

# Comfortably Numb

By Martin Boso

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1.

Pink Floyd released the album "The Wall" in November 1979, not long before my 19th birthday. This musically adventurous, deeply psychological, disturbing and introspective tour de force was the achievement that set them apart once and for all from any comparison to other rock bands. "The Wall" was universally hailed as a masterpiece.

After years of being dismissed by the mainstream as kings of "head music" and the attached stoner stereotypes, suddenly Roger Waters and Pink Floyd were the darlings of both the avant garde and the conservative middle classes, in the same season that Rolling Stone magazine published an editorial proclaiming that Rock 'n' Roll was officially dead.

The Wall debuted at Number One and stayed there for months. There was a long stretch where it sold Platinum, a million copies, every day. It eventually stayed on the charts for 14 years and sold over 23 million copies. Unheard of for a two-disc set back in the days of vinyl. It yielded Pink Floyd's first and only Number One single, "Another Brick in the Wall (part 2)." This was the first rock album ever that my friends and I would come home and find our parents listening to.

And the grand Floydian irony of it all was that the metaphor of "The Wall" itself was about the social and physical barriers that performers build up between themselves and their audiences. The genesis of Roger Waters' concept came from the utter contempt he had come to feel for the unruly fans who came to Pink Floyd shows, which had culminated in an incident on their previous tour where he had pulled an adoring teenager on stage and spat in his face.

The Wall was Waters' self-recriminatory exploration of his own psyche, and he bared his soul in the lyrics, the story of a fictional character "Pink" who was largely an autobiographical avatar of Waters himself. At the end of the album "Pink" is put on trial and the psychological "Wall" is torn down, reconciling "Pink" and those who love him for

his artistry.

Whew. Pink Floyd, who had long been my favorite band, were NEVER going to top this. Then, not long after the release of the album, Pink Floyd announced that their ensuing world tour would consist of a theatrical presentation of the Wall, the story as told on the album, performed onstage from beginning to end. In fact, the entire project had been intended from the outset as a live performance piece. It was to be a spectacle that would be far and away the most ambitious of their already legendary sound-and-light extravaganza concerts.

Then came the bad news. Since the stage, lighting, sound system and props were such a logistical nightmare to set up, the World Tour was to be staged in three cities only: L.A., New York, and London (The next year, the show was presented again in London and in Dortmund, Germany). There would be seven shows on consecutive nights in L.A., five in New York, and seven in London.

New York was closest. My two best friends and I didn't get through on the phone lines, and we didn't get tickets in the mail lottery either. We bit the bullet and decided to drive to New York and try to scalp tickets. During the weeks preceding the scheduled dates, we scraped together a couple hundred bucks apiece. Back then, concert tickets for the major acts were maybe twelve to fifteen bucks, and you could scalp into ANYTHING for fifty. Four times that seemed sufficient.

We set off from the O.S.U. campus at five o'clock on a late February morning, hoping to make it to the Nassau Coliseum on Long Island in time to try to get in to the first of the five nights of shows. With "The Wall" cranked up on the 8-track tape player of my friend's rusty old Ford Maverick, we were in high spirits... until we reached Pennsylvania. There we came up the back of a huge snowstorm which was dumping away on the Turnpike. We were slowed to a crawl for hours. Jim's car heater was not up to the task, either. I bundled up as best I could in a dog-smelling, moth-eaten blanket from the floor of his back seat.

We finally reached Long Island around 8:30 or 9:00 PM. We stopped and asked directions to the Coliseum from a middle-school aged kid. He told us the way, and asked where we were from. Ohio, we said. He'd never heard of it. He asked if it was near Chicago.

We drove by Nassau Coliseum (home of the New York Islanders) and scoped out the situation. The show was apparently well underway. We could hear occasional bass thumping when we opened a window. The arena itself was completely surrounded by two concentric rings of police barricades, with maybe 40 feet between the building and the first, and another 40 between the first and the second. In the outer area, there were dozens of police and parked cruisers. In the inner circle, more police rode mounted on horseback. And in the no-man's land of the rest of the blocked-off parking lot outside the barricades stood hundreds of crestfallen fans, just standing there in the snow wishing they were inside.

We stopped for a pizza, got a hotel, and tried to come up with a game plan to try to get into the next day's show.

The best we came up with was to go up into Manhattan in the morning, and go loiter in the Off-Track Betting office on Times Square. It seemed as likely a place as any to find ticket scalpers. Soon enough, we were approached by a middle-aged man with dreadlocks wearing a basketball jersey.

"You boys lookin' for something?" he asked us.

We explained we were trying to get tickets to see Pink Floyd and he nodded knowingly.

"Yeah, I heard those are really hot," he said. "Just a second."

He walked over to a pay phone and spoke to someone for a few minutes. He dropped the receiver and walked back over to us.

"I can get you some for two hundred apiece," he said. Damn, that would leave us dead broke.

"I don't know if we can go that high," I said.

"One seventy five," he said.

"One fifty," I said, surprising myself.

He nodded and went back to the dangling pay phone. He spoke for a moment and then motioned us over.

"Come with me," he said.

We followed him outside and walked a couple blocks, then went into the lobby of a nice hotel. Just inside the revolving doors, he stopped.

"Listen," he said, "My brothers that got the tickets are in a room upstairs, and they, well, they ain't too cool with white people. So just give me the money and I'll be right back."

What did this guy think we were, a bunch of naïve hick teenagers in the Big City for the first time?

"You really expect us to give you all our money and let you walk away?" asked Craig.

"Oh," said the guy. "I guess that does look kinda bad."

He thought for a moment, then looked at me.

