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The BLACK STRAT

Gilmour's legendary
guitar tells its story

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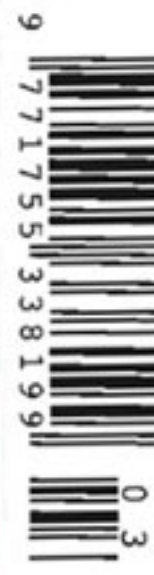
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As the red Strat was to Hank Marvin, as Blackie was to Eric Clapton, so this black Stratocaster is to David Gilmour. Rick Batey meets Pink Floyd tech Phil Taylor to hear the story of a remarkable guitar

Back To Black

It's just a Stratocaster. No luthier invested hundreds of hours to build it. It came off the a production line, along with thousands of near-identical guitars, at some point in the year 1969. A factory instrument, nothing special... and, like many guitars that were gigged

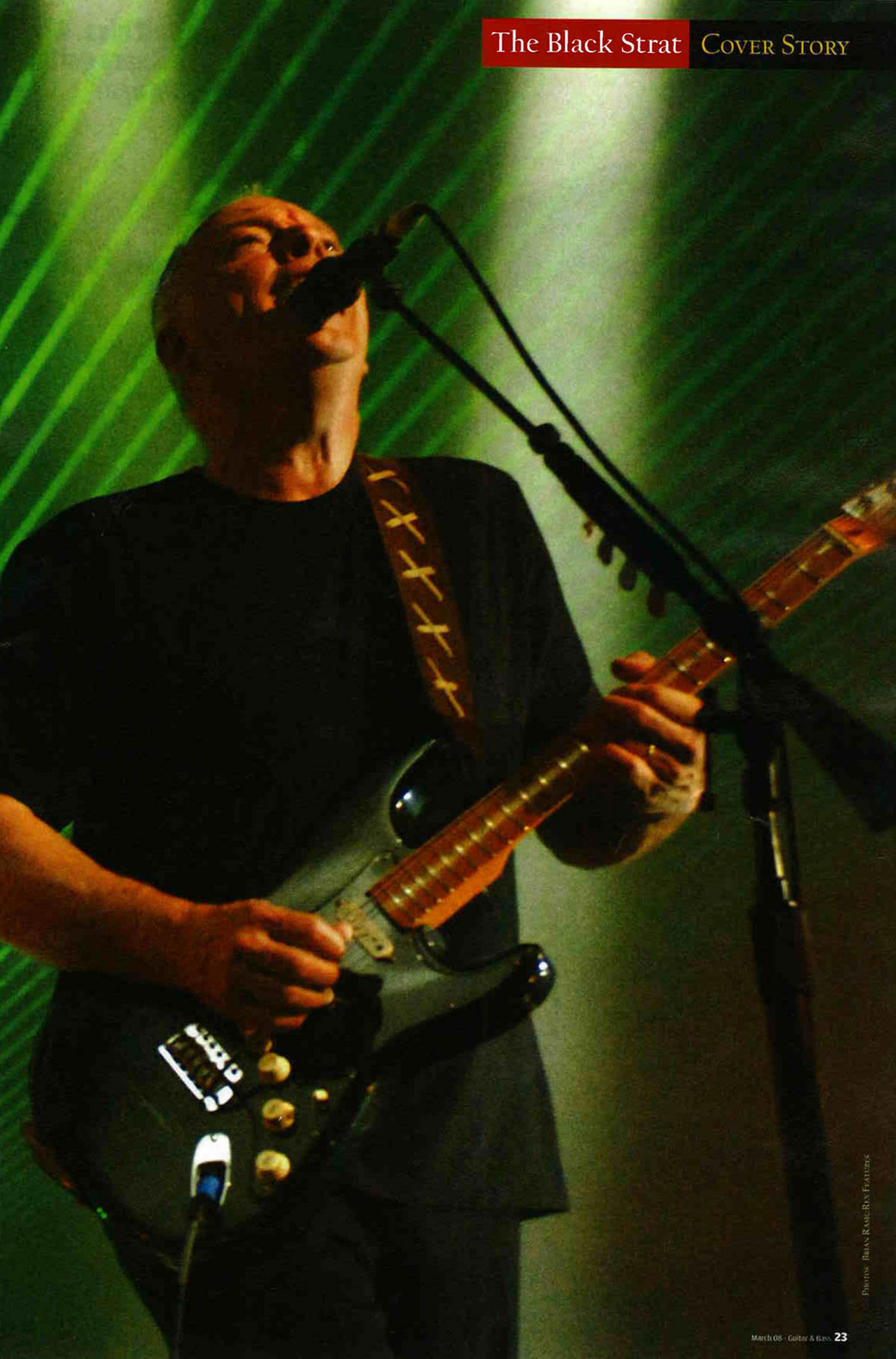
through the '70s, its owner was none too worried about originality or vintage value. Found a nicer neck? Put it on. Fancy a humbucker? Stick it in. Tuners no good? Let's change them. Heard about a thing called a Kahler that's going to change the world of vibrato forever? Great! Let's rout a dirty great hole, bolt it on, and see how it goes.

