

A word from the Editor

# Martin TOWNSEND



**T**HERE was a footbridge about a mile from the street where I grew up and, leading to it, a long, narrow alleyway enclosed by trees. At the end of this passage there was a wall adjacent to the railway line and on this plain, municipal wall, framed by curls of ivy, were painted the words: **ATOM HEART MOTHER**.

I was about 10 or 11 years old and was always crossing that bridge to play football or visit mates on a neighbouring estate, so I saw that strange, rather grotesque phrase quite often.

What did it mean? A cruel, unloving mum? A mother who had undergone some sort of strange transplant? And who had written it there, anyway? These were the days before spray-cans so someone had carried a pot of paint down that alley in the dead of night, perhaps, and daubed it on laboriously. This, I knew, was a risky business.

Another piece of graffiti, in central Harrow, read: "Put squatters in prison, then they'll have a ho..." The final "m" and "e", so legend had it, had been lost for ever when the graffitist was arrested, mid-word.

A few years later, when I was at grammar school, the mystery of the bridge daubing was solved when a friend of mine strolled past carrying a most unusual record sleeve. It had no words on it – no band or album title, just a photograph of a cow in a field looking back over its shoulder.

"What on earth is that?" I remember asking. "This," replied my friend, nonchalantly, "is **Atom Heart Mother**.

It's a brilliant album by Pink Floyd."

Pink Floyd. Even after all these years the name generates the same frisson of excitement and strangeness, so I couldn't help feeling sad this week at the death of one of their founder members, keyboard player Richard Wright.

As soon as I heard the news his face appeared in my mind as immortalised on the free poster (or was it the stickers?) that were given away with their most famous album, 1973's *Dark Side Of The Moon*. Long-haired, slightly beaky but handsome in that leonine style of Seventies rock performers, he gazed moodily into the middle-distance over the top of one of his banks of keyboards.

He must have been in his early 30s when that picture was taken. He had died at 65, the traditional age of retirement for mere mortals but a number impossible to reconcile with the image of a rock star.

The older I get the harder it

becomes to accept the passing of former idols like Rick Wright. At school, competitive adolescents all, we would test each other with his name: "Who's the keyboard bloke in the Floyd then?" To not know was social suicide for a 14-year-old.

We bought Pink Floyd's albums on the day they were released, scrutinising every inch of the elaborate gatefold covers right down to the inevitable "Printed In England By Garrod & Lofthouse". They were carried under our arms as badges of arrival and acceptance.

But *Dark Side Of The Moon* took on a different dimension for me. My father was a manic-depressive, given to swooping "highs" and dizzying "lows" of behaviour all through my childhood, and that album seemed simultaneously to soundtrack and reflect his ongoing ordeal.

The famous opening lines of muttered dialogue, apparently spoken by an odd-job man at Abbey Road studios, would echo around the little front room of our council house where my father would sit and listen, in darkness. "I know I'm mad, I've always been mad, I've been mad for \*\*\*\*ing years." That album made my father weep but he played it over and over.

Most of the headlines this week spoke of Rick Wright going to "that great gig in the sky", an invocation of the soaring, sweeping vocal track from *Dark Side*, which was my father's absolute favourite. It was sad but I suppose inevitable that Rick's death would be reduced to that cliché but the fact is that nothing over the years, not the extreme wealth

they enjoyed, the arrogance they generated, the spectacular foolhardiness of such shows as *The Wall* and the accompanying revenue-draining film it generated, have prevented Pink Floyd remaining as outsiders.

**N**OR HAVE any of those extra-curricular shenanigans blunted the impact of their finest music. *Dark Side Of The Moon*, *Wish You Were Here* and, especially, their masterpiece *Animals* dealt, perhaps more acutely than any other rock album, with the isolation and loneliness that comes with money and power, the literal dark side of capitalism. How ironic that Rick Wright should have died in a week when that very nightmare came to life.

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