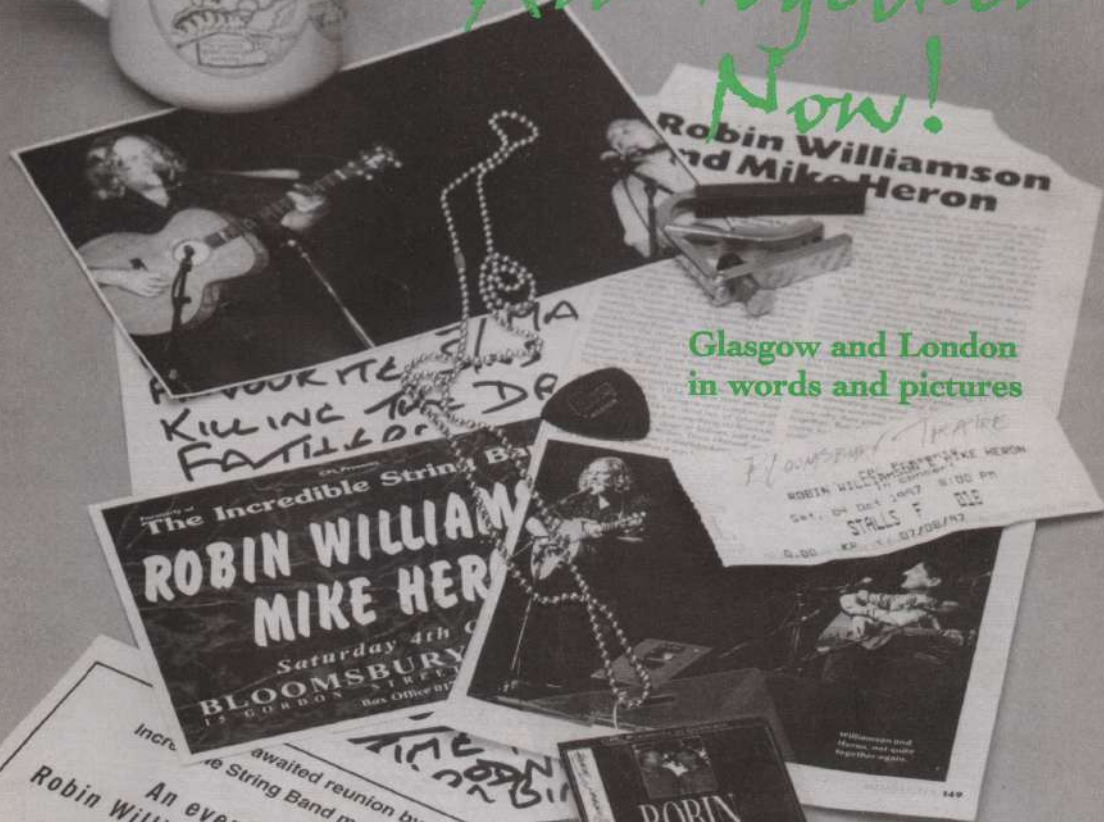


A CELEBRATION OF THE INCREDIBLE STRING BAND PAST AND PRESENT

BECAUSE

for the song has no ending

All Together
Now!



An awaited reunion by
The Incredible String Band members
Robin Williamson & Mike Heron
Sat 27 Sept 8pm £13.50
The Henry Wood Hall,
Claremont Street, G3
Box Office: 0141 287 5511

- More from Malcolm the Interview part 2
- Swansongs Hard Rope revisited
- Ithkos the graphic novel

Vishangro

Moon of the berries is waning to clay
Bayol the wind leap on the whale's way
Sing for Vishangro oak ash and may.

I will not flash the day glance on the strong king's shield
Nor yet the moon glance on the frightened man
Bring her sweet peace ere she rests on the breast of God.
With the nutmegs and oak-apples of her rosary
That counts the praying sand
Who cradles earth and water in the hollow of her hand.

I was a wasp on a nettled hill
Ten thousand brothers in one nest of fungus paper
And every sopping apple
Held its cider sweet for my thin tongue.

I was swineherd at the court of Fionn
I wore the coat of patches with Jilal beneath the stars
Sang at the black court of Ain
I baked sweet pastries for the Queen of Spain
I hid my alchemy beneath the stone of lies
Burned at the post, my boiling brain
Made craters of my eyes.

The mystery of history it is not revealed
We hear not clear, but only with hope and fear
and the pomp of crime, and the pride of the time.

I was a monk repelled by a woman's smell
I sailed in Darwin's ship, a mouse that gnawed the grain
Trapped by the cook on one dark day.
I have spoken with the Thames in much sweeter times
And with the Medway where she rolls her waves.

The snake-weed is hissing the wind of the morn
The mountains are mouthing where Albion is born
The light rays are gathering where Horus is shown
Sing for Vishangro, oak ash and thorn.

Robin Williamson

Illo by Kevin Salt

beGLAD II is published by Taproot Productions and edited in this instance by Adrian Whittaker, with the usual stout assistance and support from Raymond Greenoaken, Deena Omar & Julie Hathaway. Technical guidance and goodwill from Joe McConnell, & Martin Ford. Cover design by Jas Wetherspoon. Cover photography by Andrew Cox and Erwin Doppler. Bloomsbury set list by John Rutherford. Printed by our old chums SPC of Sheffield. Special thanks to everyone who contributed.

beGLAD is published twice a year, mid-summer and mid-winter (see News page). Issue 12 will be edited by Raymond—all contributions to the address below. The deadline for 12 is 1 May. The featured album will be the **ISB first album**. We're always happy to receive any ISB-related material—clippings, photos and other memorabilia, illustrations, poems, whatever—either on loan or as contributions to the beGLAD archive. Thanks to all who have donated material over the past year or so: it's greatly appreciated.

USEFUL GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

If you're sending material by computer disc, it's worth checking with the Editor as to whether the format is compatible with beGLAD hardware. The magazine is assembled using QuarkXPRESS and Adobe Photoshop on a Macintosh system. Text supplied in Word, ClarisWorks and other standard WP formats, whether for PC or Mac, should present no problems. Graphic material should be supplied as TIFF or JPeg. Our Optical Character Recognition software can transmute certain types of printed text into computer files. Good quality, clean word processor text usually responds well; typewritten text can be OK, but send the original—not a photocopy. We'll happily accept typewritten or even longhand text if those are your only options. Photos and original artwork are fine in their raw form; we can even deal with photocopies if you don't trust us with your originals! It's a wise precaution to number every sheet of your MSS, and to write your name on every sheet too. Loose pages have an occult tendency to get mixed up, and occasionally—despite our sophisticated filing system—to go missing. Make sure you keep a copy for yourself, then if we lose anything we can get back to you.

SUBSCRIPTIONS, BACK ISSUES, INFORMATION, GOSSIP—contact Raymond Greenoaken, 11 Ratcliffe Road, Sheffield S11 8YA. Tel: 0114 2661158

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EDITORIAL

Welcome to issue number eleven. Although it's late, it's not as late as you might think, as Raymond and I have cunningly changed the timetable (see News pages).

You'll find a major feature by Raymond on the reunion gigs inside. I haven't much more to add—I enjoyed the concerts greatly, and loved Robin's introduction at the Bloomsbury: "Lovers of evening—good evening". If we believe the Balmore tapes, this was how they started off their first ever London gig 30-odd years ago! Like Raymond, I think that this mag certainly played a part in creating a climate where "reunion" concerts could take place. But the gigs confirmed my view that Mike and Robin have developed in such different directions that it would be very difficult for them to seriously consider actually reforming the ISB.

beGLAD still has a bit more retrospective stuff to cover—there's the first album (next issue), the Be Glad sound-

track and the 2 solo albums. But after that, I can see the "historical" side diminishing so we can concentrate on what Robin, Mike, Clive and Malcolm are doing now.

I've had to hold over a few articles which, with a bit of luck, will turn up in the next issue. They include a "Me & the ISB" piece from David Kidman, an excellent 5000 Spirits article by Bob Pendleton, and a John Quigley piece on how the ISB influenced other 60s artists. You may be wondering what happened to part two of Norman Lamont's Bruce Findlay interview. Acute observers will have spotted the salient parts in No. 10's String Strife article.

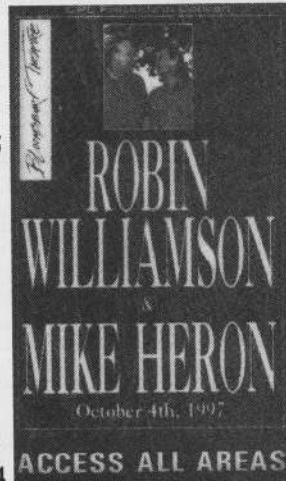
An apology to David Kidman, uncredited author of last issue's live concert review of Robin. And a big thank-you to all who've helped with this issue—particularly Raymond, Deena, Julie and Joe.

Hope you enjoy the read—let me know what you think!

Adrian.

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beGLAD NEWS

a gallant gallimaufry of news, rumour, scandal and allegation mostly assembled by

ADRIAN WHITTAKER

ROBIN'S TRUNKS CONT'D

As usual these days, the flow of music, CDs and projects from Mr Williamson continues unabated. The Opel CD, Memories, is now out (see our review for more details). He's also nearly finished his CD of reworked ISB material; I See Us All Get Home, Invocation, Ring Dance, Vishangro and Fine Fingered Hand are all in the can. Ring Dance is also on a compilation, Georgia on My Mind, a benefit for Sandy Denny's daughter. It's available by mail order from Fledg'ling Records, PO Box 547, London SE26 4BD. There'll be another story-and-music album available early next year, and in the pipeline are a family album (possibly with Bina and Vashti), and something called the Absurdicon, which promises to be even weirder than Dream Journals. An album "based around fantastic voyages", it's still at the planning stage.

Recently, Robin's hooked up with the company who did The Dragon Has Two Tongues to make a channel 4 pilot programme on European history (he provided the music). The Licorice CD project mooted a while back has been dropped; the tapes sound too rough, apparently. Oh—and he's off to the States for a tour this Easter. What else?—Well, there's the Pig's Whisker Website, which browsers can find on <http://www.thebeesknees.com> and which will be the quickest way of finding out about new R.W. releases.

For Robin's '98 tour dates see page 31.

MIKE'S GRILL

I interrupted Mr Heron's cooking the other night (sausages) to ask him about forthcoming projects. That American release for Mystics is still proving elusive, but there's a limited edition CD in the pipeline with some of his demos from '73, plus selections from the aborted '80s project with synth wizz Tony Cox—and several previously-unheard '70s compositions newly recorded by Mike in a stripped-down "demo" format. Look for it sometime in the Spring.

SEE U LATER

Mark Anstey's made another approach to WEA for the U masters—no response to date. Demon are still negotiating a CD release for the Be Glad soundtrack—out before the millennium, says the Press Officer.

REUNION CONCERTS —THE AFTERMATH

Edited highlights of the Glasgow concert, together with interviews with Robin and Mike, were broadcast in Scotland in November in the Original Masters series. The programme may turn up next year on Folk On 2. Landseer Films' documentary, featuring interviews with Mike, Robin and Malcolm as well as archive, rehearsal and concert footage, went out on BBC TV Scotland on 3rd December. Mike's mum really loved it, as did Mike, though he saw it as "the Sun version—a bit populist". It will get a national broadcast on BBC2 in Spring 1998, and hopefully will be re-edited to feature more of the recent footage. More on the documentary in the next issue.

As part of the media fuss surrounding the gigs, Robin appeared on Radio 4's Kaleidoscope and in the Edinburgh magazine LIST. Mike, meanwhile, was apparently interviewed for London's Evening Standard (anyone actually seen the article?), in addition to his cameo appearance in Border Life.

Mark Anstey is readying a live CD of the best of the London gig for January release on Pig's Whisker. Also, see the small ads page for a backstage pass offer!

MORE MIKE & ROBIN GIGS?

Nothing concrete at the moment, though East Coast gigs in the States are being mooted. Mike says he and Robin would be up for a festival gig in the UK—Cambridge Folk Fest is "interested".

ELEKTRA COMPILATION?

According to Mike's royalty slips, there's an Elektra compilation out somewhere (USA? Japan?) featuring all of Changing Horses!! Has anyone got more details?

MALCOLM TO MAKE SECOND SOLO ALBUM?

Malcolm has been working in his home studio to produce a set of demo versions of new songs for a projected CD, possibly a limited edition mail order release. His career in environmental arts continues unabated; currently he's working on three separate shows based on the themes of roads, migration and geology. His home, Gowan Bank, also hosted a global ecology conference, Ecotopia, this summer and he and Mary are well advanced with their plans to build an ecologically sustainable village.

Animals With Attitude is still in the pipeline, awaiting funding for a T.V. pilot; if that doesn't work out then the songs will be released as a CD.

Malc's just unearthed a couple of books which contain a series of diary and journal entries for the last two ISB years, '73 and '74. He's promised to produce a selected highlights version for a future *beGLAD*.

SON OF GRAND-DAUGHTER

Michael Ranauro is still inviting contributions to this second volume of ISB covers performed by *BeGLAD* readers. The closing date is 31 January, and the finished article will probably be ready in time for a preview in the next issue. He needs first generation cassettes, with a DAT copy if available, plus some background info on the musicians. The address for contributions is:

Michael Ranauro
c/o 6105 Avenue T
Brooklyn NY 11234
USA

Email: ranauro@fas.harvard.edu

BBC SESSIONS

Both On Air and In Concert are now available again on general release. Meanwhile, we're still trying to persuade Mark Anstey to put together a CD of all the previously unreleased sessions from whatever sources are available...

REHEARSAL VIDEO

Sorry for the delays with the Rehearsal video. It's out now, available for £15.00 all in from:

Adrian Whittaker
71a Colvestone Crescent
Dalston
London,
E8 2LJ
U.K.

VIVE L'INDIFFERENCE!

An even feebleer than usual response to last issue's competition, which invited our knowledgeable readership to supply the greatest number of verified covers of October Song. Only one entry, in fact, so we hope our respondent won't take it too hard if we hold the super prize—a signed copy of Robin's and Bob Stewart's Celtic Bards, Celtic Druids handbook—over for a future comp.

For what it's worth, the known tally of October Song covers stands at eight: two versions by The Corries (1967 single, 1968 LP Kishmul's Galley), and one apiece by Tom Giffellon (1971 LP Loving Mad Tom), The Furey Brothers and Davey Arthur (LP The First Leaves Of Autumn), Kathleen McPeake and Anne Sands (1991 LP Take Our Part), Maggie Boyle (1987 LP Reaching Out), and of course I Looked In and Chris Taylor on the first Hangman's Beautiful Grand-Daughter tape. Let us know if you get wind of any more.

MOVEABLE FEAST

Despite our herculean efforts to restore *beGLAD*'s original publishing schedule of 1 May and 1 November, events have again conspired against us. Patient subscribers will probably receive this issue somewhere around mid-January. So we're admitting defeat: as from now, we're officially relocating to 21 June and 21 December—that's Midsummer and Midwinter, of course, which retains the link to the old ritual calendar (1 May and 1 November being Beltane and Samhain respectively). Mark your diaries now.

YORKSHIRE RELISH

Occasional *beGLAD* contributor Tim Moon devoted an entire two-hour broadcast of his Sunday Folk show on Radio Bradford to the ISB recently. Among much else, this featured an interview with Robin, the text of which is published in West Yorkshire's local folk magazine Tykes News, Winter '97 issue. A blurry head 'n' shoulders of our man graces the front cover. You can get Tykes from 408 Skipton Road, Utley, Keighley, W. Yorks BD20 6HP, price £1.

SHIRLEY SINGS AGAIN

Shirley Collins, esteemed traditional singer and longtime friend of Robin and Mike, may be returning to public performance after the best part of a decade.

Shirley has been lured out of premature retirement to record with David Tibet's off-the-wall outfit Current '93, variously described as "Dark Folk", "Goth Folk" and even "Dark Wave". Scary... Our informant suggests their music lies somewhere between the ISB and the Third Ear Band; their Earth Covers Earth album has a cover design that looks suspiciously like a Hangman's pastiche. *beGLAD* hopes that this will be the prelude to live gigging for Shirley in the not-too-distant future. Our man in Collins country has been chasing her for a *beGLAD* interview: watch this space.

TITLE CONTENDER

Further speculation on the origins of the title Wee Tam And The Big Huge. In the early Fifties, the popular picture comic The Beano, published by D.C. Thompson of Dundee, ran a strip featuring a character called Big Hugh. Hugh was an easy-going simpleton from the sticks who thwarted assorted pranksters and miscreants with the reader's help—an early anticipation of interactive entertainment? So: was Robin a Beano fan in the "waist-high Nineteen Fifties"?



Wee Tam not in picture...

WE'RE CALLING TO YOU

Following a discussion at the Bloomsbury between Licorice's elder sister Frances McKechnie, Robin and Mark Anstey, it was decided that Frances would organise a systematic search in the States for her long-silent sibling, and that Mark would put the squeeze on Polygram for some of Likky's unclaimed royalties to fund the quest. Frances last heard from Likky some six years ago; *beGLAD* will faithfully report any developments.

SONG BY SONG BY STRING

Agenda Books of Andover have commissioned a song-by-song study of the String Band by pop journalist Ben Cruikshank, the author of similar works on the music of Scott Walker, Captain Beefheart, Frank Zappa and Love, among others. (Ben claims the distinction of having been

employed as a bouncer at the ISB's Albert Hall debut in 1966.) Agenda hope to have the book out early in January. You're unlikely to see it in your high street emporium, but you'll be able to order it from Agenda at Units 8/9, Kenyons Trading Estate, Weybill Road, Andover, Hampshire SP10 3NP. Price: £5.99, or £7.50 for overseas customers. Review next issue.

Gimmelette

The final chorus on *Cellular Song* (May the Long Time Sun...) sounds oddly familiar. Could it possibly be a bit of a steal? **J. McMarker** (no relation)

According to something reader Shane Pope came across on the Internet, it's actually based on a traditional Sikh spiritual song called On This Day. Whatever next—Maya based on a George Formby banjo tune, maybe?—*Gimmel* (Daleth is currently on a multi-centre holiday in Dalston and Sheffield).

A query—Mal Schofield was once in a band called *When Stars Collide*, writes **Stephen Robbins**. Are there any records available, and were the songs she wrote published commercially, he'd like to know. Replies to Raymond for the next issue.



Joe Boyd's been telling people his Guardian article was a covert plan by him and Mark Anstey to galvanise Mike and Robin into action...I Looked Up was no. 8 in the import charts this October...Robin made it into the Guardian's birthday listings this year (together with Billy Connolly, same day)...out in the States is Mother's Day, a poor quality CD bootleg of the 1968 Fillmore gig—a rip-off at \$28...major ISB retrospectives in Folk Roots (172) and the Guardian (29/9/97)...Robin worked up a slide guitar part to Favourite Sins in rehearsal, dropped in favour of a vocal harmony at the gigs...Andy and Adrian hatched a plan to get Chinese White on the reunion set list. They got as far as Mike teaching his band the music before foundering on Robin's lack of a gimbri...a 1969 edition of Disco Express, a Spanish mag, reviewed the ISB career to date. It rated Maya as "not one of the best songs" and claimed the Iron Stone betrayed the influence of Simon and Garfunkel!! (Ta to Francesc P)...Norwegian band The Smell Of Incense covered Witches Hat on a 1993 album...Japanese folk/psychedelic group Ghost cite the ISB as a major influence and have covered their songs live...

THE SAME OLD BUZZ

BY RAYMOND GREENOAKEN

PHOTOS BY ERWIN DOPPLER, GIL MURRAY AND SNAPPER G.

If ever a band staked out their territory at the Crossroads, the ISB were that band. Where roads met and cultures mingled, there were Robin and Mike with antennae twitching eagerly for anything to add to their unique amalgam of genres and styles. Small wonder, then, that they should have developed a shared and passionate interest in that veritable genius loci of the Crossroads, the legendary bluesman Robert Johnson. Eventually, as we all know, each man set out on his own road, and 23 years were to pass before those roads crossed again.

Picture the scene. A couple of hours before they're due to take the stage together for their historic "reunion" at Glasgow's Henry Wood Hall, Robin and Mike slip out for a curry at the nearby Empress Of India. And amid the spicy odours of Oriental cuisine, who should be staring from a large framed photo on the wall but the saturnine figure of...Robert Johnson. Return to the Crossroads, or what?

Kate and I had arrived at the venue around five to find Mike sitting on the steps having a contemplative ciggie (or *summat—Ed.*). It looked like we were the first punters to make the scene. There were sounds of much activity from within: the bell-like peals of Robin's harp, and manly grunts as heavy film equipment was being moved around the hall. Eventually, others emerged into the grey Glasgow afternoon. Mark Anstey was wearing his best "Flustered—Moi?" expression. Robin, shaggily tressed again after a couple of years of looking almost respectable, chatted cheerily to anyone in his line of sight. Alistair Fraser, head honcho of Landseer Films, who were filming the event for BBC Scotland, sidled up to me. "Weren't we at school together?" he enquired incredulously. We were,

readers, and I've still got photos to prove it! "You haven't changed a bit," he said, unconvincingly.

Some of my fondest memories of ISB concerts are of that pregnant period when the massed hordes of Stringfandom are gathering on the steps of the concert venue. Greeting old friends, making new ones, sharing String

seats were squeezed into the hall (it did not, happily, have fixed seating), and we can be hopeful that no-one was turned away.

