



Comfortably Numb: The Inside Story of Pink Floyd

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In July 2005 in Hyde Park, before a global audience of millions, Pink Floyd performed together on stage for the first time in 24 years. From the moment the metronomic pulse of a heartbeat thudded out to begin "Speak to Me" to the soaring guitar solo that climaxed "Comfortably Numb," these self-effacing men in their late fifties stole the show. Almost a year later, the death of their troubled founder-member Syd Barrett made headline news worldwide. Both events signaled a kind of closure to the remarkable tale of one of the world's biggest bands. Now, in the first full-length history of the group for more than fifteen years, Mark Blake tells the story of how a group of middle-class Englishmen conquered the world. Drawing on his own interviews with all of the band members, interviews with the group's friends, road crew, producers, former housemates and university colleagues, as well as musical contemporaries including Pete Townshend and Alice Cooper, Comfortably Numb follows Pink Floyd all the way from the early psychedelic nights at UFO in the mid-sixties to the stadium-rock and concept-album zenith of the seventies, and finally the acrimonious schism that sundered the band in the '80s and '90s.

Comfortably Numb: The Inside Story of Pink Floyd Details

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From Reader Review Comfortably Numb: The Inside Story of Pink Floyd for online ebook

Merry Mercurial says

This is the first book I've read about Pink Floyd, my favorite band by a long shot, and I appreciated it; the author's tone is respectful and not sensationalistic. If you like rock books but tire of the falsely repentant recollections of how the band took advantage of every passing cheap stimulus possible, this is a better book (maybe because, uh, this a better band). Not that Pink Floyd avoided sex with groupies or drugs (they famously did not avoid the latter), but this truly wasn't a band in it to make golden images of themselves. The fact that they cared about evolving musically and making themselves proud is obvious.

As much as I appreciated the restrained tone, I don't know that the fastidious recounting of dates and places where every milestone occurred, along with the names of the legions of peripheral players at every stage, was helpful. The main takeaway for me was that many people were involved in one way or another—or at least had a quotable opinion on—Pink Floyd throughout the years. There's little chance I could, for instance, keep all the Jennys and Lindseys straight.

Since I truly hadn't known much about the individuals behind Pink Floyd before, I figured I was in for some shifting of opinion, and I was. Roger Waters I've just been so-so on from the cumulative image of him that floats around; Syd Barrett has been of much greater interest. Through what seems an even-handed portrayal of them both (of them all, really), the book juxtaposes Roger's take-charge momentum—which boosted Pink Floyd out the “space rock” category, in which they were floundering, to the *Dark Side of the Moon*—with Syd's descent into wasted talent. The latter is shown falling from his status as shy, creative front man and idea man whose mystique had a universal appeal to an often violent, mercurial, muddled shell of himself. His is certainly a story deserving of sympathy; most evidence points to the fact that he had an undetected predisposition for schizophrenia or a similar major issue and that—like many of that era—he got promiscuous with LSD, considering it a pathway to expanded consciousness and self-awareness but not comprehending its danger.

It's easy to get frustrated, at certain points, with those in his life who watched the slow disintegration without showing him some tough love about it, though I'm sure this isn't really fair—and it doesn't apply to Pink Floyd. Actually, it seems that basically everyone in Pink Floyd did everything they could to first make it work with him, then to sober him up to the reality of what he was losing by continuing in his drug-fueled departure from reality, then to help him patch together an independent career with as much dignity as possible. And THEN he was the inspiration for some of their best and most celebrated songs. This book makes it obvious that Pink Floyd did not let Syd go lightly, and that there's a sense in which they didn't ever let him go.

One of the biggest favors this book does readers is not glamorizing Syd's drug use or mental illness. His dissolution is treated as the true shame it is, not romanticized; that's really important in light of the fact that any otherworldly, edgy vibe Syd may have benefited from clearly wasn't worth the frangible sense of self he was left with, the danger he put himself and others in, the literal degradation of his musical talent. Roger Waters might be known as an asshole and not inspire the sentimental speculation Syd does, but on the other hand, look at what he did: he mostly stayed away from acid, he advocated confronting human-realm issues in their songwriting, and he was the engine behind *Dark Side of the Moon*—one of the BEST ALBUMS OF ALL TIME.