But there is one thing different about this Stratocaster – it was used on *Atom Heart Mother*, *Meddle*, *Obscured By Clouds*, *Dark Side Of The Moon*, *Wish You Were Here*, *Animals* and *The Wall*, plus *Live At Pompeii* and the solo projects *David Gilmour* and *About Face*. Yet despite its mind-boggling history, this is no museum piece: it's still a tool for the job. Gilmour used it for the emotional Pink Floyd reunion at Live 8; it supplied some of the main electric parts on his recent solo album *On An Island*; and it can be seen and heard on Gilmour's lavish double DVD/Bluray, *Remember That Night*.

For most of the past three decades, the Black Strat has been in the care of Pink Floyd/David Gilmour's full-time backline tech, Phil Taylor. Taylor was invited to work for the band in 1974: since then, on

Despite its mind-boggling history, the Black Strat is no museum piece – it's still a tool for the job

countless occasions, he has delved into the Black Strat's to keep it working, has tweaked it to suit Gilmour's changing needs, and has handed it to him on some of the world's biggest stages. And now, with the possible release of a Fender David Gilmour replica Stratocaster on the cards, he has written a book, *The Black Strat*, that documents the guitar's life and times. It's a fascinating read. It tells the Strat's story in far more detail than we can go into here, and it contains enough Pink Floyd info and rare pictures to appeal to regular fans as well as guitar heads. ➤



'David thought it was a daft idea. Why write a book about an ordinary guitar he bought nearly 40 years ago?'



Guitar & Bass arrived at a secret location in North London, stacked to the rafters with priceless Pink Floyd equipment dating back to the '60s, to hear the tale of the Black Strat's origins, the changes that were made in the search for improvement, and its return to full-time use in the hands of David Gilmour.

ANY COLOUR YOU LIKE

David Gilmour bought the Black Strat, a standard model with a maple neck, in 1970 in Manny's music store in New York. It didn't immediately become his number one, but after a period spent experimenting with others including a brown maple-neck Tele, a Lewis custom and a Les Paul Jr, he began using it in earnest: it would become his main guitar by 1971.

This was an era when Pink Floyd was really beginning to push the boundaries of what could be achieved in a live setting, but

technologically they were flying by the seat of their pants, custom-building both sound and lighting systems to achieve results that couldn't be had with regular off-the-shelf gear - and the Black Strat was not spared in the search for sonic perfection.

Gilmour's first modification, as Phil Taylor details, was to fit an edge-mounted XLR socket that sent the signal to an outboard fuzzbox, which was then routed back into the guitar to enable the Strat's volume control to be used. It didn't achieve the right result, and Gilmour removed the parts. Other mods followed, changing the tuners to Schallers and then trying a different volume knob for smoother operation.

Next, Gilmour added a second slider switch to allow the neck pickup to be added to the middle or bridge. (The mod remains, though since '78 the slider has been replaced by a mini toggle). 'It gives a more Jazzmaster-type sound,' Taylor explains. 'He doesn't use it much, but it does come in useful for certain parts.'

Next, Gilmour began to wrestle with the practicalities of changing from regular guitar to slide guitar on stage.



A mini toggle allows independent neck pickup switching. Note also the shortened vibrato arm

The signs of Gilmour's direct-to-fuzzbox XLR mod are still visible



The Black Strat today, now on its sixth neck and third bridge pickup. The black factory finish was sprayed over sunburst

At the *Pink Floyd: Live At Pompeii* performance he'd simply laid the Strat on the floor and applied a steel bar. He had a brilliant solution – a doubleneck, one set for normal playing, and one set for slide. Gilmour delivered a thick mahogany plank to English guitar maker Dick Knight, and Knight sent back a huge Strat-shaped body. The donor necks were the Black Strat's maple neck and a 1963 pre-CBS rosewood neck from a sunburst Strat that had been a gift from Steve Marriott.

'As we know now, double necks generally aren't that great an idea,' Taylor says. 'The guitar was incredibly heavy and cumbersome, and it only lasted for a very short period. But the crucial thing was that David realised he preferred the rosewood neck to the Black Strat's maple one – it had a nicer feel, and he liked the smaller pre-CBS headstock.' The solution was simple: a swap. The sunburst Strat received the maple neck, while the Black Strat got the rosewood one.

Phil Taylor, still 18 months away from joining the Floyd as full-time backline crew member, caught the band at this fast-rising point in their career. 'Though I'd seen them in 1970 at the festival at the Bath Showground – the Black Strat's debut, unbeknown to me – the Earl's Court gig in May 1973 was the best show I'd ever witnessed as a punter,' he recalls. 'At this time, hardly anyone played big indoor arenas, and nobody had played at Earls Court to 18,000 people. The predictions for the show were dire, based on the fact that David Bowie heard they were playing there and managed to slip his show in the week before – and it was a disaster! I think 'seen by very few and heard by less in this huge echoey barn' was one report.

'There was some apprehension as to whether Pink Floyd could pull it off, but as soon



For a short while Gilmour had this '70s Gibson humbucker fitted between the original bridge and middle pickups

as the intro to *Obscured By Clouds* began, with that synth drone followed by the drums and David's great slide guitar, we knew it was going

'Pink Floyd don't just crank up the volume to please themselves. It's all about relating to the audience'

to be great. The feeling of euphoria in the audience was amazing. It was stunning, seeing *Dark Side Of The Moon* in this context with quadraphonic sound and spectacular visuals.