"Here," he said, "Take my wedding ring. You hold it 'til I get back." He twisted a gold band off his left ring finger, which had that dent in the flesh that comes only from wearing a ring for a long time. I tasted the band. It was definitely real, high quality gold.

We looked at each other, and by silent mutual consent pulled out our wallets.

We gave him all our money and let him walk away. He vanished forever. The ring brought \$100 in a pawn shop when we returned to Columbus. We had given him \$450, and now had a little over \$150 left between us, and a pending sixty-dollar hotel bill.

We wandered dejectedly around Manhattan for the rest of the afternoon, pretending to enjoy the scenery. At some point we decided to go hang out at the Coliseum parking lot that evening anyway, and pray for a miracle.

2.

The skies had cleared and most of the snow melted that evening as we cruised through a neighborhood of brownstones in Uniondale, Long Island, finally snagging a parking spot on the street that we wouldn't have to pay for.

"If we went back tonight," I said, "We could be home by morning. I bet I could get five hundred bucks for my car."

"Right," said Jim. "Well, you just do that. I sure as HELL am not driving back here AGAIN."

I looked helplessly at Craig.

"You're in denial," he informed me.

I kicked at a rock on the sidewalk.

"Well, do you guys have any suggestions?"

"Just keep your eyes open when we get there," said Craig.

Soon, we had arrived at the Coliseum parking lot and wandered into the throng outside the barricades, keeping our eyes and ears open for scalpers. And the scalpers were definitely there. Sure enough, they were getting two hundred, three hundred bucks a ticket. I saw one guy sell a pair of third row seats for a grand. I wanted to cry.

"Hey, check that out," said Craig, pointing. There was this older guy in a tattered black overcoat standing near the edge of the crowd, with six or eight people clamoring around him. I caught a glimpse of what he was holding, and what they were clamoring over... He had a stack of tickets three inches thick grasped in his hand. As we watched, he peeled

them off, one by one, taking one person aside at a time and talking quietly to them for a few moments, as if explaining something. Then they would give him money, take the ticket, and make their way through the barricades. And inside.

We watched a dozen or more people go through this process, and then there was a lull in his business. We sauntered over to him.

"Yeah? What?" he said. He was tall, stooped over, with a grizzled beard, bad teeth and unkempt greasy hair. He reminded me of the cover of the Aqualung album.

"We're, uh, looking for tickets..." I began.

"What makes you think I have any?" he growled.

"We SAW!" Jim burst out. "You've got a STACK of 'em!"

"Okay," said Aqualung, "A hundred each."

"We've, um, only got thirty each."

"Sorry then."

Then all three of us were talking at once.

"Oh, please..."

"We drove all the way from Ohio..."

"We got conned..."

"This is all the money we've got, search us!"

"It's Pink Floyd! Once in a lifetime!"

"Pleeeeeease!"

"Sorry guys, if I did it for you I'd have to do it for everybody."

We turned, heartbroken, to walk the twelve blocks to the car and drive home.

"Hey," said Aqualung, "Wait. Okay. Come here."

I wonder what our faces must have looked like when we turned back around.

He pulled the thick wad of tickets from the inside pocket of his overcoat and carefully pulled off three of them. I was stunned when I saw what he handed to me. It was two halves of tickets that had been ripped apart, and Scotch taped back together. With yesterday's date on them. The freaking seat numbers on the two halves didn't even match.

"What the HELL is this??" screeched Jim.

"Quiet down," said Aqualung, "and listen to me."

"I am NOT giving you money for THIS!" said Jim.

"Just be cool," said Craig, "How many people did you just see with your own eyes going in with these?"

The man nodded to him, vindicated.

"Okay, now listen," he said. "There's only one entry point in each of the two barricades, right?"

We nodded.

"Now, the first barricade is just to filter out who's a ticket holder and who's not. You walk right up there and hold your ticket like this," he said, demonstrating by setting the ticket longwise across his palm, encircling it with his thumb and middle finger to conceal the tape, and then holding it up like a TV detective would a badge.

"They'll just shine a UV light on it to make sure it's a real ticket, and it is. They won't look at it too close."

"The checkpoint at the next barricade is the cops," he continued. "They'll be searching you for weapons and cameras and drugs. They won't look at the ticket at all."

"Then," he said, grinning, "You'll come to a row of sixteen ushers at turnstiles to get into the building. Go to the second guy from the left. He's in on this."

We gave Aqualung our remaining \$90, and he gave us our three lame counterfeit tickets. Hearts pounding, we followed his instructions exactly. When we came to the second usher from the left, he took our tickets, ripped alongside the tape, winked, and returned each of us a souvenir stub with last night's date.

"Enjoy the show."

As we clanked through the turnstile, we realized that we didn't actually have valid seats, but still. We were inside. We were going to see The Wall.

3.

Upon entering the arena proper, that was literally the first thing we saw: The Wall. Constructed of white styrofoam-and-cardboard bricks, each of them three feet wide and two feet high, the edifice stood 35 feet tall and 160 feet long. It obscured a third of the arena, its base running all the way up the bleachers on either side of the stage, to the point where the nosebleed seats met the ceiling, its top extending horizontally across the width of the arena. There was a stepped-down "V" in the middle of the Wall, at the bottom of which was the stage, with Floyd's huge circular projection screen peeking over the top of the curtains like a moonrise.

A dozen or more P.A. stacks ringed the room, at the summit of every other stairway in the top tier. Pink Floyd had pioneered the system by which every member of the audience has true "surround sound" coming at them from a full 360 degrees. Already, subtle trillings, whispers, and whoosing sounds were emanating from unexpected points around the arena, unsettling the audience and heightening our anticipation.

We helped ourselves to some unoccupied seats and lounged there, still soaking in the adrenaline and endorphins accumulated throughout the sequence of the day's events -- events which had incredibly led us to this unlikely outcome, as spectators at one of the greatest events in rock and roll history.

