

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE  
INCREDIBLE STRING BAND

# The Pals of St Mary's

—AT THE EDINBURGH  
REUNION

The Licorice enigma  
'U'  
REVISITED



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16  
Summer 2000



*onstage and backstage at  
St Mary's Cathedral,  
Edinburgh, for the  
"unofficial" ISB  
reunion; with the band,  
Billy C and Bert J  
(report and more photos  
on page 6)*

Summer 2000  
**16**  
**beGLAD**

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# GLADitorial

**F**LICK OPEN ALMOST ANY SERIOUS MUSIC periodical this summer, and you'll see the name of the Incredible String Band blazoned boldly on ads for Cropredy, Bloomsbury, The Fling... Was there ever more gladsome sight, O true believers? Twenty-six years after the String brand disappeared from the market, Robin, Mike—and Clive—are back in harness, with the promise of classic ISB songs from all periods buffed up to a new sheen, as well as newer material from each man's post-String repertoire. As regular *beGLAD* readers are aware, this is no opportunistic cash-in but the culmination of a delicate and unhurried process stretching back to the Robin 'n' Mike concerts in 1997. We've watched, and we've wondered: would it ever get this far? And now, in the foothills of the new millennium, we find that the circle really is unbroken. Things can't be the same as they were then, of course. The whole String thing happened when we were all, in a sense, different people. For us, as well as for Robin, Mike and Clive, the ISB has to be seen in a much wider context, and that's no bad thing. Go to the gigs and acknowledge the passing of time, the dying of some dreams and the fruition of others. Savour the past, by all means—that's the *raison d'être* of this magazine, after all—but celebrate the present, and drink it to the dregs. We're all still here...

You'll notice with this issue that *beGLAD* has had a bit of a millennial makeover. Stung by Bill Allison's critique of the layout last issue, we've tried to give the mag a cleaner and more coherent look while still recklessly stuffing more in than 48 pages can decently accommodate. Any improvement? Give us your views, on this and any other aspect of the mag. **R.G.**

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# Pieces STRING

It all comes round again...

IT'S OFFICIAL! THE INCREDIBLE STRING Band walk the land once more. After 1997's Robin 'n' Mike concerts and last year's Robin-Clive-Mike get-together, our heroes have stopped pussyfooting over names and have nailed their colours to the Incredible mast at long last. August sees five concerts by the line-up that first assembled for the Edinburgh Millennial Hogmanay last December: Robin, Mike, Clive, Bina Williamson and Lawson Dando. The first of these is on Wednesday 9 August at St Donat's, Swansea—a sort of low-key warm-up gig, with a 200 capacity. The following day, Thursday 10 August, takes them to Fairport's annual Cropredy beano (see poster, right). Then two nights at London's Bloomsbury Theatre (17 & 18 August) and a shorter, one-hour, appearance on Sunday 20 August as part of The Fling, a Scottish festival staged in the sumptuous grounds of Lennoxlove House, the Duke of Hamilton's palatial residence to the north of Edinburgh. Our mole in the Pig's Whisker camp reports that there will be a generous measure of classic String songs in the programme, as well as items of more recent vintage. We're also told to expect a stylistically more eclectic approach to the material than was evident at Edinburgh.

Tickets and info:

**St Donat's**—box office 0144 679 9100

**Cropredy**—thurs/fri/sat £46.00; from Woodworm Records, PO Box 37, Banbury, Oxon OX16 8YN. fax: 01869 337142 [www.fairportconvention.co.uk](http://www.fairportconvention.co.uk)

**Bloomsbury**—£16.50; box office 020 7388 8822 [www.ac.uk/BloomsburyTheatre](http://www.ac.uk/BloomsburyTheatre)

**The Fling**—£30 per day; box office 0870 739 6677

There's already been considerable press interest in the reunion. We can expect a substantial piece by Andy Gill in *The Independent* or its Sunday equivalent sometime in late July, and *Mojo* are promising one of their mighty mega-features: 8000 words by Editor-in-Chief and devoted Stringhead Mark Ellen, a tour of the band's recorded output by award-winning pop music analyst Ian MacDonald (*Revolution In The Head*), and lots of vintage photos. Slated for the August issue (out July 15).

## Going Global

The ISB's legendary film documentary *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending* is attracting interest in some unexpected places. Peter Neal, who made the film in 1968-9, has been doing a bit of globe-trotting recently: he's shown it in Bulgaria and takes it in July to South Africa—areas not normally considered hotbeds of String fervour. And plans are currently being laid for it to be shown as part of a film festival in Tinseltown itself, Hollywood Calif. The festival in question is run under the aegis of American Cinematheque, which is the Stateside equivalent of the National Film Theatre. Organiser Martin Lewis, who used to work with the late and much-missed Derek Taylor, is intending to show *Be Glad* and *Reriving The Knot* together, alongside other vintage rock celluloid. The Cinematique Festival will take place on 12 July at Grauman's

Egyptian Theatre, Hollywood. Info line (001) 323 466 3456—press 5 # [www.ModsAndRockers.com](http://www.ModsAndRockers.com) Talks, meanwhile, are under way to release *Be Glad* on DVD, and Weinerworld have made an approach to license it for UK re-release on video.

## The old time religion

Robin's new settings of Biblical texts will be premiered at Llandaff Cathedral near Cardiff in what promises to be a memorable event. No Gamelan orchestra (as tentatively hinted last issue), but Robin will be bringing in four dancers, choreographed by Geoff Moore, and using pre-recorded music to augment his live performance, and promises a major new spoken word piece "linking the sacred space of theatre with the sacred space of Llandaff Cathedral" as well as settings of the Psalms in English and Latin. The evening will be entitled *Carmina: Sacred Songs Of The Ancient World*, and takes place on 21 October. Tickets are £10.50 and available from Pig's Whisker, PO Box 114, Chesterfield, Derbyshire S40 3YU [info@pigswisker.com](mailto:info@pigswisker.com)

## The latest batch

Pig's Whisker Music continue their hectic schedule of CD releases with the album Robin has just recorded for the Lothian Bus Company as a words-and-music commentary for their scenic tour of Edinburgh. Entitled *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh*, it draws together some of the celebrated novelist's writings on Auld Reekie, tastily topped off with traditional and original music from Robin and Lawson. Review on page 16. Mike's *Mystics* album is also out on PW's Unique Gravity sibling label, extensively remixed by Lawson for US release—review page 15—and Robin's Psalms album, titled *Carmina* (see previous item), will be on sale at the live show in October, and thereafter of course via Pig's Whisker mail order; you all know the procedure.

Meanwhile, both the *Bloomsbury 1997* and *Chelsea Sessions* CDs are being reissued to tie in with this summer's full-blown String reunion. Both have been repackaged, with *Chelsea Sessions* further enhanced by a never-before-heard Robin and Mike track allegedly recorded during the *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* sessions in 1968. Running to almost eight minutes in length, it's a medley of Robin's otherwise unrecorded *All Too Much For Me* and a couple of Blind Willie Johnson songs they often performed in concert: *Take Your Burden To The Lord* and *Let It Shine On*. *beGLAD*'s head of reviews Jonas Dalrymple declares: "An absolute stouter, as they say in Glasgow and points north. On *All Too Much*, Robin draws more out of the non-descript lyric than you'd ever believe was in there, and even throws in a couple of whistling breaks. Mike lends his voice and handclaps to the Blind Willie items, injecting a raw blues feel while Robin winds the melody line into Eastern curlicues. Live in the studio, and with all the passion of a concert performance. Hear it and be there."



Vashti circa 1967—NOT the new Marianne Faithfull

## Bunyan's progress

Former Glen Row resident and Sixties recording artist Vashti Bunyan is back in the public spotlight. Her legendary Joe Boyd-produced 1970 album *Just Another Diamond Day*, a thing of timeless, limpid loveliness, received a glowing page-long tribute in April's *Mojo* (in the spot marked Buried Treasure—The Great Albums That Time Forgot). "One of the most fragile, beautiful and unique records you will ever hear", sighed *Mojo*'s man Bob Stanley. Vashti, now based in Edinburgh, has been toiling for several years to secure a CD reissue for this ultra-rare artefact (pristine copies attract four-figure sums on the collector's market), and has finally set it up for release this July on Spinney 001 CD. It will also include four bonus tracks, one an *ur*-version of the closing song on the original vinyl, and three from her earlier incarnation as an Andrew Oldham protégée. Given the Oldham connection, she was inevitably dubbed "the new Marianne Faithfull", and once put Mick Jagger in a sulky by suggesting on television that she wrote better songs than he did. (She meant songs that were suitable for her style of performance, which was unquestionably true.) She wrote the *Diamond Day* songs during a year-long pilgrimage (yes, she is descended from John Bunyan) from London to the Hebrides in a horse-drawn caravan, before moving to Glen Row to bring up her three sons. Sales of the album, which featured Robin on three tracks, were infinitesimal, which guaranteed its rarity value. Remarkably for someone with such a modest profile in the music press, she appeared in three films: the Swinging-London documentary *Tonite Let's All Make Love In London*, and two television films, *One Pair Of Eyes* and *Where Have All The Flowers Gone?* (in the latter alongside Jerry Rubin and Timothy Leary!). *beGLAD* is hoping to set up an interview with Vashti—who is still in contact with Robin and Mike and who was present at the Edinburgh ISB Millennial reunion—for the next issue.

## Dylanology

As reported last issue, Dylan Thomas has raised his irascible Welsh head again in the world of Williamson. Robin has been revisiting the Bard of Laugharne, digging out some of his *Prospect Of The Sea* settings of Thomas' verse as well as crafting new ones, for a ground-breaking CD on the esoteric jazz label ECM. One of the German-based label's movers and shakers, Steve Lake, is a long-time fan of Robin and the ISB (hoarier readers might remember his byline in the *Melody Maker*, for he which wrote in the early and mid Seventies). Between them, Steve and Robin agreed on a programme focusing on "the Bardic continuum", concentrating on DT but also drawing in other Welsh poets such as Henry Vaughan, Idris Davies and Dafydd ap Gwilym—and leavening the mixture with some songs from the Williamson

### ELLEN GREHAN'S VIEW



**O**n a Sunday morning between darkness and dawn, one hundred-and-odd young people whose ages ranged between 16 and 70, sat around in a room high above Glasgow, and sang old songs.

They sang of rebellions and young men killed for the cause. Protest songs against bombs and wars. Fishing songs, farming songs, and songs of love. And there were a few who didn't sing at all, being too busy kissing in a corner.

There is a whole scene going every Sunday morning in Scotland's only all-night folk-song club, at 134 Sauchiehall Street, Glasgow.

#### A surprise

It is called the Incredible Folk Song Club, and incredible it is. It opened up just a few weeks ago under the ownership-management of 23-year-old Ian Ferguson, who wondered what angle he could give the club that would make it different from the rest, and figured that the all-night stretch was different from the rest and better than most.

So, his club—which is reached from street level by the most insane lift you ever stepped into—opens at ten, Saturday night, closes at six, Sunday morning.

In the eight hours between, folk enthusiasts can hear songs from home-based singers such as Hamish Imlach, Mark McGinn, and from London-based Scotsmen such as Alex Campbell and Bert Jansch.

They can drink, soft stuff only, though—Cokes and coffee. And eat, sandwiches early in the morning, egg rolls for breakfast. And generally just lounge around, and enjoy themselves.

Enjoy themselves they obviously did.

#### Needs stamina

On stage were the Brian McCollum Folk Music group from Newry in Ireland, who belted out I.R.A. rebel songs about the Easter rising. Joining in the choruses were kids who had never been nearer Ireland than the terracing at Parkhead.

These kids, who very well might have got marked at hearing the same songs sung outside of the club, were joining in with a vigour that rattled the rafters.

A pleasant surprise. The audience at the Incredible are, in the main, youngsters not more than 20 who have started coming there just because it's about the only place open until all hours at the week-end, and who have kept coming because they have taken a strong fancy to the easy-going, sing-along, come-all-ye atmosphere it successfully creates.

I haven't the stamina of those who stuck it out until dawn. I quit around two o'clock when things were at their liveliest and young Ian Ferguson was claiming that it was still just the shank of the evening.

From the sight of all those button-bright eyes and eager faces, an awful lot of kids were inclined to agree with him.

# Daily Record

MON. APR. 18 1966

4p SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER No. 21,985

The rare photos of Mike, Robin and Clive that we featured last issue were originally taken to accompany this article in the *Scottish Daily Record*, though in the event they were never used. As the date on the masthead testifies, the Incredible Folk Club came into being at least a year earlier than Clive remembered in issue 14: so that settles that! Ellen Grehan is now 92 and lives in a nursing home in Milngavie.

songbook that relate in one way or another to the theme. Steve travelled over to Cardiff for the recording sessions and professed himself uncommonly delighted with the outcome, and kindly contributed a report on the project to *beGLAD*—see page 32. The album will be titled *The Seed-At-Zero* after an early Thomas poem, and is set for European release in the autumn—though there may be advance copies on sale at the Bloomsbury shows in August. We hear that ECM's US office are so a-quiver with excitement over it that they're inking it in as a priority release Stateside for Spring 2001.

#### Old pals act

Having established the precedent via his occasional collaborations with John Renbourn, Robin will be linking up with another guitar legend for an autumn tour of the UK. Martin Carthy and Robin have been pals for many a year, and toured together in the States in the early Eighties; Martin has apparently been eager to reprise the combination ever since. The format will be similar to the Renbourn gigs, a mixture of solo and duet pieces. Nigel Morton at the Concert Clinic is currently filling in the dates; the windows of opportunity, we hear, are 11-16 September and 13-19 November. At a roosty venue near you...

#### October in June

Word reaches us that Bert Jansch has recorded a version of Robin's October Song for inclusion on his forthcoming CD, which is expected to hit the shops around June, to tie in with the publication of his long-awaited biography by Colin Harper. Channel Four will be showing a documentary on the great man sometime in the same month, as part of a themed evening devoted to eminent musos. We haven't got a date for the broadcast yet, but it'll apparently be shown at 1 a.m. Video programmers at the ready! There should be some interview footage of Robin and Clive.

#### Another look

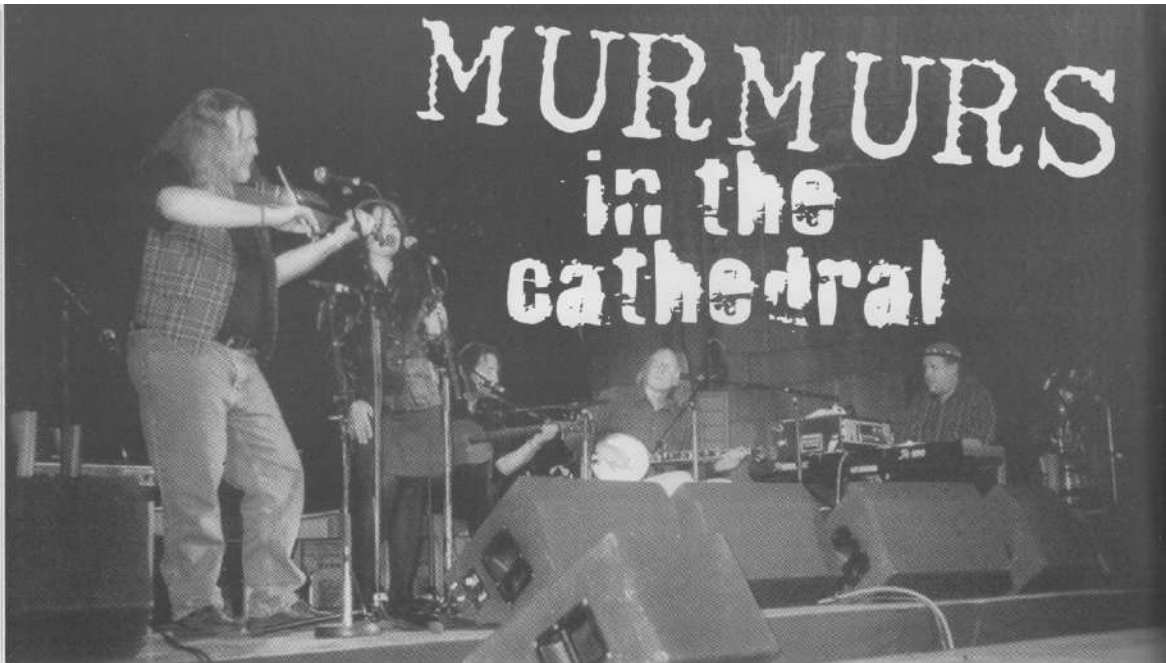
Ex-*beGLAD* supremo Andy Roberts e-mails us to announce "I still have a small stock of the following videos: *I Looked On* (ISB compilation), Jan 1994 ISB Convention and Oct 1994 ISB Convention. Anyone interested, please contact me at: 38 Highmoor Crescent, Clifton, Brighouse, W Yorks HD6 4HZ. [brigantia@compuserve.com](mailto:brigantia@compuserve.com)"



Joe Boyd was recently listed in the BBC Radio Two Folk Awards for outstanding services to folk music over the last two centuries... After a gap of at least 26 years, the ISB were heard on John Peel's radio show in April (more of this on the Letters page)... The thriving new Scottish indie band Hefner cite the ISB as an influence... Robin is currently recommending Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* novels to all and sundry... In February's *Mojo*, the ISB were listed among "Mojo's 100 Cult Heroes"... An expanded and updated edition of Ken Brooks' ISB book *Gently Tender* is now available for £9.99 from Agenda, Units 1&2, Ludgershall Business Park, Ludgershall, Hants SP11 9RN... Hearing that the annual Traquair Fair, held near Glen Row, was trying to book the ISB this summer, reader Mick Fitzgerald tried a net search for more info: "I looked up [www.traquair.co](http://www.traquair.co) by mistake," says Mick, "and found this electronics firm in the US. Nothing strange so far, but guess what their main line of products is called. You got it—the *Heron*"... Congratulations to the winner of last issue's cover competition. Adrian's managed to forget his/her name, but assures us the prize was dispatched... Continuity Corner—anybody noticed that, on the *Just Like The Ivy* cover, Clive appears to be wearing the same shirt he wore on the *First Album* in 1966?



You may not be able to see clearly from the photo reproduced here, but locomotive 90020, which plies the East coast main line, has been dignified with the name of—Sir Michael Heron! Spotted and snapped by a *beGLAD* reader on his way to the Edinburgh New Year gig...



**It was billed as an Incredible reunion  
—but were they just Stringing us along?**

**Raymond Greenoaken** samples some mixed emotions  
in the wake of the Hogmanay get-together.

**WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

**I**T LOOKED LIKE THE PERFECT WAY to welcome the new Millennium: Robin, Mike and Clive reunited on stage on their old Edinburgh stamping ground. For many of us, it will have been the first opportunity to see the original three-piece ISB, who dispersed to the four winds before we were out of short pants or ankle socks. Who could resist such a lure? Every seat in St Mary's Cathedral had been snapped up weeks before. There were murmurs of dissatisfaction, however, as the evening wore on. The venue was freezing. The sound was too boomy. More to the point, for some of those present, the music just wasn't hitting the g-spot. Had something gone awry?

The publicity for the event had transmitted a slightly confusing message. "The Incredible String Band in concert" it proclaimed, before qualifying this with the sub-heading "Robin Williamson, Clive Palmer, Mike Heron and friends". Well, we knew that Bina and Lawson would be up there adding backing vox and keyboards as they had on the Robin 'n' Clive tour; and the word on the street was that the likes of Archie Fisher, Bert Jansch and Billy Connolly would be punctuating proceedings and maybe even sitting in with the band for a few numbers. We'd also heard that the nucleus of the show would be the Robin 'n' Clive tour repertoire—a toothsome tessellation of trad and music-hall items given the unique Williamson/Palmer stamp—, and that Mike would be taking the stage for the second half, which would accordingly feature juicy items from the early ISB songbook. An appetising prospect, certainly—but (and here's the rub) could such a diverse programme legitimately bear the Incredible String brand?

Initially, it seemed, the answer was no. None of the participants had intended the ISB banner to fly over St Mary's that foggy midwinter's evening. The event, after all, was originally conceived as a celebration of the Incredible Folk Club days

rather than as a trawl through the ISB back catalogue. The organisers, however, apparently demurred, and added the "Incredible" tag without consulting anyone in the home camp. From a commercial point of view, the decision, if ethically dubious, was undoubtedly shrewd: the "sold out" notices told their own tale.

Presented with a fait accompli—you're the String Band, lads, whether you like it or not—, it was then decided to bring Mike in for the whole concert, though there was no opportunity to integrate him into every song. (In any case, time constraints on the night had made it impossible to have an interval.) It was an unsatisfactory compromise, as all compromises are—but still a recipe for a great evening's music and merriment.

Nevertheless, having gone with the flow, Robin, Mike and Clive laid themselves open to charges of cynical marketing manoeuvres. No matter that none of them had wanted to present themselves on this occasion as the ISB; the ISB was what the audience expected to see.

It's easy to understand why they'd wanted to keep the String trappings to a decent minimum. After all, everybody has a different idea of what the Incredible String Band actually is, or was. The Robin, Clive and Mike line-up undoubtedly qualifies by dint of historical precedence. But wasn't it the duo of Robin and Mike that took the ISB into the heart of the counter-culture and produced the classic *5000 Spirits-Hangman's-Tam & Huge* album sequence? There again, who can imagine the String Band without Rose and Likky...or Malcolm? There are even those Johnny-come-latelies who would contend that the ISB without Forbesy's fiery fretwork and Gilston's kit-whipping is some twee folksy imposture. You begin to see the problems inherent in presenting just one of those incarnations as The Incredible String Band.

