

The Madcap Myth

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In this short paper, the myth surrounding the production process of Syd Barrett's first solo LP "The Madcap Laughs" shall be examined. It will be argued that the greater legend of Syd Barrett as an unreliable and erratic musician, which led to him being excluded from the band Pink Floyd, was considerably exaggerated and full of discrepancies. This task will be undertaken with the aid of the few documented interviews of Barrett in various musical journals of that time (1967 – 1971). Taking into account Brian Jones' theory of the "production myth", it will be propounded that the sonic evidence purposefully rendered on the final version of "The Madcap Laughs" by Roger Waters and David Gilmour (who had replaced Barrett in Pink Floyd), served to perpetuate the myth of "Madcap Barrett" – a crazy LSD-casualty. Lastly, because the album was recorded in the famous Abbey Road Studios, this legendary site will also be given its rightful due in the course of the following elaborations.

As a reference, the well-researched biography written by music journalist Rob Chapman in 2010 with the title "Syd Barrett. A Very Irregular Head" was chosen, as it was written in co-operation with Barrett's living relatives (Chapman xi). Chapman named his book according to a self-description, which Barrett gave in his last-ever interview with photographer Mick Rock for the "Rolling Stone" magazine in the autumn of 1971: "I don't think I'm easy to talk about. I've got a very irregular head. And I'm not anything that you think I am anyway" (Rock).

A condensed summary of Barrett's life up to the recording of his first solo album "The Madcap Laughs" shall be given now for a better insight in the circumstances that led to the solo endeavours and to refute the "Madcap Syd" myth as unsustainable and inordinate.

Roger Keith Barrett was born on the 6th of January 1946. Young Barrett "was a keen Scout" (Chapman 11) and got his nickname "Syd" from fellow Scouts in 1959 (Chapman 12). When his father died of cancer, Barrett was only 15 years of age. As an adolescent, he was delineated by companion David Gale as an "industrious painter, who played the guitar for pleasure" (Chapman 40). He was admitted to Camberwell Art College and consequently moved to London. At that time, he was introduced to what would become his future band. In 1964, Barrett famously renamed it "Pink Floyd" (Chapman 53). Syd Barrett, Roger Waters, Nick Mason and Rick Wright of Pink Floyd all rented rooms in the house of Mike Leonard, "who introduced the group to the idea of light shows and mixed media performance" (Chapman 72).

In the summer of 1965, Pink Floyd incorporated the "Binson Echorec" into their equipment – "a pre-pedal echo unit powered by valves and driven by tape-heads", which "enabled tape delay, echo, reverb and vari-speed" (Chapman 105). This largely increased the artistic possibilities for singer, songwriter and lead-guitarist Barrett. The band became acquainted with the "Notting Hill Free School" and performed live shows at the "Free School benefits" (Chapman 113). After first public appearances in September of 1966, they were eventually signed by "one of the biggest and most strait-laced record labels in the world" – EMI (Chapman 138). The first single, "Arnold Layne" (which was written by Barrett) reached number 20 in the British charts (Chapman 141).

Barrett and the fellow band members recorded their debut album “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn” in Abbey Road Studios from February to May 1967. In her study on the “history, mythology and the aura of Abbey Road Studios”, Samantha Bennett names Pink Floyd second after the Beatles as a legendary band, which recorded in “the rock canon’s ultimate recording house” (Bennett 396). She describes its “aura” as the “atmosphere surrounding, generated and evoked by Abbey Road Studios” (Bennett 409) and claims that this aura is transmitted “through the sound recordings” and “through the artists and recordists who worked there” (Bennett 410). As the building has never been “open to public” (Bennett 399), various rumours and myths about the recording sessions of the aforementioned bands were generated. In contrast to several of them, Chapman states that within the studio, Pink Floyd had to adhere to “EMI’s strict working practices and procedures” (Chapman 169). Eliot Bates survey on “What Studios Do” corroborates this demythologising view by declaring that “studios are effectively identical to scientific laboratories” (Bates 18).

In July of 1968, the second single “See Emily Play” reached number 6 in the British charts. From an underground band, Pink Floyd was propelled to “Top of the Pops”, which seems to have overwhelmed Barrett. Getting up early, doing interviews, doing studio work, signing autographs, playing the same songs every night – this was not how the art student and idealist Barrett had imagined his project “Pink Floyd” (Chapman 173). Barrett’s companion, the poet Spike Hawkins, says: “he was incredibly shy [...]. That’s why he liked the light show. It coveted him. It protected him” (Chapman 182). Thrust in the spotlight, Pink Floyd’s touring schedule in 1967 was dense, to say the least – 137 live performances in total (Chapman 204).

