

Syd Barret - The Death of a Music Legend

In August 2006 a sixty year old, bald, stocky bachelor with a face at once stern and sensitive died of diabetes. He was living on his own in his home-town: the genteel city of Cambridge, England, world widely known for its university, which, in the UK, is rivaled only by the equally venerable one in Oxford.

His name was Syd Barret. Or was it? No. His name was Roger Keith Barret, known as Rog to the few people he bothered to see, mostly his family. Syd Barrett is the name the world will remember him by.

He was a living legend. Now he is a dead legend.

Let me outline the birth of this legend in a few words.

Do you know the magnolia?

What makes its beauty so special is not only its features, but also that it blooms very early, and very short. In those seminal years of pop/rock music, the mid sixties, Barrett's songs and music shared the same properties. As founding father and undisputed leader of a band called Pink Floyd, Syd Barrett was a pivotal figure in the emerging psychedelic scene in London, and, via his records, the rest of the world.

It was a time when the world, in the words of Keith Richards, suddenly turned from black and white into Technicolor. And Syd Barrett was a most colourful being indeed, to the ear, to the eye and to the mind in equal measures. Brought up quite liberally, with well to do parents, and a particularly doting mother, young Syd was as gifted as he was attractive, and a humorous, impish fellow at that. Experimenting with a few things almost no one had heard of in these days, like LSD –until the sixties mainly used by the CIA as sort of a truth serum drug- and the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, the I Ching, his main occupations were painting and music. Painting came first, the music and songs that would make him famous came second in those early days.

In the music industry many things had changed in the slipstream of the Beatles fame. Musicians were no longer puppets on a string of shady, cynically-minded Tin Pan Alley-types, churning out product for whoever laid the money down. There was a new playfulness and originality in the music of the Beatles and also a completely un-self-conscious integrity, mainly brought about by the fact that the Beatles wrote their own songs, and became a role model for that. It was the Kennedy era. People were in some ways starting to be encouraged by the authorities to think for themselves and not to do simply what the same authorities expected them to do, which, of course, implies a paradox with a vengeance, but, lucky for those times, it took a while for us all to realize.

Back to our story. So the Beatle phenomenon became a trailblazer for a whole gamut of gifted young bands, all into writing their own material: The Rolling Stones, The Kinks, and The Who, who does not know their names.

Barrett's Pink Floyd rose to fame a few years after the first batch of post Beatles bands. And in those heady days a few years made an enormous difference. Swinging London was already turning psychedelic and of that era Barrett was, is, and always will be one of the finest relics. It all went by so fast...

Syd Barrett was an almost devout non-believer in discipline, and had a frame of mind and body not heavy duty enough for the rough life of a rock star. Within two blasting years his behaviour had become so erratic that he could not rationally function anymore in the band that was his brainchild. Forgetting guitars everywhere, sometimes refusing to speak to anyone, standing on stage like a statue, playing just one chord. Roger Waters, Rick Wright and Nick Mason had to incorporate guitarist David Gilmour, a good friend of the whole band, and already a highly rated session player.

A short while the band was a five some, David Gilmour delivering the sonic good, and Syd Barrett as a sort of far-out ornament. Then the idea was that he would be the home staying genius, with the other boys on the road a la Brian Wilson, but it all expired, Syd being so deranged that he temporarily became an inmate of the Terrapin Asylum, after which followed a few years in London, living in various trippy bohemian settings. During that time he did manage to create two albums that are still enjoyed by quite a few good ears: "The Madcap Laughs" and "Barrett's" quirky, very asymmetrical songs with strangely evocative lyrics about almost nothing/everything, after which he stopped making music altogether. He ended up where he started, in Cambridge, living with his mother, and after her death on his own, picking up painting again and writing a history of art for his own enjoyment, without the slightest idea to let others read it, let alone publicize it.

All his life he had the status of a cult hero, also because his old band, Pink Floyd, became hugely successful in the line-up with David Gilmour, and the standard bearers of, let's say, adult rock: always competent, creative, even poetic, skilfully performed on state of the art hardware, but with the elusive x-factor, which makes things creep under your skin, considerably reduced.

A short career and a long retirement.

He regained his inner balance sufficiently to live as a quiet, withdrawn, strange but not crazy citizen, sustained by the royalties of his compositions on Pink Floyd's and his own records. According to his family he could even be said to live with his very own brand of satisfaction. Syd Barrett will always be remembered as one of the most enigmatic characters in the pantheon of modern Western popular music.

About the Author

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