What we were about to witness was not, you understand, an Incredible String Band reunion. The posters and tickets were adamant about that. It was "Robin Williamson and Mike Heron together in



.....a fearsome sight... Maya at the Henry Wood Hall

anecdotes, feeling deeply and deliriously Hip. And what do you know—a quarter of a century on and nothing's changed! There's the same old buzz, and as we file into the auditorium the years seem to peel away. "Forty- and fifty-somethings" we may now be, as the Scotsman's Alistair Clark tartly reminded us, but that sense of communion and shared understanding is miraculously intact.

Unsurprisingly, the hall was packed to capacity. The gig had in fact been sold out several weeks beforehand, although ticketless Stringheads had travelled from as far afield as Holland and Germany on the chance of somehow gaining admission. A number of extra

concert". And, to be fair, it's a distinction that needs to be made. For there was to be no Rose and Likky, no Malcolm, no Clive, nor any of the various Dotts and Schniers, Gilstons, Forbeses and Ingrams. John and Dave from Mike's trio were tonight's supporting personnel. Nor were we promised an evening of back-to-back ISB classics; the Williamson and Heron solo repertoires, rumour had it, would be well represented in the programme.

But no sensible Stringhead would dispute that Robin and Mike were and are the essence of the ISB, the onlie begetters of the defining trilogy of Spirits, Hangman's and Wee Tam And The Big Huge. If they got up on stage

together and did an evening of Elton John covers, the words Incredible, String and Band would still hover above their heads like haloes. *Of course* we were here for an ISB reunion, and what's more, we'd hauled a heavy load of expectation along with us. Could our heroes still deliver?



...nicer shirt for the London gig

We certainly welcomed them like returning heroes—the ovation when they strode onstage was long and loving—but there might have been an uneasy stirring of doubt in many a breast during the opening number, a shaky rendering of Everything's Fine Right Now. Robin's mandolin had slipped out of tune under the hot TV lights. Mike missed his cue for the third verse. The whole thing wobbled to a halt rather than ended. But, hey, didn't String Band shows always stutter into life like that? Well, as often as not, in my recollection. And we could still wallow in the pleasure of hearing those two voices lifted in harmony again after all these years. Judgement deferred.

The Heron contingent downed tools as Robin launched into the traditional Lonely Exile, tugging the melody this way and that before lurching into his justly-celebrated telling of the Moses and Jesus yarn ("And Jesus is a funny name for a Rottweiler..."). This was familiar Williamson territory, with our man at ease and in complete control. Mike and the lads followed with a crisp, boppy Tom And Alexei, after which Robin served up his heartfelt prose-poem Scotland Yet to a mellifluous harp accompaniment.

This sequence seemed almost designed to highlight the two men's contrasting styles; the next song, however, showed just how well they could blend their skills. Red Hair—rarely performed live by the String Band, but reputedly one of Robin's favourite Heron compositions—

shimmered in an eerie aura of harp and gentle percussion that was almost too beautiful to bear. And what followed must have been many connoisseurs' idea of String Band Heaven: a heart-stopping medley of October Song and Maya. No sitar, *hélas*, though John plugged the gap with some dazzling guitar lines. Mike's contribution was limited to his harmony vocal on the chorus of Maya, but that was enough to send this listener floating somewhere among the roofbeams.

Mike's Favourite Sins was next along. Many of us lamented the decision to leave it off Where The Mystics Swim, but it lives on still in the trio's concert set; here it was reinforced by some snaky Williamson guitar and suffered not one whit from finding itself in the long shadow cast by Maya. That dude Heron sure puffs a mean blues harp. Robin sat out for the next piece, a zestful Killing The Dragon, then brought the first set to a conclusion with a



medley of tales, tunes and jokes on the loose theme of Fathers. Roaring good fun, but many may have been surprised that a solo item should be chosen to close the set. Did it matter? In the great scheme of events, not really, perhaps—but a rousing ensemble piece would have convincingly nailed any doubts about that uncertain start.

During the interval I had the pleasure of being introduced to Mary Stewart, Balmore matriarch, ISB landlady and mountaineer of repute. She was keen to disclaim the latter epithet. Not true that she had been, as Robin had suggested in *beGLAD 8*, the first woman to scale the

North face of the Eiger. "I did the Matterhorn," she acknowledged, "but only by the tourist route!" She was escorted backstage after the concert to meet Robin and Mike for the first time in many a year—in Mike's case, since his brief residence at Balmore in '67.

The second set kicked in with Robin alone at the harp again; he gave us the tender and rueful Love Letter To My Wife Bina, another of his concert staples. It was a thought-provoking choice. This song of loneliness on the touring treadmill, of being parted from loved ones by the wandering road, offers a perspective similar to Robin's early masterpiece First Girl I Loved. But the differences are fascinating. First Girl is quintessentially a footloose young man's song, whereas Love Letter is the testament of a family man with literally decades of touring under his belt. The connection is plain, the contrast illuminating. Robin still has First Girl in his

repertoire, and in many ways it would have been an ideal choice for this occasion; but Love Letter was somehow more truthful to the time, and therefore more apt.

Mike followed up with some autobiographical ruminations of his own, crediting Robin with his introduction to the beatnik lifestyle and its canonical text, Kerouac's *On The Road*. Naturally enough, this was a preamble to Mexican Girl, delivered as always with muscular grace and enhanced by some hot Williamson whistle. By this time things were cooking just nicely. Robin then stepped forward with a radical

reworking of the first section of *The Fair*, from 1983's *Selected Writings*. The brashness and gusto of the earlier version was replaced by a much more reflective and even sombre tone—another change of perspective occasioned by the passing years? And right out of the blue this segued into the “Happy Valley” section from another Williamson classic of childhood recollection, *Koeoaddi There*, with Dave tinkling his tinkly things in true Hangman’s fashion and Mike finally adding his voice to the *Earth, Water, Fire and Air* invocation. Maximum frisson quotient: a perfect moment.

Many of us were doubtless wondering whether 1968 would find its way into the programme. Another fairly obvious choice, given that Mike and the lads have been playing it for a few years now. But would its “sensitive” subject matter—the growing estrangement between Mike and Robin in the ISB’s twilight years—count against it? Clearly not: here it was, with a full ensemble arrangement featuring Robin’s plangent harp figures, and a lovely job all four made of it too. More than a song, more than a performance, it was a declaration of enduring and restated faith in the spirit that animated the ISB at their peak. Whether Mike and Robin intended it as such is, of course, beside the point. When you’re a living legend, even your most whimsical acts are freighted with Significance...

And so to *Song For Robert Johnson*. (It’s that man again...) Robin had shown in the first set, with *Scotland Yet*, that his later work could bear comparison with the most ambitious of his String-period compositions; and here was



proof, if we needed it, that the same was true of Mike’s post-ISB writing. Make no mistake: this is a monster of a song, exploring Johnson’s mythic status without losing sight of his humanity. You can almost hear the Devil clinking the coins in his pocket as he waits at the Crossroads... If, as rumour has it, Eric Clapton passed on this one, it merely confirms that ol’ Slowhand’s taste in songs is as questionable as his taste in suits. No input from Robin here, which seemed fair enough. There’s plenty he could have added, certainly, but somehow nothing more needed saying.

“School’s got a smell that lingers...” mused Robin as the applause receded, “...of sour milk and floor polish, boiled cabbage, ink and farts.” It was *Me And The Mad Girl* *naturellement*, a song that has grown palpably in stature since its appearance on *A Glint At The Kindling* back in ’79. The canny interpolation of the “schooldays” soliloquy has transformed it from something that was

politely poignant to a sliver of pure poetry speeding straight to the heart. Funny, ghostly and profound: a magical distillation of childhood angst.

And then, waddaya know, we’re at the end of

the show and Mike’s setting the scene for *Feast Of Stephen*. By this time they could have dropped their pants and sung *God Save The Queen* in four unrelated keys and we’d still have cheered ‘em to the echo. But *Feast* was a fitting closer: though recorded by Mike on his *Smiling Men* solo outing, it was a popular item in the ISB concert repertoire, and here it afforded Robin plenty of opportunity to toot some tasty tin whistle. And we could “la la” along to the turbo-powered chorus before John brought things gently back to earth with muted, glistening guitar. Dave’s theatrical assault on the Chinese gong was the signal for us to rise as one to our feet and fill the Henry Wood Hall with the sort of thunderous and prolonged ovation normally reserved for hang ‘em and flog ‘em speeches at Tory conferences.

But what were we applauding, exactly? Judged in sternly objective terms, the show was some way short of flawless. Not to mince words, the foursome were under-rehearsed—excusably, perhaps, given the considerable slab of geography stretching between South Wales and the Scottish Borders, and Robin’s hectic touring and recording schedules. There were moments, therefore, when things didn’t quite gell, and a certain tentativeness crept occasionally into the playing. Moreover, the sound quality and balance, at least from where I was sitting, frankly left much to be desired. But we weren’t simply giving a verdict on two hours of live music, but offering up our heart-brimming thanks for a lifetime’s musical and poetic inspiration. Three decades—count ‘em—of golden airborne dreams. You know these men





Robin, Mike & John—as always, poor old Davey Haswell is out of it have made the world a bit brighter and more wondrous for us all. And they've brought us together, not just under one roof on a September night in Glasgow, but whenever we look at the stars, or watch the play of sunlight on a stream, or fall in love. We owe Robin Williamson and Mike Heron an ovation thirty years long, and here we are trying to cram it into a couple of minutes...

Robin strolls back onstage with his familiar rolling gait. "Just came back to collect the instruments!"—He's used that line so often I can't remember whether he came out with it here or not. But he slung the trusty Taylor over his neck and had us singing along to, of all things, an early Tom Paxton number, an old campfire favourite relearned from the Balmore Tapes. It all comes round again... Mike, John and Dave returned to regale us with a smouldering Baby Goodnight before Robin produced his fiddle for the inevitable Log Cabin Home In The Sky. This hoary old barnstormer had become something of a



concert cliché in the ISB's final period, but here against the odds it came across as genuinely joyful. Robin faithfully reproduced his little mime routine—"he must turn his back on the crowd..." (turns back) "...a man must run from the deeds he has done..." (slow-motion running movements) "...winter is nigh..." (shivers) "...let us fly..." (flutters arms). It was as arch as ever, and we loved it.

And finally... just our boys alone on the stage, belting their way through the Carter Family standard You've Been A Friend To Me. Mike had brought out his moothie, but Robin's guitar was tuned too sharp so it went back into the shirt pocket. Never mind: we got the two voices together and that was more than sufficient. Mike and Robin bid you goodnight.

I found myself pressed into service as Mike's guitar tuner...

Cut to the Bloomsbury Theatre, London, a week later. "Not The ISB Reunion" part two, and like many others I was there again, baying for a second helping. I'd had seven days to reflect on the Henry Wood experience and develop a stinking cold. A couple of Scottish press reviews had come to my attention:

Alistair Clark, a long-time champion of the ISB, confessed in *The Scotsman* that "it was just great to see them on stage again", and reported that there were indeed "moments when both the spirit and slightly rickety sound of vintage ISB was recaptured." A review in *Scotland On Sunday* was also enthusiastic and was accompanied by a nice picture, but reference to song titles such as Einstein, Bach and Full Moon On A Misty Night led one to wonder whether the hack had actually been at the same concert.

London was basking in balmy October sunshine when we arrived from our Northerly redoubt. The Bloomsbury Theatre had a spacious bar and social area where the gathering throng could congregate in relative comfort. As with the Glasgow gig, it was an opportunity to put faces to many of the names on the *beGLAD* database. Nice to see you, one and all—you know who you are.

The audience was even more cosmopolitan than the Henry Wood hordes. This is the God's honest truth:



Peter from Holland, the lovely Felix from Switzerland and Erwin your photographer



Log Cabin in the Henry Wood

there were Stringfans present who'd travelled from Germany, Holland, Spain, Italy, Scandinavia, Switzerland, Greece, Australia, Argentina and Mars (that's Mars, Pennsylvania...). And here's a statistic to chew on: 1.45% of the entire population of Cercs in the Spanish Pyrenees were present at the Bloomsbury tonight. As this amounted to five persons, brainy readers with nothing better to do should be able to work out the population of this picturesque Catalanian village. (Answer at the end of the article.)

It's worth pointing out that by no means all of the ticket holders were in their gruff middle years. There were many younger faces to be seen—and the same had been true at the H. Wood Hall. Good taste is timeless, as a sage once observed.

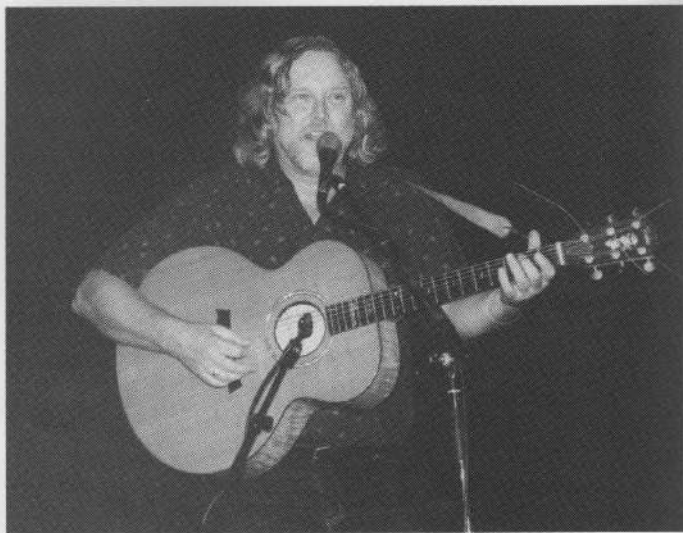
The well-known authority on Scottish poetry Sir Robert of Plant made a grand entrance in tartan trousers, inspiring a sustained susurrus of "Is that really..?" among the multitudes. Roy Harper, we knew, was also in the building; and someone later claimed a sighting of Pete Townshend, though admitting "It may have been some other bald bloke with a big hooter!" Joe Boyd had left it too late to get a ticket, but a last-minute appeal to the powers-that-be ensured his attendance. Quite right too! Another verified sighting was Her Roseness the Former Lady Mayoress of Aberystwyth, looking a trifle severe in a tweedy twin-set, but twinkling with good humour. Under relentless questioning by your scribe, she confirmed that she still had her trusty fiddle and gave it the occasional scrape when the compulsion seized her. Regrettably, she hadn't brought it along,

but we can dream, can't we? And how many of you knew that Likky had an elder sister? Frances McKechnie, believe it or not, lectures in African Studies just across the road from the Bloomsbury, at University College. It's a small world, and getting smaller by the day. We were delighted to learn that she too was among us, and it turned out that she was seated next to Kate in the auditorium. I'm told the two had a good old chinwag about Likky and related matters. (More news on Likky elsewhere in this issue.)

Events took an unexpected and unnerving turn when I found myself pressed into service as Mike's guitar operative, deputising for the faithful Tommy who couldn't be present on this occasion. My duties, I learned, would involve taking the stage during the actual concert with whichever of Mike's three guitars he required for a particular song,

and—oo-er!—ensuring it was bang in tune on delivery. I believe it was Keith Richards who launched the fashion for this particular service. The responsibility was awesome, but this was something I could dine out on for the rest of my days. "I'm your man!" I snapped with a sharp salute, and those of you who were present will surely recall my exquisitely discreet entrances and exits and faultless navigation of mic cables and instrument cases. If only my 18-year-old self could see me now!, I cooed to myself as I hovered in the wings clutching Mr H.'s Ibanez in a trembling hand. Not as good as *being* Mike Heron, but it was getting there!

It's not my intention to descant at length on the show itself, since the programme differed from the Glasgow version only in small particulars. The performance this time round was unquestionably more relaxed and sure-footed, and there was appreciably more off-the-cuff badinage from Robin and Mike. You couldn't doubt they were pleased to be playing together again. Robin prefaced Love Letter with a tender personal dedication to Bina, who was in the audience with daughter Vashiti. I closed my eyes during the choruses of Maya and convinced myself I was back in the City Hall, Newcastle in October 1969. The capacity audience, naturally, seized on every note and syllable like starving urchins and rent the evening at intervals with eardrum-threatening gales of applause. From my position in the wings it was impossible to judge the quality of





*partially obscured, but charming nonetheless—
Dave Haswell*

the P.A., and I've since heard a range of contrasting opinions, from pretty ropey to pretty good. So how was it for you?

...and so to Dalston...

After the show, Mike and Robin came back into the auditorium to chat with lingering concertgoers and sign assorted memorabilia—a typical touch, and one that sent Stringheads back to their various parts of the globe doubly delighted. As the doors of the Bloomsbury finally clanged shut, a bunch of us, high as kites,



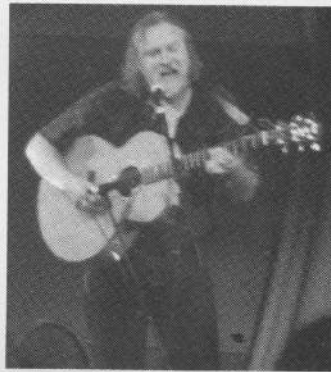
Bina listens to Love Letter...

adjourned to your Editor's bijou residence up the road in Dalston for a raucous session with battered guitars and the ISB Songbook. My bacteria-ravaged vocal cords could produce only a hoarse raven-caw, but what the hell...! I'll rasp you this October croak...Now over to Adrian for Pictures In A Mirror. These are the Mythic Times, right enough.

Population of Cercs: 345. 🐦



Rose—with Mark Ellen in the background



*An anguished-looking Robin in Glasgow—
one of Gil's digital specials*

Original set lists unearthed

According to a crumpled scrap of paper found by our reporter Gabby The Flap in a rehearsal hall in Chesterfield, the audience at the reunion gigs might well have had a few surprises. The "No Ruinous Feud" tour was originally slated to include Grumbling Old Men, Dear Old Battlefield and Everything's Fine Right Now...

Reviews

POOKA LIVE AT FIBBERS, YORK—28th SEPTEMBER 1997

I just had to catch this gig, one of Pooka's all-too-rare appearances north of Birmingham. First, I'm indebted to Andy Roberts for bringing Pooka to my attention through these pages; suffice it to say that their first album has been rather frequently revisited whenever I've felt like probing into something challenging (take that how you will!), and I'd been so Pooka-fixated that I'd spent the best part of the past two years trying to find out more and to catch up on the rest of their discography (no easy task!). Then, just two days before the gig, I was alerted to a second-hand copy of *Spinning*, which I hurriedly snapped up and managed to give but one spin before hitting the tarmac. Be that as it may, I was still only partially prepared for the phenomenon of Pooka live. Extensive enquiries to people who should have known better had led me to expect Sharon and Natasha alone, but the stage was set up with a drum kit, keyboard etc., which didn't appear to belong to the support band—not that I really minded when a drummer and bass player appeared with S & N (though they're far from being a concession to group normality!).

The all-too-short set which ensued (and rather later than advertised, though I'm sure this wasn't Pooka's fault) was a compelling rollercoaster of sound—pounding, shifting, drifting; just when you thought you'd got a handle on a song, or latched into a particular groove, you were catapulted off at a tangent, at some oblique yet totally believable angle! I'm almost sure they began their set with *Mean Girl* (their current single); this song, which could be said to embody the veritable spirit of Indie (with a capital I), gained as well as lost in live performance—gained from the utter tightness, drive and attack of the four-piece working as a real unit, but lost because (at that early stage in the set) the less than ideal sound balance obscured the instrumental lines as well as the words and muted the effect of the women's disturbing, wailing vocal harmonies. These harmonies have always been one of the distinctive features of Pooka's soundscape—sounding almost wilfully dissonant, yet always so controlled, and lurching in and out of perspective in a most

unsettling manner, at once harsh and sweet. The only other vocal harmonisers I can think of who have any remotely similar blend are the Roches. At times, the harmonies even create their own rhythms, which seem to slice right across the rhythms created by the words themselves in a weird kind of counterpoint which is strangely logical, even inevitable.

Back at the gig, song quickly followed song, some recognisable and some not. *Lubrication*, with its trademark "Kick Horns", skanked in and out, and *Rubber Arms* I'm sure was in there somewhere (but remember these were new songs I'd heard only the once). An amazing amount of stylistic ground was covered, often within the same song. A grindingly heavy riff would suddenly cut out and give way to a passage of delicate acoustic strumming, for instance (often as not, though, you'll find the driving twin acoustic guitars have generated the riff in the first place!), or maybe either Sharon or Natasha (I've still not worked out which is which!) would pick up an electric guitar and unleash a blistering, truly coruscating solo passage—bite yer fingers off, Jimmy Page! There was a brief interlude during which Sharon and Natasha entranced us as a duo, with fine renderings of *City Sick* and *Graham Robert Wood* in which the quality and texture of their harmonies, now altogether more audible, stunned some of the hitherto noisily chatty audience into silence. And then it was all over, Pooka disappeared swiftly into a back room, and it was almost as though they'd never been there. I so wanted to catch up with the band—partly to say Hi and tell them how well I felt they'd come across despite the odds, and partly to check out some facts and the set list etc. in the interests of review accuracy—but the entourage didn't seem to welcome any approaches, which was a real shame. To an extent I can understand the band wanting to keep up a certain elusiveness and mystique, but...

Pooka's music is true changeling music—Odo with a vengeance! In the best traditions of Indie, its ethos is often experimental, but at the same time you get the strong feeling that Pooka themselves have a most exact concept of the effect they want to create. *Spinning* is a strikingly apt metaphor for Pooka's kaleidoscopic roulette-wheel of startling aural images, impressions, words and sounds, which hurtle at you from all points of the musical compass and

which might well come to rest anywhere. It's always disorienting, and never easy listening, but it amply repays the effort.

