

Rosemary Breen Remembers Her Brother

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by Simon Webb. Reprinted by kind permission of fan site [Brain Damage](#) and Matt Johns.

The following interview with Rosemary Breen, Syd's sister and Director of [The Syd Barrett Fund](#), was conducted by Simon Webb of [Escape Artists](#) in May 2009. Some of the questions were those submitted by a number of Brain Damage regulars, along with members of the Late Night Syd Barrett Forum.

Thanks to Rosemary for taking a look at the many questions that we received, and for taking the time to answer a number of them. Visit [The Syd Barrett Fund's Web site](#) for more details of their activities, to buy Barrett items, or to make a donation.

Q. Your brother is best known for being Syd, but wanted to be called Roger once he'd returned to Cambridge post Pink Floyd; which would you rather we called him for this interview?

A. It's an interesting point isn't it; in a situation like this it's Syd. He was Roger to me because that was his name and he was my brother, but he's Syd when we're talking about his music and that time in his life. So, I feel more relaxed talking about him as Syd.

Q. Much has been written about Syd's state of mind, especially in his latter years, what was he actually like?

A. He wasn't mentally ill in any way, he was different, eccentric, his mind and ideas were simply different from the considered norm. Thank goodness we are not all the same; we need people like Syd to add colour to our lives.

Q. It's interesting how with the term "mental health" and the various definitions, you're essentially putting an umbrella over anyone whose brain works in a slightly different way.

A. I think it perhaps comes down to what you can and can't cure. With schizophrenia it can be helped or controlled with the use of drugs which benefit enormously. But with someone like Syd, and like a lot of people, their brains just work in a different way and it's perfectly acceptable, if only we would accept people who are different from ourselves. Illness isn't the word for it; different is the only word for it. I feel we should welcome the difference and celebrate it.

Q. Why did you decide to set up a charity in Syd's name?

A. The reason why I wanted to set up a charity was because, it seemed to me that so many people held his memory with such affection, I felt that they would, as I would, value the opportunity to put that affection to good use. There seemed to be such love for him free in the air, I thought let's do something useful with it.

Q. What do you hope to achieve?

A. I would love it to be a source of help for lots and lots of people who have a mental health problem and just to be a respectful memory, a memorial to him.

Q. Who are the people who will benefit from The Syd Barrett Fund?

A. Anybody that can gain help who have a mental health issue, I hope anyone can access the fund in the future. I hope nobody is excluded. The focus is on Cambridgeshire at the moment, but it would be wonderful if it could spread out as far as it can reasonably go.

Q. And what is the ultimate dream? There has been the idea of an arts centre in Syd's memory one day.

A. I can imagine, something like an old church, I wouldn't want a modern building because it wouldn't suit, and it would be wonderful if we could have classrooms where art and various creative things could be taught and then we could have an art gallery where we could show it, a cafe where anyone could just drop in, somewhere that was totally inclusive. It seems in life we separate ourselves too much, and I would really like somewhere where everyone could feel included and everyone was welcome. It's probably just a dream and couldn't happen because human beings aren't like that, but you can aim for it though. I think if you offer people the chance to be creative then you bring the best out of them. I'd like there to be somewhere that people could be creative, in a freeish way, where they could learn and benefit from that.

Q. And if you're talking about people who have a mental health issue, giving them the opportunity to create something tangible which they can feel good about doing then that's very important.

A. Yes that's right. If that improves your self-image then that's so important isn't it? We all need a boost sometimes.

Q. We've talked about long term, but in the short term what do you hope for?

A. My main motivation is, I'm very aware of how lonely Syd was because he was different, especially in the latter years in Cambridge after the Floyd. I would like to think that people can get companionship and accepted into society, even if it's only in a group of like-minded people. I think the loneliness he felt was just dreadful, and if we could stop that, or at least help some people from feeling that loneliness because they're different, then I would feel we've achieved something.

Q. Using the arts as a way in which to do that.

A. In a way that's a separate thing, we all have it in us to be creative and we all need it to a degree. Yes it's majorly important, but I think doing things with other people is an important aspect of it, like at Trinity (during the City Wakes), the musicians and the singers there, they were doing something together and you could see it in their faces, they got enormous benefit from it, as a group, of people, who are just different.

Q. So at this point, if someone were to donate money, or buy something through one of the online auctions, what does that money do now?

A. Any money raised goes to support Escape Artists, but I have stressed that it's to support mental health projects.

Q. What ways do you plan to fundraise?

A. We've already done a lot; we auctioned stuff from Syd's house and then the book which was on eBay in March (a collection of drawings which sold for £12,600). I think it would be nice if people who read this who have a connection with Syd could come up with ideas for fundraising; I'm sure they've got some original ideas.

Q. As we talked about at the start, the inspiration for this was the affection people have for Syd.

A. Absolutely, I think it would be wonderful if people felt part of it.

Q. One fan question regarded un-released Syd Barrett music; is there much of it and might it ever be made available?

A. I honestly have no idea. I imagine some of his friends from the 60s may have a few bits and pieces, but I don't personally know of any.