It was inevitable, therefore, that everyone who saw the three numinous words on the posters and beat a path thence brought along their own sets of hopes and expectations. They'll do Maya, obviously. And Log Cabin. First Girl... You Get Brighter, of course. Ducks On A Pond, maybe... Ithkos?—Well, why not? And it'll be great to hear the sitar again... The *Living Tradition's* reviewer probably spoke for many when he wrote: "When I stood in the dark and damp outside the cathedral I knew that a third of a century had passed, but my faith told me I was about to experience something very special and important."

### THE BACKLASH BEGINS HERE...

WELL, AS VOLTAIRE ONCE SAID, "faith consists in believing when it is beyond the power of reason to believe" (though he said it in French, of course), and it's perhaps hardly reasonable to expect that an entity as polymorphous and multivarious as the ISB could be adequately represented in a two-hour concert three decades along the road. Notwithstanding this, *LT's* scrivener was deeply disappointed with what was served up on the night, so much so that he was impelled to compose his review in the form of an open letter to Robin (whom he seemed to think had masterminded the whole thing). "You let us down," he pouted, lamenting the "disastrous choice of songs", Robin's old jokes, Mike's lack of engagement—why wasn't he on all the songs?—and, by implication, Clive's very presence, since he didn't merit a single mention in the entire review. *The Scotsman's* reviewer was equally scathing (a junior hack, according to reliable sources...). And those readers who subscribe to the ISB discussion list on the Net will be aware that several contributors who were among the audience have expressed similar sentiments.

Oo-er—was it really as bad as that? For some of you, it clearly was. But in the words of Sir Michael of Heron, the opposite is also true. *beGLAD's* own reviewer, Tony Corden, offers a more generous view on the following page. Tony's view, unlike that of the man from *LT*, is based on what was played that night rather than what wasn't. And there were, withal, a lot of happy people in St Mary's Cathedral whose voices have not been heard in this debate. (Your editor, as it happens, was one of them; I have to report I enjoyed the evening unreservedly, though I arrived with

a pretty good idea of what to expect.)

Nevertheless, there is an issue here that needs to be addressed, and one that is not confined merely to Stringland. Over the past ten years or so, every legendary '60/'70s outfit that could rout out enough alumni still alive and reasonably *compus mentis*, has thrown together a reunion tour or a comeback CD, some out of naked opportunism, others with perhaps worthier motives. Robin and Mike initially stood pure-mindedly aloof from this trend, but eventually decided they had something to prove—or disprove, if there's truth in the tale that they were goaded by Joe Boyd's gleeful gossip about their alleged mutual hatred. We had the Bloomsbury and Henry Wood concerts in 1997, somewhat ramshackle but genuinely heartwarming occasions, supplemented by the *Retying The Knot* TV documentary the following Spring. But that seemed to be that: point made, and splendid fun for all concerned. Time for each man to get on with his life.

### THAT WAS THEN...

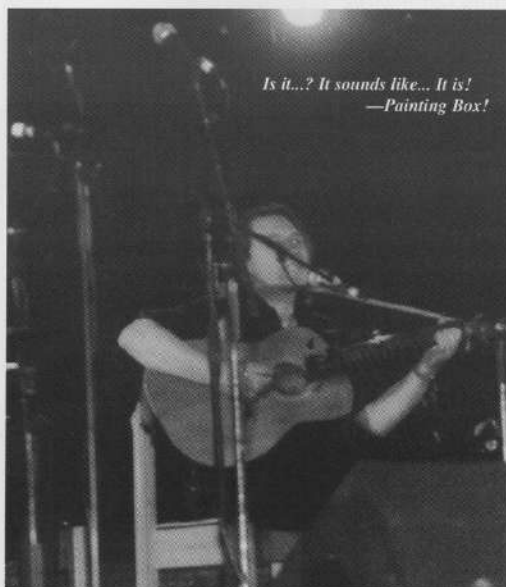
Cue the unexpected re-emergence of Clive Palmer. To say that Clive keeps a low profile is to say that water is somewhat wet. For years we wondered whether he was still a denizen of our world. Then all of a sudden he's touring with Robin, recording duo and solo albums, and pulling brilliant new songs out of his battered hat. And it looks, with hindsight, as though his return to action has been the catalyst in bringing Mike and Robin back together again on stage. All three parties enjoyed the Millennial experience so much that they've signed up for the Bloomsbury concerts this summer, as well as the Cropredy Festival and *The Fling* (see *Pieces Of String*). This time round, it seems, there will be no shilly-shallying about nomenclature. It will be The Incredible String Band, *redivivus*. A lesson not too late for the learning...

## YOU'RE THE STRING BAND, LADS, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT...

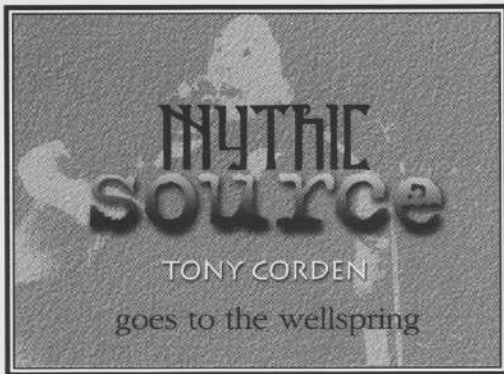
In one way, of course, this is simply a matter of bowing to the inevitable. The Heron-Williamson dyad was the one constant factor in the band's career. It's hard to see, therefore, how anything involving both Mike and Robin could avoid the ISB imprimatur. So have our heroes made a rod for their own backs? Judging by the speed with which the Bloomsbury tickets have been flying out the door, there is still a huge and undiminished appetite for things String. But maybe the Millennial experience will have encouraged us all to be a wee bit more realistic in how we deal with our desires. We know there'll be no Rose and Likky, no Malcolm, no heavy rock licks and no sitars; that was then, and, hey, we've still got the albums. What we'll get are three middle-aged blokes with lived-in faces who, despite the long shadow cast by their past achievements, are still fizzing with creativity in their various fields. They can justly take pride in those achievements, but surely they've earned the right to present themselves as they are now, and not as they were thirty or more years ago.

Nostalgia must have its due, of course. We can, it seems, look forward to a generous helping of golden age String classics: two hearty cheers for that. We shouldn't forget, however, that all three are still making songs that—to my ears at least—fit snugly enough into the grand ISB tradition of fine melodies, intelligent lyrics and spiritual perspectives. Let's hope to hear a few of those too—they'll be worth that third cheer.

So, the die is cast; and with Robin, Mike and Clive, plus of course Bina and Lawson, it's a cast to die for. It's probably too early to think of the reformed ISB as a regular touring proposition, or to be salivating at the prospect of new studio recordings, but neither is a notion outwith the bournes of credibility. The skill is there if the will is there; let's see what the future brings. Keep the faith, pilgrims, but keep your feet on the ground. ☘



Is it...? It sounds like... It is!  
—Painting Box!



I LOVE FOLLOWING RIVERS back to their source, and when I heard that the original Incredible String Band were reforming to play a pre-Millennium gig in Edinburgh I felt an overwhelming urge to be present, to see and hear the bubbling wellspring appearing again after so many years.

As Billy Connolly, one of the evening's "special guests", said, "The Millennium pales into insignificance compared to this lot up here." Well, I could gush on and on about the wonder of it, but I'll attempt now to streamline my account of this truly marvellous evening.

Edinburgh was buzzing with anticipation and colour as the Millennial celebrations were getting underway, and the crisp wintry air was warmed by the sight of old friends in the queue met many years ago round a festival campfire on a balmy summer's evening. We were soon ushered into the Cathedral where the gig was to take place, and then there they were: Mike, Robin and Clive together again for the first time in thirty-three years, augmented by Bina Williamson and by Lawson Dando on keyboards.

Following a rapturous welcome from the audience, off they bounced into You've Been A Friend To Me, an old Carter Family song, followed promptly by Going Across The Sea with Clive's unmistakable voice ringing out. Robin introduced this song as having started out as a square dance, and said that "the tune in the middle is an American tune called Liberty, commemorating the sad day when they lost us..." Following this, Robin played The Blackbird on "the old cheese-slicer", a

truly ancient Irish melody sometimes played as an air, sometimes as a hornpipe; Robin plays it as both ("because I can"). The tune also turns up on Clive's 1977 solo album, *Just Me*, played there on Northumbrian pipes. Robin and Bina then segued into Green Grow The Laurels together in sweet unison: a lovely gentle song sung straight from the heart.

Then it was Clive's turn again with Paris, his own composition, augmented by some great tinkling on the ivories by Lawson Dando. [*Ed's note*: Some may think me mad, but Lawson's darkly dissonant piano lines, echoing in the vaults of St Mary's, reminded me irresistibly of Mike's playing on Pictures In A Mirror...] A couple of moments of pregnant silence followed and we sensed that we were in a for a real treat. Sure enough, Mike started strumming his guitar unaccompanied and a wave of remembering and joy swept the Cathedral as he meandered into a sublime rendition of Painting Box. Any misgivings about the hassle involved for me in getting to this gig melted into the ether.

Robin then gave a glowing introduction to Archie Fisher, the evening's first guest, who sang a great self-penned song recalling his early gigging days and carrying the refrain "The band broke up when the van broke down". After acknowledging a request from some unreconstructed hippy in the audience for How Happy I Am [reliable evidence suggests it was the reviewer himself—*Ed*], Robin went on to remark that a few years ago he had said to Archie in conversation that it was very unlikely he would ever play again with Mike or Clive, but now he realised "they're not such bad lads after all!"

### A WAVE OF REMEMBERING AND JOY SWEEPED THE CATHEDRAL AS HE MEANDERED INTO A SUBLIME RENDITION OF PAINTING BOX...

Then it was off into a brilliant rendition of Just Like The Ivy, with Clive's banjo cooking away. Not sure whether You Are My Honeysuckle is a separate song or not. I know and love the latter from my earliest days as one of my mother's favourites. Following this one and a bit of tuning jollied along by Robin, they were off into another old-timey number called, I think, Lay Down Your Head And Cry. [We called it Why Not You And I? last issue, which was just a guess. Anyone know its actual title?—*ignorant Ed*]

Robin introduced the next song as one they had recorded in 1965 for "the princely sum of fifty quid each": It was Everything's Fine Right Now,





with a middle eight played by Robin on fiddle that also turns up on *Back In Paris* on the *Ring Dance* album. He then to much hilarity talked about Clive having made his own set of Northumbrian pipes and pointed to "those bits of white things on the ends there. That might look like ivory, but do you know what it is?—*Dog bones!*" This led on to the tune medley *Bonny Cragside* and *Neil Gow's Wife*, with Clive on his canine pipes and Robin harmonising on fiddle.

Empty Pocket Blues followed, introduced by Robin as "the kind of music that made us almost bankrupt in the first place". Quite a lovely rendition in its own way, but maybe a bit cluttered and lacking the immediacy and simplicity of the original.

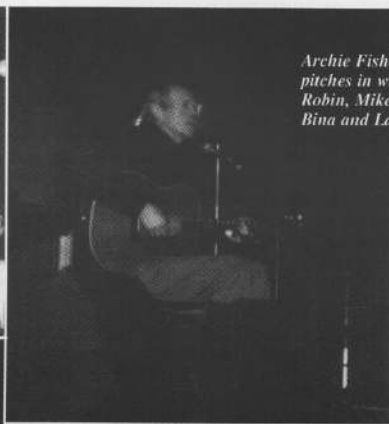
Robin then introduced the evening's second special guest, Bert Jansch, who played two songs. The first, *Lily Of The West*, was, he said, learnt from Clive many years ago. (He recorded it with the reformed Pentangle on their *One More Road* album.) The second song Bert said he'd written recently; it was called, I think, *Caledonia Will Be Free*. He left the stage to a warm ovation.

Then it was *Storm On The Ocean*, followed by the lovely old Inkspots song, *Bless You (For Being An Angel)*. How Happy I

Am was next, which certainly made me feel very happy; then Robin and Lawson duetting on *Bonny Doon*, after which it was Billy Connolly as third and last guest of the evening, telling madcap stories and playing *The Cuckoo* hesitantly but well on the banjo.

The band returned for *Rake And A Rambling Boy*, which brought the concert officially to a close. They were soon back, of course, for an encore. Encores are obligatory nowadays, but this one was fully deserved: *Side By Side*, that great old music hall song, sung with obvious affection by Clive. A roaring call for a second encore was answered by a burst of pure timeless magic—*We Bid You Goodnight*, the lullaby-cum-funeral chant originally recorded by the Bahamian vocal group the Pindar Family, also played by the Grateful Dead for a while, and of course by the ISB as part of *A Very Cellular Song*. Mike roared out the words with passion and authority, with Robin proving that he could still clap in Bahamian cross-rhythms.

Well, I knew now that I would die a happy man, and as we wandered off into the foggy Scottish night I was reminded of a line from a song of Robin's on *Journey's Edge*: "These are the mythic times; this is the age of gold".



Archie Fisher pitches in with Robin, Mike, Clive, Bina and Lawson



photos of band, Billy C and Archie F by James Jones, Jenny Bolders and Snapper Green

# The Case for the Prosecution...

## Live Reviews

NEWS, REVIEWS AND INFORMATION

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# THE LIVING TRADITION

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Don't blame me—I'm just the fiddle player...

### Incredible String Band Millennium Concert Edinburgh, December 99

An Open Letter to Robin Williamson of the Incredible String Band on the subject of their Millennium Concert:

I am not exaggerating when I say that the music you produced with Mike Heron in the 1960s changed my life. I knew and know every note and nuance of your second album, "The 5000 Spirits or the Layers of the Onion". I could not, therefore, resist going to the Incredible String Band's reunion concert in Edinburgh's St Mary's Cathedral on 30<sup>th</sup> December. Something though, went very sadly wrong. I was a fan: no, I was a disciple. How, therefore, did I find myself agreeing with the woman sitting behind me, who said, as the concert ended, "That was shite".

Let me say a little about myself. I suspect you won't be interested,

but I think it's relevant. In 1960 I went to Broughton Secondary School in Edinburgh. I attended English classes every day of the week, yet, when I left in 1966, poetry and the magic of language meant very little to me. While employed in an insurance office, I bought "The 5000 Spirits" and a world that was light years away from the with-profits pension schemes was revealed to me. Some of your songs were incomprehensible. And what on earth was a bowed gimbril, an oud and a tamboura? Years later I attempted to sum up your influence in a poem. I wrote of your songs of air and songs of light, and how you wove together East and West. So, when the other night I stood in the dark and damp outside the cathedral, I knew that a third of a century had passed, but my faith told me I was about to experience something very special and important. I'm sure that everyone else in the queue felt the same. Your concert was sold out, so you knew we still cared.

I wondered if I would hear your finest love song, "First Girl I Loved". Would you do the mystical "Maya" or "Koseoaddi There" from "The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter"? It slowly became apparent that the answer was No. However, Mike Heron performed one of my favourites "Painting Box". On the 1967 album it ripples, flows and sparkles. But, in the cathedral, he sat at the back of the stage, strummed his guitar uninterestingly and half-sang, half-spoke the lyrics. The line which leapt out at me was: "I don't mind if I do drown". In fact, he seemed to care about little, and I was left wondering why he'd bothered to turn up for the occasion. The audience had paid to experience an Incredible String Band Concert reunion but I was left asking myself if the musicians on stage were aware of the fact.

We saw and heard little of Mike, but it was obvious that you, Robin, had decided you were the star of the show. I know you've moved on from those early days, and I know you've carved out a career for yourself as a fine fiddler, harper and storyteller. Indeed I own one of your solo albums. At the concert, I could have forgiven you for the tired unfunny jokes: "It was in tune when I bought it". And then there was the tedious bit

where you compared a sausage with a penis. But who could forgive the disastrous choice of songs? On the way out, I met a friend who compared your performance with a singalong in an old folk's home. Maybe you thought that was what we deserved. Certainly, most of the audience wouldn't see 40 again! But no one was singing along. Did you notice? Did you care?

You seemed to have a thing about barrels. You gave us a lack-lustre plonking version of that old Cockney favourite, "Roll Out the Barrel". Then there was "Side by Side", the one where we ain't got a barrel of money. I looked up this song in my record catalogue. Did you know it features on a Russ Conway album called "Roll Up the Carpet"? You told us that all the Ink Spot's songs had the same introduction. I think we all knew that. Then you gave us a grey version of their old hit, "Bless You (For Being an Angel)". It was about then that I spent some time walking the length of the cathedral to the toilet.

I can just remember the time when trad jazz bands used to perform a number called "Salty Dog". You worked your way steadily through that one. It wasn't why I was there. I'm sure you and your wife enjoyed singing the sentimental song by Burns – but it wasn't why I was there. Then there were one or two songs which sounded like American folk or C&W (the acoustics were grim).

When you returned for an undeserved encore, you actually performed an Incredible String Band number. I'm afraid that after much that had gone before, it came over as almost an insult. It was inspired to have guests on stage. Archie Fisher, Bert Jansch and Billy Connolly got things right. They helped justify the price of the tickets.

I know the audience applauded you. But they were very patient and polite and I think many of them were applauding memories. I know we can't live in the past and we must move forwards. Unfortunately, most of the show in the cathedral didn't belong anywhere. You let us down. And so, Robin, if I can borrow a line from "The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter": I bid you goodnight.

Jim C Wilson

# The Case for the Defence...

ern Reporter, Thursday, January 6, 2000

## Incredible night at the cathedral

THE REUNION of the original Incredible String Band line-up — Robin Williamson, Clive Palmer and Mike Heron — just had to be special.

The rumours had been going round for months, the tickets sold out before Christmas. Edinburgh, after all, was where it all started: in rooms above pubs in the Royal Mile, in single ends in Nicolson Street and Potterrow; and for many years the group were based in a row of cottages near Innerleithen.

The concert was due to start at 8.30. By 7.15 a huddle had gathered outside the massive doors of St Mary's Cathedral, determined to get a good seat. Despite the marrow-freezing weather, the crowd steadily grew.

By the time the doors opened at 8pm, the lengthy crowd stretched down the length of Palmerston Place to the West End.

Beautifully lit, with the outside

spotlights gently reflecting the stained-glass windows onto the soaring stone pillars and arched wooden panelling, the interior of the cathedral was imposing and freezing. The music was warm and every bit as impressive as its surroundings.

The trio, accompanied by Lawson Dando on keyboard and Bina Williamson on percussion and vocals, began with "Green Laurels", followed by a harp solo by Robin.

Robin uses the harp to spray notes as clear as the water splashing from the highest Borders stream: droplets shaken from the wings of a water bird. Clive followed with "Paris", a love song for a city, inspired by his time there as a penniless teenager, and still as fresh and innocent.

Still a Borders resident, Mike's first solo, "Painting Box", brought an instant round of applause and recognition, along with memories of the days when

Innerleithen and Traquair were lightened and brightened by the Band and their friends as, tie-dyed, sparkling and sun-catching, they shopped in the local stores and made music in the village halls and pubs.

Then the first of the surprises — 'the friends' advertised but as yet unnamed: Archie Fisher was called from the audience and played "The Goldentones", an affectionate tribute to all those who started a rock band 'but gave up when the van broke down'. If you don't remember Archie Fisher playing in Edinburgh's The Howff in the early 60s, then all I can say is, it's great to be old.

The group continued with three more numbers: "Just like the Ivy" — melodic, a bit sentimental, just what we like — through "Come a little Closer" to the golden oldie, (sculpted sounds in sculpted space, winging, swooping, intricate, reflecting) "Empty Pocket Blues".

Bert Jansch was the second guest, filling and grinding his words, adding flashes of flinty sparks to his incomparable guitar playing, just as he did in the days when any of these master musicians could be seen for 2s 6d and the price of a half of heavy in the Crown Bar near Nicolson Square.

And the Band played on: "Salty Dog" — full of banjo-strumming light-hearted energy — "Bless you (for being an Angel)" — an old Inkspots number special to Robin because his mother liked it, and because it reminds him of meeting and falling in love with Bina, his wife and his very impressive accompanist.

The final guest was Billy Connolly, unsure which he found more awe-inspiring: being in a cathedral, or being on with the Band. As we all know, Connolly throws out humour as naturally as the rest of us breathe, but his admiration for the Band is strong and undisguised.

"These are my heroes," he told us. "I even got my ears pierced to be like them. I'm on stage with the Incredible String Band — what next — Grateful Dead?"

It was Clive who, decades ago, taught Billy to play the banjo, and that skill was demonstrated when Billy, his adulation and enthusiasm for the Band finally vocalised, played "The Cuckoo".

The evening drew to a close with everyone singing along to "Side by Side" and Mike's closing number, "I Bid you Goodnight", — a chorus from their 1968 album, "The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter".

We left with cold feet, and warm hearts: glad about who we were, glad about where we'd been.

A. M. G.

## Family magic



Billy C tells it like it is...