When the third single “Apples and Oranges” was only a minor success, Barrett expressed his feelings about this in the issue of “Melody Maker”, released on the 9th of December 1967, by saying: “Couldn’t care less” (Walsh). The author of the article, Alan Walsh, writes:

Ideally, believes Barrett, groups should record their own music, press their own records, distribute them and sell them. [...] He feels that the application of commercial considerations is harmful to the music. He’d like to cut out the record company and wholesalers and retailers. ‘All middle men are bad,’ he said. (Walsh)

Next, Barrett is quoted saying that in the future, musicians will have “to offer much more than just a pop show. They’ll have to offer a well-presented theatre show” (Walsh). With this envisioned multimedia spectacle of lights, sound and possibly film, Barrett was way ahead of his time. Still, when he gave this interview, any appreciation of his artistic enterprises had already “taken a back seat to speculation about his mental state” (Chapman 185). It is essential to note at this point that Barrett was in fact “undiagnosed with any mental illness” (Chapman 389) at this time and for the remainder of his life as well. Despite Barrett allegedly being mentally ill since late 1967 (madcap Barrett myth), he was deemed fit to record songs for Pink Floyd’s second album “Saucerful of Secrets” in Abbey Road Studios and also contributed its final track, “Jugband Blues” (Chapman 190).

As soon as Pink Floyd returned from their discontinued US-tour in late 1967, they went on “a package group tour with six other groups. Two shows a night for sixteen nights” (Chapman 201). This is a very busy schedule for a supposed madman, to say the least. By April of 1968, Barrett had been ousted by his own band – he was simply not picked up for gigs any longer (Chapman 208). Barrett commentated this band-split in an interview printed in the “Melody Maker” issue of the 27th of March 1971:

It wasn't really a war. I suppose it was really just a matter of being offhand about things. [...] I mean we did split up, and there was a lot of trouble. I don't think the Pink Floyd had any trouble, but I had an awful scene [...]. Their [Waters', Mason's and Wright's] choice of material [...] always [had] very much to do with what they were thinking as architecture students. Rather unexciting people, I would've thought, primarily. Roger and I [...] wrote our own songs, played our own music. [...] I don't know that there was really much conflict, except that perhaps the way we started to play wasn't [...] as full of impact as it might've been. I mean, it was done very well, rather than considerably exciting. (Watts)

Chapman concludes that there have been “deeper personality conflicts within the band, as well as broader conflicts of artistic interest and intent” (Chapman 309). Following Chapman's line of thought, the former architecture students Waters, Mason and Wright “had all forsaken potentially lucrative and secure futures in the professions in order to pursue their pop careers” (Chapman 212). The band's first manager, Peter Jenner, sustains that view in an interview he gave to Robert Sandall of “Mojo Magazine” in 1994: “Roger was argumentative [...]. He was this giant ego [...]. He was the one [...] to drive Syd out [...]. The chaos factor was too great [for Waters]” (Sandall). In the previously cited edition of “Melody Maker” in 1971, Roger Waters tells his side of the story: “When he [Barrett] was still in the band in the later stages, we got to the point where anyone of us was likely to tear his throat out at any minute because he was so impossible” (Watts).

In his study on “The Power of a Production Myth”, researcher Brian Jones defines the term “production myth” as a real or imagined backstory of a records production process – perceived in the sonic nuances of a recording and fleshed out through its surrounding discourse” (B. Jones 349). A production myth is facilitated by “a spatial and temporal separation” between the listener and the performing artist and is based upon the “surrounding discourse” provided by “feature stories”, “liner notes” and “interviews” amongst others (ibid.). In the following paragraphs, different production myths pertaining to “The Madcap Laughs” shall be examined.

Despite the rumours about his mental health, Barrett returned to Abbey Road Studios with his manager Peter Jenner on the 13th of May 1968, but “for reasons never fully explained” – as it is phrased in the booklet for “The Madcap Laughs” 2010 re-release on CD – there would be no further recording sessions until the April of the following year. Being only slightly older than Barrett (23 years of age), Malcom Jones was “given the task of establishing and running the new [EMI] label”, which he called “Harvest” in early 1969 (M. Jones 3).

