

# “The Dark Side of the Moon”—Pink Floyd (1973)

Added to the National Registry: 2012

Essay by: Daniel Levitin (guest post)\*



*Dark Side of the Moon*

Angst. Greed. Alienation. Questioning one's own sanity. Weird time signatures. Experimental sounds. In 1973, Pink Floyd was a somewhat known progressive rock band, but it was this, their ninth album, that catapulted them into world class rock-star status. “The Dark Side of the Moon” spent an astonishing 14 years on the “Billboard” album charts, and sold an estimated 45 million copies. It is a work of outstanding artistry, skill, and craftsmanship that is popular in its reach and experimental in its grasp.

An engineering masterpiece, the album received a Grammy nomination for best engineered non-classical recording, based on beautifully captured instrumental tones and a warm, lush soundscape. Engineer Alan Parsons and Mixing Supervisor Chris Thomas, who had worked extensively with The Beatles (the LP was mastered by engineer Wally Traugott), introduced a level of sonic beauty and clarity to the album that propelled the music off of any sound system to become an all-encompassing, immersive experience.

In his 1973 review, Lloyd Grossman wrote in “Rolling Stone” magazine that Pink Floyd’s members comprised “preeminent techno-rockers: four musicians with a command of electronic instruments who wield an arsenal of sound effects with authority and finesse.” They used their command to create a work that introduced several generations of listeners to art-rock and to elements of 1950s cool jazz. Some reharmonization of chords (as on “Breathe”) was inspired by Miles Davis, explained keyboardist Rick Wright.

The album opens with a long, cinematic introduction of a crescendoing heartbeat, eventually accompanied by a ticking clock, distant voices, and other sound effects that have been compared to a motor or airplane propeller. Among the discernible spoken phrases are “I’ve always been mad” and, a few seconds later, a screaming melodic voice with an edge of insanity ushers in the song proper. At 1:09, bass, ride-cymbal drum kit,

chorused guitar, and slide guitar all enter, an extraordinarily luscious, delicious, warm ensemble of merging tones, yet each retaining their distinctiveness.

Throughout the album, the songs flow into one another symphonically, with seamless musical coherence, as though written as part of a single melodic and harmonic gesture. Lyric themes of madness and alienation connect throughout.

Listeners delighted in the array of new electronic sounds, spatialization, pitch and time bending. Clocks, alarms, chimes, cash registers, footsteps, and other *in situ* recordings are woven into the sounds and tropes of a traditional rock quartet. Pink Floyd were not the first to borrow the techniques of Stockhausen and of Pierre Schaeffer's *musique concrète*, nor were they even the first pop artists to do so. The Beatles had done this on their "Sgt. Pepper" in 1967 and again more extensively in 1968's "White Album." Simon & Garfunkel also experimented with found sounds on their breakthrough album, "Bookends" in 1968. But the prominence of such experimentation, and the brilliant execution of it put "Dark Side" in a class unto itself.

"On the Run" is a masterful use of synthesis by guitarist David Gilmour, in which the instrument (the EMS synthesizer Synthi AKS) gives the musical impression of running on a treadmill, accompanied by the lockstep time of 16th note hi-hat, created entirely on the AKS. The instrument goes through a range of odd, otherworldly sounds, forming the basis for what we now know as the electronica and EDM genres, and predated Kraftwerk's breakthrough "Autobahn" by 18 months (which used the Synthi AKIS along with Minimoog and ARP synthesizers). Additional special effect sounds were added to "On the Run" by bassist Roger Waters using an EMS VCS3.

The ambient space of the Rotoms in the album's third cut, "Time," gives way to neo-funk rhythms and gripping vocals by Gilmour. Throughout the album, guitarists found the guitar-tone-to-die-for, first heard on this track. Gilmour created it with multi-tapped analog delays (from a Binson Echorec 2), a sound that Pat Metheny, The Edge (U2) and others would later adapt to their own use. Gilmour is the master of the slow string bend, creating evocative, emotionally-fraught pleadings and wailings one moment, and triumphant exultations the next. His solos are so perfect, so exquisitely and intuitively crafted, that one might overlook that he is one of the most effective and exciting rhythm guitarists in all of contemporary music.

