

The great gig in the sky



Well-known musician, private pilot and AOPA member Nick Mason tells **Pat Malone** how learning to fly conquered his fear of flying

It's intriguing to note how many aviation motifs crept into Pink Floyd's performances over the years; amid all the psychedelic *sturm und drang* there was always room for a crashing aeroplane, launched on a wire across a heaving stadium, a half-scale model Stuka or an exploding pig on the wing. Remember the Spitfire pair that opened their Knebworth concert in 1975? We batter our air guitars to tracks like *Learning to Fly* and *High Hopes*, while *Point Me At The Sky*, complete with Tiger Moth promotional material shot at Biggin Hill, goes all the way back to 1968.

It may seem perverse, but in fact the members of the band cordially loathed flying, believing that their tour jets were kept aloft solely by the death-grip they had on their armrests, and preferred an 800-mile car trip to a couple of hours in the air. This unfortunate situation endured for almost two decades while Pink Floyd climbed to the dizzy heights of rock stardom. But in a remarkable transition, drummer Nick Mason and guitarist David Gilmour have become perhaps the best-known aviators in the music industry, the owners and pilots of exotic and beautiful machinery befitting their multi-millionaire status. Of the two, Nick Mason remains most active in GA

Above: Nick in the Robin DR400 with his beautifully-painted Squirrel B3 in the background

Right: the Squirrel is Nick's favourite aircraft, which he flies more than any other

and currently has four aircraft, a Robin DR400 he's owned since 1983, two Piper Cubs – a Super Cub and an L4 – which are currently undergoing restoration, and a Eurocopter AS350 B3 Squirrel helicopter tricked out in the most beautiful, Floyd-like cloudscape colour scheme.

Unusually for a rock drummer, especially one who enjoyed success at the height of a uniquely hedonistic and indulgent era, Nick Mason remains well-grounded and devoid of airs. Unlike many of his contemporaries he is not drug-addled, mad, or dead, and he surveys the human comedy with a wry and self-deprecating wit. It is tempting to think this is due to his involvement with flying, which may have provided a leavening counterpoint to the surreal switchback of fame, but I suspect it's just the way he's made. Well-educated, widely read and personally disciplined, he was a relatively emollient influence while the original





Pink Floyd was going the way of all previous experiments with overcrowded laboratory rats, and long before he ever learned to fly he was known for keeping his head when all about him were whacked out of their gourds.

A passionate fan of cars, he made the acquaintance of Vic Norman on the motor racing circuit, and Vic prescribed learning to fly as a cure for fear of flying. Nick took his advice and found the cure to be "efficacious, but bloody expensive". Since then, he and Vic have jointly made a number of aviation purchases, not least Rendcomb, the very private airfield in Gloucestershire they share with Torquil Norman. Sitting at Rendcomb on a lovely summer's morning, Nick Mason was clearly at peace and in his element.

"When the band really kicked off in 1967 we were doing most of our travel courtesy of a six-wheel Ford Transit, but American success in the early seventies brought with it a lot of flying, and I ended up being quite nervous about it," he says. "There were several incidents – one when a baggage truck rammed a DC-3 we'd chartered while we were standing next to it. They said it was okay, but we bravely left the road crew to fly in it while we booked tickets on a scheduled flight. We were



Top left: Super Cub under restoration, and miniature Bugatti Type 52s made by Tula Engineering, who share the hangar with Nick Above: Nick's first aircraft and best aviation investment, the Robin DR400 Left: the world's best toy cupboard – two of Nick's planes and some of his 30 cars

landing at Bordeaux one day when we had to make a fairly violent manoeuvre to avoid a jet taking off the other way, and on another occasion we ran into horrific turbulence in a 707 somewhere over the Himalayas – even the cabin crew were scared. So I was definitely not mad about aircraft, and the others felt the same way. Eventually we had this absurd thing of trying to pretend to ourselves that renting a car and driving 800 miles was as easy as getting on an aeroplane.

"Vic advised me to learn to fly – find out what it's all about, he said, that'll help you. He introduced me to Brendan O'Brien who was the perfect instructor for me, absolutely steeped in aviation, and with a passing interest in dressing up. Brendan felt it was vital to get the right kit, so for my first lesson we rented a Jodel and flew to Paris to acquire the correct flying jacket. My lessons moved around a bit depending on which flying school or airfield Brendan had fallen out with. Lessons were under the auspices of one of the schools at Biggin Hill, but we also flew from Elstree, Old Warden, Compton Abbas, White Waltham, Redhill, Shoreham and Southend.

