

ROB CHAPMAN ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS

From: Greg Bugay
Sent: 05 May 2010

Hi Rob!

Just ordered your book & am looking forward to it. I've read some reviews & I hope they are right in that you've buried a lot of this "Urban Legend" B.S. that so many other hack journalists seem to drool over. My question is: In your book do you find out what happened to Syd after 1974? Besides him seeing the Floyd in '75? What was his life like in the 1980's; did you find out anything that we don't already know?

A – Thanks for the kind words Greg. It was always my intention to challenge many of the myths and rumours that have grown up around Syd. As you say, those aspects are often the only ones that certain music hacks like to address (or in some cases seem capable of addressing). There is a considerable amount in my book about Syd's life after 1974 – although the years 1975-81 remain his lost era, to even his family. Both his sister Rosemary and nephew Ian were able to shed new light on his post pop-life back in Cambridge, as were a couple of neighbours. A lot of it isn't mysterious, as you'll see. More mundane than anything. Plus Cambridge is not a big town. He was often seen out and about.

From: Daniel Gibson
Sent: 07 May 2010

Rob, while doing research for your book, did you find any evidence of any other photos of Syd in the period from 1972 until he returned to live in Cambridge? Apart from the 3 or 4 photos that are already in the public domain.

A – No I didn't and to be honest I didn't search very hard either. Syd photos weren't high on my agenda (although there are some great unseen photos of 'Syd's women' in the book, i.e. his mother Win, Ella O'Connell, and Vanji Thorgerson.) I believe Russell Beecher's forthcoming book may be more helpful to you in this respect.

From: Supa Fab
Sent: 07 May 2010

Dear Mr Chapman,

I did enjoy an Irregular Head, but I felt disappointed by some aspects of it. For example, you did not include any information about the film that Syd is supposed to have started making with his friend Anthony Stern in 1968. The film was called The Rose Tinted Monocle and was inspired by Buckminster Fuller. I first read about this project in the Pink Floyd book Pigs Might Fly, and was intrigued to know more about it. It was fascinating to read about Syd's collaboration with John Latham, but why nothing on The Rose Tinted Monocle? This seems like an oversight. Also, did you deliberately leave out information about Syd's violent incidents with women as a mark of respect to his family, especially his sister who I understand co-operated with the book. There is a lot of credible eyewitness accounts about these incidents, and while it is unpleasant I think you have to tackle all aspects of Syd's character and behaviour in a book of this kind. Thank you anyway.

A – Sorry to have let you down Supa Fab. I didn't include anything about The Rose Tinted Monocle because there was nothing to add that wasn't already in Mark Blake's book. This was not an oversight on my part. I didn't merely want to replicate what was already in previous biogs (hence the absence of a plethora of previously aired, and often not very interesting, material.) I had a fascinating time interviewing Anthony Stern and he was able to furbish me with much new detail regarding Syd's life, and life in Cambridge in general. The second half of your question is simply baffling. I quite clearly go into detail about Syd's abusive attitude towards certain women in his life, complete with direct eye witness accounts and testimony from David Gale and Duggie Fields. This is indisputably one of the less savoury aspects of Syd's personality in the late 1960s and early 1970s and no amount of co-operation from family members would have made me compromise my integrity on this matter.

From: Chris Moise
Sent: 09 May 2010

Hi Rob,

As a long time Syd obsessive I'm very much enjoying your book. I've been intrigued by the mysterious title "Flapdoodle Dealing" on the London Free School setlist for ages. How did you work out that it was an instrumental? I was also wondering if "Living Alone" from the Dylan's Blues tape was in fact the 1966 song "I Get Stoned"?

A – On the subject of Flapdoodle Dealing, this is one of those occasions where I have to own up and admit I can't remember my source on this matter. I was told years ago that a.) it's a Waters title and b.) it is in fact an embryonic version of Pow R Toc H. Both seem feasible to me. It doesn't sound like a Syd title. Syd always had simple song titles and a very unshowy vocabulary. As a title Flapdoodle Dealing has got that self consciously wacky Waters vibe about it (see also 'walk with me sydney' 'take up thy stethoscope' and floyd titles passim). On the subject of Living Alone/I Get Stoned. I assumed this was common knowledge. Given that those who remember the song (Jenner, King etc) say that its first line is 'Living alone/I get stoned' I thought it was self evident. Syd always had a rather arbitrary approach to titling songs of course (when he bothered to title them at all) and often changed them at will or random, e.g.

