

# SYD BARRETT

(ROGER KEITH BARRETT)  
PANCREATIC CANCER

**Born:** January 6, 1946

**Died:** July 7, 2006



"He was a visionary," said Roger Waters. "He was the key that unlocked the door to rock 'n' roll for me."

Roger Keith Barrett—nicknamed Syd after a drummer in his hometown Cambridge—was trained as a painter, but bewitched by The Beatles and Rolling Stones. "I was teaching him to play Stones riffs every lunchtime for a year at technical college," said David Gilmour. In 1965, Barrett joined Waters—another Cambridge pal—in London, and cofounded The Pink Floyd Sound.

Barrett's compact discography belies his importance. Pink Floyd's hits "Arnold Layne" and "See Emily Play," and *The Piper At The Gates Of Dawn* (1967) were largely his work. A couple of haunting cuts on *A Saucerful Of Secrets* (1968), 1970's scratchy solo albums *The Madcap Laughs* and *Barrett*, and outtakes and radio sessions complete his catalog.

Nonetheless, his influence extends from David Bowie ("His impact on my thinking was enormous") and Blur (whose "Far Out" is a nod to Barrett's "Astronomy Domine"), to R.E.M. (who covered "Dark Globe") and The Mars Volta (who performed "Interstellar Overdrive").

Pink Floyd—from whom he was ousted in 1968, his unreliability exacerbated by LSD—spent years in his shadow, to their irritation. "In the beginning the songs were all his and they were brilliant," Barrett's replacement Gilmour told *NME*, "but I don't think the actual sound of the whole band stems from Syd...Syd's thing was short songs."

Nonetheless, Barrett is referenced in Floyd's "Brain Damage" (*Dark Side Of The Moon*, 1973), "Nobody Home" (*The Wall*, 1979), and "Poles Apart" (*The Division Bell*, 1994), and is the subject of "Shine On You Crazy Diamond," from 1975's *Wish You Were Here*—at the mixing of which he unexpectedly materialized in Abbey Road studios. Jerry Shirley, a friend of the band who drummed for Barrett in 1970, remembered: "This overweight Hare Krishna-looking chap...I asked him what he was doing lately. 'Oh, you know, not much...I get up, eat, go for a walk, sleep.'" Barrett's reported reaction to "Shine On": "Sounds a bit old."

"Syd's father's death affected him very heavily," explained Gilmour, "and his mother always pampered him—made him out to be a genius of sorts." Too fragile for stardom and damaged by drugs, he spent the rest of his life in London, then Cambridge—barely acknowledging his past. Waters, however, namechecked Barrett at Floyd's 2005 Live8 reunion, and appeared at a London tribute concert in May 2007, as did a Gilmour-led Floyd.

Although Barrett's death was initially attributed to complications from diabetes, he succumbed to pancreatic cancer in a Cambridge hospital. "So much of his life was boringly normal," his sister told *The Sunday Times*. Describing him as "a hopeless handyman," she said: "When Roger was working he liked to listen to jazz tapes. Thelonious Monk, Django Reinhardt, Charlie Parker and Miles Davis were his favourites...but apart from the early Rolling Stones, he'd lost interest in pop music a long time ago."



**RIGHT** The piper in his psychedelic, Floydian heyday, circa 1967.