In his booklet “Syd Barrett. The Making of The Madcap Laughs”, Malcom Jones attempts to provide a “factual account of the making of the album” (M. Jones 3), which will be employed here to rebut some of the (production) myths surrounding “The Madcap Laughs”. Jones reports that Barrett, who viewed him “as his ally at EMI” personally requested him to be the producer of his upcoming album (M. Jones 4). He remembers Barrett arriving with his “blue speckled Fender Telecaster” in “a great mood and in fine form, a stark contrast to the rumours and stories I’d been fed with” (M. Jones 6). Barrett would record in Studio Three (of Abbey Road Studios), which was equipped with a 4-track machine, where four “tracks exist in parallel on a tape without requiring a mixdown to a single channel” (Collins et al. 14).

In the main part of this paper, the 13 songs, which were featured in the final release of “The Madcap Laughs” in 1970, shall now be discussed individually. The first four of them were all produced by Malcom Jones in 1969. The opening track, “**Terrapin**”, was recorded on the 11th of April 1969 and on the 4th of May Barrett added overdubs. In his study on “Recording Technologies and Music”, which was briefly quoted before, Nick Collins and other researchers define the technique of overdubbing as follows: “[r]ecording one part on top of another, keeping the mixture of both though losing their separation” (Collins et al. 20). In this case, Barrett added an additional (electrical) guitar to the rhythm guitar, he had already recorded. The following two songs “**No Good Trying**” and “**Love You**” were also both taped on the 11th of April and overdubbed on the 3rd and 4th of May 1969. They feature members of the band “Soft Machine” – namely Robert Wyatt on drums, Hugh Hopper on the bass guitar and Mike Ratledge on the keyboards (Opel). Track four is “**No Man’s Land**”, which was recorded on the 17th of April and overdubbed on the 4th of May – this time with Jerry Shirley on the drums and Willie Wilson on the bass. Track six, carrying the title “**Here I Go**” was recorded with the same line-up on the 17th of April 1969. That none of the musicians had been credited on the album sleeve because it was “contractually impossible [...] added an air of mystery to the whole affair” (M. Jones 13). Malcom Jones describes these five performances as “Syd at his relaxed best” (M. Jones 8).

The “relaxed” times at Abbey Roads Studios would come to a stressful end, soon after David Gilmour had taken “a casual interest in what Syd [Barrett] was doing in the studios” (M. Jones 10). Gilmour and Waters would approach Barrett to produce some of his tracks. “In June 1969 Malcom Jones’ services were dispensed with and in three hastily convened sessions” David Gilmour and Roger Waters finalised the album (Chapman 233). Gilmour later suggested that this happened because he thought “the project was going to be shelved” and that he had to get “it finished in double-quick time” (Chapman 233f.). This is incorrect, as “EMI had [already] agreed that the project should extend into an album after about the third session” (M. Jones 10).

“**Dark Globe**” is the first track produced by Waters and Gilmour, which was unfittingly interpolated between the Malcom Jones productions “No Man’s Land” and “Here I Go”. In comparison to the tracks that proceeded it, “Dark Globe” is louder – Barrett’s strumming especially. Moreover, Barrett’s voice sounds screechy and unsound. This song was recorded by Waters and Gilmour on the 5th of August 1969 – no overdubs were added.

When the “collection of previously unreleased songs” (Chapman 367), “Opel”, was released almost twenty years later (in 1988), track number twelve provided an alternative take of “Dark Globe”, recorded on the 26th of June 1969 by Waters and Gilmour. In this version, Barrett’s voice sounds “more natural and less strained” (Opel). Keeping this audible evidence in mind, it can be assumed that the later recording was chosen to depict Barrett as being a mediocre singer at best. It is feasible to argue that Waters (and Gilmour) wanted the line “Won’t you miss me? Wouldn’t you miss me at all?” (Chapman & Jenner 41) to sound like the haunting cry for help of a mad man dissolving in his illness – a farewell to his former band “mates”.