Lucy Leave/Lucy Lea in blue tights
Snowing/Flaming
Silas Layne/Arnold Layne/Silas Lang/Swan Lee
Games For May/See Emily Play
Scream Thy Last Scream/Old Woman With A Casket
Clowns and Jugglers/Octopus
Dark Globe/Wouldn't You Miss Me
Mindshot/It is Obvious.

As the man once said "don't know/hasn't got a title/I suppose its called Dominoes".

From: Greg Curry
Sent: 11 May 2010

How did Mick Rock get Syd to sign the insert of his book Psychedelic Renegades, did he first approach Syd's sister to see if she would approach her brother about this or did he just go to Syd direct? Also did Syd ever mention anything of this meeting with Mick?

A – Again, this story is fairly common knowledge. I'm not exactly passing on the holy grail here. See page 385 of my book for further information.

From: Rob Bell
Sent: 14 May 2010

Rob,
Just finished reading your book, very informative and enjoyable read about one of my all time heroes. My question is, in your opinion how much did the songs and so called muse of Roger Waters contribute to his unhappiness, in that they indirectly made his privacy situation intolerable. Did you get the impression from Rosemary that she thought that Roger Waters had a hell of a lot to answer for? Perhaps if he had behaved a little more like David Gilmour things would have been better for him.

A – It might surprise people to know that I don't think Roger Waters is the anti-christ in these matters. As David Gale said to me in the book "they did what had to be done." Certainly 'easing' Syd out of the band was handled badly and as a matter of expediency because he was jeopardizing their careers. And the 'what if-er' in me wishes they could have done a Brian Wilson job and kept him on in a writing/recording capacity, but I don't automatically think Waters is the bad guy in that scenario. In fact I came out of the book with a kind of grudging admiration for Waters. It's a classic tortoise and hare situation. Outshone initially by a lyrically gifted intuitive genius three years his junior, Waters had to take up the reins when Syd imploded, and managed to keep them going. I love the late sixties period Floyd. I don't blame Waters for what happened to Syd. And I didn't get any impression that Rosemary did either. You can argue that writing songs about him later on is exploitative and/or guilt ridden but I don't think Shine On You Crazy Diamond was responsible for making his "privacy situation intolerable". I think doorsteppers, stalkers and certain fanzine/website editors did that.

From: astronomedomine
Sent: 13 May 2010

Rob, I have always been curious what time of day Roger was born. Wondering if you would know this information, even if it were roughly say a morning baby etc?

A – Sorry, AD, I can't provide you with this information. And I don't think it's that important. I had my star chart done once. It showed that I had six planets in my house of creativity. Two or three is meant to be ok, apparently. Six is overload. But so what, y'know? The universe is a vast unknowable place, full of dark matter and debris. That's all ye know on earth and all ye need to know. Here's Tom with the weather.

From: John
Sent: 18 May 2010

Congratulations on the book, really excellent work... a few questions:

1. p 113 "Snowing [aka 'Flaming']... instrumental 'Flapdoodle Dealing'". How were these identified as Flaming and an instrumental?

A – See earlier answer regarding Flapdoodle Dealing and Syd's arbitrary and interchangeable attitude towards titles. Regarding Snowing/Flaming. Both terms were in common currency in the mid-sixties as acid slang for that afterburn image you get while on LSD. See also the Small Faces 'Afterglow of your love'. Interesting also that neither word, Snowing or Flaming appears in the song.

2. p 236 "additional instrumentation from David Gilmour and Rick Wright ('Octopus' and 'Long Gone')". How did you verify that Gilmour--and especially, Wright--played on these?

A – I didn't. I merely replicated David Parkers hunch on page 149 of Random Precision. David's reasoning seems entirely feasible to me.

3. p 269 "On the Bob Harris session, Syd was accompanied by Gilmour on bass". Likewise: where is this information from (the 1971 BBC session sheet has no other musicians present)?