For many, the emotional high point of the album is "The Great Gig in the Sky." Clare Torry's wordless vocal is more emotive, more evocative and haunting than anything with words. Keyboardist Richard Wright recalled that the band directed her to "think about death, think about horror, whatever." Her impromptu singing so transformed the songs that later versions of the recording carry her name as a co-writer of the tune.

Opening side two of the vinyl version of the album, "Money" naturally became a hit on Top 40 AM radio in an edited form and, then became an FM radio staple. The song is composed in 7/4 time, except for 4/4 during the guitar solo, creating a unique urgency.

That same analog delay guitar cuts through like a lobotomy knife, and then suddenly gives way to Stratocaster that sounds like it is standing right next to you. The fade-out vocals of “Money” give way to the opening of “Us and Them,” with a solemn, ecclesiastical organ, which in turns gives way to a suspended, arpeggiated chords and a ride-cymbal groove that evokes 1950s cool jazz, deepened by Dick Parry's tenor saxophone solo, redolent of Sonny Stitt or Dexter Gordon. Gilmour's vocals enter unhurriedly at 1:41, taking the analog delay sound first heard on Gilmour's guitar and festooning his lead vocals with it. The middle of “Us and Them” features another tenor solo by Parry amidst a lush chorus of background vocals. The song fades into “Any Colour You Like,” the third instrumental on the album. The guitar effects are largely provided by Univox Uni-Vibe effects pedal (made popular by Jimi Hendrix on “Machine Gun”), in addition to David Gilmour singing in unison with his instrument--a technique often attributed to Slam Stewart who sang with his bass in the 1940s, and became a signature feature of George Benson's guitar playing in the 1970s.

“Brain Damage” sums up the narrator's (Roger Waters) mounting anxiety and vulnerability:

*The lunatic is in my head.  
The lunatic is in my head.  
You raise the blade, you make the change,  
You re-arrange me 'til I'm sane.  
You lock the door,  
And throw away the key,  
There's someone in my head  
But it's not me*

“Brain Damage” segues into “Eclipse,” a restatement of the main musical and lyrical themes, with the now-familiar ride-cymbal groove and its sparkly texture supporting multiple climaxes, including a swirling organ motif and lush background harmonies supporting the final words of the album (sung by Waters), “and the sun is eclipsed by the moon.” The album ends with a fade-out of the heartbeat that began the album 42 minutes earlier.

Roger Waters explained the album's creation and the context of the band's founder, Syd Barrett, who had gone through a phase of behaving erratically before being briefly hospitalized under suspicion of mental illness. “After Syd went crazy, in '68...we were all of searching, fumbling around...[Syd] was the heartbeat of the band.” It was the first time that Waters wrote all the lyrics for a Pink Floyd album--he had some things he needed to say. “I suddenly realized then, that year, that life was already happening. I think it's because my mother was so obsessed with education--and the idea that childhood and adolescence, well everything--was about preparing for a life that was going to start later. And I suddenly realized that life wasn't going to start later, it starts at dot and it happens all the time. At any point you can grasp the reins and start guiding your own destiny.... A lot of the musical ideas just came up just jamming away in these rehearsal

rooms.” The lyrics were clearly informed by Barrett's mental breakdown, and Waters' reactions to it.

“Dark Side's: influence reached across several generations of musicians and spanned a wide range of genres. James Taylor nicked the idea of the cash register loop for his own song “Money Machine” in 1976, and Paul McCartney paid homage to it with the loop opening his Wings track “Silly Love Songs” also in 1976. Smashing Pumpkins, Radiohead, Phish, The Austin Lounge Lizards, and scores of other musicians have found inspiration in the recording technology, lyrics, music, or all three. It also raised the ambitions of Pink Floyd themselves, propelling them to create the ambitious and much-praised double-album “The Wall.” Although prog-rock had sometimes been accused of ignoring the emotional aspects of rock music in favor of the cerebral, “Dark Side of the Moon” combined both brilliantly in an emotionally intense tour de force that continues to surprise and reward listeners.

*Daniel J. Levitin, Ph.D., is the James McGill Professor of Psychology and Behavioral Neuroscience at McGill University and is dean of the College of Social Sciences at the Minerva Schools at KGI. His is the author of the books “This Is Your Brain on Music,” “The World in Six Songs,” “The Organized Mind,” and “A Field Guide to Lies.”*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.