Track number seven until the penultimate track were all produced either by Waters and Gilmour or Gilmour and Barrett. It will be proposed here that the tracks produced with the involvement of Waters are inferior in quality. “**Octopus**” and “Golden Hair” – tracks number seven and eight respectively – were produced by Gilmour and Barrett on the 12th of June 1969. Overdubs (Barrett playing lead-guitar) were added to “Octopus” on the 13th of June. For this song, which would also be his first and only solo-single, Barrett was supported by David Gilmour on drums. It is also Gilmour, who lays claim on the album’s title: “It was my idea to lift that phrase from the lyric to ‘Octopus’” (Chapman 314). The line in question reads: “the madcap [?] laughed at the man on the border” (Chapman & Jenner 74), but it is still up to debate, whether Barrett rather sings “madcap” or “mad cat” (Chapman & Jenner 75). Although Gilmour assesses that madcap is “jolly, original” and a “kind” word (Chapman 314), it is a fact that Barrett himself did not choose this title and with the abounding rumours about his supposed mental health issues at this time, the title would strongly reinforce his public image as madman (and possibly cause lower buy-rates). Notably, there exist many other versions of this song produced by both, Jenner and Jones, under its former title “Clowns and Jugglers”, one of which was released (as track number two) on “Opel” in 1988.

In his booklet about the genesis of the album, Malcom Jones expounds how recording Barrett would succeed: “namely not to keep on with too many attempts at the same song with no break” (M. Jones 11). This advice was not heeded by Gilmour, who brought Barrett to do eleven takes each for both, “Octopus” and “Golden Hair”. “**Golden Hair**” (track number eight), which is Barrett’s interpretation of a poem by James Joyce, was attempted at all three stages of the recording process. Knowing his own and Jenner’s recordings of “Golden Hair” (two of which were released on “Opel”), Malcom Jones scrutinizes the final choice: “The issued recording, [...] is far less atmospheric than the original, and I still feel that a re-make was unnecessary” (M. Jones 7).

Barrett’s final sessions for the album were “completed pretty much in a hurry” (M. Jones 12). Tracks number nine to twelve were all produced by Waters and Gilmour and recorded on the 26th of July 1969. On number nine, “**Long Gone**”, Barrett’s rhythm guitar appears to be too loud again in comparison with the previous song and in the very end (02:44), a rise in volume can be detected, which could have easily been deleted. What follows is a series of three previously “untried compositions” (The Madcap Laughs) credited as a sequence 7 minutes and 59 seconds on the original vinyl release.

These are the songs, which to a large extent impaired the overall coherence and quality of the album – all of them could have easily been left out, edited or replaced, as it shall be illustrated now.

In “**She Took a Long Cold Look**” (starting at 53 seconds), Barrett can be heard turning the pages of his lyrical notes. Malcom Jones annotates that “Syd always had lyric sheets in front of him, and turning the pages was often caught on tape” (M. Jones 6) – unlike Waters and Gilmour, Jones (or any other diligent producer at that time) would choose to edit these sounds out. Another turning of the pages can be heard at the end of this song (at 01:48) followed by Waters’ seemingly annoyed comment “that short...” (01:53) followed by a sigh. With his comment, Waters adverts to the overall length of the song. The inclusion of these segments in the final version of the song leads to the conclusion that Waters (and Gilmour) probably wanted to portray Barrett as a musician unable to remember his own lyrics and write normal-length songs. Furthermore, there is another take (4) – released as a bonus track on the 2010 CD-re-release of “The Madcap Laughs” – wherein, starting at 40 seconds, Barrett apparently does a better job at singing and strumming the guitar – the ending being superior as well.

On the track eleven, “**Feel**”, Waters can be heard again at the very beginning saying: “Feel, take one”. Obviously, it is unprofessional of Waters (and Gilmour) not to cut this production-announcement from the tape, which would have been a genuinely simple task for any producer. Barrett does not commence playing until eleven seconds into the song, which ought to end at 02:10, when a defective sound can be heard, which is followed by an unintelligible comment by Barrett and Waters languidly responding “Alright...” (02:12). That these superfluous parts were left in only serves to substantiate the myth of Syd the lunatic, who is incomprehensible in his speech and hard to work with as a musician. Malcom Jones supports this observation in an interview he gave in late 1984 to Ivor Trueman, expressing that “the Madcap things they did just made him look a babbling fool” and that Waters and Gilmour were “creating an image” for Barrett (Trueman).