"I started on the lovely Slingsby T67B but very soon bought the even more lovely Robin DR400, which I still have today, and which

has served as faithful trainer for innumerable friends and half the family. It was an uncharacteristically sensible purchase on my part; for the same money I could have had a second-hand aircraft with disappearing wheels and lots of kit, but the DR400 was the perfect beginner's aeroplane and I love it still. My wife Annette began to learn to fly it shortly after I did, and as soon as I got my PPL she insisted we fly to the South of France. It seems rather intrepid to me now, but even getting completely stuck for three days in Dinard because of bad weather didn't dampen our enthusiasm."

David Gilmour also learned on the Robin with Brendan, and he went on to form the Intrepid Aviation Co which operated aircraft as diverse as the Mustang, Harvard and Gnat. "David was far more into it than I was and ended up with a whole fleet," says Nick. "He was the prime mover behind the idea that we desperately needed a plane for touring, and we were able to convince our accountants and the Inland Revenue that a Cessna Golden Eagle fitted the bill. We had lessons on smaller twins first, with some pretty competent instructors –



Above: Nick's first helicopter, the R22 G-BROX, later owned by the writer of this article
Top: Nick in a Lynx, which he flew with one of the Blue Eagles
Right: 'A sort of Mount Olympus of the Sky Gods' – Nick and his wife Annette with Griffon at RAF Shawbury



one was a Special Forces C130 pilot, and another was Paul Bonhomme (the Red Bull racer). We almost always flew with a commercial pilot on board, but nonetheless it was a big jump from the Robin to the 421.

"We took it to Scandinavia, to Italy and elsewhere in Europe, but the trouble was, when we weren't on tour it wasn't used very much. My kids weren't mad about it – if you want to go down to France it was quite a lot slower than a jet, and a bit bumpier, too, quite often. So we let the Golden Eagle go. By then David had bought a Harvard, and we shared a Beech Staggerwing. We had a Stampe, too, and I can't remember what else, but I quickly realised that that sort of flying was not for me. I was much happier tooting around in the Robin, so David bought out my share of the Staggerwing and the others, and who knows, my interest might have sort of withered had not David turned up at our house one day in a Robinson R22 helicopter. I was a bit sniffy about it, but Annette said, 'God, that would be fun!' She's always been my enabler, prodding

me on to do these alarming things and leading the charge.

"My instructor on the R22 was the wonderful Brian Balman – I've always been fortunate in having very good instructors – and I bought a half share in the R22, G-BROX, from David. I loved the simplicity of it and of course I liked what it could do that a plane couldn't."

A man of many talents, Nick was well-placed to appreciate both the technical and aesthetic aspects of helicopter aviation – he made a career out of enticing sonic novelties from an array of bewildering experimental kit, and as an architecture student he knew something of structure and stress, although he says he had a tenuous grip of helicopter aerodynamics until he took a flying instructor course. "I knew enough to pass the exams but I relied on the magic to keep us in the air," he says. "In fact I did very little with the helicopter once I'd got the licence, and it probably would have slid away from me had Brian not taken me for a flight in a JetRanger. That was the big

eye-opener, because suddenly I could see a way to use it – we could take the kids, we could carry the luggage and we could go somewhere quite quickly. It coincided with buying our house near Bath, which we still have, and which we fly down to. I looked at lots of second-hand JetRangers, some of which were really rather alarming, and eventually I ended up buying a new one, G-IOIO. Again it was the right decision – I've always felt confident with the 206, it's a solid and reliable machine.

"By then Annette had got her helicopter licence too, and we did the JetRanger conversion together. It was ideal for getting to motor racing circuits – cars have always been my main passion and I've been racing since the first record royalties arrived. I've always had a problem selling anything I've raced, and what with having two daughters and a wife who compete, the garage does tend to bulge a bit. I think the present car count is around thirty, which may sound excessive because it is..."



“Regular helicopter trips included some of the European circuits such as Spa, the Nurburgring (surprisingly hot and high in August) and Le Mans as well as the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu where I chair the advisory committee. We kept the 206 at Denham, where it was the smallest thing in the Lynton Aviation hangar which was full of big boys’ toys like Dauphins and 109s. What I liked was the fact that there were a lot of very senior captains with lots of gold bits on their jackets, but they were all unfailingly helpful, and the engineers, particularly the excellent Andy Dixon, really looked after it well. And of course, I eventually did the flying instructor’s course on the 206.

“I had no real intention of working as an instructor – the drums always seemed easier, and better paid – but Brian encouraged it because it forced you to really learn what it’s all about. I can’t recommend the rating highly enough; it’s going over the same stuff you learn in the PPL but it makes you truly understand what you learn. I did it to improve my skills, although Annette said I did it in order to try and gain some sort of status over her. In fact, if you flew with us you’d see that she is generally captain, and I am doing the in-flight catering.

“I did offer my services as an instructor at Denham and I had a few customers, which was very trusting of them. Brian would say, ‘okay, he’s a rock drummer but we’re pretty sure he hasn’t done any drugs today...’ Most of my students were doing the conversion course from the Robinson to the Bell, and I really enjoyed the small amount of instructing I did.”

