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CULTURAL STUDIES

The Boston Globe

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Shine on, Syd



By James Parker | January 29, 2006

FORMER PINK FLOYD frontman Roger "Syd" Barrett, the cracked vessel who hasn't made a record since 1970 but whose blurred, chiming songs and prismatic gobbledygook will never die, was 60 this month. If there was a party, it was a very private affair: Although his ex-bandmates in Pink Floyd recently appeared before a global audience at Live 8, Barrett has been living in seclusion in Cambridge, England, for the last 30 years. In the new DVD "Syd Barrett: Under Review" (available Feb. 21 from Music Video Distributors), a somewhat diffuse and sagging collection of British music journalists consider the swift arc of Syd-his brilliance, his bemusement, his burnout-and actually come closer than might be expected to the heart of the matter.

Syd, unlike Janis, Jimi, et al, did not die-much more terrifyingly, he *changed*. Having left Pink Floyd, and two years into a wobbly solo career, he put down his guitar, shaved his head, and withdrew into what biographer Tim Willis (who visited him there, only to be ignored) calls "the faceless terraced acres of South Cambridge." Expert opinion remains divided as to whether it was LSD, an organic mental disorder, or a world-spurning Rimbaudian instinct-or all three-that parted him from his music and his celebrity. In 2002 he reportedly sat through a BBC documentary on Pink Floyd but was said to have found it "a bit noisy."

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The rather desultory probings of the DVD (talking heads filmed in dim rooms) reveal Syd to have been the T.S. Eliot of psychedelia, marshaling fragments from his primary sources into a fractured master narrative-although in his case the sources were not Chaucer and the Bhagavad Gita but Lewis Carroll and Hilaire Belloc, Kenneth Grahame and Edward Lear, the "doll's house darkness" (as he wrote in the 1967 song "Matilda Mother") of his nursery reading. Pink Floyd's first album, "Piper at the Gates of Dawn," took its title from Chapter Seven of Grahame's "Wind in the Willows," and the Barrett songbook is peppered with quotations from favorite childhood stories and poems.

It would be a mistake, however, to apply the word "whimsy" to Syd Barrett-in Grahame's imagery of dazzling rivers and shadowy woods, and in the symmetrical nonsense of Lear, Barrett seems to have found a key to his own fissured and endangered psyche. Song by song, phrase by gnomic phrase, he laid out a connect-the-dots map of mental dereliction. "I'm wondering who could be writing this song?" he asked in 1967's "Jugband Blues," his last work for Pink Floyd. The song ends, after a cacophonous interlude involving a Salvation Army brass band, with Barrett brushing stunned, aqueous chords from his acoustic guitar, transfixed in the absurd light of nursery rhyme: "And the sea isn't green/ And I love the Queen/ And what exactly is a dream/ And what exactly is a joke?" Somehow, he survived. Happy birthday, Mr. Barrett.

James Parker's column will appear in Ideas biweekly. E-mail cultural.studies@globe.com. ■

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