

# SET THE CONTROLS FOR THE HEART OF THE MI

Oregano Rathbone more than half-loves the half-live, half-studio *Ummagumma*

**R**emarkably, given Pink Floyd's precarious circumstances at the start of 1968, one year later it appeared that everyone suddenly wanted a piece of them.

For these now fully-rejuvenated workaholics, 1969 was effectively bookended by studio sessions for film soundtracks: Barbet Schroeder's *More* between February and May, and an ill-starred travail in Rome in December for Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*. (In a curiously inverted echo of Syd Barrett's anarchic composition *Have You Got It Yet?*, the band altered their work daily in a doomed attempt to indulge the director's whim, all the while feasting like Tudors in the Hotel Massimo D'Azeglio on the MGM dime. First-class drudgery.)

The Floyd were also invited to jam, in their most earnest space-rock idiom, during a BBC *Omnibus* special devoted to the moon landing on 20 July: the resulting interlude, *Moonhead*, can be heard on the *Early Years* box set. The same month saw David Gilmour and Roger Waters in Abbey Road with their purportedly moonstruck former colleague Syd, working on the latter's extraordinary first solo album, *The Madcap Laughs* (see pages 92-97).

And then there was the touring. Always, the touring. Europe had proved hugely receptive to the Floyd in 1968, but in the first half of 1969 they were a fixture on UK motorways as they toured their home circuit. They still couldn't sell singles to save their lives, of course: December 1968's *Point Me At The Sky* had nosedived, but did at least harbour a B-side which would become a central pillar of the live set for several years thereafter. Careful With That Axe Eugene, alternately known as Murderotic Woman, was a melodically simple but undeniably effective "slice" of rock theatre which dined out on the band's uncanny mastery of dynamics (and which would also crop up, re-badged as *Come In Number 51, Your Time Is Up*, on the *Zabriskie Point* soundtrack).

This was implicit *Grand Guignol*: no props were involved, but Waters' chillingly convincing screams befouled audience gullets regardless. And the song's protagonist just had to be called "Eugene", didn't he? The kind of effete fop, familiar to devotees of Hammer and Amicus films, who *would* have an axe lying about in his inherited manse.

You can hear it to its best advantage on *Ummagumma*: a double LP which was the Floyd's first on the new Harvest imprint (see



*Ummagumma's* *Hipgnosis* sleeve design alludes to the notion of serialism, "an infinite series of dimensions". The picture was taken at the house of Libby January, where *The Tea Set* and Gilmour's band *Jokers Wild* played in 1965 for Libby's 21st birthday – as did an unknown Paul Simon

pages 52-57). Split between a live album (recorded at Mothers in Erdington on 27 April and Manchester College of Commerce on 2 May) and a studio disc subdivided into solo sections from each member, *Ummagumma* derived its title from a slang term for sex coined by band associate Iain "Emo" Moore. Floyd aficionados tend to file it under "well-loved but inessential": its impenitent live tracks (*Astronomy Domine*, *Set The Controls For The Heart Of The Sun* and *A Saucerful Of Secrets*, plus "Eugene") reveal a hive mind only attainable with constant touring, giving a beautiful snapshot of a set which hauled them back into serious contention on the road.

The studio half, meanwhile, has its troublesome aspects – even Nick Mason is unlikely to have listened to the clonks and rattles of his own *The Grand Vizier's Garden Party* more than once – but David Gilmour's *The Narrow Way* pleasingly combines bucolic acoustic strums and UFO strafes of reversed

slide guitar with a scowling cyclical riff and a coda of tense foreboding ("Following the path as it leads towards the darkness in the north").

Rick Wright's sternly allegorical *Sisyphus* (sic) references the Greek legend of Sisyphus, doomed to perpetually roll a boulder up a hill, while Roger Waters' fond *Grantchester Meadows* remains one of the Floyd's loveliest moments: garlanded with birdsong, an atypically plaintive acoustic paean to nature and home.

Waters' other contribution, *Several Species Of Small Furry Animals Gathered Together In A Cave And Grooving With A Pict*, reveals an innate genius for comically disturbing tape manipulation, no doubt facilitated by his friendship with Scottish composer Ron Geesin (see pages 26-27). It's tempting to surmise that Waters' cod-Scottish tirade is a tribute to Geesin: and as this piece is being written by a Scotsman, it's worth pointing out that the Floyd bassist's Scottish accent is annoyingly first-rate.