Photos on pages 6-11 by James Jones, Jenny Bolders and Snapper Green



# BRIEF encounter



A quick word with  
**Julie Felix**



The ISB appeared on **Julie Felix's** BBC TV show three times in the late Sixties. **Colin Thomas** asked her about her ISB connections

“ I loved their music. When they first came out in the Sixties they captured something very magical, which probably wouldn't work in today's harsh world. But then they had a dreamlike quality—I know some people blamed the drugs!—a kind of interaction with the unseen world, if you like.

I met them through Joe Boyd. He was very much part of the spirit of that time and was involved in putting together the *International Times* with Hoppy, and with the early Pink Floyd, and he was very much a good person—because some things were not that ethical in those days; and he introduced me to them. It was just wonderful to sing Painting Box live with them on the show. Even though it was taped, we played to a live audience, and despite all the cameras and lights the music did transport us to an “altered state”, if you like.

Unfortunately I don't have any of the shows on tape myself. I was told [the BBC] destroyed a lot of the tapes. But they keep showing the Leonard Cohen clip [from her show], so somebody must have some. I hope some day I'll find them.

(Colin: You don't remember when they came on with the girls and did Fine Fingered Hand?)

I do!—because we had a rehearsal for about two hours of doing chants; and Robin Williamson was very... I think fame and exposure shook us all—it certainly did me—and he probably was taken aback with that too, very much wanting to go to kinda roots things, and that's when we started to do more chants and less accessible music. It was lovely, it was magic, but it was more way-out if you like...

[Is she perhaps trying to hint very gently indeed that Robin was being a bit of a prima donna? There was a rumour that a “contretemps” with Julie's producer at this point led to a virtual ban on further ISB TV appearances, though Robin has recently dismissed this notion—*Adrian*]

The Sixties was a very potent time and I feel very blessed that my little “time in the sun”, as it were, was part of that era—because I think that there were lots of seeds planted at that time. When I do my shows now, I try to bridge the gap between the Sixties and the Nineties. I do some old songs that are still relevant today and try to bring in a bit of the magic—and that's what the ISB had so much of! They were writing songs for *after* the revolution!

## THEY WERE WRITING SONGS FOR AFTER THE REVOLUTION

I haven't spoken to Mike in ages but I see Robin from time to time—we both do work for the Dandelion Trust and bump into each other in passing. Of all the Sixties performers that are around today, I feel Robin and I are on a spiritual track. There's a lot of wonderful, rich lore which is very connected with the earth; I feel that when God became a patriarchal figure and was kind of zoomed up into the sky and the earth became a heap of mud, that we lost a tremendous sensitivity and I think Robin incorporates a lot of that into his fairy tales and his music. We did a concert together in Glastonbury in the early 90s—I think it was for the National Federation Of Spiritual Healers—and he actually played the harp behind one of my poems called The Holy Grail. We do interact, Robin and I, and I have a great respect for the fact that he's keeping magic alive.

*Transcription by Adrian. Colin did the interview in 1994 but it's only recently surfaced in the beGLAD archives.*



# Dr D.'s Prescription



Jonas Dalrymple  
talks to  
Lawson Dando  
about the *Mystics* remix

where the mystics swim

THE CONCEPT OF THE REMIX arrived on Planet Pop about a decade ago. Shrewd record company execs immediately recognised it as a way of repackaging existing product, of plugging the yawning gaps between the album releases of their ever more self-indulgent, ever more indolent recording stars—in a word, of raking in the ackers for minimal outlay. It's a notion driven by commercial rather than artistic imperatives, and by the increasing compartmentalisation of popular music: the Dancefloor Mix, the Chill-out Mix, the Dishwashing Mix... The list is potentially infinite. So when we hear that Mike's 1996 album *Where The Mystics Swim* is now available in remixed form, should we clap our little hands in innocent delight, or snort cynically into our tofu?

The moguls of Unique Gravity insist the motivation is unimpeachably artistic. The story has long been going the rounds that the original *Mystics* mix, an intricate tapestry of innumerable overdubs, was the product of producer Iain McKinna's overweening ambition. Budget constraints were loftily disdained as McKinna insisted on endless overdubs, and even—it's whispered—excluded Mike from the mixing sessions! The result was hailed in these pages (*beGLAD 10*) as a "classy, imaginative and sympathetic production", but the feeling persisted in certain quarters that, technically impressive though the production was, it had rather relegated Mr H to secondary status on his own album. And on a more venal level, the vastly increased overheads had ensured that it would never recoup all its costs—a fact that still rankles among certain of its independent backers.

When a US distribution deal was finally hacked out last year, therefore, an opportunity seemed to emerge to restore the simple beauty of the original concept. Enter Lawson "I can do that" Dando, sonic sorcerer.

"It all came about," recalls Lawson, "when I stopped over at Mark Anstey's for an evening on the way up to Leeds [the Yorkshire leg of the Robin 'n' Clive tour, on which Lawson was playing keyboards], and Mark played me the album and asked me what I thought. That was the first time I'd heard it; in fact it was the first time I'd heard Mike since the String Band days."

When he bent an educated ear to *Mystics*, Lawson was less enamoured than our reviewer had been. "I felt it had been overdone," he says. "I thought it had been completely Artexed!" (Foreign readers and non-DIY enthusiasts should note that Artex is a gelatinous paste we Brits slap on surfaces to insulate them against the effects of damp and so on.)

"I felt it was a shame that a lot of the songs had just been buried underneath...well, all that superfluous percussion for one thing. I thought there were songs under there that were really crying out to be liberated.

"Technically, it all seemed very fine. Musically, however, I felt that the whole thing had run away with itself. It didn't do Mike's songs justice. It didn't do his voice justice, and I thought it was totally the wrong flavour and approach. I could hear the songs being very raw. His voice is very emotional and really grabs you, and it doesn't need to be tarted up. You just need to hear Mike and the songs. They really are such a strong, strong force. So it's a shame to spoil them in any way, and I just felt that the whole album had gone off in the wrong direction."

Finding that Lawson was echoing his own feelings about the original mix, Mark promptly deputed him to strip away the glittering encrustations and see if what lay beneath held together in its own right.

## I THOUGHT IT HAD BEEN COMPLETELY ARTEXED!

"The starting point for each of the songs was, what am I going to be able to salvage from it technically?" says Lawson. "Because my fear was that there would be percussion or other instruments that I didn't want to use spilling onto tracks that I did want to use. So my first consideration was the technical aspect of getting the tracks that I wanted to use clean. Actually, it was very well recorded in that respect. The only track I had a problem with was one on Robert Johnson. There was some hi-hat spillage on an acoustic guitar track. I did get rid of it in the end, but it took me a long time, without dulling the general tone of the track, 'cause I had to get in there and get that frequency out."

The Dando mix is, it's fair to say, a radical revision of the original. Not only has Lawson excised much of Stewart Smith's rubbery fretless bass and McKinna's ubiquitous keyboard fills, but Dave Haswell has been effectively airbrushed out of history—the John Major of percussion! Did Lawson have any particular animus towards percussionists, I wondered?

"No, no, not at all! I love percussion. I love any instrument, providing it's in its proper place. It wasn't so much a question of there being too much percussion, as of its not being appropriate: it didn't capture the feel of the songs for me. And in any case, when I actually got the tapes into the studio, I found a lot of the drum tracks weren't there. They weren't on the multi-track tapes from the sessions. Don't ask me where they ended up. So a number of percussion tracks I didn't have access to, and that determined certain things. I basically cut out what I felt was not relevant to the songs. And a lot of that ended up being the percussion."

And the bass? (Our reviewer—see opposite page—particularly laments the disappearance of Stewart's lyrical lines on 1968.) "The fretless bass was great in itself, but it gave the whole thing a sort of dated, Seventies sound. This is Mike now—or at least in the mid-Nineties!"

I confessed to Lawson that my first exposure to the remix left me feeling the album had been eviscerated. It was that very richness and intricacy that had ensnared me in the first place, and it was only after several plays that I found myself listening not to what *wasn't* there, but to what was. Having finally made that conceptual leap, I quickly came to appreciate the virtues of simplicity and directness that the new mix embodied. It was striking, I pointed out, how many of John Rutherford's dazzling guitar arabesques, now revealed in their majesty, had been virtually inaudible in the McKinna mix.

"John had done some incredible stuff, which had been buried in what he'd later done. I cut sections out, because he was having to play to these great long arrangements, especially on Always, which needed a lot of sorting out to bring it into focus. So I did that, digitally. The bass riff was nice, too, but it was overdone—doom pa-doom, boom pa-doom! Nice, but please give me a break! I thought there was a lot of that throughout the album: lots of good snapshots, but they were just...well, it's the old cliché of less is more."

"The other thing that troubled me was that many of the songs weren't given a chance to develop. With Robert Johnson, for instance, you can now hear the organ come in and think, ooh, there's a bit of space, a bit of frequency for that to fill, because there's been nothing before it. But on the original there was clutter and crashes and bangs, so when the organ came in you just thought, oh well, it's just another phase of the song."

In your writer's view, Lawson's most telling contribution is his treatment of the vocals. The occasionally over-emphatic backing vocals have been delicately repositioned in the mix; and Mike's lead vocal is vastly improved: it's warmer, more intimate, given more presence.

"Yes, I brought the vocal to the fore, whereas on the original it was buried way too deep. It was right down there. Everything else was right in your face, and Mike was somewhere down in the valley—Look you there, boy! I'll be up in a minute! Which was wrong. It's a Mike Heron album. I want to hear Mike Heron. I love the style of his voice now. It's really excellent, really matured."

Here and there Lawson has exploited the capabilities of digital editing to move bits of music from one part of a song to another—a dauntingly difficult business back in the days of analogue recording. "Tom And Alexei was a track I cut up quite a lot. I took a riff from the very end of the song and used it as the main hook. It was a great song, but very muddled and going

John R—hidden contributions



off in all sorts of directions; it was missing the hook, and the whole arrangement seemed to wander around. And it's only when you get to the end that you hear the hook that should be holding it together. I thought, aha, that's its start, its punctuation and its end."

Just now and then you hear, in the remix, a guitar figure or chord that lacks the inevitability you might expect. Lawson admits that removing the extraneous and distracting matter from these points left the guitar a little exposed. "It occurred to me that I could create a suitable context for the guitar by overdubbing some keyboard in one or two instances. But it just didn't feel right. The album was very guitar-based, it had that feel to it, and laying on piano in the background just softened it too much. I tried a couple of things, but I wasn't really happy. I

sent them to Mike, and he didn't care for them much either. I certainly wasn't going to slap things on just for the sake of it. Which made the job harder for me, as I had no cement of my own to apply." Rumour has it that a version of Baby Goodnight exists in Unique Gravity's vaults with some sumptuous Dando piano overdubs... One for the boxed set, perhaps?

The running order on the remixed *Mystics* has changed somewhat from the original. Even on first hearing it seemed a distinct improvement. Was that Lawson's handiwork too?

"No, I think that was thrown open. I don't know whether it was Mark or Mike. They said, if we're going for a remix, we might as well have a look at the running order too. So I put it in some sort of order—I can't remember what—and sent it up to Mike. But I didn't really want to be responsible for that. Because I was listening at the album from an analytic point of view, I wasn't thinking of it as an album as such. I was grappling with it on a song-by-song basis."

## I LOVE THE STYLE OF HIS VOICE NOW—IT'S REALLY EXCELLENT, REALLY MATURED

And what is Mr H's verdict on the reconstituted *Mystics*—the Dechlorinated Version, as he's taken to calling it? "I gather he's very pleased with what's been done. So much so that there looks like there's another album in the offing. That's the next job on the board, in fact, to start listening to the new songs and think about where we could go with them."

For the record, I don't take as stern a view as Lawson of the original mix. I reckon there's still a lot to be savoured there; but after half a dozen spins, it became clear to me that the Dando mix has captured the essential Heron in a way that its forbear hadn't really done. He's also done a great job on John's guitar, imparting a warmth and richness that wasn't there before. "It sounds like he was using an electro-acoustic in the studio," Lawson explains. "It doesn't sound like it was miked at all, and I wouldn't have recorded it that way, given the chance. Electro-acoustics are great for stage work, but I don't like them as a recording tool."

Though first-time US buyers will come to *Mystics* without any of the preconceptions we bring as owners of the original, I confess to a certain gladness at having access to both versions. Through the Dando mix I've come to fall in love with the Heron pipes all over again. I agree with Lawson that Mike was ill-served by the original mix in this crucial respect. Nevertheless, the brio, glitter and sheer fun of some of the McKinna cuts—I'm thinking of Killing The Dragon and Always in particular—remain cherishable. For me, the Dechlorinated Version doesn't quite render its predecessor obsolescent. My life is not so narrow that I can't find room for both. But owners of the original should certainly make their acquaintance with Lawson's revamp at the earliest opportunity. *beGLAD* has spoken! ☘

# Views

## WILLIAMSON, PALMER, WILLIAMSON AND DANDO

Just Like The Ivy And Other Favourite Songs

Pig's Whisker PWMD 5021

THE RECENT *At The Pure Fountain* album, which reunited Robin and Clive for the first time in over thirty years, spawned a successful tour where they were augmented by Lawson Dando and Robin's wife Bina. This fearsome foursome then took their expertise into the studio. The result was this nicely well-paced album, which brings back the flavour of joyful and warmly relaxed down-home music-making that pervaded the tour.



The material runs the expected gamut, from traditional songs and tunes to old ISB favourites; so what if some of it is (as has been mooted in some of the music press that should know better) predominantly lightweight, even unfashionable? After all, it's a celebration of both a collaboration and a reunion. The foursome are heard in various permutations, but at times I wished there was more duetting between Robin and Clive. The fragile simplicity of Bina's girlish, innocuous backing vocals is most appealing in a distinctly String manner (though maybe at times she's placed a bit too far forward in the mix). Just occasionally too, I find that Lawson has a tendency to over-vamp, as on the title track. But these are minor carps; the CD has plenty of other fish to fry. Let's run through the album track by track, then...

**You've Been A Friend**—Another version of this old ISB Carter Family favourite, with plenty of bonhomie but Lawson's piano just a tad over-dominant, I feel. A sensible and spirited opener nevertheless, with Clive's suitably happy-all-the-time banjo right there to remind us.

**Going Across The Sea**—Another old-time good-time number, given one hell of a lift by Robin's wonderful log-cabin hoedown fiddle breaks in his unique take on oldtimeyness, with banjo and piano chugging along contentedly in the background.

**Planxty Irwin/Spanish Is A Loving Tongue**—Robin's solo offering, the harp's only appearance on this album, and coincidentally its longest (official) track. A lovely mellow frisson is generated, but the mood isn't totally destroyed by—

**Boston Burglar**—Robin moves on to mandolin here, with electric bass doubletracked, for a further variant of that live favourite which didn't make it onto the CD of the brass project. A great version too, but why no banjo—Clive just growlyly vocalises, though Bina does well here. There's an uncredited drone (harmonium?—surely not small pipes?) in the background, and tambourine (Bina?). Loads of infectious spirit, and markedly less stilted than I remember the brassy version.

**Downtown Dandies**—Clive's solo banjo showcase, jauntily swaggering as of old, with the instrument faithfully captured and well spotted. Clive's treatment recalls Rifkin's Scott Joplin, in managing

to convey forward movement while retaining a delicate poise (cool, but not without feeling). The added delicacy of those quasi-hesitations in the rhythm in the B-section are entrancing. I love it, but it ends all too soon!

**Blind Fiddler**—Robin moves back to fiddle, with Clive's banjo giving it a grand old-time feel. I'm not sure Robin sounds entirely convinced by the words, though...

**Just Like The Ivy**—A delectable rendering of the old standard, it clings to your memory cells like it shouldn't. Forget the hoariness of the sentiment, just revel in details like those filigree interludes for Robin's guitar, and Clive's ragtime banjo.

**Bonny Cragside/Neil Gow's Wife**—Clive's small pipes make their first (and, sadly, only) appearance here, duetting memorably with Robin's sweeping (and slightly drunken-toned) fiddle on a brace of traditional tunes. Wonderful—more please!

**The Storm Is On The Ocean**—that simple Robin 'n' Bina duet, in an over-in-the-old-golden-land waltz style that oozes *echt*-ISB charm. Best kept uncomplicated, and it works well too.

**Empty Pocket Blues**—The most eagerly anticipated inclusion, I suspect, and no letdown. Taken at a faster pace than the First-Album-ISB vintage version, having been transported from its bleak Edinburgh garret to Stateside, Depression-era, it's now decidedly jaunty, complete with detuned bar-room piano and Irish-American Tin Pan Alley whistle solo. It's no longer a bleak and direct starvation experience, but more a tall story of emotion recollected in relative tranquility, recalled at a remove, a distance of time and place. Some good harmony vocals too, by the way.

**Salty Dog**—a rough 'n' ready remake of the *Pure Fountain* track, this time more successful, I reckon, with a more natural feel and simpler arrangement, complete with vamping piano and a fun banjo coda.

**Bonny Doon**—Normally a Robin solo, but done here with his guitar accompanied by Lawson's piano, which provides unexpectedly lyrical fills (though perhaps sometimes a mite distractingly florid). This here is the full version (all the verses), as performed on the tour, and it's good to have this definitive performance on record.

**Rambling Boy**—Pleasant enough, but Clive's banjo seems virtually inaudible. (I could be wrong here of course—maybe I'm just imagining that it's even there at all...)

**Side By Side**—the album's "official" closer (doubling as eventual "tour anthem" and usual encore), this is a rather fetching rendition of the old music-hall song that many of us habitually hate to bits with all its overtones of false chumminess and faux-cameraderie. Here, though, it's just charming (sorry, an overworked word in this review I know), with its delectable ideal-traveling-companion banjo, with interweavings from Lawson's piano and Robin's guitar. A masterpiece. But not the end, as it turns out—there's 45 seconds of silence, before—

**Paris**—The "hidden track", this is a deliberate (in both senses of the word) reworking of the *Pure Fountain* track, with Lawson's piano stylings really coming into their own and Clive sounding even more world-weary (though most attractively so—for all the world an affectionate old codger!). And so we ride into the proverbial sunset...

Overall, I loved this album for its high feel/good factor and straightforward (OK, old-fashioned) charm, as much for its furnishing incontrovertible proof that the Robin 'n' Clive reunion has been most viable, is no disgrace as an ongoing project, has further untapped potential I'm sure, and—importantly—can't be seen as a mere flash in the pan or one-off cash-in. That phrase "easy geniality" from *beGLAD 14* just won't go away! This CD is an hour well spent in good company.

David Kidman

## MIKE HERON

Where The Mystics Swim—Remix

Unique Gravity UGCD5008

I ALWAYS feel I've got a special relationship with this album—I saw the 4-piece band playing this material live on many occasions, including a memorable 12-Bar Club gig on my birthday! I should also, I suppose, declare a financial interest, having contributed a sum to help pay for finishing the mixing...

So what of the remix? Well, the cover is much better, a Gauguinesque painting by Ken Bryce of a boy with a fish on his head. Good, too, that Iain Skinner returns to the fold with a couple of booklet shots of Mr H.

As you've probably gathered, this "dechlorinated version" as Mike calls it (or should it be "Where the Mystics Go Paddling?") is an attempt to turn the material into a stripped-down, acoustic guitar-based set with his vocals to the fore. Lawson Dando has had a bold stab at this, but omitting a lot of the percussion, keyboards and backing vocals leaves some strange gaps in the arrangements. If Mike had actually set out to do an album with just two guitars and a bit of bass he'd have arranged the songs quite differently.

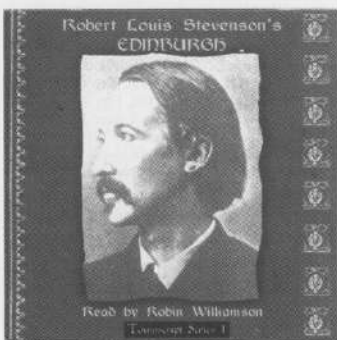
A track which suffers from this approach is *Killing The Dragon*, from which the entire intro is missing, leading to a rather uncomfortable and abrupt beginning, set against what was originally the rhythm guitar part. In *Mexican Girl*, too, you can feel the gaps left by much of the original drum track. And it's a downright crime to get rid of the tablas and the beautiful bass melody in 1968. 29 Words and Dry All My Rain lose some of their propulsive energy and a lot of their backing vocals; the original mix did rather go to town on backings and they're no great loss from 29 Words, though I'm not so sure about the cut-and-paste repeated chorus stuck on the end of the new version.

It has to be said that the new approach also produces some winners—I never liked those handclaps at the start of *Tom and Alexei*, and neither, clearly, did Lawson D. Always has a shorter intro and gains a lot in immediacy; similarly, *Baby Goodnight* used to suffer from backing vocals run amok syndrome and from over-production. Both these ailments have been rather successfully treated by Dr D.

My favourite "remix" here is *Song For Robert Johnson*, which now works very well. It's great to hear the Hammond given new prominence, Mike's voice comes through loud and clear, and the whole track gets into a nice semi-acoustic groove. Who's the mystery female on backing vocals towards the end (or is it John Rutherford doing his falsetto bit rather more audibly)?

Finally, there's the bonus track of a live, solo *Painting Box* from the Edinburgh gig last December. At the event itself we were all praying for Mike to make it through this OK, but listening again it's clear that, despite a few lyrical fluffs, he did know exactly where he was going with it. It would have been better to include his *Bid You Goodnight* encore from the same concert, by which time he'd conquered both his nerves and his cold, sending us off into the freezing night on a soulful, full-throated high.

