

# DID SYD BARRETT FIND MY BRAIN TUMOR?

**I'M NOT SURE WHETHER YOU GIVE A FUCK**, and I wouldn't blame you if you didn't, but I'm an epileptic, as are many unheralded geniuses.

During childhood, family members often spotted me having night seizures. My sister frequently observed my young, sleeping body kicking like a pink, hairless mule. At around age 12, when Ma chanced upon me flapping around on the bed like a sea bass on a ship's deck, my family decided it was time to have me tested.

I remember staring at the scuffed, Wrigley's-spearmint-gum-colored hospital floors as workers fastened cold metal electrodes to my scalp. I was instructed to lie back on the starchy white sheets and shut my eyes as they began flashing the strobe. Green-and-red honeycombs spun on my closed eyelids. As I drifted off, a row of twitching pens recorded the seismic disturbances inside my head.

The doctor who read my EEG said it showed abnormalities, but they were "within the statistical margin of error."

After several nasty alcoholic blackouts in my late teens—and again suspecting epilepsy—I went to have a CT scan. They inserted my head in a spanking-clean, radiation-dripping white uterus as some bored doctor examined my brain one mozzarella-flavored slice at a time. Again, the test results were ambiguous.

It had been a good 30 or 35 years since I'd had a seizure. I wasn't sure whether my brain had outgrown them or if I was merely gearing up for the Big One.

## GREEN-AND-RED STAGE-LIT HONEYCOMBS

spun on Syd Barrett's face at London's UFO Club back in 1966 as the club's house band and the preeminent weirdlings of the UK's psychedelic scene, The Pink Floyd Sound, strummed ditties about intergalactic hot-rodding and demonic housecats. As lead vocalist, lead guitarist, and principal songwriter, Barrett had led his band since 1964 through various incarnations such as "The Screaming Abdabs" and "The Meggadeaths" until settling on "The Pink Floyd Sound." The moniker was an homage to two black American bluesmen, Pink Anderson and Floyd Council, which is highly ironic when you consider that Pink Floyd would become monstrously successful worldwide for playing just about the whitest music imaginable.

It was around 1966 when Syd first dropped acid, and video clips of his inaugural trip are easily accessible on the Internet. According

to some accounts, he would ply his brain with LSD every day for at least the next two years.

And holy bleeding fucking hell, was it evident it in his music! The Pink Floyd Sound, later truncated to The Pink Floyd before finally lopping off the "The" and becoming simply Pink Floyd, were such a raging hit in London's tripped-out club scene that by early 1967, they were recording their first album just down the hall from where The Beatles were laying down tracks for *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Pink Floyd also started releasing a string of singles—oddly, none of which appeared on their

first album—which rocketed up the UK charts. Their first, "Arnold Layne," was about a panty thief and reached #20. The second, "See Emily Play," was a sweeping, whooshing, goosebump-inducing sing-along that crept all the way up to #6. Both songs had a wide, massive, ethereal sound so absolutely drug-drenched, one could conceivably have a full-blown trip just listening to it.

But not having heard it yet, I wasn't going to take any chances. When I bought Pink Floyd's first album, *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, I was around 19. I went into my bedroom, placed a hit of blotter acid under my tongue, set the needle to the vinyl, and sandwiched my brain between headphones. I'm sure the LSD helped ease the way, but there has never been another album before or since that impressed me so tremendously upon my first listen.

What a shock it was, too. I was already familiar with Pink Floyd's later, more-famous work—none of it recorded with Syd Barrett—but not one note of any of it had prepared me for such a

brain-ripping, otherworldly sonic onslaught. I thought *Dark Side of the Moon* was the most overrated album in Earth's history, couldn't muster many feelings either way about *Wish You Were Here*, thought the flying pig balloons in *Animals* were cute (but that was about it), and was so annoyed by *The Wall*, I prayed for the fucking wall to collapse and kill the band members. As far as I was concerned, Pink Floyd had managed to become one of the world's biggest rock bands merely by dint of overspending on production and album-cover artwork. They didn't write catchy melodies or clever lyrics. They seemed congenitally incapable of truly rocking out. And most importantly, for a group that had purportedly staked its turf on being so "freaky" and "psychedelic" and "spacey," to my ears they churned out a lazy, monochromatic,

arrhythmic mishmash that bummed my high every time I heard them—even if I was on acid.

But from start to finish...from the distorted announcer's voice rattling off zodiac signs that begins "Astronomy Domine" to the millions of screaming alarm clocks and brain-hammering electronic duck sounds that finish "Bike"...listening to *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* was like strapping oneself into a small, nicked, badly dented carnival-ride space capsule and shooting straight toward a supernova. Even Jimi Hendrix at the top of his game, on a lobe-liquefying song such as "Third Stone from the Sun," was nowhere near as psychedelic as this.

Syd Barrett's version of Pink Floyd would tour the UK with Hendrix late in 1967, and by that point it had become evident to everyone except Syd that his drug intake was crushing his mind. There were reports of him playing a single chord throughout an entire set...of him detuning his guitar instead of playing at all...and of him crushing pills and Brylcreem, pouring the mix over his head, and letting it ooze under hot stage lights until he looked like a melted candle. By early 1968, his bandmates decided they'd had enough and replaced Syd with his childhood friend David Gilmour.