David Kidman

POOKA *Spinning* (TRADE 2)

Well yes, it *has* been worth the wait! We already know *Mean Girl*, *Sweet Butterfly* and *The Insect* from previous single releases, so what does that leave? A shiny, shimmery version of *Higher* that builds into an insistent, mantra-like chorus, and a newer song called *God Sir* (could be about an old teacher!) which has one of those instantly memorable choruses as well as featuring that very un-rock 'n' roll word *ginormous*. Shine now has stacks of extra backing vocals twittering sweetly in the background, and sounds a mite over-produced; and *Lubrication*, out recently as a single, should've been a hit, with its solid bass and drums groove and an effervescent brass riff (those Kick Horns again). *Rubber Arms* starts with the memorable couplet "If I don't get a boyfriend soon/I'm bound to get a disease", but is another song staggering under the weight of production effects. Part of the problem is that the master tape has been lying around for so long (two years?) whilst Pooka got a new record deal, that they (or their producer and excellent live sound-man, Joe Leach) haven't been able to resist the temptation to fiddle about with the mixes. It means the album as a whole loses a bit of the freshness and immediacy we've come to expect from Sharon and Natasha; on the other hand, new details reveal themselves to you on each successive play. *Spinning* itself starts as a spine-chilling song, which moves into a Carl Orff-like bombastic passage and then on to a tinkly reconciliation. Thematically, it's linked to *Why Are We Sleeping* by Kevin Ayers—a common interest in Gurdjieff, perhaps? *This River* is serene, contemplative, and gently uplifting, and ends with a nifty bit of singing which sounds like Dolores from the Cranberries. I was wondering what had happened to *Love Song*, the perfect coda, but it's there as a hidden track after *Ocean*, which is exactly that...14 minutes of the sound of the sea. A couple of production excesses, then, but otherwise excellent. The perfect use for those Christmas record tokens. A.W.

WALKING THE WITCH
Curious Child

A five-song E.P. from Grahame Hood's current outfit, the ones who did *The Tree on Grand-Daughter*. It's a folk-rocky melange featuring dulcimer and high-strung guitar (where the bottom four strings are tuned an octave higher, according to Grahame), which produces some beautiful harmonies. Bob Kitcher, the vocalist, has one of those great husky, strained voices like Steve Winwood, coming particularly to the fore on *Show Me The Way To Me*, a nod to *Led Zeppelin 3* with full-blooded bass and drums. *Gold On Blue*, one of Grahame's songs, has a summery, relaxed vibe slightly reminiscent of *Turquoise Blue*. A favourite of mine is *Tamarisk Steps* (about a busking site in Hastings, of all places) which has a modal feel and features some hot dulcimer playing. So why not see "What lies over that hill", in the words of one of Grahame's songs, and investigate this eclectic and fresh-sounding collection.

A.W.

From Grahame Hood at 41 Bromley Gardens, Bromley, Kent BR2 0ES

QUIETLY TORN
(Future CD)

You read about the genesis of this band in the last mag—this is their first recording. Ex-Cure guitarist Porl Thompson has assembled a group of acoustic musicians (double bass, percussion, cello) from the *Page/Plant* road band and added Mimi Goese on vocals (Mimi already has a solo album with David Byrne's *Luaka Bop* label to her credit). This is an album for all of you who like, say, *Nightfall* by the ISB. It's a very laid-back, gentle, riff-driven collection, more about mood and texture than traditional song structures. Much of it, oddly, reminds me of the Bert Jansch side of *Pentangle*, and it's been pronounced "a bit *String Bandy*" by none other than Malcolm Le Maistre. *Single Star* features some very mean and moody vocals by Mimi and a sparkly acoustic guitar riff from Porl; *Jai* is suitably floaty, and *White Birds* (no relation) starts off gently but builds into a quiet storm with even a bit of spacy electric guitar at the end. My favourite is *Nature of the Moon*, about the moon's effect on the psyche—which I could imagine being done (a lot more noisily) as a Cure song. The next song, *Marigold*, reminded me of *Pentangle's*

Sweet Child, and it's followed by *A Found Smile*, a slow meditative piece. The other song I enjoyed a lot was *Out There*, the last track, which settles into a rather nice, raga-ish groove and gives Nadia Lanman, the cellist, a chance to shine. A reflective, late night album, then, a very long way indeed from most of the Cure's stuff.

A.W.

To order a Quietly Torn CD, write to: Fiction Records, 4 Tottenham Mews, London W1P 9PS.

BANOFFI
Home before the sky breaks
(Sticky Label BAN02)

That flamboyantly flavoursome, flippantly frothy appellation belies rather more substantial content; the group's music has a wealth of depth and integrity, and is likely to appeal strongly to many ISB devotees. Leading light of the band is Dave Moss, a fine young fiddle/bouzouki/mandolin player from the wild and wonderful Whitby area (look out for him currently gigging with the underrated West Yorkshire singer-songwriter Jon Harvison); in *Banoffi* he is effectively partnered by Ian Hulme on whistles, flute and bodhran, and the duo are augmented here by the accomplished guitar playing of Stephen Dodds. This, the band's debut CD, embraces a wider variety of musical experiences than the line-up might suggest. Of the 11 tracks here, six are original songs penned by Dave, in which his haunting, almost minstrel-like style of delivery (a bit reminiscent of *Forest*), abetted by fragile yet strongly characterised lead and harmony vocals, produces a magical, yearning quality which is quite distinctive and rather appealing. The remaining five tracks are instrumental pieces, ranging widely in style from a "favourite" and slow jig (composed in the traditional manner but no mere precious pastiche), to a couple of Scandinavian-influenced fiddle pieces with nods towards the baroque and Michael Nyman, and a couple of "mood pictures" with occasional hints of the *Be Glad* soundtrack, the *Third Ear Band* and various ethnic musics. Can't be bad, can it?! So here's a strong recommendation to seek this CD out—you won't regret it!

D.K.

**JOSEPH—KEEPING YOU IN SUS-
SPENCE**
by David Kidman

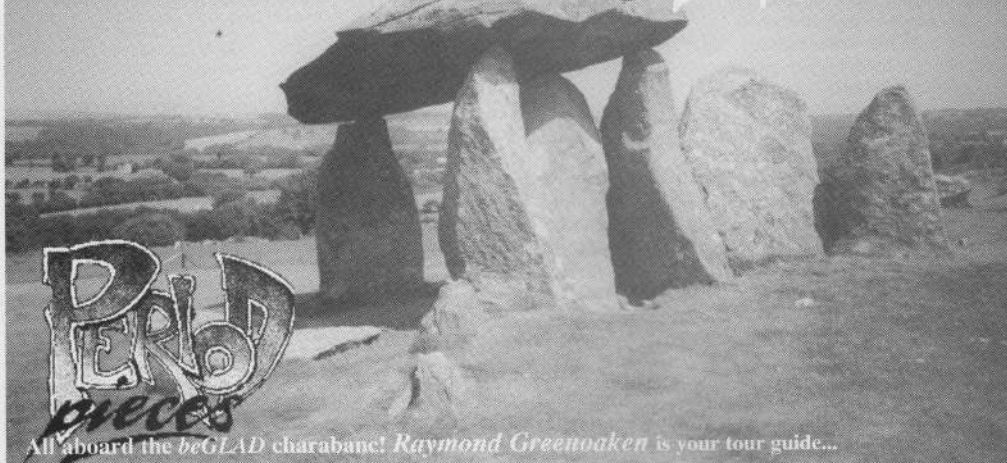
Avid readers of the past three issues of *beG* will have spotted several references to the inspiration which both Mike and Robin gained from the Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence; these same readers may be tempted to investigate further, so here's a note of the CDs by Joseph Spence which I know to be currently available.

Joseph Spence, Bahamian Guitarist
Arhoolie ARHCD 349 *Living On The Hallelujah Side* *Rounder ROUCD 2021*
Glory *Rounder ROUCD 2096* *The Spring Of Sixty-Five* *Rounder ROUCD 2114* (The Pindar Family also feature on some tracks.)

There's also *Happy All The Time*, on Hannibal's Carthage label—HNCD 4419—but this CD is only available in the States. Joseph Spence also crops up on *The Real Bahamas*, a selection of vintage (and classic) field recordings, which is listed in the current Warner catalogue as being available on CD—I've yet to see a copy!

Last but certainly not least, there's a rather fine tribute album, *Out On The Rolling Sea*, which came out in 1994 on the Hokey Pokey label (HPR 2004-2). It features (mostly brand new) interpretations of songs and tunes associated with Joseph Spence and the Pindar Family, as well as a few specially composed pieces. The album contains some really excellent stuff—virtually all of it has been specially recorded or is otherwise unavailable. The highlights for me are the two a cappella vocal pieces: first, *Kneelin' Down Inside The Gate* by Jody Stecher, Kate Brislin and Larry Hanks (Jody, you'll recall, presided over many of those original Sixties field recordings), which has all the Stecher-Brislin hallmarks in abundance, including that wonderfully controlled fluidity; and second, *Bid You Goodnight*, performed by "Blue Murder" (nom-de-studio for a mouth-watering conglomeration of various Watsons, Eliza & Martin Carthy and Coope, Boyes & Simpson). However, several other tracks also stand out, not only for the sheer quality of the musicianship but also for the way they capture the true essence—the unique blend of spirituality, humour and what Jody terms "good-natured audacity"—of Spence the man and performer. I'm thinking especially here of David Grisman, Michael Chapman, Taj Mahal, Victoria Williams and Tarika (a kind of Malagasy *Bid You Goodnight* recorded back in the days when they were Tarika Sammy). But all the tributes come across as genuinely felt, and not just dashed off in a spare moment (though some may well have been, they don't betray it!). Humour in music is notoriously difficult to bring off, but many of the tracks here cope really well and are musically satisfying to boot—I'd single out Ron Kavana's quirkily languid Tex-Mex *Sloop John B* and Niles Hokkanen's decidedly odd, but in the end eminently listenable fusion of *Good Morning Mr Walker* with the Hendrix classic *Wait Until Tomorrow*(!), where a chirpily busy mandolin does duty for Joseph Spence's buoyant yet intricate guitaric ramblings. The 70-odd minutes of music on this CD is mostly so good it just floats effortlessly by, making no waves except those of pure joy—a perfect tribute to Joseph Spence.

Incredible StringLAND



All aboard the beGLAD charabanc! *Raymond Greenoaken* is your tour guide...

On a wooded hillside overlooking Newport Bay on the Pembrokeshire coast stands a strikingly beautiful cromlech—an arrangement of four standing stones supporting a capstone—called Pentre Ifan. Stringfans who have never ventured to this remote part of Wales would nevertheless recognise the elegant megalithic structure at a glance, owing to its starring rôle in the fantasy sequence from *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending*. The view from Pentre Ifan is a fine one: if you rotate slowly on your axis in a clockwise direction you take in Carn Ingli (The Hill of Angels), the ruined cone of an ancient volcano that dominates this stretch of coast; Newport Bay and the characterful fishing village of Newport itself; and the nearby hamlets of Nevern and Velindre. Halfway down the hill as you gaze towards Velindre, you can descry the whitewashed chimneys of a large farmhouse (just visible on the photo above). This is the fabled Penwern, where Robin, Licorice, assorted Stone Monkeys, the odd Strangely and various camp followers sampled the delights of the communal lifestyle in the second half of 1968.

The area around Penwern is a timeless, dreamlike place of winding, high-hedged lanes, shady copses and little rivers. Quintessential String Band country, you might think; and Robin himself has remarked: "It's fantastic, probably the most inspired place I've ever lived, an enchanted place... just the most beautiful part of Wales."

There does, in truth, seem to be a sort of spell lying over the area. It seems to belong as much to the wildlife as to the human population. Foxes "just waltz across the road", in the words of one local, unheeding of vehicles or passers-by. As we drove round the lanes during a visit last summer, a sparrowhawk glided sedately alongside the car, swooping up to a nearby treetop as we pulled up on the roadside.

On the other side of the hill from Pentre Ifan, beyond the tiny village of Brynberian, the landscape changes abruptly, the rolling meadows and woods giving way to the bare, rather forbidding heights of the Preseli Hills, where the bluestones that make up the inner circle of Stonehenge were allegedly quarried. The nearest sizeable towns are Fishguard to the west, where the ferry departs for Rosslare in the Irish Republic, and Cardigan to the north east. The road that joins them, the A487, is pretty busy, being the main freight route in west Wales, and tourist traffic is fairly heavy in the summer months. Despite this, the little land in the Newport-Velindre-Brynberian triangle has a

hushed and secret charm. Bleak hills, gentle pastureland and rugged seacliffs, all within a few square miles. This, for about eighteen months in the late Sixties, was Incredible String Land.

The chronology is roughly thus: Malcolm and Rakis, late of the Exploding Galaxy and briefly based in New York, met Robin and Mike at the legendary Chelsea Hotel in May 1968 and plans were hatched for future mixed-media collaborations. The idea of living together seemed to flow naturally from this, so, upon their return to Britain, Malcolm and Rakis tracked down a dilapidated farmhouse—unoccupied since the Thirties—that looked to be spacious enough for serious communal living. This was Penwern. Robin and Likky moved in on their return from the ISB's American tour, as did a few of Malcolm's and Rakis' erstwhile Galaxy cohorts. Mike and Rose, somewhat wary of the communal lifestyle, restricted their involvement to the occasional visit. On one such occasion, in late summer, the *Pirate And The Crystal Ball* fable was filmed for inclusion in the *Be Glad...* film.

Throughout the Penwern occupation, the composition of the household was in constant flux. According to Roy Luke, the son of the farmhouse's owner, "There might be three of them there one week, and the next week there'd be six, and the week after there'd be ten of 'em there. Some would be leaving, others coming in..."



*Penwern during preparations for the filming of *The Pirate And The Crystal Ball**

Peter O'Connor arrived at Penwern towards the end of the year, and remained part of the String Band extended family until the end of the Glen Row period (he's one of the merry mummers on the Myrrh sleeve). Here he tells it like it was...

Houses of the Indigent and Half-Remarkable

Penwern, Trehaid and Gelli
by Peter O'Connor

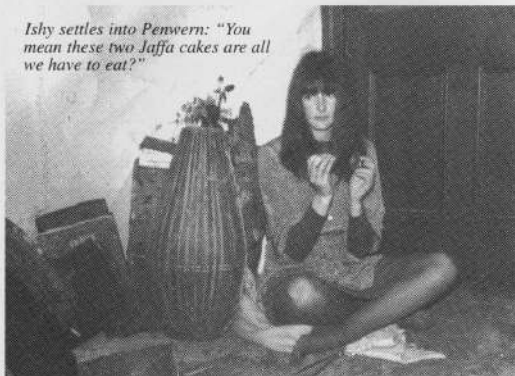
In November or early December 1968, I turned up at Penwern, near Newport, Pembrokeshire. I came at the invitation of Rakis (John Koumantarakis, now the Oliphant of Rossie) and Malcolm le Maistre, both old schoolfriends from Frensham Heights, a coeducational boarding school in Surrey with an undeserved reputation for progressivism.

Since leaving Frensham prematurely in 1965, I had been watching Rakis and Malcolm's metamorphosis from effete adolescence to unbridled creative licence in London and New York. While I ground away at A levels in dowdy Tottenham, Rakis was dropping his loin-cloth and Malcolm was displaying his Y-fronts in Exploding Galaxy performances at UFO in the Tottenham Court Road. While I was just getting into lager and limes in tatty Crouch End, these two supped daily on forbidden fruit in the Galaxy's commune in Ball's Pond Road. To cap it all, they had both decamped to the Chelsea Hotel in New York, met the String Band and danced with them at the Fillmore East. Their world seemed impeccably avant-garde, and I longed to be part of it.

In July 1968, Rakis and Malcolm, John Schofield and Ishy, the poet Mike Chapman, and other members of the Exploding Galaxy including Paul Keiller had gone to Penwern farmhouse with Robin and Licorice. Around the same time, I had left London and gone to live and study history at the Catholic Chaplaincy in St. Aldate's, Oxford. Throughout that summer and into the autumn, Rakis sent me astonishing letters describing high times at Penwern: making a film in which he played a pirate, shenanigans with Mr. Luke's prize pig Big Ted, uncanny experiences with the dolmen above the house, plus useful tips for the novice, viz. "Astrology's where it's really at" and "Remember, bread is money". In late November or early December, I met up with Malcolm, Rakis and possibly Mal on the train at Oxford and we travelled up to Fishguard together.

Penwern was a big old house with plenty of space, but it was bitterly cold. We all spent a lot of time in front of a log fire in the large room downstairs, with breaks for fuel gathering and hurried visits to the WC, located in a romantic ivy-hung shed a little way from the main house. I remember a sort of cupboard off this room, and inside a collection of animals huddled together for warmth. Robin's elegant whippet, Lief, had already moved with him to Trehaid, but there was a Persian cat called Ching, mother of the three-legged Chamomile, later adopted by Robin and Janet, Lucy, a Welsh Border Collie puppy, a young cat of stunted growth called Luan, and

Ishy settles into Penwern: "You mean these two Jaffa cakes are all we have to eat?"



Tashy, a selfish, matronly, flatulent Jack Russell belonging to friends of Malcolm's father Ian.

Penwern was freezing. At night, it was so cold that Rakis and I tossed coins to see who would have Tashy in his bed. Food was in short supply, and I, used to the groaning tables of the Catholic Chaplaincy, soon began to wonder whether I was really cut out for this life of rural spontaneity. Both Malcolm and Rakis were adepts of George Ohsawa's 10-day brown rice diet, but I soon joined Rakis on covert visits to Velindre to binge on Jaffa cakes, ginger snaps and ice cream. One one occasion, Rakis indulged so heavily that he was unable to leap a two-foot stream on our way home through the woods, and just sort of sank into it.

When I arrived, the atmosphere was a little strained, as everybody had received notice to quit from Mr. Luke, the farmer who owned Penwern. Nicky Walton and Ivan Pawle had already moved to Trehaid, a warmer, more commodious house nearby, and Robin and Likky had joined them there. John, Ishy, Malcolm, Rakis, and John's first wife, Mal, and their baby daughter, Sarah, tried to work out where to go next. Eventually, these returned to Sheffield and London, with plans to regroup in another house in the New Year. Meanwhile, Rakis and I and the cats and dogs were offered a house called Gelli, belonging to a Mr. Conran, who also owned Trehaid.

Gelli was smaller and uglier than Penwern, but it was a lot warmer as it had a Rayburn range. Rakis had invested in a movie camera, so to pass the time, we made an arty horror film. The film opened with the undersized black cat Luan yowling as it slid significantly down the snow covered slates of Gelli. I remember hurling it up to the eaves again and again, as Rakis called "Action!" in the approved neo-Realist manner.

Trehaid was near Brynberian village, just a short walk away from Gelli, and I started going over there to commune with Ivan and Nicky Walton. I remember Ivan leaning against the stove there and playing me a thirty-second setting of the words "Mares' tails in the sky" to music.

Just before Christmas, Robin and Likky returned from touring America, and I met them for the first time at Trehaid. They had just discovered Scientology in New York, and their excitement showed. What seemed to intrigue them most were just those elements that seemed least likely to appeal: its modernity, its American brashness and lack of mystery, and its technological vocabulary. But maybe Scientology's hard edges really suited the String Band better than the older, more romantically satisfying systems that seemed to inform the first few albums. So much of their music celebrated nature, mystery, and myth, but the String Band were really children of the post-war city—like all of us at Penwern and many of the people who bought their records. Before Scientology, these differences between what Robin and Mike were and had known and what they sang about provided their music with powerful, unresolved tensions. There is no contradiction in saying that these differences and tensions helped make their music the Real Thing. Maybe the music they made together grew weaker when these tensions were ironed out—hence the split.

In any case, these were early days, and even while they talked excitedly in the downstairs room at Trehaid about their findings in New York, Robin rolled long, elegant joints (on the sleeve of a String

Band album). Even now, I have a sense of ships passing in the night, because I had my first (terrifying) taste of dope at Trehaid, thanks to Nicky Walton's home-made eight-hole hubble bubble, just as Robin and Likky were getting out of that world, more or less for good.

For all our macrobiotic principles, Christmas was Christmas, and Rakis had ordered a 17 lb. turkey for the 25th. We fired up the Rayburn early on Christmas morning, lopped off the turkey's head and pulled out the giblets for Tashy and the cats, stuffed it to bursting with sage and onions, added all the trimmings and waited. Sometime in the late afternoon, Ivan, Robin and Likky, and Nicky Walton showed up, and we laid a table on the floor in front of the window and set to. Ivan and Nicky were unhappy about breaking their vegetarian diet, but Robin suggested that by eating it we were helping the turkey onto a higher path of evolution. I think Ivan was the only one to abstain (but this may have been because he had gone to Dublin). After dinner, Robin produced a jarful of a seasonal tippie he had mixed up, called Hangman's Blood, and this produced a philosophical ambience.

One question that stays with me, regarding Penwern, Kilmanoyadd, and especially the Glen, was why Robin and Mike chose to associate so closely with us. In 1968 and 1969, they were highly regarded, not just in the rock world but by people with a real eye for quality. They could have swum more significant seas—set themselves up as musical avatars in London or New York, for instance. Instead (though this was probably Robin's more than Mike's decision), they chose to associate with a group of unknowns, of whom Malcolm and Ivan were the only ones who were at all serious about their work. We were all young and friendly enough, with some outstanding personalities like Rakis, but we weren't musicians, and not many would have called us dancers.

Part of the explanation for this affinity may have lain in a common quality of naïvete among Malcolm, Rakis, John and Ishy, Mal, Robin and Licorice. They all had at least one completely impractical idea or obsession, about which they would talk as if it was all as plain as the nose on your face. Mal's visits to Venus, Rakis' business and film making plans, John and Ishy's general otherworldliness and disproportionate tolerance, Malcolm's cherished three-day ballet based on Waley's translation of the Chinese classic *Monkey*, for which he had done piles of multicoloured drawings, Licorice's theories and lives, and Robin's strange, defiant, vicariously innocent. This naïvete may have been the glue that bound them together at Penwern and later, and it did achieve staggeringly beautiful expression in the pantomime U, and for most of them it outlasted youth itself.

