



Dear Dairy

MUSIC → *Pink Floyd washed their hands of Atom Heart Mother, calling it “absolute crap”. So what possessed David Gilmour to perform it again 38 years later?*



Storm Thorgerson's enigmatic cover star, Lullabelle 111 of Potters Bar.

IN JUNE 1984, PINK FLOYD'S Roger Waters, unequivocal as always, told Richard Skinner on Radio 1: "If somebody said to me now, 'Right... here's a million pounds, go out and play *Atom Heart Mother*', I'd say: 'You must be fucking joking... I'm not playing that rubbish!'"

David Gilmour has generally taken a softer line about Floyd's experiment with orchestrated long-form composition, the 24-minute

title track to the band's first Number One album. "A good thing to have attempted which didn't come off very well," he told *Rolling Stone* in 2001. But elsewhere he's said, "All I've ever tried to do is play music I like listening to. Some of it now, like *Atom Heart Mother*, strikes me as absolute crap, and I no longer want or have to play stuff I don't enjoy."

And yet, on Sunday 15 June, Gilmour stepped onstage at the modest Cadogan Hall in Chelsea and played *Atom Heart Mother* one more time.

The event was billed as an evening with the piece's co-composer, Ron Geesin, and formed the opening shows at this year's Chelsea Festival. Always a bit miffed at having been uncredited on the album's famously oblique sleeve (though listed as a co-writer on the label), Geesin partly saw this brace of performances over a weekend as a gentle public reminder of his role in the album, but more pertinently as an opportunity to premier some new works for brass ensemble, choir

and cello, the elements he used on the *Atom Heart Mother Suite*. The brass were gathered from the Royal College Of Music, the choir was Canticum with conductor Mark Forkgen, Caroline Dale provided the cello solos and the band was Mun Floyd, an Italian tribute band who'd once made an aborted attempt to stage *AHM* and met Geesin in the process.

After entering into discussions with the festival organisers, Geesin asked Gilmour to join in. He agreed.

Geesin, a twinkly Scotsman who writes poems and aphorisms ("Fanaticism is enthusiasm without the humour") as well as idiosyncratic music for films, radio and the concert stage, opened the show with a witty piece for the brass ensemble, gave us a solo piano improvisation that sounded like a schizophrenic silent film accompanist whose

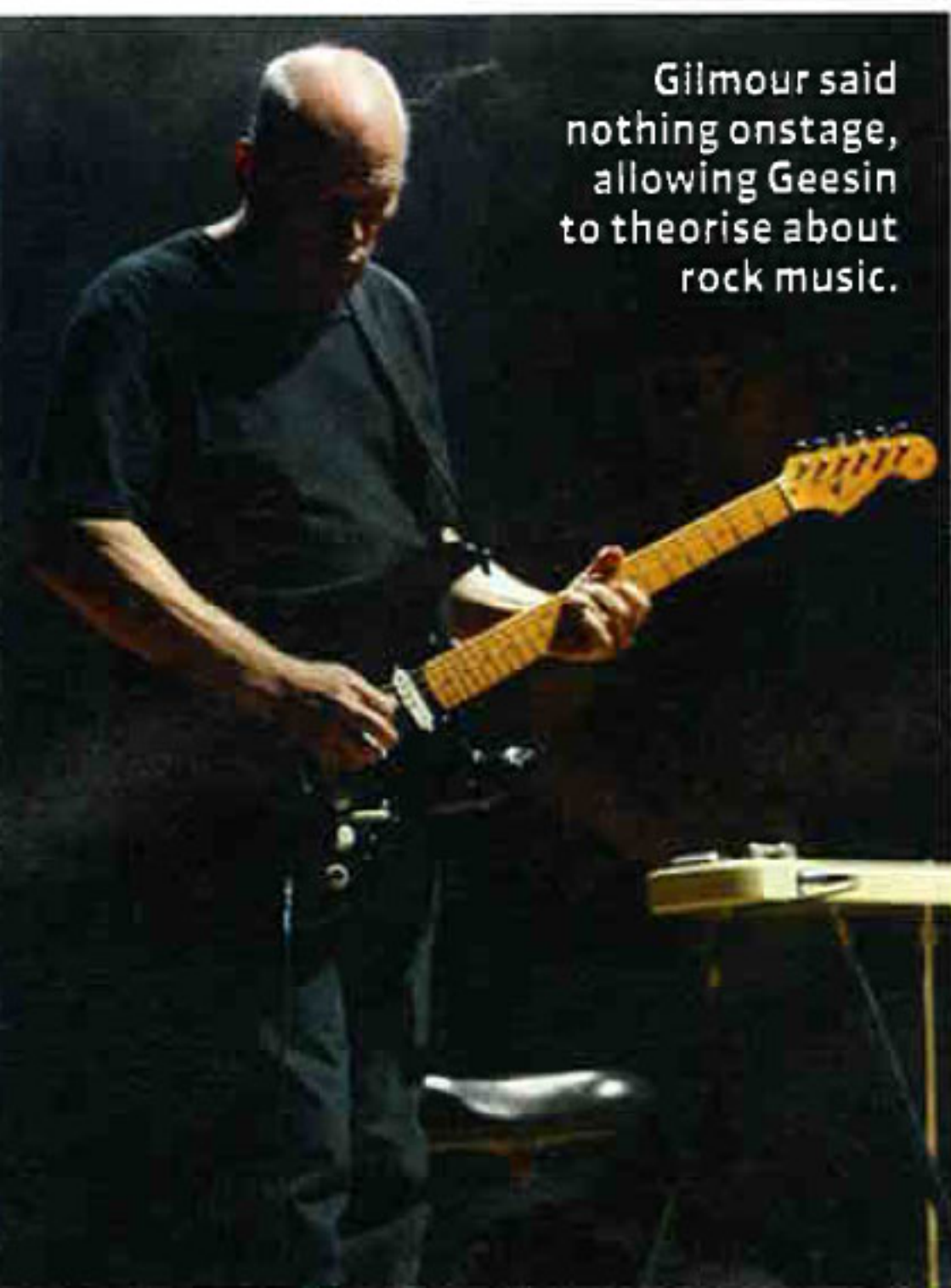
medication wears off in the middle of a chase sequence, a beautiful duet for Dale's cello and Geesin's banjo, a solo for bass marimba and a transfixing choral work harmonising with a slightly slowed recording of a blackbird. All of it pointed nicely towards the second-half finale of *AHM*. But first, a short talk on the genesis of the piece, known as *Epic* while Geesin was working on the score,