Touring with Pink Floyd in chartered jets meant stick time on a variety of big passenger aircraft, and simply being Nick Mason brought in invitations to fly hot military metal, or at least go along for the ride. “A couple of years ago Annette and I bid for a day out at the Defence Helicopter Flying School at RAF Shawbury at an auction for one of the forces charities, and what a terrific day they gave us,” Nick says. “We flew the Bell 412 on the simulator in the morning, then the real thing in the afternoon. That’s where I first came into close contact with the Squirrel – they fly B2s there as *ab initio* trainers, and the instructors are the cream of the crop, a sort of Mount Olympus of Sky Gods...”

**Above: ‘it’s a great camouflage scheme, rather sadly let down by the noise’
Right: of course, there is no dark side of the Moon, really... the B3’s vertical stabiliser**

“When the time came to upgrade from the JetRanger I looked at the Bell 407 and the Hughes 500, but the Squirrel really stood out. I’m a big fan of Bell helicopters; Annette and I had done one of their safety courses at Forth Worth, another excellent piece of education, but the internal layout of the Squirrel particularly appealed. Unlike the JetRanger and the 407 it doesn’t have that bulkhead between the front and back seats, which prevents you from swinging around and smacking the kids when they’re fiddling with the door handles and so on. The B3’s lifting ability is phenomenal and its hard to resist the temptation to do rather dramatic towering takeoffs in front of R22s that are coming down slower in autorotation than you are going up, and that’s with full fuel. What’s more, you hardly ever have to do a weight and balance calculation with the B3 – it’ll take full passengers, full fuel and a lot of luggage.

“The real treat was the Fadec, which means you’re not going to hot-start the engine. I never did, but you’re always conscious of people telling you that a moment’s carelessness can cost you £40,000, and it’s great to have that



burden lifted. The only disadvantage of the B3 is that the hours seem to build very slowly – what used to be a 40-minute trip in the 206 becomes 25 or 30 in the Squirrel.

“I wanted to do something rather different and ‘un-corporate’ with the colour scheme. Damon Hill suggested I have a word with Peter Boutwood, the graphic designer he’d used during his championship year. It turned out to be an excellent idea. Peter came up with the sky-and-clouds scheme – he painted a door panel for me as a test, and he thought they’d have to apply it in sections on plastic panels all over the helicopter. But in fact Pete Darwell at Mech-Spray in Kent made a fantastic job of it, and it’s become a talking point wherever we fly. It’s a great camouflage scheme, rather sadly let down by the noise...”

Meticulous preparation and a conservative approach to aviation mean that Nick’s flying has been relatively incident-free, although he’s had a few ‘moments’. “I read a lot of aviation magazines and it seems a big problem for a lot of people is the radio, and the relationship between pilot and that voice from the ground. I’ve quite often felt, however, well, thank God I was talking to someone; it’s really taken some of the stress out of a situation. I was coming back from Alton Towers with the family on what had been a beautiful Sunday when the weather started to deteriorate in a worrying way. Annette and I agreed this was not good and that we should divert, and the closest airfield was Birmingham, which one might think would be a bit disgruntled at having a small helicopter interrupt the flow of business. But they were fantastic, really helpful, giving us vectors in poor vis and shepherding us onto finals.

“Just as we were on short finals I sort of looked up and saw that the weather was lifting, and the way ahead was clear in the direction I wanted to go. So I said in a rather embarrassed way, look, I’m terribly sorry, I don’t want to come in after all... and they said fine, glad to help, any time – and we got home very easily. That was a useful lesson to me... there’s a whole world out there you can call on for help, just don’t be afraid to get on the radio and ask.

“I think Annette and I are relatively cautious; it helps to have two people evaluating the situation. When one says it might be a good idea to go back, it makes the other one think

very hard whether they really feel confident enough to continue. I hope I'm normally very conscientious – we fly in and out of controlled airspace all the time. Our house in Wiltshire is inside the Lyneham zone and they're enormously helpful about direct routings and access, as are Heathrow. I'd hate to feel that my mistakes were responsible for any reduction in these services."

Although Nick has done a short instrument flying course tailored for him by Bristows at Norwich, he has no IR. "It was more like a safety course, or an instrument appreciation exercise," he says. "I don't have an IMC rating or an IR because I think if you have one, you have to really practice those skills all the time in order to stay safe, and quite frankly I don't even do enough dual basic emergency skills training at present. I keep saying we ought to do more training, but I'm remiss in doing anything about it. Note to Rod Wood to nag me when next I see him!

"For a year after we got the Squirrel we employed Glenda Wild as an instructor and safety pilot, and that was brilliant – every flight was a learning experience, no time was wasted. My daughter Chloe had qualified on the Squirrel so Glenda had three students, and everywhere we went we were coping with emergencies, practicing autorotations, hydraulic failures and so on. The arrangement came to an end because Glenda inexplicably decided she would prefer to live and fly in Hawaii. No-one's ever been able to explain that to me.

