An invocation of madness

by Neal Vitale

Concurrent with the era's trending psychedelic phase, there emerged around 1966-7, particularly in England and on the Continent, a whole range of groups -- the semi-professional, experimental, self-consciously-dubbed "underground" variety which was represented by such diverse and obscure period luminaries as The Stooges, The Velvet Underground, and The Bonzo Dog (Bozo) Band. Their music combined rudimentary vocal harmonies with early electronic explorations, cacophonous instrumentations, bizarre lyrical topics, black comedy, and basic, low pop structure. The only group to be functioning in 1975 is Pink Floyd, whose past has been playing as well as business, and this band still being with us today were not terribly positive when Pink Floyd last played in Boston, at a mid-March 1973 Music Hall concert. The Dark Side Of The Moon had just been released, the sixth American Pink Floyd album and ostensibly the last to be delivered to the US distributors. A solid cult-type following has been growing over the years, Pink Floyd record sales were steady but far from spectacular, and the group's latest recordings and live work was strong, yet commercial/promotional乏力 continued. Pink Floyd's future is a decidedly terminal light.

CBS Records, though, at the tailend of a rather disappointing more, signed Roger Waters, Nick Mason, Dave Gilmour, and Richard Wright to a new contract, for an amount ranging around $50,000-$60,000, as Capricol readied one final PF push.

In the summer of 1975, The Dark Side Of The Moon was a Number 1 record in both America and the United Kingdom, and "Money" was a hit single; the album was well on its way to its current status as a sell-out in the millions of units and having remained on the British pop charts for what is now approaching 125 consecutive weeks. All of a sudden, Capricol was less than enthusiastic about looking to Pink Floyd; in turn, the band was not particularly excited about leaving the label which had helped them finally reach the British pop charts for what is now 125 consecutive weeks. All of a sudden, Capricol was less than enthusiastic about looking to Pink Floyd; in turn, the band was not particularly excited about leaving the label which had helped them finally reach superstardom, and, if they had to leave, they certainly weren't thrilled about doing so for a sum as paltry as the one CBS offered.

Manifold legal problems ensued, with different parties attempting to buy in and out of contractual obligations. An agreement ultimately left Pink Floyd with the option of recording for CBS or not releasing a record for six years; the group opted for the former choice. Those entanglements, though, were but a small fraction of what transpired in the two years between Boston appearances of the band, a period of what has so significantly changed Pink Floyd.

In 1967, Pink Floyd's prime source of energy and invention was Syd Barrett, original guitarist with the group. Barrett, progressively being swept up in the worldly successes and excesses of those early days, went mad, to the point where his unstable and unpredictable behavior had rendered Pink Floyd virtually impossible. Dave Gilmour replaced Barrett on the group's second record, A Saucerful Of Secrets, today. Gilmour considers the topic of Syd Barrett to be extraneous to discussions of the band.

But, most obviously, it has been Pink Floyd's dealing and redesigning with the specter of Barrett which has dominated the group's latest work, The Dark Side Of The Moon, as though to make its essential themes the dementia even more apparent. It was originally entitled Eclipse (A Piece For Wind Diver) Luminous) when first performed in Boston in May, 1972. Now, Pink Floyd's newest album (which will be reviewed following the conclusion of their current tour and released, reportedly in a lavish pink package, in mid-August) features three numbers which all relate, directly or tangentially, to Barrett's madness - "Echoes" and " driping" and "Shine On You Crazy Diamond," and the related definitive title track, "You Gotta Be Crazy." But whereas the intensity and madly intriguing nature of the Barrett/Floyd specter of Barrett/Floyd-generated its own electricity and excitement, Pink Floyd circa 1975 is simply vicariously recreating and rehashing Barrett's insanity. And it's all become quite dull.

In the backwash of Pink Floyd's commercial achievements, as well as those of Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells and the established artistry of Ye, ELP, Genesis, and King Crimson, a wave of instrumental groups have emerged, seemingly, to exploit the newly-established "space rock" market. Rather, it has been the record companies, hoping to cash in, at last, on one of their "eclectic" European (particularly Germanic) signings, who have finally released albums by Tangential Dream, Gong, Triumverat, Kraan, Trace, Lucida's Friend, and Isotope. Only Kraftwerk's Autobahn has even approximated all the Pink Floyd/Oldfield successes, leads such as Nekati and Hawkwind have found a responsive niche, particular in the American Midwest.

In the press, Pink Floyd's audience has changed drastically, and the band's playing venues like the Boston Garden (as it did two weeks ago) rather than the "mass market" may be particularly indicative of a turn for the worse. Until recently, Pink Floyd has relied on visuals and an elaborate sound system to enhance, rather than dominate, its music; their current show reveals a greater effort to appease the drugged-out, nouveau fans.

At the Garden, more applause was afforded such trappings as a gigantic mirrored pinwheel, a film counterpart to Dark Side (which was, in fact, the show's highpoint -- "Running Class director Peter Medoc's cops from Kubrick's 2001, direct footage from the finale of Antonioni's Labyrinth, and stunning submarine photography from the movie Crystal Voyage were fascinating at times, as was the self-parodying segment marked with "Money"), a well-conceived miniature spacecraft which crashed on stage (in synchronization with a crash on film, at de rigeur billows of dry ice/smoke than was given the group), Past Pink Floyd's collective love of English football, I'm not sure what matters to the group nowadays. Clearly, stage dominance is unimportant -- as performers, they rival theGrateful Dead for lack of stage flash and presentation of the most disinterested visage imaginable; as theatrical-crowd-pleasers, their staidness is far too derivative and ordinary to command any straight interest.

Musically, Pink Floyd has degenerated musical aptitude and technique in favor of conceptual creativity -- not only does what was once clever and creative seem imitation, but what was once more than passable musicianship is now bordering on the annoyingly plebian. At the Garden, Gilmour and Wright, on guitar and keyboards respectively, were particularly uninspiring, making even the most mundane passages sound ordinary. In terms of writing, Pink Floyd's new material could graciously be called unexplored. "Evaporating and Drooling" is reminiscent, rhythmically, of the Doobie Brothers' "Clear As The Driven Snow" (which is more of an observation than a criticism); "You Gotta Be Crazy"'s minor changes prove more boring than astute, and "Crazy Diamond" seems banal in all but one or two spots. All the new songs smack of the same glossy, sanitized quality which marked The Dark Side Of The Moon -- and made it a hit.

It may well be that Pink Floyd now represents one extreme among rock bands -- a group that plays solely for its own enjoyment -- and have, indeed, always done so. Some Floyd records have simply found receptive listeners; others haven't. Given the group's rather eccentric background, such a conclusion might not be far-fetched. Yet I can't help but think that Pink Floyd may well have burned out, if only temporarily, the creative talents it once displayed. On it could be that Members, Gilmour, Waters, Wright, and Wright are just lazy and bored; maybe we've all just been too enamored by a music that has held very little real substance, I'm beginning to doubt more and more, though, that Pink Floyd even cares -- it will be an interesting comment on the state of rock music to see how long record-buyers and concert-goers continue to care. I, for one, have stopped.