A – David Gilmour told me that he accompanied Syd to all the sessions during this period and that is highly unlikely that Syd would have gone alone. Incidentally, BBC session sheets are notoriously unreliable, as are BBC P's as B's (when they aren't missing from the archive!) as indeed is publishers sheet music. (Opened up a whole new can of worms for you there folks.!)

4. p 288 "[Steve] Took contributed conga drums to the initial Madcap Laughs sessions in 1968" Along the same lines: how did you confirm this?

A – I didn't confirm it. On page 215 of my book I quite clearly say "is strongly rumoured to have been". Although I will say this. I was a massive Tyrannosaurus Rex fan, and I'd recognize that playing anywhere.

From: Maria Georgiou
Sent: 20 May 2010

There has been much talk of Syd's wit and sardonic humour, but no examples have been given. Are there any anecdotes or funny quotes from Syd, which display the wit people so often reminisce about?

A – "They've probably done very well. The singing's very good and the drumming is good as well." Syd Barrett on UmmaGumma.

It's the way he tells them Maria!

From: Keith Wyrick
Sent: 24 May 2010

Hello, I am a Syd Barrett fan from the U.S. The thing I've always wondered about Syd was his life after he withdrew from the spotlight. Was he so damaged mentally as to not be able to function in society, or was his personality such that he withdrew at least in part by his own choice? I know that he lived to be sixty or so, but the last thirty to thirty-five years of his life have up to now been buried under the veil of his 'madness', if he was really mad. Does the book cast any new light on his later life?

A – Regarding the first part of your question Keith, well as Grandpa Simpson would say, ‘a little from column A. A little from column B.’ On the one hand Syd was quite clearly damaged, which affected his ability to function normally later on. I don’t make light of this in the book and I don’t deny it. What I question is the rapidity with which this happened and the extent to which Syd was, or could have been, helped. And what I object to most is lazy journalists and writers who make ‘mad syd’ their default position, (to the exclusion of all other considerations about his artistic merit) and insensitive newspaper hacks/biographers/stalkers who hassled the man right up until his death. Indeed let’s be clear about this, right up until the man was quite visibly dying of cancer.

But to muddy the, er, waters, Syd’s condition was never obviously so incapacitating that it stopped him shopping, painting, gardening, cooking, etc. Yes he was reclusive and ‘fragile’. No he wasn’t a basket case.

Regarding the second part of the question, I was fascinated by David Gale’s assertion that ‘Syd the recluse’ or rather ‘Roger the recluse’ was this character/persona he had to create in order to get by. I give this theory considerable credence and quote David’s comments almost entirely unedited in the book. I’ve avoided cod-analysis in my biography so I’m not about to launch into any now, but Syd doesn’t fit any of the incapacitating archetypes of full on madness. At the risk of sounding bland I think he was just a bit odd. Well, more than a bit. The books not called ‘A Very Irregular Head’ for nothing you know.

From: Ian Macintosh
Sent: 24 May 2010

Hi Rob, I was fortunate enough to see the Floyd with a disintegrating Syd twice back in 1967. I was fifteen, and developed a bit of an infatuation with him then that has stayed with me all my life. It is so refreshing to hear your perspective on Syd and his supposed ‘madness’. I am a painter and musician myself, and I always viewed a lot of his behaviour as quite predictable for an artist in the times that were psychedelic London, and in later years, quite understandable behaviour. Would you agree that, rather than going crazy, he suffered a crisis of confidence about his place within the confines of a ‘pop’ band, albeit an underground one? A crisis no doubt exacerbated by regular drug use. It was/is we, his audience, who viewed his alienation as a form of tragic, romantic theatre. He merely spent a period of time adrift and unfocussed. Let’s face it, there were weirder and more eccentric individuals around throughout the late sixties. Also, the legends that grew around reports of his behaviour in later years can be viewed in two ways? (a) The behaviour of a man who will be forever viewed in the light of three amazing years when he made records, yet who desperately wanted to cut himself free and be totally the man he wanted to be, not what the world wanted him to be. And (b), the deluded perceptions of a voyeuristic public who viewed any utterance or appearance by Syd in its most extreme interpretation. The classic, ‘Syd doesn’t live here..’ is quite an erudite and sane statement by Roger Barrett, 30-odd years after he left London. The good Ronnie Lang once said to the rest of the Floyd, “Are you sure it’s Syd who has the problem?”

