

## **Unspoken bricks** *Ezrin and Guthrie ring their bell on "The Wall"*

**by Christian Diemoz**

### ***Introduction: how many untold bricks?***

Despite Pink Floyd's historical discretion, nowadays we probably know more details on *The Wall*, than what Roger Waters, the mind behind this masterpiece, would like us to. Many "disclosed bricks" came from interviews, like the fundamental one by BBC host Tommy Vance (aired on 1st November 1979), or from the outstanding "Inside Out" book, recently out by drummer Nick Mason (dedicating the chapter "Writings On The Wall" to the concept project which emanated from the 1977 in-famous "spitting incident").

In a sincerity effort, however, it has to be mentioned that much is known thanks to less public sources. Every fan sure experienced goosebumps by listening to the set of demos with different (early) lyrics and musical atmospheres for many lp tracks. The same happened thanks to the three pro-shot videos witnessing gigs of the 1980/81 tours (New York, London and Dortmund). Equally inspiring were some recording logs (learning us that our Graal was known, in CBS close circle, as "PROJECT # 5622-2"), and the storyboard for Alan Parker's film (both spreaded from the internet months ago).

Satisfied by these "alternative voices", but willing to go deeper, yours truly tried to tear down some more "unspoken bricks", and contacted two of the key figures in the album team: producer Bob Ezrin and co-producer James Guthrie, who lent to the band also his able engineer hand. Luckily enough, they kindly opened the door at first knock. What follows is their toll of the bell on the story of the album that marked a "no-turning back" point for Pink Floyd. Undoubtedly, they shed more light on a work that finds its roots in paranoia and obscure colours, so that respect and gratefulness have to be paid them for their memories recollection.

### ***The approach: genesis of a masterpiece***

*The Wall* got released on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1979. Work started on it a year before, when Roger Waters submitted to band members two demos, as ideas to be developed in order to become Pink Floyd's last album of the eighties. *Bricks In The Wall* got the majority of votes, making *The Pros And Cons Of Hitch-Hiking* fall in Roger's personal drawer, and turned into group's new mission. During the autumn of 1978, Floyd then started to make rough versions of some tracks at Britannia Row, the habitual "recording bunker" for the group.

As for the personnel to be involved in the project, "Inside Out" clears how the band "started looking and asking round for a young but talented engineer with a track record who could bring a different approach to our sound". In the end, Alan Parker recommended James Guthrie, "who had been producing and engineering a number of bands, including *Heatwave*, *The Movies* and *Judas Priest*". His track record, "particularly an instantly identifiable shimmering audio edge he had brought to his work with *Runner*, suggested that he could add a fresh, brighter feel to our work".

At that time, James knew Pink Floyd by their name and fame. "I had never attended a show, - he explains - but I was familiar with the music. 'See Emily Play' had quite an affect on me when I first heard it. I think I was 13 when I bought that record. I was playing it to all my friends saying, 'You've got to listen to this!'. That's still one of my favourite Floyd songs. Then of course, 'Meddle' and 'Dark Side'. I was not familiar with their gear or methods, just stories that you hear. I actually became a much bigger fan by working with them".

Soon after he spoke his "yes" to manager Steve O' Rourke, James met Roger, to discuss the concept of the album. It might sound as a standard procedure, but for details lover Guthrie it had more to do with a working philosophy/state of mind. "It's very important to have a clear understanding of

*what an artist is trying to achieve. Obviously, the creative direction is going to change once you get into making the album, that's normal, but the only way to help realize someone's vision is to have a sympathetic view of it. After that, you can bring your own ideas to the project. But the focus must start with their vision. Remember, the rest of the band were just getting to grips with the project as well. They would eventually all bring their own personalities to the music". As it concerns his first encounter with Waters, James recalls that it was "mostly just to see how the chemistry was between us. To see how we got on. We talked about past projects that I had done, which bits he liked and he explained his concept for the 'The Wall' and gave me a copy of his demo".*

The scale and challenge of the project seemed overwhelming and was immediately attractive to the young engineer. *"Roger was an imposing figure, very direct in his communication. He was testing me. After our first meeting, we had regular phone conversations, more meetings with the rest of the band and we began work, just the five of us, in October of 1978 at Britannia Row Studios in London". Guthrie soon realised it wasn't to be as simple as that. "Roger had written enough material for three albums, so we began by arranging and recording the most complete songs. That way we could start to get our heads around the shape of the story. At that time they were still playing together more as a band, rather than one guy at a time, which is the way we ended up recording in France. Working on a concept album is akin to making a movie. How you tell the story is all important".*

