

Michael Waddacor's

Strange Brew™

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Shine on you crazy diamond!

A tribute to Syd Barrett, eccentric Pink Floyd co-founder

Over three remarkable years between 1965 and 1968 and one seminal album, the late Syd Barrett (60) was a gifted songwriter, a witty counter-culture figurehead and a dandy English eccentric before tragically succumbing to the dark side of LSD and rock stardom and then, sadly, disappearing into reclusion and anonymity for the best of part of 35 years. Michael Waddacor **pays tribute to one of the most influential pioneers of the English psychedelic and post-psychedelic rock genres.**

Almost 40 years on, it is apt to dust off a vinyl copy of Pink Floyd's classic debut album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, and again indulge in all 42 minutes of its timeless fusion of freeform, experimental psychedelia and frolicsome 1960s Anglo pop-rock eccentricity.

At the heart of this seminal, 1967 British rock music album pulsates the bizarre, free-spirited and often erratic genius of Pink Floyd's original singer and guitarist, Syd Barrett.

He was once a daringly creative and devilishly good-looking leader of Britain's mid-1960s cultural revolution before plunging into a reclusive world, mostly concealed at home in Cambridge, for more than 30 years.

Syd Barrett – according to a Pink Floyd spokesperson quoted through an online edition of BBC News on July 11 2006 – died peacefully at home from diabetes-related complications in his hometown of Cambridge, England in July at the age of 60.

For those of us who continue to celebrate Pink Floyd as one of the most inspirational and frontier-breaking British rock bands of the past four decades, then Barrett merits a special tribute for his contribution to the heady, ephemeral days of the psychedelic movement. His subsequent influence on the more explorative and experimental rock music of the 1970s will long be remembered – even though his fleeting musical talent only graced one full Pink Floyd album.

Born Roger Keith Barrett in Cambridge on January 6 1946, he met two would-be

members of Pink Floyd, Roger Waters and David Gilmour, while attending Cambridge High School for Boys. He later moved to London where he attended the Camberwell School of Art and learnt to play the guitar. Barrett played in several low-key bands in the earlier 1960s, including a folk-duo with David Gilmour, before being invited in 1965 by Waters to play in The Abdabs, which would soon become The Pink Floyd Sound.

Pink Floyd legend has it that Barrett – a blues aficionado – suggested the name after a record he owned by two American bluesmen, Pink Anderson and Floyd Council.

Eclectic expressions

The original Pink Floyd – comprising Barrett, Waters, keyboardist Richard Wright and drummer Nick Mason – fast became the arty darlings of the London underground in the earlier part of 1966 by playing regular Sunday afternoon gigs at The Marquee club. Dubbed *The Spontaneous Underground*, these experimental, surreal and usually indulgent musical sessions were alchemic and eclectic expressions of music and the visual arts.

Seemingly random elements of American blues, 1950s rock ‘n roll, British pop-rock and folk, distorted amplifier feedback, nursery-rhyme motifs and freeform electronica were fused and shaped into a new musical art form. These inventive Floydian soundscapes established the nexus between The Beatles and much of the more captivating and progressive British rock music that would evolve in the latter 1960s and earlier 1970s.

One need only listen to the likes of Hawkwind of the 1970s, The Dukes of Stratosphear of the 1980s and Porcupine

Tree of the 1990s to savour a modicum of the Barrett-era Pink Floyd influence.

In October 1966, Pink Floyd performed a weekly gig at the London Free School’s Sound/Light Workshop in the All Saints’ Church Hall in Notting Hill. It was during one of its Free School performances that members of Timothy Leary’s Millbrook Institute suggested that the band should introduce psychedelic lightshow to complement its music.

Psychedelic heydays

From here, the band moved on and would become the pivotal musical act of London’s 1966-1967 psychedelic heydays, playing at trendy underground venues such as the UFO Club. Here at the most counter of counterculture sanctuaries, Pink Floyd dazzled audiences not only with high-decibel music that was fast becoming more adventurous and original, but also with novel visual effects comprising mostly projected light and moving, liquid slide visuals.

Towards the end of 1966, the band and its two founding co-managers, Peter Jenner and Andrew King, established an egalitarian, counterculture-style management company, Blackhill Enterprises, to manage the band’s music and affairs. Pink Floyd’s career began to build critical mass and, in January 1967, the musical director of the UFO Club, the now famous English music producer, Joe Boyd, produced their first single, *Arnold Layne*.