And me? I was innocent enough at 18, but my inner life was too awkward and difficult for me to belong properly in such a community of idealists. It wasn't so much a case of running before I could walk, as of flying before I could crawl. It took me years to realise that I had to learn to walk ordinarily before I could run or fly with anyone, let alone people like these. I dare say there are some people reading this who know what I mean.

Gone—but not Forgotten

Raymond Greenoaken trawls through neighbourly recollections. Interviews by Colin Thomas.

Almost thirty years have now elapsed since the communards decamped from the Newport area. Physically, nothing remains of their occupation—not even the famous hole in the Trehaid wall (allegedly Robin's work, though Rakis seems the likelier suspect), the wall itself falling victim to an ill-considered extension in the Seventies. But local residents have long memories, as Colin Thomas found a few years ago when he took his trusty Walkman around the lanes of Incredible String Land.

Tommy and Ruby Llewellyn lived in Trehaid shortly before Robin et al moved in; the couple now live next door, in a house they built themselves. "They were a good bunch altogether," Tommy recalls. "I used to go and listen to them, but I finished with them for a while because they had this incense stuff. There was a hell of a stink and I couldn't cope with that flipping lot."

"They had all kinds of flipping instruments, big boxes of different things, and all kinds of beautiful tape recorders, and they would be singing away, and oh it used to be really beautiful. I used to enjoy myself sitting down and listening to them."

Pete Bury was less enamoured of the sounds of String. "I was in the Army at the time, and being a squaddie I was into Jim Reeves more than anything, but I was just getting into Cream and stuff like that. A mate of mine was very keen on the String Band, and he came down over Christmas and brought this [String Band] tape. It was really weird, warbly sort of music."

"Well, he went back home, and the same night we got a call from a farmer, out of the blue, saying there's a party, come and see these people, and it was the String Band doing a sort of Christmas pantomime involving music. So my mate missed the very people he'd most have liked to hear! About ten of us went up to Ty Canol, and there was a sort of scratch concert going on in the barn there. Really weird sort of music. It was probably pretty good, thinking back, but I was freaked out because I was a squaddie at the time."

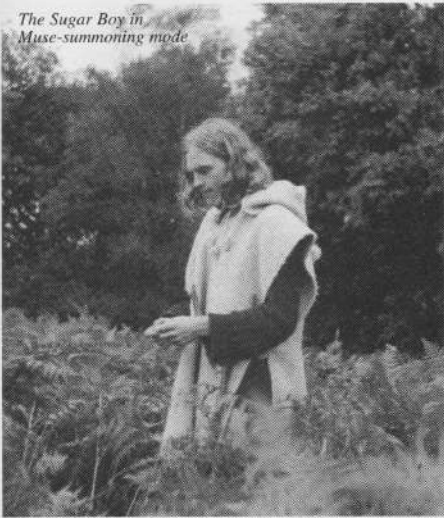
Tommy Llewellyn remembers Robin communing with the Muse. "The biggest laugh I had...he used to go round with a sort of leopard-skin cloak on him, marvellous blooming thing, and he had these clapper things and a load of bells, and he was going along the road and he passed the house and said 'How are you getting on? I'm composing a song.' And there he was jiggling away, and off he went. And just around the corner these two horses came: the owner of Trehaid at the time and her friend, on horseback. And of course he didn't look where he was going, he was in a sort of trance, you know, and the horses bolted at the sight of him! There was hell to pay..."

(Peter O'Connor claims to possess a contemporary photo of Robin "in full Bardic regalia"—could this be the horse-scaring outfit, we wonder.)

a hushed and secret land...



The Sugar Boy in
Muse-summoning mode



Tommy, it turns out, had a special name for Robin. "The Sugar Boy, I called him! They didn't have much money at that time, and they were always on the bum, especially the Sugar Boy there—he used to call by practically every day, knocking on the door: 'Could you spare me a cup of sugar, we've run out of sugar.' They had very little money."

The commune's dress code certainly left an indelible impression on their neighbours. "You'd hardly recognise some of them," says Tommy, "the way they were dolled up. And when Sugar Boy came round, Crikey you'd look twice, with his leopardskin cloak and the clappers and the bells going..." Licorice's fondness for *déshabillé* was also a popular subject for local gossip. "Oh yes, she used to walk around starkers," grins Pete Bury. "The postman was terrified of her. He used to go down the lane and just chuck the letters down the hallway and bugger off!"

Tommy Llewellyn had a closer encounter. "I was going fishing one day and came past [Penwern]—there's a little brook running down there, you see—and I walked past the house and she said 'Where are you going, Tom?'... 'Fishing,'... 'Can I come with you?'... 'Not bloody likely! Christ, I'd be shot if anybody saw me with you in the state you're in!' She had nowt on! So I said you can put something on, and she put a pair of shorts on—she might as well have been without—and a bit of a bra. She came down fishing with me then. I didn't catch anything..."

"She didn't care two hoots. None of them did!"

Tommy & Ruby Llewellyn, 1994



beGLAD

Interestingly, the communards weren't the only eccentrics resident in the locality. Pete Bury remembers Trehaid's landlord, Mr Conran, as an unpredictable sort of cove. "I always wondered if Ivan Pawle named Dr Strangely Strange after this bloke, 'cause he was a doctor and a right funny bugger besides. When I worked for him he sometimes wouldn't talk in the mornings, he'd just totally ignore me... by dinner time he was as right as rain."

And then there was Bachelor Sam. Sam kept pigs, and *pace* Peter O'Connor, may have been the owner of the celebrated Big Ted. Tommy Llewellyn: "Sam used to live in a run-down old place like a flipping hermit. He bought up second-hand clothes and things. I've never seen so much junk..." Ruby: "He had old Army clothes and that. In latter years he had a second hand shop." Tommy: "I love a bargain, and with Sam you could get a pair of boots for ten bob. Oh, he was a character..."

An opinion that the Sugar Boy himself endorses. "Bachelor Sam was a complete character, he was," says Robin. "I once went to visit him, and he had a fox under a bucket. And he used to speak polite Welsh, very politely and quietly, and speak English very loudly and profanely, because he learned it in the Army."

Robin remembers an unexpected encounter in Los Angeles with one of his former neighbours. "Mrs Francis, who ran the baker's shop at Brynberian... her son became quite a famous actor and I bumped into him in Los Angeles when I was living there in Hollywood, and he was working for Steven Berkoff. I was invited to a New Year's party, and he was there with his mum, who'd flown out, and she'd never been out of Wales before."

He clearly has fond memories of the local community. "One of the nice things about that time was that the local people were very tolerant of us. We must have been quite exotic 'cause we wore very colourful clothes and lived on rice, but they were frightfully nice to us, very very kind, the Lukes and the other people—very very nice people."

"All the locals were scared of them," says Tommy Llewellyn, "because nobody around here then knew *what* they were—they'd never heard of hippies! But I thought they were wonderful, really wonderful".

Note on spelling

In spelling the names Trehaid, Velindre and Kilmanoyadd we've followed Peter O'Connor's practice, though current maps favour Trehaid, Felindre and Kilmanoyedd respectively. In the spirit of balance and fairness, however, we've plumped for the spelling Kilmanoyedd elsewhere in this issue.

Photos by Colin Thomas, Snapper Green, John Schofield and anonymous



The old joke runs that if you remember the Sixties you weren't really there... Be that as it may, we're wondering if any of our perverid readership has any personal recollections of Clive's Incredible Folk Club in Glasgow, where the ISB cut their musical teeth, and Les Cousins in London, where Mike and Robin played to packed houses in 1967. This is a joint appeal on behalf of *beGLAD* and the John Martyn fanzine WKS (Well Kept Secret). JM, as is well known, was active on the Glasgow folk scene in the mid Sixties, and started attracting metropolitan attention around the same time as the ISB. Memoirs involving either party will be gratefully received. 🐾

HOMETOWN THOUGHTS

BY JOHN QUIGLEY

"We live in cities, and cities live in us" proclaimed the director Wim Wenders somewhat portentously in his film *Notebook On Cities And Clothes*. Occurring in a film which I liked even if the critics mostly didn't, this statement nevertheless made me think a little. Certainly it's applicable to Wim Wenders' other films, which often display (as well as carefully-chosen pop/rock soundtracks) a strong sense of place, whether it be Tokyo, Berlin, Lisbon, or Paris, Texas. And maybe it's also of relevance to the ISB. Both Robin and Mike were born and raised in Edinburgh. How much of Edinburgh "lives" in their work? It's a question that's intrigued me ever since I first heard their music—and their Scottish accents. As an "outsider" I'm conscious that my knowledge of Scotland's capital city is far from complete—but I hope that my perspective on the ISB's home-town "roots" might be of interest for that very reason. So—here are some suggestions...

Edinburgh scarcely needs introduction nowadays; it's renowned worldwide as Britain's most beautiful city, as home of the world's biggest arts festival, as a centre for tourism, culture, education, finance, administration, etc. etc. The current city fathers are fully aware of Edinburgh's attractions and know how to exploit them efficiently, so tourists from far and wide can be seen around the town centre at most times of year. The city has become fashionable for its "high quality of life"—supposedly the best in the UK—and is now self-confident and thriving. Even a film like *Trainspotting*, which doesn't exactly conform to this positive image, doesn't worry Edinburgh people all that much. In some ways, however, today's Edinburgh is a very different city from the quieter, more mysterious city which I first got to know around 25 years ago; and I would suspect that this "earlier" Edinburgh is the city in which Robin and Mike grew up, and which is reflected in many of their songs.

Like many incomers from the south, I came to Edinburgh in order to study; in the mid 1970s, after the ISB had broken up and Robin had headed west to Los Angeles, I took the train north. I found the "city of grey spires and green parks" which Vivien Goldman talks about in the liner notes to *Seasons They Change*, a city whose buildings "are like very beautiful prisons", as Adrian Henri, Liverpool poet and Festival Fringe regular, put it... Having been raised in a middle England where "New Town" meant places like Milton Keynes, Stevenage or Telford, I was knocked sideways by the

beauty and dignity of Edinburgh's classical New Town. I remember spending hours walking around the city centre, the New and Old Towns and the solid, stone-built, 19th-century suburbs south of the Meadows, amazed that a city with so few ugly, functional modern buildings still existed. With its large student population and gentle "alternative" scene, it often seemed a kind of *Sleeping Beauty* of a place. It only featured in the media during the Festival and when Five Nations rugby internationals were televised from Murrayfield, and thus didn't figure very prominently in Britain's national consciousness.

A MIXTURE OF DOUR CALVINISM AND A HIGH-MINDED PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE...

However, I did have problems with the prevailing mentality. It seemed very different from the down-to-earth, business-oriented and self-consciously "modern" thinking I'd known in northern and middle England. The Edinburghers were quirky, irritable, occasionally aggressive, eccentric and slightly out of time; an odd mixture of dour, repressive Calvinism and a high-minded pursuit of knowledge and culture. The contradictions of this were most apparent during the Festival; sophisticated London critics frequently expressed their amazement that a city which could stage such high quality, cosmopolitan cultural fare closed down completely at 10.30 p.m. It's no accident that the key Edinburgh film of that period was *The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie*, the film of the play based on Muriel Spark's novel about an eccentric, artistic teacher at one of Edinburgh's selective schools—Maggie Smith won an Oscar for playing Miss Brodie, with an accent not unlike Robin's.

Scotland in general hadn't participated greatly in the increase of prosperity in 1950s and '60s Britain—but Edinburgh, for all its beauty, hadn't developed much throughout the 20th century. Its lack of modern industry made it a very untypical British conurbation, both physically and socially. Class distinctions were drawn rather more sharply than elsewhere and snobbery was rife. "Edinburgh has two classes—the ruling class and the servant class", proclaimed one Scottish actor sourly. The fast-growing, sceptical "upper working class" to which my own family belonged (what advertising agencies and political pollsters now refer to as the C1s and C2s) was totally absent. Instead, an old-fashioned professional and administrative middle class—bankers, lawyers, civil servants, doctors, teachers, lecturers—

continued on page 18—

String Band Guide To Edinburgh

Could this lead to a "Heritage Trail" programme of walks conducted by Norman Lamont ("assemble at Bronze Horse, Saturday 11 am prompt—maybe; bring stout shoes and a thermos"? Probably not. Here's a key to Deena's sketch map:

1. **Bronze horse and clock tower** (*Saturday Maybe*): at the junction of Princes Street and North Bridge.
2. **Greyfriars Bobby**: The room in Society Buildings, now demolished, that played host to the miscreants of *Mirrorman Sequences*. Sheep stay away.
3. **Below the Castle**: Likky and Robin lived in a tenement overlooking Princes Street gardens in the 60s (*In Concert notes*).
4. **Craigtinny**: Mike's childhood home.
5. **Roman Camps**: Near Broxburn. Where Mike lived (and was filmed) in 1968 (off map).
6. **Stockbridge/Water of Leith**: Inspiration for *Born In Your Town* (see *beGLAD 10*).
7. **Glen Row**: Near Innerleithen, in Borders.
8. **The Howff**: Early ISB venue. On the Royal Mile, opposite St. Giles' Cathedral, above what is now the International Newsagent(!).
- 9 & 10. **Somewhere in the Old Town**: According to Bruce Findlay, site of both Crown and Drummond Bars, mentioned in *Trim Up Your Lovelight*. '60s Mike Heron solo venues.
11. **Not on map whatsoever**: "Music shop" from first LP cover photo. According to Bruce, this was not a music shop, but Joe Boyd's office in London. Allegedly, the reason Clive looks rather rotund is that he was in the process of sneaking one of Joe's albums off the premises.
12. **Rosebury, near Murrayfield**: Robin's childhood home.
13. **Happy Valley Pond**: thought by Bruce and the Le Maistre family to be Craiglockhart Pond, near Colinton Road in Happy Valley.
14. **Northumberland Street**: Robin lived here in his late teens, at the other end of the street from The Corries/Roy Williamson.
15. **Castle Street**: Lillian, Home and Cook(?), Mike's accountancy firm. Off Princes Street.
16. **Jeanie McTavish's Plant Hire Yard**: Probable location of woman with bulldozer.
17. **Dumbiedykes**: Another 60s Robin haunt.
18. **Usher Hall**: Frequent ISB concert venue at the height of their success; also scene of Mike standing on the seat going crazy for Led Zep!
19. **Bruce's**: Bruce Findlay's record shop, Rose Street. Unofficial fan club and ISB central pre-Scientology.
20. **Waverley Studios**: Bits of U recorded here—prob. Overture and some of *Rainbow*.
21. **St. Mary's Street**: The shoe-shop site of Dobson D. De Bray, infamous 1970 Stone Monkey Edinburgh Festival show. Canongate.

Compiled by Adrian Whittaker and Norman Lamont, with thanks to Bruce Findlay, Raymond, Mike Swann, and Bill Allison. Map and icons by Deena Omar.

The String Band Guide to Edinburgh



HOMETOWN THOUGHTS CONT'D

dominated the city, sending its children to a network of public schools and private foundation schools whose conservative educational ethos ensured that "Edinburgh values" were passed down from generation to generation. To me, it all seemed rather old-fashioned, if not without its own kind of wisdom—and even a certain quaint charm.

Among the pupils of these schools were Robin and Mike. It's interesting to look back to the hand-written biographical details they contributed to *The Incredible String Band* songbook. While Mike states that he spent a year at Edinburgh University ("no benefit"), Robin claims to have been educated at the "school of life". This was to be expected in the psychedelic 1960s, when a new, young world seemed to be emerging, making it more difficult than ever to identify with your family, old school tie or old boys' rugby team. Yet later they were both much less coy about their backgrounds. I don't know whether this is a result of simply growing older, or an example of Scientology's insistence that past experience shouldn't be denied, but anyway: in an interview with the *Edinburgh Evening News* around the time of *Diamond Of Dreams*, Mike was described as a "Heriotier", i.e. a former pupil of George Heriot's School, and Robin was said to come from the coastal suburb of Portobello. A few years later the same paper reported that Robin was paying a visit to his old school, George Watson's College.

References to school in Robin's songs usually highlight the traumas and "short, sharp shocks" of corporal punishment, for example in *When You Find Out Who You Are*—"Remember, young man, the time before you first went to school / How did it feel, trying to live by the rule?" Whether he had indeed spent much time "avoiding the rod of the cod-faced master" (*Darling Belle*) or experienced "stormy weather...in the schoolhouse" (*Weather The Storm*) there, I have no idea, but one thing is certain—Scottish education in the 1950s, whether private or public, was a serious, sometimes painful business (miscreants were seldom spared the belt, cane or rod) and hardly a hotbed of progressive, child-centred ideas—as the career of the educationalist A. S. Neill shows..

In *Koeoaddi* There Robin goes back even further, to early childhood memories: "*Mrs Thomson gave me a bear / Bridget and some people lived upstairs*", reflecting the tendency of Scots urban dwellers to live in flats rather than the modest two-up, two-down house of the typical English family. "*A busy main road where I wasn't to go*"—a nicely ambiguous line, foretelling how he was destined not to take up a mainstream career and describing how his parents told him to keep away from the traffic...on Portobello High Street, perhaps? However, I

have no idea where the "*skating on Happy Valley Pond*" took place—does anyone? (*Yes we do!* See map—Ed)

'PLODDING DULLY THROUGH THIS BLACK TOWN'

Other ISB songs contain references to Edinburgh streets or well-known city sites. Hiram Pawnitoff lived in Bread Street, which is near the entertainment district (Usher Hall, two theatres, Edinburgh's two best arthouse cinemas, numerous pubs and restaurants) of Lothian Road and Tollcross, and was formerly marked by a huge, sootblack Co-Op building, now cleaned up and converted into a hotel and backpackers' hostel. (Co-incidentally, I saw Mike himself walking along Bread Street a couple of years ago!) (*I think Bread Street was more of a '70s pun meself*—Ed)

Mike is usually less specific than Robin in his evocation of the past (an exception is *Residential Boy*), but it's easy to see where his "*Friday evening's footsteps plodding dully through this black town*" (*Painting Box*) come from—the tenement blocks and other 19th Century buildings, blackened by decades of soot, grime and petrol fumes, a townscape which still exists in some Edinburgh districts. However, in many of the more affluent areas, the buildings have been restored to their original hue, which has lightened the gloom (and occasionally irritated the conservationists). And when Mike sings "*Climbing up these figures, the sun is tugging at my shoulder*" (in Chinese White), it may be useful to know that he trained as an accountant, hence "figures". The feeling he expresses in those lines is familiar to everyone who's ever slaved over files in a stuffy office on a warm summer's day (myself included!).

In one of the spoken passages of *Waiting For You*, Robin, in his most pukka voice, refers to a "*Mr. Jack McMarker, a bricklayer's labourer from Pilton*"—typical of the rather coy drug references which spoil an otherwise enjoyable song ("*Must you bring your horse in here, Miss Jones? Although your snowshoes do look terrific!*"—what was he thinking of?). (*What is this Quigley on?*—Ed) Pilton has long been notorious as one of Edinburgh's most deprived and problem-ridden areas—one of the poor, outlying districts the tourists don't get to see, more "Trainspotting country" than "the Athens of the North". I think the "*bronze horse by the clock tower*", where the singer in *Saturday* Maybe will meet his lover, is the one at the east end of Princes Street, opposite the steps leading to Waverley Station—although I'm not 100% sure!

WEIGHT OF TRADITION

So much for specific Edinburgh references in the ISB's work. I think it might be possible to detect a more general influence running

through their career, though probably deriving from the fact that Edinburgh was to some extent "a place apart", with its own social and cultural world. As Ian MacDonald points out in his *Revolution In The Head*, much British culture in the 1960s—not just hippie culture—was intensely nostalgic for a lost childhood, or a lost Golden Age: concepts which are familiar to any ISB listener.

Edinburgh in the '50s and '60s, a city where the present moment seemed less important than the weight of tradition transmitted by architecture, education or religion, was perhaps an extreme example of this tendency—and this must surely have influenced Robin and Mike, even subconsciously.

Scottish, but middle-class ("Edinburgh people are imitation English", my grandfather used to say); conventional yet a haven for bohemians (Sandy Brown and other jazzmen educated at the Royal High School, the poets' pubs in Rose Street, the folk scene which nurtured the ISB, Better Books, the Traverse Theatre); insular yet cosmopolitan (the Festival bred numerous passionate Francophiles and stern devotees of German *Kultur*); so far behind the times as to be actually ahead of them (the city was run for a long time by a right-wing Conservative council—until Margaret Thatcher, who had learned to "speak properly" by copying the accent of the Edinburgh-born headmistress of her school in Grantham, came along—and they were promptly thrown out)... the city revels in paradoxes ("and the opposite is also true").

However, if the ISB have changed with the years then so has their home town. Towards the end of the 1970s the *Sleeping Beauty* began to awaken. Graduates of the city's universities began to spread the word that here was a nice place to live. The Sunday colour supplements followed suit. New wealth began to flow in, thanks to the North Sea oil industry. The financial sector, too, boomed during the Thatcher years and Edinburgh was well placed to benefit. The dismal Tory councils of the 1970s were replaced by younger Labour administrators with more outward-looking, open-minded attitudes ("New Labour" before its time?). Suddenly, new houses and industrial sites grew on the periphery of the city; many of the notorious "holes in the ground" in the city centre were at last filled in. Edinburgh nowadays is in many ways a much more lively, attractive and cosmopolitan place than it was 25 years ago. Of course, there are problems—traffic, drugs, general urban stress. But much of the worst aspects of "old Edinburgh"—the prim snobbery, po-faced Calvinism and repressive ignorance—have disappeared, hopefully for ever. And it may well be that the ISB have contributed to this change for the better.