A – This astute question/series of observations needs virtually no elaboration from me at all, except to say I agree with almost every word of it.

From: Bill Roberts
Sent: 26 May 2010

1. Did Syd encourage Roger and Nick to contribute in the song writing department during the 'Piper' period or was he territorial as the 'leader' of the band. (I know Roger had one contribution on the first album, and there is also 'Nick's Boogie' the jam-along) How did Syd view them as writers?

A – This answer involves a certain degree of speculation on my part, but I think Pink Floyd were genuinely a collective in their early days. As Nick Mason says in *Inside Out*, Syd's arrival in the band didn't immediately lead to a radical change in repertoire. He was hacking away hopefully, and for a long time not that convincingly, like the rest of them. They were late developers and that quantum leap in 1966 I would attribute to three factors (four if you include the departure of Bob Klose) namely Mike Leonard's light show experiments, the Binson Echorec, and LSD. As Pete Jenner said, he asked all of them to write. It was Syd who was most able and in that initial burst, summer through to late 66, it was Syd who wrote the majority of songs. If you read Syd's own disparaging comments on his abilities it's very unlikely that he would have been 'territorial', and with such a forceful personality as Roger Waters in the band? I mean, c'mon?

2. Did Syd ever talk about his solo output after he returned home to Cambridge, or did he lump the whole experience (PF, solo) together and try to forget it all.

A – At the risk of sounding glib I think Syd himself answers a lot of these questions in the interviews he gave after leaving the Floyd, which is why I devoted a whole chapter to them. Despite what the usual drones have said about his rambling and fragmented replies I find a lot of his interview utterances utterly cogent and lucid and they throw considerable light on his attitude towards it all. Read the 'Proverbs and Sobs' chapter for further elaboration.

3. Did he ever come to terms with treating his mental illness (i.e. professional help) or was it a subject he and his family left alone?

A – I think he was trying to work out what went wrong to the end of his days. As the handwritten notes in his Psychology textbook reveal. I think that is unbearably poignant, don't you?

From: Randall Yeager
Sent: 28 May 2010

1. You mention in the book that it was rumored in the mid-1980s that Roger had written a book on art history, but you say this amounted to little more than nine or so pages of random notes, names, dates, movements, etc. (pg. 400). However, Rosemary has been quoted many times since Roger's death as say something to the effect, "Roger has written a book, but I am too sad to read it at the moment." It seems that had this only amounted to a pile of random notes in a binder, she would have mentioned that it was only a few pages or nothing significant, and not referred to it as a "book". Could you explain what she may be talking about?

A – Revelation time, Randall. Your enquiry was news to me, so I contacted Rosemary direct. This is what she said:

"Roger did write a much more comprehensive very short book about history of art in the year or two before he died and that is what I was referring to. I have it very safely put away".

2. In the book, you talk of the neighborhood children speaking quite fondly of 'Rog'. You know, mediating debates about make-believe horses and the like (pg. 366). What do you know about this David Sore character (born 1975), who claims to have grown up in the semi attached to No. 6 St. Margaret's Square (from 1981-2006)? You must be familiar with the name, as he has written several online articles and given a few interviews about his experiences (supposedly was writing a book as well). If you cannot mention him by name, could you vaguely address his accounts? He talks of Roger screaming all night, particularly yelling he wanted to kill Roger Waters; David states that these night-terrors became less prevalent after the Floyd lawsuit was settled in the late-1980s. He also talks about Roger constantly burning things (trees, bushes, garden, junk) and studying the fires up close, which is of interest, given that we know he burnt things from the front of the house after Win died, and that he burned his artworks, according to Rosemary. David's account leans toward a tendency of pyromania, perhaps. Many have accused David Sore of making things up, flat out lying, or that he didn't even live next door to Roger. You never mention him in the book, or any stories like his, and I wondered what your thoughts were.

A – My thoughts, clearly and unambiguously are that I didn't want to give this individual a scintilla of publicity. Whatever the 'merits' or otherwise of his comments (and there were none as far as I can see), I totally objected to the forum in which he presented them. I did check him out, quite extensively as it happens, and my enquiries lead, among other places, to a website where he gives his enlightened views on capital punishment and who should receive it – most of us, by the look of it. I found some of his comments (and the manner and 'style' in which he expressed them) genuinely disturbing actually. For some reason I was also reminded of Private Eyes "from The Message Boards" column. Private Eye readers will know exactly what I'm talking about.

