

HOLY COW

Pink Floyd and the making of *Atom Heart Mother*. Joe Geesin celebrates the band's most controversial album.

Pink Floyd's 1970 album *Atom Heart Mother* is one LP in the band's illustrious discography that is often overlooked, and has met with very mixed reactions from fans and band alike. With the psychedelic Syd Barrett material a favourite with critics and *Dark Side Of The Moon* gracing almost every record collection in the country, the 60s and 70s Pink Floyd took the music world by storm, and 1970 was a turning point.

The aforementioned *DSOTM* has outsold pretty much any other album by a British artist and inspired recent themed concerts by the band's bassist Roger Waters. And 1979's *The Wall* took the band to the top of the singles' chart.

So 38 years on, why celebrate *Atom Heart Mother*? Well, it was the band's first really big seller, the first album to go gold, there's the groundbreaking 23-minute title track, and it was the first Pink Floyd album to top the charts, something that *Dark Side Of The Moon* never did.

And earlier this year, guitarist David Gilmour performed the title track live with co-writer and arranger Ron Geesin and top tribute band Mun Floyd to much acclaim. This was something many fans thought they'd never see, and it proved a huge success.

So what is the appeal of *Atom Heart Mother*? The orchestrated title track with its aggressive undertones? The quandary with their musical direction, drifting from psychedelia to progressive rock? The tension in the studio (there was plenty)? The pressure? Or was it the now familiar cow on the front cover with no title or band name? Either way, judging by the success of the recent performance, with brass, cellist and choir, it is still a work that means much to a great many.

The two recent shows were part of a performance by maverick composer, poet, electronic musician and collector Ron Geesin, who had collaborated on the original piece, opening the Chelsea Festival on 14 and 15 June 2008. Ron elaborates on the show further as well as his work with Pink Floyd in the following excerpt of an interview conducted

by Matt Johns, editor of *Brain Damage* (www.brain-damage.co.uk), where the full afternoon's discussion can be found.

In 1969, and following from the LP *Ummagumma*, Pink Floyd recorded three tracks (Heart Beat, Pig Meat, Crumbling Land and Come In Number 51 Your Time Is Up) for the *Zabriskie Point* soundtrack, and Embryo, which appeared on the Harvest label sampler *Picnic, A Breath Of Fresh Air*, both LPs released in 1970.

Early on in 1970, Roger Waters started work on the soundtrack to *The Body*, with Ron Geesin, who had previously recorded an LP for Transatlantic and several sessions for the BBC (compiled on the recent CD *Biting The Hand*). This collaboration would be completed after the recording of *Atom Heart Mother*, and was released in November, a month after the Pink Floyd album.

In May 1970, with the band under pressure to get a new record out and to go on tour, the band approached Geesin with some ideas, with themes the band had started work on in November 1969. This 18-minute 'untitled epic', still a work in progress, was given a live outing in January 1970 at Croydon's Town Hall: the title used at the time

was 'The Amazing Pudding'. It was played again a week later in Paris, before the band laid down the backing track and added new segments at London's Abbey Road studios. This process was completed in April. At this stage, the track was still a bit of a mess, with some sources calling it 'lifeless'. With a US tour looming and no time to overdub or re-record parts, the track was left with Ron Geesin, who worked on it further at his Ladbroke Grove studio, weaving his writing into and over their rough-edited assembly.

It would be easy to draw comparisons with work by Deep Purple and The Nice from a year earlier, but Geesin would not have been aware of these. The result, however, was extraordinary and unique. From the opening bars, it is clear that it was hardly rock'n'roll; in fact it was more anti-rock'n'roll, certainly anti-establishment. A suitable working title could easily have been 'Argument In E Minor For Rock Band And Orchestra'.