Adrian Whittaker



**ROBIN WILLIAMSON**  
Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburch

Rattle Records RR001

**Y**OU'RE IN EDINBURGH and hungry for history. You hop on a sleek Lothian Buses coach offering a scenic tour of the town. You find a set of headphones on the seat, slip them on and, as the coach pulls off, what do you hear but the gruffly mellifluous tones of our own Mr W, cannily ventriloquising the thoughts of Robert Louis Stevenson on their shared hometown? That man Williamson seems to have a finger in every pie these days...

This CD, which you'll have speedily purchased from Lothian Buses at the conclusion of your ride, pulls together the nine extracts from Stevenson's *Edinburch* volume that punctuate and illustrate the Classic Tour, tastily garnished with bursts of traditional Scottish music on suitable instruments (and a couple of keyboard extemporisations by Lawson Dando). A fitting souvenir of your visit to Auld Reekie, but does it work as a stand-alone recording?

Not having taken the trip myself, I'm tempted to say...maybe. There's no doubting the quality of the execution: Robin gets under the skin of RLS' resonant prose with a sure instinct; and the music is a delight to ears-attuned to the stately airs and rollicking dance measures of the Scots traditional muse. The music is, however, sparing in its use, claiming less than a quarter of the 63-minute running time. In context, this is entirely proper: it would be tempting to splash it liberally over the prose, but in truth Stevenson's rolling periods have their own musicality, and need little instrumental embellishment. In fact, it's not difficult to detect his influence in Robin's own writings—Edinburgh and Scotland Yet spring readily to mind, and if you've a taste for that side of Robin's oeuvre, you'll find this CD richly satisfying. If, on the other hand, it's primarily the music that lures you into the world of Williamson, you might find it flavoursome but less than a full helping.

Stevenson is seen as essentially a 19th Century writer, but in fact he was of the same generation as Yeats, Hardy and Shaw; had not TB carried him off in his early forties, he might well have emerged as one of the voices of modernism. Here, however, his prose has the ornateness and leisurely pace of late Victorianism—though there is a Calvinistic undertow that makes it sound just a little guilty about its own luxuriance.

The CD begins and ends, aptly enough, with animadversions on Edinburgh's weather, a rich and enduring source of conversation among the natives of that clime. "The Scots dialect," remarks RLS, "is singularly rich in terms of reproach against the winter wind. Snell, blae, mirly, scawthering are four of these significant vocables. The inclemency of Heaven, which has thus endowed the language of Scotland with words, has also largely modified the spirit of its poetry: all our singers have a stave or two for blazing fires and stout potatoes." With a grim glee, he describes the climate as "a downright meteorological Purgatory", and the city as "an unhomely

and harassing place of residence" and a "Northern temple of the winds". Such Calvinistic dourness, of course, is served up with an authorial twinkle.

In *A Most Admired Disorder*, Stevenson reflects on the gracefully haphazard layout of the old town, and in *Such A Flitting* describes how "the new town began to spread its draughty parallelograms". Suitably, this latter track is prefaced by stately harp, but is soon underscored by the spiky swagger of Lawson's piano, sounding not unlike one of Ron Geesin's dissonant digressions. The collision of old and new is further evoked by *Cadgers On The Cannongate*, in which Robin's scratchy, pawky fiddle is gradually overwhelmed by comically grandiose keyboard syncopations.

*Auld Reekie*—an account of how Edinburgh acquired that unflattering epithet—is fretted with more rippling harp (Robin's harp, incidentally, has never sounded sweeter), and Robin buckles on the Border small pipes for the first time since *Winter's Turning* in 1985 for an authentic street-piper's rendering of *The Oyster Wife's Rant*.

*Deacon Brodie And Other Ghosts* gathers together some of the city's sturdier rogues: as well as the ecclesiastical house-burglar of the title, there are appearances by Burke and Hare and the sinister soricide Major Weir. Also vividly recalled are the officials of the Order of St Andrews, a sort of Ku Klux Klan of clinical pathology, dedicated to "stamping out contagion with a deadly rigour." They would, it seems, perambulate the city bearing the St Andrews Cross before them, seeking out houses where "the plague lay ambushed like a basilisk, ready to spread blain and pustule throughout the city", and put them to the torch. This is followed by a sombre fiddle and keyboard elaboration of the old ballad tune *Long Larkin* (sic).

Where I Spent My Aprils is a fond reverie on the author's childhood—an acre of literary ground on which our Mr Williamson has planted his own penon many times, of course; and here, indeed, the kinship of RW and RLS is at its most marked. "To scale the Castle Rock from the west Princes Street Gardens and lay a triumphal hand against the rampart itself was to taste a high order of romantic pleasure..." There's something very Williamson about that, wouldn't you say? And what about: "...We have some possessions that not even the infuriate zeal of builders can utterly abolish or destroy. Nothing can abolish the hills, unless it be some cataclysm of Nature which shall subvert Edinburgh Castle and lay all her florid structures in the dust." Or "...when the Spring comes round and the hawthorns begin to flower and the meadows to smell of young grass, even in the thickest of our streets, the country hilltops may seek out a young man's eyes and set his heart beating for travel and pure air." Can you read that and doubt that the two Robbies have drunk from the same freshet of Helicon? I rest my case.

A jaunty version of *Flowers Of Edinburgh* on the harp leads into *The View From Calton Hill*, at 11½ minutes the longest piece on the CD. This shows off the visual acuity of Stevenson's prose to its fullest, and makes the shrewd (but not obvious) observation that the best views of Edinburgh are not to be had from Arthur's Seat! And was ever a truer word said of that eminence than that it's "a hill for magnitude, a mountain by virtue of its bold design"? Buoyed by some lovely, ruminative Dando piano, the author's gaze reaches over the city and out to the coast, to the frowning mass of the Bass Rock and to the little port of Aberdour, from which Sir Patrick Spens famously set sail on his doomed voyage to Norway in the dark of Scotland's myth-haunted past. Here the piano falls momentarily still and we get a wee verse of the ballad in Robin's creaky balladeer voice.

The harp takes up the tune of another old ballad, *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, with whistle entering to add a twist of melancholy. There then follows Stevenson's meditation on the rigours of the Edinburgh winter (see above), after which Robin and Lawson play us out with an exceedingly convivial medley of *Farewell To Whisky* and *Bottom Of The*

*Punch Bowl*, faithfully evoking a bothy session fuelled by those pleasant cordials, with rustic fiddle, mandolin, mouth organ and piano.

And there you have it. Mainstream it ain't, but it has a seductive charm. You'll learn a lot about Edinburgh, quite a bit about Robert Louis Stevenson, and a bit more about Robin Williamson than you may have thought you knew. If you can escape the clamour of the 21st century for an hour, let this CD wrap its warm eloquence around you like an antique cloak. You'll feel the better for it. (Word from Pig's Whisker is that this may be the first in a series of "literary tour" Williamson CDs: look out for London, Bath and Oxford in the not-too-distant future. Rattle Records, by the way, is the Pig's Whisker spoken word imprint—named, *beGLAD* can exclusively reveal, by Robin's daughter Vashti. Facts—we got'em!)

R.G.

**ROBIN WILLIAMSON**  
Cerddoriaeth I Macbeth  
Music For Macbeth

Pig's Whisker PWMD5018

**I**T'S NOT UNLIKELY that, in a few years time, *beGLAD* will be running a feature on this CD entitled "Robin's Forgotten Album" or something similar. It slipped out almost unnoticed last summer, and *beGLAD* neglected to review it in issue 15; and although it was released as a souvenir of Geoff Moore's outdoor staging of *Macbeth* at St Fagan's, for which it comprised the soundtrack, hardly any of the punters bought it. Moreover, since most of it consists of already released material, you may well have decided not to buy it either.

Still, it's not too late to trumpet its virtues. Notwithstanding its recycled nature, it hangs together beautifully as an album of instrumental pieces. There are six tracks from *Legacy Of The Scottish Harpers Vol. 2*, three from *Music For The Newly Born*, two from *American Stonehenge* (the ever-wonderful Her Scattered Gold fits the context like a glove, but Port London Early, pitched somewhere between Ravi Shankar and Tim Buckley, is a surprising choice), and the instrumental coda from *Culwch And Olwen*. A satisfyingly eclectic assemblage of Williamsoniana, they prompted me to pull out their source albums to play at full length.

The main interest, of course, will be the four new pieces written specially for the production. These unerringly catch the dark and ominous mood of "The Scottish Play". First off, *Macbeth* is an unsettlingly harsh harp piece, a timely corrective for anyone who believes the harp can never by nature be other than pretty. Beefed up by some alarming synth effects, it will have effectively prepared the audience for the unfolding horrors. Owl Music is an episodic sequence. Starting with bamboo flute and sampled shawms, it conjures up the sort of atmosphere Yeats was aiming at in his Kabukified dramatisations of Irish myth; then a lone jew's harp buzzes sulkily like a wasp in a jam jar, to be followed by wide-screen synth chords and what sounds like a sampled cymbalom (it might even be the real thing). *Lady Macbeth* is a darkly introspective piece on electronically-modified harp; and *Birnam Wood* rolls along with an implacable menace to a doom-laden bass drone, throwing in brusque percussion, more shawms and synth effects, and ends abruptly with a shawm fanfare just as you're getting up to check the locks on the doors.

Taken together, these four tracks left me shaken and stirred (is this a Martini I see before me?), and panting for more of the same. It's an old cliché, but they're worth the price of the album, even if you've got all the other tracks. They come from a more shadowy part of the Williamson psyche than we're used to, but, as Shakespeare has Banquo reflect, "the instruments of darkness tell us truths".

R.G.



The long-awaited  
Likky feature—  
PART ONE

I'M

CALLING  
TO YOU



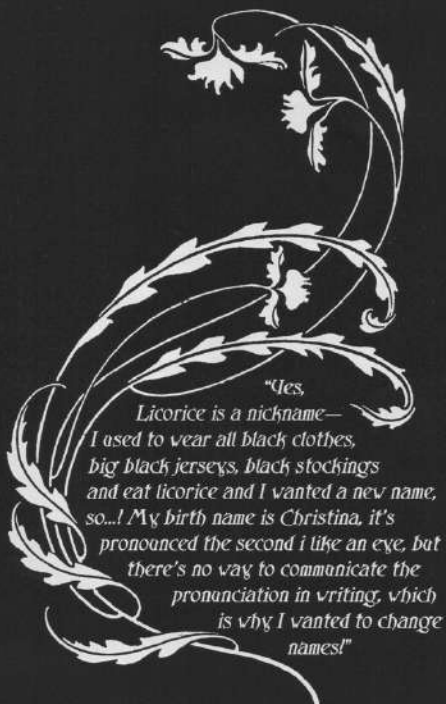
*She just wanted to say Hello—  
but she left without a goodbye*

**Raymond Greenoaken**  
looks at the Licorice enigma

OF ALL THE PROTAGONISTS in the Story of String, Christina "Licorice" McKechnie is probably the most enigmatic. (Okay—except for Gerard Dott...) Licorice undeniably had a glamour about her, not in its vulgar modern connotation but in the earlier sense of a quality of magical enchantment. Whereas Rose's stage persona was that of the Head Girl letting her hair down, Likky seemed almost otherworldly, a creature of mist and cobweb, a changeling child flitting through our sublunary world in a permanent state of puzzled amusement.

If this sounds like the stuff of overheated male fancy, I make no apologies: we were young and full of such watercolour dreams in those distant days (Allan Frewin has much to say on this: see page 22), and *The Female Eunuch* was still no more than a steely gleam in Germaine Greer's eye. We liked our girls—our dream girls at any rate—modest, quiet and decorative, childlike but with that seductive hint of mystery. Likky fitted the bill in every detail. She'd tiptoe across the stage in some fluttery, weightless garment, strum something here, bang something there, sing the odd chorus in a piping, birdlike voice and giggle girlishly at frequent intervals. And of course she never said anything at all.

The real Christina McKechnie was all of these things—but the opposite is also true. The childlike innocence, though real enough (face it—



"Yes,  
Licorice is a nickname—  
I used to wear all black clothes,  
big black jerseys, black stockings  
and eat licorice and I wanted a new name,  
so...! My birth name is Christina, it's  
pronounced the second i like an eye, but  
there's no way to communicate the  
pronunciation in writing, which  
is why I wanted to change  
names!"

no-one would write Cosmic Boy unless they really meant it) existed side by side with an uninhibited sexual appetite. The male contingent of the Glen Row community apparently consisted of those whom she had seduced and those whom she had tried unsuccessfully to seduce. As Robin remarks affectionately, "She had a great number of relationships on the go simultaneously, all of which she entered into with great spirit." It should also be remembered that this shy, modest creature had no compunction about whipping her kit off at the drop of a hat—and even when there wasn't a hat to be dropped. The Penwern postman was allegedly traumatised by this proclivity of hers, though other neighbours took a more robust view!

Similarly, she had an assertive side to her. Joe Boyd recalls that "Licorice was quite a powerful personality in her quiet way." He hints that Robin's keenness on having her perform with the band around the time of *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* might have been to some degree a response to Likky's quiet insistence. "I don't think he was prepared at that point to risk her wrath," says Joe.

And if she said little or nothing in performance, it was not because she had nothing to say. She wrote poetry from an early age, with passion and—according to Robin, whose opinion carries some authority—no little skill. In the Edinburgh days she would read regularly at poetry clubs. "There was a poetry circuit in those days," says Robin, "with people like Brian Patten and the Scaffold, and she used to go and read her poems on those occasions early on."

Eventually, of course, she began writing songs too, four of which featured at one time or another in the ISB repertoire. At this time she was not a prolific songwriter. According to Robin, her songwriting "just developed spontaneously; she wasn't pushed into doing it... She wasn't particularly discouraged from doing it either." But these seem to have been only her first cautious steps. In 1975, in a letter to a fan, she claimed to have composed seventy new songs with her songwriting partner of the time David Zimian.

There is a certain poignancy in writing about Licorice at this juncture. No-one today has any notion of her current whereabouts, and there is a widely-shared fear that she may even have died. Prior to her disappearance from view (she was last sighted some ten years ago), reports were abroad that she had been seen panhandling on the streets of L.A., where she moved in the mid-Seventies. One account speaks of her walking off into the Arizona desert—or at least in that general direction. Her elder sister Frances Harding, a lecturer in multicultural studies at the University of London, got a search for her underway in the aftermath of 1997's Bloomsbury concert. There were a few leads, but the trail quickly went cold.

It should be said that America is a very big place, and it's easy enough there to live normally but quite out of sight of the media and even of old friends and family, if that is one's inclination. Nor do people habitually die of starvation or despair simply because they may have fallen on hard times. She had, after all, a network of friends who it's safe to say would have extended

## I MUST HAVE FORGOTTEN TO SUMMON UP THE "ME" WHO LIKES COOKING...

a helping hand with alacrity, had one been asked for. So, while a concern for her wellbeing is entirely proper, we perhaps shouldn't automatically assume the worst. *beGLAD* likes to think that she's still out there, painting her pictures, singing her songs, or just living a happy, normal life somewhere in suburbia. Maybe she's just folded her wings away...



"She developed a taste for tapestry..."

**T**HOUGH SCOTTISH BY BIRTH, Likky had Irish Catholic parentage on both sides. She enters the String story in 1963, when Robin, Clive and Bert Jansch were sharing squats around the less salubrious areas of Edinburgh. Robin recounts in *Mirrorman Sequences* (in which she's referred to as Sleeka) that she left home while still at school to marry Bert (easily recognisable as Bart). Her father apparently administered the future guitar god a "christian thump", but was unable to restore his errant daughter either to school or to the family home. When Bert took off for London in the summer he left her behind, whereupon, as Robin tells it, she fell into his arms. He quotes a line from one of her poems: "Another circle was drawn, freehand and perfect."

He also touches upon her other creative skills. She "developed a taste for tapestry, wove wool into trees of birds and dancing foxes, bagpipers and zebra-lions". And he hints at her dreamy, unworldly Celtic nature. "I must have forgotten to summon up the 'me' who likes cooking," she apparently said after burning the pea soup one day. But he points out that she could "nevertheless relate and talk and be in the world quite well...could relate to actors from Liverpool and to young bookstore keepers".

Robin has recently described their relationship as "an on-off thing", and one of the most moving pieces in *Mirrorman* (particularly in its recorded form) concerns a time when Likky had





moved to Dublin and was living in the famous "Orphanage" communal house on Mount Street, later immortalised by the Strangelies. Not knowing the number of the house, he nevertheless set off for Dublin in search of her and ended up conversing into the night with a nightwatchman next to a hole in the Mount Street tarmac. After a few hours, Likky happened to walk by, "wearing a black and white op-art beret", and the scene shifts to the Orphanage for a tender reconciliation. "They made love as though nothing had changed."

Robin and Likky went off to Morocco together in 1966, and on their return they holed up in Mary Stewart's cottage at Baltimore, where Robin and Mike hatched their plans for world domination. Likky can be heard on the legendary Baltimore Tapes singing and talking. At one point she improvises a song based solely around the words blue, golden yellow and black; at another she reads what sounds like a short self-composed memoir concerning bicycles, drum lessons and a friend(?) called Frank.

When *5000 Spirits* was released the following summer, Likky's voice was featured on a couple of tracks: *Painting Box*, on which she also clinks some finger-cymbals, and *Gently Tender*, on which she joins the shamanic chorale near the end of the song. She also appeared on *Hangman's* six months later, famously uttering the words "Amoebas are very small" on *A Very Cellular Song* and joining the chorus of *Bid You Goodnight*—as well as turning up on the back cover hugging Robin's whippet Leaf. When the ISB went on their first full-scale American tour in May 1968, she was drawn into band politics for the first time. Joe Boyd: "Licorice went everywhere with Robin,

and he said if they were going on a concert tour...she might as well come on stage and sing the bits she sings [on *Hangman's*] or play tambourine or whatever. Rose later told me that the day Robin released that notion was the day Mike bought her a bass and said, 'Here—learn this!', because he saw it as becoming outnumbered. Suddenly Licorice was part of the band and it was going to be two against one."

Joe had serious misgivings about this development, although he conceded that Likky and Rose added an extra dimension on stage. By the time of *Wee Tam And The Big Huge*, however, the girls were seemingly regarded as members of the band—at least by Robin and Mike. They were called upon (or allowed, depending on your point of view) to do things in the studio that the lads would normally have done—play hand-drums, strum a harp—as well as add their distinctive voices to the choruses. (Rose was not yet ready for bass duties, however.) Joe was not best pleased. "They ended up spending a long time getting their parts right and we disagreed on the extent of their involvement—the need for endless takes leads to some tensions."



Nevertheless, by the time *Changing Horses* hit the shops in November 1969 the process was complete. There sat Rose

and Likky on the front cover, leaving no doubts over their status as official String Bandswomen. Notwithstanding Joe's disapproval, the massed ranks of Stringfandom unanimously took them to their collective bosom. Male Stringfans fell for them almost to a man (there is abundant anecdotal evidence of this); and, as for the distaff side, they may well have regarded them as rôle models—how often, after all, did you see women so active on the instrumental side of things in the bands of the late Sixties?

For the ISB's 1969 Spring tour, a concert programme was printed that included three whimsical stories about the band by the mysterious Fate And Ferret from Pittenweem, which we've reproduced in this issue and the last. These amusingly portrayed Robin as a head-in-the-clouds dandy and Mike as a sulky buffoon, and the girls as cooing maternal types who probably wiped their noses and dressed them. Those were the days, eh?

Also featured was a double-spread photo of all four flashing their teeth wolfishly. It will have come as a shock to many Stringheads to see that Likky had a huge shadowy gap where one of her front teeth should have been. Though it gave her something of a witchy aspect, the effect was not altogether displeasing. Indeed, the impression this conveyed was one of airy unconcern for conventional notions of beauty. The String Band,

**"AMOEBAS ARE VERY SMALL"**



you could see, didn't play to anybody's rules. They were utterly themselves, and none more so than the gap-toothed girl at the front. Likky's lost tooth instantly became a sort of icon, if an absence can be thought of as iconic.

John Tayler, who met the band after the Bristol gig (see his piece *You're Bringing Who Home For Supper?* in *beGLAD 2*), was bold enough to ask her about this. A dentist had offered to fill the gap, she revealed, but she had declined the offer, declaring an aversion to anything artificial. By '71, however, a denture had appeared. At this time the band, influenced by Scientology's stress on effective communication, had become more image-conscious, and Likky's falsie might have been a sign of this. Unlike Rose, she was a committed follower of L. Ron's teachings.

Before—and after



But there were limits, it seems. When, less than a year later, Mike took the stage at Bickershaw Festival sporting a shorty haircut and tank-top, it was a bridge too far for Likky, who reportedly ticked him off for slavish obeisance to the whims of fashion. By the end of that year, she was gone—from the band, and from Glen Row.

Rose had left the year before, of course. It may be significant that, shortly after she and Likky became bona fide band members, they ceased being girlfriends. Or, then again, it may not. What seems sure is that they allowed their own views on how the ISB was developing to influence them in a way they might never have done if they'd simply remained appendages of Robin and Mike. Rose's disenchantment with Scientology and the *U* debacle undoubtedly hastened her departure. She's always maintained that she had no real ambitions as a performer, other than to become a decent bassist. Likky, by contrast, developed her rôle within the band considerably.