Something odd was going on with the house lights. Suspended within their fixtures above the steel beam rafters, the scores of bare bulbs were winking out -- one at a time, every ten seconds or so. The change in illumination was so gradual that it took a while for the crowd to catch on, and you could feel the moment of collective realization as it happened, the sound of hundreds of quiet gasps and whispers sweeping like a wave across the room. The creepy ambient sounds crept in a little closer from the edges of our awareness. The crowd's murmuring died down for a moment, and then a spontaneous cheer erupted. In a subtle,

almost glacial fashion, the show had already begun without our even having realized it.

The lights were almost all extinguished when the rightful occupants of our seats showed up. We decided to take our chances standing in the aisles. In the main aisle of the first tier of bleachers straight out from the stage, at either end and in the middle, stood three huge 70 mm movie projection stations. Between the middle and the right projectors was one of the control boards for the special effects. We joined half a dozen fans standing in the other gap between the projectors on the left.

The crowd let out an animal roar when the last of the light bulbs was extinguished, and then waited in the darkness for an uncomfortably long time. An MC strode onstage to introduce the band, and had barely spoken the first sentence of his spiel when he was interrupted. We were struck like a physical blow by the thunderously loud opening power chords of "In The Flesh?" and the accompanying fireworks from the stage. As the crowd's welcoming cheer died down, and our sight and hearing recovered from the initial sensory overload, all eyes focused on the four figures onstage where the curtains had opened.

And as we focused on their faces, we noticed the masks. The guitar player was wearing a David Gilmour mask, the bass player a Roger Waters mask, the drummer a Nick Mason...

and then Waters' disembodied voice intoned from offstage,

"So ya / thought ya / might like to go to the show / to feel the warm thrill of confusion / that space cadet glow / Tell me, is something eluding you sunshine? / Is this not what you expected to see? ..."

The guys playing onstage were not actually Pink Floyd at all, but their touring ensemble - an extra musician for each instrument, whom the Floyd had for years brought along on the road to help recapture their multilayered studio sound.

With the masks, a secondary, more subtle theme of the piece was introduced virtually as the show began - - a question of identity. And the answer to that question, unbeknownst to the audience, was being determined as we watched. Beneath the dark symbolism and cynical plot of the story being told in "The Wall," a critical battle was being waged between the members of Pink Floyd -- a moment in their epic real-life conflict that was to change the band irrevocably, nearly destroying it.

"By the way, which one's Pink?" asks the record executive bitterly satirized in 1975's *Have a Cigar*. Which one indeed? No one really believed that the fictional character Pink was the man-sized pink rag doll sitting on the stage, back to the Wall.

The story of the band Pink Floyd is basically the story of three guys: Syd Barrett, Roger Waters and David Gilmour. The band was founded by Barrett, Waters, keyboardist Richard Wright and drummer Nick Mason in the mid-1960s in London, where they became a staple of the underground psychedelic scene.

Their performances in small clubs and warehouses were attended by the likes of Jimi Hendrix, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, Pete Townshend, the young David Bowie and members of the Rolling Stones. They pioneered many psychedelic lighting techniques with gels, films and multicolored filters, and often had performance art going on throughout the venue. These events were sometimes held in the wee hours of the morning, in unconventional locations which were kept secret until hours before the doors opened. The Pink Floyd Sound was usually the house band during the birth in London of the tradition we know as the Rave.

Syd Barrett was undeniably the driving force behind the success of the band: He sang, played guitar, and wrote the songs. His dark, bohemian looks and flamboyant, exotic wardrobe created a mystique about him that women were crazy for. Syd was a maverick who was constantly testing his own limits - in his music, and in his lifestyle.

Pink Floyd's uniquely weird and experimental early sound -- offbeat and non-sequitur filled lyrics combined with long, feedback-laden and almost atonal guitar solos, punctuated with the latest in electronic sound effects and wildly unusual lighting were Syd's oeuvre... and the rest of the band were little more than competent side men.

However, Syd's experimentation with a wide variety and huge quantities of recreational drugs, especially LSD, took an inevitable toll. He became withdrawn, paranoid and eventually catatonic. Despite occasional moments of sheer brilliance, his behavior onstage became more and more unpredictable - playing one note over and over for hours, just standing and doing nothing, smashing his guitar and continuing to play the imaginary instrument that only he thought was there.

Even though weirdness was expected of Pink Floyd and Syd was the main draw, the band felt the situation was becoming untenable. Roger Waters decided to hire on a second guitar player to pick up the slack on Syd's "bad nights" and the natural choice was Syd's longtime friend Dave Gilmour - the guy who had actually taught Syd to play guitar.

Gilmour adapted readily to Pink Floyd's style and was carrying the band in no time at all, as Syd continued to deteriorate. By the time Roger Waters fired Syd Barrett from Pink Floyd, he was unable to even comprehend what had happened. Not long afterwards, he was institutionalized in a mental hospital for several years, and thereafter dropped out of public life forever.

Pink Floyd continued to develop as musicians and became known for their intricate, rambling compositions that would often fill an entire album side. They developed a special chemistry as an ensemble by composing most of their material on the road, during improvisational jams in their live shows. Much of "Dark Side of the Moon," all of "Animals," and parts of "Wish You Were Here" were written this way.

Roger became more and more enchanted with "concept" pieces - works or sets revolving around a given theme, often forming a cycle with the end of a piece or set blending seamlessly back into its beginning. Although all the members of Pink Floyd continued to make significant musical contributions, Waters firmly established himself as the band's primary lyricist with clever wordplay, a biting and cynical wit, and darkly symbolic imagery. He had a particular fascination with insanity and often made veiled references to Syd

Barrett in his lyrics. Waters also took the lead in directing the design and construction of Floyd's increasingly grandiose stage props.