The difficulties of recording have been well documented, and were highlighted in Ron Geesin's mini-lecture before the recent performance at the Chelsea Festival. Working with the John Alldis Choir was relatively smooth, but the session brass players were awkward to say the least: hardened by years of playing mediocrity and keen to play confrontational games with an admittedly 'green' Geesin. John Alldis soon took control and Ron was removed from studio

to mixing desk, for everyone's safety. It worked, in the main, with drummer Nick Mason admitting years later that the band had learnt a lot about innovative recording techniques 'on-the-cheap' from Ron. That said, a misunderstanding between Ron and Nicky (as he was then) over the lead beat in the funky section, and a small chunk of the 23-minute track, left the band and choir a beat out of sync.

This was only rectified for the recent Chelsea performances, with the erroneous segment played twice; correctly (by the record) out of step and incorrectly (or as intended) in step. Add to that two new cello parts and the work extended past the 30-minute mark.

On record, the track *Atom Heart Mother* is divided into six parts; this is partly indicative of the original parts that were pieced together, but also for royalty reasons in the USA. The pieces were titled Father's Shout, Breast Milky (a nod at *The Body* soundtrack), Mother Fore, Funky Dung (quite a funky section), Mind Your Throats Please and Remergence. The sections move from brass to rock band to choir (chanting and phonetics making for a unique feel) and cello. The track also sees some of Gilmour's best work, reiterated during his recent performance.

Still under working titles when completed (Ron Geesin's score was just labelled 'Epic'), the band needed a title for a live performance on John Peel's Sunday Concert. Assembled in the BBC's Paris Cinema on Lower Regent Street, Thursday 16th July, Ron pointed Roger in the direction of the *Evening Standard* lying on a table (early edition, trivia lovers), pronouncing "You'll find the title in there!" He duly did, leafing through and finding the headline 'Atom Heart Mother named'. This new title for the 'Epic' soon became the title for the album.

Side Two of the album, recorded through July and August 1970, features three solo compositions and a lengthy group effort. Roger Waters' If is an



small boxed EMI logo above 'Harvest' on the label, and the removal of the label rim text beginning 'The Gramophone ...'. A subsequent Quadraphonic mix was issued in 1974, on the crest of the short-lived new technology. Two editions see the quad logo either on the outside sleeve or inside the gatefold.

The striking sleeve, with the Cow front and more cows on the back, was one of the first to feature no mention of band or album title, although some reissues and international editions added this in a variety of fonts. The opening gatefold artwork was, where present, always black and white. The Hipgnosis designed sleeve features the front picture taken by Storm Thorgerson, and is one of his more striking images. The shot, taken in the south of England, features a pedigree Friesian called Lulubelle III.

acoustic number with some very reflective lyrics, providing a rare insight into the man. Wright's Summer '68 is more keyboard led, mixing both organ and piano before the rest of the band come in, while Gilmour's Fat Old Sun is a melodic yet whimsical acoustic rock number, with an outstanding guitar solo midway through.

The group composition Alan's Psychedelic Breakfast, checks in at 13 minutes and is more of a montage. The song features spoken commentary from roadie Alan Stiles (who would cook the band's breakfast while on tour) and sounds of cooking, frying, pouring milk on cereal etc were pieced together with music, and was probably the most hurried piece on the album.