Q. Is there a history of creativity in the Barrett family?

A. Yes, my father was a very good musician, and artist and a brilliant doctor, that was his main focus. Sadly he died when Syd was fifteen and I think that was a huge gap in Syd's life, I don't think Syd ever connected with anyone else in quite the same way. They were both very unique in their own way. My father's interests were explored to the nth degree, his music, art and pathology. He was very thorough, very enthused and very focused.

Q. Do you think, even subconsciously, Syd followed his own creative ambitions as a legacy to your father?

A. No, I really don't. Everything he did in his life was from him as an original, it wouldn't occur to him to do that.

Q. What were you doing in the 60s and 70s?

A. In the 60s I was training at St. George's in London as a nurse, that was most of the 60s, then moved back to Cambridge in the early 70s and married in 1974. While in London in the 60s it was very exciting because Syd was there too and that's when it all took off. I remember going to see him at The Roundhouse and having a great time.

Q. That must have been great to be around, watching a brother have that kind of success and acclaim.

A. Well it was, but when you have a brother like Syd you always know something exceptional will happen. He never surprised me however extreme he was because that was just him. He never seemed to do anything normal, I don't think he had it in him, but yes it was exciting, of course it was.

Q. Do you have any memory of seeing Syd in the months after he left Pink Floyd? If so did he talk about what happened or express his feelings on how his tenure in the band ended?

A. No he didn't, I did visit him a few times when he was in London and we went out and about, when he lived in Chelsea Cloisters. He didn't want to talk about it so it was a road we didn't go down.

Q. Do you think he had any regrets about that time, or was he very much about the here and now?

A. I'm pretty certain he didn't have any regrets because I'm pretty sure there was quite a lot he didn't enjoy. He was just playing music with his friends and it took off. He didn't really understand the fame and didn't enjoy it, he just wanted to have fun and it wasn't fun touring and being asked to play when he didn't feel like it.

Q. That's a very familiar story though. Those who want fame from music nowadays will lean towards shows like the X Factor; the people playing in pubs are doing it for the fun and love of it.

A. And Syd would have been much happier simply playing in a pub. The whole thing to do with celebrity he found impossible to understand and uncomfortable and I think it was a relief in some ways to move on.

Q. The common description of Syd's life post-Pink Floyd, and especially once he'd moved back to Cambridge, was that of a recluse. Was that a tag given to him because the media couldn't get to him, or had his personality significantly changed?

A. There is some truth to it, certainly he was a lot less sociable after the Floyd, I don't think we could say he was a recluse, I don't think that's accurate because he didn't generally shun company. He did however become more selective: when he was younger everyone was his friend; after the Floyd I think there were lots of issues and it made him much more wary of human contact. Not everyone had good motives towards him; therefore I think he became quite suspicious of people.

Q. Because of who he was and the band he was in, and their subsequent success, that reaction would have received a lot more attention, but his response is perfectly natural and understandable given the celeb circus he would have been caught up in and the profile he gained.

A. A lot of people still search for more and more acclaim but he certainly didn't want to. When he came home he was trying to be Roger because I think Syd held some not so good memories and he just wanted to become Roger and move on.

Q. Because Roger was his childhood and that had happier memories for him?

A. It may be that, or he just wanted to become the real person that he was, I'm not sure how genuine the Syd character really was.

Q. And unfortunately, if the press can't get what they want, they'll write something else and as a result we have so much mis-information, is that something you would like to put right with any exposure you gain through The Syd Barrett Fund?

A. Now that he's gone I'm not bothered about them. When he was alive if he could be hurt by them, then of course I would do something, but I can't think there would be much to be gained now.

Q. How do you feel about the amount of books written about Syd? Which, if any, are most accurate?

A. Do you know I have no idea. I've never read any of them, and neither did Syd. I hope there's accuracy in them, but I have never and would never read any and he didn't even know many of them existed.

Q. So how did he sign the 'Psychedelic Renegades' book?

A. Because it was Mick Rock who was a friend of Syd's. He didn't ever want to see it and just signed the papers.

Q. He's known to have been a big Jimi Hendrix admirer; did he have much of a record collection?

A. No, very little actually. He admired Hendrix but he didn't have any of his music, he admired his guitar work and of course they toured together and I think they had a bit of fun together. He had a few CDs, all jazz, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, people like that. He enjoyed the Stones later work, in fact the earlier work too, he enjoyed that, but he only had about ten CDs and they were all jazz. He always used to listen to Jazz on the radio on a Saturday afternoon, but he was never interested in pop music.

Q. After he returned to Cambridge did he play guitar much or was he focused on painting and photography?

A. He didn't play much music, he had a very basic guitar which he bought for about £15, or £20, but I certainly never saw him play in the last few years.

Q. What period are we talking when you say "last few years"?

A. Through the nineties, before then he would strum a few chords but he never played as such. He had really changed his interest from music to painting.

Q. You've talked before about how he was very interested in the history of art; which painters/artists work did he especially enjoy?