This quirky single, which helped to define the more accessible, radio-friendly side of psychedelic music, managed to reach number 25 in the British charts. Ironically, however, it did not endear itself to one fringe, pirate radio station, Radio London. Based on a light-hearted lyrical sketch of a

transvestite who stole women's underwear from wash-lines, *Arnold Layne* was considered to be "too smutty" for the station and was banned from airplay.

Without doubt, by 1967 Barrett had become the group's leader and frontman – not only because of his dandy dress sense, attractive looks and often eccentric behaviour, but because he was the singer, the guitarist and, by far, the principal songwriter. EMI Music in England signed the band in 1967 with a cash advance of £5 000, which was a considerable enticement at that time for an aspiring, experimental rock band with little following outside London.

Success was confirmed when Pink Floyd's second single, the perennial pop-psychedelic classic, *See Emily Play*, reached number five in the British charts in July 1967. A month later, this hit single was followed by the release of the debut Pink Floyd album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*. Barrett – an admirer of children's stories and fairytales – took this title from a chapter in Kenneth Grahame's children's classic, *The Wind in the Willows* (1908).

Tragic decline

Less than a year later, after a high-octane surge into the stellar realms of rock heroism and counterculture improvisation, Barrett's art and career plummeted swiftly in the wake of releasing *The Piper ...* album. His tragic decline was affirmed when his Pink Floyd colleagues decided not to pick him up from his London apartment one spring day, as agreed, for a scheduled meeting.

On April 6 1968, it was announced that Barrett had left Pink Floyd and the band would forge ahead with its new-found guitarist and singer, David Gilmour, who

had augmented Barrett on stage for a few weeks prior to the latter's departure.

By this time, Barrett's increasing taciturnity, eccentricity, moodiness and unreliability were deemed to be far greater liabilities than his assets as a gifted, but erratic songwriter. It has long been argued by music fans and journalists that the combined excesses of pop stardom, inner struggles for creative leadership and, most of all, recreational-drug consumption in Pink Floyd at the time led to the emotional, mental and creative demise of Barrett. In short, Barrett is often documented in the music media as rock's first notorious acid casualty due to his allegedly high consumption of LSD.

While Syd Barrett was by then regarded as being little more than a fading amusement and encumbrance by his band mates, his departure was not entirely acrimonious. Gilmour, Waters and Wright, acting in different roles, went on to help Barrett to record two good, but comparatively prosaic solo albums, *The Madcap Laughs* (1970) and *Barrett* (1971). In the 1970s, with his physical health, mental faculties and artistic muse failing him – Barrett returned home to Cambridge to live what was largely regarded to be a subdued, reclusive lifestyle, with his mother, far from the limelight of the British music industry and media.

In the mid-1970s, he joined Pink Floyd for a surprise social visit during the recording of the landmark *Wish You Were Here* album (1975), which features the famous Barrett eulogy, *Shine on You Crazy Diamond*. Barrett was also alluded to in Pink Floyd's most famous album, 1973's *Dark Side of the Moon*, as "the lunatic on the grass", among other references. In his absence from the public eye, a group of devoted fans, who had formed the Syd Barrett Appreciation

Society, kept his legacy aflame by publishing a monthly newsletter, *Terrapin*.

Quoted online through BBC News on Wednesday, July 11 2006, British singer, David Bowie, paid homage to Barrett, saying: “He was so charismatic and such a startlingly original songwriter. His impact on my thinking was enormous.”

In the same online edition, one-time friend and producer, Joe Boyd, wrote: “I think Syd leaves an extraordinary legacy because (Pink) Floyd are famous all over the world.” He added: “The songs that he wrote and the way he played the guitar and his attitude and his approach towards music in 1966 and ’67 shaped the group.”

New dawn

While his two solo albums may still continue to allure die-hard fans, Syd Barrett’s legacy is, without doubt, best encapsulated in *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* album. *The Piper ...* remains one of the most enchanting, kaleidoscopic and whimsical albums to have emerged from the British rock vanguard of 1966-1968.