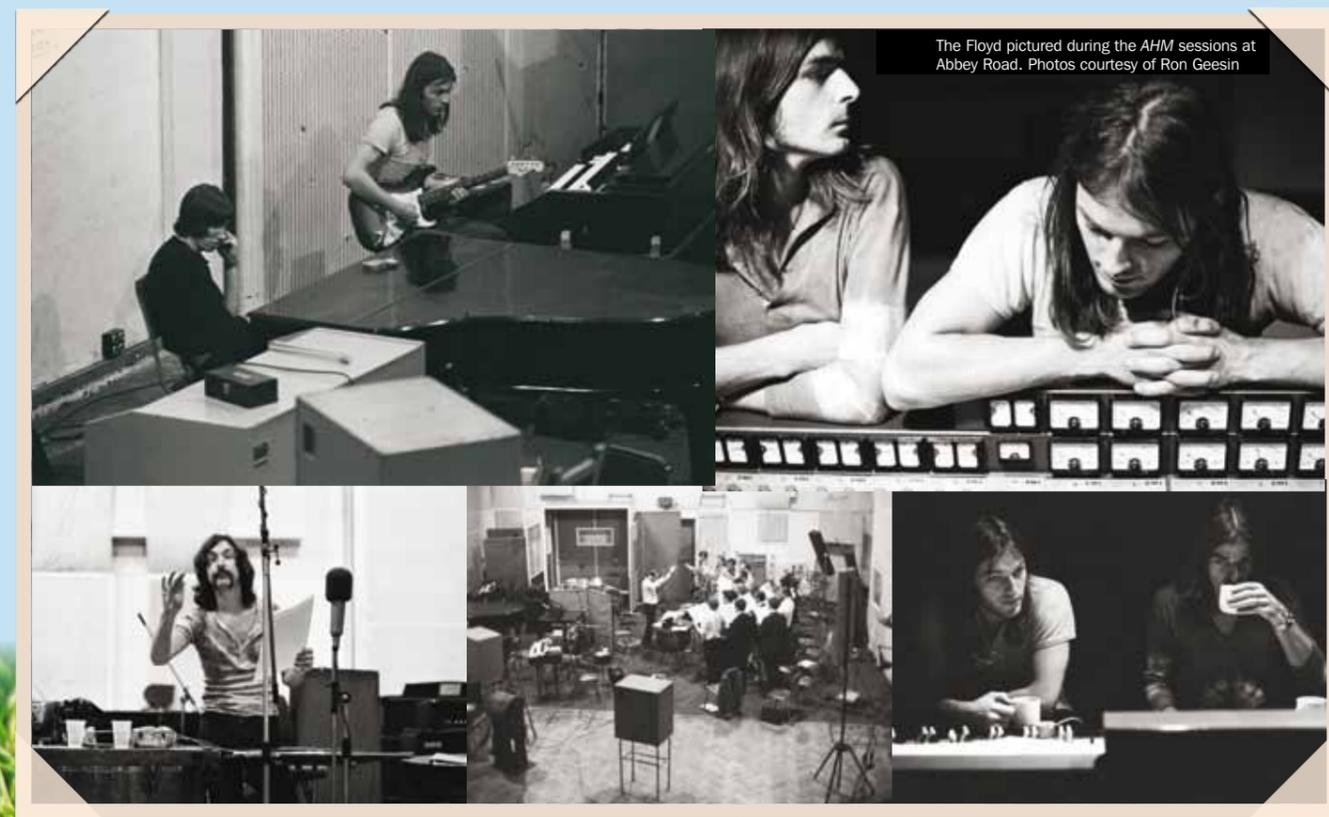
The album *Atom Heart Mother* was released on Harvest SHVL781 on 10 October 1970, quickly topping the charts and going gold in the UK, staying in the charts for 23 weeks. In the USA it achieved a more modest 55 on the albums chart, going gold in 1994. Engineers for the album were Peter Brown and Alan Parsons, the latter going on to some acclaim as a musician in his own right.

The album was re-pressed with the same catalogue number, and this can be identified by a

The album has been reissued on LP and CD many times, almost as often as *Dark Side Of The Moon*, and would make for a very boring discography if detailed. US 8-track anyone? *Atom Heart Mother* appeared in some form in almost every territory releasing LPs, so only the more interesting have been listed here, and the discography illustrates only a very small number of what's out there.

No tracks from *Atom Heart Mother* were issued on compilations in the UK, although the LP was issued as part of the *First XI* and *'97 Vinyl Collection* box sets, and more recently on the *Oh By The Way* 40th anniversary CD box set. *A Best Of* was issued in Korea, which can be considered semi-legitimate at best. This features the track *Atom Heart Mother* on side one, and mis-credits Ron Geesin with co-writing several tracks on side two, including Money. "Yeah right. If only...." was his reaction on seeing this.