For the *U* stage show, she pitched in with Stone Monkey on the dance side, and contributed her first song, the tremulous *I Know You*, which she performed both onstage and on record entirely solo. By this time, also, she was singing the occasional lead vocal on songs by both Robin and Mike. In the wake of *U*, dance or pantomimic interludes became a feature of String Band concerts, especially after Malcolm joined the band in early '71. Likky took a prominent rôle in these *disguisements*, portraying Eve in the Garden of Eden, a Chinese princess (in *Willow Pattern Song*), a stork, and much more. At the same time, she was bringing the odd song into the repertoire. *Cosmic Boy* and *Sunday Song* were co-written with Mike, but the haunting and unrecorded *Secret Temple* was all her own work.

Likky, it's fair to say, was not an especially accomplished musician. In accord with ISB philosophy, she coaxed musical sounds out of a variety of instruments with minimal technique. By 1972, however, her instrumental duties were effectively confined to live performance. Her only instrumental contribution to *Earthsap* was a bit of bass on *Seagull*. Perhaps, then,

## SHE TOOK A PROMINENT RÔLE. PORTRAYING EVE, A CHINESE PRINCESS AND A STORK

her departure at the end of that year was on the cards, particularly since we'd reached the era of the on-stage roadies, when Stan and Jack, as well as Janet and Suzie, would appear from the wings whenever an instrumental gap needed plugging.

The circumstances of her leaving remain obscure, however. Her absence from the Autumn '72 tour was explained as her having taken a "holiday". But there was every chance, we were reassured, that she'd be climbing back on board in due course. It was not to be. No-one has hitherto been very illuminating on the subject, but it seems likely that Likky was simply feeling the need to move on. Her close involvement with Scientology caused her to move down near East Grinstead, where the Church has its UK headquarters. Remarkably, she was pictured in an advertisement for Scientology that appeared in the music papers around this time, skipping through flowery fields and looking as winsomely happy as a "Clear" should be. (*beGLAD* sadly has no copy of this in its archive; if anyone out there in Stringland has one they'd be willing to lend or donate, we'd be very pleased to hear from them.)

It's been suggested that she "went on to work briefly with Woody Woodmansey's band *U Boat*" (*Record Collector* 1994). Woodmansey is best known as D. Bowie's drummer in the *Spiders From Mars*; like the *Spiders'* pianist Mike Garfield, he was a Scientologist (Garfield co-wrote *Glancing Love* with Malcolm Le M for the *Hard Rope* album). Only the Scientology connection could explain such an implausible collaboration, and in fact it may simply have been a one-off. The *NME* carried a sniffy little item in March 1974 about a "bunch of Scientologists who gigged together at the Adeline Genee Theatre, East Grinstead last week". The accompanying photo shows Garson, Woodmansey, Ray Boyer (ex-Procol Harum guitarist)—and Likky, dressed as ever in something wispy with a tambourine at her feet. This may well have been the last contemporary photo of Likky to appear in the music press.



"STAR MUSICIANS At Adeline Genee" said the headline that arrived with this unrecognising picture. It refers to a bunch of Scientologists who gigged together at the A.G. Theatre, East Grinstead, last week. Included are Mike Garson, from the *Spiders From Mars*, Woody Woodmansey who used to be in *Spiders*, Likky McNeochrome who used to be in the *Incredible String Band* and Ray Boyer, who used to be in *Procol Harum*. The caption was written by Sarah Nettles, who used to play with himself in the bath till he discovered a *Burton Way Of Life*.

*NME*—March 1974

"Likki is writing songs and singing and looks like she may be singing in public soon," Mike (Heron) reported in a letter to a fan in May of that year. But by the end of the year she had left for LA, and was soon in contact with Robin and Janet, who had moved to Hollywood after the break-up of the ISB. In May 1975 she wrote (again, to a fan—the ISB were remarkably diligent correspondents): "I've been over here in Hollywood five months now and like it lots. It's very hot today. I miss the soft British flowers sometimes. Yes I am singing lots. I work with

my friend called David Zimian. He is from London and we are both studying Scientology. I did a big course in Scientology when I left the band—it really helps your communication—especially if you are a singer.”

By November she and Zimian had assembled a band, called the Silver Moon Band, in which she was “mostly singing and playing some bass.” For her birthday, Zimian had bought her “a beautiful little electric bass of [her] very own”. “We’re doing lots of rehearsing ready to start winter gigs,” she confided to a regular correspondent. “I’m so excited.”

It’s not clear whether the Silver Moon Band ever got off the ground. Probably not, as it was reported that round about the same time she and Zimian were in discussions with Malenie Schofield about forming a band to be called Seven And The Stars. However, Likky’s silvery tonsils finally found their way onto vinyl again when she contributed some backing vocals to the Merry Band’s debut album *Journey’s Edge* in 1977. By this time she had met, married and was playing with the guitarist Brian Lambert, who also turns up on a couple of tracks on *Journey’s Edge*. They tied the knot in December 1976. She was still moving in Scientology-muso circles, and accounted the jazz-rock pianist Chick Corea as a “dear friend”. Corea’s two children were the delighted recipients of two paintings of hers, “a duck in some lillies for his little girl, a toad in some primroses for his boy”.

By the early Eighties she and Brian had parted, and it looks like her involvement with music ended with the separation. According to an article in *Dirty Linen* (Feb/Mar 1991), she had “reportedly worked as a waitress and cloakroom attendant”, by which we’re invited to conclude that she’d fallen on hard times. Outstanding royalties for her ISB songwriting were, however, unclaimed.

There is some evidence that her health and perhaps state of mind were in decline at this time. A friend of hers and Brian’s recalled that, towards the end of their relationship, she looked “physically exhausted and depressed, like she had the whole universe on her shoulders”—but this was on the basis of a single isolated encounter while they were in the process of moving house, a experience that can leave any normal individual exhausted and depressed!

Nevertheless, such rumours are all we have. We rake them over for meaning, like solemn mantics studying the entrails of chickens. In 1989, an item in *Q* quoted “a former String Band associate” as the source of the “heading for the Arizona desert” story, though it’s unclear when this journey was supposed to have taken place. The *termini post quem* and *ante quem* enclose virtually the entire Eighties. A correspondent to the Be Glad web page claimed to have encountered her on the streets of LA, hollow-eyed and disshevelled and bothering passers-by for money. She allegedly recognised him as an old acquaintance and fled in shame. Again, a dateless anecdote. The last verified contact with Likky was a letter from her to sister Frances some ten years ago—which at least seems to postdate the desert expedition.

And there, alas, the story peters out. “What happened to Licorice?” is one of the commonest questions fielded by *beGLAD* and other String-related enterprises. There’s undoubtedly a sense of sadness in Stringland that she has disappeared so completely from view, and in circumstances that strongly suggest she was down on her luck. Some, clearly, remember her as “carrying the weight of the universe on her shoulders”. Others, who knew her in happier times, still speak of her as “utterly charming, full of fun, optimism and the joys of living”. And that, obviously, is how we’d prefer to remember her. And though, in so doing, we risk reducing her from a complex human being to a girl-shaped screen onto which we project our youthful fancies and ideals, it’s fair to surmise that this is how she herself would have preferred to be remembered. Likky of the dancing feet and dryad hair, who lost a tooth and found the lasting love of many a Stringfan across the whole round world. Goodbye, sweet waif—until the next hello.

## Licorice on Vinyl

5000 SPIRITS  
voice, finger cymbals

THE HANGMAN’S BEAUTIFUL  
DAUGHTER  
voice, finger cymbals

WEE TAM & THE BIG HUGE  
voice, percussion, Irish harp

CHANGING HORSES  
voice, guitar, organ, kazoo, percussion

I LOOKED UP  
voice, bass, hammered dulcimer, drums

U  
voice, spoons, drums, guitar

BE GLAD FOR THE SONG HAS  
NO ENDING  
voice, recorder, organ, mandolin,  
kazoo, percussion

LIQUID ACROBAT AS REGARDS  
THE AIR  
voice, organ, bass, pipe organ,  
autoharp, harmonium, kazoo, spoons,  
bodhran, percussion

EARTHSPAN  
voice, bass

IN CONCERT  
voice, bass, tenor guitar, spoons,  
bodhran, percussion

Thanks to Chris Taylor for excerpts from  
the Licorice Letters

I'M  
calling  
to  
YOU

## LIKKY, I NEVER KNEW YOU..

Allan Frewin  
hasn't forgotten

VERY MANY YEARS AGO, webbed and sticky from the spawn of the seminal Sixties, floating free on the storm-tossed wreckage of my bed, I used to conjure dream-girls for my secret delight in my seismic and amniotic head. Well, didn't we all, my boys, one way or another? One of these girls was Licorice McKechnie, arch-hippy lady with the angel voice and the amazing gaze of a lysergic Mona Lisa festooned in gypsy finery. When I first read that Likky McKechnie had decamped to California, I wrote a little lament to mark the occasion. It was called Christina.

Christina, though both land and sea divide us still we sail the sky on a ship of air and music your song still sings love's rhythm through my life oh, and you're here again...

There was more, but you get the gist. Tossed like a new-born seal by the hormonal ocean breakers of my teens, it seemed to me that Likky was the ultimate fantasy woman for the week-end-hippy tie-dyed freaky-straight urban urchin that I was. Like Goldberry stepping out over the threshold of Tom Bombadil's enchanted house, she arrived unannounced one Summer afternoon, slipping somehow through into the "real" world for my wonder and for my delight.

Hard choices had to be made in those heady, unready, single-beddy days: was it to be Melanie Safka? Sandy Denny? Licorice? Or would I be feeling strong enough to entertain the phantom presence of Grace Slick? Seldom so—scary American siren singing out lustily her Banshee wails upon the Charybdis of the Californian coast. Likky was less of a threat; one wouldn't be dashed to pieces on her rocks, one would sit at her feet and fall into an eternal sorcerous sleep of beatific bliss. Or so it seemed back then.

There is an alchemy that is created for me when male and female voices twine together in harmony. (Maybe this is because most interactions between the sexes have all the harmony of a pram-load of colical infants bouncing down the Odessa steps—or not, as the case may be.) I've always loved bands where the boys and the girls sing together: early Fairport Convention, Jefferson Airplane, Mr Fox, Judy Henske and Jerry



Yester, Trader Horne, Steeleye Span, Waterson/Carthy, the String Band—name your own purveyors of the divine cadence.

I first heard Likky and Robin in a record shop in Hastings. Job's Tears. Hello, I thought, here are *voices*. Here's poetry. Here's a door into heaven. Here's heart's-ease at the end of a long quest. Back at the holiday cottage at Camber Sands my father declared none of them able to sing a note to save their lives. He much preferred Black Sabbath. Trust me. He did. Would I lie to you? My father didn't like the String Band. The blessing of parental disapproval was invoked. The circle was complete. Nirvana attained!

## THE LUCKY DOG!

I can still listen to Likky singing stratospherically of the golden book of the golden game and feel quite convinced that this is not a thing of this earth. This is the stuff that dreams are made of. And then Mike joins in and the three of them call to us from over the high green wall of the magic garden and we pass through the golden gates and never come back. Well, some of us at least. Some of us find the whole thing silly and pretentious and dopey, but we're not here to talk about them, are we? They can go off with their Cliff Richard records and their *Best Of Middle Of The Road* albums and their Bee Gees compilations, and good luck to 'em, forsooth.

My first encounter with the visual Likky was on the front/back-back/front (take your pick—I almost can't remember which came first nowadays) cover of *Hangman's*. I sort of assumed she was the beautiful daughter in question. It was the smile. No, it was the hair. No, it was the rainbow-hued cloak-thing. No, it was the hands clasped around the dog. The lucky dog. No, it was the delirious fact of her sitting *alfresco* on the dried and crinkled leaves of some past Autumn. No, it was the entourage of strangely-garbed attendants that posed in her wake. No, it was the memory of that voice in my head. Nurse! The screens! It's happening again. It's all coming back to me!

Actually, and in absolute sooth, the wistful Licorice-led sighs of my dreamy adolescence were never born of unrequited lustful longings, nor by entertainments of ephemeral erotica. I didn't fancy her. She was beyond *fancying*. Unless, of course, the desire of a face and a voice and an aura has animal undertones below the acuity of the human ear to detect. In fact, members of the jury, the very first time I thought of her in ways other than through the refining-glass of the chaste delicacies of Courtly Love was relatively recently, when, in an article in *beGLAD* (I can't be



bothered to clamber into the attic to look it up) [Issue 11, you idle toad—*no-nonsense Ed*], someone commented on the way she would waft around the countryside in the 1960s with no clothes on, much to the dismay of the locals, for whom walking abroad naked consisted of leaving home without a sensible hat and knitted scarf. Cor! I thought—Likky with her kit off, strewth! After which I went into a mock-swoon on the living room carpet until revived some time later by the application of a cold flannel to the back of my neck by my beloved Claudia—sharply followed, it must be said, by some rather searching questions.

Then there was the cover of *Changing Horses*. I had that pinned up on my bedroom wall, you know. Remember those plastic sheaths you could buy to keep your album covers pristine? I'd staple them to the wall beside my bed and slip a constantly-changing gallery of album covers into them. Let me think. *Changing Horses*, yes. *Stand Up*. *Lumpy Gravy*. *Trout Mast Replica*, of course. *A Song For Me*. *Unicorn*. *Hangman's*, naturally. *In The Court Of The Crimson King*. *Alchemy*. *HMS Donovan*. I'd like to see the CD generation do that without the aid of a powerful microscope, by Jove! As I said in the very first thing I wrote for *beGLAD*, you don't just buy into the music—you buy into the whole package: sights sounds and sensualities. And there they were, up a tree in an English garden. And there they were, curiously blurred on the back cover of *I Looked Up*; Likky smiling that enigmatic smile (yes, I know about the tooth), her face shining like the face of an angel.

And then the songs began to emerge. I Know You, sweet and simple as running water. Blodeuwedd's child finding the perfect balance between being birds and flowers. [See our etymological postscript—*Ed*] Cosmic Boy, with a grinning Mr Punch at the piano, lolloping over the ivories like a March hare on speed. Oh, and I nearly forgot the giggle on *This Moment*. If that doesn't fill a fellow with the melancholy thrill of unattainable sweetness, then I don't know what would. And the whole "thingummywhojemmyflippery" on *The Juggler's Song*. Oh, children of the lost times, lament for things gone by—we'll never see that kind of elfin brightness again, live we ever so long.

I saw them performing *Sunday Song* in the Drury Lane Theatre umpty-squiddly years ago. I went there with Doz and Rob and Christine Headland. We arrived late, thanks to Christine's hair. Don't ask. Someone was banging a huge drum. "Love is god, is god, oh, sweet joy!" Likky departed shortly thereafter and the Incredible String Band was never the same again.

Where is she now, Christina Licorice Likky McKechnie, other than in my head and in my CD collection and between the pages of *beGLAD* magazine? They say she wandered off into the desert. Many years ago. Maybe so. I have a theory, you know. Captain Beefheart lives in the same desert. I believe they met. I believe they are out there making strange and oblique music together. I don't care if it's not true. I'd rather believe an enchanting lie than a toothless truth, any day of the week. And if you don't believe me, just open your heart and your ears and your sunset windows and listen at twilight-time to the voices of the West Wind. She's in there sometimes. I'd swear she is. You just have to listen and believe.

20



## Etymology—or Who Says We're Not Thorough?

We know that Likky acquired her nickname partly because of her fondness for liquorice, a chewy black comestible sold in sticks. Your Editor remembers calling it Spanish where he grew up; and Tennyson in *Queen Mary* (1875) boasts: "English carrot's better than Spanish licorice." Just lie down for a while, Alfie... As any fule kno, the stuff is made out of the evaporated juice of the rhizome of the marsh-plant *glycyrrhiza glabra*. Our heroine's preferred spelling, Licorice, is an earlier variant of the word, which also refers to a plant of the pea family, Wild Licorice (*astragalus frigidus*). This, you will notice, creates a nice symmetry, with the '68-'71 period ISB consisting of two birds—Robin Williamson and Mike Heron—and two flowers, Rose and Licorice. Poetic, or what...? According to one Glen Row communitard, Likky took a mischievous pleasure in intimating that the unrelated adjective *lickerish* means "lecherous".

*Next issue, we hope to bring you an exclusive intrview with Likky's sister Frances...*



It was a warm still summer evening all over the quiet countryside which humped and wrinkled under the light of Venus, the pale evening star. There was a new moon and Pan was on the loose. He was stampeding across

the fields, taking running jumps at anyone he might meet. He was feeling even more sharp and mischievous than usual, that goat-footed scatterer of nymphs. But where were the Increds, who were as close to him as the curls on his shaggy loins? Where were they, who should be chasing across the peppermint fields, searching for flowers in the long night? He sat down in a small grotto to think and soon his eyes twinkled with merry mischief and his great laugh woke the birds in the forest, where they sang as though it was still day...

Truth to tell (and it shames me to say so) Robin and Mike and Rose and Licorice were all at the flat practising. That is to say, with the two girls holding Mike down, they were just about to start when...

In burst Fate and Ferret, all hard frenzy, and before Robin could say "Almighty Pan!" they burst out: "It's the fuzz! The fuzz! The fuzz are coming! They've got a 'fudge-making-in-public' charge!" Was it bluff? The company froze, listening for the sound of those heavy footfalls. Mike was the first to break. With a cry of "Aargh! They won't take me alive!" he dived for the window and shinned down with the speed of long practice.

Clutching her broomstick, Licorice followed. Trying to cool it, Robin stepped over the windowsill and glided to the street below as does thistle-down waft in the summer winds when that season comes upon us. Rose slipped out of the room after Robin, but not before winding up all the clocks, dusting the furniture ("I hadn't expected visitors") and leaving a note for Joe which read:

Dear Joe, there are four steaks under the grill. Do try to eat at least three so they will not be wasted and I think you need a little fattening. Tell Angie I'll see her whenever possible. Feed the cat. Dust the furniture. Keep the guitars in tune. While Mike and Robin are still away please put up the nice curtains Licorice and I wanted. We may be some while. Love,

Rose.



# i say...

The Voice of Stringfandom!

## Millennial musings

Dear beGLAD

The Millennium concert in Edinburgh: I felt I couldn't miss it, even though I had to get to Bristol next morning as I had some work to do. All the travel arrangements went remarkably well—British Rail, or whatever myriad companies make up the rail network these days, came up trumps and on time. As for the concert, I'm really glad I was there, but I have to admit to coming away with mixed feelings.

There was obvious anticipation in the air, and it was good to see such a full house, but there seemed to be something missing, and the audience was a little subdued. The guest spots were superb—some wonderful guitar playing by Bert Jansch, and Billy Connolly was simply outstanding. Perhaps it was the edge to his performance due to his nervousness at playing for his heroes, or the fact that he wasn't doing his usual material, but he was sparking and crackling like a frosty bonfire.

In contrast, the performance of our heroes lacked that edge, and choice of material—or, more importantly, the material not chosen—must have disappointed more than a few, me included. Whilst it was not really unexpected that the emphasis was on material drawn from Robin and Clive's early days, there was precious little from the "glory days" of the ISB, and none of it from Robin's repertoire.

The other problem, and it could be said that it was a fundamental one throughout their time together, was that Mike didn't contribute much in the way of accompaniment to Robin and Clive. Unfortunately, it was working the other way as well, and Robin didn't complement Mike at all in the wonderfully inventive ways he did in the early days. I have to say that Mike was the major disappointment, and he seems content just to strum along where once he fingerpicked, and his voice is decidedly dodgy at times.

Robin was also a bit of a disappointment in that there was little magic in his performance, and instead he seemed content to stick to the safe realms of old pre- or early ISB material and Celtic stalwarts like The Blackbird. I've seen him many times over the last few years, and he seems to be increasingly settling for a safe and comfortable life. It was a shame, therefore, that for this one-off end-of-an-era concert he couldn't dig out a few of his own jewels.

Perhaps someone can explain in an article in *beGLAD* why Robin has distanced himself so much from his glory days in the ISB, and even from his time with the Merry Band—I'm listening to *Live At McCabe's* as I write this, and to my mind his period with the Merry

Band was musically as productive as his time with the ISB, if not as emotionally resonant for me. What is the nature of "the dream that I dreamed on the world" that was so "long and dark and deep"?

Anyway, back to the concert. Despite all the aforementioned misgivings I did enjoy the concert a lot, and was impressed with the contributions made by Lawson Dando, which were very sympathetic to the music, unlike those made by Mike's Acoustic Band members at the reunion concert in London.

All in all I came away from the concert feeling that an era had really ended, probably as much to do with where I'm at right now as with the events on stage. I always seem to get mixed emotions when I'm thinking of the ISB or reading *beGLAD*. Their music, and Robin's in particular, is so deeply ingrained in my psyche that it is an essential part of me, but my outer life is out of synch with this inner landscape and never seems to match up to the life that I imagined could be possible listening to such music and reading of their lifestyle. One day I may resolve the two, but I guess I'll have to read a few more issues of *beGLAD* before that happens.

Keep up the good work—I look forward to the next issue—and may the road ever rise before you.