Rock on, Susie

SUSIE Watson-Taylor is a like and sexy rebel who spends most of her time playing mom to so-performable young men. As a women rock group manager, Susie is a pretty rare commodity.

She admits, without a blush or a smirk, to being JD. On the other hand, she says, she doesn't feel she fits the picture her job conjures up.

"I am not a tough old hag," she said, in the upper-class accent that was bred into her in Kent.

Susie was a country girl who spent seven years at a private boarding school. When she left at 18, she gave up the thrill of the chase at local hunt balls, stepped out of her Gucci shoes, unperfumed her Hermes scarf and took off for London.

Now the manager Heron, the band that got together with a partial new lineup after the popular Incredible String Band had twanged for the last time.

Susie, who lives in a flat in London's Ladbroke Grove, with ex-String Band man Mike Heron, found herself spinning in the pop world almost by accident.

"When I arrived in London, social class structures were just beginning to break down," she said. "Their were openings for



people with talent and charisma to do something, regardless of background, family or money."

Susie took a crash secretarial course, and went to work for an advertising agency.

She then had a spell with a theatrical agency.

"I happened to meet the right sort of people and started going along to recording sessions. Then in 1967, I ended up as tour manager for the Incredible String Band.

"I took them out on tour, checked their passport details, booked them into hotels and made sure they got up in time.

"Then their personal manager went off to the States, and I was left holding the baby.

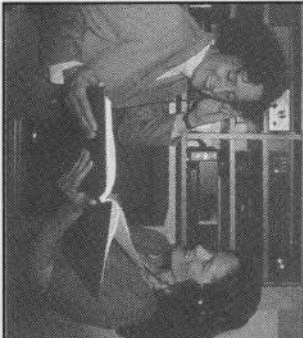
In 1974, the baby cried off when the String Band split up, and a new offspring landed in Susie's lap. Mike Heron and two of the original String Band got together and founded Heron.

"When I first came into the business, the boys were a bit wary of me," said Susie. "After about six months on the road, they were treating me like a very old sister. Now they're very good to me.

"I'm tired or I'm not feeling too well, they treat me very delicately like a piece of china. It's nice.

"They know how they can't tell me anything at all, and it's fantastic to have that sort of relationship.

"I can't remember when it was that made them suddenly accept me one day. But once you've dealt with the first big problem, and dealt with it properly, they trust you. From then on there's a rapport between you."



This is another piece in Andy Roberts' famous series "Press cuttings you may not have seen".

Susie Watson-Taylor, sometimes referred to by Mike as "Susie Watson-Telly", started off as ISB tour manager in 1969, continuing as their manager after Joe Boyd left and then managing Heron until their demise in 1977. The above is a syndicated feature which ran in local press in Devon, Grimsby and Slough in January 1977; this one comes courtesy of The Grimsby Evening Telegraph. Susie has remained a Scientistologist and is currently administering Hubbard's publishing rights round the world as the boss of "Author Services Inc." (see inset picture, courtesy of Malcolm). She seems to have hung up her rockin' shoes, though the headphones provide a kind of conceptual continuity... *Research by Adrian.*

Song and Dance Man (part two)

by Adrian Whittaker

In this second part of our Malcolm Le Maistre series, Malc talks of U, his ISB years and the 1974 split. Last issue, we left him at Kilmanoyedd...

Kilmanoyedd was a beautiful building, a twelfth century farmhouse. I remember we uncovered this wonderful fireplace five or six feet deep which you could actually sit inside. The house was inhabited by members of Exploding Galaxy and Stone Monkey. I think Robin and Licorice used to visit... We stayed there till we were told we were moving to Glen Row—on 19th November 1969. Stone Monkey had done a few things with the ISB since Be Glad, an Albert Hall gig... When this new idea came up, U, it seemed natural we should all live together. Licorice and I were the first two to move in—she tried to seduce me that night, but it was a bit difficult as I was still with Mal at the time. She'd split up with Robin by then and moved into no. 7 next to Mike. Robin was in 5, John and

Ishy were in 6, I was in 4, Rose was in 2. Ivan Pawle lived in no. 8 and Tim Booth was in no. 3. There was a period when 3 was a sort of rehearsal room, and when Licorice left, no. 7 became the sort of roadies' house. Jane Mock was in 8 for a while; that's where she made all the costumes for U.

Is this the period when you and Robin came round to lecture Edward Pope on the perils of masturbation?

I never lectured bloody Edward Pope—I can vaguely remember Mike and Robin having some discussions about it... My first introduction to Scientology

Way up in the remote hills of Mid Wales stands the Pales, a historic Quaker Meeting House, where beGLAD contributors Martin and Lynda Williams live as wardens. Next door, quarter of a mile away, is the farm Rhonllwyn; next door but one, a mile away, is Kilmanoyedd... Martin reports on how the locals remember the smiling men with strange reputations...

They are certainly remembered, that's for sure. David Ingram of Rhonllwyn, a teenager at the time of Stone Monkey's stay, first alerted us to the connection, saying that "a band called The Incredible String Band lived there—good God, have you heard of them?!" David remembers their van particularly, and the communal trips to the nearest pub, the Severn Arms in Penybont—and the chaotic bicycle rides back afterwards! But not, significantly, the name Stone Monkey. Make of that what you will...

David's mother, Mrs Ingram, now 80 years old, remembers them clearly and very, very, fondly. I showed her the pictures of Malcolm in *beGLAD 10* and she immediately exclaimed "Oh, I remember him, lovely boy. Oh they was nice people, they'd do anything for you, real neighbours. When they first came out, they was hippies, long hair and all. But they were so kind and honest, you know Martin, we missed them so much when they went, they was like another family. I remember they used to meet at night on that big yard there, and they'd come from all around, like starlings we used to say, they'd come all in a flock and then be gone in a flock. But they'd get together and they'd be strumming away till the sparks flew. There was a drummer too."

came from Robin and Licorice. Rakis was never into it... At that time he and Rose were in a lustful relationship. Quite a bit of interchanging of partners went on at that time. I hated it, I have to say. Anyway, we created this bizarre U-shaped story which we rehearsed in the village hall. I'd describe U now as naïve but interesting—within it, there were some good bits, from both Stone Monkey and the ISB—but on the whole, we just weren't good enough for our ideas. I can see why the Americans didn't take to it.

It was an ambitious piece. I don't know whose idea it was to do such a big production—probably Robin's.

And not Mike's?

Everyone enjoyed sitting around coming up with crazy ideas—it's just that some didn't work. U got some of the most amazing reviews I've ever read in my life!

Did you take reviews like Tony Palmer's to heart?

That infamous Tony Palmer review of U:

...The hero, a lad called Malcolm Le Maistre, had 'ideas' for the dancing. These were not evident until he impersonated Charlie Chaplin and Ram Gopal—simultaneously. Stone Monkey, a team of Medieval Leapers, leap and grunt and attempt to perform the ancient parable of love and truth called U...

Observer, 12/4/1970



Malcolm and Mal outside the Kilmanoyedd cottage



Spot the odd one out... at the Scientology bookshop in Toronto, 1972ish

Tony Palmer always hated me—but anyone who likens the Beatles to Schubert can't be taken seriously anyway... As far as judging the quality of Stone Monkey's work, he's right—it wasn't very good. But it also wasn't very **bad** and it was also rather imaginative; we were lacking in technique and experience. We were only 19, 20 years old and were never going to be the Royal Shakespeare Company—we were trying to do a slightly wistful, mad production. A lot of people enjoyed it including Billy Connolly and Marc Bolan. It did really well in London, we came close to selling out every performance. The guy who's now one of the most successful entrepreneurs in Scotland, Pete Irvine, (he's going to be in charge of the largest millennium TV events in the world) came up to me recently and said U was one of the best shows he'd seen!

Going to New York was great fun, though I think the audience wasn't really ready for us. After one gig Mike was chatting up this "girl", who we'd all realised was a transvestite—and he hadn't... He came back an hour later looking rather shocked! Then Joe Boyd said it was losing money, we've got to recoup the money we've lost and we were given £40 each to get home! That was a very summary dismissal really.

This is a question from Andy—Looking back at the '67, '68 counter-culture period, how do you judge it now?

It's interesting to answer that question with a daughter who's 21 and a son who's 18... I feel there was a fundamental difference then, a sort of

an energy which said we can change, things have to be different—as in Times They Are A-Changing. Maybe they weren't, but there was a belief it was true...

What I believe now is that out of that culture came quite a lot of significant people who are now in their 40s, 50s and in positions of power—but also retaining some of that idea.

What about the drugs side—acid and so on?

I see all drugs and all belief systems as like an opening of a door. Acid opened a door in my head, but I realised very quickly that was **all** it would do. It wouldn't make me understand myself. I'd have to live more of my life to understand myself. I got into Scientology as I stopped taking drugs—my last acid trip at the Glen was around '71. We were sitting around outside having gut-ache, laughing our heads off over and over again at this record which is the greatest piece of kitsch, hippie nonsense you'll ever hear. It's a work of genius, by a band called Milkwood Tapestry. Everything is magnificently over the top, all the worst hobby

consensus, a kind of philosophical base. At the moment it seems to be about Having A Good Time. The peace and love ethic was quite a real thing—yes, it got mixed up with a lot of sex—but underneath that there was

clichéd pseudo-mystical poems you could possibly write sung to this pseudo-Hendrix feedback guitar... it was so funny... There's a lot of hysteria about drugs but I don't regret that period, I think I've stayed totally sane! There are always people who will abuse anything, whether it's drugs or food...

...and that leads into the usual Scientology question. How do you see all that now?

For myself, it was tied up with all kinds of complicated things in my life. It was associated with the ISB—I'd have probably got out a lot quicker if I hadn't joined the ISB. It's an interesting philosophical belief system..

This stuff about 'Scientology broke the band up' is claptrap...

Did you grow as a result of Scientology?

Only as much as I grew through taking acid—but in a different way. I haven't really got an axe to grind—I think Scientology left me with some useful pieces of knowledge which I always use. I'll defend Hubbard on one level—if he was a charlatan, why did he **write** so much? He must have spent a great deal of his day writing. One side of him gets forgotten—he was very right about psychiatry and ECT, which have since cleaned up their act. I also like the way he said that pregnant women should be



The Liquid Acrobat line-up



A moving scene from *El Ratto (my pants I shatto)*—photo by Thomas Stout

respected and treated well as they hold our future...

Of course he also had a space cadet side, extremely bureaucratic but you can't get much more bureaucratic than the Christian Church! I never actually met him. All this stuff about "Scientology broke the band up" is claptrap. People go into Scientology because they've got problems—and bands break up all the time.

Almost all belief systems get corrupted and Scientology was no exception—but it did provide some valuable teachings. I left in 1983—it coincided with my marital split from Annabel. I'd tried to get some help from Scientology, but it didn't work.

Back to Stone Monkey...

In 1970, after U, we came back to Edinburgh and did a show at the Edinburgh Festival. Somewhere on reel-to-reel I've got a tape of all the songs, including the one Edward Pope mentioned. We put the show together and got an empty shoe shop in St Mary's Street. There was no advertising, and at first no-one came; but gradually the word got around, and people kept coming back. We got to know our audience on first name terms. That's where I met John Gorman from The Scaffold, they came regularly, and where I first met Lindsay Kemp. I'd split up with Mal and moved out of the Row to a cottage down the road, and

one day Likky and Susie came round and said Mike and Robin would like to see you. And then they asked me to join the band.

It was really, really a shock... I didn't believe it. I'd been suggesting they got Krysia Kocjan in to replace Rose. I was not a musician—I'd written a few songs, including a 20-minute epic about the changing seasons!!—but I didn't really understand why they wanted me in the band: I didn't play anything! They said we'll teach you—and that's what they did! For the next 3 months, I was sweating my guts out learning five or six instruments, so when it came to my first performance (Birmingham City Hall) I **looked** like a multi-instrumentalist—the audience just didn't realise I could only play **one thing** on each instrument!

Rose had left by then. That's when I moved back to the Glen.

Did you join as a full member?

Yes, though I was on a smaller percentage than Robin and Mike. At the end of the first tour the money was shared out and I got \$3,000 in cash—more than I'd ever earned in my life. It was quite a surprise—so I went off for a holiday in Mexico!

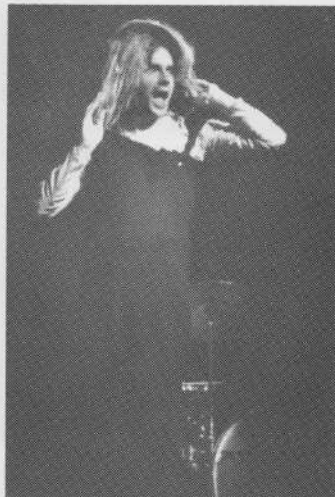
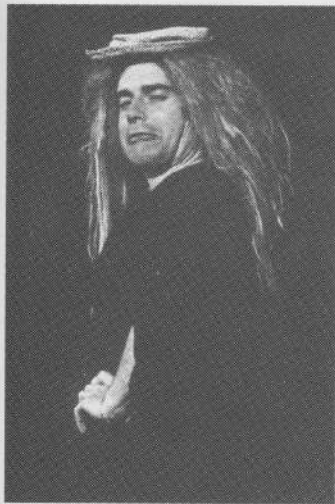
Did Mike and Robin consciously write vehicles for you?

I suppose they recognised my range was limited and I had a lowish voice. Robin and I would figure out a story, then he'd write a song to go with it. I'd say it took me a year to settle in.

By the time of Earthspan?

Yes, especially live. With the ISB there were always these gaps between songs, which I started to fill. As time went on I developed a really strong performance style. I don't know if it's true, but Billy Connolly told me he took some inspiration from my anecdotes. I went to see him backstage with Mike once and he said the thing about my stories was, I could talk about absolute rubbish! I think he got that thing of talking about the hall from me. Anyway, after that, he and Mike went off to a David Essex party and he sent me home in one of his limos!

With the anecdotes, I'd begun by just



Gloria Beaver (before and after) and Horny Rhino, all about 1972/3

talking to the audience. As it went on, when I arrived at a town, I'd spend the first twenty minutes walking as fast as I could, just looking around and noticing things... Like I'd say "Have you noticed the smell in this town?" and people would start laughing because it smelt of Trebors and Refreshers, but no-one had really thought about it. I suppose it was a sense of timing, coupled with a deadpan manner—like Eddie Izzard now. In America I was really known for it—they'd say get up on stage and tell us a story!

Some American press quotes

(We were...) knocked dead by his uninhibited free-form dancing, his dual portrayal of Sherlock Holmes and Watson in a long skit that made up in fun what it lacked in tightness (and) his inspired stint on assorted junk on Evolution Rag....
(LA Free Press, June '71)

In addition to singing, dancing and imitating the rhythm section of a circus band in Circus Girl Malcolm filled the tuning breaks with anecdotes...
(Stanford Daily '72)

What about your memories of recording albums?

I remember playing the church organ on Darling Belle in a church over the road from the studio—that was a hell of an experience. Anyone could've played what I played but I got elected to do it—Robin's on his hands and knees under my legs playing the foot pedals with his hands, I'm playing the keyboard, Mike's back in the hall somewhere trying to make sure the sound's all right... Being in the studio was so weird for me, there was so much pressure—playing the bouzouki in this sort of goldfish bowl! Earthspan was the first record with my songs on it...

Was there a set way of getting songs recorded? Was it Malcolm gets one song per album, or a vote?

Going back in time, Mike and Robin would always split the songs equally, so I was quite surprised to get two-and-a-half songs on an album. I can't remember if there was a system. I think, for them, it just came down to the best songs—but trying to keep a balance. Their songs would be the predominant force.

A strange story of desperation

So what was Lighthouse Keeper about?

I don't know! I don't like the second one I wrote (Lighthouse Dance)—it was

written purely as a follow-on! The first one is a more organic song. I did have this surreal imagery kind of mind, and it had something to do with that. There's a strange story of desperation in there. It was very much arranged by all of us in the studio. Some of the backing harmonies are a bit out!

Your favourite song?

Down Before Cathay—and Did I Love A Dream. There weren't many unrecorded; I wasn't prolific at that point.

I think Glancing Love is the nearest to what you do now—it's more personal, less mannered...

It's about a real person, a Jewish ballet dancer I'd met in New York—a real case of unrequited love! I met Mike Garson at Saint Hill and the music was written on the grand piano in the chapel there. I also met Bowie in '73—we spent the entire night talking. He'd just come back from Japan on the Trans-Siberian express and he was telling me stories about the journey. I met John Cale around then too. Mike knew him; he was a staff producer at Warner Brothers. He wanted to buy a piano but he was completely zonked and scruffy looking—and we went into this exclusive piano shop in LA where they were reluctant to even serve him. Then he sat down and played this stunning sonata! He was a very charming bloke.



*Mr Dots in the States, 1973
—photo by Christine Santiago*

Wasn't there a Robert Plant connection too?

Well he came to a gig in Dudley and took us off for a pub crawl round Wolverhampton! I wrote a song for him, actually, which I never sent him. I'd read his favourite book was *News From Tartary*, by Ian Fleming's brother. I'd just read it too, so I wrote him a song about it. I've still got the demo!

Back to the ISB. Tell me about the touring.

We did a lot—America, Britain, Holland, Spain. There was an American tour in the Gerard Dots era. The first town was Memphis—we were on in this large club for 3 nights. The first night there were 5 people in the audience, the second 10 and the last 15—they all came back! There were just about more people in the audience than on stage. Then we were in Nashville where Julie Christie was making the film *Nashville*. She liked the ISB so she bought the whole crew of the film along! We were quite frightened playing Nashville but we realised that you can do what you like there as long as you do it with conviction—they appreciate that. After that was Atlanta where we did a gig, then to the hotel before we did a breakfast TV slot. So after half an hour's sleep we were told to get up again and went to "the largest diner in the world"—this fifty metre counter. We arrived at 7.30 and there was a chirpy host in a bright red blazer, and an audience consisting entirely of kids in summer camp. On the other side from us was Monsieur So-and-so, the chef who was going to demonstrate a meal. The show started, there was a bit of news and then the host said "And now for the

ISB—this is Robin," and stuck a microphone in my face. "So Robin, how do you like Atlanta?" I said "That's Robin over there," and he stuck the microphone in Mike's face... Finally he got it right and we did *Black Jack Davy* or something and everyone was forced to clap. Then it was over to the chef, who was cooking lobster. He had this big pan of boiling water and this huge pepper pot stuffed with shredded garlic—and the lid came off, so about 20 cloves of garlic fell in the boiling water! Of course they had to clear all the kids out, their eyes were streaming, and so to cover this it was—"Hey we've got another song from the ISB!", which wasn't scheduled at all. We looked at each other blankly and then did a really bad version of something else from our set... It was complete mayhem on those tours. I loved touring America. We did a lot of TV—it's funny so little has survived on video.

A very bizarre choice

How did Likky leave and Gerard Dots come to join?

I can't remember much about Likky leaving: she just disappeared. It was quite a weird episode. Gerard was asked because he was a good musician and both Mike and Robin knew him from the early days. He was thrust into something he didn't fully understand. Gerard lived with his Mum and worked in a music shop—and when he left the band, he went back to the shop. It was as if nothing had happened. Whenever we got to a town, Gerard and I would disappear. I'd be looking at things and talking to people and Gerard would be out taking photographs. It was strange for him—he was thrust into this famous band, on a world tour, girls chatting him up... I think at the end of the tour he was politely asked to leave. It was an aberration I will never understand—a very bizarre choice really.

Back to 1973—Did you have any other songs apart from Glancing Love?

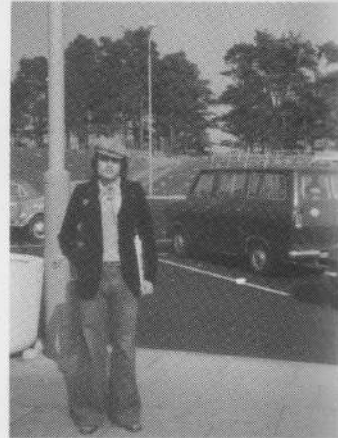
In that period I had a lot of good songs that never saw the light of day—I'd bought a harmonium and they were all based round chord progressions on the harmonium. But they were all rejected.

Was there a time towards the end of the band when you began to feel a bit uncomfortable?

That's a very interesting question... In some ways I passed the buck a bit—but I was aware of this tension. Part of it was Janet's desire to be the manager of the band, a rivalry between her and Susie—this is just my opinion, but I think it was always what she was going for. And there was also this thing about the representation of the two main men in the band. I was aware of all those undercurrents...

Were things exacerbated at the end by pressure from Neighborhood to make a more mainstream, radio-friendly album?