From: Tony McNamara
Sent: 30 May 2010

How much influence did Syd have on later Pink Floyd song writing? No, not "Wish You Were Here" type of influence but the Brian Wilson type of influence. It was mentioned early on Syd could possibly be a writer but didn't happen. Yet he turns up at the WYWH recording session? Playing Syd on guitar lately and I find there are similarities to the way the music is written. I'd like to think that Roger or Dave would ring him up and ask for some advice and Syd would mutter some C's and Am's and some D's, maybe a G or two and hang up.

A – Good question. Well, the first paragraph anyway. I don't go for the kind of conjecture outlined in the second para (and the idea of David Gilmour – a far better guitarist technically – having to call up Syd for advice is laughable) but the point you raise initially I've thought a lot about over the years. Firstly, as I mention in the book several of Syd's solo songs, Dominoes being a prime example, could easily have sat on the song side of either Atom Heart Mother or Meddle. Secondly Rick Wright in particular wrote songs that were clearly indebted to Syd. Paintbox and Remember a Day are virtually homage to Syd's style. Rick even tries to sing like him. Even some of Waters more 'pastoral' stuff, If and Granchester Meadows for instance, although more self-consciously poetic, bear all the hallmarks of Syd's influence and lightness of touch. After 1970-71 however I think the Floyd shake off their musical debt to Syd. I know they continue to eulogise and mythologise him in song but that's not the same as being directly influenced by. And they get more portentous. Syd was never portentous.

From: Greg Curry
Sent: 31 May 2010

In Syd's song Jugband blues, I have read where it can be interpreted as a self diagnosis of the state of his own mental condition at the time that he wrote the song. Meaning that he was aware of the change in his mental state. If this is true, in your interviews with Rosemary did he ever mention to her that he realized that he was not the same person that he once was before he became involved with The Floyd. If so did he ever express any regrets in the path that he took when he became involved in music and did get involved with something else?

A – Time to nail this once and for all. The entire discussion about Jugband Blues being a comment on schizophrenia begins with Peter Jenner's comments in Nick Kent's Cracked Ballad article in 1974. No one, but no one, was interpreting this song in such a way before 1974 – FACT! Find me one reference to Jugband Blues, pre 1974 that mentions schizophrenia and I'll give you my entire record collection. In fact one of the many conclusions I've come to about Syd in recent years, is that for all its diligence and insight Nick Kent's NME feature has done more than any other to consolidate this idea of mad Syd. "I'll do my loving in the winter?" "And I love the Queen?" Are they comments on schizophrenia too? It all seems to hinge (unhinge?) on that line "And I'm wondering who could be writing this song". I read that as sarcasm actually, in the same way as I read Vegetable Man as sarcasm. Syd had a very sarcastic sense of humour. His letters to Libby are dripping in sarcasm. He was always a sarcastic boy, was Syd. And he carried on being sarcastic after he left the Floyd. ".....architecture students. Rather unexciting people I would have thought, primarily" as he said to Michael Watts of Melody Maker in 1971. And even in the throes of overweight befuddlement and despair what is he reported to have said to the Floyd at the Wish You Were Here playback? "Sounds a bit old." Nah, I don't buy the schizo thing with Jugband Blues for one minute. "And I'm wondering who could be writing this song" and the whole of that opening verse can equally be interpreted as "if you lot (ie the Floyd) think I'm so irresponsible and out of it who's writing these words then, eh?" If you want full on plunging down the swirling wordpool of mad despair listen to Vivien Stanshall's Strange Tongues from the Men Opening Umbrellas Ahead LP.

From: Kieran Short
Sent: 31 May 2010

1. Did you discover anything during your research which surprised you about Syd?
2. Did you have a different opinion of Syd at the end of your research than you did at the start?

