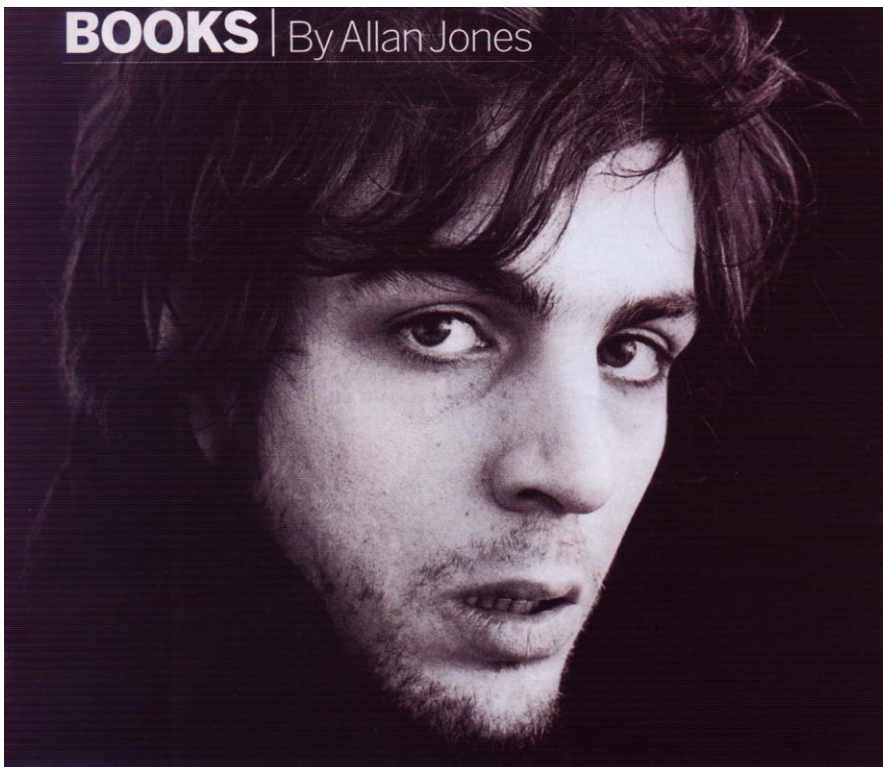




Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head

Rob Chapman FABER ★★★★★

Gripping biography of Pink Floyd legend sets the record straight



THERE ARE many reasons to recommend Rob Chapman's gripping biography of Syd Barrett, signal among them his separation of actuality from legend. So many sensational stories about Barrett accompanied his long retreat from the world that the unique genius of his music has often been obscured, lost to the distracting myth of Syd as tortured romantic artist, his erratic behaviour, often embellished, held up as evidence of a consuming madness, as if his only achievement was mental disintegration.

As Chapman's research demonstrates, many of these stories were without foundation, and he correctly chafes at their unthinking repetition, referring to them here only to refute them. That Syd later did become mentally ill is indisputable, of course. But before the series of meltdowns that saw him institutionalised, however, there was great clarity to his creative vision. As Chapman insists, the originality of his song-writing was less the result of his psychiatric problems than his assimilation of modernist writing techniques and his love for certain literary traditions, particularly the dark whimsy of Edward Lear and Hilaire Belloc, and the fantasies of Lewis Carroll.

Chapman first locates Syd – *né* Roger – in the idyllic Cambridge of his childhood. According to the articulate testimony of his many friends

from that time, he was bright, engaging, even then charismatic, if not as entirely happy in the company of others as he was in worlds of his own devising. He was not especially distant – that would come later. But he was not uncomfortable in his own company and the more solitary pursuits of reading, writing and painting, which emerges here as his passion.

The Cambridge set Syd grew up with, many of whom would remain life-long friends, were largely children of privilege, with parents who worked in the arts, sciences and academia. As teenagers they went on CND marches, listened to modern jazz and rock'n'roll, smoked pot, were sensitive to the cultural shifts around them as the austere '50s were replaced by the luring promise of the libidinous '60s. When LSD was introduced to their circle, they became enthusiastic advocates of its liberating properties and tripped copiously.

By all accounts, Syd was a precociously hip schoolboy, stylishly dressed, good-looking. By the time he enrolled at Camberwell Art School in September 1964, he was, according to a fellow student, "glamour on legs". Chapman's descriptions of Syd's early years in London, the formation of Pink Floyd and their startlingly quick journey from amateurish R'n'B band to darlings of the emerging underground scene is where *Irregular Head* really takes off. He provides an exemplary account of the halcyon days of the English underground, taking as his starting point the 1965 Wholly Communion

poetry festival at the Albert Hall, the Notting Hill Free School, UFO, the 1966 happenings at the Roundhouse and Alexandra Palace. In Chapman's opinion, Syd was at this time at a creative zenith. He would never again enjoy such freedom. Within months, the Floyd were signed to EMI. "Arnold Layne" was a modest hit, their debut album, *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* a much bigger successes. "See Emily Play", their second single, was a pinnacle of English psychedelia. It also turned them into pop stars, and put a spotlight on Syd that so unhappily illuminated him, his expulsion from the band duly followed.

It's generally accepted that the increasingly errant behaviour that precipitated Syd's sacking from his own band was due to the unwelcome psychological effects of the LSD Syd was abundantly ingesting. Chapman argues that Syd just wasn't interested in pop fame and so sabotaged his career, that to a great extent he was still at this point in command of his precocious talent and writing some of the his greatest songs. The tribulations of recording them for *The Madcap Laughs* – painfully drawn out sessions, according to his manager and producer Peter Jenner – are again usually attributed to his drug-induced befuddlement. Chapman, on the other hand, believes that recording for Syd was merely a chore. Imagining the songs and bringing them to life in the writing of them was an end in itself to Syd. Preserving them in any form for posterity was an irrelevancy.

Syd was just 22 when he started recording *The Madcap Laughs* and only 24 when he stopped recording altogether. In between, there was a second solo album, *Barrett*, produced by Dave Gilmour in largely unhappy circumstances. Syd's professional haphazardness, once predicated by the idea of spontaneity and improvisation, had by then been overtaken by a greater lassitude, an accelerating unmooring and a drift into what Chapman calls "entropy as a permanent condition". He did nothing much more than get high then at his drug pad in Wetherby Mansions before moving back to Cambridge where his involvement in a group called Stars was desultory and predictably short lived. In August 1974, he went back into the studio for the last time, with Peter Jenner again producing. One night, he walked out of a session and never came back. He retreated to an apartment in Chelsea Cloisters, where he lived in almost complete seclusion and much distress until he left London for the last time in 1982, walking all the way to Cambridge and the sanctuary of his mother's home, where he lived, sometimes pestered by journalists and morbid fans but mostly in quiet solitude, until his death from pancreatic cancer in July 2006.

"The Syd Barrett story is as well known as his material," Robyn Hitchcock reflects towards the end of this book. "Most people, if they know of him at all, know him as the man who died in the summer of 2006, who founded Pink Floyd and died after 35 years as a hermit. They've never heard 'Octopus' or 'Long Gone'. It would be great if Barrett was known for his songs rather than the way his life went."

This is the tragedy that Rob Chapman in *Irregular Head* so compellingly remedies.