Dave Barrett  
Bath,  
Somerset

**The trouble with any event designed to honour the past is that it confronts us with the reality of passing time, and with the gulf between the Platonic Idea of the good life and our inadequate attempts to realise it in our own lives. Discuss, using examples from *beGLAD* and other great works of literature...—Ed**

## Ticket pleas

Dear beGLAD

Good to see the ISB back together. Went to see them up in Edinburgh on the 30th of December and there lies a tale. We couldn't find our tickets on the day, so we made speed to the Virgin Megastore in Edinburgh only to find there was no way they could check the day we purchased the tickets. Then it was off to the Cathedral to see if the promoters could help in any way.

The first man we bumped into was Mark Anstey. We told him our tale of woe but there

was nothing he could do (no guest list, as he wasn't the promoter), so it was left to providence. We went to drown our sorrows in the local bars and decide what to do when the doors opened. The last bar we were in, we decided to have a bite to eat, and, would you believe it, in walked Malcolm Le Maistre and friend. I got my courage up to tell him our tale, and as luck would have it his friend had two spare tickets. We bought the tickets off him and proceeded to the Cathedral for a night we'd waited for for God knows how many years (and one we thought we'd miss out on for the eternity it took between 5pm and 7.30 when we got the tickets to actually see our heroes). So there you go!

Yours sincerely,  
Eddy & Joyce Collins  
Sunderland  
Co Durham

## Myrrh—the truth

Dear beGLAD

Did anyone catch John Peel's mention of the ISB on *Home Truths* recently? There'd been some item on myrrh (the substance, not Robin's record) and correspondence following. Peel hazarded it was something people might "burn while listening to the Incredible String Band's Greatest Hits"! I wrote putting him in the picture—we're all still here, burning or not burning incense, and the band are alive and well after a recent reunion concert. I also made reference to his enduring love of Donovan's music, and asked if he himself was given to burning incense whilst listening to Donovan. Maybe that's why I didn't get my letter in the programme...

Alan St John  
Newcastle-upon-Tyne

**A curious and possibly related incident: when I called by at my local print shop on *beGLAD* business recently, the staff-person, noting the String connection, claimed to have heard Peel play an ISB song on his radio show earlier that week, and speak in glowing terms of the band. "You're almost certainly mistaken, madam," I replied snootily, recalling Peel's latter-day preference for the noises made by bored adolescents with Portastudios. Later that day, however, word reached me from Pig's Whisker that Peel had indeed played *Worlds They Rise And Fall*, and rhapsodised over our heroes. "They sound so contemporary," he's reported to have observed. Remarkable!—dazed Ed**

# isay...

## Candour or slander

Dear beGLAD

Well, no. 15 was yet another excellent issue. I especially enjoyed the Jeff Rockwell memoir and the thorough and erudite piece on the Merry Band. However, I felt I had to write to respond to one of the published letters. While I would completely agree with Adrian's postscript to Hartmut Bogen's letter that a fanzine should never be sycophantic (which beGLAD certainly is not) [We do try—bootlicking Ed], I do feel that distorted views such as those of Tom Gubler have no place in the magazine.

I felt his attack on Mike was uncalled for and totally unfair. When he stated towards the end of his letter that he was *not* one of those ISB "fans" who had "been stoned for the last thirty years", I did wonder exactly where he was during the late Seventies and early Eighties when it was not just difficult but well nigh impossible for icons of the hippie era, no matter how popular, to maintain any sort of profile or achieve the same level of success if (as Mike was) they were competing in the mainstream rock area. Robin, for all his achievements, was (as Tom hinted) never trying to be part of the rock scene after the ISB split. A fair amount of Mike's work in that difficult late Seventies period, especially *Diamond Of Dreams*, was scarcely targeted purely at "the left-over, ageing fans of the ISB for their audience", as Tom maintains. Mike certainly suffered some bad luck during his solo career, it is true (particularly as regards the fine 1980 Casablanca album), but work such as *Reputation* and (as Adrian said) *Mystics* were of a very high standard, and did reasonably well under the circumstances. Mike's success as a songwriter however easily maintained his profile: in addition to penning a near-Top Forty hit single—something the ISB never had—for Manfred Mann's Earth Band (*Don't Kill It, Carol*) and contributing the closing track to their transatlantic Top Ten album *The Roaring Silence* (with Singing The Dolphin), he also wrote the closer to Bonnie Tyler's US gold album *It's A Heartache* (Baby Goodnight), and also had songs recorded by Meal Ticket and other artists.

Tom is so off-beam, I actually wondered if he wasn't being completely tongue-in-cheek. It was when I read the expression "minor tours" in his letter that I began to think it was all a joke (minor tours—minotaurs??!!)

Yours sincerely  
Mike Swann  
Sudbury  
Suffolk

Tom invoked his Australian heritage of plain speaking when he wrote his letter, and I think we can take his claim to be "a fan" at face value. Even in the gently meandering river of rodomontade that is beGLAD, there is, I think, room for the occasional choppy cross-current. Contributors should take note, however, that the editors reserve the right to delete any reference to [deleted]—easygoing Ed

# Views

EXTRA

Limo with chums Riff and Ufo, formerly of the Shiny Gnomes and featured on the new Discolor album



## DISCOLOR Soundbath Installation

September Gurls SGCD24

Soundbath Installation by Discolor? Crazy name, crazy guys, no doubt. Limo is the driving force behind this little number and we've met Limo before in many incarnations, from the String Band covers of Fit And Limo to the electrics of Shiny Gnomes. I'd just seen the latest manifestation of Gong a day before your editor sent me this CD and I was immediately struck by a certain Gong-ness to it. It may be ambient but not all the instruments are of a synthesised nature, which is what we have come to expect of music bearing that term. Here we see excellent use of cello, with cowbells, tambourines, piano and pedal steel guitars living in peace and harmony with the micromog, Farfisa organ and, bless its divine sound, the Fender Rhodes. In fact the cello/violin combo imbues the whole CD with an organic melancholy more often to be found in classical music. Yeah, so the vocals can be a bit twee and annoying but they don't dominate so it's no big deal. Should you buy it? Well, it's not indispensable (what is?), but if do, you won't be disappointed with the intelligent ambient Discolor's Soundbath Installation.

Andy Roberts

## MIKE SWANN

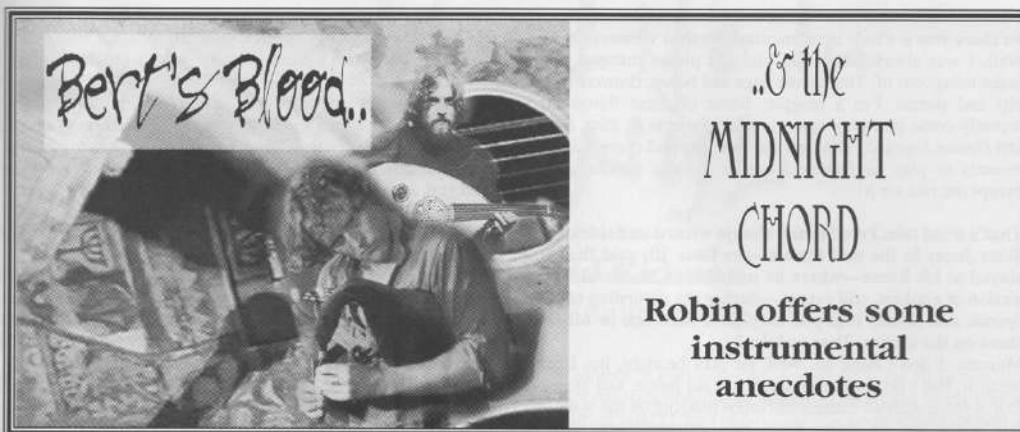
Songs In Summer: The Best of Mike Swann

Cygnett CYGCD 1001

This CD collects together 19 of Mike's recordings from a period of almost 20 years. The earliest are four tracks from Mike's debut set of 1980 (*Child Of The Moon*), the latest are five from 1995's *Yesterday's Skies*, though the compositions

themselves mostly date from many years earlier than their actual time of recording. *Songs In Summer* serves as both a good introduction to, and a good overview of, Mike's work. The obviously low-fi nature of the recordings (and the consequent sonic deficiencies) doesn't really matter, in the context of the consistency of Mike's songwriting. Having said that, I still find there's a certain elusiveness about Mike's writing, that even after three or four hearings it's not easy to get the full measure of. This may be partly due to the sometime distraction of the musical settings; for the present, for me, the songs that communicate best are those with the simpler or more considered arrangements. Most of the songs have a certain amount of instrumental backing to Mike's own guitar—electric guitar/bass/drums and/or keyboards, but generally speaking these elements are used more convincingly and with more sophistication on the later recordings, it seems. Paradoxically, the recent *Yesterday's Skies* (recorded in 1995) perhaps comes the closest to evoking the spirit and soundworld of the ISB. But I also rather liked the Frozen Years ambience of *When The Dreamer Comes*, and the compelling imagery (and authentic Summer '70 re-creation of that early Pink Floyd organ sound) on *Songs In Summer* (it even rhymes with Ummagumma!). It's the tracks from 1986's *Proper Gander Licence Lander*, with their often over-dominant keyboard timbres, that I find least convincing generally. Mike himself acknowledges in his insert notes that he's happier working in the studio than playing live, which may also be an indirect reflection of the often intimate privacy of the songs themselves, which though personal are not exclusive. Mike's two anti-war songs are compelling in their relative simplicity; *Empty Walls* benefits from its sparse whistle accompaniment. The booklet helpfully contains notes on the recordings, as well as extracts from the lyrics. Worth investigating, certainly.

David Kidman



*beGLAD* had the opportunity in early April to run Robin to ground at Cardiff's Albany Studios, and he kindly agreed to answer a shoal of obscure and impertinent enquiries on various aspects of his art. See page 45 for his views on *U*. Here, however, Robin sheds some fascinating light on his celebrated practice of playing every instrument devised by human hand.

The vast variety of instruments used by the ISB in their heyday was of course integral to the band's mystique. It is undoubtedly part of their enduring legacy to the performance of popular music in the late 20th century—and, of course, beyond. On the folk scene, certainly, mastery of only one instrument is nowadays regarded as something of an oddity, a sign of either obsessive devotion or a singular lack of ambition. Expanding the possibilities of music was what the ISB were always about, and multi-instrumentality was a particularly exciting aspect of that. And although all members of the band, at least up to 1972 or thereabouts, eagerly picked up whatever was to hand, it's an area in which Robin was always perceived as the motivating force. *beGLAD* wondered how it all came about...

**T**HERE WERE TWO WAVES TO IT. There was the Edinburgh junkshop wave, 'cause you could find all kinds of stuff in junkshops left over from colonial times, in the way of gongs and bells and so on. But the next big wave was finding a shop in New York which stocked instruments from all over the world. The grandson of the original owner still runs it in Greenwich Village to this day. And that was where a lot of my things came from, and also from places round about Central London and elsewhere. The percussion came from London. The Chinese reed stuff came from San Francisco—I used to hunt around Chinatown and see what there was.

**When you were shopping for instruments, was it a case of "I need a particular instrument to render a particular sound", or were you just hoovering up whatever caught your fancy?**  
Just hoovering up, yes. That's been my theory all along.

**Legend has it that you brought an impressive pile of exotic instruments back from Morocco in 1966.**

A very small pile, really. There was just the gimbri and a pair of small hand drums...and a few flutes. Just what you could carry in a knapsack, really. Plus the oud, which you couldn't carry in

a knapsack. But basically I only brought back from Morocco what I could carry.

**Had you taken a bow to the gimbri while in Morocco, or was that a later innovation?**

Later. It was after I began playing the sarangi, which I used a big bow for; though for the gimbri I always used a double bass bow.

**Did you use exotic instruments simply to achieve specific effects in performance, or did you actually play them for recreation?**

Oh yeah. We used to sit round and play them for sport, right enough. But the fact of the matter is this, that certain instruments you have to be born and raised to. I really believe this. One of them's the sitar, and another's the oud. I don't think that anyone could really play the oud that didn't grow up in an oud-playing culture. That's why the harp is so great for me, because it goes right back into the ancestral corpuscles; whereas the oud, wonderful though it is, will always be a very exotic instrument from the land of the Arabian Nights. The oud goes even further back than that, through ancient Persia and right back to dynastic Egypt, long long ago. But it's somebody's else's ancestry, you see.

**You need to feel a sense of cultural connection with an instrument?**

Well, I feel that now, but in the old days I was quite happy to have a go at anything. But that's why you can't take it to any great depth, because to all intents and purposes you're making noises on something rather than playing it to its full potential.

**Did you ever pick up the sitar?**

No, never. I didn't see the need, because Mike seemed to have it covered pretty well. He did some pretty nice things on the sitar. I wish he'd pick it up again.

**Getting very specific here. I remember that you took to playing what looked like a solid-bodied electric cello on the Autumn 1971 tour. You played it on Sunday Song, but as far as I know you never featured it again. What's the story?**

It's one that I made myself, using an old cello neck.

**It looked pretty space-age...**

Ha! It was! Pretty Trecky... It was painted purple. I made a couple of electric violins out of various odds and ends, too. There was one that was painted red, and another that was painted green. They had various electronic innards, tone controls and the like.

**So there was a whole armamentarium that we never saw...**  
Well, I was always collecting bits and pieces that you could make things out of. There were bags and boxes, drawers full of bits and pieces. I'm a magpie. Some of these things have recently come into play again in such projects as *Ring Dance* and *Dream Journals*. They get dug out. The oud came out again recently to play on *Dream Journals*. I'd dig out the gimbrì except the rats ate it!

**That's a sad tale. Pete Stanley (banjo wizard and sidekick of Wizz Jones in the mid Sixties—see issue 10) said that you stayed at his house—where he maintained his sizeable collection of gimbris, still extant—during the recording of *5000 Spirits*, and thinks that you may have used one or other of them on the album. True or false?**

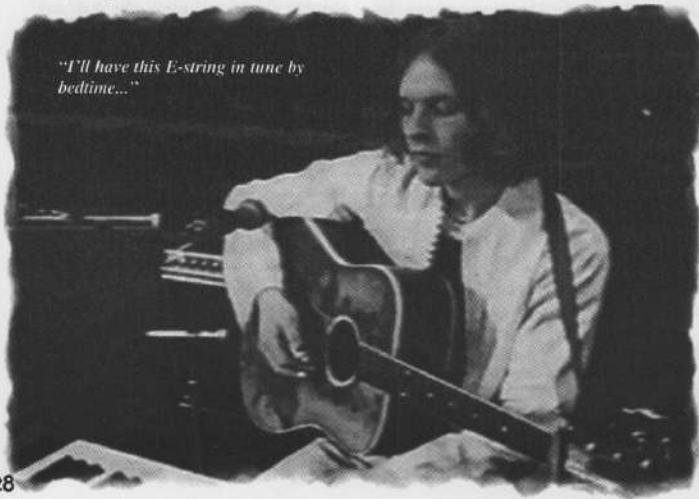
Mmmm...I don't think so. Well, he may be right, but I can't recall it. But I do remember staying at his house, and sleeping in this room with all manner of banjos hanging on the wall, and one night one of them made this extraordinary noise—Pling!—all by itself. So I got up, and I fingered it, and there was no way that noise could have been made in that tuning—it was a chord. There was no open chord on any of the banjos. It was a fourth or fifth position chord, and it played entirely by itself, and I thought, "My, that's great!"

**The force was with you! But still with gimbris... The so-called bass gimbrì on *Spirits*: Pete surmises it might have been one of his that you fitted out with cello strings.**

Jesus, I can't remember anything about that... Maybe that was one of his. It might have been a bigger one than what I had. They do come in various sizes.

**The gimbrì and the sitar sort of defined the exotic quality of String Band music in the late Sixties, but the legendary Levin guitar, sumptuously decorated with intricate coloured designs, ran them close. Tell us a bit about it.**

A guy called Barney had the guitar originally, and then he decided to give it to me. He was going to become a monk, though later he didn't become a monk, but by that time he'd given the guitar away. So that guitar was used by me and Bert [Jansch] when we were sharing rooms. The inside of it has still got the evidence of a nosebleed that Bert once had, which all went inside the guitar. There are large brown blotches inside the guitar to this day, which are actually Bert Jansch's blood! As for the painting... Well, I stripped the polish from the front, and covered it with various kinds of ink and crayon designs, but they didn't last past the repairs that John Bailey did in the early Seventies. He just took them off! I'd rather he had kept them on, really.



"I'll have this E-string in tune by bedtime..."

**Did he remove them without consultation?**

Yeah... He did a nice job on the guitar apart from that!

**Why the repairs? Just general wear and tear?**

General wear and tear, yeah... I glued bits of piano keys on it at one point. There used to be pianos lying around rusting on tips. And of course the ivory all falls off, and you can take it away with you. I had bags of it!

**The Levin was retired from active service around 1972. Any particular reason?**

It was devilishly hard to tune, always, even with new pegs and so on. I got the Gibson Dove at that time, which was a bit easier to tune. I just figured it was time to get a new guitar. It had its various charms, the Levin, but it was very hard to actually operate because it buzzed and hummed and rattled...

**I thought that was intentional!**

Well, it did buzz intentionally on the bridge, but it buzzed unintentionally nearly everywhere else...

**An instrument you used once and never again, and which has engendered a good deal of interest and speculation, was the voice sitar, as featured on *Invocation on U*. What's the story behind that?**

There was an extraordinary guy I bumped into in, I think, San Francisco. Greg Heat was his name. He was an electronics wizard. He thought up a number of things that later were used to greater or lesser success. This was in the days before the microchip got going, of course. He was still doing things with wiring, and one of the things he invented was the e-bow, which was a thing you could put on the guitar strings and it would give you instant sustain. But you had to hold it in your hand, and pick like this [demonstrates], and it would give you instant and unending sustain. So that was a minor success, but rapidly replaced by various boxes which you operate with your feet. He had a couple of other things at the time. He invented a drone that went round and round forever, a kind of wooden box powered by a battery and which had strings, and once you set the strings going they would just continue in endless feedback. And the other thing was the voice sitar, which you plugged inside the centre of a piano... which was quite a nice idea, quite an interesting sound. You wouldn't think of doing it that way now; you'd do it in some other way with algorithms...

## IT HAD ITS VARIOUS CHARMS, THE LEVIN, BUT IT WAS DEVILISHLY HARD TO TUNE...

**Was that model the only one in existence?**

Yes.

**And you never used it again...**

Well, it could only be used on the piano, and it was used in the studio. I didn't own it. I did own one of his drone boxes, but God knows what became of it. I've still got an e-bow somewhere as well.

**What became of the voice sitar?**

He never developed it. It was a prototype.

**So the track is unique in recorded music?**

It is, yes.



# My Life In VINYL

David Kidman

spins back through String history

**S**TRANGE, ISN'T IT, BUT WHEN a particular group, artist or piece of music has become special to you, you'd think it'd be so easy to recall the first-time hearing, that blinding flash of magical inspiration and cosmic enlightenment which started you out on the Golden Road to discovery and Unlimited Devotion? Most fanzines have a feature where subscribers recall what turned them on to whoever, but for me it's often impossible to access the particular memory or experience generating that revelation. Life just ain't always like that, especially when you're so much into music—soundbites are like seeds scattered around in the consciousness: some germinate and prosper, some just don't take at all, some fly on into the wind and may get blown back another day, some lie dormant for ages awaiting the right growing conditions. So before you redirect this rambling of mine to the *Gardeners' Question Time* potting-shed, I'll return to the ISB... Like many of you out there, I expect that what made the ISB's music stand out from the rest was that it was different (it was *now*), and in some ways unique—though whether you actually liked it or not at that moment was often another matter entirely.

First, ye obligatory potted biography. I grew up in an East Midlands backwater town, where the term "record shop" was a euphemism (no, not the brass band instrument!) for a music store that sold pianos and sheet music (and probably brass band instruments too), but where they had a few "pop" singles hidden away in a back room so that the ailing store owner could make a few quick pence profit. Music on the radio was the BBC Light or Luxembourg; the pirates suffered from reception so bad it wasn't worth trying with a small portable tranny and intolerant parents.

I suppose it was only when Radio One started, and John Peel's programmes had halfway decent reception for at least part of the time, that I got to realise there was a lot more music out there than just the Top Twenty or the more esoteric fields of jazz, classical and R&B. My tastes had always strayed towards the wilder stuff (certainly the Stones rather than the Beatles), harder rock 'n' roll, thrashy instrumentals, etc., and so I reckon with hindsight that the emergent progressive scene of mid/late 1968 was a fairly logical next step in the expansion of my musical horizons.

Anyway, I started listening to the Saturday afternoon Peel shows, at first probably more out of a desire to avoid TV or sport. I found much of the gentler stuff he played (initially) dull and samey, but—apart from the odd Fairport track—the first "non-heavy" music to catch my ear was the ISB's *Yellow Snake*, which I'm sure was played on at least two occasions. I didn't appreciate it in its true context of course, as the miniature masterpiece it undoubtedly is, but was attracted by its flowing melody, its utterly unusual sonorities, its unique atmosphere—even over airwaves punctuated by eruptions from Radio Albania or whatever. The only thing I'd ever heard that was anything like it was *Within You Without You* (which I actually enjoyed more than most of the rest of *Sgt. Pepper*, to everyone's amazement!). But somehow I had formed the impression that the ISB

were another of Peel's obscure discoveries—for all I knew, just another American band who made LPs on arcane labels impossible to get hold of, and in any case no-one at school seemed to have heard of them. Though there was vague talk of a somewhat unapproachable sixth-former with (gosh and golly!) a real stereo record player... This chap had been heard muttering about the ISB, but being a mere fourth-former I wasn't exactly encouraged to pursue that line of enquiry.