The only singles known are the Japanese *Julia Dream / Summer '68* and the Dutch *Arnold Layne / If*, both issued in 1971 with picture sleeves.



ATOMIC THEORY

An interview with Ron Geesin, producer of Atom Heart Mother. By Matt Johns

So how did the 38th anniversary of *AHM* come to be celebrated (in June this year) at the Chelsea Festival?

A friend of mine knew a millionaire who is on the committee, or the Board of Trustees of the Chelsea Festival and the millionaire said to a friend of mine last June, 'Can you think of anything high profile that might work for next year?' This chap said, 'Well, there's Ron, and *Atom Heart Mother*, and he might be able to get a Floyd along, or two of Floyd along, or something...' He invited me out for a pint a couple of weeks after that. He sort of slid this thing in: 'What are you doing these days? How about'... We identified a conductor (Mark Forkgen), who just happened to have a choir which was perfect because we were wondering whether to have a children's choir.

How did it come about that you used the Italian band, Mun Floyd?

It just happened that I was in Florence about two or three years ago, and they were in that area doing a gig, and they played the non-orchestral version of *AHM* and they sounded good, they sounded pretty tight, and knew the piece. The Festival just said 'Yes, fine, we'll get them over'.

The Brass Ensemble were top end Royal College of Music students, and they were all coming up for exams as well, as it happens, but they all seemed to manage, more or less! Caroline Dale (cello) was David Gilmour's recommendation, because he'd worked with her. She turned out great, and we're very good friends and we're going to work on new things...

That leads on to how David got involved...

Yes. Well, going back to the original selling points of the show, to the committee, many of whom would not have heard of Pink Floyd ('Which one's Pink?' etc.) early on the message came to me: 'Do you think you could get anyone involved?'

And I thought, well, certainly I'm not talking to Roger and anyway he had fuck all to do with the composition in the first place. There might have been a couple of simple bass lines, and that was that. I imagine that he'd been responsible for the musique concrète section – the cavalry charge, the motorbike, and the other bits and pieces – but as far as the musical composition goes he very much took a back seat on that.



Ron Geesin, engineer Peter Brown and Roger Waters

It was really David Gilmour's guitar and chords, and Rick Wright's keys, so I thought the obvious one was David Gilmour, and also I had an open offer to go for a mug of tea, when I was at the University of Portsmouth as Senior Research Fellow in Sound, and I was going down that way and I could have popped in any time.

And then later, another time, when I went down there... I put quite a lot of effort into this, going down there to see him, draining the teapot, I said, 'Listen David, it's really awkward – it would be nice to know that we've got a show and who's doing it. Why don't you just do the second night, do the two nights?'. He said, 'Yeah OK'. But early on, when I was talking with David, he said 'Well, Rick might fancy to turn out'. He definitely said that. And then quite soon after that he said 'No, it may be best just to... I'll just come and do it. You'd better keep it low key... it's your gig, Ron'.

And I didn't approach anyone else. If Nick had thought – and in fact I was in touch with him, as I was asking him questions about a couple of photographs – he'd have said 'Can I come and bang a skin?' but he didn't, and I wasn't going to go around inviting people. Because there's all sorts of... it's politics, you get into silly games, and I haven't got the energy for games...

I've got very mixed feelings about *Atom Heart Mother* in the first place! The relationship, and the combination, and all that. So, I was going along with the whole organisation of the show up to a point, and then after that point, I was not. If I've got anything to do with it ... and I'm just one of

five composers, if you want, legally, on that piece... I would sit on the score and wait until it can be done in the Albert Hall or the Festival Hall, a very big venue, with top, top quality performers. Which might mean the Floyd turning out if they fancied a bit of a holiday!