A. Well the period he enjoyed was the Byzantine period, the older the better really. He was fascinated by cave drawings and the older artworks were of much more interest to him than any of the modern artists. He didn't like Picasso, I would have thought he would have done since Picasso was very extreme and unusual, but Syd didn't find anything there to connect with. As a child he did some very unusual caricatures of people in the family, they would have great big heads or be in some way amusing.

Q. After he died you spoke about the book he had written on the history of art and how you hadn't read it at that stage, have you looked at it since?

A. No, not yet, I will do one day.

Q. Is it true he would burn his paintings after photographing them and if so, did he ever say why?

A. He did talk about that. Once a creative need was out of his head and onto the paper he had no further use for it. It's like you or I would eat an egg for breakfast, you don't then want to see it there for the rest of the day, you wanted it at the time and then it was done. He saw a painting like that. He needed to do it. Once it was down on the paper and out of his head it was done.

Q. So why did he take photos of them if he didn't need them anymore?

A. For me mainly. I was very sad they disappeared but I do have all the photographs.

Q. What books and or films did he enjoy?

A. He never enjoyed films. He wanted fantasy, like Alice in Wonderland, children's sort of fantasy. Make believe, fairies fascinated him and always had done. He enjoyed map books, he bought countless atlases. Dictionaries too, he liked words, but he wouldn't read a book, a novel. He bought children's fantasy books but when I asked him about them he'd never read them, he just wanted to have them.

Q. I suspect they were nicely illustrated and he got enjoyment out of that, and you can use your own imagination to piece a story together from the pictures in some cases.

A. Yes, you're right. He never enjoyed cinema or television.

Q. I read that in his teenage years he had a fascination with India, are you able to tell me anything about this?

A. Not really no. In the 60s we as teenagers were very inquisitive about things and he did think about religion a lot. I remember having a long conversation with him on the train back to London about India and religion, but it was just teenage curiosity, nothing more involved than that.

Q. Did he have any feelings about the Pink Floyd reunion at the Live 8 show in Hyde Park in 2005?

A. He didn't have a television and he never mentioned it, so I don't think he even knew it happened, but, if he had known about it, it would have felt like the past I think.

Q. You've talked about how he was very good with kids, are you aware of him ever wishing he'd had his own?

A. I'm sure he did and he'd have been a fantastic father because he was such fun. I suppose he was very good with kids because he was one. He immediately got onto their wavelength, he never grew up and was happy just being a child.

Q. What were his favourite places to visit, either Cambridge and Cambridgeshire or further away?

A. With our father as kids we used to go to Byron's Pool in Grantchester. It's a big pool and a wood and he used to like going there. Any quiet, countryside areas around Cambridge he would enjoy. One day a year he would take himself off to London on the train and go to Harrods' food hall, which he loved. I think he liked London because of the busyness and he could be so anonymous.

Q. Did he ever express pride for the music he created or was that very much something of the past?

A. No, he thought it was all a bit of fun really; it was just something he'd enjoyed. He never wrote a piece of music to make money, he wrote it because it was in his head and it was enjoyable to do so. He didn't see it as something to brag about, it just came very naturally.

Q. And I'm assuming his status in rock history would at no point ever have crossed his mind.

A. Absolutely, he had no idea about it at all. He wouldn't have understood it; he certainly wouldn't understand what was going on now, since his death.

Q. Although, you've spoken before about how he would have been very pleased to know things he'd created were able to raise money for good causes.

A. Very true, but that doesn't mean he did anything to make that happen. He was a very kind person and he would be very pleased to know that anything he did helped people. He was very pleased when he was playing in a small group of people and they would sing along, he loved that, but groupies, people wanting to be his friend because of the Floyd he didn't understand.

Q. People wanting to know him because of what he'd become rather than who he was.

A. Yes, he found that very unbelievable, it is a very odd world isn't it, the fact people wanted to be his friend just because he played the guitar, he couldn't understand that. On the subject of the attention, I'm really grateful people respected his privacy during the last twenty or thirty years while he was living in Cambridge. I know that a lot of people wanted to speak to him but the majority of people were very kind and realised he didn't want to know and respected that and I'm really grateful for that. It did upset him when people were too intrusive.

Q. We've talked about how his position and status would have meant very little to him, what, if anything, does it mean to you?

A. That's a tricky one. If I'm absolutely honest, I wish it hadn't happened. I wish he could have had a happy life, perhaps painting, I wish he hadn't got involved in the music world, because it's a rum old world that one. Not now perhaps, but in the 60s there were a lot of people who didn't have the best intentions of looking after the boys in the band, a lot of sharks around, and I think he'd have had a happier life if he'd not got involved in that world and all it brings with it.

The Syd Barrett Fund was created in 2008 by Rosemary Breen, to support the work of Escape Artists, a charity which uses arts projects to better wellbeing in marginalized groups and the mental health sector.

If, having read this interview, you wish to show your support for the fund, go to www.syd-barrett-trust.org.uk and click on the '[Support the Fund](#)' link in 'About the Fund'.

Find out more about Escape Artists at www.escapeartists.co.uk