(I had relisten to the album in full while reading this book, and I was blown away all over again. Not a junk note.)

While, as I've said, I found the list-taking of names in some places unnecessarily exhaustive, I really appreciated how much focus was placed on the band's significant musical moments. It's a gift to listen to the nitty-gritty of how each piece of *Dark Side* and their other albums were conceived and executed, and then be able to go listen to the final product. Plenty of rock books take the approach that fans must want only any steamy, scandalous details of the band's clashing personalities; you witness those clashes here as well (and it's hard to talk about Pink Floyd's history without talking about the tug-o-war between Roger Waters and David Gilmour), but the MUSIC gets its due. Left me wanting to learn even more about them.

Tobin Elliott says

I'm coming to realize I hold Pink Floyd almost to the same level as the Beatles. They're easily in my top five, along with Bowie, Steely Dan, and Tom Petty (and yeah, that's a list that fluctuates almost daily).

Anyway, for all of that, while I know the basic history of Pink, I've never delved deeply into it.

Until now.

Blake does an amazing job of corralling all the names and places and events and the times of the various decades of Pink Floyd, from back when they were the Barrett-led The Pink Floyd Sound all the way up to the Gilmour-led Pink Floyd behemoth that they became in the late-90s/early-00s.

This is an incredibly readable, well-researched biography of one of the most incredible bands in the world. Highly recommended.

Dave says

Part of me just likes to read about songs or albums that I like--the more mundane the details the better: my favorite book on the Beatles is "The Beatles: Recording Sessions," which is a day-to-day account of what went on while they were recording all of their records (who played what when and so on).

But another part of me is fascinated to read about the personalities that go into making the songs or albums I like--it's like a family saga, reading about John Lennon & Paul McCartney trying to get along, or reading about driven, nasty Roger Waters and poor, confused Syd Barrett.

And, actually, I like the "Recording Sessions" book best because when it talks about the personalities in conflict (or consensus), it shows them most clearly while they're trying to make something. Not that you might want to, but you can learn a lot about all of the Beatles--and about family dynamics--by reading about how they recorded "Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da." This book has some of that, but spends too much time talking about what houses they bought and what cars they drove.

Oh, and I like books with lots more pictures.

Edmole says

Alright, why do you read a biography about a band? To learn more about them? To get the historical context? To work out where you want to go upwards and sideways in the back catalogue? To see if the voice matches the actions and the lyrics match the life? To have a little more in the nerd armoury next time you get out to Pop Quiz? Because there's nothing better than the comfort of the satisfying rock bio arc; Young Blossoming/ Mass Market-Art Mastering/Coke Collapse and Crotchetty Crack Up? To maybe give you an insight about the artists of today and where they are in the arc? Well all that is here.

I learnt a lot more about them, but none of it was all that interesting. These are some plain cracker guys but something about their stillness was able to communicate something cosmic and essential. I learnt that their inability to talk about how they were feeling ended up with great universal sighs and despairs ending up in their music, and that being the best place for it once it got recorded. I learn that Roger Waters is a colossal arsehole.

I went upwards and sideways in the catalogue and felt vindicated that the best stuff, Echoes through Wish You Were Here, is where I'm already at and already dig. I don't need the Syd stuff, as it is mainly falling over beautifully, which I have enough of elsewhere. And the post Abbey Road stuff, esp the Wall, is as full of bitterness (Waters') or absence (Waters leaving and taking his focus with him) as I'd expected.

The voice matches the actions - Dave Gilmour's. What a beautiful creature he is, to look at and to listen to. John Lennon was massively improved by Paul's musicianship and soft edges, but John would still have been great without him. Roger Waters wrote most of the songs, did most of the thinking, had most of the insights, but Gilmour's gentle beauty made it all work.