On this album, Barrett is the crazy diamond of many facets with his novel fusion of carefree and child-like naivety, mischief and spontaneity that swung from moods of lightness and euphoria to those of frenzy, disconsolation and even a grim desperation and seclusion bordering on the paranoid.

His subject matter, especially, epitomised that daft, nonsensical and quintessential wit that only the unhinged English can best master and cherish: short and silly songs about bicycles, cats, gnomes, perverts and “a thousand misty riders”, as well as transcendental, surreal, lysergic-tinged

reflections about the stellar realms and other less worldly themes.

Structurally, *The Piper ...* was one of the trendsetting albums of the time, shifting from longer, meandering and atmospheric guitar-and-keyboard-driven pieces with sinister and disturbing undertones to succinct, quirky and cheerful pop tunes that could have found their way into pre-school music curricula. At once, *The Piper ...* was mature and childish, charming and dark, cheerful and menacing, languid and energised, restrained and explosive, cosmic and earthy ... a true guidebook for concocting a veritable collage of psychedelic sounds, lyrics and images.

The album fared well in Britain where it peaked at number six in the charts at a time when the likes of The Beatles, The Who, The Kinks, The Rolling Stones and The Yardbirds were serious competition for airplay and concert tickets. Across the Atlantic, however, it would take the less-eccentric Americans a while longer before they started warming to the album, which crawled to an insignificant 131 in the US album charts in 1967.

Top 10 psych gem

Along with nine other psychedelic-era musical gems, The Beatles’ *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts’ Club Band*, The Jimi Hendrix Experience’s *Axis: Bold as Love*, Love’s *Forever Changes*, Jefferson Airplane’s *Surrealistic Pillow*, Cream’s *Disraeli Gears*, The Thirteenth Floor Elevators’ *Easter Everywhere*, The Rolling Stones’ *Between the Buttons*, The Byrds’ *Fifth Dimension* and Traffic’s *Mr Fantasy*, *The Piper ...* ranks as one of the most celebrated and seminal albums to have been conceived during, or close to, 1967’s Summer of Love.

Once described ineloquently by The Who's guitarist, Pete Townshend, as a "fucking awful" LP, the first Pink Floyd album was recorded in 16 sessions over four months at EMI's Abbey Road Studios in London with the help of producer, Norman Smith, and engineer, Peter Brown. Almost 40 years later, it remains a rare and precious gem – a fitting legacy to a crazy English diamond.

Come on you raver

In hindsight, one is certain that today's mellower quartet of Gilmour, Mason, Waters and Wright would confess, if gently prodded, that the greatest post-Barrett Pink Floyd masterpieces, *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*, could not have achieved such artistic lustre and commercial glory without the subtle influences of Syd Barrett.

One of the most majestic Floyd songs from these two works is the latter's *Shine on You Crazy Diamond (Part One)*, which ends with these fitting Roger Waters lyrics:

"Come on you raver, you seer of visions, come on you painter, you piper, you prisoner, and shine!"

The Piper at the Gates of Dawn is the subject of a dedicated pocketbook under the same title by the British rock writer, John Cavanagh (Continuum, 2003; ISBN 0-8264-1497-4).

Other views on The Piper at the Gates of Dawn

"One of the first 'head' albums ...," Colin Larkin in the third edition of *All-Time Top 1 000 Albums* (Virgin, 2000)

"*Piper ...* virtually defines British psychedelia," from the third edition of *The Mojo Collection (The Ultimate Music Collection)*, edited by Jim Irvin and Colin McLearn (Canongate, 2003)

"It (*Piper ...*) revealed Barrett to be a master of charmingly simple songs, while on *Astronomy Domine* and *Interstellar Overdrive* they unveiled the space rock epics that had grown out of their on-stage improvisations," from *The Rock Primer*, edited by John Collis (Penguin, 1980)

★★★★★ "Syd (Barrett) had a taste for whimsy, leaning to lyrics about cats and gnomes, but his daft wit and eerie melodies made the album (*Piper ...*) a rock version of the Mad Hatter's tea party," Rob Sheffield from the fourth edition of *The New Rolling Stone Album Guide* (Fireside, 2004)

High Hopes!

Speaking in the British rock press in recent weeks, Pink Floyd singer and guitarist, David Gilmour, is adamant that the stellar band will not regroup to record another album or undertake live performances, even though the band has received attractive concert-tour offers from big rock promoters.