Roger Keith "Syd" Barrett would release two solo albums in 1970: *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett*, and no anti-dope propaganda ever concocted by any drug-war czar could ever serve as more chilling propaganda against drug abuse. The manic, expansive energy of his work with Pink Floyd had been completely siphoned from his spine, leaving deadpan songs from a brain-dead man who sounded as if he might actually be dead. On one track from *The Madcap Laughs*, Syd fucks up mid-song, stops playing, yells at the producer, and then continues. What's mind-blowing is that they didn't even seem to think it was worth doing another take.

The genius who founded Pink Floyd would eventually spend some time in a British "home for lost souls" before moving back into his mother's basement. He lived as a legendary recluse who mostly tended to his garden before finally succumbing to pancreatic cancer in 2006.

**I FORGOT ABOUT SYD BARRETT FOR DECADES**, just as I didn't spend much time thinking about my childhood seizures.

A few months ago I began having headache symptoms that fell neatly into the category of migraines: weird "halo" visual lighting effects forming around objects, followed by nausea and vomiting.

Almost a month to the minute before typing this, I caught a Syd Barrett documentary on cable called *Crazy Diamond: The Pink Floyd and Syd Barrett Story*. (Two songs on the *Wish You Were Here* album were about Barrett: the title track and "Shine On, You Crazy Diamond.") The film whet my appetite to hear his music again, so being a law-abiding citizen 'n' everything, I went to my local record store and wasted close to a hundred dollars (because Syd's corpse needs the money) instead of spending a listless hour downloading everything for free via Limewire. I snatched all the early Floyd singles, the entire *Piper at the Gates of Dawn* album, and even some never-before-heard Syd/Floyd rarities such as "Vegetable Man" and "Scream Thy Last Scream."

I eagerly gorged my brain on Syd's sonic insanity for a few days until that fateful Sunday when I started to feel another

migraine coming on. I began to see little multi-colored plastic chips in front of my eyes, then felt intensely nauseous and tried to induce vomiting, with no success.

And that's all I remember.

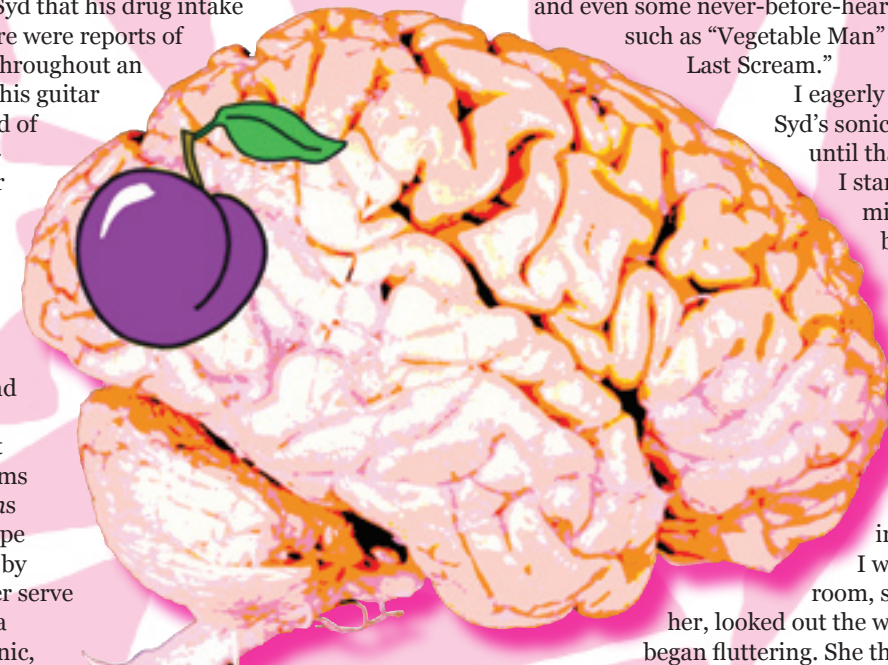
According to my intensely pregnant wife, I walked into our living room, sat on the couch next to her, looked out the window, and my eyelids began fluttering. She thought I was just goofing and asked me to stop. Then my arms and legs started flailing, I bit down on my tongue hard enough that blood was pouring out of my mouth, and I finally collapsed, stopped breathing, and turned blue. She pushed furniture out of the way, dragged me to the floor, called 911, then proceeded to administer mouth-to-mouth.

At the hospital, they strapped my head down with leather and shoved me into a giant cold white vagina where I was absolutely unable to move or scratch myself for ten minutes at a time. It revealed a brain tumor which a doctor's assistant described as "plum-sized."

Thankfully, the tumor was as benign as a prepubescent lamb on a bright Spring morning. They yanked it from my skull, stitched me up, and sent me home with a bunch of cool pills.

But I don't think I'll listen to any of Syd Barrett's music again for a long, long, LONG time.

Would you?



## HOW THE MUSIC OF PINK FLOYD'S LEGENDARY DRUG-CASUALTY FOUNDER MAY HAVE INDUCED A SEIZURE THAT MAY HAVE ULTIMATELY SAVED MY LIFE