Because we got damn close to doing it completely properly on the 14th and 15th of June, and I know what that other 5 or 10 per cent is. I know how that can be there, without sterilization, automation, painting by numbers, because it's all there, and I think the slightly extended score makes it even better, because it gives people time to become immersed in it.

You started the performance this time around with what sounded like the original cavalry charge and motorbike. How was that discovered? Where was that lurking?

That was kindly provided by the Pink Floyd Sound Archives. Run by David, because in case you didn't know, Nick runs the paper and photograph archive, and David runs the audio archive. From what I know of the very nice chaps that are involved in it, finding that piece and the steam train in the second excursion will have helped them on a bit, in terms of sorting all the recordings.

You met Nick in 1968, and then the rest of the band. How did you get on?

I crewed for him, because he was into boats then sailing and we went down to Dell Quay, where his parents were. Dell Quay is down on the south

coast, this side of Portsmouth, and he would be in for the Saturday morning racing at the club, and I crewed for him in a race. We went in and I lost my first decent watch in the drink. So he owes me a watch! And we stayed at his house, at different times. When we moved down here (Sussex), a couple of times I remember staying at his place. And then I met Roger. Roger was the special friend, because we were a couple of awkward creators, and that was a bit more than just being friends with Nick, going out socially.

And then Rick lived in Norting Hill, just up the road, around the corner, Rick and Juliette. We saw quite a lot of them in fact, because he was into jazz music more, and so was I, so we had that common interest. The one that I didn't see anything of was Mr Gilmour. But the other three, fine.

And then of course, when we moved down here, which was only a year after writing *Atom Heart Mother*, there was less reason to keep up with them, and they were moving into another airstream. I was continuing with my film work and crazy gigs, and NOT in the rock scene at all. You could say that I was against a lot of the whole machine of rock, and I could see that the Floyd was turning into a giant machine that minced its way across the countryside.

I'd known (manager) Steve O'Rourke for some time – it was looking at him that tells you what the machine was about. He was vicious and ferocious – not socially, but business wise, he'd be out there with his scythe, cutting his way through the field!

Achieving what he needed to...

Yes, well, or what they [the band] needed to...

YOU COULD SAY THAT I WAS AGAINST THE MACHINE OF ROCK.

So then you came to work with them.

Some say it was because I was seeing more of Roger, because we were two equal but very different creative energies, so it might have been he who swung it, but I didn't know, I wasn't sitting there, or saying 'Do you want anything doing?'. It was a surprise to me for them to come and say 'We've got this... we're trying to put this thing together, and it's not happening much!'

Did this all happen before you commenced work on *The Body*?

Roger and I had done the music for the film of *The Body* around March, or February 1970. It might have been his experience with seeing me tackle bits of a film, and writing stuff because I wrote cello things, and different, small combinations, for different bits. It might have been him seeing that, that he knew that I would be capable of doing...

And in those days, you didn't hang about for long on anything. It was just like 'This is what's needed to be done'. Right, I'll get at it tomorrow morning, that kind of thing. It wasn't like you had to wait two weeks. I might have been into another film, or doing something for the television or something. I'd have just had to get the drawing board clear and then on to it. And that was it, that was total. Mid-May to mid-June. And then after that was done, Roger and I got

together and did the album and remade stuff. That's how that happened.

None of the Floyd have been overly complimentary about the piece over the years...

But remember I must remind you here – no journalist or other reporter – ever asked at the time 'to what exactly do you refer? Is it the piece that lasts 23 minutes on Side One? Is it anything to do with Side Two, or is it the whole album?' These questions you can still ask. They've not actually been answered.

I've clarified it, and I've said I've had absolutely nothing to do with Side Two, and we know what's on Side Two. One of the magazines asked certain personalities to choose their favourite Floyd pieces, and I said 'Well, I don't really listen to any of it! But, if I did, I would choose If by Roger which starts side two, which reminds me of what he really was, or what was really inside him. Take away all the bluster and the stardom and the machinery, and you've got a human being who has feelings, but you don't often see 'em. But in that one you do.