Simultaneously, David Gilmour was developing into one of the greatest masters of individual style ever to play the electric guitar. His arrangements and leads were among the most distinctive and innovative of the era. One of Gilmour's trademarks is wringing deeply intense emotions from the subtlest of phrases. As one guitar player I know says, "He can do more with one note than most players can do with an entire solo." While always sharing lead vocal duties with Waters, Gilmour's voice as he matured became richer and smoother, while Waters' remained shrill, nasal and often off-key. The contrast between them became more noticeable as time went on.

And that, I think, leads us to the key to understanding Pink Floyd. "The contrast between them."

It's well known that even as their success grew, the individual members of Pink Floyd, but especially David Gilmour and Roger Waters, developed a personal dislike of each other which became more intense with every recording project and tour.

Nick Mason and Rick Wright remained critical ingredients in the recipe that made Pink Floyd a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. However, it was Waters and Gilmour who settled into the complementary roles within the band which gave the Floyd projects their depth and texture -- Waters contributed brilliant words and high concepts, stagecraft and an overarching vision for each project. Gilmour, meanwhile, provided the musical soul, a distinctive instrumental voice and emotional impact, drawing the listener into the songs with his powerful guitar work and then underlining and providing context to Waters' provocative themes.

Undoubtedly, Waters' contributions to the music itself as a bassist and vocalist were still integral to Pink Floyd's sound, just as Gilmour's contributions to the group as a songwriter

were not to be dismissed. However, their very personality types evolved into polar opposites, which were reflected by their roles in the group.

If Roger Waters became the Brain of Pink Floyd, then David Gilmour should most certainly be seen as their Heart. Gilmour was the balancing Yang to Waters' Yin, the Zen to his logic. Gilmour was the Type-B, laid back artist to Roger's domineering Type A control freak. Roger Waters wanted to be a Rock Star; Dave Gilmour was just a world-class musician.

It was in the live performance setting that Waters' resentment for Gilmour must have grown. By the time of their legendary tours following "Dark Side of the Moon," "Wish You Were Here," and "Animals," it was the very nature of the groups' mode of performance to improvise and explore musically during their concerts; One of the reasons that Pink Floyd's shows from the 70's are so popular with bootleg collectors is that that their set lists varied frequently, and none of their songs ever sounded exactly the same twice.

So, night after night, amidst the gigantic props, the explosions and lavishly produced films, Roger Waters sang the lyrics he had written so long before and sung so many times; lyrics he was sure the stoned teenagers grooving to the Floyd couldn't possibly appreciate, lyrics which, when Roger couldn't sing prettily enough, David Gilmour sang for him.

And while the audience ooh'ed and ahhh'ed at the props and explosions that Waters had dreamed up, their reactions to the Floyd's spontaneous improvised jams were visceral, passionate, and deliriously loud. Improvised jams -- driven by the guitar playing of David Gilmour. Roger's creative contributions to Pink Floyd's productions had been set down months and years before the shows were staged, and now were simply being played out according to the script and the score; whereas David Gilmour was letting loose a new classic riff or killer effect with every solo; creating and inventing every night, imbuing the atmosphere with that "space cadet glow" that comes with the act of creation, every time he stepped on stage.

And thus, or so it must have seemed to Roger, all the applause that rightfully belonged to Pink Floyd collectively was being focused specifically on David Gilmour. He was playing second fiddle to the guitar player, again, just as he had to Syd Barrett. By the time of the Animals tour, in grand paranoiac fashion, Roger had convinced himself that his audiences were blind to the subtleties and nuances of his carefully crafted concepts. They were simply plebian masses attending the spectacular light shows as an excuse to get stoned.

Roger began to fantasize about -- and then to seriously suggest -- playing an entire concert with the band hidden behind a gigantic wall, a symbol of his contempt for the unappreciative masses. He finally acted out on his neurotic rage during the last concert of the tour in Montreal -- with the infamous spitting incident.

The rest of the band recounted later that they went home from that tour with no desire to ever perform with Roger Waters again.

David Gilmour and Richard Wright both recorded solo albums over the next couple of years, highly sophisticated and polished, very listenable albums... but missing the je-ne-sais-quois magic unique to their collective efforts as Pink Floyd. Neither album sold that well.

Then the members of Pink Floyd received some news at their estates in the U.S., France and Greece. It seemed that the financiers who had been hired years before to manage the collective assets of the corporate partnership called Pink Floyd Music had not done a very good job. They had lost millions. There was fraud and embezzlement involved, and expensive lawsuits.

Not too long afterwards, they received an offer of a £4 million advance on a new album - almost \$10 million. And Roger Waters showed up with a set of new songs that he was calling "The Wall."



5.

As we cheered ecstatically along with the rest of the dazzled Long Island crowd, Pink Floyd and their "surrogate band" wound down "In the Flesh?" with Roger Waters goose-stepping to the front of the band, wearing a headset mic and assuming the pseudo-fictional "fascist movie director" persona he was to adopt throughout much of the show.

"Lights!" he screamed. "Roll the sound effects!" And suddenly, from the back of the arena, an airplane came hurtling over our heads, engulfed in flames, to crash into and over one side of the Wall with a huge explosion. The effect was synchronized perfectly with the masterfully recorded sound effects which ended the song, segueing into the sound of a baby crying, signaling the birth of "Pink." A spotlight illuminated the pink rag doll leaning bonelessly against the Wall.