'Ever since I first saw the band in the late '60s, I knew that the quality of a Pink Floyd

show, that incredible combination of sound and visuals, was the standard to aspire to. It's something that's remained a constant with them. Pink Floyd don't just go onstage and crank up the volume to please themselves – it's always been about relating to the audience, and they'll do whatever's necessary to accommodate that. They always try to get everything right.'

Indeed, David Gilmour was still trying to get the Black Strat right. In 1973 he had the body routed out and added a Gibson humbucker. It didn't take long to discover that he was, at heart, a single-coil player.

'David has tried humbuckers on various occasions, and he just can't get on with the sound,' Taylor confirms. 'I think that single-coils – not just Fenders, but Gretsches and Gibson P90s as well – are more to his taste. They let



him impart his own stamp and individuality to get his sound. It's interesting – some players who have used Gibsons and are known for their own sound have usually eventually settled on Strats... Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck, for instance. Jimi

'David just can't get on with humbuckers. Single coils let him impart his own stamp to get his sound'

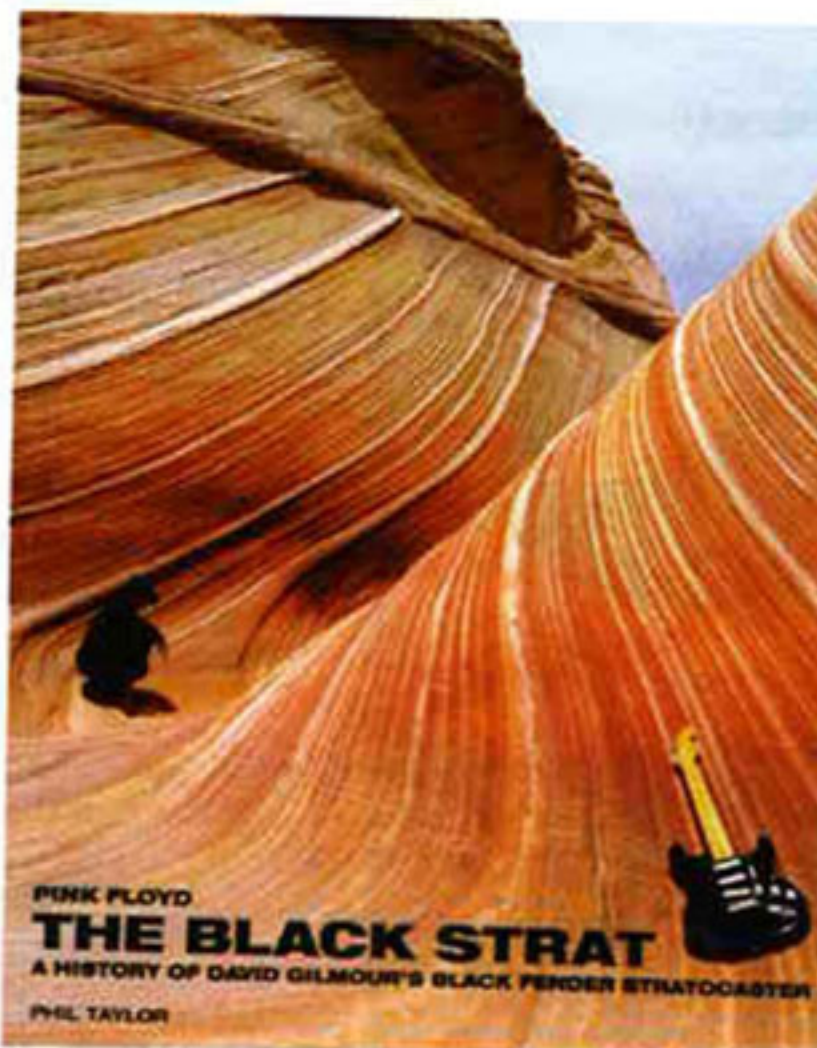
Hendrix, Mark Knopfler and of course Hank Marvin all got their instantly recognisable sounds and styles using a Strat. Perhaps humbuckers make people sound more samey, whereas single coils are better at allowing the player's personality and style to come through.'

BIRTH OF THE ALL BLACK

The next alteration to the Black Strat, in 1974, was cosmetic: a black scratchplate. Nothing was available off the shelf – Fender didn't offer black guards until 1977 – so the new, extra-thick one is probably the work of Dick Knight. 1974 was also the year that Phil Taylor joined the Pink Floyd camp. 'Having seen them play so many times, and with the Floyd being so far ahead of everybody else, being asked to work with them felt pretty unbelievable,' he says. 'The first thing I did was spend some time working in a small, grubby rehearsal studio in King's Cross, just the four of them and me. Two weeks later, they came out having written *Shine On You Crazy Diamond*, plus two tracks which later became known as *Dogs* and *Sheep* [on *Animals*].'

It wasn't until 1977 that the bridge pickup was replaced by one of the first drop-in alternatives, a DiMarzio FS-1. The DiMarzio performed well

The Making Of The Black Strat



You might think that documenting the history of a well-known guitar would be easy: a few photographs, a spot of history, job done. But it turned out to be not so simple after all...