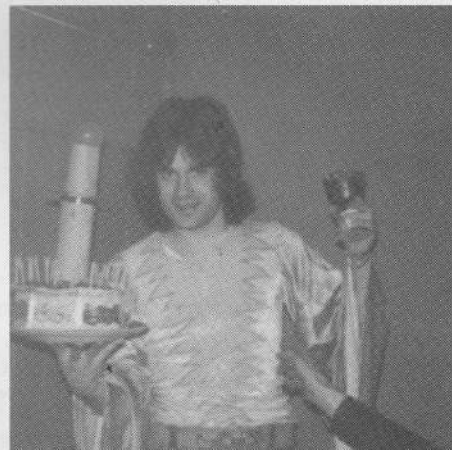
It's not my recollection, no. I don't think I was told about those final studio sessions—at the end of the American tour I went off. I was hanging around with this guy called Barry Smith, who was the original *Marvel Comics* illustrator of *Conan The Barbarian* (interesting link with *Ithkos* here—see later in the mag—Ed). He introduced me to *Black Russians*, which is vodka and Tia Maria, which, even though I didn't usually drink, I was enjoying—and meanwhile I was having another go at trying to seduce this ballet dancer (of *Glancing Love* fame)—you know, "Look, I've written you this song,"—but it still didn't work out! I didn't find out about the split till I got back to the Row and Mike rang me to say the band had broken up and would I



*Male looking unusually normal
—States tour, '72ish*



From the top left, clockwise: Mal at the Row, Giles waxes romantic (De Montfort Hall, Leicester, 1973/4), the 'lighthouse' 23rd birthday cake made by the Glen Rowers, Malcolm tries rather shifty to creep into (or out of?) the Kings Road flat the band would stay in for London gigs.



like to join Reputation! I was pissed off—my income took a dive for a start, but I thought *why do it now?*—when we had these big Australian and British tours lined up. It was very brutally done. I knew there was a problem, I knew things were not being talked about... There had been a lot of anger about Ithkos earlier on—in some ways it might have hastened the break-up of the band. And then there were these power struggles for management which went beyond the members of the band itself. I found Janet quite difficult, I had a sort of love/hate relationship with her. She could become quite entrenched... I was sad that the ISB had veered away from being experimental, the stuff

Robin used to do. It had been taken over by other people, become more mainstream... But at the end of the day, everyone has a different story to tell!

How was the decision finally taken to end the band?

Mike and Robin were still trying to work things out, and I gather they had a session in a hotel room in New York where they brought in two Scientists, Paolo Lionni and his girl friend, as facilitators to try and work out a way forwards. But it just turned into an extremely heated argument, and after that I suppose it just became irreparable. It had to come though. The band broke

up because these guys were changing—they were getting older, suddenly they're in their 30s, thinking about their future careers. I'd been around them for four years and I'd watched Mike and Robin develop as people—and they'd started to diverge.

In the next issue Malc discusses Reputation ('I should've gone solo'), the lean years in the '80s and his current work.

Unless otherwise credited, all photos from the L.M. archive.

Letters

Let there be Rashomon!

Dear Adrian,

I see my comments have stirred something up. Maybe I should expand a bit.

In view of Robin and Mike's objections, it is tempting to say "I didn't mean it really, just exaggerating!". But history is always in the eye of the beholder and all I can do is tell it as I remember it.

As I understood it at the time, they were both originally friends of Clive Palmer and not necessarily of each other. Then Clive left, leaving Mike and Robin to look after the growing ISB momentum. Around the time of the second and third LPs, 1967/68, there was a clear atmosphere of creative tension. They both often complained to me about the other. My interpretation of events was that they would only tolerate the other one's songs becoming part of the group repertoire if they could do the arrangement, sing harmony, play the lead melody instrument etc: in other words, put their own stamp on each others' songs. "Hatred" is probably too strong a word for the rivalry and competitiveness which existed, and I plead guilty to using some hyperbole to make the point.

But I know that Mike was very frustrated about Robin's insistence on involving Licorice more and more in the recording of Hangman. Rose has told me that the day Robin announced that Licorice would be a permanent participant in the live performances was the day that Mike bought a bass, brought it home and handed it to Rose, saying "Learn how to play this". It was clear that it was essential Robin should not get an upper hand through having his girlfriend become a member of the band!

It may well be that Robin and Mike got along famously when they were away from me and recording studios. I don't think it demeans or lessens the history of the great things they achieved to point out that they were human with plenty of tricky parts of the personality to go around. I admire them immensely for the fact that they used the rivalry and competitiveness in such a creative way

and never for a minute suggested breaking up the group. All I know is that during those key years, I got a lot of complaining from both of them about the other and there was a lot of tense eye rolling in the studio and backstage between the time Licorice and Rose joined and when they became Scientologists and all this rivalry ceased. I am a bit of a literal-minded person so I tend to take things at face value and that certainly was the facet I saw. I remember marvelling to people in my office and at Elektra about how little they liked each other and yet how productive the relationship was.

Let there be Rashomon! Let a thousand histories bloom. History can be tricky stuff and I hope they don't feel upset that I have told it as I remember it. But it would be a bland story if we didn't blurt out what we remember without editing, wouldn't it?

Best regards, Joe Boyd.

A flabber

Dear beGLAD,

Just writing to say how much I enjoyed issue 10 of *beGLAD* (and indeed 9)—they just get better and better!

But my ghastr was flabbered by David Kidman's unkind words about When You Find Out... Yes of course it "moves forwards in fits and starts"—so does life; yes there are "awkward joints", sometimes it "doesn't flow". Ah, but when you find out who you are... The contrast of the jagged brittleness and broken rhythms of unknowing with the calm swelling flow of knowing—it is beautiful beyond your dreams. Clearly, it meant enough, to Robin at least, to make it part of their sadly small offering to the Woodstock generation. It remains a firm favourite of mine—as does the whole of that side of I Looked Up.

Yours in peace, Martin Williams.

A great night...

Editor, beGLAD,

I reckon you'll probably get lots of feedback from readers of the magazine about the Glasgow and London concerts of Robin and Mike etc, but I thought I'd drop you a line because I've been a fan of the ISB for about 18 years although I was too young to see them when they were around. From what I can gather, their performances, like their recordings, had lost a lot of sparkle in the final years, so maybe it's good that I didn't catch them at the tail end of their time together. Whether they were a bit jaded at the end or not isn't important, but for me I had nothing to compare the Glasgow concert with, although that didn't stop me having huge expectations. As to the Glasgow gig, I thought it was slow in warming up but nearer the end, when Robin stopped being the Bard and Mike stopped being a reggae/calypso contemporary singer/songwriter, they really were something else. The smiles on both their faces, Robin becoming especially animated during Log Cabin Home In The Sky was brilliant to see. In fact, all the encores were excellent, but what was that incredibly sad song Robin played when they came on for the encores? (*It was Every Time I See Your Face, which he rediscovered on the Balmore tapes—Ed*) The songs where they played or sang—especially sang—together were really powerful: Maya and Log Cabin were particularly impressive. If the ending was brilliant and very sad, my personal favourite moment was Robin doing that unpronounceable song Koeoaddi There from Hangman's Beautiful Daughter—what a wonderful song!

Separately, I thought they did some good songs from their solo projects. I've seen Robin play about eight times, but I'd never seen Mike play before apart from a tiny segment of his acoustic band playing in the Meadows in Edinburgh a few years ago. So, it was good to hear some of his songs—I particularly enjoyed his Song For Robert Johnson. Although his Tom And Alexei was the evening's low spot for me.

All in all I thought it was a great night and I look forward to seeing it on TV. (*All right for the Scots...—disgruntled southern editor*) Let's hope they can occasionally play together more often and maybe someone can persuade them to record some new stuff together again. All the best and still enjoying *beGLAD*.

Derek Devine.

Interviews on tape / side B 5

market, it doesn't contribute anything to your life, apart from allowing you to boogie^⑦. You know, if you think dancing is the be and the end-all^⑧ of music, you must have a pretty narrow^④ understanding of what life is all about.

SPEAK UP (Standard British English accent): Do you think there was a down side^⑤ to the '60s? **Roger Bunn:** Oh... Yes, the '70s!

Robin Williamson, on the other hand, was a member of the Incredible String Band, one of the few British groups to have played at Woodstock. Speak Up went to see him in Wales, where he has continued a career as a Celtic folk singer. We asked him what the atmosphere had been like in London during the Summer of Love.

Robin Williamson (Mild Scottish accent): Well, it was optimistic but I think that in actual fact



Robin Williamson
Musician

the Summer of Love in London really got going a bit later there than it did in San Francisco, you know. I mean, by '68 it was a widespread^⑥ phenomenon. In '67 it was still quite underground, though you'd had the IT magazine^② and the various clubs, UFO and Middle Earth and other clubs... where sort of "psychedelic" (quotes unquotes)^③ bands were playing, including us, the Incredible String Band, but I mean you didn't see people walking around saying, you know... you know "peace, peace" and

whatnot^⑨ like they were doing in Haight Ashbury that same year, but there was quite a radical underground in London in the '60s. In '67, a lot of really good theatre, really good dance, fantastic experimental this and that, with a lot of people breaking the barriers between one media and another, mixing them

up and doing things without technique, you know with a sort of spontaneity and verve that was very refreshing.

SPEAK UP: You said that the Summer of Love probably came later in London. I mean, when do you think it really began to take off?

Robin Williamson: Well, by '68, '69, people had got the notion of festivals and so on, but by that time, you see, the media had got hold of the notion. In '67 it seemed really quite possible to

change the nature of the world, I mean, quite literally, to go back to a sort of exchange economy. I honestly believed in '67 that the world would go back to a kind of village community economy and we might as well go back to growing potatoes now because there wasn't going to be such a thing as money by next year. It seemed that way and with a tremendous dose of sort of optimism. And, however, as soon as that thing became a marketable commodity^⑩, it almost immediately began to dwindle^⑪ and left in its stead^⑫ a sort of jaded surfeit^⑬ of experience, a satiety of experience, you know... a bombardment of sound and light which left a kind of jaded feeling in the world and then that was replaced, of course, simply just by general "I'm Alright, jack" right greed^⑭ and mass marketing of the '70s and the '80s and into the '90s. Well, the '90s has got radical again.

GLOSSARY

- THOSE WERE...**
- ① sold down the river - emisionar
 - ② to boogie - bailar
 - ③ the be (and) the end-all - el no va más
 - ④ narrow - limitado, estrecho
 - ⑤ down side - lado negativo
 - ⑥ widespread - extendido
 - ⑦ IT magazine - INTERNACIONAL: TEMA, revista alternativa de los años 60
 - ⑧ quotes unquotes - entre comillas
 - ⑨ and whatnot - y cosas por el estilo
 - ⑩ marketable commodity - bien de consumo
 - ⑪ to dwindle - disminuir
 - ⑫ in its stead - en su lugar
 - ⑬ jaded surfeit - exceso, hartazgo
 - ⑭ greed - codicia

Below: the Beatles with their guru, the Maharishi. During the course of 1967 the formerly fabulous four were to study with him, both in India and in Bangor in North Wales, where they heard the news of the death of Brian Epstein, their manager. **Below left:** Carnaby Street, which was the epicentre of "Swinging London."

Robin's dates

This is the latest crop of Williamson gigs. You should confirm them with the venue before setting off.

JANUARY

Fri 9 LONDON Kings Head, Crouch End
Sat 17 WINDSOR The Arts Centre
Sat 24 SPILSBY The Theatre
Mon 26 DERBY The Flowerpot

FEBRUARY

1-7 ITALY
Thu 12 CAMBRIDGE Venue TBC
Fri 13 BANBURY The Mill Theatre
Fri 20 FROME The Merlin Theatre
2-4 pm children's workshop
Sun 22 EXETER Northgate Theatre
23-27 NOTTINGHAM Village Tour
Sat 28 SUNDERLAND The Ropery

MARCH

Sun 1 SHEFFIELD The Boardwalk
Mon 2 NETTLEBED Village Club
Fri 6 WESTON S. MARE Blakelay Arts Centre
Sat 7 GLASTONBURY Ass. Rooms
Thu 1 OXFORD The Zodiac

APRIL

last 2 Weeks USA

MAY

First week USA
Sun 17 LICHFIELD The Guildhall
Sat 30 NARBERTH Queen's Hall

JUNE

Fr 5 PENZANCE Venue TBC
Sat 6 ST AUSTELL The Arts Centre
Wed 17 GAINSBOROUGH Trinity Arts Centre
Thu 18 BIRMINGHAM Theatre
Fri 19 ALDERSHOT West End Centre
Sat 20 BURY The Met
27/28 ULSTER Storytelling Festival

The above comes from *Speak Up*, a magazine for young people learning English—in Spain. Our man in Segovia, Francesc Puerto, kindly sent in a copy.

Elsewhere in the mag, Robin mentions his favourite '60s memory: "I got up one morning at dawn and went for a walk along the clifftop and there was a fox with one foot raised in this damp, wet, green field. And it just seemed that nothing could be more perfect than that moment. The '60s were a bit like that a lot of the time".

beGLAD welcomes back John Quigley, a man of no fixed abode and a mine of critical insights..

Old-Timey Bands, Jugs, Explorers and the ISB

I was intrigued by Tim Moon's piece on traditional influences in the ISB. As he said, it could have been much very much longer, and also much more diverse—so as to reflect the ISB's "incredible eclecticism" (Joe Boyd). The striking thing about the String Band was the way they absorbed so many seemingly disparate musical forms... thereby, perhaps, illustrating 1960s concepts of a new openness to diverse cultural influences, like Marshall McLuhan's "global village" or Andre Malraux's "museum without walls"; or reflecting Robin's ideas of a secret link between all kinds of world music and of a community not bound by time or space... Be that as it may, one effect of the early ISB records on me was to stimulate an interest in the music which had influenced them; many relatively rare or obscure albums found their way into my record collection in subsequent years. The stuff I discuss here should amply illustrate my point, and also reveal some of the many non-pop sources from which the ISB drew.

I. Old-Timers and Jug Stompers

Early press releases on the ISB usually talk about their origins as a kind of Scots-hillbilly string band playing, among other things, songs by Uncle Dave Macon. Clive Palmer's idea of calling the band the Fruit Jar Drinkers (mentioned in Andy Roberts' interview with Mike) is actually a reference to

Uncle Dave's classic old-timey band, which recorded prolifically in the late 1920s under that very name! In fact, I discovered Uncle Dave's music in an unusual way: by listening to AFN. In the late 1960s, American Forces Radio in Europe offered an alternative to the limited and commercialised output of BBC Radio One—especially late at night, when R1 was off the air. One of their late-night disc jockeys was a rather solemn, patriarchal-sounding folk music specialist, and one evening in 1968 or '69 he played a whole hour of Uncle Dave Macon! Having read of the influence Uncle Dave had exerted on the early ISB I was naturally curious to hear what he was all about, and having been fascinated by the reissues of scratchy old 1920s recordings proliferating in the late-'60s blues revival, it wasn't too strange an experience... What was surprising, however, was that the very next day I visited my local (and quite small) record shop and found the album I'd heard just the night before—*Uncle Dave Macon—First Featured Star Of The Grand Ole Opry* (Decca Ace Of Hearts AH 135). The material is a mixture of songs and banjo features by the larger-than-life Uncle Dave, and exuberant band tracks—banjo, guitar and two fiddles. It's impressive stuff, but there's not much of a direct connection with the ISB's recorded material. Later, however, I got *Uncle Dave Macon—Early Recordings* (County 521), which is maybe easier to relate to the String Band; the songs on this collection tend to be a bit more subdued, the fiddle and banjo pyrotechnics and breakneck tempi giving way to slightly melancholy, gospel-influenced vocal harmonies and instrumental blends, which sometimes recall the trio tracks on the first ISB album. Listen to songs like Rock About My Sarah Jane, Take Me Home Poor Julia, and Gwine Back To Dixie... (The County album also contains a wild string band version of Sail Away Ladies, a song revived in the

1950s by numerous skiffle groups—and in the 1960s by John Fahey, who, accompanied by "Mysterious" Al Wilson (of Canned Heat) on the South Indian veena, transformed it into a dreamy ISB-like instrumental which became a favourite of John Peel, and was often heard on his 1967-8 Top Gear and Night Ride programmes. It's on Fahey's *The Great San Bernardino Birthday Party and Other Excursions* (Takoma C 1008).

If you look for a parallel to the ISB of Log Cabin Home In The Sky and Black Jack David in 1920s old-timey music, though, then perhaps Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers would come to mind. Charlie Poole died young, in 1931, and he wasn't quite such a big star as Uncle Dave Macon, but his band's music is still influential. They were a banjo-fiddle-guitar trio, a little more relaxed, "laid-back" even (also a little more in tune), than the majority of wild and woolly hillbilly bands, and had an unusually wide repertoire ranging from traditional songs and dances to popular songs—both late 19th-century weepies and 1920s ragtime/pop hokum. If you look I daresay you can find examples of all these genres in the ISB repertoire (for hokum try e.g. the ending of Creation, or Waiting For You); anyway, the Poole material has been reissued by County Records—last time I looked (quite a long time ago, admittedly) there were 4 LPs...

Everything's Fine Right Now, with its kazoo and mandolin accompaniment, bears a certain family resemblance to 1920s jug band music—as do later ISB songs (the "ain't got no home in this world any more" section of Ducks On A Pond, the live Weather The Storm...)—again, probably a more direct influence on the original ISB concept (even on Empty Pocket Blues?) than the spirit of Robert Johnson. Like the old-timey bands, the jug bands had a mixed,

eclectic repertoire—blues, jazz, pop, hokum, traditional songs.... The two greatest are Cannon's Jug Stompers and the Memphis Jug Band, both of whom can be heard on numerous reissues. There is a fine Memphis Jug Band collection on Yazoo Records, while Cannon's complete works have been reissued several times—I have a double album on Herwin Records, although I believe this has been superseded by a CD reissue from Japan! Again, it's the poppier material which most recalls the ISB, e.g. the Memphis Jug Band's 'Stealin', covered in the 1960s by Arlo Guthrie and many others, Gus Cannon's Walk Right In, an early 1960s hit for folkies The Rooftop Singers, and his Prison Wall Blues, the source of the chorus for John Sebastian's Younger Girl, a big US hit and UK offshore pirate radio turntable hit in 1966. Many of the bluesier items in the Cannon's Jug Stompers repertoire were taken up in the '60s by the likes of the Grateful Dead, Canned Heat, and the Jim Kweskin Jug Band. Yazoo Records has a fascinating compilation of classic blues tracks (including Cannon's Walk Right In; Henry Thomas's Bull Doze Blues, the origin of Canned Heat's Goin' Up the Country; Charley Patton's Spoonful, etc.) which were revived by rock bands: *Roots of Rock*. (L 1063). Tony Russell's book *Blacks, Whites and Blues* (Studio Vista, possibly out of print, but at least Tony himself is still around...) is a good source of information on the interaction—important for the development of rock and roll—between hillbilly music and blues during the period. Someone somewhere should write a history of '60s music showing how, and maybe even why, material

from the '20s was stolen/adapted... For example, how in Everything's Fine... and Younger Girl rough and rowdy blues-based material is fashioned into tender pop love songs. My own memories of the 1920s in '60s music range from the UK trad jazz boom, represented by such oddities as the Temperance Seven's Pasadena at the start of the decade, to the country blues revival, which brought forth the Woodstock theme tune Goin' Up the Country just before its end. A fascinating topic.

2. Explorers and Exotica

The String Band did sessions for John Peel's Night Ride programmes in 1968-69. This was, as Mike says, very much "pre-Andy Kershaw", and the kind of "world music" to be heard on the radio then was mostly inspired by the fashion for things Eastern, and thus quite different from the urbanised, semi-pop stuff Andy features today. Rather, it tended to be very obscure and often quite weird tracks drawn from the BBC Sound Archives—there is a classic compilation album, *John Peel's Archive Things*, issued by BBC Records in 1969. But specialist labels (Folkways, Ocora, Argo) were beginning to issue records of non-Western music, often from countries on the "hippy trail", ranging from the Balkans to North Africa, Nepal and Tibet. In fact I strongly suspect that the ISB, as Elektra recording artists, were aware of Elektra's subsidiary label Nonesuch and its Explorer album series, which was one of the first catalogues of "world music" to appear. Many of the key records in the series were issued during the late '60s, and I got my copies in the early '70s when, for a while, the

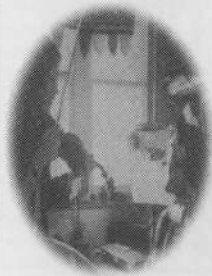
label was imported and distributed by Transatlantic. Scholars, fanatical collectors and seekers-after-truth—I'm sure there are many among *BeGLAD* readers—will have plenty of fun seeking them out.

The ISB's recorded career begins with *Maybe Someday*—"Bulgarian, Indian, Scottish and schizoid"... Well, Mike's guitar and Robin's fiddle do provide an approximation of the characteristic sound of Bulgarian folk music, nowadays more familiar to us because of the world-wide success of *Le Mystere Des Voix Bulgares* and its successors. One of the first LPs of Bulgarian folk music to appear in the West was issued on Nonesuch—*Music of Bulgaria* (H-72011). The performers here, as on *Le Mystere...* are a professional stage ensemble rather than village folk musicians (Nonesuch also had a couple of fine LPs of Bulgarian village music—H-72034/8). The album apparently influenced the likes of David Crosby and Graham Nash; and Albert Grossman, he who managed Bob Dylan, Janis Joplin, etc., was involved in its release.

Probably the best-known Nonesuch Explorer LP as far as the folk and rock audience is concerned is *The Real Bahamas In Music And Song* (H-72015). This contains the Pindar Family's version of I Bid You Goodnight, together with their version of Great Dream from Heaven, in which they are accompanied by Joseph Spence, the legendary and eccentric guitarist who strongly influenced Ry Cooder and—so it seems to me and Raymond—might have been a source of the Caribbean-style inflections in Mike's early work (Can't Keep Me Here, The Hedgehog's Song, Little Cloud...). There are also numerous Nonesuch albums for those who, like Robin, were/are inspired by Eastern music—from India (e.g. *Classical Music Of India*, H-72014; for folkier stuff, *The Bauls Of Bengal*, H-72035 and *Kashmir: Traditional Songs And Dances*, H-72058/69), Japan (*Koto Music Of Japan*, H-72005; *A Bell Ringing In The Empty Sky*—an ISB-like title for a beautiful meditative album of solo flute music, H72025), Bali (*Music From The Morning Of The World*, H-72015), and Iran before the ayatollahs outlawed music (*A Persian Heritage*, H-72060); think about Pictures In A Mirror

Continued page 34—

REHEARSAL



This 1975 James Archibald documentary features the Scots Guards, the Royal Opera, a boys' choir—and the ISB rehearsing and performing Ithkos! I've still got 50 copies left (on VHS video with box & sleeve).