though the Floyd had been performing a version prior to his involvement that they'd called *The Amazing Pudding*.

"The opening section is clearly a critical statement about the nature of so-called 'progressive

rock,'" Geesin declares from his lectern. "I've got very mixed feelings about rock music. I find my part embodies a dilemma for and against. The group's drone is on the tonic note of E, my brass drones pull and twist that in tension, up and down, never

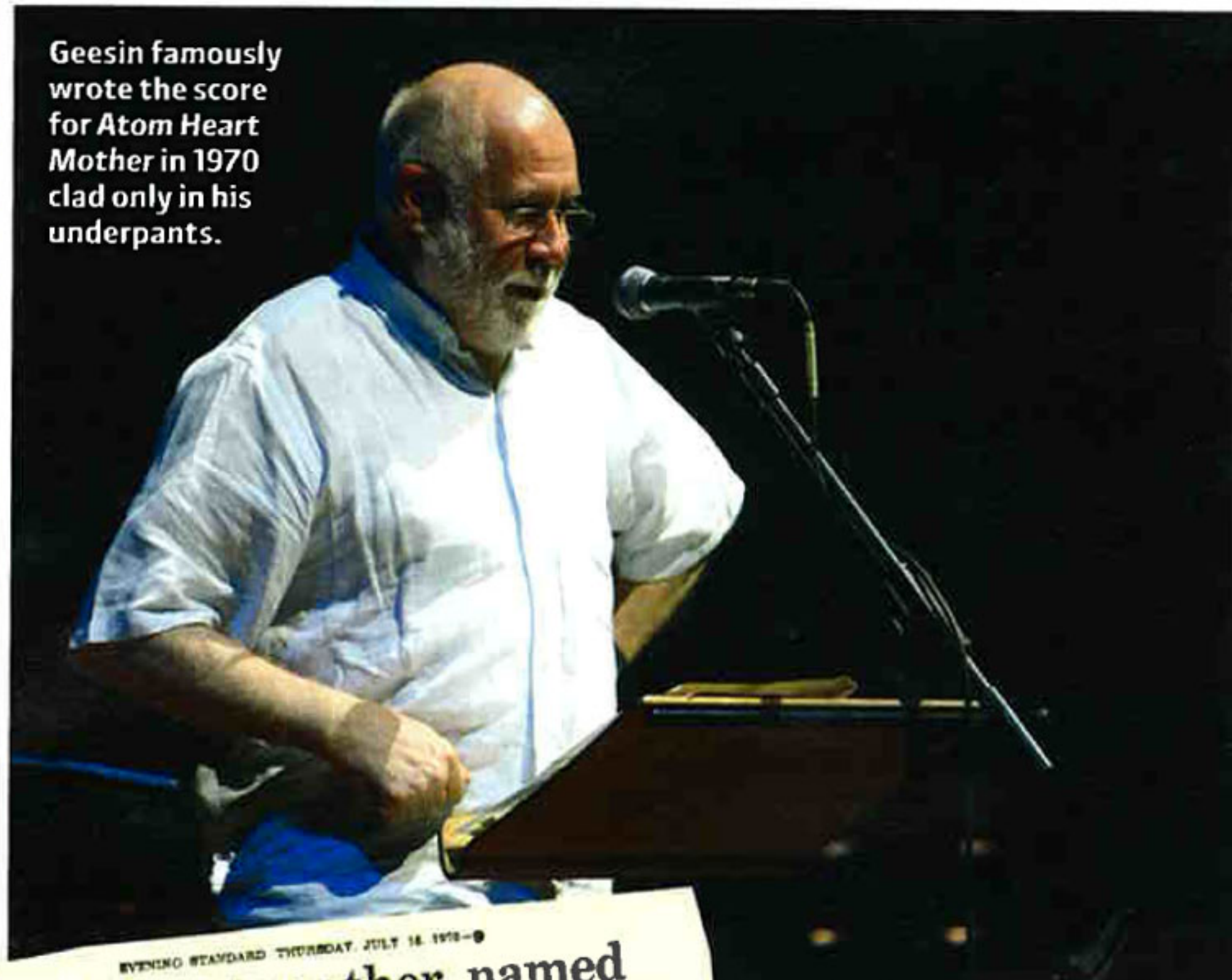
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"It could have been called Argument In E Minor For Band And Orchestra"