Nerd Armoury - well... I know the order of the records and which ones are a jerk off. I know a bit more about the Joe Boyd psych club end of things. But GOD ALMIGHTY this is a boring, stodgy book. And is so CRAMMED with mundane facts that the chance of them sticking is nil. It's not anyone's fault, it's meant to be encyclopedic, not kaleidoscopic, but working one's way through the grind of 80s spats and solo album fall flats, not fun at all. Oh, i did learn that Roger Waters is a collosal arsehole.

This book is TEXTBOOK Rock Biog structure. Although Syd Barrett cycling through the whole process when the story has just got started is very sad, and of course central to Floyd's whole mythos. The third act of terrible solo records and coke binges on cash in tours is epic in it's turgidity, and by page 380 I was almost Stockholm Syndromed into enjoying it and wanting to carry on reading. Thankfully it has the Live 8 reformation as a bookend to open and close the book. The footage of which is on Youtube and, if you ignore Waters' gurning, is genuinely beautiful. (As is the bit where they cut to the audience and a man is overexcitedly singing along to his missus and sort of headbutting her in excitement as she looks confused as to who this man is she married. It's at 4 minutes 37 seconds, do watch.)

In terms of perspec on today - I kept being reminded of Kanye when Roger Waters was being a collosal arsehole throughout. Just seems such a shame, making all this amazing music, making a ton of cash, and the whole time just concerned with petty squabbles, anger and frustration. The root of which in both cases is missing a dead parent and wanting desperately for them to hear all the beauty they're making, and being confused and upset when Mom/Dad never turns up to listen.

Anyway. Great band, stodgy book, odd people, Roger Waters is a colossal arsehole.

P.S. I went and bought this in Rough Trade Nottingham when I popped up there a few weeks ago. They had a two for a fiver books offer and I had picked this up and asked my girlfriend what other one I should get. She suggested a Van Morrison biog, which I wanted, but had to refuse on the grounds that going into a newly opened hip record shop and buying a book on Floyd and a book on Van the Van Man would have made me the most middle aged human in history. I spoke to the nice young man at the counter and told him I had been going to RT for years and years. He was 23, and I noticed out loud that when I met John Peel in RT Neal's Yard at a God Is My Co-Pilot in-store gig HE HADN'T EVEN BEEN BORN. So that was quite something.

Paul says

Mark Blake covers a lot of ground in the span of 448 pages. The members of Pink Floyd have always been notoriously private which makes writing anything about the band difficult. Add to this the dual loss of Syd Barrett, mentally so many years ago and physically just a few years ago, and one wonders how Blake was able to pull off this project in the first place.

Despite these challenges, Blake has done solid work. His insights into the creative process of the three Pink Floyd's explain why it took so long for many of their albums to come to fruition. "Lumbering beast" ... indeed.

It's a four star work... not because Blake was deficient... but because of the challenges mentioned above and an attempt to cover a 30+ year period of time.

For those unfamiliar with Pink Floyd, I recommend it. For those who have read everything about Pink Floyd, I still recommend it.

Shine on, Syd... shine on.

Erik Eckel says

Pink Floyd's contributions to music, songwriting, motion picture scoring, motion picture authoring, arena rock productions, musicianship, engineering, production, lyricism and infighting are unsurpassed. Regardless your position or opinion debating the greatest band of all time, the greatest arena show performer ever or the greatest guitarist of all time, the facts remain: 250 million albums sold, Grammies, a BAFTA, Hall of Fame inductions, record-setting tours and a 14-year Billboard listing for Dark Side of the Moon, potentially the most famous rock album that will ever be produced.

Comfortably Numb: The Inside Story of Pink Floyd is Mark Blake's meticulously researched exploration of the band. All pre-loaded adjectives aside, the biography is an accurate, well-documented recounting of one of the most impactful music groups ever to record. Anyone who grew up struggling to understand the band or its music or believing the group's ubiquitous FM messages of the 70s were just anti-authoritarian and base rebellion will find crystalline clarification and an informed education within Blake's work.

Sean Wilson says

If you're a *huge* Pink Floyd fan, like me, then this will be one of the most interesting books you'll ever read. Mark Blake's well-researched account of rock music's most innovative and timeless band is riveting, poignant and quite sad at moments, especially when recounting the mental deterioration of Pink Floyd co-founder Syd Barrett.