So that's where it all stopped, until a Christmas gift—a reel-to-reel tape recorder—catalysed further discovery. I could now be entrusted with "rapid-loan" items from a like-minded soul's LP collection. As well as the Moody Blues, there was Love, Beefheart, the Doors, Byrds, Dead, Airplane, and—crucially—Fairport. But I don't recall him even mentioning the ISB!

So the year 1969 is really a bit hazy now. I reckon I was just so busy getting into all that new music that I must have just coiled the yellow snake away in my consciousness somewhere, to lie dormant. I know I taped bits of *Top Gear* during 1969, including the August 24th ISB session, which confused me somewhat due to its wide mix of styles. Hard to recall, then, just what made me take a gamble, unusual in those days of extreme penury, of buying *Changing Horses* (largely unheard, too) early in 1970.

True, I was getting more into folkier music, and I think I'd heard Sleepers, Awake played on Peel. Anyway, I do remember two things about the LP: (a) it was expensive, and (b) it was extremely long, its glorious length hitherto only approached by the very first LP I'd ever owned, the Stones' *Aftermath*! But I was seriously entranced, particularly by White Bird and Creation (naturally) and Sleepers, Awake, though Big Ted appealed to my strange sense of humour too. (Here was a band with a genuine sense of fun without being plain dumb, over-the-top or resorting to silly gimmickry.)

**I LOOKED UP MUST HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE LAST LPS I BOUGHT WITH OLD MONEY...**

I was obviously so hooked that I went and ordered *I Looked Up* straightway upon its release; I think it must have been one of the last LPs I bought with old money! When the local music store dealer rashly offered to order *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* for me (I think his sales of pop singles must have been getting low that month), I jumped at the chance, hurriedly selling off some old 45s to pay for it—and then it took absolutely aeons to arrive! But it knocked me sideways, despite the poor quality of the pressing. The records hardly left my deck for ages, banishing such demonic luminaries as the Edgar Broughton Band to (deserved) oblivion. By chance I happened on someone else at school who, having traversed a similar path through electric folk, was becoming receptive to the ISB, and we compared notes and queries, having fun guessing wildly at some of the more or less obscure references (some of which have waited years to get solved!).

My own voyage of discovery quickly turned up the vital information that earlier LPs (*5000 Spirits* and *Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*) existed, and I spent several frustrating months trying to obtain a copy of each. *5000 Spirits* I eventually acquired by mail order—massacred by the GPO—from Virgin Records (whose very name caused friction with my parents), and it was not until after *U* came out that I finally managed to get a copy of *Hangman's*. It took so long to arrive that the (cousin) Caterpillar had turned into a “butterfly” label!

I loved both these early albums, but I delighted particularly in the darker weirdnesses of *Hangman's* (which still possess the power to disturb all these years later). I found *U* a bit hard to take at first, mainly because I couldn't really handle the overall concept, but the music compensated. It was a lovely long double LP and there were at least two normal albums' worth of good music despite a couple of silly or embarrassing bits.

## MY MUSICAL TASTES WERE BEGINNING TO SERIOUSLY UPSET MY FAMILY

In any case, my rapidly expanding musical tastes were beginning to seriously upset my family and alienate me from former friends. I was getting rather more interested in classical, folk and jazz, partly I suppose as a result of exposure to some of the more interesting “progressive” groups and feeling the need to trace back to what had inspired them.

I'd also (almost certainly because of my experiences with the ISB) been investigating music of other countries, and things like recitals of Indian classical music on the Third Programme, always wanting to dig deeper and hear more. I was getting bored with the predictability of the straight “rock” scene, and felt increasingly drawn to exploring music which I saw as far more adventurous: music of the then-modern classical composers (Vaughan Williams, Sibelius, Mahler, Prokofiev, Varèse, Messiaen and Shostakovich—none of whom were anything like as easy to get to hear then as they are nowadays). I listened less and less to Radio One, though I kept track of ISB developments through the session broadcasts.

I learnt of someone at school whose elder brother had a copy of the very first ISB LP—a true rarity, and in mono only—which, after much persuasion, was loaned to me for barely one evening, under pain of death not to scratch, in order to be taped. This had to suffice for over a year, until I came across an import (stereo) copy in an enterprising new shop which had opened up in our town.

Although I appreciated Clive's contributions, I didn't really see them as belonging with Mike's and Robin's at all. I still wanted more ISB “product”, and couldn't accept the hard truth that there really was no more. You see, the ISB were unique, though I'd read reviews of the “if you like the String Band you'll like x” variety,

and tried out Forest (still have a soft spot for them), the Sun Also Rises (couldn't quite agree, though their album was indeed charming), Tea and Symphony (never did get past Side 1 of *Asylum For The Musically Insane*). Curiously, I never managed to hear Dr. Strangely Strange's *Kip Of The Serenes*, as no shops seemed to stock it, and nobody I knew had a copy or had even heard it—aside from the only track everyone knew of, the intriguing (but perhaps not overtly ISB-like) Strangely Strange But Oddly Normal, due to its appearance on the *Nice Enough To Eat* sampler. But I digress. I bought—and loved—the *Be Glad* LP, and, idly, I wondered whether there were any more similar unreleased gems stashed away at the record company.

For me, the next ISB milestone came with the release of *Liquid Acrobat*. Actually, at the time it seemed more like a millstone—I felt rather let down by it, and started to lose faith somewhat. It seemed, and to an extent still does, as though the band had been forced to “level out”, and tone down their more unusual ideas to appeal to a broader market.

The songs appeared generally less epic, less unique, less adventurous perhaps (notably in instrumentation), and some seemed almost to be “idea samplers” for longer and/or better things. The group's versatility was still on display, though it had been trimmed and made to function more like a marketing strategy—“Let's show the punters how many different sounds and styles we can cram onto one record without any of them going on too long in case they lose interest”—rather than letting the words and music develop and expand naturally.

It may sound like heresy now, but it's how I felt at the time. I had the strong feeling that the band's wings were being clipped. Goodness, there were even “heavy rock” chords and full-blown electric arrangements—fine in their place, but surely not “incredible” enough! And even the lone long track, *Darling Belle*, seemed at the time a conventional “story song”, lacking the more ethereal, mythical and spiritual dimensions of those earlier Williamson epics I knew and loved. Of course, I've come to appreciate *Darling Belle's* literary merits and the album's other special qualities since then, but I never completely got over that initial shock. I'll come clean and admit that my first reaction to all the subsequent ISB releases was one of general disappointment; maybe I'd just come to expect too much, or my own tastes were diverging away from the band's—who knows?

I still kept the ISB flag flying, nevertheless, pushing their work onto music-lovers I met, but increasingly it felt like a lost cause and in the end I just contented myself with enjoying their past glories in private and in obscurity. I bought all the LPs as they came out, though with some of them I felt like it was more out of duty.

At the time, I could only partly connect with the solo work of Mike and Robin. *Smiling Men* I found too “rocky” generally, despite some nice moments, with fine songs like *Beautiful Stranger* ruined by what felt like overkill in the arrangements.

Even *Spirit Beautiful* seemed a pale echo of the group version which I remembered from the radio session, and *No Turning Back* came across as a bleak, gloomy portent for the ISB's future.

I enjoyed Robin's *Myrrh* much more, despite being disappointed by what I saw then as a turning away from the musical and stylistic experiments which had made the earlier ISB LPs so interesting, in favour of more “conventional” instrumentation and more classically-inclined arrangements, which I felt at that time were somehow less appropriate to the imagery and content of Robin's songs (not that I really expected an album-full of gimbrì and soondri duets and raga-length epics, you understand!).

But at least there was still compensation to be had in the quality of many of the songs themselves, and in such elements as Likky's distinctive vocal contributions. These got me through



INCREDIBLE STRING BAND'S "Changing Horses" consists of six tracks, the longest, at 16 minutes 4 seconds, being "Creation" — a Robin Williamson poem with music by Mike Heron.

The album veers towards vocal harmonies for which they're not really always equipped. And Mickey-taking country blues,

boogie and 1920's sounds have now become so much part of them that it's no longer a mickey-take. Which leaves only the fairyland lyrics and occasional snatches of fine melody.

The String Band, incredible as ever, may have changed horses, but they're not sure which way they're travelling. (Electra) ★ ★ ★

*Earthspan*, which I found distinctly patchy, despite wonderful moments like Banks Of Sweet Italy. On its inner sleeve, I learned of the Friends of the ISB, and promptly joined up, without really getting all that much out of it other than a vague friendly feeling of belonging, and some much-needed biographical information. (You won't believe it, but I'd hitherto been unaware of the band's Scottish origins and had spent ages trying to place Robin's accent!) To tell the truth, the whole "Friends" thing actually felt a bit "businessy" and un-ISB—though I must own up to having ordered a (now very shrunken) ISB T-shirt!

NOTHING UP TILL THEN had really prepared me for the biggest disappointment—*No Ruinous Feud*. I used to take the LP off after Saturday Maybe, and then play only My Blue Tears and Little Girl with any regularity... Well, I admit to occasionally spinning *Second Fiddle* when I felt like something other than the ISB! Frankly, I felt cheated; I even went as far as writing to the band to say so but never sent the letter in the end (perhaps I was scared that Gerard Dott might send the boys round...). Instead, I gave the band another chance, went to see them at the Finsbury Park Rainbow, taking our college's Social Sec along hoping to impress. But she came away more interested in booking Mike and Robin as a duo on the strength of *This Moment* (the encore)...

When *Hard Rope And Silken Twine* came out, however, I was actually more pleasantly surprised, hearing tracks like *Dreams Of No Return* and *Cold [Days Of] February*, which I felt were a kind of return to form and to the band's earlier soundworld and sensibilities. I quite liked *Maker Of Islands* and even got to liking *Glancing Love*, but I couldn't take *Ithkos*, which it just didn't seem "Celtic" enough, I'm afraid, despite some nice passages; and its continuity was utterly ruined by that intrusive "heavy" guitar solo. I couldn't work out where the band were heading, so when the split was announced I can't say I was surprised, though naturally I mourned.

I took solace in the early LPs and continued playing them to death, realistically acknowledging that seasons they change and all good things must come to an end, etc. At the same time, though, I came to find strengths in some of the later albums. The more I think on it, I'm sure my initial disappointments were due to my expectations (unrealistic, I know) that the band's earlier intense span of constant originality, creativity and inventiveness would be maintained; I just didn't realise the salient fact that there's only a finite number of sound worlds that can be discovered.....

A major catastrophe occurred a couple of years later, when all my ISB albums (except the *First*, curiously enough) were stolen, along with over half of the rest of my total record collection. Perhaps the thieves had impeccable taste, but I just didn't see it like that, of course, and panic ensued until I had replaced the lot, courtesy of an awful lot of shopping around. Deterred by the experience, I kept my listening pleasures to myself for a while, though I'd also been experiencing an increasing antagonism towards my own musical tastes anyway, finding that many of my student contemporaries couldn't conceive that any music worth listening to could exist outside the hallowed grooves of the same few *Purple/Zepplin/ELP/Quo* albums...

A period of several (too many) years then followed during which all music took a back seat, while I had to work awkward and long hours to keep in a job, etc. It was miserable, though at the time I didn't think about it much. I managed to keep just about in touch with developments through Robin's mailings, and got round to hearing most *Merry Band* and subsequent solo records. At first I didn't connect much with the "new Celtic" idiom, while continuing to admire and respect Robin for his artistic integrity. With hindsight I must put my reactions down to my own lack of musical receptiveness at the time.

As far as Mike's solo work went, I got the *Reputation* album from a bargain bin somewhere out of curiosity, and wasn't impressed; frankly, it just seemed rather—dare I say it—ordinary,

undistinguished even. When my work hours eased up a bit, I found there was a lot of catching up to do and I'd missed out on a lot of good music; nevertheless, other than attending the occasional concert, the ensuing trauma of house moves, etc. meant pleasurable activities had to be put on the back-burner again.

## WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS THE ESSENCE—THE "SPIRIT BEAUTIFUL"

THERE'S NEVER TIME ENOUGH to get properly into everything, is there? To turn another well-known phrase, the rounder you go the faster you get—for the longer music exists in the universal scheme of things, the more it accumulates and the more there then is to hear, and the more frustrating it is to have to pass good things by for a genuine lack of available listening-time.

It'd be so easy to devote a whole lifetime to just one narrow field of interest—many folks do. And, sure, that goes for the whole wide world outside of music too, but with music it has often felt like a curse to be born with a receptive, responsive and/or tolerant ear. But either way, the problems of so-called hi-fi (read "endless variations on the theme of cornflakes") had to end some time, and the arrival of CDs gave me the impetus I needed to get back into listening. It took a time for much of my favourite listening outside of classical music to come out on CD. Tastes and times change too, and (naturally) not everything comes out this side of the Nineties sounding like the solid gold it once did. It's amazing, though, how well some music which I'd have believed so much tied to its time has not only survived into the here and now, but paid out a bonus too.

The ISB's output really has stood the test of time generally, and its far-reaching influence on an awful lot since has often gone unrecognised and thus unacknowledged. In latter years, wearing my freelance reviewer's hat, I've come across an inordinate—and increasing—number of performers, including many highly-regarded and/or not exactly obscure names, who will readily cite the ISB and their pioneering fusion activities as a formative and positive influence. Can't be bad, eh?

Perhaps I shouldn't be too surprised that the ISB's music has stayed with me. Many a time I'd be on holiday somewhere, climbing some remote hill in North-west Scotland, perhaps, and a snatch of some more-than-half-remarkable ISB song would present itself in my mind, unbidden, to accompany then haunt me along the walk. Music of all kinds can surface just when you least expect it, the odd riff or musical phrase or lyric fragment you can't quite place there and then, but the ISB work is so distinctive.

The "closed-ears-and-minds" syndrome is what caused many music fans to dismiss the ISB in the first place as just plain weird, purely because unfamiliarity breeds contempt and contempt leads to intolerance, even aggression. Tolerance, open-mindedness, learning not to fear innovation through experiment—all these traits are the legacy of the ISB, but are just as often misunderstood. I'm not a practising musician (yet!—wishful thinking for another lifetime there, perchance), but I know some musicians have criticised the ISB for their alleged amateurishness, for the wrong notes, duff timing/entries/dubious harmonies etc.; but these quirks, these occasional rough edges are often a great part of what gives the band's music its unique ambience and makes it so alive. The note-perfect but sterile pickings of a technically wizard musician can so easily miss out on the real soul of the music. It's what that funny little hedgehog said, ain't it?

What's important, then, is the essence—the "spirit beautiful", in effect. This has really been brought home to me since I took up singing. Indeed, I'd always been so much in awe of (in particular) Robin's vocal abilities that I thought it pure cheek to even attempt to emulate him by singing any of his songs. Recently, however, a couple have crept into my own repertoire...

# Let the hero seed find harbour'



It's that man again!

**Steve Lake**  
of ECM Records  
reports on Robin's latest  
Dylan Thomas project

The Seed-at-zero shall not storm  
That town of ghosts, the manwaged tomb  
with her rampart to his tapping,  
No god-in-hero tumble down  
Like a tower on the town  
Dumbly and divinely leaping  
Over the warbearing line.

Through the rampart of the sky  
Shall the star-flanked seed be riddled,  
manna for the rumbling ground,  
Quickening for the riddled sea;  
Settled on a virgin stronghold  
He shall grapple with the guard  
And the keeper of the key.

May a humble village labour  
And a continent deny?  
A hemisphere may scold him  
And a green inch be his bearer;  
Let the hero seed find harbour,  
32 Seaports by a drunken shore  
Have their thirsty sailors hide him.

**T**HE SEED-AT-ZERO, Robin Williamson's first album for ECM, situates his songs in the long tradition of "wrought verse" that extends from Taliesyn through Henry Vaughan to Dylan Thomas and beyond. It became clear, in the course of recording, that the Bardic continuum, for want of a better phrase, was what we were documenting, alluding to, or commenting upon.

The album drives home several points. It shows, for instance, that Robin Williamson is one of the most astonishing singers of our time (a fact he may have modestly downplayed on some recent releases), and that his exceptional songs, with their finely-chiselled lyrics, can claim a home beyond the confines of the folk scene. Skull And Nettlework and To God In God's Absence are by no means diminished when set alongside Dylan Thomas's verse. We understand instead that Mr Thomas and Mr Williamson are, more or less, in the same business.

There was no conscious attempt to prove this case. Albums often assert their own personalities or emphasise attributes that their makers may initially be blind or deaf to. I can't speak for Robin, but I was very positively surprised by the outcome of the session. Then again, I was surprised to be in Cardiff in the first place, and doubly surprised to be working with Williamson and his trusty sidekick-engineer Lawson Dando at the meanwhile quasi-legendary studio called Albany Productions Ltd. None of this was in the career plan.

For most of the last 20 years my focus as a writer and record producer has been on the experimental end of jazz. In my job at ECM in Munich I've worked primarily with free jazz players, microtonalists, instant composers, and perpetuators of transidiomatic synthesis of various kinds—African drummers with jazz saxophone, free improvisation heavily doctored with electronics, Coltrane-inspired free rock players from Helsinki, Italian big bands, raging sax players from Chicago... Links between these worlds and the Incredible String Band would seem tenuous at best to any sane outsider observer. But if I pause to think about it, I have to allow that listening to the ISB in the 1960s was a crucial element in a musical self-education that led naturally, inevitably, to music of other cultures. Following the early concerts, or listening to the Elektra albums (the ones that most mattered), you were challenged to be as open as Williamson and Heron were, to share their musical curiosity. It's only in retrospect that I can see how important that was for me.

Anyway, I came back to Robin Williamson by a circuitous route. For private listening I'd been basking for a while in the extraordinary voices of the Pakistani Sufi soul singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his Azerbaijani counterpart Alim Qasimov, master of the art of mugham. Following their daring phrasing and virtuosic embellishment, wrung out by the emotional intensity of the delivery, I started to dwell on a voice that once had a similar impact on me, that of the author of The Mad Hatter's Song, The Eyes Of Fate, Job's Tears, Maya and so on, the Scottish folk artist who had somehow absorbed the inflections of the muezzin or the raga singer or the qawwal. What was he up to these days? Readers of *beGLAD* know the answers, but I had some serious catching up to do.

Williamson's prolific output took the breath away—and dented the purse!—but before too long I had everything assembled: the CDs, the LPs, the story-tapes, the books... Only a couple of flexi-discs proved elusive. I found I liked everything except *The Glory Trap* and parts of the TV and theatre music recordings, where it sometimes seemed that synthesizer elaborations were mere sketches for something real instruments might later block in. But almost all the Pig's Whisker material



was pitched at such a high level, and covered such a broad range: the best of it—*Dream Journals*, *Mirrorman Sequences*, *Job Of Journey Work*, *Ring Dance*, *At The Pure Fountain*, *Island Of The Strong Door*, and the two volumes of *Gems Of Celtic Story* trounced even the cream of the ISB's output. As I later said to Mark Anstey, there hasn't been a musician-owned label of such far-reaching excellence and inventiveness since Charles Mingus launched Debut Records in 1952...

## THE ALBUM SHOWS THAT ROBIN WILLIAMSON IS ONE OF THE MOST ASTONISHING SINGERS OF OUR TIME

And I loved what had happened to Robin's voice in the post-ISB years. When he gives it free rein, as on the *Bloomsbury* October Song/Maya, there's an authority and resonance at the bottom-end that brings smouldering tenor saxophones to mind. In just about every way, it seemed to me, Williamson was demonstratively a greater artist now than in what was supposed to have been, by conventional wisdom, his "heyday". There are a few singer-songwriters who have trodden water gracefully since the Sixties, certainly, but I can think of no others who have freely expanded their creative base in so many ways.

After exchanging a few more e-mails with Anstey, the idea of an ECM album was broached. Robin raised the idea of revisiting Dylan Thomas, some of whose work he'd sung in the *Prospect Of The Sea* music theatre production, way back when. I suggested balancing Thomas with songs that could be related to him by subject matter, density of imagery or emotional strength. I also felt that there were plenty of Williamson songs that deserved a wider hearing, that shouldn't be mere archive items on hard-to-find discs. So we ended up re-recording For Mr Thomas (an obvious choice), Verses at Balwearie Tower, Cold Days Of February (reinstating original lyrics), By Weary Well, To God In God's Absence (now roaring powerfully out of Dylan Thomas's poem Holy Spring), and two important songs that needed rescuing from rather heavy-handed arrangements on Ten Of Songs—The Barley and Skull And Nettlework.

The album features, for the first time, a substantial dose of unaccompanied singing by Robin. Very pure and beautiful. The Dylan Thomas poems, performed to guitar or harp accompaniment, worked so well that it was decided to expand the frame of reference and try a few more poets. Gerard Manley Hopkins resisted the treatment—we'll nail him next time, maybe—but Henry Vaughan, Llywarch Hen and Idris Davies were perfect matches for Robin's voice.

The whole album was finished in five days, which is fast indeed in folk-rock terms, but actually quite long by ECM standards, where three days is still the norm for recording and mixing an album with jazz improvisers.