Gilmour said nothing onstage, allowing Geesin to theorise about rock music.



David Gilmour with brass, choir and strings, and (below) the *Evening Standard* story seen just prior to the Floyd's performance on John Peel's Concert Series that inspired the title.



Geesin famously wrote the score for *Atom Heart Mother* in 1970 clad only in his underpants.



Gilmour at the rehearsal, noting apparent absence of "absolute crap".



By MICHAEL JEFFRIES
BRITAIN'S first atomic-powered mum is 36-year-old widow Mrs Constance Ladell, of Crescent West, Hadley Wood, Barnet.

The secret
Her third sister, Beulah, 38, also married, and her brother Brian, 28, were to visit their mother later.

Mrs Ladell has been a widow for three years. The hospital... The patient had an excellent night and is feeling fine. The operation is working very well. She is very pleased with her heart.

settling on it... It could have been called *Argument In E Minor For Band And Orchestra*."

During the hot summer of 1970, Geesin, who'd met the band through Nick Mason, laboured in his top floor studio in Ladbroke Grove on *Epic* and the score to *The Body* (with songs by Waters), clad only in underpants. His arrangement was composed to a spare backing track laid down by Mason and Waters, with melodic suggestions by Wright and Gilmour. While recording it at Abbey Road in June, Geesin quarrelled with the brass players of the EMI Pops Orchestra, who had

trouble getting it right, and stood down as conductor in favour of choirmaster John Aldiss.

On Thursday 18 July 1970, Floyd and Geesin were at the BBC's Paris Cinema studios in Lower Regent Street preparing a session for John Peel's Radio 1 Sunday Concerts series. Roger Waters didn't consider either of the working titles sufficiently interesting; they needed a better one before the afternoon's recording. During a break, Geesin pointed to that day's *Evening Standard*. "Your title's in there," he announced. Waters flicked through the paper and his eyes lit on a small story about

a woman, Constance Ladell, who had just been fitted with a prototype pacemaker that contained traces of radioactive plutonium. The headline read: "Atom Heart Mother Named".

When the record appeared in October 1970, with its famous cover image of a cow, the *Atom Heart*

Mother Suite had six sections. "On the score the piece was divided into sections A to Q, but we assumed it was one track," says Geesin. But Floyd manager Steve O'Rourke pointed out that, under American publishing rules, one track, no matter how long, would be treated as one song, a fifth of the record rather than half of it. So they divided it into six sections purely for commercial reasons. Geesin suggested some titles, such as *Father's Shout*, sparked by his admiration for Earl "Fatha" Hines. The band came up with *Breast Milky* and *Funky Dung* after designer Storm Thorgerson

delivered the cover. The cow, subsequently identified as Lullabelle III of Potters Bar, was a random idea Thorgerson came up with after the group confessed they hadn't a clue what the work was about, but wanted something "non-psychedelic". Yet to the consumer *Atom Heart Mother* seemed cohesive, summoning various aspects of the countryside, the rumble of thunderful skies, the whiff of freshly chewed grass and the impending clamour and stench of the slaughterhouse for its cover star.

Nicely enigmatic is how it all remains. Maintaining the Floyd's characteristic detachment, David Gilmour says nothing onstage at Cadogan Hall, except with his guitar and a bottleneck lap steel, peeling the lyrical, blues-marbled solos his fans come to hear. Geesin is at the grand piano. The choir sounds stunning. The show receives a standing ovation from a packed house of 900. Gilmour smiles and embraces Geesin, clearly having enjoyed the outing. There is a brief encore reprising the final section, *Remergence*, the crowd rises again and, as Geesin and the musicians take their bows, Gilmour slips out the back, leaving Chelsea before the applause has died down. JIM IRVIN