Karl says

With "Comfortably Numb: The Inside Story of Pink Floyd, author Mark Blake gives the reader an intelligent biography of the band. Blake, a former editor with Britain's Q Magazine and longtime contributor to Mojo.

This Biography is being marketed as "published to coincide with [Pink Floyd's] 40th anniversary"

Lots of good stuff here, some nice Syd stuff, though leaning a bit towards the Roger Waters side of the story.

Deniz Kuypers says

The first part of this book is pretty much the story of Syd Barrett's rise and fall, so depending on your tolerance for endless stories about endless varieties of drugs, you'll either find this riveting or you'll be wanting to skip ahead to the part where Floyd records Dark Side of the Moon. It takes about 150 pages (of a 400-page book) before we get to Meddle, which the author rightly considers to be the spiritual precursor to DSOTM. The albums the group made in between -- four in total -- are mentioned only briefly, giving the impression that they were merely a prelude to Dark Side-era Pink Floyd, which of course is the Pink Floyd everybody knows.

Apart from their music, Floyd is known for their aloofness and their falling out with each other, the press, and their audience. This makes for a grating second half of the book. It's hard not to think of the band as arrogant and perhaps even ungrateful, when they finally hit the big time only to turn around and bite the hand that fed them. Still, this doesn't change the quality of their music. As a musician, I would have liked more technical details on the making of their most famous albums, but that's probably outside the scope of this book (besides, an excellent documentary already exists on the making of Wish You Were Here).

So all in all, this is a compelling and informative read, that doesn't really change what we know about Pink Floyd, but is definitely the most comprehensive book I've read on one of my all-time favorite bands.

Michael Finocchiaro says

I have been a Floyd fan since I started listening to rock-n-roll as a pre-teen when The Wall came out, screaming "We don't need no education" when it came on the radio (or MTV), but hardly new anything about the band. When I was in high school, Roger had split with the other three and, yet, I was blown away when I discovered Dark Side of the Moon, Wish You Were Here, and Animals and still have my vinyl and CD copies of The Wall. It wouldn't be until I made friends at university with more eclectic tastes that I would listen to Piper at the Gates of Dawn, Meddle, Obscured by Clouds, Atom Heart Mother, Ummagumma and The Final Cut. By then, most people in my entourage were Roger fans and so I also loved Pros and Cons of Hitch-hiking and Radio K.A.O.S. But still, I was ignorant of the history behind the band besides the legendary replacement of Syd Barrett by David Gilmour.

Comfortably Numb is an exemplary biography of Pink Floyd from their Cambridge origins through the Syd (which the author calls Pink Floyd Mark I), post-Syd (Pink Floyd Mark II), and post-Roget (Pink Floyd Mark III) periods. It gives well-rounded biographies of each member without the fawning of a fan or the bitterness of someone having taken sides in any of the many battles that ultimately split up the band. For my money, it is on par with Spitz's masterful The Beatles biography which I consider to be the benchmark - balancing biography, musical analysis and insight, and some of the backstage shenanigans but without ever taking focus off the band. It saddens me to think of how the clash of egos became more embittered over the years - Dark Side of the Moon was really the last moment that the band members really "liked" each other. Roger took more and more autocratic positions and bullied the other band members on Wish You Were Here, Animals and The Wall and was almost alone for The Final Cut. I do not know that none of them aside from Gilmour were truly gifted players of their instruments: Richard Wright actually was fired from the band during The Wall for not contributing musically, Roger's focus was really composition and lyrics, and Nick Mason was unable to play some of the complex pieces.

While I was too young to see Floyd II, I did see Floyd III in San Antonio for The Division Bell tour in San Antonio and Roger Waters on the Amused to Death tour in Paris. Each was good, but Floyd III missed Roger's vocals and Waters was missing Gilmour's guitar. And the author was spot on in describing these shows.