On the other hand, to go on with Nick Mason's book, *"the infinitely patient James was a complementary counterbalance to the extremely energetic and often irascible Bob Ezrin. Although we had produced Dark Side and Wish You Were Here ourselves, Roger had decided to import Bob as a co-producer and collaborator. Bob was an established producer who had worked on a number of Alice Cooper albums and Lou Reed's Berlin". He first met the band at Britannia Row too. "When I first heard the demos, I knew that I was about to embark on the making of a great Pink Floyd album and every one of the past ones had been milestones in their own way. But I didn't realize how important the album was going to be until we did our first rough sequence of the rough tracks and demos".*

After moving its first steps in the United Kingdom, *The Wall* – as James Guthrie mentioned – got developed in France. In Nick Mason's words, this happened because *"although Britannia Row had been adequate for recording Animals, it now became clear that it was not up to the task for The Wall. We had already installed a large quantity of replacement equipment. This was primarily due to Bob and James wanting to upgrade it to their own demanding standards, and it seems that everyone who arrived to work on the production side also brought along their own preferred piece of kit".*

Exile had, however, to be embraced also due to financial reasons (notoriously, the Norton Warburg crack). Bob Ezrin sees this matter, more than any technical issue, as the main reason for the recording party to temporarily transfer in the area surrounding Nice. *"Britro would have been perfectly acceptable to me, but the band had made a business decision to take their activities out of Britain for a year, so we were forced to move recording elsewhere". That's why, to quote our favourite drummer once again, "like naughty children abandoning an untidy playroom, we were able to leave the financial mess behind for the professionals to clear up".*

### ***The sessions: war of the Gods***

You can't figure out how a Pink Floyd recording session could be, unless you attend one. Magic has to be in the air (or, to better say, in the studio). This is the main idea yours truly made, after hearing James and Bob on this side of the story. The attempt to make Guthrie highlight a couple "peaks" along the creative path for *The Wall*, for example, simply went unsuccessful. *"It's very difficult for me to pick two moments because I'm so wrapped up in the project. Also, the technical and musical aspects of making an album merge into one thing for me. Really, the songs are the high point. But in terms of the process, there are some great memories. Just a few of which are: Witnessing Roger's*

vision. *The first time I recorded David and had the instant recognition of that amazing voice. Helping arrange the songs at the very beginning, as the project began to take shape around us. Building guitar solos from multiple performances. Playing drums with Nick on 'Happiest Days' and string synths with David on 'Empty Spaces'. Layering textures of acoustic, electric and lap steel guitars. More textures of Rick's keyboards (he played much more on the album than people give him credit for). Hearing Michael's beautiful orchestrations".*

About orchestra parts, Ezrin has a personal story to tell. *"The band and I agreed that I could build side 3 of the double album - the side that was mostly orchestrated. The reason for the orchestration was that the album reached the point of surreality by side 3 - became like a journey through the Looking Glass. Michael Kamen was not only my best friend but also my collaborator on a number of projects before PF and my musical brother. We spoke a common language and we orchestrated the album together - mostly in my rented apartment in Toronto with one of us at the piano and the other one at the table writing. We did the recording in NY at Columbia Studios".*

However, atmosphere had to be not so heavenly as these lines seem to paint. Chronicles are plenty of stories about this being the most flawed time in band members' relationships, especially between Roger and Rick (with the latter clashing with the former after he rejected his request to count among lp's producers). Both our interviewees agree, even if truth is not always exactly what reporters write. *"Most of the personal disputes - says James - were already established before The Wall. Certainly Roger's relationship with Rick, but things did deteriorate further on that level during the making of the album. There were some very difficult moments, but I don't think there was ever a question of Roger not finishing the album. He's a very strong person. Not easily deterred from his path. If everyone else had walked out, he would still have finished it".* On his side, Bob Ezrin situates on almost the same wavelength: *"Rick was looking for respect from Roger and a sense that he was a valued member of the band. He was definitely feeling Roger becoming more and more distant from him. He was becoming insecure about his role. He had good reason to be. Roger was particularly hard on him".*

### ***Another Brick pt. II: back to juke-boxes***

*The Wall* has to be owed for many things, included bringing Floyd back to release singles, a format they abandoned in 1968. Choice fell on *Another Brick In The Wall pt. II*, soon to become band's insignia throughout the whole world, despite an unusual (for Pink Floyd, obviously) disco mood. Many observers - and Nick Mason is among them - credit Bob Ezrin for this release, recalling his long time dream to play a starring part in a successful disco single. Needless to say, he denies: *"I pushed it through because I knew that it was an undeniable hit song. The band was not interested in singles but that was the culture I came from and so I was determined to make it into one. They only played one verse and one chorus and refused to do more. I copied those and created a second verse and chorus and decided to add the kids. It was obviously a winning formula".*