'It all started when Fender's Mike Eldred and Todd Krause visited to discuss the possibility of a David Gilmour Strat,' Phil Taylor begins. 'They had a lot of questions, so I started digging into the Strat's story and pretty soon ended up with a large pile of paperwork.'

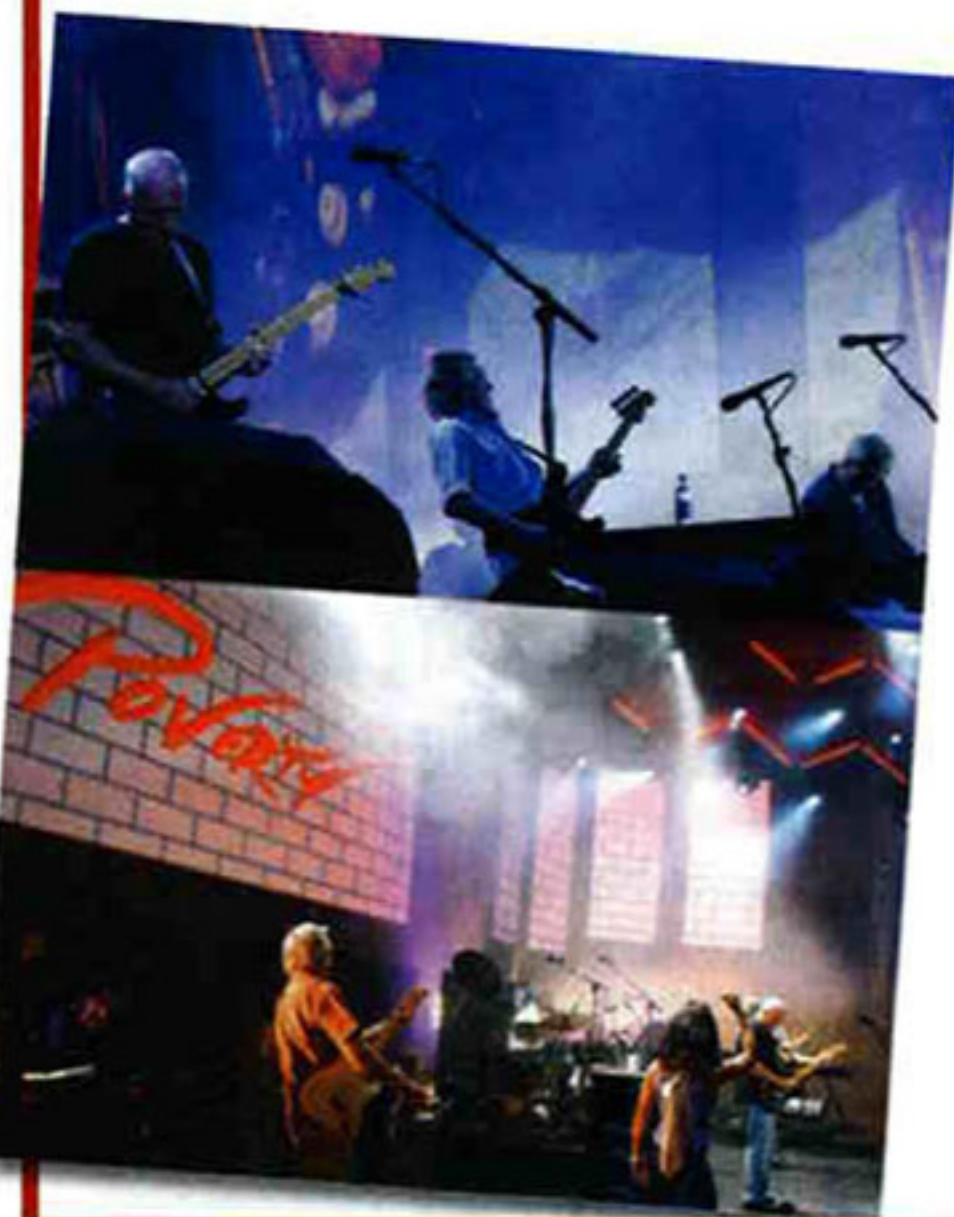
'Then Langley Iddins, a book designer friend of mine, suggested that it should be published and he offered to do the design and layout. Naively, I let myself be talked into it, because I figured I'd done most of the groundwork. I was wrong! I was

persuaded that it made sense because, if the replica Fender guitar does eventually come off, we can include the book with it, so people really will know the whole story.'

Central to the project's success, of course, was the approval of David Gilmour. 'I sat down with him with lists of questions,' Taylor says, 'and started to piece it together. One tricky thing was that David had bought the guitar four years before I'd come on board. But many photographs of the guitar in the early '70s are incorrectly identified. I discovered that there wasn't one Black Strat – there had been three... one with a rosewood neck that had been stolen in New Orleans; the maple neck; and another, the "bullet Strat", a later maple neck model with a bullet trussrod adjuster.'

