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Rock 'n' Roll Tragedy

One of Pink Floyd's founder fell into an abyss of mental illness. Friends talk about his rise and fall in documentary.

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Tragedy seems to follow artists around like a starving mongrel. From Van Gogh cutting off his ear and eventually his own life, to Beethoven weeping upon seeing but not hearing an applauding audience at the premiere of his Ninth Symphony, there is no shortage of truly “tortured artists” throughout history.

But one of the most profoundly sad modern-day versions of that oft-told tale is that of the near-legendary Syd Barrett, one of the original founders of Pink Floyd. Directed by John Edginton, this new film—which includes a three-hour disc of unedited interviews—is by no means a comprehensive history of the band with and without Barrett, who passed away last year after quietly living out the past 30 years or so gardening and painting at his family home in Cambridge. But with full access granted by surviving members of the band, including previously unseen archival footage and extensive, heartbreaking interviews with Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Nick Mason and Rick Wright, this may well be the best opportunity to hear the tale of the Barrett years as told by those who were actually there to witness it.

Barrett’s legend has not only outlived the man himself, but has grown to such epic proportions in tall tales told over bong hits that it’s hard to separate fact from fiction. This much is known: as the band which eventually came to be called Pink Floyd rose to fame by toying with psychedelic, experimental sounds in London in the mid to late ’60s, their singer/guitarist Syd Barrett suffered a mental breakdown of some sort.

Legend has it that Barrett ate too much acid and subsequently freaked out, and there seems to be some truth to that. But as Roger Waters puts it in the film, “We know that marijuana and acid are not beneficial to people suffering from schizophrenia, and that it can exacerbate that condition. And we know that Syd suffered from something like schizophrenia.”

The way the band members tell it, and based on photographs and home-movie footage, Barrett before the breakdown was a shining, bright beacon of a man, someone with boundless energy and a natural charm who drew people to him, and who insatiably painted, wrote and played music. But a lost weekend in London in 1968 changed all that.

The group was scheduled to play a radio show on a Friday, but Barrett never showed up. When they finally found him on the following Monday or Tuesday, he was literally a different person. Something vital had been wiped out of his head, leaving behind an increasingly erratic stranger, who now had, as Waters later put it in “Shine on You Crazy Diamond,” “... a look in your eyes/like black holes in the sky.”

And the film shows that transformation. You can actually see in photograph after photograph an emptiness in Barrett’s eyes in stark contrast to the ebullient liveliness he had previously possessed.

In addition to the footage of early Floyd in the studio and playing “freak-out” shows in London—and home movie clips a friend took of Barrett’s first trip—the real value of this film is in the interviews with the band and their compatriots. Waters, who had known Barrett from childhood, tells the story that was later immortalized in the film version of *The Wall*, of when Barrett was living in a hotel-like suite of rooms in London: “That scene in *The Wall* when Pink (played by Bob Geldof) is sitting in a chair with a cigarette that has burned all the way down to his fingers—I walked in and saw that.”

Years after he had left the group, when the band was in the studio recording the tracks for “Shine on You Crazy Diamond,” a

not-at-all-disguised love song/eulogy for Syd, he appeared like a bizarre apparition in the studio. Not one of the band members recognized him at first; he had shaved his head and eyebrows, put on 60 pounds or so, and, according to Nick Mason, was brushing his teeth, giggling and jumping up and down.

If you ever have smokily wondered which of the Syd Barrett tall tales are true and which are invented, check out this film. The depth of sadness the rest of the band members feel for the passing of Barrett 30 years before he actually died is moving and profound, and director Edginton has captured it here.

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