I learned a ton about Pink Floyd thanks to this excellent effort by Mark Blake. With the passing of Richard Wright and Syd Barrett, all hope is lost for a reunion of Pink Floyd. It was a tremendous run though. It will be interesting to see what Roger Water's projected 2017 album sounds like, as David Gilmour's Rattle That Lock from 2015 was OK, but somewhat downkey. The one piece that was mentioned with which I am completely unfamiliar is Roger Water's Ça Ira which was a foray into classical music.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone familiar with Pink Floyd's music to get a backstage view of this truly unique band with an inestimable influence of rock music.

Matthew says

Not as nerdy as I would have liked (would have liked to have more on the actual recording process) but an entertaining (and quick) read nonetheless.

Scott Holstad says

Wow! After reading this book, I've come to the conclusion that Roger Waters was one of the biggest assholes who has ever lived. He was/is a freakin' monster! A bully. A grouch. Never happy. Always has to be right. Always has to win. Always has to have the last word. Confrontational. Critical as hell. A royal dick. To everyone. Especially to David Gilmour. And Richard Wright. He generally spared Nick Mason.

This is one of the most comprehensive rock bios I've ever read, starting out with the group's boyhoods in Cambridge in the 1950s to their forming the band in the mid-60s. Of course, Syd Barret was the singer and guitar player and was charisma personified. This book probably is probably one fourth about Syd, which irritated the hell out of me and nearly knocked it down a star. I've never understood the writer's, fan's, and band's obsession of and love for Syd Barret. Floyd's classic album *Wish You Were Here* was made as a tribute to Barret and just about every album they produced had songs that were tributes to him. Yet he was only with the band for one fucking album!!! The first one. The band has been in existence for 50 years and he was with the band for about two, so get the fuck over him people. Damn! He wasn't even that good. And six months into their first album's existence, he went insane. Too many drugs, mostly pot and LSD. Lots and lots of acid, daily. He burned himself out. He went from being a fun, eccentric, vibrant young man with lots of promise to a basic corpse on stage who couldn't/wouldn't sing and just let his guitar hang around his neck without playing it. So the band hired their friend David Gilmour to come in and back Barret up, to play the guitar for him and even sing the songs, all the while pretending it was Syd. But that didn't last very long. After about six months of that, one night the band decided not to pick Syd up for a show. And then they didn't the next night. And after that, he was gone.

Pink Floyd got their start playing at the UFO, a psychedelic club in London where they were the house band and everyone was tripping. When their first album came out, it generally got decent reviews and made them minor stars. They were doing what was called acid rock or space rock, take your pick. After Syd left, they had to find a new songwriter, so Roger took that role on his shoulders and became the band's de facto leader. He wrote the songs, with minor contributions from the others and Gilmour sang. Gilmour was apparently an excellent guitar player, while Waters was a mediocre bassist, but he was an ideas man and felt good about that.

Their next few albums got decent reviews, but weren't huge sellers and their record company was begging them for a hit single. Finally, they produced the all time classic, *Dark Side of the Moon*, which stayed on the charts for an amazing 14 straight years. That changed everything. It went to number one in many countries, made them superstars, and made them rich. And they went on tours. Big tours. Expensive tours. Tours that Waters became dictator of in regards to everything in every detail.

Wish You Were Here and *Animals* came out over the next few years and sold well. Everyone seemed to know the first one was the band's tribute to Syd, who by this time was quite ill. But Gilmour was watching out for him, making sure he was getting his royalties and being taken care of. Around this time, Waters had had enough of Wright, who he thought wasn't contributing enough, so he got the band to fire him, which was stunning. Wright's keyboards played an integral role on virtually every Floyd song there was and he had even written some songs, so it was just a crazy power play. This didn't sit well with Gilmour, who by this time was having a hard time even conversing cordially with Waters.

