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MUSIC

Hidden in Archives, New Music

Fresh Releases by Pink Floyd and Queen

By ALAN LIGHT OCT. 31, 2014



Queen in 1981: from left, Brian May, Roger Taylor, John Deacon and Freddie Mercury. Neal Preston/Queen Productions

They say that dead men tell no tales. That does not, however, mean that they stop releasing new records.

Posthumous albums have been an inevitable and often tragic staple throughout pop music history. Sessions that weren't initially released because of legal complications, live albums and rehearsal takes have long been considered fair game for fans who continually crave more music from their favorite artists after they have died. The advent of CDs, and then of deluxe reissues and box sets, led to a widespread cleaning of the vaults from countless artists who weren't still around to offer their own opinions.

A different tradition, though, has also emerged over the years, which involves the estates or the surviving members of a band opting to add overdubs to incomplete tracks and put them out as new music. Next week, two of the biggest-selling groups in rock history — Pink Floyd and Queen — will release albums that are being presented as their first new material in decades.

The public's interest hasn't waned: In Britain, Amazon announced that Pink Floyd's "[The Endless River](#)" is on track to become the most pre-ordered album of all time, potentially surpassing One Direction's 2013 "Midnight Memories." "[Queen Forever](#)" is coming out in the middle of the band's wildly successful world tour, with Adam Lambert taking Freddie Mercury's spot as lead vocalist, in front of the guitarist Brian May and the drummer Roger Taylor.



Pink Floyd in 1994: from left, Rick Wright, David Gilmour and Nick Mason. Credit Andy Earl

But these albums raise the question of how exactly listeners are supposed to approach such retooled archival work. Jimi Hendrix is probably the artist whose unreleased recordings have been rebuilt, reconstituted and tweaked the most: Though he put out only three studio albums in his lifetime, there have been a dozen “new” Hendrix albums since his death in 1970, most recently 2013’s “People, Hell and Angels.” Numerous albums by Tupac Shakur and the Notorious B.I.G. have been released since their murders, sometimes with full songs constructed around a single unreleased verse. In May, Michael Jackson’s “Xscape,” announced as the first in a series, reached No. 2 on the Billboard album chart and included “[Love Never Felt So Good](#),” a hit duet beyond the grave with Justin Timberlake.

More confusing, perhaps, are the cases when bands have revisited and completed songs from their own past. The most prominent example was the three surviving Beatles’ decision to play over two rough demos by John Lennon — “[Free as a Bird](#)” and “Real Love” — and release them as part of the “Anthology” collections in 1995 and 1996. (“We just pretended” Lennon “had gone home on holiday,” Paul McCartney remarked at the time, “as if he’d said: ‘Just finish it up, I trust you. Just do it.’ ”)

Though all the members of the Rolling Stones who recorded “Exile on Main Street” and “Some Girls” are (miraculously) still alive, the band used a similar method when it recorded new parts to fill in outtakes that were included in the reissues of those albums.

All of these recordings are interesting, at some level, for obsessive fans, but it’s hard to know precisely what they are. Is the idea that this is what the songs would have sounded like had they been finished at the time? Or that this is what the artists hear now as the best way to develop them? Ideally, where would these new-old sessions fall within a historical discography?

“The Endless River” (Columbia) bears the additional burden of representing a version of Pink Floyd that many feel is already compromised. The keyboardist Rick Wright first left the band in 1979, followed by an acrimonious break with Roger Waters, the group’s singer-lyricist-bassist, in 1985. Still, the guitarist David Gilmour and the drummer Nick Mason continued as Pink Floyd; Mr. Wright rejoined them, and the three produced two albums, “A Momentary Lapse of Reason” (1987) and “The Division Bell” (1994).

Mr. Wright died in 2008, and a few years later, Mr. Gilmour excavated the tapes from the trio’s final 1993 jam sessions. He and Mr. Mason began overdubbing new parts to the old tracks, bringing in some of the same musicians who worked on “The Division Bell” and turned to Roxy Music’s Phil Manzanera, who is credited as co-producer, to help them shape the fragments into an album, which they have described as a tribute to Mr. Wright.