Oh yes, the chorus. It's undeniable those *Islington Green School* children obstinately singing "We don't need no education" gave the track a personality by itself. Many interviews and documentaries, however, agree on the fact London based engineer Nick Griffiths (serving Floyd at Britannia Row, while they were in the US) didn't follow the original band request while putting together that part. Anyways, would it be possible to imagine *Another Brick* without that particular choir phrase? Here comes James Guthrie's advice: *"It was great; instant atmosphere. We actually sent Nick a 24 track tape, with a stereo mix of the song on 2 tracks and asked him to fill up the rest of the tracks with different performances of the kids. That way we would have plenty of choices when making a balance, which we then transferred to the master tape. On one take, he put some of the kids into an echoey stair well. I used a lot of that one in the mix. It really helped to increase the size of the chorus".* About "who made what", James has his own mind: *"I've read numerous interviews about this subject and there's been a lot of arguing over the years as to who came up with the idea. It was Roger's idea to have the school kids sing. That was the big deal. The process of adding an extra*

*verse with just the kids singing on their own was obvious. I instinctively put together a rough mix with the new arrangement, but everyone already knew it was the right thing to do. I don't understand what all the fuss was about. Anyone making the record would have done that".*

On the reasons for a comeback to singles, many speculations can be done. The appetite for an immediate commercial profit remains the easiest one, while others (about Floyd trying to stay on the wave, with many major bands exploring dance path, like The Rolling Stones with *Miss You* and Queen with *Hot Space*) are less probable, but possible. On this subject, though, Guthrie conserves a clear view. *"The band were not looking to follow anyone else and I think their attitude toward singles had changed over the years. Particularly since 'Money' had received so much air play without initially being released as a single. Sometimes the radio DJs just pick their own singles. The band were actually quite happy with the idea of selling lots of records! As the album took shape, 'Brick 2' was clearly the best choice for a first single. We were not trying to make it blatantly commercial, just a good groove. But the commerciality of Roger's chorus hook was already clear on his demo and the school kids certainly helped".*

### ***Mixing The Wall: sparkling or smooth?***

The chapter previous to the release of the double album that disclosed Pink's odyssey to the masses saw a major argument between Roger Waters and David Gilmour, the other two producers of the lp. Something of that kind already happened for *Dark Side Of The Moon*, and like in 1973 this had to do with real artistic issues, rather than with personal rows. *"Mostly – tells Bob Ezrin - we all had a common vision of the sound and scope of the album by mixing time. There were a few notable points of contention, the most famous of which surrounded Comfortably Numb and the orchestration. David didn't want it in the body of the song and Roger and I did. We negotiated this for weeks before it was finally agreed to leave it in this form. I think we made the right choice".*

Questioned on the mixing days, James Guthrie remembers the tensions between the band and CBS/Sony, the label who later released the album. Guess that their head of promotion even came to claim the finished work *"a travesty of the record he'd first been played".* An unexpected hard behaviour, if one considers that Floyd always scored overwhelming success. *"Well, I don't know who that executive was, or quite when he'd been played an earlier version. – states Guthrie - The thing about the Floyd is that they never involve the record label in the making of an album. They have a production deal, money changes hands and they say, 'You'll hear it when it's done'. There were probably some people at the label who took exception to that approach. Most of the tension was to do with making a Christmas release date. Someone did threaten to come down to the studio and take the tapes from us, but they would never have got away with it. This band has an enormous amount of clout. There was a race to get it done, though. That always creates tension. The artistic tension was to be expected when you're trying to get a group of strong willed individuals to agree on something".*

For sure, a funny moment came with the first record company playback of the album. *"At last, we had finished. – recalls James - A playback reception was organized at CBS records in Los Angeles, as an opportunity for the whole company to hear what we had been doing for the past year. I took a 1/4" tape of the completed album to the conference room, where the reception would be held later that evening. They had a sound system with huge JBL speakers and I played some of the mixes just to check that everything would sound good for the party".*

Hundreds of people were expected. Everyone duly arrived and helped themselves to the spread of food and drink. *"The air was turbulent with anticipation. What had the band been up to? What could they expect? We turned up the volume, the room went quiet, and 'In The Flesh?' burst from the speakers. Guitars and drums assaulting the guests. 'Lights!' Roger's voice filled the room. 'Roll the sound effects!' The Stuka dive bombers (which, incidentally, were taken from original wire recordings made during the war) screeched down on us with their intimidating sirens and, as they reached the peak of their dive, blew out the right hand speaker. One song into the album and we*

