

POP

On an Island David Gilmour

EMI

★★★★☆

PETE PAPHIDES

Out in cyberspace reunion rumours swirl with niggling persistence, but David Gilmour's perpetual half-smile masks an unyielding nature. Asked about a putative Pink Floyd re-formation in Q, he is emphatic: "I just don't think working in a studio with Roger [Waters] would increase my personal happiness." So he gives his spare London townhouse to homeless charities, but clearly he's not that selfless.

More likely, Gilmour has realised that he can give the die-hards what they want without having to don the albatross again. His first solo album for 22 years could pass muster as a doddery old uncle to Floyd's 1975 opus *Wish You Were Here*.

With Gilmour a week off his 60th birthday, it's worth pondering that — at his current rate of productivity — this might be his de facto farewell to the world. It's not a view that repeated listens of *On an Island* do much to dispel. Strip away the starlit sonic expanses of *The Blue* and *A Pocketful of Stones* and what remains is something more intimate: a sort of sun-dappled



Saga-rock in contentment is tempered by an attendant awareness of mortality.

Similarly, *Where We Start* comes on like a chronicle of what zillionaire baby-boomers get up to when the kids are grown up and life is an endless holiday: "I light a campfire away from the path/ We lie in the bluebells, a woodpecker laughs." Faced with a choice of two boxes to describe what you were hear-

ing, you'd tick the one marked happy rather than sad.

In truth though, it's a peculiar sort of Prozac-happiness that seems to envelop much of *On an Island*. "Remember that night/ The warmth and the laughter?" inquires Gilmour on the title track, assisted by the disembodied harmonies of David Crosby and Graham Nash. If there's an underlying eeriness to these soporific washes of sound — and it's

not always apparent that there is — the slo-mo fretboard pyrotechnics of *Castellorizon* might hold some clues. The island of the title, Cycladean, where Gilmour and his wife Polly Samson holidayed during their courtship is heavily subsidised by the Greek Government — which is keen to deter Turkish occupation by ensuring it remains inhabited. Perhaps then, it's no accident that *On an Island* feels like a sensational holiday in a beautiful place with absolutely no atmosphere.

Like the, big fat cumulonimbus clouds evoked by these soundscapes, the three instrumentals included here instil a certain sense of calm in the listener. The word I am desperately trying to avoid is "nice", but if nice is enough for your long motorway drive, then let's not turn our noses up at it.

It shouldn't pass without mention that the best track on here is also the least typical. Comprising six minutes of faintly sinister marching music, *Take a Breath* is the best thing Gilmour has put his name to in more than two decades. And while his reputation as an architect of sonic ambience will hardly be dented by *On an Island*, he's one of the most versatile singers of his generation and he plays rock'n'roll guitar like a demon. None of which is particularly apparent when you listen to this album.