The results are almost entirely instrumental, structured as four “sides” or movements, an effort that Mr. Gilmour insists will be the final music released under the name Pink Floyd. Lovely passages alternate with segments that feel static and a bit dull. Parts of “The Endless River” clearly evoke some of the band’s much-loved instrumental

freak-outs, like “Echoes” or “Shine On You Crazy Diamond,” but the new songs can’t match the urgency and intensity of those space odysseys.

More than halfway through the album, “Allons-Y (1)” breaks out into a gallop that recalls “Run Like Hell” from 1980’s “The Wall,” and you can practically hear millions of fans sigh with relief, though Mr. Gilmour’s distinctive, slicing tone feels a bit softer, more burnished throughout. The most interesting element of “The Endless River” may be that of Mr. Wright’s keyboards; his role in the group was always a bit hidden and underappreciated, but there are moments where he plays a certain chord and suddenly the sound of Pink Floyd snaps into focus.

Stephen Hawking’s computerized voice turns up on “Talkin’ Hawkin’,” testifying to the power of communication (“All we need to do is make sure we keep talking”), but the only song with actual sung vocals is the final track, the single “Louder Than Words.” The lyrics, by Mr. Gilmour’s wife, the novelist Polly Samson, call for acceptance and camaraderie. (“The sum of our parts/The beat of our hearts/Is louder than words.”) It’s a fine concluding statement on the career of a revolutionary, fractious band, but it also reveals the limitations of Pink Floyd after Mr. Waters’s departure: Great sound can’t fully overcome flabby structure.

“Queen Forever” (Hollywood Records) is primarily an anthology of the band’s work, which is being presented as a “definitive collection of Queen’s timeless love songs.” Many would question the need for another retrospective; the group’s “Greatest Hits” is the best-selling record ever in Britain, with “Greatest Hits II” not far behind. Queen’s situation is similar to that of Pink Floyd: Of the four members of its classic lineup, one is dead (Mercury died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991), and one is no longer working with them (the bassist John Deacon retired in 1997). So the headlines for this set are the three opening songs, billed as the first material to feature the foursome since 1995’s “Made in Heaven” album.

The provenance of these recordings is complicated. Mercury’s long-rumored duet with Michael Jackson, “There Must Be More to Life Than This,” was initially written and recorded for Queen’s 1982 album “Hot Space,” but never completed. Mercury subsequently recorded Jackson singing the song at his home studio in Los Angeles. The band revived the track during sessions for 1984’s “The Works,” and the next year, a version of the song appeared on Mercury’s debut solo album, “Mr. Bad Guy.” This “new” performance fuses Queen’s original backing track with Mercury and Jackson’s separate vocals, all of which has been produced and remixed by William Orbit.

Mr. May’s “Let Me in Your Heart Again” was also attempted for “The Works” album, but not finished; the “Forever” version has newly recorded guitar parts and backing vocals. The third new track, “Love Kills,” was released as a disco-flavored Mercury solo recording on the soundtrack the producer Giorgio Moroder assembled for the 1984 rerelease of Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent movie “Metropolis.” The full band, however, played on a slower take of the original track, and this release resurrects that power-ballad rendition, with additional guitars and drums.

So just exactly what are these recordings? New or old, fresh or recycled? Would Mercury have approved or authorized them, or would he have come up with some entirely different direction? There’s no way to know. But, maybe owing to the unashamed showbiz nature of the band, or maybe because its members were close enough to being finished in the first place, they sure are a lot of fun, showcasing Queen in all of its glorious grandeur and bombast. Mr. May’s peeling, stacked guitars make no concession to keeping up with the times, and hearing Mr. Jackson’s voice — so intimate and vulnerable amid the rock and roll thunder — it’s easy to understand why he was such an avid fan of the group.

The rest of “Queen Forever” concentrates more than previous collections on the band’s romantic side (no “Bohemian Rhapsody” or “We Will Rock You/We Are the Champions”) and presents a case for them as a balanced group. (“Long Away” is the only Queen single sung by Mr. May, while “Drowse” features Mr. Taylor on guitar.) The three “new” songs may not be a revelation, but, unlike so many of these pop Frankenstein monsters, they fit right in.

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