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CHANNEL CROSSINGS: Hanging On in Quiet Desperation is the English Way

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by **Raphaël Costambeys-Kempczynski**

"You don't need it very loud to be able to hear it and some of it is very quiet, in fact. Personally I like quiet music just as much as loud music. We play in very large halls and things where obviously volume is necessary." – Syd Barrett (1967)

Even though Syd Barrett's physical presence was subtracted from the equation early on, his influence on Pink Floyd was expansive, filling the volume through his absence. Long before his death from diabetes-linked complications on 7 July 2006, his was the loss of a musical child to the fish bowl of mind-altering drugs. Barrett's was a mind already expanded; closed forever by chemical indulgence. But he left much in his wake.

Many eulogies have been written about Barrett. And as Roger Waters knowingly points out, there are those that believe Pink Floyd are nothing without him. The debate is well documented and ultimately deters from the fact that Barrett never actually left Pink Floyd. He just stopped turning up after 1967. There weren't any ego clashes, neither were there irreconcilable artistic differences – both of these traditional rock group implosions would be left to Waters and David Gilmour. Barrett simply sublimated, and his ghost infused Pink Floyd with the unpredictable completeness of Englishness.

Barrett named the band after two American bluesmen: Pink Anderson and Floy Council. He almost certainly read about them in the sleeve-notes to *Blind Boy Fuller: Country Blues 1935-1949*, where they are described as being "amongst the many blues singers that were to be heard in the rolling hills of the Piedmont, or meandering with the streams through the wooded valleys." Imagery that must have appealed to the piper at the gates of dawn. The apprenticeship of the group's first recognisable line-up, Nick Mason, Roger Waters, Bob Klose and Syd Barrett, was grounded in the blues and jazz. But when Klose failed his first year university exams, his father put an end to his musical shenanigans, inadvertently allowing Pink Floyd to take off in a new direction.

Waters relates how Barrett was a huge Beatles fan, allowing as they did for a new English tradition: "it feels as if Lennon and McCartney single-handedly wrenched the power of the pen from Tin Pan Alley... suddenly we were given permission, because of their enormous success, to write from our own experience." Today, looking back, there is no mistaking Pink Floyd's English lilt.

In the childlike song 'Bike', the final track on Pink Floyd's first album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967), Waters discusses the way the lyric and meter function together in a very "satisfying way":

I've got a bike
You can ride it if you like
It's got a basket
A bell that rings
And things to make it look good

But then the lyric shifts and undercuts itself:

I'd give it to you if I could
But I borrowed it

For Waters it is this completeness, unpredictability, and simplicity that construct Barrett's English voice. For the singer-songwriter Robyn Hitchcock, Barrett knew what *not* to play, he wasn't scared of keeping this simple: "It was mental *vérité*."

Right up until his death there is no doubt that Waters loved Barrett the way that only childhood friends growing up together can – a love that is pure and wistful. At least, this is what transpires in the DVD box-set *The Pink Floyd and Syd Barrett Story*, first released in 2003 and recently reissued. But John Edginton's 50-minute film is misnamed – this is the Syd Barrett story as told by Pink Floyd.

Barrett and Waters grew up in Cambridge in the '60s. This was very much Orwell's satirical vision of England as cricket on the village green, middle

class bliss. This wasn't enough to stop Waters, closely followed by his schoolboy chum, from moving to London and setting up camp in the basement flat of a tutor called Mike Leonard. Leonard enjoyed putting together experimental light shows and asked Pink Floyd to soundtrack these events. The band began to use a range of unusual sounds and by 1966 they were firmly part of the emergent psychedelic rock underground scene. They became the resident group at the legendary UFO, and owner Joe Boyd so taken by Pink Floyd produced the single 'Arnold Layne' (1967):

Arnold Layne had a strange hobby
Collecting clothes
Moonshine washing line
They suit him fine

Similar in voice to David Bowie's eponymous debut album released the same year, this was unmistakably mid-'60s English pop. As Boyd explains: "no American would think of writing about a guy sniffing girls' panties, you know, in backyards." In fact, Bowie did the vocal to 'Arnold Layne' as a tribute to Barrett in May 2006, two months before Barrett's death. The protagonist of the song is a transvestite that Barrett had known about back in Cambridge, a theme that the archetypal English band The Kinks would pick up on in 'Lola', their 1970 account of a confused romantic encounter. All of this adds a wry twist to one particular poster from the period which read: "The Swinging England Sound of the Pink Floyd. So start thinking pink."

On the strength of this first single, EMI immediately signed Pink Floyd but Barrett's mental health deteriorated quickly. Peter Jenner, Pink Floyd's manager from 1966-68, mockingly talks of the quasi-religious nature of the drugs scene at the time: "it was going to change everything because we were all going to see our true inner-whateverness." By May 1967, at around the time of 'See Emily Play', Barrett's frequent use of LSD was taking its toll. Richard Wright recalls seeing Barrett and noticing that he simply was not there, the film aptly punctuating this moment with an extract from 'Jugband Blues' (1968):

It's awfully considerate of you to think of me here
And I'm much obliged to you for making it clear
That I'm not here.

This physical presence/ mental absence almost undermined Pink Floyd's American tour. But Barrett was a product of his time, and fittingly, the audience in San Francisco was receptive to the vision of a man decomposing on stage. The rest of the tour was cut short, and although the band wasn't too sure what to do with Barrett, Waters admits he could not face the idea of losing the flow of songs. Pink Floyd continued to tour across Britain -- Mason believes this just exacerbated the problem.