The band re-formed last year – with Roger Waters – to perform at Live 8 in London. From Gilmour's media reports, we assume that 1994's mixed-review *The Division Bell* will be the last Pink Floyd studio album.

But Floyd fans need not feel entirely bereft of hope and satisfaction: the new David Gilmour album, *On an Island* (reviewed overleaf), is worth exploring.

Island (re)treat

Listen to the new David Gilmour album, *On an Island* (2006, Columbia)

Produced by David Gilmour, Phil Manzanera and Chris Thomas

Featured musicians include B J Cole, David Crosby, Georgie Fame, Jools Holland, Phil Manzanera, Graham Nash, Andy Newmark, Guy Pratt, Chris Stainton, Richard Wright and Robert Wyatt

Getting personal at 60

Twelve years after the release of the last Pink Floyd studio album, 1994's *The Division Bell*, singer-guitarist David Gilmour recently launched his third – and best – solo album, *On an Island*. The release date coincided with the musician's sixtieth birthday – March 6 2006.

Fittingly, *On an Island* is Gilmour's most personal and intimate album of his 38-year recording career and a far cry from his disappointing previous solo album, 1984's lacklustre *About Face*.

An aura of contentment, tranquillity and understated artistry surrounds this album, which is at once fluid, touching, warm and earnest. There's that overriding feeling that Gilmour – now the bucolic and gracefully ageing gentleman with nothing left to prove – has long since shed any rock-star ambitions and preoccupations with groundbreaking rock concepts in favour of making music that is simple, subtle, honest, idiosyncratic and free from the dictates of any dominant musical fashions and obsessions.

While that certain evocative and rustic English melancholy still colours his work, it is today more subtle and more optimistic, and therefore less disconcerting. He has plumbed the depths of human love – and has risen in a new light, perhaps even reborn.

Deft guitar solos

To his credit, as one of rock's most hurtfully underrated and under-acknowledged guitarists, Gilmour's familiar languid Fender Stratocaster sound remains melancholy sweet, eloquent, relaxed and melodious as ever. In a nutshell, his deftly played guitar solos remain his high points – and it is heartening to hear that he remains assured, explorative and heartfelt as ever without getting excessive or fanciful.

While one doubts whether *On an Island* will be a powerful catalyst for creating a new generation of David Gilmour fans, it will reaffirm his reputation among dedicated fans and endear him a little further to those of us who have followed the Cambridge-born-and-bred musician since Pink Floyd's second album, 1968's *A Saucerful of Secrets*.

One gathers from reading some of the recent British rock magazines that Gilmour has been enjoying domestic bliss in rural Sussex, raising his second brood of four children with his second wife, English fiction writer, Polly Samson. He has devoted a considerable amount of his time and energy to his family and home life, as well as some of his hobbies and interests, which include flying the veteran aircrafts he keeps at his Surrey home.

The houseboat sessions

His artistic muse, however, has not abandoned him and, after recording about 150 ideas for songs on mini-disc, he began to reflect seriously on the idea of recording some of these for an album. With gentle encouragement from his wife, Gilmour called on his neighbour and friend, former Roxy Music guitarist, Phil Manzanera, to get a serious album project going in May 2004.

Working mostly on Mondays at first, Gilmour and Manzanera laid down the basic tracks and ideas for *On an Island* in Gilmour's personal recording studio in his century-old River Thames houseboat, *Astoria*.

The songs were shortlisted to an initial 40 choices – and then whittled down further, with 10 of the pieces (eight songs and two instrumentals) being mastered and featured on the album.

Subsequent recording sessions took place in London at EMI's Abbey Road Studios – the home of many Pink Floyd recording sessions, including the marathon sessions of 1972 for *Dark Side of the Moon*. Recording sessions also took place at British Grove, Gallery Studio and at home.

The Abbey Road-recorded orchestral arrangements by Zbigniew Preisner were conducted by Robert Ziegler.

Finding his alter ego

As with *The Division Bell*, *On an Island* features a generous lyrical contribution by Polly Samson, who acts as an alter ego of sorts for Gilmour. While some distracters may challenge the merits or pertinence of Samson's role, her words fuse well with

Gilmour's musical forms and ideas, notably his lyrical guitar work.