In their opening number, Pink Floyd had presented more fireworks, theater, lighting and special effects than the most popular groups of the time added to an entire show. Then the story began in earnest. As Waters intoned the tale of Pink's abuse and alienation, layer after layer of unprecedented lighting and special effects illustrated the story. The band played the soundtrack with improved arrangements and instrumental flourishes that brought Pink Floyd's magnum opus to an even higher plane.

Fog and lasers were introduced during "Another Brick in the Wall (part 1)," as Rick Wright created a hypnotic groove, building ethereal layers of synthesizer voices reminiscent of earlier Floyd albums, then introducing to the mix the grand piano which was to be his signature instrument for the evening.

This sonic tapestry bridged seamlessly into an uncharacteristically funky-sounding Gilmour guitar, quickly coalescing into a cyclical riff. The echo delay of the instrument was synched to strategically placed spots in the 360-degree matrix of speakers, the music chasing itself around the room in a rapidly revolving vortex. The keyboards crept back in, building a

traditionally Floydian textured jam.

The first of many, many animated movies by artist Gerald Scarfe began to play on the giant circular screen above the performers. Those who have seen the cover art of the album or the animated clips featured in the 1982 movie will be familiar with the work. A perfect complement to Waters' bitter and disturbing lyrics, Scarfe's grotesquely distorted caricatures and violently nightmarish archetypal scenarios had taken a team of 40 animators a year to complete.

The artist himself described parts of the work like this: "Walls scream and flowers turn to barbed wire. The dove of peace explodes and from its entrails a terrible eagle is born. This menacing creature tears great clods from the countryside with its gigantic talons, destroying whole cities... The ghosts of soldiers fall and rise continuously, and on a hill of bodies a Union Jack turns to a bloody cross. Blood runs down the cross and through the corpses and pointlessly trickles down the drain. Cathedrals are crushed and reform as glittering gods, and gigantic hammers march smashing all in their paths."

Although Pink Floyd and their music were often associated with the drug culture of the 60s and 70's, you didn't need drugs to have a transcendent, mind-blowing experience at their shows.

The movies were extinguished suddenly as blinding searchlights began to crisscross the crowd, and from the back of the room the deafening roar of a fleet of helicopters swept over our heads, scaring the living hell out of us.

"You! Yes, YOU! Stand still, Laddie!"

The ten-minute episode of utterly brilliant instrumental interplay had snuck us up to the song which was currently parked at number one on the charts, and remains possibly the best-known Pink Floyd song of all time.

"We don't need no ed-you-kay-shun..." The recorded children's chorus was completely drowned out by the gleeful singing of the entire audience at the top of its lungs. Gilmour's solo at the end was almost vicious in its intensity, and ended just as abruptly as it did on the record. Nick Mason's drums marked a measure of the outro, then Gilmour began another solo, longer and even more exciting than the first.

The Schoolmaster, the first of the gigantic marionettes used in the show, had clambered over the Wall as the song was performed, strings disappearing up into a scaffolding above. The monstrous puppet gamboled across the stage as the band played, dwarfing the musicians and gesticulating with a ruler at the spotlit "Pink" doll still sprawled on the stage (The head and shoulders of this marionette, along with a small portion of the Wall reconstructed from original bricks, are part of a nice commemorative display at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland).

As the show progressed, each of the major songs from the album was treated with such musical elaboration and theatricality. All of the interstitial moments were reproduced faithfully to recreate the orchestration of the album -- each set piece flowing into the next so as to create one long, continuous piece rather than a series of discrete songs.

As the story of Pink and his alienation from the people surrounding him continued, a swarm of roadies swathed in black from head to toe like ninjas emerged from beneath and around the Wall. They carried more and more of the huge white bricks onstage, where they haphazardly continued the construction of the Wall. Just as our hero Pink saw each of those who stifled, belittled and betrayed him as "All in all, just a brick" in his metaphorical, psychological Wall, a very concrete and real Wall was rising before our eyes -- a Wall that would ultimately obscure the real Pink Floyd from our view as Roger Waters had once envisioned, across which would be projected the mad visions of a twisted psyche.

Strategic gaps were left in the Wall as it was constructed to provide a view of the band for

as long as possible, and as it rose in front of them, Scarfe's animated films were projected onto the Wall itself instead of the circular screen, providing a focus of interest as it became harder to see the band themselves. Marionettes of the Mother and Mrs. Pink made appearances during their respective songs, and the light show brought constant surprises.

By the end of Act 1, the Wall was complete except for a space the size of a single brick at center stage, about four feet from the floor. Waters leaned into the gap, facing us from behind the Wall.

"Goodbye cruel world, I'm leaving you today...

There's nothing you can say to make me change my mind, goodbye."

And with that, he shoved in the last brick and the Wall stood complete. Roger Waters had assimilated the fall of Syd Barrett, his own autobiography and fascination with madness, and his wildest onstage fantasy into an unforgettable theatrical reality.

6.

There was a twenty-minute intermission, and since my friends and I had no money left for one of the crossed-hammers T-shirts on sale in the corridors outside the stands, we stayed in the spot we had chosen between the projectors. We wished we could go a little closer to the stage, but concert security were still checking the tickets of everyone going onto the main floor, and... well, I'm sure you get the picture.

We talked excitedly about the show, which had so far exceeded our wildest expectations. We had been relieved to see Richard Wright onstage, and delighted with his strong contributions to the music. Contributions far beyond those which could be heard on the album, on which he had received no writing credits. There had been vague rumors, but it was not revealed to the public until almost two years later that, at the time of the Wall concerts, Rick Wright was no longer a member of Pink Floyd.

