

They're back in the Pink

By Tony Hicks
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Music fans are thinking pink again. As if they ever stopped.

A dozen years after Pink Floyd's last studio record, teen chain store Hot Topic officially carries 22 pieces of Pink Floyd memorabilia. Many of those items are emblazoned with a logo older than most of its customers.

Pink Floyd tribute band House of Floyd sold out Benicia's 375-seat Majestic Theatre days before its July show. The promoter says she had to turn away at least 100 people at the door.

Tribute band the Australian Pink Floyd Show will play not one but two large Bay Area venues -- Oakland's Paramount Theatre and the San Jose Civic Auditorium -- later this month.

A new DVD featuring 12-year-old Pink Floyd concert footage has been the top-selling music DVD in the country since its July release.

And, of course, the group's opus "Dark Side of the Moon" remains the standard of constant album success. On May 5 of this year, the 1973 release achieved its 1,500th combined week on the Billboard 200 and Pop Catalog charts, easily a record.

If all this is making you nostalgic for the album, head down to Mountain View on Tuesday, where Pink Floyd member Roger Waters will play the entire album live at the Shoreline Amphitheatre. Things have really coalesced in 2006 for a band that hasn't played together but one time since 1994.

Pink Floyd isn't the only classic rock band experiencing a revival. According to Rolling Stone, more teens are listening to classic rock radio and buying classic rock records, and thanks to the Internet, their parents' music is a click away. Acts such as Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, Jimi Hendrix and AC/DC are being discovered at a higher rate than normal among younger music lovers.

Even the power-ballad masters in Journey are benefiting. The band's 1981 single "Don't Stop Believin'" appeared on iTunes Top 10 last year after being played on MTV's popular reality show "Laguna Beach," selling a quick 200,000 digital singles afterward.

"Any kid who finds a great eagerness for music has a natural curiosity for the acts that came before," says Geoff Mayfield, charts editor at Billboard. "The Beatles get rediscovered every year."

But 2006 seems to be the year of Floyd. Actually, interest, and sales, for the band's music started picking up steam again in July 2005 when Pink Floyd reunited with Roger Waters for the first time in more than two decades for the Live 8 benefit. The roll continued into this year, when David Gilmour released a well-received solo album and went out on the road, with Pink Floyd keyboardist Rick Wright part of his band.

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Now the other half of Pink Floyd, Roger Waters and drummer Nick Mason, is out on the road doing "Dark Side of the Moon" in its entirety. (Mason is only playing select dates, however, and will not be onstage at Tuesday's Shoreline show.)

"The Roger Waters tour is doing very well," says Gary Bongiovanni, editor of concert industry magazine Pollstar. "He's got the hook with that show, doing 'Dark Side of the Moon.'"

As if all that didn't bring the band enough attention, band co-founder and troubled musical genius Syd Barrett died this year at age 60, renewing interest in Barrett's legacy and the mystery surrounding his decades of seclusion. Amazon.com saw spikes in Pink Floyd sales that week, coincidentally the same week the band released the "Pulse" DVD.

But brief reunions and small tours can only do so much. The bigger question surrounds why Pink Floyd -- considered by some to be the ultimate '70s album rock band -- is doing so well in the digital 21st century.

"The music's never gone away," Bongiovanni says. "Not even without the benefit of people seeing the live show (performed by the whole band), which was really in a class by itself. They could set up a residency in London for six months and have people come to them."

Some say it doesn't hurt that there's a shortage of bands making great music. Some of the more modern bands making a real effort at great rock music, such as Radiohead, can be traced directly to Pink Floyd. "It's because of a lack of real good music right now," says Mark Showalter, who plays horns and keys in House of Floyd. "There's not a lot of young bands doing much. (The Pink Floyd resurgence) is phenomenal. I'm getting calls from promoters all over the place."

But grading Pink Floyd on a curve is hardly fair, especially to the competition. Musically, Pink Floyd was before its time -- both in production techniques and the ambitiousness of the songs. They wrote material experimental enough to demand respect from purists, but catchy enough for classic rock purists to remember the choruses. The effect is rubbing off on a new generation.

"A lot of the renewed interest in Pink Floyd has come from not just the generation that grew up with the band, or those of us who discovered it 15 years ago, but from kids who are searching for new music that means something to them" says Sean Sundwall, a spokesman for Amazon.com. "Rolling Stone did an article back in February that attributed 20 percent of Pink Floyd album sales in the past three years to kids ages 13-17, a trend that's growing."

Then there's the phenomenon of the phenomenon, which still grabs attention for a band with a record on the charts for more than 30 years. "It's all about 'Dark Side of the Moon,'" says Mayfield. "Just the fact that it's been on the charts so long, it sets itself up as an object of curiosity. It's an album that always sounds fresh. It has a broad palette. It's kind of got something for everybody. It's lightning in a bottle that's hard to emulate."

Pink Floyd presented a package hard for anyone to duplicate. They were one of the first bands to push a grand live show, with monstrous video screens and special effects, all in tune with

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dramatic and moody music. The lyrics were sophisticated and literate and the players were first-rate. It was one of the first groups that successfully folded an artistic vision into a rock 'n' roll aesthetic. It's a combination with which most bands can't be bothered.

Showalter knows all about the difficulty of replicating a Pink Floyd show. House of Floyd does good box office business, but doesn't pull much of a profit, he says.

"We haven't made any money -- it all goes back into the band," he says. "Six lasers, strobes, a fog machine, video editing, a computerized lights show. You pretty much have to have the visual show if you do Floyd." Much of the allure of Pink Floyd -- and Pink Floyd tribute bands -- lies in the fact that seeing the classic lineup together hasn't been a reality for decades. Bongiovanni says the Australian Pink Floyd is the most successful touring tribute band he's seen since the much-celebrated ABBA cover group Bjorn Again.

"They do really good business -- it's amazing," he says. "Both acts have something in common. You're never going to see them play together again. A Pink Floyd tour has been the big prize since 1994, when they last toured. It doesn't appear that they're ever going to do it again, and it's not for people not offering them small islands and gold bullion to do it."

Tony Hicks is the Times pop music critic. Reach him at 925-952-2678 or thicks@cctimes.com.