The songs are personal and idiosyncratic without the high-flying social commentary and barbed cynicism that pervaded the latter days of the Roger Waters-dominated Pink Floyd (1977-1982).

These are sincere, heartfelt songs about admiring stars, strolling along beaches and through fields and groves, lighting candles, celebrating marriage and fatherhood, feeding swans and – above all – celebrating human love and companionship far from the madding crowd.

Warm media response

The British media, in general, has warmed to *On an Island*, with two of the premier English rock magazines, *Mojo* and *Q*, each awarding it four stars and *Uncut* three stars.

Classic Rock, however, was far less enthused with its 4/10 rating. Review writer, Philip Wilding, was largely dismissive of the album, remarking that it "... sounds like it was recorded in Dave's conservatory after a light lunch, so soulless are the results".

Q's Mark Blake calls *On an Island* "a very warm record", adding "... you can wallow in songs that allow Gilmour to do what he does best: sing in that lullaby-ish high register and peel off another candidate for the mother of all guitar solos, repeatedly".

Mojo's James McNair refers to it as "a hugely sensual work, its prevailing mood (being) one of Zen-like calm". *Uncut*'s Andy Gill says: "*On an Island* is very much a vacation reverie, its languid manner and soothing textures designed to trigger memories of holiday bliss."

The Wright sound

On an Island opens with a short, poignant instrumental, *Castellorizon*, featuring Gilmour alone on guitars and special effects. It is a sombre piece that gives little hint about what follows until the third minute, when Gilmour breaks out into one of his more familiar-sounding, slow-burning Stratocaster solos, which transitions slickly into the first of the songs, the title track.

On an Island is one of the album's vocal highlights, with its meandering, blissed-out-in-the-moonlight vocal harmonies by David Crosby and Graham Nash. Within minutes, Gilmour launches the first of several notable guitar solos, which recollect the best of his Floyd solos, such as those he crafted on standout classics like *Comfortably Numb*. Friend and fellow Floyd stalwart, Richard Wright, provides some sympathetic aural tapestries on Hammond organ, reminding us that he and Gilmour were just as vital to the Floyd sound and concepts as was Roger Waters.

The unhurried musical musings flow through to *The Blue*, this time featuring Wright on harmony vocals with Chris Stainton (ex-Grease Band and Roxy Music), Jools Holland and Polly Samson all contributing on keyboards without ever detracting from Gilmour's idly flowing guitar solo. Forty years on, Gilmour has not strayed from his love of slow blues – and why should he?

The pace lifts on the fourth track, *Take a Breath*, with its determined, march-like beat keeping shy from sounding pompous. It is, perhaps, one of the album's low points with its overall lack of discernible melody until Gilmour later shifts the song upwards towards a higher plane with another blues-tinged, spacey guitar solo.

To be blunt, it is at this point that one realises beyond all other reasons, this album is being admired and sold on the strength of Gilmour's gorgeous guitar solos.

Saxophone debut

Then comes one of the album's pleasant surprises: the haunting, opening strains of a solo saxophone that prelude *Red Sky at Night*. Just as one recalls with admiration the fine contributions of Dick Parry to the *Dark Side of the Moon* sound, it dawns that Gilmour has been studying the saxophone in recent years with his son, Charlie – and now he is doing something he's always wanted to do: play the saxophone on one of his own albums.

This Heaven has to be the most spiritually sounding Gilmour we have heard, despite his ongoing admissions that he remains an atheist. He has felt the power of holy places and declares with all the comfort and certainty in the world that “this earthly heaven is enough for me” – and so it is.

Just after the halfway mark, the second instrumental, *Then I Close My Eyes*, introduces fresh, new sounds, with Gilmour's ethereal acoustic guitar being complemented by B J Cole on Weissenborn guitar, Robert Wyatt (ex-Soft Machine) on cornet, Caroline Dale on cello and Alasdair Malloy on glass harmonica.

A hint of Vera Lynn

A hint of Wartime England brings nostalgic hues to *Smile*, with Gilmour unashamedly sounding like he is just as close to the memory of Vera Lynn as he is to the roots of the blues and space rock. It may be one of the weaker tracks, but it has a reverent earthiness to keep one piqued.

