“Comfortably Numb” Pink Floyd

By Douglas Baldwin

Re leased as a double album, The Wall would have made a great single disc. Imagine cutting out some of the fat and filler, leaving a solid hour of songs like “Mother,” “Goodbye Blue Sky,” and, of course, the epic “Comfortably Numb.” Pink Floyd’s study of a rock star’s nervous breakdown transcends its subject in this song, becoming a more universal reflection on the suffocation of one’s inner child as a way of coping with the demands of daily living.

A STUDY IN CONTRASTS

A look at the chords used in “Comfortably Numb” reveals little about the song’s emotional complexity. The verses convey generic sadness with chords in B minor (Bm–A–G–Em), while the pre-chorus brightens up with a seesaw between D major (D–A) and C major (G–C). But it’s the contrast between the two sections that deepens the emotional resonance of the song: the half-spoken vocals of Roger Waters, answered by David Gilmour’s clear low tenor; and the slow and somber orchestration of the verse, followed by the wave-like string arpeggios of the pre-chorus. It’s challenging to articulate these arpeggios (transcribed for Gtr. 2 as Riff B) in such a way as to mimic the bowed strings. Each note must be released as the next is played—a particularly difficult feat when two notes are played on adjacent strings at the same fret. This bit of “finger ballet” requires a roll of the index finger to articulate each note, a technique attributed to virtuoso violinist Niccolo Paganini. On the recorded guitar front, the echoed glissandos of the slide guitar in the verse contrast effectively with the bright acoustic guitar of the pre-chorus. The acoustic guitar, by the way, is strung in “Nashville tuning,” where the four lowest strings (E, A, D, and G) are replaced with lighter strings tuned an octave higher (see Acoustic Cafe, page 162).

TWO OF THE GREATEST SOLOS EVER RECORDED

The ironically triumphant chorus announces David Gilmour’s first solo, a melodic excursion that underscores the “comfort” of the title with its pastoral complacency. The chords he plays over and over are the same “happy” major chords of the pre-chorus, and Gilmour’s phrasing treats them as if they were the very pillows on which he rests his fevered head. Consonant chord tones abound, and gentle half-step bends and tremolo bar vibratos make his hands sound just like two balloons. As you tackle this section, try to visualize the shape of each major chord as it goes by, and use these notes as targets for memorizing Gilmour’s phrasing.

In triangulated contrast to the vocal persona of Waters—ascetic and Gilmour—self-naiive, the outro guitar solo embodies all the rage and anger of a soul painfully shedding a lifetime of repression. This is certainly one of the greatest blues-rock guitar solos ever recorded, as Gilmour presents an impassioned study in how to make the minor pentatonic and blues scales come alive. For the first minute-plus, he plays almost entirely in 7th position, as shown in Fig. 1. Any first-year guitarist worth his rock salt will know this pattern, but it’s Gilmour’s subtle use of bends, vibrato, rhythmic articulation, and an absolutely devastating tone that make this solo so transcendent. Two landmarks in his phrasing occur whenever the chord cycle returns to B minor: a descending sextuplet phrase, excerpted in Fig. 2, and a traditional blues-based phrase similar to Fig. 3, which is also nestled into the second beat of the sextuplet phrase.3

**TONE ZONE**

**GUITAR:** Solidbody 1
**PICKUP/POSITION:** Single-coil/Neck
**GAIN:** 1
**EQ:** Bass/Mid/Treble: 5/5/5
**EFFECTS:** Echo
**GUITARS 4 & 5:** Solidbody
**PICKUP/POSITION:** Single-coil/Bridge
**GAIN:** 9
**EQ:** Bass/Mid/Treble: 6/7/8

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COMFORTABLY NUMB
As Recorded by Pink Floyd
(From the Columbia Recording THE WALL)

Words and Music by George Roger Waters
and David Gilmour

Intro

Moderately Slow \( \frac{4}{4} = 65 \)

\( \text{Bm} \)

Verse

\( \text{Bm} \)

1. Hello,

is there any body

Gtr. 1 (elec.)

\( \text{Riff A} \)

steady gliss.

\( \text{w/ clean tone} \)

Gtr. 2 (elec.)

\( \text{Rhy. Fig. 1} \)

steady gliss.

\( \text{w/ clean tone} \)

strings arranged for guitar

A

\( \text{G} \) \( \text{Em} \) \( \text{Bm} \)

in there?

John nod if you can hear me.

Is there any one... home?

End Riff A

End Rhy. Fig. 1

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Comfortably Numb

Gtrs. 1 & 2: w/ Riff A & Rhy. Fig. 1 (2 times)

A G Em

Come on, now... I hear you're feeling down... Well, I can ease your pain... and get you on your feet again... Relax,

I'll need some information first, just the basic facts... Can you show me where it hurts?

§ Pre-Chorus

Gtr. 1 tacet

D A

*Riff B

A

There is no pain, you are receding...

Gtr. 2

A distant ship, smoke on the horizon...

*Nashville tuning (strings 6-3 light gauge) are raised an octave
Comfortably Numb

You are only coming through in waves.

Your lips move but I can't hear what you're saying.

When I...

End Riff B

Gtrs. 2 & 3: w/ Riff B & Rhy. Fig. 2

I was a child had a fever caught a fleeting glimpse

My hands felt just like two balloons

Now I've got that feeling once again I can't explain you would not un...

I turned to look but it was gone I cannot put my finger on...
Comfortably Numb

Chorus
Gtr. 2 tacet
Asus4 Asus2 A G/B Cadd9
Rhy. Fig. 3

Gtr. 3

have be-come... com-f'rt-a-bly numb.

Gtr. 4 (elec.)

f w/dist.

15 14

Guitar Solo
Gtr. 3 w/ Rhy. Fig. 2

D A D

w/bar 14 1/2 (14) 15 14

w/bar 14 (14) -12 12

A G/B C G

w/bar 15 -14 14 12 (12)

11 -11 7 -9 7 9 9 7 9 11 11

C G

grad. bend 1/2 w/bar w/bar

15 14 14 12 -11 9 7 9 7 -7 9 7 9 11 11

10 -9 9

10 -9 7

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Comfortably Numb

Chorus
Gr. 3: w/ Rhy. Fig. 3
Asus4 Asus2 A G/B Cadd9 G D

1. have become com-t'ra-bly numb...

Verse
Gr. 4 tacet
Bm
Rhy. Fig. 4
Gr. 3

2. Okay, just a little pin prick, there'll be no more

G D/F# Em Bm End Rhy. Fig. 4

ah! But you may feel a little sick. Can you
Gr. 3: w/ Rhy. Fig. 4
Bm

stand up? I do believe it's working, good. That'll keep you
Gr. 3

D/F# Em Bm

D.S. al Coda
go ing for the show... Come on, it's time to go.

Φ Coda
D

Gr. 3
numb...
Gr. 4

8va loco P.H.