During the recording sessions of "The Wall," Waters' perfectionistic demands and relentless criticism had been focused from the outset on Wright's performance on the keys, and Rick withered under the pressure. He lost all confidence as a player, and when not in the studio retreated deeper into his growing cocaine habit. Waters added insult to injury by expanding the lyrics of The Wall's "Nobody Home:"

"I've got nicotine stains on my fingers / I've got a silver spoon on a chain /  
I've got a grand piano to prop up my mortal remains..."

By the time of the final recording sessions of the Wall, Rick Wright had exiled himself to his estate in Greece, ignoring Waters' summons back to the studio. Waters responded by buying out Wright's financial share in Pink Floyd Music and summarily dismissing him from the band.

Roger, however, hadn't quite had the chutzpah to leave Richard Wright out of the Wall

concerts -- Pink Floyd's audiences might not accept such a last-minute bombshell. Rick was put on salary along with the rest of the touring ensemble. Due to the band's enormous personal investment in the show (after ticket sales and concessions, they lost a million dollars per show), Wright was the only original member of the band to see a profit from the Wall concerts.

We fans in the audience that February night knew nothing of any of this. Our greatest concern was, was Pink Floyd really going to play the entire second act of the show from behind the Wall -- leaving us to watch movies and fireworks but never see the band themselves again?

The lights were slowly extinguished once more, albeit more quickly than the first time around. Again there was an uncomfortably long moment of darkness, and then the Wall was illuminated. About 20 feet above the stage, a platform had folded down like a shelf extending from the Wall, perhaps six feet wide and six deep. On the platform David Gilmour sat on a stool with an acoustic guitar, singing and playing "Hey You." Instead of his being obscured behind the Wall, we were being treated to a performance delivered from one of the most elaborate sets ever devised.

At the end of "Hey You," the tale had reached the moment where Pink isolates himself away in his hotel room. A larger platform was revealed, offset lower and to the left of the first. There sat Roger Waters in an easy chair, with a coffee table, lamp and a live television set, showing a black-and-white broadcast of an old movie. "Is there anybody out there?" he murmured, amidst the swirling strains of Wright's sirenish "worms" synthesizer motif. Rick then layered in the stark crying tones which had always evoked in my mind images of vultures circling an arroyo, a musical quote from the old Floyd classic "Echoes." Echoes of "Echoes," if you will. Damn, those Floyds were ALL so clever like that.

The spotlight returned to Gilmour as he recreated the haunting classical solo from the album, and a hush fell over the crowd so we could absorb every note. Both Waters and

Gilmour had been known to criticize Floyd's audiences for all the noise they made during the "quiet bits" of their performances, but there was nothing but reverent silence for David Gilmour's subtle plucking on this night.

Roger then had his dramatic turn from the ersatz hotel room on the other platform. Listening back to live recordings of the event, it seems that Rick Wright is playing the grand piano with particular verve and irony during "Nobody Home" with its offending line... consciously refuting Roger's disdain with every chord and fill.

And up in the stands, Craig had once again displayed his own "amazing powers of observation." He pointed to the stairs, where the concert security had finally abandoned their posts. We scurried down the steps, over to the center aisle and forward towards the stage to the incongruous strains of "Vera" and the bombastic "Bring the Boys Back Home," along with hundreds of other fans swarming towards the stage. A gigantic diorama of Scarfe's animation and black-and-white home movies filled the stark face of the Wall before us.

The crowd in the aisle became impenetrable -- but the rows were easy enough to cross, with every single spectator standing on the seats of their steel folding chairs, as they had from the onset of the concert. We shouldered our way across the sixth or seventh row, and were able to locate three abandoned chairs about thirty feet from the stage. We climbed up onto them and regained a view over the heads of the rest of the crowd. The Wall was even more imposing from here, stretching to the edges of my peripheral vision on either side.

At that moment, Roger Waters strode in from stage right, lit by a single spotlight and wearing a white lab coat. He stopped at center stage and turned to the unilluminated blank face of the gigantic white Wall and turned to knock upon it, as if at a door.

"Hello? Is there anybody in there...?"

The crowd was delirious. Not only was this the classic song on "The Wall," but in an almost unprecedented moment, one of the performers in Pink Floyd was assuming the spotlight at the front of the stage, breaking their long tradition of singing and playing in obscurity behind the overwhelming spectacle of their show. And it escaped no one that Waters, the self-proclaimed "Pink" himself, had now stepped out from behind his symbolic Wall.

However, Waters was not playing the role of "Pink" at this moment -- he was the villainous Doctor, a character drawn from a true story in the band's history. Syd Barrett, shortly before his final collapse into madness and catatonia, had once been given a "cocktail" injection of amphetamines and antipsychotics backstage before a show, in hopes of reviving him enough to perform. Just as was being recounted in the song.

As Roger completed the first verse, we had a split second to wonder where David Gilmour was. Would he come out from stage left to face Waters? Would a door open in the Wall where Roger had been knocking? If he was going to be on the platform again, shouldn't it have folded down by now?

Roger Waters' spotlight faded out, and there was a moment of complete darkness as Gilmour's plaintive voice filled the room.

"There is no pain, you are receding..."

Then three of the brightest spotlights in Pink Floyd's mighty arsenal split the darkness from backstage. Silhouetted in the intersection of the beams stood David Gilmour with his Stratocaster, on the top of the Wall.

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With a slower tempo and underscored by the addition of Wright's grand piano, the song assumed a completely different, almost majestic quality completely unlike the album version. Gilmour's voice never sounded sweeter, nor his licks more provocative. I nearly fell off the chair as I felt gooseflesh rising on my arms and legs and a cluster of chills flowed up my spine.

Looking back across the years, knowing what we all know now about the history of Pink Floyd up to that moment, and what was to happen in their future, I have to wonder what was going through David Gilmour's mind in that moment.