To order, send a cheque for £15 with your name and address to—

Adrian Whittaker, 71A Colvestone Crescent, Dalston, London E8 2LJ. This includes EEC postage costs—for other countries add on a pound, though note that the format probably won't be compatible.

**Old-Timey Jugs...
cont'd**

with its hammer dulcimer accompaniment and wailing vocals, only slightly less melodramatic...). These albums still have plenty to offer to the listener who's willing to "open up the ears" (sounds painful but isn't, necessarily)—and, uncharacteristically for recordings of exotic music, they were affordable and well-recorded, with good sleeve notes and even pretty album sleeves. And for those who suspect that it might all be too obscure and far out, let me recall the experiment which a group of psychologists carried out in the mid-1970s. They took a piece of modern, "difficult" classical music and played it to two groups of sixth-form students at a school in Wales, telling one group that it was from a new solo album by the Pink Floyd's Roger Waters and the other that it was a piece by the contemporary Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu... and guess what? The first group's verdict was positive ("great"), the second groups less so ("boring"). Which must prove something... Are **BeGLAD** readers more open-minded, or is the opposite also true?

TEACUP & SORCERY

by BJ Craven

A bizarre tale of a Mystic and a Teapot Man who do battle with an evil Count to save the World from ecological disaster.

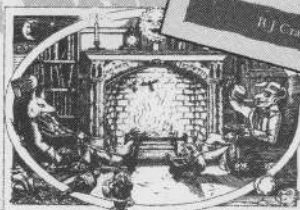
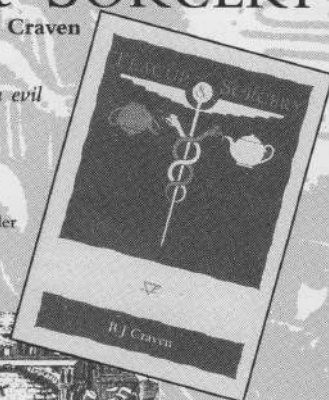
"The only way to convey the oddness of the book is to suppose that you are only nine years old and you find it hidden under the stairs. You read it alone one rainy Sunday evening, and as you are nine you wouldn't understand everything.

You would, though, find the stories magical, and a little frightening. Compared to everything else, *Teacup & Sorcery* is decidedly off-beam."

The Sitarist, Winter 1996.

Between the covers of this slim volume, allusions to 15B songs may be found.

Hardback Limited Edition of 333 copies, with line illustrations, hand numbered and signed, with a tipped-in colour illustration.



By mail-order at £8.95 each inc. p&p. Early orders will also receive copies of unpublished extracts

from a work in progress. Cheques & IMOs to: The Smallest County Press, The Old Chapel, XXVI Main Street, Sewstern, Grantham, Lincs. NG33 5RF, UK. Tel: 01476 860860

Martin Payne, our man at the Net, has sent in a feature from *Wales On Sunday* called "Bolt Holes of the Stars"—"they arrive in the dead of night, unnoticed by neighbours... they are celebrities in the sun, hiding from the public glare, and Wales is their favourite bolt-hole."

'Bolt Holes of the Stars'

Alongside Take That, Salman Rushdie, Robert Plant and the Minogues, Robin's "hideaway" is dutifully run to ground: "The musical genius behind the Mabinogion lives in Beverly Hills (oh

really), but when L.A. becomes too much for him he heads for his second home in one of the most select streets in central Cardiff."

Future exposés may include Malcolm's '80s career as a cleaner (remember, you read it here first).



Cartoon by Peter Dawson

FIT AND LIMO/SHINY GNOMES
Feather And Dust (Catweeze CW002)
Various Artists: *The Story Of Today's*
Hallucination Generation (UR-Kult 047)
MC Creatrix

(Our Choice RTD 195 1917 2)

Weltraumservice

(Our Choice RTD 195 3172 2)

Fit and Limo first came to **beGLAD**'s attention a few years back with *This Moment*, an EP devoted to lovingly-crafted cover versions of ISB classics. That this German husband-and-wife(?) duo have several more strings to their bow is demonstrated by the hefty wodge of CD and vinyl recently delivered to Be Glad Towers. Their retrospective vinyl album *Feather And Dust* collects tracks recorded over the course of the Eighties, but which owe conspicuously little to the likes of Wham! and Human League. Think Pink, rather—the Floyd of *More/Ummagumma* period—and you're in through the door, though you'll also meet sitars, shenais, flutes and what have you as well as some deliciously catchy toons. And you'll sigh with delight to find a track called (I kid thee not) Ivan Pawle, a homage to the great man with Frosty Morning-style glockenspiel tinkling through shimmering vocal harmonies.

Yet another slab of vinyl—do these people live in the real world at all?—finds Fit and Limo rubbing paisley shoulders with other creatures of "Today's Hallucination Generation". The Psychedelic Revival, if you didn't know, is in full swing *sur le Continent*. The Mandra Gora Lightshow Society, Matmosphere, Billy Moffett's Playboy Club, Krone Der Gastlichkeit: they've got Mellotrons, and they're not afraid to use 'em. F. and L.'s contribution to this curious catalogue is the lengthy Humpty Dumpty, a rambling, multi-instrumental voyage that you could easily believe was the ISB pottering through one of their more discursive live pieces circa 1969. Cherishable.

The Shiny Gnomes are the ubiquitous Limo in cahoots with guitarist Hanz and drummer/keyboardist Ufo. For a trio who between them can muster less than twelve letters to their names, the Gnomes show no shortage of imagination. *MC Creatrix*, released in 1994, mixes trippy melodies with bone-crunching riffs and eerie electronica in a way that seems entirely natural. Limo's Barrettesque voice spins wispy cobwebs over the often dense soundscapes, and some of the tunes are frankly gorgeous—Healing Sounds Asleep, Lavender Hill, Triple Mother. By contrast, tracks such as Dyade and Feelpool are basically noise, though beguiling noise for all that. There's some judicious sampling too: a disshevelled Middle Eastern chant winds through In Nasreena's Garden, and you'll hear a familiar voice on Thinking At The Edge Of The Unthinkable assuring you that Amoebas

Reviews *extra!*

are Very Small...

1996's *Weltraumservice* finds the Gnomes in a slightly spikier mood, and singing, for once, exclusively in German. The title seems to be some sort of pun on world/planet-room/space, but my grasp of the language is too tenuous to be confident about this. Track titles like Planet Core, Standardorbit and Sphere seem, however, to suggest a focus on spacey themes. The album kicks off with a couple of Limo's patent psychedelic anthems, after which things get a bit jazzier, a touch more ambient, but the Gnomes' sure melodic touch is never far away. Notwithstanding a snatch of melodica and occasional acoustic guitar, the overall sound is pretty metallic and sci-fi bleepy. Very approachable, for all that.

It should be possible to get the Shiny Gnomes albums through your high-street record dealer, at least in the UK. For *Feather And Dust*, try contacting September Gurls Records, Sigmundstr. 92, 90431 Nürnberg, Germany (+49 911 3262182; septembergurls@compuserve.com)

Jonas Dalrymple

ROBIN WILLIAMSON

Memories (Erinnerungen)

(Pig's Whisker PWMD 5005)

Last year, Opel Cars in Germany commissioned Robin to contribute some music to accompany their anniversary celebrations, which to me seemed extraordinarily incongruous, considering Williamson's not exactly "anti-technology" but rather "irrelevant to technology" standpoint—and the guy doesn't even drive!

Leaving that aside, Robin has here produced a "mini" (no pun intended) canvas, depicting not just his instrumental dexterity and versatility, but how effortlessly his compositions evoke nostalgic images. In a similar manner to his 1980 album *A Glimp At The Kindling*, this CD is about childhood and adolescent memories—indeed, it includes a version of one of *Glimp*'s best tracks, Me And The Mad Girl, which is here extended to 6½ minutes to include some further spoken reminiscences:

School's got a smell that lingers, doesn't it?—A mix of sour milk and floor polish, boiled cabbage, ink and farts. Squeak squeak the chalk on the blackboard, scrub scrub the iron matron's nail brush on grazed knees...

The seven tracks are a cycle of four songs interspersed with three instrumental works (alternating with the songs). The only really new one of the songs to me is the opener, and a fine one too: North Sea Beaches—the other two songs (in addition to Mad Girl) being Happy Valley Pond (which is a section from Koeoaddi There) and the final track,

The Martial Law, which was quite an eye-opener. It is an adaptation of the best lyrics from one of his least-successful cuts, Mr & Mrs, with an entirely different, better tune and a much firmer, crisper arrangement and performance, proving that even the few supposed "bummers" from Williamson's long, prolific career can be adapted to something very worthwhile.

The instrumentals, featuring Robin on his characteristic instruments, harp, violin, mandolin and the like, are all truly splendid, in particular the one that is probably the CD's outstanding track (the last of the three), Just West Of Yesterday: the most scintillating, gorgeous, soothing (though never bland) harp music you are going to hear between now and when the universe collapses in on itself.

The CD is distributed in Germany by Opel with a brochure "celebrating the motor car" (still can't get over the incongruity!). It really is a very beautiful album. If you can't get one—and Unique Gravity should be your first port of call—you'll probably have to buy an Opel car in order to obtain a copy (well worth it!!).

Mike Swann

DOCTOR STRANGELY STRANGE

Alternative Medicine

(Big Beat)

Subtitled *The Difficult Third Album*, this has been 25 years or so in the making! Much of the material was performed at the Leeds gig a couple of years back: this is a good point to say mucho credit and thanks to Andy Roberts for providing the impetus for them to get down to recording it.

There are three instrumental tracks, which one reviewer considered the best aspect of the album! Whilst they're very pleasant, it's the songs which grabbed my attention. Darksome Burn (the Hopkins poem set to music), Hames and Traces, The Heat Came Down and Too Much Of A Good Thing all sit well alongside the established canon, though boasting a precision in the rhythm section unimaginable on *Kip Of The Serenes*. Whatever Happened To The Blues is a bit more beefy, with Gary Moore back again to do the heavy bit. On Pulp Kayak, too, mild-mannered Ivan Pawle is unmasked as a closet heavy metal merchant (well, for 35 seconds or so).

A couple of songs don't come off so well: The James Gang loses its frenetic yippee-ays and is taken at a much slower pace than at Leeds, an elegy rather than a celebration. And Strange World, co-written by ex-drummer Punka Khosa in African Highlife style, is absolutely ruined by inappropriate and inept heavy rock drumming.

A three-star rating, then.

A.W.

P.S. There's a lovely booklet with a potted history of "The Interim Years".

THE KNOTTY ISSUE OF HARD ROPE AND SILKEN TWINE

This final ISB album, like *No Ruinous Feud*, evoked fairly strong reactions from the fans at the time. **Mike Swann** comes out unequivocally in favour, while **Shane Pope** is decidedly guarded with his praise. But as well as their contributions, we've got the historical lowdown on Ithkos from **Stephen Robbins**, an historical map by **Jas Wetherspoon**, and a rather delightful cartoon version from the pen of **Allan Frewin**.

To start off this retrospective, I thought it would be interesting to see what Robin, Mike and Malcolm had to say about the album now. Here are their track by track comments:

MAKER OF ISLANDS

Mike: "It's one of those songs where there were originally a lot of ideas, pared down to the essence of the song (like *Worlds They Rise And Fall*). The piano arrangement took a long time to get that simple. It's basically a love song."

COLD FEBRUARY

This was recorded live at the Rainbow. Robin: "This was originally specific about Northern Ireland. The lines about Belfast and Derry were changed at the time not because of the record company, but because some of the people around the band felt we should soft-pedal a bit. I prefer it the way I originally wrote it."

GLANCING LOVE

See Malc's interview earlier in the issue for the full tale of his unrequited love for a New York ballet dancer!

DREAMS OF NO RETURN

I asked Robin if this could be seen as a *Dream Journals*-type song. Not really, sez Robin, "...it's goodbye to an earlier

idea of God, looking at the idea that death is not total extinction..." After this I was a bit stuck for a follow-on question.

DUMB KATE

At the time, Mike said it was a case of needing a song of this type—which he wrote to order. "I was trying to write a song in Log Cabin style, but with a Cajun, Wild West feel—or maybe the Canadian wastes. We nearly got killed playing that in Berkeley: the audience rioted, we had to stop the concert. It went down like a lead balloon. I did my little speech from the stage, explaining that men could be dumb too—as a chair whistled past my head... We dropped it from the set after that. But I'd still defend it a bit—not something I'd go to the wall for, though."

ITHKOS

The genesis of this song was a three-week holiday Mike and Susie had on a fairly remote Greek Island (possibly Skiathos, says Mike). He'd taken his guitar, and "we had this little, very private villa and a beach—and that was all. I'd have quite liked a bar, actually. So I wrote loads of material in this Conan The Barbarian, historical vein, making a story out of that time period, and refined it down. Yes, I still quite like it."

Robin: "I've been re-listening to old ISB stuff recently, and Mike's written a lot of good songs. But this isn't one of my favourites. We were forced into it by the situation—we'd been forced into playing really big venues."

Malcolm: "I felt a bit on the sidelines making *Hard Rope*." Ithkos? "Well, we had a drummer who couldn't drum... It didn't feel right—it was supposed to be a vehicle for all of us, but it came out disjointed and uneven. I was never quite sure what it was. I think there's a bit of a Hubbard influence in that song—he wrote a book about using memory to pinpoint old cities around the Mediterranean. I do think there are some really lovely melodies in there we could have made more of."

LOOKING OUT ON AN ENDLESS VIEW

AN APPRECIATION OF
HARD ROPE & SILKEN TWINE
BY MIKE SWANN

This final album was, for many years, numbered among my real favourites of their work. I always felt, as Raymond Greenoaken mentioned in his splendid series on their album cover art, that it highlighted their stylistic contrasts rather than smothering and obscuring them in the way that *No Ruinous Feud* had done. This factor of course was the prime reason for the demise of the band, which occurred just eight months following *Hard Rope's* release, as the musical differences between Robin and Mike became more or less unworkable but, thankfully, this "swansong" work is one that in a profound and mature manner covers virtually the full spectrum of their nine years' remarkable music.

I love it to this day as well. All the band's albums, with the possible exception of *Feud*, go on improving with age, yielding more and more with each play. While there are those String fans who dismiss this later period entirely, that is a myopic view which I am convinced is only held by a small minority. I'm sure *beGLAD* readers would never have wanted to see them just serve up pale *Hangman's/Wee Tam* imitations. The general "critical" view of course has always been that there was an inexorable, if slow, decline after *Wee Tam* with any value in their work petering out altogether as the magic was lost (the usual summary phrase) after the move to Island. The year between *Feud* and *Hard Rope* was one of considerable activity and upheaval for the band, involving a number of personnel changes and additions, as well as two UK tours, one of which, in Autumn 1973, was the biggest they ever undertook.



The final line-up—that's John Gilston and Stan Lee in the doorway

On the eve of that tour, the band confirmed the full-time employment of their first ever rhythm section, bassist Stan Lee Schnier and Geordie-born Jack Ingram on the drums, both of whom, in true ISB tradition, were adept on quite a number of musical instruments other than their main ones. Feud's woodwinds man Gerard Dott also left to be replaced by electric lead guitarist Graham Forbes, a youthful, loquacious Glaswegian. Graham was in fact the first ISB member to contact me when I was researching my ISB biography back in the late '70s, and "loquacious" is an appropriate adjective, believe me. I remember one occasion when he phoned me (at work!) and the conversation lasted, I kid you not, an hour-and-a-half.

An ambitious undertaking

At an exhausting 32 dates in just 40 days, the tour was, truthfully, far too big. Even for a band enjoying a great deal more commercial success than the Increds at the time, it would have been an ambitious undertaking. While the big city venues, including the November one at London's Rainbow (the best gig I've ever seen, to be honest!), were packed out, many of the provincial dates had barely half-full halls—a fact which

played right into the hands of some of the critics. Melody Maker's Steve Lake in particular coupled this "failing to fill halls" line with the fact that Earthspan and Feud had (only just) missed a chart placing. Lake's review of the Rainbow concert was distorted and nasty throughout, though Melody Maker certainly atoned for his excesses just a month later when Karl Dallas penned a quite superb piece for their "Rock Giants" feature.

This article was reprinted in its entirety for the programme which accompanied another tour in Feb 1974, a gentler one this time at just 10 dates, closing on the 23rd at London's Drury Lane Theatre Royal. The new album had been due to be released on the same day, but various problems held up its issue for over a month. The workload did not slacken though: as well as taping a Danish TV special on March 2nd, they played a concert two days later at Oxford Polytechnic, the result of winning a poll among the students as to whom they would most like to headline a gig, which surely proves just how massive and enduring the band's popularity still was—especially on the college/Uni circuit. This for a band that Steve Lake three months earlier had said were "rapidly

disappearing into obscurity".

The sessions for the new album had lasted through December 1973, and immediately on completion of the recording, drummer Jack Ingram left the band to be replaced by John Gilston, a young man who had known the band members well since about 1970. John had admired the ISB immensely since early '68. He first met the band at the U performances at the Roundhouse. Later, in 1970, he moved to Scotland and joined Stone Monkey, thus establishing a close association with the ISB. After Malcolm joined the String Band, the remaining Stone Monkey members formed various bands, including Clement Weather and the Wiggers, whom John was with until early '72. Later on John did session work in London, including the Jigs track on Feud.

Minimal publicity

Hard Rope was finally issued on March 23rd with minimal publicity. There was not even the usual full-page ad in the music press. Reviews appeared at different times as well, and were hardly ecstatic, the Music Week one not arriving until May 2nd and saying: "Not an outstanding example of the brilliance and versatility of this band...any fan who looks back more in sorrow than anger to

the vitality and invention of early LPs like 5000 Spirits will wonder if the String Band has grown old and stale." The writer did have some praise however for the "tour-de-force" of Ithkos, saying it showed off "some of the group's old multi-instrument talents." Sounds (Steve Peacock) however did give the album a reasonable review, saying of Ithkos: "Heron has blended it all together with skilful subtlety and the band plays with a kind of controlled intensity of which I didn't think they were capable..." Coverage of the album being somewhat diffuse and hardly ecstatic did have its effect on sales, totals being well down on the likes of Feud and Acrobat. The work does have one or two noticeable flaws, but these are more than offset by its considerable qualities, and its return to the style, profundity and scope of their pre-Feud albums. A beautiful, totally worthwhile collection, and I will never understand how it managed to amass such a garland of poor reviews and reactions.

Side one

Side One begins with Mike's Maker Of Islands, an exquisite song which I feel is one of his very best, having been a popular song at gigs well before release. A lovely, mellow tune and a touching, emotional lyric that Mike handles with the utmost taste and sensitivity, with just his piano, unobtrusive bass, and a fine (if very occasionally slightly overdone)

scoring for strings behind. His soaring vocal on the "in my soul" line near the end is positively spine-tingling. A classic.

Track two, Robin's Cold February, is another popular favourite—like Islands, a slow song but powerful and melodic, an ideal vehicle for his strong, piercing vocals. A very atmospheric piece, heightened here by Mike's solo organ and Robin's shrill whistle passages between verses. The main fault I feel with this track lies in the live recording. A sparse song like this would have been better in the studio; everything here sounds too much in the background, as if done from the back of the hall. Much of the song's power and atmosphere thus evaporates. Ostensibly, this concise and lyrical statement decrying war and violence is about Northern Ireland, but I feel the *...cried o'er their bones unburied...* line (as opposed to the *...in Belfast or the Streets of Derry...* which Robin substituted in later solo gigs) does lend the song a universality more appropriate to its classic feel. Malcolm Le Maistre and Mike Garson's Glancing Love is the third track. I'm a Malcolm fan—unlike some Stringheads, referred to at the beginning of the interview piece in the last issue! I feel he added so many dimensions to the band in the Island days, mostly in the dancing/theatrics of their live gigs of course, but also in the songs he contributed (I particularly like his Earthspan tracks, The Actor and Sailor

And The Dancer). This is a goodie as well; it is another slow song which, in terms of programming, may not have been a good choice at this point, but I feel that Side One does have a very relaxed feel that nicely complements and contrasts with the rockier climes of both Side Two's Ithkos (and, certainly, No Ruinous Feud!). However, it is certainly true to say that the full potential of the new band line-up is not being realised on this first side. This is a splendid track though, with fine words and a distinctive melody. Mike's organ, deep in the background, sets a strong base, while Robin's crisp acoustic, Graham's tasteful electric guitar and Stan's bass add to the laid-back feel, leading into excellent flute solos by Robin after verse two, and on the coda. Very enjoyable.

The fourth track, Robin's Dreams Of No Return, is another quiet beauty. Even most of the generally apprehensive reviews liked this one. As with February it is steeped in Williamsson-esque atmosphere, and also, in many senses, harks back to Wee Tam days in style if not execution. Robin sings the piece with perfect diction and intonation, playing acoustic guitar in fine counterpoint to Mike's sitar (making its first appearance in quite some time). Danny Thompson's string bass is another highlight. A fine melody; complex in structure and intervals perhaps, but that really is Robin's forte, and he handles the whole thing with

WANTED

I've got the following rare LPs (strict grading): Mike HERON—same (Casablanca NBLP 7186; ex+/ex+) Mike HERON—same (Casablanca NBLP 7186; ex-/ex-; promo-copy) and would like to sell them for serious bids. Trades are very welcome—I'm looking for I looked Up in original cover (see *beGLAD 10*, p17) or Incredible String Band in music shop cover or Wee Tam And The Big Huge as a double LP (UK cover) or Kip Of The Serenes by Dr. Strangely Strange (all in at least real ex/ex condition). Juergen Poessnecker, Schweigerstr. 8, 81541 Munich, Germany.