'I became an expert at dating pictures of Pink Floyd live! It was a lot of work and I ended up building a huge file on everything from the clothes the band wore to which heads were on Nick Mason's drum kit. It had to be researched properly, because there's a lot of wrong information about that gets repeated as fact. As an insider, I had to make sure that everything was 100 per cent correct.'

The book would not have been complete without a suitably Floydian cover dreamed up by Storm Thorgerson, the designer responsible for the band's classic LP sleeves. 'We eventually narrowed it down and ended up with two ideas,' explains Phil. 'One was a silhouette of a Strat made by a composite of many hands: that became the back cover. But Storm thought he should spend a load of my money by sending the guitar with a couple of people to Northern Arizona, to a place called North Coyote Buttes National Park where the wind has eroded the rocks into these fantastic wave-like shapes. Apparently, it was 115 degrees in the sun and they had to walk for three miles to get there! They were shattered! But the end result was fabulous, and it certainly captured that surreal Storm feel.'



Being just up David, that Pink Floyd live! (and, of course, the book) is the only one of the three that is not a black and white photo. It's a color photo of the band performing live, with David Gilmour in the foreground playing the Black Strat.

On the 2nd July when David appeared on stage at Live! in Hyde Park, London, it was an historic moment in the history of Pink Floyd. Live! was a series of environmental benefit concerts, aimed to provide the UK's 'Make Poverty History' campaign and the Global Call to Action Against Poverty. An estimated three billion people viewed the live broadcast. The only way to see the live broadcast was to go to the live broadcast. The only way to see the live broadcast was to go to the live broadcast. The only way to see the live broadcast was to go to the live broadcast.

A NEW 87V NECK, 2008

After Live!, none of the three on the Black Strat were quite the same and the neck was replaced. A change of 87V neck was used, but was unsuitable and David was the back in the studio to continue recording. On the 1st of August, the neck on the Black Strat was replaced with the 87V neck. The 87V neck was used for the first time on the Black Strat. The 87V neck was used for the first time on the Black Strat. The 87V neck was used for the first time on the Black Strat.



'The Kahler seemed like a good idea at the time, but it dulled the sound of the guitar'

throughout the recording and touring of *Animals*, plus the artist's first solo LP, *David Gilmour*, in 1978. Later that year, the rosewood neck was showing signs of wear, so Phil Taylor made contact with Grover Jackson, who had just taken over the Charvel guitar parts company. Following his specifications – 'I remember taking a close look at the neck on David's favourite Fender Esquire and giving him the measurements' – Jackson produced a '57-style birdseye maple neck for the Black Strat, and later a matching pair for two of Roger Waters' three Precision basses. (Five years later, in 1982, Jackson made another neck, this time with 22 frets; fitting it meant cutting away a little of the scratchplate.)

The Black Strat finally found its bridge pickup around the end of recording sessions for *The Wall* in late 1979. 'Seymour Duncan had sent David some custom wound pickups that he had made,' Phil says. 'It's actually a one-off, based on a SSL-1 model, and it remains in the Black Strat to this day.'

THE BLACK STRAT IN EXILE

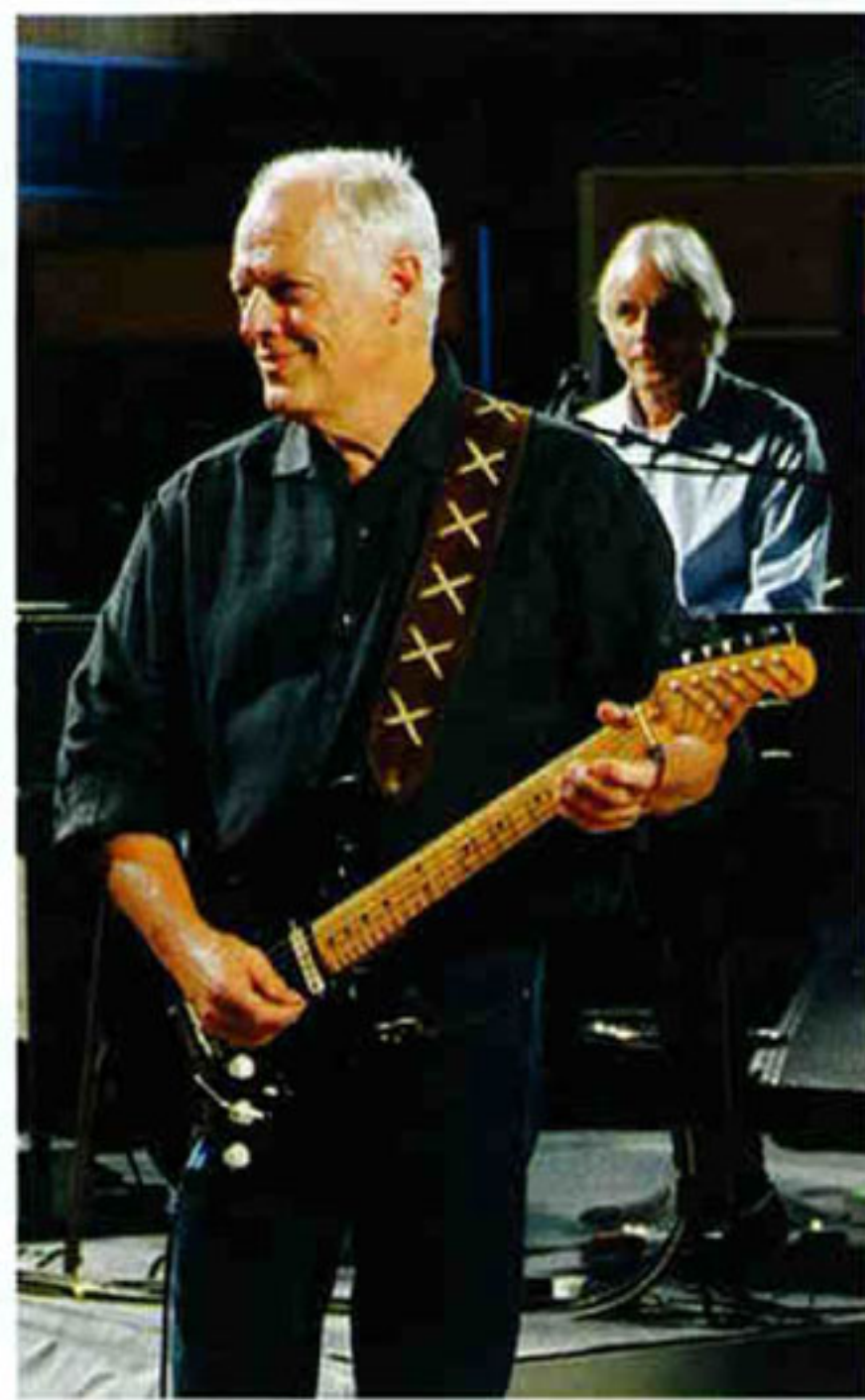
But the Strat's days were numbered: it was jinxed by the addition of a Kahler vibrato. 'It seemed like a good idea at the time,' sighs Taylor, 'but it dulled down the sound of the guitar. It was one reason why it fell out of favour.'