Looming like a god over the crowd and staring down at the sea of faces as he sang and played, perhaps Gilmour was just submerged in that timeless and delicious trancelike state that occurs in the critical moments of creation and performance. But the thoughts at least must have been there, suspended just below the surface of his consciousness:

Here he was, playing for this one moment the role of "Pink," in a show that was at the center of attention of the entertainment industry. "Pink," the persona to which Roger Waters was laying claim with this very piece of work.

"Comfortably Numb" was one of the two songs on "The Wall" that Gilmour had written and brought to the table at the beginning of the project. Gilmour's bandmate and nemesis Roger Waters had, over the course of its production, expanded the melancholy, angst-filled meditation into the critical moment of the story, when Pink surrenders to the pressures upon him and collapses into madness, pushed over the edge by one last sting of the needle from the agent of those who wish to exploit him.

And as Dave looked down onto the stage from atop the Wall, watching Roger sing his second verse, how could he not have reflected that the doctor who administered the shot

to his childhood friend Syd in that hotel room over a decade before, had done so at the request of Roger Waters? The shot which was a final act of desperation to maintain Syd's ability to perform in the group Syd himself had created -- the very act which, in its failure, provided an opportunity and led to a fabulous career for Gilmour himself? Who was exploiting whom now? Which one's Pink?

And as Gilmour sang the final verse he had penned, could he have failed to appreciate the role he was now playing in the real-life drama underlying the story the audience thought they were seeing?

What were all the players in our story feeling at this moment as the Ouroboros of Pink Floyd swallowed its tail in one more recursive twist of life imitating art imitating life?

With one of the most memorable lines he had ever written, "The child is grown / The dream is gone..." was David Gilmour portraying a cynical and defeated, tacit acceptance of the new status quo of Pink Floyd? An acceptance of the proposal that the ensemble was nothing more than a vehicle for the ravings of the obsessive, totalitarian lunatic that Roger Waters had become, and was about to gleefully present onstage in the guise of fiction? Was his greatest moment in the spotlight going to be spent in symbolic capitulation to his own obsolescence?

David Gilmour's "Comfortably Numb" guitar solo is a descent into despair that is among the most famous and beloved instrumentals in all of rock music. It eloquently summarizes all of the bitterness, fear and isolation described by the song and inherent to the moment in the story, in a language beyond words which communicates more powerfully than any lyric could ever hope to.

I've seen David Gilmour play that solo many times since that night in New York, and never has he played with more brilliance and intensity. In that unique style of his, he poured out layer after layer of gut-wrenching licks that sent the audience into throes of ecstatic

submission. The aura of emotion unfurled over the crowd like a blanket, somehow amplified and compounded by our collective appreciation.

Gilmour wove in every trick and technique he knew, and invented a few new ones on the spot. He quoted the other major themes from the Wall, as well as a few tidbits from earlier Floyd classics. And when the band started in with the fills and chord progression changes that signalled the end of the extended jam, David Gilmour was having none of it. Twice, three times, the band attempted to wind down -- only to have the guitarist ascend to even greater musical heights. Finally, it was the band who yielded to Gilmour's direction for the instrumental, although it seemed that Gilmour was not so much directing the band as he was oblivious to them.

And thus, David Gilmour turned the paean of acquiescence, despair and surrender to the inevitable into a denial, a rebuttal, and a refusal of the very emotions which it bespoke. Just as Rick Wright had done before him this evening, David Gilmour presented through the voice of his instrument the final and compelling argument for his own claim to an equal share of the soul and essence of the entity known as Pink Floyd. With the greatest of Roger Waters' artistic stage conceits beneath the soles of his boots, David Gilmour played and played and played.

Roger Waters watched helplessly from the stage below as Gilmour departed from the carefully scheduled sequence of events and stole the show once more. The meticulous timetable was further interrupted by the long minutes it took for the thunderous applause to subside once Gilmour finally brought the song to its explosive conclusion.

That remains in my mind the crowning and defining moment in Pink Floyd's career. Although the Wall is not necessarily my favorite of their albums, it is arguably their most ambitious, commercially successful, and historically significant project, as well as a defining moment in the lives of each of its members.

After "Comfortably Numb" and Pink's tipping over into madness, the show took its most deeply recursive and theatrical turn. In an inside-out "Evil Twin" instant replay, the reprised "In the Flesh" (complete with slow-motion "Emcee") was performed once more by the masked "surrogate band," instruments now set up in front of the Wall. Waters once more took the front, this time as the transmogrified, Hitleresque alter ego of Pink.

As even the most diehard fans in the audience cringed, Waters lovingly belted out the infamous diatribe: "Are there any queers in the theater tonight... there's one in the spotlight, he don't look right to me... and that one looks Jewish! and that one's a coon!... there's one smoking a joint! and another with spots..." as the spotlights carefully picked out preselected members of the audience who fit the descriptions. The music was punctuated with the lights and fireworks befitting a Pink Floyd self-parody, and their infamous giant pig balloon floated over the Wall and into the fray, adapted to fit the occasion with glowing red spotlight eyes.

In a continued role reversal, the real Floyds took the stage, but crouched like shadows or understudies of their "surrogate" selves. And in the context of this mixed up masquerade, the players provided the final musical highlight of the night -- David Gilmour's "Run Like Hell." Rick Wright's grand piano once more lent an entirely new flavor to the opening chords of the song, and Gilmour revisited and improvised upon his funky, cyclical riff motif from the "Another Brick" pieces... a technique which must have been an influence on the signature guitar style of Dave "The Edge" Evans of U2.

The song stretched into another extended jam, Waters perhaps resigning himself to allow the band one more moment of spontaneous improvisation before the grand finale, even contributing to the groove with a scatter of the gurgling squeals and screams like those that punctuated the Floyd standards "One of These Days" and "Careful With That Axe, Eugene."

