

Restored 1972 concert film *Pink Floyd at Pompeii—MCMXXII*: A record of artistic transition in a tumultuous world

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The restored and remastered concert film, *Pink Floyd at Pompeii—MCMXXII*, captures the acclaimed English rock band at a critical moment of transformation, which bridges the psychedelic experimentation of their early years to the conceptual, progressive rock that would soon make them global icons.

The film—whose original 1972 title was *Pink Floyd: Live at Pompeii*—had an international theatrical release at select theaters, including in IMAX with Dolby Atmos audio, on April 24 and was made available for purchase on DVD and Blu-Ray formats and digital streaming platforms on May 2.

This unique concert film finds renewed relevance, offering both longtime fans and new audiences a glimpse into the creative process that defined Pink Floyd in the early 1970s. Most of the 90+ minute movie was shot on 35mm film during a live performance on site at the ruins of the amphitheater in Pompeii, Italy with no audience.

The balance of the footage was shot at Studio Europasonor in Paris later that year and at Abbey Road Studios during the first days of the recording of *The Dark Side of the Moon* album. Segments of three tracks from that 1973 record, which went on to sell more than 50 million copies worldwide, are being developed, played back or rehearsed: “Brain Damage,” “On the Run” and “Us and Them.”

Pink Floyd at Pompeii is more than a concert film; it is a documentary record of Pink Floyd as they emerged from the devastating loss of their original frontman and creative force Syd Barrett. Barrett left the band in April 1968 due to a severe decline in his mental health and apparent schizophrenia, which was exacerbated by heavy use of psychedelic drugs such as LSD.

While Pink Floyd’s association with psychedelic rock music was perhaps more tragic than most, a series of performers—Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and Jim Morrison to name the most famous of them—fell victim to alcohol and drug abuse in 1970-71.

The psychedelic genre was identified loosely with the counterculture and hippie movement of the mid- to late-1960s, which sought to expand the template of popular music with surrealistic lyrics, audio innovations and multimedia “experience” performances that included advocacy of the use of hallucinogenic drugs.

Several important bands from the West Coast of the US were associated with the short-lived genre for one or more of their albums, including the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, the Beach Boys, the Byrds and The Doors. British groups that had a brief association with the form were the Beatles, Yardbirds and even the Rolling Stones.

All of these groups went through a significant creative evolution during 1966-67. While some music writers have foolishly argued that this development was the product of “mind expanding” drug use, the truth is that the transition of popular music into various forms of rock was the

product of important changes in society as a whole, including the influence of sophisticated electronic—although still analog and not yet digital—instruments and recording techniques combined with the social and political movement of the working class, youth and oppressed in the colonial and semi-colonial countries of that time-frame.

The remastered film depicts Pink Floyd’s development within this context as the group was forging a new identity that would later emerge in their most successful recordings. Filmed in October 1971, the band was in a state of flux and moving away from singles and into more musically complex compositions and meaningful lyrics, but still working with the sonic experimentation of the psychedelic era.

Drummer Nick Mason reflected on this transitional period: “We’d become an albums band because the great British public were so disinterested in buying our singles.” This rejection from the mainstream forced Pink Floyd to explore new artistic avenues, leading to their embrace of longer, more ambitious projects and multimedia live performance techniques.

The film’s setlist—featuring extended renditions of “Echoes,” “A Saucerful of Secrets” and “Set the Controls for the Heart of the Sun”—showcases the band’s move toward progressive rock’s expansive structures and tendency toward long improvisational segments. The performances are raw, immersive and unmediated by audience reactions, allowing the music and the ancient setting to speak for themselves.

The new film—meticulously remixed by renowned producer and musician Steven Wilson and the frame-by-frame digital restoration by Lana Topham—has prompted the surviving band members (keyboard player Rick Wright died in 2008) to revisit their youthful selves with both pride and humility. David Gilmour, who returned to Pompeii in 2017 for his own solo concert film, praised film director Adrian Maben’s vision: “All credit to Adrian. I don’t think any of us thought it would be as well-received and last in people’s minds for as long as it did.”

Mason has called it “a rare document of us before *Dark Side*,” but also expressed regret that no comparable films exist of the band performing their most successful albums. Roger Waters once described their pre-*Dark Side* performances as “experimental,” admitting, “To be honest, we probably did all this improvisation because we hadn’t yet come up with constructive songs to perform.” This point underscores the film’s value as a snapshot of Waters, who emerged as the central creative force of Pink Floyd, finding his voice as a major figure within the broader transition of rock music as a whole.

Director Maben’s ambition was to create a concert film unlike any other, one that would strip away the distractions of a live audience and place Pink Floyd’s music in a space resonant with history. Maben was drawn to Pompeii for its aura, describing the amphitheater as “a space outside of time” where the band could interact with the unique

environment.