A Pocketful of Stones keeps the languor flowing, but this time it is graver and more sombre in tone, almost depressing, until a hint of optimism creeps in later with another unhurried, no-particular-place-to-go guitar solo.

One of the strong tracks, *Where We Start*, is an ironic, but nevertheless fitting closing track as one pictures Gilmour and Samson walking hand-in-hand on a glorious day to savour the joys of swans, woodpeckers, bluebells and an immaculate moment of seemingly eternal existentialism – just pure being-ness in an English country setting.

This is close as Gilmour will ever get to being a romantic – a man made all the deeper and fuller by rediscovering the blessings of love and nature in his autumn years.

Sublime production

While Gilmour’s pleasing third solo album, sadly, may not emulate the grand, mid-1970s Floyd masterpieces, *Dark Side of the Moon* and *Wish You Were Here*, it is a well-crafted and sublimely produced musical journey spanning slightly more than 50 minutes of domestic bliss, earthly love and an appreciation for nature and friendship.

What *On an Island* may lack, in places, in melodic vigour, instrumental adventure and soul-searching lyrics, is countered by its warmth. Here, one must concur with James McNair that there is “a Zen-like calm” – a feeling that the master has slain his internal dragons and has come close to experiencing his own musical nirvana.

Whereas Roger Waters is tempted to be dramatic, daring, outspoken and even downright sneering and scathing, as he was on 1991’s *Amused to Death*, Gilmour finds

comfort and purpose in restraint and a more pared sound.

So, if you want to rock out, forget it ... because the closest Gilmour ever came to rocking out was on *The Wall* of 1979!

PS: For the ecologically minded, this is the first time I have seen a CarbonNeutral® CD

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Five essential Floyd albums

- (1) *Dark Side of the Moon* (1973)
- (2) *Wish You Were Here* (1975)
- (3) *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* (1967)
- (4) *The Wall* (1979)
- (5) *Meddle* (1971)

For a definitive introduction to the band, listen to the 26-track, double-disc anthology, *Echoes*, released in 2001. The compilation was co-produced by David Gilmour and James Guthrie and features a delightful booklet designed by Storm Thorgeson and Peter Curzon, as well as reproduced lyrics.

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The must-read Floyd books

Saucerful of Secrets: The Pink Floyd Odyssey, Nicholas Schaffner (Delta, 1991)

Inside Out: A Personal History of Pink Floyd, Nick Mason (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2004)

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The must-see DVDs

(1) *Pulse: In Concert* (2DVD)
(2005) featuring an entire live rendition of *Dark Side of the Moon* recorded at Earls Court, London in 1994

(2) *Live at Pompeii: The Director's Cut*
(2003) featuring delightfully indulgent, psychedelic jams in an empty amphitheatre

(3) *The Making of Dark Side of the Moon*
(2003) featuring interviews with David Gilmour, Nick Mason, Roger Waters and Richard Wright

- Obscured by Clouds, 1972 [s] ★
- Dark Side of the Moon, 1973 ★★
- Wish You Were Here, 1975 ★★
- Animals, 1977 ★
- The Wall, 1979 ★★
- A Collection of Great Dance Songs, 1981 [c]
- Works, 1983 [c]
- Final Cut, 1983
- A Momentary Lapse of Reason, 1987
- Delicate Sound of Thunder, 1988 [live] [I]
- Shine On, 1992 [8-CD box set]
- The Division Bell, 1994 ★
- Pulse, 1995 [I]
- Is There Anybody Out There: The Wall Live 1980-1981, 2000 [I]
- Echoes, 2001 [c] ★★

The Pink Floyd websites

Fans can visit Pink Floyd online at www.pinkfloyd.com

Other sites worth visiting include:

- www.pinkfloyd.co.uk (EMI)
- www.pinkfloyd-co.com (fans)
- www.pinkfloyd.net (fans)
- www.pinkfloydonline.com (fans)

The Pink Floyd discography

- The Piper at the Gates of Dawn, 1967 ★★
- A Saucerful of Secrets, 1968 ★
- Ummagumma, 1969 [half-live] ★
- More, 1970 [soundtrack] [s]
- Atom Heart Mother, 1970 ★
- Relics, 1971 [compilation] [c] ★
- Meddle, 1971 ★★

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