickie Most heard it he convinced Smith to release *Don't Let It Die* himself. It was a hit, reaching No 2 in the summer of 1971, and adopting the name Hurricane Smith, the then pushing-50 producer embarked on an unlikely second career, rubbing shoulders on TV shows with fellow performers often half his age. For a year or so Smith was a pop star, known to a younger generation largely oblivious to his work with Floyd and The Beatles.

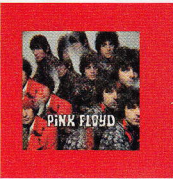


A portrait of the be-hatted Norman 'Hurricane' Smith



PHOTO: ANDREW WHITTUCK/BETTY

**“HE USED TO GO AND KICK HIS ECHO BOX EVERY NOW AND THEN, JUST BECAUSE HE [SYD] LIKED IT” Peter Bown**



...trolling with his sound. He used to go and kick his echo box every now and then, just because he liked the sound”.  
 Of the more experimental pieces, *Interstellar Overdrive* was the most challenging for the average 1967 listener. But this improvisational number was the highlight of their live show, so a version had to be on there somewhere. Floyd had already made two recordings of *Interstellar* before, but the finished version is an overdub of the band towards the end of the sessions in June, playing over a re-recording of their second take back in February, creating a ‘delay’ effect. Also included on the stereo mix is a panning effect, which though still unusual in mid-1967 would quickly become something of a psychedelic cliché.  
 Last to be recorded was *Bike*, written for Barrett’s then-girlfriend Jenny Sparks and the nearest thing in the oeuvre to a love song. Collapsing in on itself, the track ends with a cacophony of tape effects, speeded-up drums, oscillators, clocks, gongs and maracas. Finally, the album ends

with what sounds like a flock of geese, but which is actually a recording of the band members laughing, reversed and speeded up. Nobody can remember whose idea this was, although Mason suggests it was “probably between Syd and Norman’s”.  
 In the midst of the sessions was a new song Barrett had written, initially entitled *Games For May* after the event at Queen Elizabeth Hall that Floyd performed at on 12 May. The lyric evolved into another Barretian tale of childhood trauma, inspired perhaps by Emily Young, the ‘psychedelic schoolgirl’ that had frequented the UFO club. *See Emily Play* had clear commercial potential and thus was left off the album and set aside for single release. Helped by three performances on *Top Of The Pops*, it peaked at No 6 in the charts in late July. Pink Floyd were pop stars and their leader’s problems were just starting.

**SYD’S DEFINING MOMENT**

*Piper* was released on August 5 1967 and received broadly positive reviews

– *Record Mirror* and *NME* both gave it four stars out of five, the former describing it as “a fine showcase for their talent and recording technique. Plenty of mindblowing sound”. But if their earliest fans felt let down that it didn’t replicate the intensity of their early shows, *Piper* did its job of condensing this new phenomenon for the mainstream. Its experimental and pop sides are supremely balanced. Yes, *Interstellar Overdrive* and *Pow R. Toc H* were unlike anything most people had heard in summer 1967, but tracks like *Lucifer Sam*, *Bike* and *Chapter 24* all had hooks as naggingly catchy as anything then in the singles charts.  
 The album’s status has grown over time. *Piper* remains Syd Barrett’s greatest achievement; its release heralded the arrival of a unique new talent at pop’s head table – a writer who was able to delve back and locate both wonder and anxiety from childhood’s deep recesses. But the album’s (and Barrett’s) moment was brief. Within six months the group that made it would be no more. ■