

Why Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon* continues to resonate after 50 years

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March 1 marked 50 years since the release of *The Dark Side of the Moon* by the English rock band Pink Floyd, among the most influential and significant albums in the history of popular music.

Recorded during a period of significant social and political unrest in the early 1970s, *The Dark Side of the Moon* (or *Dark Side*) paints a picture of conditions in modern capitalist society that has consistently resonated with tens of millions globally.

The themes addressed in the album's 10 songs—including class conflict, war, mental illness and death—account in large measure for the 45 million-plus copies of *Dark Side* that have been sold over the past half-century.

Although it is not the best-selling album of all time, *Dark Side* is by far the longest charting record in music history. Remarkably, the album has been on the Billboard Top 200 for a total of 971 weeks, including a continuous stretch of 741 weeks—14 years and three months—from its original vinyl release in 1973 well into the compact disc era in 1987.

Explaining the wide appeal of *Dark Side*, Roger Waters, former Pink Floyd bassist and creative force behind the album concept and song lyrics, explained to music critic and journalist John Harris in 2005 that “the whole record might be about the pressures and preoccupations that divert us from our potential for positive action, if you like.”

The artistic maturity of Waters, 28 or 29 years old at the time, is evident in the lyrics of the song “Time,” for example, which address the subject of mortality and the importance of using one's time wisely. Members of at least three generations of young people have memorized these lines:

*Ticking away the moments that make up a dull day
Fritter and waste the hours in an offhand way
Kicking around on a piece of ground in your hometown
Waiting for someone or something to show you the way
Tired of lying in the sunshine, staying home to watch the rain
You are young and life is long, and there is time to kill today
And then one day you find ten years have got behind you
No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun*

Similarly, on “Money,” which became a hit single in 1973, Waters parrots the greed and attitude of the wealthy elite to the inequality inherent within capitalist society:

*Money
Get back
I'm alright, Jack, keep your hands off of my stack
Money*

It's a hit

Don't give me that do goody good bullshit

I'm in the high-fidelity first-class traveling set

And I think I need a Lear jet

On “Us and Them,” Waters addresses the class divisions in society:

Down and out

It can't be helped

But there's a lot of it about

With, without

And who'll deny

It's what the fighting's all about

In addition to Waters, the other band members—David Gilmour on guitar and vocals, Nick Mason on drums and Richard Wright on keyboards—all made important contributions to the music. Their creative input is evident on the opening instrumental track “Speak to Me” by Mason, the guitar solo on “Money” and vocals throughout by Gilmour and the keyboards on the instrumental “Any Colour You Like” by Wright.

Other notable contributions by studio musicians include the stunning and memorable vocal improvisation by Clare Torry on the “Great Gig in the Sky” and the iconic tenor sax solo by Dick Parry on “Money.”

Along with its thematic and musical elements, *Dark Side* is also significant for its sound qualities. Produced during the rise of 1970s progressive rock music and the “concept album” format with which Pink Floyd became identified, *Dark Side* excels as a cohesive audio masterpiece. The album is groundbreaking for its intermingling of both simple and complex musical arrangements with audio collages and loops, sound effects and spoken word samples.

Dark Side was recorded over an eight-month period, from May 31, 1972 to February 9, 1973, at Abbey Road Studios in London. The band was assigned studio staff engineer Alan Parsons, who had worked with Pink Floyd on their 1970 album *Atom Heart Mother* and on the Beatles' *Abbey Road* (1969) and *Let It Be* (1970) albums. Parsons would go on to establish himself as a successful songwriter and musician in his own right with The Alan Parsons Project later in the 1970s.

Parsons, responsible for including the audio loops of clock sounds at the beginning of “Time” and the coin and cash register sounds at the beginning of “Money,” told music journalist Martin Popoff, “Being an engineer for Pink Floyd was arguably the

biggest challenge I ever gave myself. They're so sound oriented; they used the studio to the absolute maximum."

Another audio component introduced by Waters was the use of a series of questions on cue cards asked of various people around the studio. The questions included, "Are you afraid of dying?" and "When was the last time you were violent? Were you in the right?" The best responses came from the Abbey Road Studio doorman Jerry O'Driscoll, who can be heard on "The Great Gig in the Sky" saying, "I'm not frightened of dying, any time will do," and on "Speak to Me," saying, "I've always been mad, I know I've been mad."