The album reaches its presumed anti-climax with song number twelve called “**If It’s in You**”. It begins with a false start, followed by a second false start (at 00:07), in which Barrett sings well out of tune. He is then clearly heard saying: “I’ll start again” (at 00:15) and at 26 seconds in, he even voices the wish to edit the false starts out: “If we could cut...”. After he clears his throat, Barrett starts the song anew (at 00:30) – not perfectly in tune, but noticeably improved when compared to the previous try. Malcom Jones critiques the inclusion of these false starts against the will of the artist:

False starts are OK if they give an insight into the musicianship or artistry of those present [...] [T]he false starts to the tracks that I had personally supervised were far more interesting than those left in the final album. They certainly would have been [...] less detrimental to Syd’s abilities than the ones left in. Those left in show Syd, at best, as out of tune (which he rarely was) and, at worst, as out of control (which again, he never was). They are still my least favourite tracks on the record. (M. Jones 12)

To sum it up, the style in which “If It’s in You” was (not) edited portrays the decisive picture of madcap Syd, which at this point can be assumed as its intention. Gilmour terms these decisions as “a form of studio *verité*” and says: “Roger and I both thought that it was important that some of Syd’s state of mind should be present in the record – to be a document of Syd at that moment – and to explain why some of the songs had these, how should I say, unprofessional moments” (Chapman 235). On the contrary, the way that Waters and Gilmour edited the album must be called unprofessional. In the process called “precision editing”, what they (as the ones responsible for production, mixing and mastering) should have done by default is to splice “together from multiple takes, with all glitches hidden behind fades. Cutting out bad parts, pasting in good [parts] [...]” (Collins et al. 20).

The last track of the album is “**Late Night**” – it was the only song included, which was recorded on the 28th of May 1968 with Peter Jenner as producer and overdubbed on the 11th of April 1969 with Malcom Jones. It does not have any of the flaws of the previous tracks.

Due to a Pink Floyd tour in Holland and studio work for their own upcoming album “Ummagumma” (in which Waters and Gilmour proved that they are capable of precision editing), “the final mixing and mastering” took four months – from August until November 1969 (Chapman 235). “The Madcap Laughs” would not be ready in time for the Christmas market and was “eventually released on EMI’s new Harvest label on 6 January 1970” (Chapman 235). Malcom Jones recalls that Barrett found “the long gap [...] very frustrating” (M. Jones 10). Barrett himself discusses this in an interview with Giovanni Dadomo for “Sounds” magazine in June of 1970, which was first printed in “Terrapin” number 9/10 in July of 1974: “[The Madcap Laughs] was released far too long after it was done. I wanted it to be a whole thing that people would listen to all the way through with everything related and balanced, the tempos and moods offsetting each other [...]” (Dadomo).

Jones reveals: “the album was completed and mixed with no-one (including myself) knowing so!” (M. Jones 12). It is probable that Malcom Jones could have released it in autumn of 1969, because in his estimation, it was almost finished: “I still feel that there was enough already made to complete an album” (M. Jones 10). When interviewer Chris Welch asked Barrett, if he were satisfied with the album, he responded: “Well... no. I always find recording difficult. I can only think in terms of [...] forty minutes of sound, but I can’t in terms of the music industry” (Welch).

To rephrase it, Barrett was prepared for 40-minute recording sessions, jams or live appearances, but he was not willing to succumb to the requirements of the music industry. Although Barrett would still issue such critical remarks, most of the reviews focussed on “madcap Syd”. One example is a line from “Melody Maker” cited by Malcom Jones: “a fine album full of madness and lunacy representing the Barrett mind unleashed” (M. Jones 13). More than 50 years removed from 1970, it could be argued that “The Madcap Laughs” was one of the first “lo-fi” albums, before that genre had even been invented in the “first half of the 1990s” because the record “sounds as if it were produced in a non-professional setting” (B. Jones 351). At the time of its release though, the imperfections of “The Madcap Laughs” would only fuel the madcap myth.

In conclusion, the demythologised tale of the Pink Floyd band-split in early 1968 is one of competing approaches to music production: the artistic / non-commercial (Barrett) and the architectural / commercial (Waters). Waters took over the band from Barrett (and replaced him with Gilmour) first and foremost to accomplish (or keep up) commercial success, whereas to Barrett Pink Floyd was a way to express his art in the combination of the light show and his avant-garde musical performance. When Barrett chose to attempt a come-back in 1969, Waters and Gilmour assumed the role of sympathetic producer Malcom Jones and instead of professionally editing the album, they ensured that there would be sonic evidence of the madcap Syd on the record. Desirably, this short paper will contribute to the reappraisal of the madcap Barrett myth.

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