And then the band was obscured as the recorded orchestrations of "The Trial" brought

Pink's story to its conclusion, fully illustrated in a featurette-length Scarfe animation projected across the width of The Wall. The Mother, the Schoolmaster, and Mrs. Pink all bearing witness against him, Pink is found guilty of "showing feelings of an almost human nature" and his sentence is to be "exposed before your peers..."

In a final bit of clever recursion, the animated characters being projected on the Wall swirled into each other, turning into bricks and transforming into a Wall, until the Wall itself was perfectly replicated in the image shown upon it - a movie of the Wall projected onto the Wall. In the movie, the Wall began to smoke and shatter, and the bricks to tumble out.

Then we realized that one of the huge white bricks had bounced out into the audience from the real structure, which was shuddering alarmingly. With an apocalyptic crash that seemed to last for minutes and taxed the capabilities of the 450,000-watt sound system, the gigantic Wall collapsed into itself amidst gouts of smoke and flame, several of the bricks tumbling into the crowd.

Bearing odd acoustic instruments, the members of Pink Floyd picked their way through the rubble, performing the acoustic postscript "Outside the Wall." They shook as many hands in the crowd as they could reach, and the show was over.

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It's no great secret that "The Wall" was the last project that Gilmour, Waters, Mason and Wright all worked on together. After the album, concert and movie had played themselves out, Pink Floyd sans Richard Wright returned to the studio to record another of Roger's self-engrossed song cycles, this one a rumination over the death of Roger's father in World War II.

Waters had replaced Nick Mason with another drummer before the project was over, and so alienated Gilmour with his argumentative insistence upon absolute creative control that

David actively avoided the studio, coming in only when it was absolutely necessary to lay down his solos.

The record, entitled "The Final Cut" in grand Floydian irony, was universally hailed as crap. Although the cover proclaimed, "written by Roger Waters and performed by Pink Floyd," many see the album as Roger Waters' first solo album with Gilmour and Mason along as unwilling participants.

Waters continued with a series of solo albums, and Gilmour released another himself. There were competing tours by Gilmour and Waters featuring Pink Floyd's music, both of which yielded pitiful ticket sales (Waters even failed to sell out small halls whilst featuring Eric Clapton in his entourage).

Finally, in order to resolve a dispute over management rights to his performances, Roger wrote a letter to the record company formally proclaiming his departure from Pink Floyd. He was shocked to learn a few years later that Gilmour and Mason were in the studio recording as Pink Floyd, with the intent of touring under the name. Waters, believing that they were exploiting a brand name he thought of as his, sued them.

There was an ugly, acrimonious public debate as both camps presented their cases very publicly to the press and their fans. Then, it was announced that Rick Wright had joined Gilmour and Mason in the recording sessions. Waters lost the lawsuit.

But it was during "Comfortably Numb" in the Wall shows, I now believe, that Gilmour finally asserted the confidence and courage he would later need to team back up with Mason and Wright and defy their megalomaniacal co-founder -- continuing Pink Floyd without Roger Waters.

Millions of fans around the world have seen the Roger-less Floyd, and in my book, the good guys won. But Back in The Day, I think that perhaps it's at least possible that the

classic lineup of Waters, Gilmour, Mason and Wright succeeded not in spite of the tension between them but because of it. Maybe each, in his subconscious zeal to demonstrate the validity and value of his own role in the collective entity, pushed himself all that much harder in order to establish his own worth. I think it's an interesting idea to consider.

The Wall was Roger's elaborate effort to capture and inextricably subjugate the identity of Pink Floyd to his own... and this time when Roger posed the question "Which One's Pink?", it was only he who did not realize that the Floyd's answer must inevitably be, "all of us."

And that's the story of how, in classic dangerdork fashion, I got Inside to witness my favorite band at the pinnacle of their career, and a bit of Rock & Roll history. Just thought I'd share.

Afterword...

That story was just posed to be about how we got in to the show, it kind of got away from me.... if you took the time to read it all, thanks a lot, I hope you enjoyed it. Thanks too for letting me get the whole thing out without comments in between...

I actually didn't go into PTS with all this deep symbolic stuff about "Comfortably Numb" on my mind, although my Pink Floyd fandom had taken a couple of other major booster shots this summer.

First, in May, I got to sing my sentimental favorite song of all time , "Wish You Were Here," with Stev up at Shadow North in their Patron Talent Show. and it came out pretty damn well, if I do say so myself.

Then, just weeks later, the impossible happened. It was in London, during the "Live 8" fundraising multi-city concert event on July 2nd.

Roger Waters, David Gilmour, Nick Mason and Rick Wright appeared onstage together for the first time in the almost 25 years since the last of the "Wall" concerts. According to the Live 8 website, 3 BILLION people watched these concerts... half the population of the world. The Pink Floyd reunion was overwhelmingly chosen as the favorite of all performances in all the polls taken afterwards.

After all these years, my favorite band played together one last time, and the social and

cultural significance of the event was an appropriate coda to their remarkable career together as Pink Floyd.

They sounded as good as ever too, that old chemistry remarkably still there. Somehow Floyd's groove just sounded more right with Roger's bass line back in the mix than they had ever managed to replicate without him. If you look closely at the video, you can still sense the competitiveness and tension between Gilmour and Waters.

Pink Floyd closed their 19-minute, final set together with "Wish You Were Here" and "Comfortably Numb."

Thanks to Stev and Matt and Red, and Stacie and Allen, and ALL the other Bill Who players too numerous to mention, for being part of my immersion this summer back into the music of the band I've loved for decades now -- inspiring me to write this story and, in retrospect, gain some new insights of my own into the music and intriguing history of Pink Floyd.