Another reason why I'm well away from rock and pop, and music, is that the quality of reporting has been very poor. It's obviously improved now, because you flush the rubbish out. It seems incredible to me, that statements like 'It's a load of rubbish' are not properly challenged and looked into. In the same way, or rather to the same depth, that I went, with the help of (my son) Joe to find that *Evening Standard* cutting, and to say 'That is it, it can be no other. We've looked at every other newspaper and it can be no other'. It could have been maybe this, or maybe that. But that's it. ●

The full version of this, Ron Geesin's last ever interview on *Atom Heart Mother*, can be found



The man who knows the Score: Ron Geesin





Argentina



Germany



Japan, booklet, red vinyl pressing



Japan, single



Japan



Japan



Korea



UK Quadrophonic



Spain



Turkey



Turkey



USA Original Master

ATOM HEART MOTHER – Selected Discography

Singles

- 1971 Odeon OR-2840
- 1971 Odeon OR-2840
- 1971 Odeon OR-2840
- 1971 Harvest 5C 006-04 725

- Julia Dream/Summer '68 (Japan, black label) £50
- Julia Dream/Summer '68 (Japan, white label promo) £150
- Julia Dream/Summer '68 (Japan, black label, red vinyl)..... £150
- Arnold Layne/If (Holland, yellow, green or blue sleeves) each £80

Albums

- 1970 Harvest SHVL7 81
- 1970 Portrait SHVL 781
- 1970 Harvest 20 Q 4 SHVL7 81
- 1970 EMI/Odeon OP 80102/SHVL 781
- 1970 EMI/Horzu SHZE 297 Q
- 1970 Harvest J 064-04.550
- 1972 Harvest XHVL 1016
- 1974 Harvest QHVL7 81
- 1975 EMI Q4 SLDC 42006
- 1975 EMI/Odeon, EO Z 80008/QHVL 781
- 1978 Siera 1785
- 1980 Pardon NS176
- 1982 Harvest SMAS-382/OLE-398
- 1984 Fame/EMI 5041/Harvest SHVL781
- 1985 EMI 11788
- 1988 Harvest/Pathé Marconi SHVL7 81/DC 108
- 1994 Harvest MFSL 1-202

- (UK, gatefold sleeve, originally with "The Gramophone..." around the label rim, later pressings have boxed EMI logo on label) £30/£20
- (Israel, single sleeve, b/w rear) £25
- (Australia, Quadraphonic, single sleeve, b/w rear) £40
- (Japan, red vinyl, gatefold sleeve, OBI strip, booklet; also white label promo, no booklet) £80/£300
- (Germany, Quadraphonic, gatefold sleeve) £40
- (Spain, gatefold sleeve)..... £20
- (Brazil, Quadrophonic, gatefold sleeve) £50
- (UK, Quadrophonic, gatefold sleeve, initially with Quadraphonic logo on front sleeve, later inside) £50
- (Chile, Quadraphonic, gatefold sleeve) £75
- (Japan, quadraphonic, Channel 4 Sound, gatefold sleeve, booklet; also white label promo with booklet)..... £80/£200
- (Turkey, single sleeve, colour rear)..... £50
- (Turkey, single unique sleeve) £80
- (Korea, gatefold sleeve, insert, gatefold pic reversed) £25
- (Argentina, reissue, single sleeve, b/w rear) £25
- (Columbia, blue vinyl, gatefold sleeve) £500
- (France, DIAL Record Club issue, blue vinyl, 500 pressed, gatefold sleeve)..... £300
- (USA, original master recording reissue, 200g vinyl, numbered gatefold sleeve, insert) £100

Thanks to Herve Denoyelle for help with the discography and artwork