'Another reason was that at this time, in 1984, Fender was really getting their guitar quality back together again – especially the '57 Vintage Reissue series. David and I went up to Arbiter's in North London one cold day and sat there in our overcoats, pulling one Strat after another from the racks, trying them acoustically. Among them were the red and cream '57s, which ended up being David's main Strats for the best part of the next 20 years. The black one took a back seat... and, really, we hardly gave it another thought.'

A couple of years later, the Hard Rock Café asked if they could obtain a David Gilmour guitar for display, and the unemployed Black Strat was nominated and shipped off to Dallas, Texas, where it spent the next decade behind glass. 'David was canny, though,' Taylor points



Above: the custom-wound Seymour Duncan bridge pickup. Right: David Gilmour at Abbey Road, 2006, with one of Jimi Hendrix's guitar straps



In 1982 the Strat received its second Charvel neck, a 22-fret version with a flatter fingerboard

out. 'He didn't give it to them: he said they could borrow it on loan if they made a contribution to charity.'

'Some 10 years later I was going through some papers, and said to David, "Maybe it's time we got the Black Strat back." He just shrugged, and said okay. It was all very casual. I contacted the Hard Rock, and to my surprise they claimed no knowledge of any loan, saying the Strat

was theirs. I immediately faxed them copies of the original

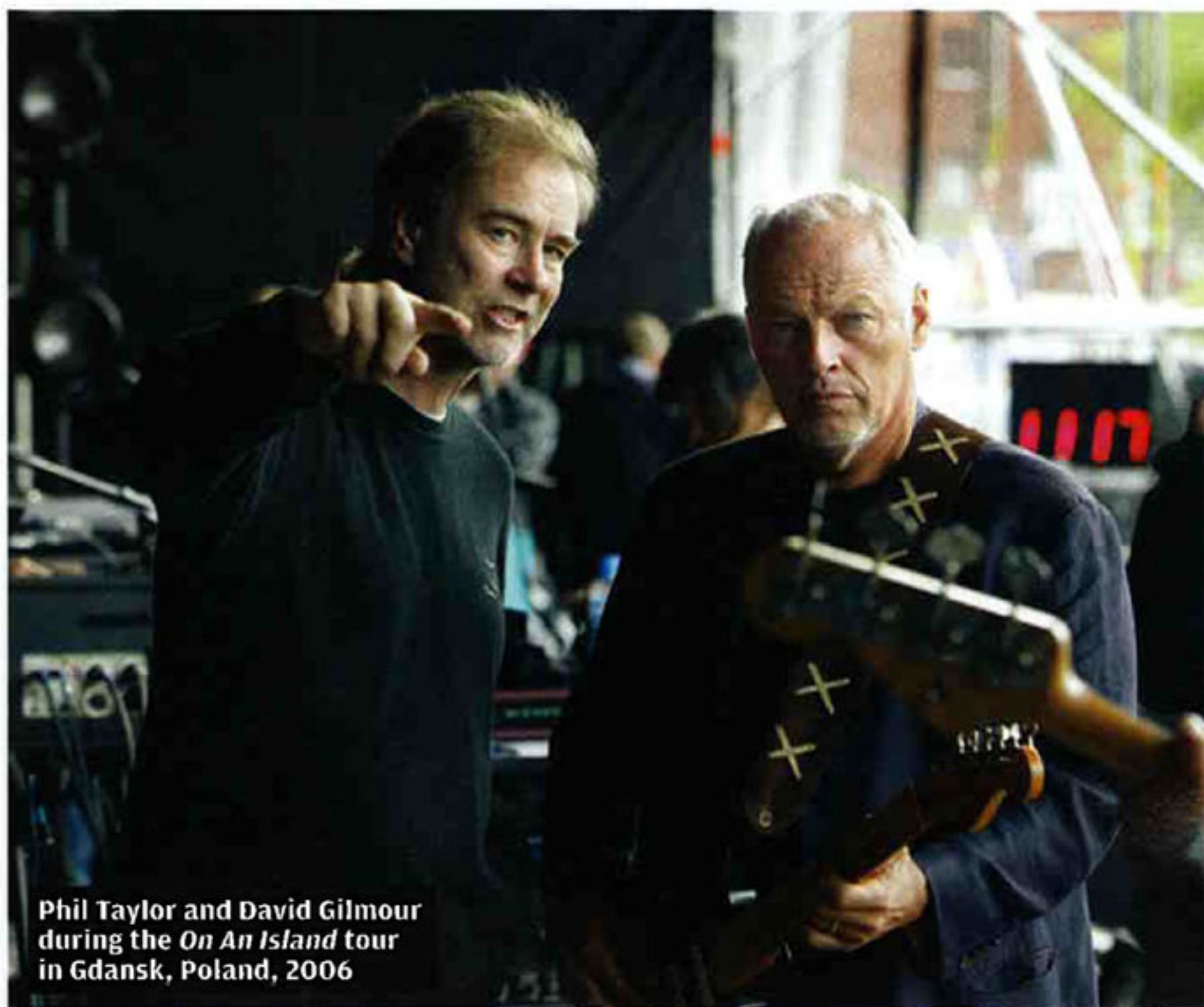
paperwork, and the guitar was returned!'