Gilmour was an old friend of Syd and the band's, and was brought in to help out. This was not a coup d'état nor was it an aggressive take over. Gilmour was at first Barrett's ghost-guitarist, playing Syd's parts when Syd was 'not there'. One day, as the group set off to a gig they just omitted to pick Barrett up.

Barrett left the band in 1968 and began working on his first solo project, *The Madcap Laughs*, an album that would take a year and half to complete because of Syd's growing reclusiveness and his fondness for Mandrax. Jerry Shirley, the drummer on the album, makes the astonishing claim that Barrett wasn't quite as "nutty" as people assumed him to be, that it was almost as if he were faking it. A reflection that there were no hard feelings between Barrett and Pink Floyd, Gilmour produced the album and remembers a moment of genius during the otherwise waking nightmare of its recording. On the track 'Dominoes', the guitar part wasn't working out and so Barrett suggested turning the tape over. He managed to marry the guitar to the backward noises, producing the take that appeared on the record. Gilmour concludes: "It still seems mind-boggling."

Shirley's analysis is genial: "Nutters have moments of clarity all the time... [Syd] literally stared right through you but at the same time could see right through you. You know, no flies on Syd. Much too, you know, a lot of, I just realised what I said because the cover of his album is a bunch of flies..." It is, however, important not to confuse English eccentricity and manic creativity. The drugs may have stopped Barrett from becoming Emerson, Lake and Palmer as Robyn Hitchcock ironically and somewhat cleverly suggests, but even R.D. Laing believed him to be incurable, the drugs having had a detrimental effect on his brain.

Barrett's former flatmate, the artist Duggie Fields, makes a very insightful comment about Syd's increasing inertia: "My interpretation is that he was thinking that while he lay there he had the possibility of doing anything in the world that he chose, but the minute he made a choice he was limiting his possibilities, so he lay there as long as he could so he had this unlimited future. But of course that's a very limited presence when you do that and a very depressing one ultimately."

Hanging on in quiet desperation is the English way, but in 1970, after

walking off stage mid-concert, Barrett returned to his mother's home in Cambridge.

When Barrett left Pink Floyd, the group entered its second phase of Englishness. Much of the catalogue with Waters seems haunted by an identifiably English sense of loss, defined in part by nostalgia for the absent friend. Bob Geldof's character in the film version of *The Wall* (1979) was based on Barrett – Geldof's appearance shaved and bald echoing Barrett turning up unrecognisable during the recording sessions of 'Shine On You Crazy Diamond': "now there's a look in your eyes, like black holes in the sky."

Of course, 'Shine On...' and the album *Wish You Were Here* (1975) were overt references to their leading light that had burnt itself out all too soon. Wright believes this is Pink Floyd's best album, the only one he can listen to for pleasure. Intriguingly, what seems telling is that the differences within the group come after *Wish You Were Here*. Gilmour can't be bothered with *The Wall*, commenting that it lacks soul. This leads Edginton to astutely conclude "it had sort of run its course maybe. I mean maybe you'd said all you needed to say in *Wish You Were Here*." With this sort of hindsight many would perhaps agree that Pink Floyd had run its course having so fittingly managed to give body to its ghost.

Unfortunately, Edginton's film disappoints on two levels: firstly, it has obviously been reissued in the wake of Barrett's death but lacks this fundamental perspective, even the biography slideshow in the bonus features hasn't been updated; secondly, there are few extracts of Barrett and Pink Floyd performances. In fact, of the three complete songs that feature here, two are sung by Robyn Hitchcock and the other by Graham Coxon.

Of course, I understand that there is a Barrett influence here – both have a distinctive English voice and have written songs about English eccentrics. But surely it would have been far more rewarding to have Barrett performing his own songs, perhaps over the slide show of poster memorabilia included in the extras. Instead we have Coxon being uninterestingly geeky and reading the lyrics as he sings. Is he there as a modern day incarnation of Barrett? Surely not. There is an amusing moment, however, when Coxon admits that the sound of the geese at the end of the song 'Bike' made him feel like he was going to faint. He concludes: "If anyone can make me feel like that, then it's got to pretty good."

The film was originally made for the BBC's Omnibus documentary series in 2001 and is narrated by Kirsty Wark, a hard-hitting journalist with a distinct interest in the arts. The interviews that appear in their unabridged form on disc 2, however, were all done by the director, and ultimately it is this disc that is by far the most interesting. The hour long interview with Waters is the definite highlight – Waters' memory may falter, but his emotional sincerity doesn't as he relates his experience of Barrett's disintegration. The early lives of Waters and Barrett were so intertwined Edginton is left wondering if Waters ever thought 'there but for the grace of God go I'. Waters just stares like a wide-eyed boy. Answer enough.

RATING:  5

EXTRAS:  7



Raphael is maitre de conferences at the Sorbonne, Paris, where he lectures in English literature, Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Radio Journalism. Though born and bred in England, Raphaël has spent much of his adult life travelling between London, Edinburgh, Dublin and the Continent. After a short career as a rock band front man and music critic, he worked for several years as a radio presenter/producer and is currently piloting the Radio Sorbonne project. His radio work mainly focuses on the analysis of British current affairs with a cultural angle as well as issues dealing with the reception of popular music. He is known in radio circles as the "Dr of Pop". He completed his PhD in 2001 on the performances of postmodernity in contemporary British poetry and subsequently left his home in Britain to take up his post in Paris.

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