The logistical challenges were immense: securing permission from local authorities, running cables through the ancient ruins and contending with the interruptions of religious processions and power outages. While Maben had been granted six days to make the film at Pompeii, two of those days were lost to electricity problems and a traffic jam caused by a Catholic festival that blocked the film crew and band from reaching the amphitheater.

Maben's intent was not merely to document a performance, but to create a dialogue between the music and the environment. The shots of the band members wandering among the ruins, walking on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius, and contemplating the boiling mud pools of Solfatara evoke an aesthetic that was popular in films of that era. As Maben later reflected, the film became "a eulogy to that beauty ... among the reddish streaks of the sunset sky over Pompeii."

The choice of Pompeii as the film's setting is laden with symbolic significance. Although there are no direct references to the social and political context within which the film was being made, the world situation was still rife with the upheavals and crises of the period, such as the May-June events of 1968, protests demanding an end to the Vietnam War and the constant danger of nuclear annihilation during the Cold War.

While Woodstock expressed something of the utopian and hedonistic ideals of the counterculture, Pompeii embodied a different kind of artistic vision: a city frozen in time by catastrophe, its ruins a testament to the fragility of human civilization from existential threats. When viewed within this context—and alongside the colossal development of technology—the multicrises of the 21st century represent an intensification of the same contradictions of world capitalism that existed more than a half century ago.

By performing in the empty amphitheater, Pink Floyd positioned themselves as innovators who were pushing the boundaries of modern music juxtaposed against what was left of an ancient culture. Maben's film placed the ancient frescoes, statues, mosaics and crumbling columns against futuristic instrumentals on the cutting edge of sonic technology.

Maben's camera lingers on the surviving artwork of Pompeii and invites the viewer to investigate and learn about the lost civilization. The film mirrors the music's oscillation between chaos and order, dissonance and harmony. The tight shots of Waters striking the gong, Gilmour coaxing ethereal sounds from his guitar as it sits horizontal above the dirt at his feet, Wright's lead vocals and Mason's energetic and hypnotic drum sequences are memorable.

In the opening and closing of *Pink Floyd at Pompeii*, the band performs parts one and two of the epic track "Echoes," a song that takes up all of side two of their 1971 album *Meddle*. "Echoes" is a song whose lyrics brought a significant shift in Pink Floyd's thematic concerns. Waters wrote the lyrics, and he has pointed out that this passage was a breakthrough creative moment for the band:

*Strangers passing in the street
By chance two separate glances meet
And I am you and what I see is me
And do I take you by the hand
And lead you through the land
And help me understand the best I can?*

Waters has described "Echoes" as a departure from the inward-looking psychedelia of the earlier Pink Floyd era and toward a more outward-facing empathy that explores the human desire for connection, a motif that would become central to *The Dark Side of the Moon* and subsequent albums.

The song's emphasis on shared experience and mutual understanding resonated with audiences in a world increasingly defined by alienation, exploitation and national antagonisms. The turn toward empathy, both lyrical and musical, laid the groundwork for Pink Floyd's enormous

success as their music became universally accessible.

One of the enduring frustrations for Pink Floyd and fans alike is the lack of visual documentation of the band performing their most successful albums, *The Dark Side of the Moon*, *Wish You Were Here* (1975) and *Animals* (1977). In this context, the film assumes even greater importance, serving as the sole cinematic record of the band's live energy and creative process during a pivotal era.

The film's influence has only grown over time, inspiring generations of musicians and filmmakers. As Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood once insisted to his bandmates, "Now this is how we should do videos." The film's focus on the interplay between musicians and emphasis on atmosphere over spectacle have made it a touchstone for artists seeking to capture the essence of live performance.

Pink Floyd at Pompeii is notable not only for its performances, but also for the on-camera discussion among band members about the role of technology in their music. The film includes scenes of the group at Abbey Road Studios, experimenting with synthesizers, tape effects and other innovations soon to define the sound of progressive rock. These moments reveal a band deeply engaged with the possibilities of the new tools, debating how best to harness technology as a means of artistic expression.

Maben has emphasized that the film is unique in showing "how the group actually work together in a recording studio." The interplay between analog equipment and musical creativity is foregrounded, highlighting both the excitement and the challenges of pushing boundaries.

The 2025 remaster and restoration has brought the film's visual and sonic qualities to new heights. Audiences have praised the enhanced color grading, improved clarity and immersive surround-sound, which reveal new details in both the performances and the setting. Some have noted that the IMAX screenings were particularly stunning in the power of the music and beauty of the visuals.

Critics and fans alike have also noted some weaknesses—such as the limited variety of camera angles and the relative lack of wide shots—but these are largely the result of lost footage and the technical constraints of the original production. The remaster cannot overcome these limitations, but it does allow for a deeper appreciation for what was achieved as a breakthrough project under challenging circumstances.



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