

Ummagumma by Pink Floyd

A Rock Masterpiece?

By MICHAEL QUIGLEY

Ummagumma by Pink Floyd (Capitol-Harvest STBB-388) is quite simply, one of the best rock albums ever made. To classify it under the term "rock", however, is misleading, because like other pop music masterpieces — for example, Van Dyke Parks' *Song Cycle* — it precludes the term "rock" both by its musical invention and its progressiveness.

Ummagumma is a two-album set, one of which was recorded live last summer in concert at the Birmingham and Manchester College of Commerce, while the other was made in the studio.

Three of the live album cuts are expanded versions on their earlier two albums. *Astronomy Domine*, by the group's original lead guitarist Syd Barrett, features more drum work than the version on *The Piper at the Gates of Doom*. (Capitol ST 6242). Also organist Richard Wright does a long solo which is more of an anti-solo. Not that it's badly done, but it doesn't go anywhere and doesn't build. Nevertheless, it holds one's attention.

Careful with that Axe, Eugene, a new work, begins with a slow organ, quiet drums and a moody vocal. However, it soon progresses into some abusive screams and a total sound effect similar to that produced by Led Zepplin with its full volume and full feedback in the Agrodome last May.

The two pieces on the second side are based on cuts from their second album, *Pink Floyd (Capitol ST 6279)*. Set the controls for the Heart of the Sun is, like the earlier version, quiet but enveloping. Featured is another solo by Wright, which sounds distinctly East Indian-influenced, especially when accompanied by a tribal drum-like beat.

A Saucerful of Secrets, the outstanding long track on the earlier album is here presented in an almost completely different version with the exception of some of the organ work. It begins quietly and, similar to the previous version, then builds up tension through the piling of layer upon layer of sound. After this reaches a climax, a constant drum beat takes over and lead guitarist David Gilmour interjects some ricocheting guitar outbursts combined with what I suspect is the use of tapes.

In the live album, Pink Floyd is not concerned so much with melody of lyrics to the extent that they were on their earlier efforts. Instead they are more interested in creating musical moods through a kind of prolonged electronic jamming — all of the cuts are over eight minutes long.

This alone would make a release of more than routine interest. However, the superbly engineered and produced studio album is what makes the difference between an excellent album and a masterful one. What is particularly remarkable about this album is the incredible musical invention shown by each of the group's four members in what are basically four long cuts, each of which is written by one of the group members and in which his work predominates.

Organist Wright's contribution is called *Sysphus*, which is divided into four parts. The first starts out with a dull heavy droning bass pattern, but cuts to a piano solo which sounds as if it is written out, even though it's probably improvised. The next section mixes jungle-like noises with John Cage piano pluckings accompanied by drums and occasional snatches of reversed tapes.

The third, quieter section consists of, in order, sad strings, vibes, bird sounds, water noises and gongs. And then POW!, an incredibly loud and dissonant organ combined with drums, cymbals and wordless vocals.

The second cut, actually made up of two, bass guitarist Roger Waters, is the most lyrical and relaxing one on the album, and a considerable relief after the high-pressured sounds which have just gone before. Across a panorama of birds chirping, acoustic guitar and vocal combine in a fold song very much like the Incredible String Band in both sound and style.

Several Species of Small Furry Animals Gathered Together in a Cave and Grooving with a Pict which closes the side is an incredible collage of noises, most of them presumably generated electronically. At its close is quasi-Gaelic voice yelling in argument with jungle-like grumblings coming from the other speaker.

On the fourth side, lead guitarist David Gilmour's *The Narrow Way* builds with a sudden rush of taped noise which suddenly cuts away to acoustic guitars reminiscent of the beginning of *Chelsea Morning*. Over this line grows a chorus and interjections of Stockhausenish sound which passes from one speaker to another.

The final cut, *The Grand Vizier's Garden Party*, is by drummer Nick Mason, and consists entirely of percussion solos except for flute phrases entitled *Entrance and Exit*. Aside from a consistently effective use of stereo here, there is an interesting technique exploited. Mason takes a continuous percussive sound, such as a roll on a drum, cymbal, or gong, and then, by editing, makes that sound — essentially many fast beats — into a separate pulse of sound. He then incorporates this sound into his solos, playing against it and with it as just another percussive noise.

In practically every way, this studio album is a brilliant achievement, as different from the mainstream of pop music as the electronic achievements of Karlheinz Stockhausen are from the plethora of anti-electronic Moog-Muzak albums currently flooding the record stores.

As a whole, the album opens new directions for pop music, makes more effective use of the depth and stereophony than any album since *Song Cycle* and in short, is a fantastic total musical experience.

There seems to be little else to say except buy it and hear it. Considering that the double album is on sale in some local stores for as little as three dollars you can't miss a bargain one way or the other.