The guitar arrived back in a sorry state, with a number of parts missing. Shocked at the

guitar's condition, Taylor set about its restoration, and asked Charlie Chandler to remove the Kahler, to fill the hole with proper wood and to retouch the finish, and to fit the old vibrato. The Charvel neck was replaced a neck from one of Gilmour's '57 reissues. The Black Strat was back, and playing better than ever... but perhaps its time had gone.

BLACK TO THE FUTURE

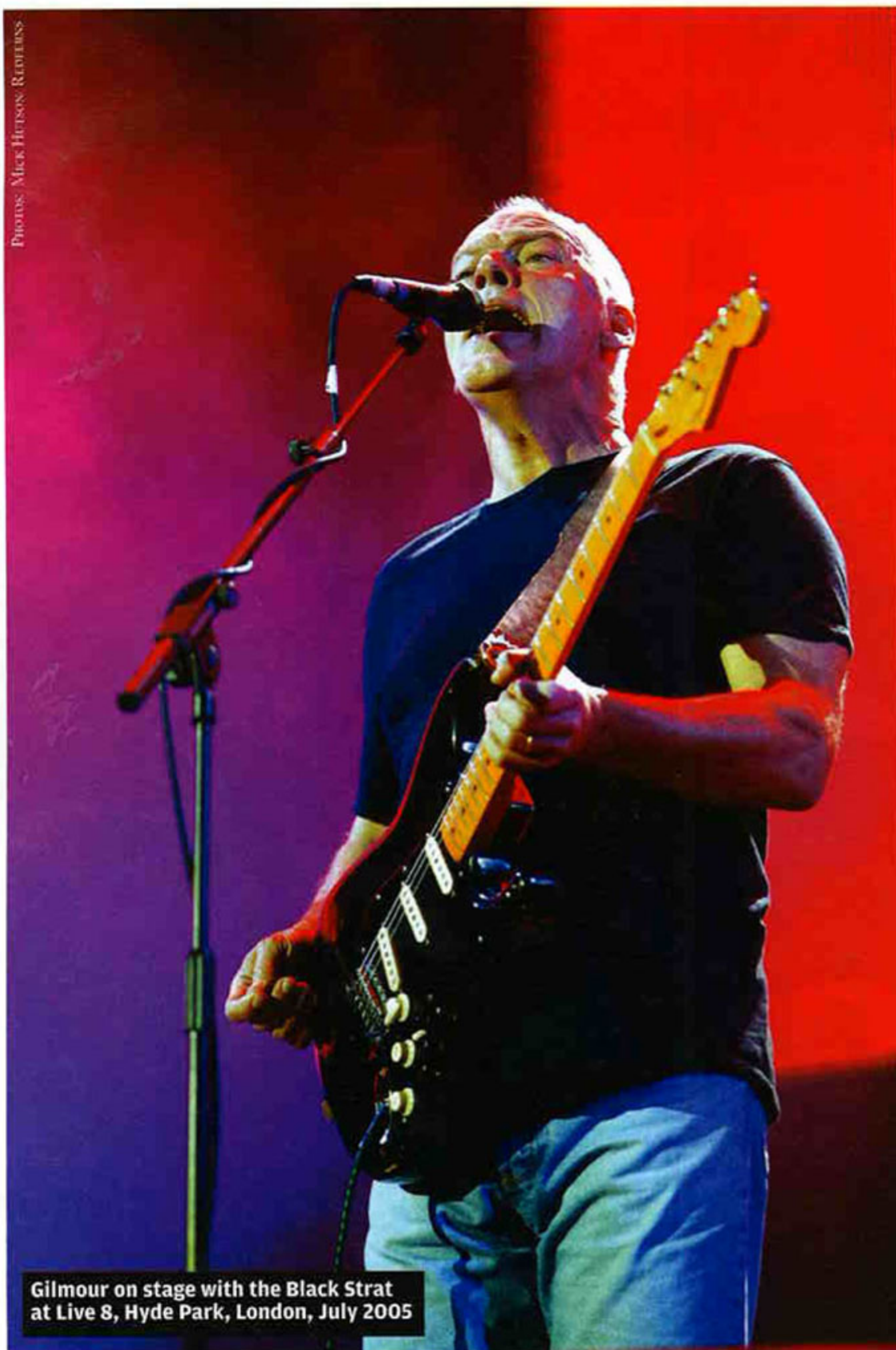
There was no guarantee that Gilmour would adopt the Black Strat once more. He'd become accustomed to the '57 reissues, and with the addition of EMGs and onboard boost electronics they were certainly efficient and quiet. Phil Taylor got into the habit of occasionally leaving the Black Strat out, ready to play, but it saw little use – at least, not until 2003, when



