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The Pink Floyd and Syd Barrett Story

Director: John Edginton

Cast: David Gilmour, Nick Mason, Roger Waters and Richard Wright
(Otmor Productions, 2004) Rated: Unrated
US DVD release date: 18 September 2007 (Zeit Media)

by **Jeremy Estes**

"He looked the same, but he was somewhere else", says Pink Floyd keyboardist Richard Wright in this uneven DVD tribute to his former band mate, Syd Barrett. Where he went, though, is still in question. Physically, Barrett occupied the "womb-like" basement of his parents' home in Cambridge, leaving behind London and the call of rock stardom, but Syd's was hardly a physical journey. Though his time in the spotlight was brief, Barrett's story still fascinates, 40 years after his departure from the public eye and nearly two after his death.

The Pink Floyd and Syd Barrett Story tells the Barrett story in the words of those who knew him and those who admired him, but the man himself is missing. This is a natural and necessary omission as Barrett was rarely photographed, let alone heard from, in forty years. Unlike a long dead historical figure or mythical warrior, Barrett was still alive when this film was produced, and his absence is palpable throughout.

In a series of intimate interviews with Pink Floyd members, Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Nick Mason and Wright, each describes the loss of Barrett with varying degrees sadness, amusement and even self-righteousness. All four men are clearly still affected by the loss of their friend, a man none of them knew from 1967 onward, and the story remains essentially the same throughout. Syd tried acid, went insane and Pink Floyd soldiered on, haunted by his ghost for the rest of the band's career. Unfortunately, this is no more insight into the story than what was previously available. We're given nothing to sink our teeth into, and the "real" Syd still remains a mystery.

We know he was a talented artist, he was well liked and that he suffered from one mental ailment or another, which was exacerbated by his frequent use of LSD. The lack of in-depth information surrounding what actually happened to Barrett no doubt adds weight to his legend, allowing others to add their own tales of mischief and mental liberation on the psychedelic plane to the mix. The film does serve as a decent introduction to the Barrett legend, and the band members' stories are vivid and richly illustrated by a number of vintage film clips and performances from Pink Floyd's early days at London's UFO Club.

Though no one in the film ever comes right out and says it, what's most interesting about Barrett's story is how it affected his band. The '60s Pink Floyd was successful with Barrett, releasing the acclaimed *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* and a number of singles. After their early success, the band found itself stalled due to Barrett's condition, and the new songs from the chief songwriter lacked the vitality of a hit like "Arnold Layne." Former manager Peter Jenner describes the evolution of Barrett's song writing as a series of "open sores," songs detailing the singer's deteriorating mental state in increasingly mundane detail (as in the unreleased "Vegetable Man").

If the band was to continue, things had to change. Music geeks the world over can speculate what direction the band might have taken with Barrett at the helm in the post-psychedelic era, but it was Waters who ultimately controlled the band and led it through its huge successes of the 70s and beyond. Had Pink Floyd broken up and faded into obscurity, Barrett might only be a footnote in rock history instead of a mythical figure that, in the words of Waters, "reached for the secret too soon". With Waters in the lead as primary songwriter and vocalist, Barrett may be the first person in history to be a member of a band whose role was that of subject, muse, and inspiration.

The film focuses on Syd's influence on *Wish You Were Here*, an album-length meditation on the loss of Barrett. The band members discuss the haunting day their former friend showed up at the studio, puffy looking and with a shaved head, as they went about recording "Shine On You Crazy Diamond," the album's opening and closing track. He sat in the corner, in the words of Wright, "jumping up and down, brushing his teeth." All the band members recount this day with a kind of sick amusement, apparently unsure how to process such a sight even after nearly forty years. Barrett's specter also makes significant contributions to *The Wall*, *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Animals*, if only as a window into the madness and alienation Waters clearly found so fascinating.

A full disc of bonus features accompanies the film and includes a slideshow of '60s-era Pink Floyd memorabilia and song performances from Barrett-acolytes Graham Coxon and Robyn Hitchcock. Coxon's performance of "Love You" from The Madcap Laughs is stilted, but Hitchcock makes "Dominoes" and "It Is Obvious" his own, revealing completely how indebted his work is to Barrett.

The full, unedited interviews with all the members of Pink Floyd are also included. Watching the interviews this way, it's clear that Barrett wasn't entirely the focus, as the members tend struggle for memories of places and, in the case of David Gilmour, ramble about the origins of the opening riff of "Shine On You Crazy Diamond". Though hardly more illuminating, the interviews are relaxed, almost somber. Because they're conducted separately, they make physical the division that remained between the band until their one-off reunion in 2005.

One of the few nuggets in the unedited interviews is Roger Waters' recollection of the last time he saw Syd. Waters was shopping in Herod's department store, and across the way he saw Barrett at the sweet stand buying candy. Waters didn't approach his old friend, knowing that seeing people from the past upset Syd. He just let him be. The man that haunts the greatest records of one of rock's seminal bands passed unnoticed through the department store and faded back into obscurity, back into legend.

RATING: 
EXTRAS: 

— 9 October 2007

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