



Pink Floyd with Syd Barrett (centre) and Bob Klose (second from right) Highgate, north London, early 1965.

Dear Mr Fantasy

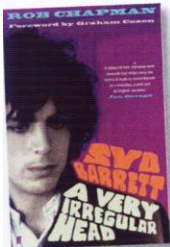
The poster boy for psychedelic excess is tackled sympathetically in a powerful new biography that salvages art from myth. By Mark Paytress.

Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head



Rob Chapman

FABER & FABER £12.99



PRODIGIOUSLY TALENTED, fabulously photogenic and fleetingly famous before famously flaking out, Syd Barrett is a gift for any biographer. Still it's a pleasure to report that this, the first biography since Barrett's death in July 2006, is the best written, the most accurate and by far the most incisive account of the man's life and work.

MOJO contributor Chapman witnessed at first-hand the "shell-shocked eyes" of the fallen Floydian as he gave his final public performance with makeshift outfit Stars at the Cambridge Corn Exchange in February 1972. But instead of trotting out the same old crowd-pleasers, he takes great glee in demolishing them (though the one about Barrett walking home to Cambridge from

London remains intact). "The stories were no longer about what drove Syd creatively," he writes, "they were about what drove him mad." Though he's good on Barrett's life, Chapman's book is essentially about the work. The result is a brilliant piece of scholarship that claims Barrett as one of rock's most imaginative sonic explorers, and argues convincingly that his lyrics are worthy of comparison with uniquely English writers Edward Lear and Spike Hawkins.

The high and hugely informed level of analysis in *Irregular Head* will send even the most keenly informed admirers rushing back to the discs. Whether dissecting the early Floyd demo *Lucy Leave*, or revealing the various lyric sources for *Octopus* (a mass snatch which he says, a little generously, "transcended mimicry or plagiarism"), Chapman has well-attuned ears, a vast critical palette on which to draw, and an understanding of the English literary canon that repeatedly gives new meanings and insights to our understanding of the forces which shaped the so-called 'Madcap'.

Which brings us neatly to one of the book's main themes. While Chapman is at pains not to diminish the role mental illness plays in

Barrett's adult life, he scoffs at received wisdom that has Syd coming apart at the seams by mid-'67. There is a certain bloody-mindedness about this, for the author ignores almost every utterance from Barrett's Floydian colleagues on the matter, and dismisses much else that's ever been written. Oddly, he makes a special case for Nick Kent, whose influential 1974 NME piece on Barrett was largely responsible for creating the 'Madcap' myth —

and the source of several untruths repeated verbatim down the years. By mid-'68, Chapman has Syd's Cambridge filmmaker friend Anthony Stern admit that his subject "was no longer the Syd of old", but offers no tangible explanation for this.

Like Barrett, Chapman too has a penchant for venturing into free form from time to time, even quoting a 1917 piece by a Suffragette critic on T.S. Eliot to illustrate a point. But the abundance of insight and detective work that fills this impassioned biography more than compensates. *Irregular Head* is the book that finally repositions the man we've come to know as rock's craziest diamond as an exceptional artist of great integrity and disciplined — rather than drug-fuelled — imagination.

"He saw Syd's 'shell-shocked eyes'."