

Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head

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Terrapin was a 1970s fanzine produced by the Syd Barrett Appreciation Society, which eventually puttered to a halt due to 'lack of Syd'. But that lack of Syd – sadly now complete following his death in 2006 – didn't stop the flourishing of rumours around his reclusiveness and mental disintegration, while numerous biographies have appeared and interest in his small body of work continues to grow.

In *A Very Irregular Head*, music journalist and former *Terrapin* contributor Rob Chapman bravely hacks his way through the undergrowth of innuendo and speculation to give us the clearest insight yet into the rise and fall of one of rock's greatest enigmas. This being an authorised biography, Chapman was granted access to letters and archives, and has assiduously interviewed family and friends, including sculptor Emily Young. As a teenage ingénue, she was the likely inspiration behind Pink Floyd's Barrett-penned psychedelic pop masterpiece "See Emily Play", a hit for the group in 1967.

Growing up in Cambridge, Barrett was a bright, hip, charismatic kid, who loved painting and playing his guitar, but who always kept a certain distance. Although the story of the beautiful young poet who went supernova too quickly, then disappeared into a black hole of acid burnout and madness holds a fascination – and contains more than a grain of truth – Chapman gives us a far more substantial story.

For a brief period, Barrett was a songwriter whose brilliance seemed effortless. He loved The Beatles and The Stones, but was also fascinated by Robert Rauschenberg's Pop Art collages, the conceptual work of John Latham and two people he saw perform at London's UFO club: performance poet Bob Cobbing and Keith Rowe of AMM. Indeed, like Rowe, Barrett would occasionally lay his guitar flat, feed it through his Binson Echorec and play it with a slide.

But when Barrett's 'unmediated talent' came up against the full force of the record industry – including the demands of pop stardom – the results were dramatic. He retreated, symbolically at first, by loosening all his guitar strings onstage or constantly playing one note. Chapman feels this apparently bloody-minded non-cooperation might also have been aimed at the sort of conceptual purity that Latham pursued in his idea of 'the least-event'.

Although Chapman's likening of Barrett's multiple-perspective lyrics for "Love You" on his debut 1970 solo album *The Madcap Laughs* to cubist paintings by Picasso and Delaunay feels somewhat contrived, his

critical analysis is generally inspired. His panorama of what he calls Barrett's found world, an unprecedented meeting of a whimsical English tradition and modernist techniques, is impressively researched.

For example, on "Octopus", from the same album, the literary comforts of a childhood Arcadia meet the techniques of the Instant Poetry Broth, a verse recipe of cut-up lines sold in a PVC pouch devised by Barrett's friend, the poet Spike Hawkins. The song emerges as a brilliant mix of Barrett's own words and adapted lines from the children's anthology *Mother Goose Rhymes*, folk song, William Shakespeare, Elizabethan playwright Thomas Nashe, 19th century poets John Clare and William Howitt, and Edwardian poet Sir Henry Newbolt.

But the distance between Barrett and the listener was widening, as he began to find his own metrically complex songs difficult to play. This intensified the feeling that he was disappearing from his own picture, and the struggle for coherence is what makes *The Madcap Laughs* such a haunting, poignant, erratic album. Its 1970 successor *Barrett* sounds dulled from the singer's mental deterioration and ingestion of Mandrax, and on his disastrous last recording session in 1974, Barrett sounds like a man awkwardly learning to play guitar. Then a lack of Syd.

Financially comfortable from his Pink Floyd royalties, Barrett lived in a flat in Kensington, refusing to see old friends. In 1982 he walked back to Cambridge, where he had a complete mental collapse. Barrett was now, according to his sister Rosemary Breen, "utterly different and not really a very nice person. A very unhappy person and a very damaged person." He was admitted to Fulbourn mental health facility, but was soon discharged with just the information that he had a personality disorder.

Although shamelessly doorstepped and hounded by fans in his later years, Barrett gave no more interviews. Rosemary remembers persuading her brother to watch the 2001 BBC documentary on him, *Crazy Diamond*. She noted that he was uncomfortable, didn't seem to understand what was going on and simply commented, "The music's very noisy".

A mystery remains: what did Barrett actually think about his own work? He turned his back completely on his music and although he continued painting to the end, he always burned the canvases after photographing them. "For him it was just in his head," his sister tells Chapman, about his drawing habits as a youth, "he got it out on paper and then it was finished. He didn't need anybody to say it was good, or admire it. He probably didn't even go back to it." These words may have held true for his entire life.

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