"The Squirrel now lives with Cabair at Elstree. Fond as we were of Denham, Elstree is a hell of a lot easier to get to from North London and is a lot more flexible in terms of availability for the PPL. It really is 24/7, whereas Denham was constrained by curfews both morning and evening."

Chloe's career as a music video producer and the fact that she has two children mean she doesn't fly as often as she did, and the Masons' other daughter Holly prefers car racing to flying. Their two sons Guy and Cary are of late-school, early-university age and have not declared their hands. "You have to be careful not to pressurise your children one way or the other," says Nick. "The boys have done



This photo: perched between his Maserati Birdcage and his Ferrari 250 GTO, Nick is filmed with co-author Mark Hales for a projected DVD of his book 'Into The Red' Below: like the T-shirt says, buy Nick's book! Left: two of the Aston Martin Ulster works team cars in Nick's garage





a little bit of flying, and it is available to them, but I'm wary of pushing them into it – they have to find their own way. They need to feel that they really want to do it."

David Gilmour has drawn back from aviation a little, and although he still flies his Harvard he has sold the Intrepid Aviation Co, saying it was becoming more like a business than a hobby. "I think David became a bit demoralised when Norman Lees, who had been his aviation guru, died in the Spitfire accident at Goodwood in 2000," says Nick. "When someone as good and as experienced as Norman has an accident, it brings home to us lesser mortals just how vulnerable we are."

"I was not affected in quite the same way but I understood his trepidation. I still worry about my flying and find my pulse rate increases as I approach the aircraft, which is a good thing, I think – it makes you careful, it makes you take it seriously."

Among his many friends in the music business Nick numbers some fellow pilots, and the subject of flying often comes up when they meet. "There's Gary Numan, of course, and Jay Kay," he says. "I sit on a music advisory board with Dave Rowntree (drummer in Blur) trying to establish ways of helping

young talent in a music industry that is changing rapidly because of the internet, and he is a keen aviator." (Both men are AOPA members.)

"The aviation world brings people together, whether they share anything else or not. It's the same in motor racing – men bond through shared playing experiences. It doesn't matter if you fly a DR400 or a Sikorsky S76 or a 747, you've got that shared experience; same applies to music, too. It doesn't matter if you play in a pub or in Shea Stadium, you have something in common."

Nick Mason is the author of two books, one the definitive history of Pink Floyd, warts and all, called *Inside Out*. He's also addressed his passion for cars with *Into the Red*, an acclaimed tome which covers the design and driving characteristics of 22 of his own cars – both are available from all good bookshops (and Amazon), and both are well worth buying for the humour as well as the content. Who knows, perhaps someday a third volume on his aviation habit? Or maybe not.

"My own intention is to get the Cubs in the air and do more fixed-wing flying," he says. "I've always thought it would be nice to have something like that, just for pottering around Rendcomb. I can't see me changing the Squirrel for some time – I mean, what do you get that's better? Well, short of joining the Forces, that is. I have to confess I'm completely ruthless in taking advantage of any connections to both civil and military

helicopter experiences. I've had a trip with the air ambulance out of Coventry, and I'm keen to find ways of helping them to raise money. I also intend to try to assist the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton with fund-raising. I obviously subscribe to the view that these wonderful warbirds need to keep flying rather than simply be kept in museums. Quite strange, one might think, for someone who was a card-carrying CND member in his youth. But I have come to appreciate what the military do, and why they do it.

"Most wonderful of recent trips was a flight with one of the Blue Eagles pilots in a Lynx out of Middle Wallop. I'm not a huge fan of fairground rides so I approached the trip with some trepidation, but it was one of the most exhilarating rides of all time. God knows who tried some of these manoeuvres for the first time – I'm not sure if it was an expert pilot or Ozzy Osbourne.

"It was also an eye-opener to see an Apache close up. Of course I'd read Apache Dawn, but to see the complexity and sophistication of this machine makes awesome an understatement. What is perhaps most impressive of all is how so much is achieved by so few crew and machines in Afghanistan. The training required is enormous and inevitably the costs are astronomical. It certainly puts one off a career in politics; do you buy more helicopters or build a new hospital? I think I'll stick with banging the drums... it was a terrific day out, but frankly, very humbling." ■



Top: the Guinot wing-walking team's Stearmans are also based at Rendcomb
Left: LM21, a 1935 Aston Martin team car, is wheeled out of the hangar ready for a race meeting, to which Nick will fly in his Squirrel
Below: Nick in LM21 en route to winning the Brooklands Trophy at the 2009 Goodwood Revival meeting. Nick started his racing in the Aston Martin