In addition to taking advantage of the first solid state—as opposed to vacuum-tube—mixing board and state-of-the-art 16-track analog tape, the band made use of synthesizers for special keyboard and sound effects. The album was recorded and then mixed for quadrophonic sound and was one of the earliest LPs issued in this format in December 1973.

The fold-out album cover design by Storm Thorgersen and graphic arts studio Hipgnosis, with its abstract prism spectrum image on the front cover that transitions into an oscilloscopic image of a heartbeat on the interior, also played an important role in the presentation of the concept of the record and absorption of its meaning by the public.

There is no question but that the success of Pink Floyd's *Dark Side* was bound up with the rising popularity of the progressive rock music of bands such as Yes, Genesis, Emerson, Lake and Palmer and Jethro Tull. They all benefited from the emergence of stereo FM radio and what became known as album-oriented radio (AOR).

Reflecting the desire of audiences for a more substantial listening experience and, one might add, more challenging compositions and lyrical content, away from the pop music hits of top 40 AM radio, AOR helped drive the record business from the era of 45 singles in the 1950s and early 60s to the album era of the mid-1960s to the late 1970s.

The eighth studio album of the group founded in 1965 as the Pink Floyd Sound—after the African American blues artists Pink Anderson and Floyd Counsel—*Dark Side* catapulted the band and individual members into the status of rock music superstardom. They would go on to make three more highly successful records in the 1970s that contributed to their progressive rock credentials, *Wish You Were Here* (1975), *Animals* (1977) and *The Wall* (1979), all of which were envisioned and written primarily by Roger Waters.

Although Waters left Pink Floyd in 1985 to pursue a solo career one year after the release of *The Final Cut*, the group continued in the form of Gilmour, Mason and Wright (who died in 2008) and released three more albums, *A Momentary Lapse of Reason* (1987), *The Division Bell* (1994) and *Endless River* (2014).

As a solo artist, Waters has produced significant records, which have developed many of the themes present on *Dark Side*, such as *Amused to Death* (1992) and *Is This the Life We Really Want?* (2017). Waters' lesser known post-Pink Floyd creative activity include a classical music opera called *Ça Ira* (2005), about the French Revolution, and an adaptation of the narration for Igor Stravinsky's 1918 theatrical work *The Soldier's Tale* (2018).

In February of this year, Waters announced that he had rerecorded *Dark Side* as a solo project and would be releasing it to mark the 50th anniversary. He has said he intends to clarify and "readdress the political and emotional message of the whole album."

Further commenting on the new recording, Waters commented on YouTube, "It's not a replacement for the original which, obviously, is irreplaceable. But it is a way for the 79-year-old man to look back across the intervening 50 years into the eyes of the 29-year-old. ... And also, it is a way for me to honor a recording that Nick and Rick and Dave and I have every right to be very proud of."

Many articles have appeared in the corporate media on the *Dark Side* anniversary and, with varying success, have attempted to explain the lasting popularity of the record. Typical is the review by *New York Times* chief popular music critic Jon Pareles, who asserts that Waters' effort to emphasize a positive or redeeming message in the original album is "revisionist." Pareles writes that *Dark Side* "luxuriates in alienation, futility and desperation. Its persistence reveals just how many listeners feel the same."

Pareles also takes a deceitful, right-wing political swipe at Waters for his steadfast opposition to the US-NATO war against Russia in Ukraine over the past year, writing that "Waters would go on to spout cranky, conspiracy-theory-minded, pro-Russia political statements that many former fans abhorred. When *Dark Side* appeared, all that was far in the future."

Waters has, in fact, not made pro-Russian political statements but instead has consistently denounced the Putin regime's invasion of Ukraine, while also pointing out that the Moscow government was provoked into the war by the US and European powers.

Anyone familiar with Waters' artistic development over the past five decades recognizes the connection between the issues raised on *Dark Side* and his subsequent generally left-wing and antiwar political positions. While Pareles and many others in the official music press will not acknowledge it, there are large numbers of Pink Floyd fans all over the world who agree with Waters on the war in Ukraine and support the stand he has taken on many issues, including his demand that UK authorities release WikiLeaks founder and editor Julian Assange.

The truth is that the enduring attraction of *The Dark Side of the Moon* comes from the fact that its themes continue to speak to the problems of life facing millions in the 21st century as much or more than they did in 1973.



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