



The madcap larks: Barrett (centre) with the early Floyd (including guitarist Bob Klose, second right), Highgate, 1965.

Paging Doctor Freud!

Rob Chapman's forensic examination of Syd Barrett's muddled mind retains all the warmth of his life-long devotion

SYD BARRETT – A VERY IRREGULAR HEAD Rob Chapman FABER AND FABER, £14.99



By Roy Wilkinson

DID PINK FLOYD'S EARLY MIS- sion consist of stimulating John Lennon and 10,000 other turned-on types at the 14 Hour Technicolour Dream in Alexandra Palace? Or entertaining beered-up bobbies at the Gwent Constabulary Dance in Abergavenny?

Both, actually. Also, while on on a 1967 pack- age excursion – featuring both Jimi Hendrix and Amen Corner – the expansive, *Interstellar Overdrive*-ing Floyd exceeded their set time by 30 seconds. “Do that again,” advised the promoter, “and you’re off the tour.”

The Age of Aquarius, it seems, was about hard-nosed pragmatism as well as “flutes & feet & ladders & locomotives & madness & autumn”, as a flyer for one “happening” had it. Similarly, this weighty Barrett biography sets Syd in a world that is equivocal, multifaceted. Rob Chapman, a journalist and academic, aims miles beyond another reprisal of the mind-mashed Syd mythography. Chapman’s account is rich on pretty much all fronts – analysis, social context and revelation.

Previously, for example, the man who would become psychedelic Syd was thought to have acquired his nickname from the Cambridge

jazzier Sid Barrett. Chapman talks to a school peer of Barrett who is adamant the Syd soubri- quet came from a Scout camp. Barrett had turned up in a flat cap. For Syd’s peers, – progeny of the Cambridge intelligentsia, kids who might espy “DNA Cripp” cycling by – this was headgear déclassé enough to be matched by a name associated with one’s tradesmen.

The book clearly stems from long-term devotion. Chapman reviewed Syd’s last ever show, in 1972, for the Barrett fanzine *Terrapin*. Later, Chapman was a singer himself – for the Bristol punks Glaxo Babies, a band of Barrett enthusiasts. Perhaps most pertinently, Chapman once inad- vertently added to the Syd mythos – some comically marginal stuff about a post-Floyd Barrett randomly loitering at *Top Of The Pops* and, in the process, unearthing the identity of the men behind the novelty psychedelic hit *We Are The Moles*. (It was Simon Dupree And The Big Sound, but Syd had nothing to do with the breaking of this crucial pop news...)

Drugs and Syd’s mental travails are compre- hensively considered. But Chapman diligently

roots the peculiar metres and lexicon of Barrett’s songs in the literary Victoriana of Syd’s child- hood. The tone is illustrated by the lovely blend of research and hypothesis brought to bear on the words to *Matilda Mother*, from the first Floyd LP: “The doll’s house darkness/ Old perfume”. A Cambridge associate reveals how the young Syd had a Pollock’s toy theatre, a plaything seemingly also owned by Millais and Robert Louis Stevenson.

The book’s title comes from Syd: “I don’t think I’m easy to talk about. I’ve got a very irregular head.” Chapman has no problem discussing Syd. TS Eliot, Susan Sontag and textual analysis of Shakespeare are all deployed to bring perspec- tive to Barrett’s lyrics – alongside such familiar Barrett touchstones as Edward Lear, Kenneth Grahame and Hilaire Belloc. Real-life human drama arrives with the bumbling insensitivity of Syd’s eventual exclusion from Pink Floyd. At the time, keyboardist Rick Wright was living with Syd and would sneak off for gigs while pretending he was popping out for cigs. “It got really embarrassing,” says Wright with tragi- comical English understatement.

The core mad-Syd texts are all rigorously examined. The show Syd allegedly played with his hair full of Brylcreem and Mandrax. Was it at the ICI Fibres Club in Pontypool or at the Cheetah Club in Santa Monica? The time Syd burst through airport security in Ibiza and tried to flag down a plane as if it was a cab. All these legends are found wanting, with the notable exception of the time Syd walked home from London to Cambridge, in 1982. The latter sets up a moving, bittersweet comparison between Syd and John Clare, the 19th-century ruralist poet.

Clare, too, walked home – to Northampton- shire from Essex, where he’d placed himself in an asylum. Clare’s benighted closing years found him loitering in Northamp- ton town centre, knocking off poems for beer and tobacco. The latterday Syd also liked his booze and fags, but never returned to his own poetry. Walking around Cambridge, Syd famously became an attraction for voyeuristic sight- seers, until he was killed by cancer in 2006. This voyeurism was seemingly the worst of it for Bar- rett – sister Rosemary says he

simply had no understanding of why people were interested. His family cared for him and David Gilmour made sure Syd received his, substantial, royalties. But Syd could never solve this invasive mystery. At least now his memory is served well by this sympathetic, fascinating book. ■

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