Phil Taylor and David Gilmour during the *On An Island* tour in Gdansk, Poland, 2006

PHOTOS: ANNA WLOCH

Photos: Mick Hutton/RedUX



Gilmour on stage with the Black Strat at Live 8, Hyde Park, London, July 2005

Eagle Rock/Isis made a 'Classic Albums' TV programme about the making of *Dark Side Of The Moon*. 'David was filmed with the Black Strat at Abbey Road,' says Taylor. 'He didn't say anything about it, but at least he'd used it.'

'Two years later came the great Pink Floyd reunion for Live 8. I had a telephone call from David, three weeks before the show, saying simply "we're doing it". I asked if he was joking. "We're doing it, with Roger. You're in charge. Sort it out!" So it was on with the production hat. I had three weeks - two weeks to rehearsals - with no crew, no equipment, and no place to rehearse. It was an incredible mixture of excitement, adrenaline, apprehension and nerves. It's Pink Floyd... it didn't have to be right, it had to be perfect!

'During the first day's rehearsals, he stuck to the red Strat with the EMGs. The second day was the same. But then, during the third day, he tried the Black Strat - and everything changed. It was that real single-coil thing once again. The sound just went into this whole different

league. And it's funny, but I noticed - and so did a few of the other long-term Floyd crew - that when he put it on, his body language changed. It was quite an exciting thing to witness.'

Pink Floyd's Live 8 set in London's Hyde Park was the music event of the decade - perhaps of the last 25 years - for generations of Floyd fans. 'It was strange, too,' Taylor muses. 'Suddenly here was the Pink Floyd with David, Richard, Nick and Roger, just for that one time, proving to the world that they still were a great band - and here, once more, was the Black Strat.'

'Since then, it was both one of the predominant guitars for the recording of *On An*

'Here was Pink Floyd with David, Richard, Nick and Roger... and here once more was the Black Strat'

Awaiting The Signature

Will there ever be a Fender David Gilmour Signature Strat? The answer is... maybe. 'Fender has been asking about it, on and off, for about 20 years, but in the past David had always refused because he's never liked the idea of a high-priced replica model,' Phil Taylor explains. 'However, he's been open to talking about a really good reproduction - one that would be affordable for players, not just for the collectors who would buy the guitar and stick it away in a cupboard.'

'They've sent us some initial prototypes, plus about five different sets of pickups, but if it's going to happen, it's got to be correct - everything from the late '60s body curve to the distinctive shape of the 1983 '57 reissue headstock.'

'David is very particular about replicating the pickups' sound and the set-up of the pickups and trem. To give you some idea, so far, we've found just one neck pickup that would work - it's really good, and we've just now settled on the bridge pickup.'

'We've also talked about the whole package, and it seems likely the guitar could come with a copy of the *Remember That Night* DVD, so owners could see the original in action, a set of David's GHS Boomers Strat strings, plus a copy of *The Black Strat* book, so they'd know the whole story of the guitar. So, the signature model is progressing from a possibility to a probability - but nothing is signed and sealed.'

Island and his main guitar for the tour that followed. After all those changes, after hanging on a wall for 10 years... it's a weird thing.

'At the end of the day, though, it's just a guitar. When I sat down to write the book, David's reaction was that it was a daft idea... why write a book about an ordinary Strat that he bought nearly 40 years ago at Manny's in New York?

'But it was a decent instrument back then: after all, he chose it. He's always been happy to make changes to it, and while some things haven't worked, others have. It's been well looked after, but it's never been treated with much reverence. It's simply a Stratocaster, his working instrument, and that's how he's always viewed it.'

The Black Strat book (£19.95) is available from www.theblackstrat.com and Borders. The DVD/Bluray set *Remember That Night: David Gilmour Live At The Royal Albert Hall* is out now at £21.99