WANTED

Earthspan: anyone got a spare inner sleeve for the LP? Adrian Whittaker, 71a Colvestone Crescent, Dalston, London E8 2LJ.



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WANTED

(1) THE ISB FAMILY TREE—Someone out there must have a spare copy they're willing to part with?
(2) POOKA—Any of the Pooka singles/EPs/collaborations containing

non-album tracks (except Graham Robert Wood and Mean Girl). Contact David Kidman, 3 Margerison Crescent, Ilkley, West Yorkshire LS29 8QZ if you can help out.

PASS IT ON...

What you need to complete your collection of Bloomsbury memorabilia is an authentic *backstage pass!* This attractive item, as seen on the cover of this issue, features a unique colour photo of the lads, is sealed in clear plastic and comes with its own chain for wearing stylishly about the neck. Mark Anstey at Unique Gravity has a small stock of them, as worn by by the likes of Joe Boyd, Robert Plant and of course Robin and Mike themselves. £10 will get you one—if you're quick—in this never-to-be-repeated offer. Contact Mark at 196 Old Road, Brompton, Chesterfield S40 3QW.

both precision and strong feeling. Side One's closer is Mike's Dumb Kate, the only one on this side to feature the full band line-up. Whilst not strictly a jig it is an ideal vehicle for Robin's spirited fiddle-playing. It is also a concert recording, but though Kate is much more suited to a live feel, even here the production is not all it could be, with the vocals at times sounding cluttered and indistinct. It is a splendid track though, giving a perhaps necessary lift after the slow, reflective songs preceding it. An amusing tale of a "friendly" young lady who moves from San Diego to Nome, Alaska and keeps the local male populace happy through the winters ...*she used to serve tables down in the Last Post Grill Room / where they chewed on the beef with a lean and a hunted jaw.* A pity the words are not a little clearer, but Robin's excellent violin is of course the standout.

Ithkos

The whole of Side Two is given over to Ithkos, which lasts a full 19 minutes, one of the most ambitious and (in the purely musical sense) successful ventures the band undertook. One's overall view of this album will surely be coloured by whether one likes Ithkos or not. I love it, and thus I rate Hard Rope highly. The band only really stretch themselves and show the true potential of the new line-up on Ithkos. Although certain critics described the piece as "episodic", I never personally found this track disjointed—it flows well, and it is difficult at times to distinguish where sections begin and end (there are nine separate "pieces" listed on the album's inner sleeve). Though a very "modern"/prog-rock venture for its time, it does contain much of the old evocativeness and atmosphere in parts, as well as the sheer power and expression it gains from its predominantly rock content. I do however recall that the early version performed by the band at the Rainbow concert mentioned earlier on was much heavier (and less varied in musical content) throughout than this final recorded version.

The whole song is by Mike, but the opening instrumental passage, Sardis (Oud Tune) is by Robin. A fast, furious main tune and interplay with the orchestral section is very effective, and sets the Mediterranean/North African atmosphere. In the second part of the

passage, acoustic and electric guitars signal the song's forthcoming rock elements; Robin's whistles on top strengthen the "Greek Islands" feel too. Graham Forbes' biting lead guitar heralds the second section, Lesbos—Dawn, with Mike on organ and acoustic, bass and drums behind demonstrating the gradual build-up of texture and strength to lead into the first vocal from Malcolm, singing of Ithkos, a merchant visiting the isle of Lesbos. Robin's electric violin—perfect here in a rock context—duets well with Graham's guitar, switching quickly to organ/acoustic guitar backing on the massed vocal chorus lines. In the third section, Lesbos—Evening, the bass/drums/guitars elements strengthen and quicken the tempo as the vocal breaks off into a staggeringly effective violin solo from Robin, again showing how versatile he was on this instrument, playing here in a totally rock vein.

A short pause leads us on to the fourth passage, Aegean Sea, where Mike takes lead vocal for the first time. This is a gentle, flowing section perfectly conjuring up the tranquil blue-green Aegean; Robin accompanies on mandolin/backing vocal/acoustic then flute as the track builds before the string orchestra and rhythm section bring in section 5, Dreams Fade, with Malcolm on vocal. Section 6, Port Of Sybaris (co-written with Graham Forbes) begins with Robin's pounding congas, with the drums and guitar making for a distinctly rhythmic passage. Malcolm again takes the vocal. A short gap leads to the second part of this section, beginning with a Mike Heron piano solo edging into a duet between the string section and the lead/bass/drums element of the band. This passage builds so much in intensity that the sheer force and compelling nature of the music is quite breathtaking by the end—one of the most successful and distinctive passages of music in the ISB discography, and a pointer to how they had completely mastered the rock idiom. Another small pause moves us into a stunning straight electric rock track, Go Down Sybaris, with pulsating lead guitar from Graham, Malcolm's strongest ever vocalising, and a very lively rhythm section. A great piece of music, which again showed that the new line-up could rock as well as any electric band of the time. Congas and acoustics bring in the final pieces,

Huntress and Hold My Gaze, where Mike takes the main vocal, with his piano, the strings and lead guitar behind. One of the most beautiful, romantic parts of the whole cut, Mike sings of Ithkos' love for Hippolyta. An utterly superb melody here; this passage is possibly the finest in the whole of this excellent track, as the vocal edges away into the stirring coda where woodwinds and strings, backed with the bass and drums, close Ithkos in the most uplifting fashion imaginable. A classic track, which would surely have gone down in rock music annals as one of its finest examples, had this album gained its deserved recognition. It is sad that an unfortunate set of circumstances dictated that Hard Rope should not reach a wider audience, and I will never understand why media response to the LP was so mixed.

Hard Rope was to prove to be the final String Band release and a better, more wide-ranging "swansong" it would be difficult to imagine.

Born In Your Town

A couple of years on from the split I took the decision to try and write a biography of the band and I completed a revised version of this in the late '70s entitled "A Decade Of Delight". I was never able to find a publisher who felt it was a viable proposition. To my mind, the very existence, and excellence, of *beGLAD* itself removes the necessity for a biography. The sheer amount of information, detail, background, varied opinion etc. that has surfaced to date (as well as those yet to appear!) far outweighs that which could be encompassed in a book. There are quite a number of facts about the band that have come to light in *beGLAD* which even I was unaware of—possibly most amazing of all being that Rose was born in my old home-town of Otley in Yorkshire. To close this Hard Rope retrospective, I want to echo Raymond's sentiments in String Strife (*beGLAD 10*). I met and interviewed both Mike and (especially) Robin on many occasions in the late '70s. Despite the fact that both were trying hard to establish their new, individual musics, and might well have resented someone coming along and raking over old coals, neither ever referred to the other in any terms other than the greatest of respect, admiration and obvious affection.

**A LOAD OF
OLD (HARD) ROPE
OR
A PIECE OF
FINE SILK(EN TWINE)?**

*A reappraisal by
Shane Pope*

Hard Rope And Silken Twine, the final String Band album: a couple of live tracks, nineteen-odd minutes of Ithkos—all a bit of a hotch-potch, thrown together as the band fell apart? At least, that's what I first thought.

I only bought the album two or three years ago, when I found it lurking in the sale CDs in Southampton's Virgin Megastore for £4.99. First impressions weren't that good—sure Cold Days Of February was wonderful, but most of it left little impression, and I hated Ithkos! Since then I'd only played it a couple of times, so I have to admit that the idea of writing an article about it didn't really fill me with enthusiasm when Adrian first mentioned it. However, I thought I'd give it the benefit of the doubt, so dug it out again and listened to it continuously (the wonders of having a workstation with CD-ROM drive on my desk at work). And guess what? It wasn't half as bad as I first thought—true, it was no Wee Tam And The Big Huge, but I actually got to quite like it!

So, with all that out the way, let's pick the album up again and have another look. The sleeve design has never been one that particularly enamoured me to it: the front features a rather Tolkienesque study of a fairy, surrounded by assorted forest creatures, whilst the rear shows two snakes, one in the process of swallowing the tail of the other, two birds and a spider. The execution of the piece is certainly fine, and anything could be considered an improvement on the horrendous No Ruinous Feud cover, but is it really "String"? Worse still, on the CD reissue at least, the lyrics and instrumental credits are omitted; consequently, any such mentions that follow are purely guesses on my part.

The album opens with Mike's Maker Of Islands, a piano-led piece much in the singer-songwriter mode of say James Taylor or Joni Mitchell. It's a pleasant enough song, with echoes of some of the tracks on his latest Where The Mystics Swim album, though for some reason it's never left a great impression on me. The orchestration spoils it: I find it just a bit too much in the front and intrusive; a simpler arrangement, maybe just Mike at

the piano would have been preferable. Robin's Cold Days Of February (or Cold February as the sleeve calls it) is the obvious stand-out track on the album, making it worth the admission price on its own. Recorded live at Oxford using Island's Mobile, it's a beautifully melancholic piece about the futility of war—as such, maybe it could be seen as something of a companion piece to the also wondrous Darling Belle from the Liquid Acrobat... LP. Instrumentation is suitably sparse, an organ provides an unobtrusive minor backing, whilst a lovely fluid whistle weaves around a moving solo melody which almost seems, for a split-second, like it is going to break into the tune of Koeoeaddi There ("and there was a tent you played cards with the soldiers in"—or is it just me?). A surprisingly and uncharacteristically direct song, lyrically, then, but certainly among his best.

Next up is Malcolm's Glancing Love. Now I'd always loved Malc's songs on the previous String Band LPs, he's got a wonderfully distinctive singing and writing style (which is just as good today, as seen on his Nothing Strange album from a while back), and this is a typical example. A gently strummed acoustic guitar and organ that threatens to cross-over into Procol Harum territory at times (frightening thought!), plus suitable little fills from a second guitar and interjections from what I assume must be a clarinet (*alto flute*, *Shane—the People who Know*), all add up to a nice little song.

Meanwhile Dreams Of No Return is another fine RW song, which harks back, musically at least, to the glory days of Hangman's or Wee Tam And The Big Huge. Certainly it could have sat fairly comfortably within either of those magnificent collections, with Mike thankfully digging out his sitar again for a welcomed final return. The title is fairly self-explanatory and the song seems to suggest a comparison between the way a past dream could not be revisited (the new Dream Journals CD informs us that Robin kept a dream diary throughout his ISB days) and a lost love—or it could possibly be seen as an epitaph to the String Band in its final days, as although it could be considered as musically retrospective, lyrically it is far more world-weary than the child-like wonder of times past. Maybe Robin had just had enough of it all?

Some light-hearted relief is provided by Mike's Dumb Kate, the half-witted red-neck cousin of Log Cabin Home In The

Sky and Bad Sadie Lee maybe. It's a fun, fiddle-led tune, though the phrase "dumb as she is" was probably not the best choice as it ends up sounding more like something much cruder! Does anyone know if more of the same gig survives on tape in the Island vaults? Could be ripe for issue on CD...

Well, I can't put it off any longer, it's now that we have to deal with Ithkos. I've already stated my dislike of it on first hearing: it's too overblown, pompous even, and is the only time that I feel one of the very long String Band songs outstays its welcome. The overdone middle-eastern sounding orchestration at the start, lyrics about ancient Greece that veer dangerously towards the pretensions of the "progressive" rock of the time, the distorted rock guitars—"Well I'm as free as a bird, babe, and this bird is gonna fly...". You can almost hear that ten minute drum solo beckoning. In retrospect, maybe it's not quite so bad. Robin throws in some rather tasty rock fiddling, the gentler middle section is actually quite pleasant, the fuzzed-up Stones-style rockin' boogie bit towards the end is fun (maybe the Skynyrd weren't that bad after all—well, apart from those interminable drum solos!) and the final section is also far from unpleasant. So, maybe I was wrong about Ithkos after all. Yes, those ingredients that first turned me against it are still there, it's just unfortunate that they're all mainly at the start, which tends to put me off immediately, so I'm prone to switch it off before reaching the better bits. Maybe it should have been trimmed down a little, or split into a couple of shorter sections, but this is what Mike intended, those were the times, and although, twenty-odd years on, it is easy to criticise what was, and ponder what might have been, perhaps it is best left as is.

So there it is, the end of an era: save for their forgettable appearance on the Scientology Live LP, and Robin's presence on a couple of tracks on Mike Heron's Reputation, the Incredible String Band were no more. Is this a fitting epitaph, then? Well, a reserved yes, I think. Revisiting it again, there's one track which is probably as good as anything Robin has done previously or since, a couple of other great songs, others that are at least fun, and really only a small section of one track that I don't like. If you too have dismissed it in the past, dig it out again, play it to pieces—you may find that you are pleasantly surprised...



THE WORLD ACCORDING TO ITHKOS

SYBARIS A prosperous port founded in 720 BC by Achaian Greeks from the North Peloponnese. Destroyed by the rival city of Croton in 510 BC. Famous for its luxurious lifestyle and invention of the chamber pot. No traces survive, though "Crotona" is still on the map. **LESBOS** The largest island of the East Aegean, colonised by Aeolian Greeks from Thessaly. Homeland of the lyric poets Terpander and Sappho. **SARDIS** Chief city of Lydia in Asia Minor. An important port on the navigable lower reaches of the Hermos, until progressive silting of the river left it high and dry. Capital of Croesus, last king of the Lydians, who was proverbial for his vast wealth. 90 kilometres east of Izmir, it's now known as "Sart" in Turkish.

Purposeful Poetic Licence

*Stephen Robbins
gives us the lowdown on the real
Sardis, Sybaris and Lesbos*

I have long been fascinated by Ithkos, the setting of the work amidst the Aegean sea and its landscape of a classical and a mythological Greece, the so called birthplace of European civilisation. I was struck with the idea of a song about an imaginary Greek person setting out on a voyage of spiritual discovery as well as engaged in the pursuit of trade, and meeting his beloved in a place he supposedly hates. In a letter to the

author in 1985 Heron stated "I know about Ithkos—someone else pointed out its inaccuracy: it would be cool to say it was purposeful poetic licence." I enjoy the song and Mike must have had a good time writing it, even though it must have been stressful and hope that he isn't too pissed off at having it pulled apart.

The song has many parts to it, opening up with Robin's contribution played on the oud, therefore giving it a Middle Eastern feeling. One may have thought that a song about the Aegean Sea would have been the ideal opportunity for Robin to have used a bouzouki, as the song is essentially about a Greek person

visiting Greek places. The idea of using a Middle Eastern instrument is quite a novel idea and its use is quite revealing, as we shall see through the course of this essay.

I sailed out from...Miletus?

After this musical passage we are introduced to Ithkos, but here we hit our first problem with the line "I sailed out from Sardis...". This is well nigh impossible (*experts differ: see above—Ed*) as Sardis is several hundred miles from the sea in mainland Turkey. It may have been more appropriate to the song if the lyric had been "I sailed out from Miletus...", but

then Ithkos would have been a Milesian, thereby opening up a can of worms for mytho freaks. As it is, Ithkos could be either a Lydian or a Greek. He may well have wanted to have sailed from Sardis on the back of a camel, as Sardis was on a main trading route and was at the centre of the Lydian empire. There was some Greek influence, as it traded with the fringes of the Grecian empire and even waged war upon the Milesians in order to gain access to the sea.

The Greek influence upon Sardis could be seen as enormous. Greek gods were worshipped here but not, as Mike would have it, Aphrodite the goddess of love. The deity worshipped here was Artemis, a daughter of Zeus, the Goddess of Hunting and of Animals. Artemis is the Goddess whose body is covered with breasts. The temple dedicated to her was the fourth largest in the Greek world. One has to remember that Sardis was the centre of the Lydian empire which, through its army, controlled Asia Minor. It is claimed that coins were invented as a form of currency in this city. Prostitution was rife: all young girls became prostitutes in order to earn enough money to pay the wedding dowry. It is also the city where the legend of the Golden Fleece originated. The Lydians used to put sheep fleeces into the local streams that were fed from nearby mountains, and the gold used to accumulate in the fleeces. It is from this gold that the currency later originated.

The city and the Lydian empire went through many changes. It was captured by the Persians under the command of Cyrus I who started to sack the city and (supposedly on reflection) stopped and then killed Croesus the Lydian king. It became an outpost of the Persian empire in 492 BC, was lost again to Alexander some years later, and in 100 BC became part of the Roman Empire. Due to this last twist of fate it eventually became a Christian city, was one of the Seven Churches of Asia Minor and gets mentioned in the Book of Revelations. The commentator acting as a mouth-piece for the church/Jesus claims that the church and its followers in Sardis are backsliders (Rev. 2 vs. 4-7).

As for Lesbos, this is a very important place for lots of reasons. The island was originally thought to have been settled by the inhabitants of Troy after that city had been sacked, and after a fairly untroubled time, it was then settled by Greeks from the mainland. It was during this time that the island prospered through trade; the wealth this generated enabled the outpouring of poetical works. So our sailor-cum-trader/merchant arrives from Sardis, feels somewhat tempted but tears himself away from all the love and affection or, as I see it, the patronage of the arts by

rich traders and governor. This is almost the story of Sybaris but to have this outpouring on an island is containable—and Lesbos may have been treated as a city state, so people were far more tolerant.

Pale Sybaris, I bear you great scorn

As Ithkos travels to his next destination, he feels the pull of the Aegean, and his Greek identity comes to the fore as he travels to another part of the Greek empire. It is to Sybaris that he goes; sadly he feels very negative about the whole thing and about the people etc. The city state of Sybaris was situated on the gulf of Taranto, Italy (see map). The city was founded in the year 510 BC by Greeks who left an overpopulated Greece; the area in which they settled was very fertile and this itself may have led to a few problems. There were a number of Greek colonies in Southern Italy, most of which were founded around the same time. The River Croton nourished the land, which was prone to flooding, and eventually led to the end of the city.

Sybaris' wealth flowed from its use of the agricultural land but it also had silver mines; there was a port as well, which meant that trading could take place with the other parts of the Greek empire, including Lesbos. The wealth meant that other places within the southern Italian area became increasingly jealous; one of these places was the city state of Croton whose inhabitants were followers of Pythagoras, whom some regarded as a philosophical mathematician and others as a magician. Whatever he may have been, his followers were not as clever and could be regarded as backward and never willing to accept change. War was waged upon Sybaris, and the city itself was destroyed; another city sprang up nearby but this was not as successful as the first and fell into decline.

Legend has it that the inhabitants of Croton diverted the river so that Sybaris was flooded. This is true to some extent. As the area was prone to flooding and landslides, the river did flood in such a way that it altered its course; this brought such a weight of silt and other debris down with it that the city became covered to a depth of some 10 metres.

This fact was discovered only during the last twenty years by archaeologists trying to determine exactly where the city lay. Our traveller has some very unsatisfactory things to say about what may have been a very beautiful city, and whose name has given the English language "Sybarite" and "Sybaritic", meaning a luxurious and voluptuous person from the city of Sybaris. Ithkos seems to embody these feelings of

hostility, but as I have stated, this view is not a true picture of why Sybaris was a wealthy place. Sadly Mike has gone along with this idea.

A warrior race of athletic killer women

Ithkos comes to Sybaris to meet Hippolyta, who is the love of his life. In one verse about Hippolyta Heron says that she is a huntress—this is in effect true, as her namesake, Hippolyta, is the Queen of the Amazons. The belief in a warrior race of athletic killer women was prevalent in Greece at around the time these myths were being created. It is true that there were women in the steppes of Russia who were indeed warriors and were equal with men—some were also shamans. A small element of this managed to work itself into the Greek psyche through travellers' tales.

There are other reasons why tales of the Amazon women existed. The Greek author Herodotus embellished these tales purposely to upset Greek male sensibilities; in other words it challenged their male pride. Greeks were intrigued as to whether or not these super-masculine women existed, and so the Amazons entered the world of the classical myths. It is very difficult to differentiate between Hippolyta the Amazon Queen and the woman in Ithkos' life. The song itself does not distinguish between them and eventually they seem to combine into the one person.

Heron has admitted a certain amount of poetic licence, so one can forgive him for toying around with the Amazonian myth and trying to turn a mythical and poetical figure into a human capable of loving feelings towards our central character. In some ways Mike has done what Herodotus had done in telling a story.

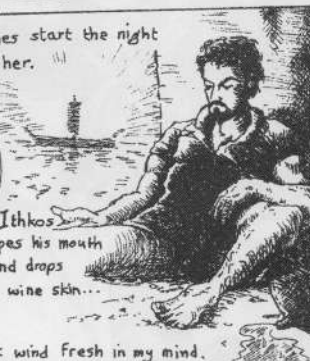
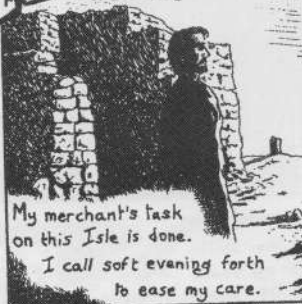
Herodotus was a noted historian who travelled throughout the Greek empire and seemed to excel in telling stories to a people who were extremely gullible, and who loved to be shocked by fanciful tall stories. In some ways we are very similar, in that we love to be shocked by some horror story and are equally enthralled by Robin's wondrous stories. **In this case it is Mike that has donned the robe of a master story teller...**

Thanks for help with this article go to the Library staff, University College of Wales, Lampeter, Grahame Hood, Bill Allison, Klaus Gerards and Mike Heron.

The Ithkos strip over there is by Allan Frewin.



ITHKOS





Gotta come right out and say it
pale Sybaris, I bear you great scorn.

You know, I'm talking about
your fluted pillars
and your muted lives...