Meanwhile, Waters had a vision. He wanted to do a themed album, a brutal album about a rock star who

goes crazy, gets power hungry, but is then redeemed at the end. In other words, himself. And Syd. He wrote the songs for The Wall and the band put it all together for a year and a half. The band hired Wright back, but not as a full member, rather as an hourly player with no credits. Somehow Wright agreed to this. When The Wall came out, it was a huge hit and Waters was flush with pride. And then they made it into a movie, starring Bob Geldoff as the main character. Waters hated Geldoff, but couldn't do anything about the casting. The band went on a huge tour with some 200 roadies, all around the world, and made a killing, but Waters pissed everyone off so much, that a lot of people refused to ever speak to him again. Gilmour, by this time, hardly spoke to Waters, himself. He had had it with him. And Waters had had it with Gilmour. So he quit Pink Floyd and tried to dissolve the band. But Gilmour and Mason had other ideas. They wanted to keep the band going, with Wright, and still put out albums under the Pink Floyd name. Waters was incensed and sued them to stop it. He lost. Hah! Serves him right. He went on to do solo albums, none of which made a dent in the charts. He toured to crowds of 6,000 people, but claimed it didn't bother him. Meanwhile, the remaining members of Pink Floyd gradually decided to do another album, after Gilmour put out his own solo album, which also didn't sell. A Momentary Lapse of Reason was produced with Gilmour writing most of the songs, with the help of his then journalist girlfriend, later his wife. The album shot to number one everywhere and the band went out on huge stadium tours playing to 80,000 people at a time. Gilmour must have felt vindicated, but Waters couldn't let it go, bitching that Gilmour could only do it with the help of his wife, that he didn't have the talent to do it on his own. He also said the album sucked.

Fast forward a few years. There are more solo albums, by everyone. None sold well. The members of Pink Floyd decide to do another album and spend a good bit of time producing it. It hit number one on the charts too and they went on another big tour. During this tour, they played new stuff, very old stuff, including stuff from the first album, and the entire Dark Side of the Moon album. Recordings of the concert were later released as Pulse. Of course, Waters was immensely critical.

And that's about it. Waters produced an opera that was mildly successful and allegedly mellowed in his 60s. The band reunited for Liveaid 8 around 2005 and there was speculation they'd get together again. Waters even indicated he'd be willing to, but Gilmour wouldn't hear of it. He hated Waters too much. He turned down a \$250,000,000 offer. The book ends with a new solo Gilmour album that becomes the band's first solo album to sell successfully and with Gilmour finally finding some peace. And with Syd's death in 2006. He lived very frugally, but to everyone's surprise, was quite rich when he died. He left his money to his brothers and sisters. None of the band members attended the funeral. Syd was quite insane for most of his life. A pity.

One of the cool things about this book is the detailed descriptions of the covers and how they came about. How they were conceived and shot or drawn. You don't usually get that in rock bios and I was glad to see that. You also get commentary on most songs on the albums. Pink Floyd is one of the most enduring and successful bands in rock history. This book does them justice and is definitely recommended for fans and anyone else.

Sam says

Man, is this one going fast. I've neglected books I was reading just to zip through this one. I'll even be in bed, barely awake, and CANNOT put the fucker down.

I think I've read just about every book on PINK FLOYD, learning little bits of information along the way, filling in the gaps, sometimes even getting most of the same stuff with every book I read. First it was Miles' PINK FLOYD datebook from the 80's, then Nicholas Schaefer's A SAUCERFUL OF SECRETS, then the

recent Nick Mason autobio/unmitigated history of the band in INSIDE OUT.

But THIS thing? Jesus. Most comprehensive history of the band, delving into parts of their lives from the early days that I never knew about. I'm not saying don't read the three books from above, but if you start with THIS one, you might not need any of the others.

Gary says

Well written, well told. With some facts I knew little or nothing about. This book really pulls back the curtain on one of the most enigmatic groups of 70s to reveal what corporate rock looks like--not as corporate and professional as one might think. This is a story of the pitfalls of fame and fortune as much as it is a story about the iconic group.

Clinton Sweet says

Fantastic!! I've really only "discovered" Pink Floyd about two weeks ago and what a treat to now go back through their full catalogue and tantalise my ears with "Echoes", "Comfortably Numb" and "Atom Heart Mother" - a song which takes up the entire first side of their same-titled LP!! This book was a remarkable read, detailing the absolute roller coaster ride of what David Gilmour aptly describes the "lumbering great behemoth" of Pink Floyd, shares incredible insights into the individuals evolving and disintegrating relationships with one another and leaves absolutely no doubt as to why they grossly capture audiences across generations! Including me!