*had to stop the tape! The search began. We set off around the building trying to find a big office with a half-decent sound system. We moved quickly through the vacant rooms as everyone was either at the reception or had already gone home. Nothing! This was a major record label and we couldn't find a proper playback system for the album. How could they tell who they were signing? Eventually, we found a corner office with a reasonable pair of bookshelf speakers. The room wasn't nearly big enough for this many people. Phil Taylor (in charge for the sound equipment) and I looked at each other. The furniture would have to come out! We removed the poor guy's desk, his couch, chairs, anything that moved. Dimming the lights, we grabbed cushions from the other offices and scattered them across the floor. First come, first served! People filed in and lay down on the cushions. Within minutes, the place looked like an opium den. We pushed 'play' and a few minutes later it started to smell like one too. The overflow was out the doorway and down the hall. The record label had been transformed".*

### ***Wiser after the event?***

It's always easy to look at things years after, when you know how the story ended, and who married the Princess. More difficult is to take the right step, at the appropriate moment, when you're in the middle of a dance. Anyways, Guthrie, had he to be given again the chance to re-live *The Wall* days, would not change much of what he decided and did. *"In retrospect, there are always things that you feel could be improved. The thing is that the album works as a whole. It tells the story in a very atmospheric way and with some exceptional songs. I suppose it would have been nice to have them playing together as a band more, but they weren't in that space in those days and who knows; maybe the difference wouldn't have been as good. I think I'll leave it as it is. Although it would be fun to do a 5.1 version. If that happens, I would put 'What Shall We Do Now?' back in. We had run time restrictions in those days, due to the vinyl release format".*

### ***Brick by Brick on the road***

With the work on the album over, James got enrolled in the live Wall troops. He sat behind the board for the whole 1980 and 1981 tours. As a consequence, his hand basically signed the 2001 release of *Is There Anybody Out There*. Ask him about the nights in Los Angeles, New York, London and Dortmund and you'll get an instant picture, both considering technical and human elements, of those record-breaking shows. *"The halls all presented their own challenges. Earl's Court was probably the most difficult because it is often used for exhibitions. Most of the centre section is actually hollow. They pull up the floor, exposing a deep chamber, flood the area and have boat shows in there! The real ceiling is about 40 feet above the one that you can see. cavernous and acoustically pretty tricky. Dortmund was probably the easiest acoustically, but our best performances were at the other three. The European audiences were generally more polite. America tends to be a bit more over the top. But you encounter big fans everywhere. Every night in L.A. the occupants of the first ten or so rows of seats immediately in front of the mixing area would light up 'as one' on the downbeat of 'In The Flesh?' A thick cloud of pot smoke would drift over us and after a few bars, we were able to see the stage again".*

If you ever wondered why German fans were so lucky to be treated with *The Wall* concerts, despite halls like Westfalenhalle certainly existing in others European countries, be aware that *"it's a good question and it seemed a bit odd to me too. I honestly don't know. It must have had something to do with the size of the arena, availability and their willingness to present a show of that magnitude. Possibly it had something to do with a deal that Steve O'Rourke had going at the time".*

### ***Conclusions: a pièce de résistance***

Freedom of mind has to be allowed on *The Wall*, especially to fans who got addicted to Floyd in the early seventies. That said, you can complain it's commercial, glamorous, or whatever you think, but a serious analysis can't omit an element, deserving universal agreement: the only double studio album in Floyd's discography outstandingly stands on its feet. Tracks have a strong element/feeling of cohesion, making the concept fall as hard as a marble block on listener's ears.

For sure, the fact Roger Waters developed the whole project in his own mind before submitting it to the band (as we all know, he even had a clear idea of the esthetical side of the opera, i.e. album cover) influenced the final result. Anyways, even if the making of the lp brought unavoidable sufferances to bassist mates, some of their contributions undoubtedly increased *The Wall* shining potential (even by de-personalising an history that, in his original form, would have contained too many intimate elements to appear fully understandable). The same applies for the work conducted by the production team. We'll never know how it would have sounded if James wasn't at the mixing desk, or without Bob as a producer, or without Michael Kamen directing the orchestra (and without Steve O' Rourke, who always knew which keys had to be stroked in order to obtain that particular result, in the leading position). Significantly enough, the nature of the project itself applied to his realisation: anyone involved brought and placed his/her own brick, to build a successful Wall, only to fall under a Supreme Court judgement, but to resist everything else, time and critic marks included.

### ***Acknowledgements***

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