A – These are lovely questions to end on and give me a chance to summarise at length. So I will. Let's start with an anecdote. Libby was good enough to let me take her Syd letters home with me – unlike Tim 'what'choo talking 'bout' Willis who had to read them 'on the premises,' which to be fairer to him than I am in the book, might account for his howler about the 1964 songs that were in fact written in 1965. On the train going back from Sussex to London I carefully spread the letters out on the table to read, and reflected that the 17 year old me would have exploded in his pants at such a prospect. And yet once I started looking through them there were no sudden revelations, no great lost song lyrics, just the passions and interests and wit of a fairly typical 15/16 year old boy. I always knew that the young Syd was this bright and buoyant spirit, a bit of a cheekie chappie, and there it all was in the letters laid out in front of me. So in a way, Kieran, my answer to your first question is not 'surprised' no, but plenty that embellished or confirmed what I'd I'd previously heard. I love that comment from Hester Page in the book about 'the boy scout Syd. The outdoor boy. That was the real Syd.'

One or two people hinted at that and I know what they mean. He wasn't a 16 year old genius who was already writing songs. He was quite a late developer as a songwriter. (And again, let's put to bed forever all that nonsense about having written Effervescing Elephant and adapted Golden Hair at 16.) What he was at 16 was an extremely likeable and witty and cheeky and typical lad. The kind of person I'd have wanted to hang out with at school. You just know he'd have been up for a laugh.

To answer question 2, not a 'different opinion of', no. But I came out of it with a great deal more respect than I already had for Syd the craftsman. I'd made it a personal commitment (and a central tenet of my proposal to my agent and to potential publishers) that I was going to tackle those songs head on, the influences, the techniques, where they fit within the greater tradition, etc. I'd never been happy with the critical shorthand that everyone seemed to adopt when talking about Syd's lyrics. 'stream of consciousness blah blah' (no they're not) 'he let his imagination run riot blah blah' (no he didn't.) Too many previous accounts of his writing seem to have been written by people who don't write themselves and have no understanding of the creative process. All that 'he used to throw some pieces of paper up in the air and see what landed' bollocks. I was determined to nail all that once and for all. I think I've been reasonably successful. I did this by approaching the whole project as one would a literary biography. I don't have a very high opinion of most rock biographies, and most of Syd's influences lie outside of rock and roll anyway. Contrary to what some people have claimed I don't think my book will (or even should) be the last word on Syd. I'm sure other accounts (and archive material) will continue to come to light which will rise above the merely anecdotal to shed new insight into Syd's life. The retrieved TOTP footage of See Emily Play emerged too late for me to include in the book, but again I'm glad to see that the bouncy Syd on display casts further doubt on all the 'Syd's lights went out' theories. And aside from Spike Hawkins revelation about Stacey Waddy's 'Scream Thy Last Scream' film Hester Page also recalls bombing round London one afternoon in a mini moke, with someone filming for the Floyd. So who knows what else it out there? However I do think I've been pretty definitive about Syd's craft skills and his creative thinking. In that respect the fresh insights from people like Maggi Hambling and Spike Hawkins were invaluable. Syd was a grafter, a thinker. Those songs (and those paintings) don't just come out of nowhere. In the light of all the above I ultimately have a deeper understanding of the Roger Barrett who eventually returned to his first love, painting. That speaks volumes about the primal urgency to create, don't you think? In the end the only thing that could kill that impulse in Roger was death itself. He was painting right up until he died. I think we should remember that above all else.

And finally, another anecdote. To say this book has been 'a labour of love and deep level research' as Jon Savage very kindly put it, doesn't tell you the half of it. You'd need some kind of time machine/get inside my head machine that could take you back to early 1967, where you'll find the 12 year old me sitting on the wall outside the rec, in thrall of the older boys I used to hang around with, one of whom has a transistor radio, which is where I hear Arnold Layne for the first time. It begins there and then really. Fast forward forty years to the spring of 2007 and I'm just getting over my own bout of cancer, not as serious as the one that killed Syd, but one that was enough to take me out of circulation for a year and a half. Me and my wife Caroline are back in the old home town, on a bit of a sentimental journey, just to celebrate still being here basically. I've just been commissioned to write A Very Irregular Head and I'm musing on my luck and the circuitous route that has brought me here, at this stage in my life, and here I am almost exactly four decades to the day walking past the very spot, the very wall, where the 12 year old me first heard Arnold Layne. Let's just say it was an emotional moment.

Thank you for listening.

Rob Chapman