The rapport and understanding that Robin and Lawson Dando have, getting this music of intensity down while maintaining an almost unbroken stream of amiable banter—merry chatter punctuated by explosive laughter—helped make the job an easy one. Recording is sometimes a painful undergoing, like pulling teeth. The *Seed-At-Zero* sessions, though, were the opposite. The tone of the album is not exactly lightweight, with old age, imminent death and writer's block emerging as dominant themes. It's a stark record and, I think, an emotionally powerful one. Making it, however, was truly enjoyable, and I was happy to be part of the process.

## Life has been a tangle

says George Dow

LIFE HAS BEEN A TANGLE...or so goes the song. How true that is for the String Band and me. How did it all start? Earliest memories go back to '67 watching the *Here And Now* nightly magazine programme on Scottish TV. Robin and Mike interviewed by host Bill Tennent. I recall them singing Chinese White (although I may be mistaken) and throwing something into a bucket of water. Is my memory playing tricks or did this happen? Also hearing for the first time *5000 Spirits* and then *Hangman's* in our Sixth Year common room in Motherwell. The spell had been cast. How wonderful it was to have such beauty in music/words/appearance—all from a Scottish band from my favourite city. The all-time greatest album *Wee Tam & The Big Huge* to follow. These songs which saw me through my angst-ridden late teenage years... religion and Hesse—the sheer joy of Likky's woman-child crystal voice where angels trod and majesty of the soaring undulating tones of our Robin—the majestic philosopher and teller of tales—breaking all the rules, grounded by the heavier simplicity of Mike—yes I do recall amoebas and the white bird, the timelessness of that song which carried me through short summer job in Crianlarich—Big Ted and Creation—fun and legend with a bit of music hall thrown in—these were truly great times. The tangles tightened with the first (import) album on show in the window of Bruce's record shop in Sauchiehall Street where I spent hours between lectures and the purchase of *Relics* and a cheap coverless copy of *I Looked Up*, and visits to Edinburgh to see John and Michelle at Canonmills—dearest Michelle who knew both Robin and Mike in the old days and now had *Liquid Acrobat* which oh glory I saw performed at city halls in Candleriggs—Adam And Eve, Tree, jigs plus Circle Is Unbroken with Robin standing stage right. Summer of '74 spent hitching in Europe and onto Shetland, my home for a year, and met my darling Irish Jacqueline who is now my wife and by whom my three sons are here, two of whom were born in Edinburgh where we lived for three years. Since then never without my String Band albums—played often—every album apart from *U*, which I recall hearing but have never managed to get. Then onward to work in London in '78. Saw Mike and electric band playing at festival fringe on visit north in early Eighties (at top of Leith Walk), then Robin on his own in North London, can't recall the venue, and then Bloomsbury and then Cecil Sharp House. And conversation with Bob Devereux in St Ives where we have holidayed for seven years. Been collecting Robin's work and trying to turn on Jacqueline to it but she just looks at me sadly and complains about the "wailing in the corner". But at least one of my children likes the band (still further work required here!)—Graeme whose lifestyle is I suppose closest to how they were. Sometimes wonder why I spend so much time singing the songs walking between offices and up and down escalators—it's not (just) nostalgia—they are simply so much better than anything else I've heard—I mean ever heard—even when they're not! Thanks to Andy Roberts and Adrian and Raymond and Mark for helping to keep this whole thing going through the magazine and Pig's Whisker/Unique Gravity. The music goes on and so do the tangles.

# Here's looking at

# 'U' ...again

**They called it “a surreal parable in song and dance”. The critics called it something else.**

**Raymond Greenoaken was there (he thinks)...**

**I**T WAS ALMOST A COINCIDENCE that I started tapping out this piece on the afternoon of April the 8th, thirty years to the day since the opening of the ISB's “surreal parable in song and dance” at London's Roundhouse in 1970. I was aware of the date, of course. I could just as easily have started the day before, or the day after. But one of the mental ties of any fanzine editor is the compulsion to see significance in the most trivial correspondences, and to act accordingly. So—it *was* thirty years ago today...

Veteran *beGLAD* readers will be aware that we covered *U* way back in issue 2. Founding editor Andy Roberts served up a shrewd and entertaining overview of the project and its long-lost vinyl accessory. The current feature is an attempt to supplement rather than supercede that pathfinding essay. For we now know a good deal more about the circumstances in which the show was assembled, and have a clearer view of how it fits into the career graph of the ISB. Plus we've got a lot more pictures on file than we had then. It seems, therefore, like a timely opportunity to look in a bit more detail at the magnificent and vainglorious folly that was *U*. Root out Andy's piece if you have it, and keep it to hand as you pore over the next few pages.



THE BAND AND DANCERS HAD SET themselves a challenging schedule with the live show: fourteen three-hour performances at the Roundhouse in ten days, before flying out to tour the show across the length and breadth of America. Hopes were high, but the critics turned surly. The pop comics were not so much hostile as bamboozled: good music, amateurish dancing, too long ("Bring a cushion," counselled *Disc's* Caroline Boucher sensibly) and what's it all about? was the consensus. But the "serious" critics went for the jugular. "The deadweight of boredom is too much," groaned Derek Jewell in *The Times*. (Or maybe it was the deadweight of his headquarters on that hard Roundhouse floor...) From the lofty battlements of *The Observer*, Tony Palmer excoriated everything from the music and dancing to the lighting and the collapsing scenery, even tutting about the "clutter of instruments" and concluding: "They have nothing to say and have left it to the fairies." And in the house journal of the counter-culture, *IT*, Barry Miles (then sans first name) famously inveighed against "sad groping and vacuous hand-waving".

The ISB, who had enjoyed an extended critical honeymoon since the release of *5000 Spirits* two and a half years earlier, were forced onto the defensive. Robin, Mike and even Rose rushed into print to explain that the critics had missed the point. It wasn't devised as a slick West End entertainment, but as a kind of naïve art. Audiences were invited to bring a degree of creative engagement to the experience, to interpret it in their own ways and to identify with the homey ethos of the whole thing. "If anyone saw anything bad in the performance," said Mike with the ghost of a sulk, "it was because they weren't in a happy mood. I thought it was like a mirror, showing you what you were." But not even the ISB could fashion a mirror in which a jackal might perceive himself as a placid herbivore. It looked like they'd fatally misread the temper of the times—or at least of the *International Times*.

Worse was to follow. The show had been booked into the Fillmore West for six consecutive nights at the band's own expense, the original backer having pulled out. A combination of bad initial notices and the word from across the water ensured that house full notices stayed in storage. The financial fallout was such that the dancers had to be packed off home, with the ISB playing the rest of the tour in a straight concert format. In an attempt to recoup some of the losses, Joe Boyd booked the band into a San Francisco studio for a weekend to cut the entire soundtrack for vinyl release. By an almost inhuman effort, they emerged with nearly two hours worth of extensively overdubbed recordings, which duly hit the shops the following autumn. The ISB returned to Britain to find that, for them at least, the world had changed. The dream is over, a crop-headed John Lennon was proclaiming. The sun was setting on the hippy idyll of love, peace and lysergic voyaging. The ISB had always been a step ahead. Now they were simply out of step. Things were never going to be quite the same.

TO PUT MATTERS IN SOME SORT of historical context, it should be pointed out that, just over a year earlier, The Who had unleashed their vaunted "rock opera" *Tommy* to unanimous critical acclaim. The similarities between *Tommy* and *U* are obvious enough, vastly different though the two works are in terms of content and attitude. The "concept album" was still in its mewling infancy as the Seventies dawned. Following the example of *Sergeant Pepper*, assorted popsters with pretensions to seriousness had toyed with the thematic song-sequence as a framework for articulating a major statement on life, the universe and everything. These tended to the earnest and portentous, with the Moody Blues (*Days Of Future Passed*, *In Search Of The Lost Chord*, etc.) emerging as brand leaders. It was the erstwhile Mods, however, who gave it a different spin.

The Small Faces devoted the second side of *Ogden's Nut Gone Flake* to a whimsical song-cycle detailing an unpretentious Everyman's search for enlightenment, mixing the demotic with



the high-falutin', music hall with psychedelia. It was shakily constructed and frequently arch, but eschewed the solemnity of the Moodies and their ilk. But was the Who, the Faces' stropky Mod elder brothers, that redefined the genre.

*Tommy* was defiantly downmarket, aggressively streetwise. There was no place on Pete Townshend's storyboard for the wispy beatitudes of the flower generation. His magnum opus was a sort of phantasmagoric take on social realism, mixing sexual depravity, mental illness, gangland menace and *Carry On*-style vulgarity with the Who's thunderous riffs and dry-ice histrionics. It was brash, it was simple-minded—and it was enormous. A pivotal moment in the metamorphosis of pop into rock.

Although *Tommy* eventually found its way onto the silver screen, like its antecedents in the "concept" field it was initially presented to live audiences simply as a high-intensity rock concert with a storyline. The ISB were therefore breaking new ground with their plans for *U*, which was conceived at the outset as a mixed-media spectacle. A tricky notion, perhaps, to put across to the public. With ill-advised self-effacement, therefore, they flagged it to the press as a "pantomime".

"Pantomime is a logical progression for the group," Robin declared to David Franklin of *Disc & Music Echo*, making it sound like some rarefied classical form. To the British, at least, pantomime has quite different connotations: a couple of hours of jolly, spangly, low-brow post-Christmas slapstick and cross-dressing for boisterous kids and their bored parents. *U*, by contrast, was intended to be mime- and dance-driven with minimal dialogue, and the music a continuous presence. Nearer the time, they began to describe it more accurately, if less concisely, as "a surreal parable in song and dance". But the tag had stuck: "Incredible panto" was a not-untypical headline.

Now, it's an old canard that music fans in those high and far-off times were an intractably "either-or" breed. If you were into heavy rock, you couldn't be into the String Band—You know the drill. Well, I was there, best beloved; I still have a few functioning brain cells, and in my recollection it ain't necessarily so. Stringophile though I was, my tastes comfortably embraced Hendrix, Can and even the brainier bits of Deep Purple. (I'm better now...) The ISB's constituency was never a separate race of winsome, woodland-dwelling flower children; they appealed to the idealistic, poetry-scribbling, ecologically-aware side of many young people of the time who were equally happy to pull out the air guitars whenever Zepp or Sabbath hit town.

But try telling this to the press or the television. Media hacks love grand simplicities and delight in portraying conflict where none exists. *Tommy* and *U* were merely two sides of the same coin, but this was evidently too complex a concept for most critics, who gleefully proclaimed that the ISB were last year's thing and *U* a twice self-indulgence by a band that had lost touch with market realities. You had to read between the lines of the reviews to descry the awkward fact that the Roundhouse shows were, on the whole, very well attended and that audience response was highly enthusiastic.

Don't get me started on critics! It's curious (putting it no stronger than that) to consider that the very people who never have to pay the piper happily arrogate to themselves the right to call the tune—and I speak as a sometime critic myself, ahem. It remains true, I'd suggest, that the poor view posterity has taken of *U* is more a creation of those who wrote about it than those who paid their 15/- (that's 75p to you today, sir!) to see it.

So—was it any good? Well, I was present at the final night of the Roundhouse run, and I can report that, yes, it was good for me. The earth moved that mild Spring night in 1970.

**L**ET ME SET THE SCENE FOR YOU. (A faraway look appears in your editor's one good eye...) My trip to London was the first occasion on which I'd travelled further south than Sunderland on my own. I'd taken the overnight train from Newcastle in order to sample the fleshpots of the metropolis at my leisure before reporting to the Roundhouse. I'd originally hoped to attend the afternoon matinée, which would have allowed me ample time to catch my homeward train; but the matinée was cancelled, and I accordingly found myself a witness at the last UK performance of *U*.

My perambulations that day had taken me to the hippest parts of the capital: King's Road (where I spotted and snapped up a copy of *I Looked Up*, just out), Ladbroke Grove, World's End (where I saw the boarded-up shopfront of *Grannie Takes A Trip*, and inhaled several lungfuls of incense in the exotic gloams of Gandalf's Garden). The posters advertising *U* were, well, *U*-biquitous around the city. In that high summer of psychedelic poster art you might see any number of designs that were more intricate and finely-turned, but Janet Shankman's green and yellow *meisterwerk* lured and then ravished the eye like none other. I bought three at the show, and later gave two to absent friends. The third hangs somewhat ragged and sun-faded on the wall to the right of where I tap out these words.

And so, at last, to the Roundhouse, a converted locomotive turning shed at groovy Chalk Farm near equally-groovy Camden Town. It's a circular building—some of you may have guessed this already—with the stage area nestling in the south-eastern curve. There was no visible seating. But we were young, don't y'know, and adept at holding the lotus position for long and agonising periods of time. Of course, in the absence of

numbered seats you could park yourself wherever you wanted. I made a beeline for the front, mere feet from the overhang of the stage, and (typically with String Band gigs) soon befriended a gaggle of fellow fans seated nearby as the "Overture", a medley of themes from the show stitched rudely together and recorded by Mike and Robin in an Edinburgh studio, played over the PA. At the appointed hour (untypically with String Band gigs), the show commenced.

On the left of the stage, upon a raised podium, assorted guitars and stringed things were arranged. A grand piano was parked at the rear. Applause filled the auditorium as Mike, Robin and Rose took their places. No Likky? Explain, please... Mike was barefoot and fetchingly bedight in a white singlet with a flywheel motif, a choker with long, petal-like extensions and white loon pants with a sort of tasseled black overskirt. Robin was resplendent in a pied two-piece comprising a doublet with alternating panels of yellow and red over a multi-coloured chemise, and trousers with one yellow leg and one red. Rose was sizzingly garbed in a very short black shift decorated with geometric designs, and calf-climbing thonged sandals. Behind them a hand-painted back projection depicted birds, hooded nymphs and half-human trees root-stepping across a Japanese watercolour landscape. Two of the male dancers—John and Rakis, presumably—assumed the static poses depicted in Janet's poster design.

First off was the *El Wool Suite*. This was the ISB at their most Oriental. A langorous sitar stated the theme before Rose weighed in with a clatter of percussion and Robin switched deftly between flute and gimbri (managing somehow to sing and play flute simultaneously at one point—well, you would, wouldn't you, if you could?). Enter the dancers, who included Likky. Mystery solved...

## ROBIN MANAGED TO SING AND PLAY FLUTE SIMULTANEOUSLY...

(right) a stroll in the country on the lovely planet *El Wool*

(below) the *El Wool Suite* unfolds



The scene, according to the programme, was the lovely planet El Wool. This paradisaic realm, it appears, was the creation of Janet, who later described it in a letter to a fan as "an imaginary planet that I like to draw. It had many lovely people on it and the favourite game was creating—they created water where they liked, unicycles, things to juggle, music, strange shapes for themselves, disguises for fun, etc." A charming notion, wouldn't you say? It's worth pointing out that Janet's description anticipates with uncanny fidelity the world later imagined by Michael Moorcock in his *Dancers At The End Of Time* trilogy. We know that the likes of Bolan and Townshend turned up to the show to look and learn; could it be that Moorcock, already lionised for his Jerry Cornelius tales, was also present, sniffing around for ideas?

Into this prelapsarian world, then, came the dancers of Stone Monkey in suitably exotic guise. The programme identifies them as: Resell, a lady; a fluttery-eyed bird; Laoo, a mermaid; Thlamar, a centaur; two planet (*sic*—a misspelling for plant) beings; a jester; and a harper. A small discrepancy here, perhaps—There are eight characters listed, but, according to the programme, only five dancers in the troupe: Malcolm, Rakis, John, Ishy and Mal; and the addition of Likky only nudges it up to six. Well, on the evidence of one of the available photos, it looks like Janet pitched in as an honorary Monkey; and maybe Robin could have nipped across to do a cameo harper... I have to confess at this point that my memories of the performance are at best partial. If any readers can fill in the gaps in the unfolding account, I'd be suitably grateful.

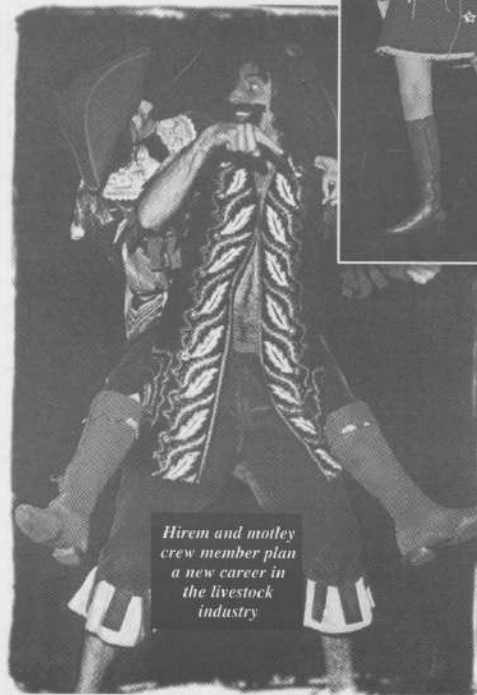
**T**HE DANCERS LOPED, PRANCED and insinuated their way around the stage while the music buzzed beguilingly. As a spectacle, it was a dazzling whirl of bizarre costumes and flying tresses. But could they actually *dance*? This question, of course, lies at the heart of the critics' vituperation of the show.

At the time, I was deeply involved in "experimental" youth theatre, and therefore had a keen interest in the type of free-form modern dance ("movement", we called it) that Stone Monkey were aiming at. It's true that, in those days, there was little in the way of a critical framework for this form of artistic expression. Basically, you did what felt good, felt spontaneous, and if you were sufficiently adept you would communicate your feelings to the onlooker. There was minimal emphasis on conventional choreography and group discipline. This lack of identifiable reference points may have foxed the critics; though it's likely enough that, as music journalists, they were unrepentantly ignorant of both the classical and modern dance milieux. "I know nothing about dancing, but I know what I like..."

Stone Monkey, as far as I recall, were not especially polished practitioners of their chosen form. They writhed, they gambled, they waved their hands; but ultimately, with the exception of Malcolm, they lacked clarity of expression and native grace. They left you feeling—if you were interested in modern dance—that you could do quite as well yourself. Now, that's not necessarily a bad thing. The ISB, in their own way, cultivated the same approach—a sort of democratic levelling, in which the audience could feel they inhabited the same plane of being as the performers. You always felt that you could play those three guitar chords as well as Likky, or whack a drum more or less on the beat: in other words, you could be up there too! You never got that feeling at a Santana concert... It's no exaggeration to say that this inspired a generation of aspiring musicians, many of whom have since risen to positions of some eminence in their various fields.

Whether Stone Monkey had the same effect on a generation of dancers is harder to say. (It's worth pointing out, however, that there is a Yorkshire-based Morris side who dance today under the same name—coincidence, or *homage*?) I certainly felt I could do as well as they could, and found this liberating—empowering, we'd say today. This, I suspect, was a level of experience to which the pundits were wholly inured.

"Bad" Sadie Lee—one for the Trades Descriptions scrutineers, we think...



Hirem and motley crew member plan a new career in the livestock industry

**SCENE TWO: TIME TRAVEL.** According to the précis of the story supplied by Witchseason's press office, the Edenic bliss of El Wool is shattered by the arrival of Time. In a sort of creation rite, one of the El Woolites—presumably the Jester from Scene One—is juggling with a set of coloured balls representing Substance, Space, Power...and Time, as Robin and Likky perform The Juggler's Song. The juggler, however, can't manage four balls at once, and has to jettison that orange and blue ball. Time, accordingly, enters the material universe. A plant being slips offstage and returns in a purple leotard and with a clock on his head. Robin reaches for the twelve-string and delivers a spine-tingling performance of Time, the song.

## A PLANT BEING SLIPS OFFSTAGE AND RETURNS IN A PURPLE LEOTARD AND WITH A CLOCK ON HIS HEAD

In the wake of this sombre turn of events, a character emerges called the Mournful Page, who gads about the cosmos lamenting the loss of the state of primordial innocence. He arrives on Earth, where he somehow becomes entangled with El Rato ("the aristocrato") and feisty cowgirl Bad Sadie Lee. It's time for the comic relief...

El Rato, as you all know, never made it onto the *U* album. Perhaps it was too dependent on the terpsichorean element, or perhaps there just wasn't room on the disc. Either way, it has taken its place among the Lost Treasures of the ISB. If you missed the *U* shows, you may have caught its brief revival in the Spring

'72 concert tour (a decent concert bootleg exists of the Bergen, Norway gig on the 23rd of March). An amusing confection of Robin's with a strong and impressively executed undertow of Flamenco. El Rato and his rival El Cato engage in a duel for the hand of their mutual paramour. Rose joins the action at this point, stepping up to hand El Rato his rapier. Our hero decides, however, that *prudencia* is the better part of *valor*, and contemplates an extended career in the Foreign Legion.

Moving swiftly on to the Wild West, a quick costume change finds Robin bare-chested and in braces and Janet tricked out as a saloon-bar floozy for a love-it-or-hate-it rendering of Bad Sadie Lee, the leading contender, along with Circus Girl, for Stringfandom's dubious accolade of Least Favourite ISB Song. Hey, loosen up out there! As a piece of harmless whimsy, it's perfectly enjoyable. Of course it's not in the same league as Queen Of Love or Bridge Song, but it pulls its weight effectively enough in the context of the show. Mal unwisely dons a Sixties-style kiddy-cowgirl outfit to portray the sassy Sadie, which unfortunately is prominently featured on the album's inner gatefold.

Scene Three: The Egg. A sort of rebirth tableau, in which the Mournful Page is resurrected as the Newborn Seeker. He's evidently had enough of temporality and desires to reconnect with his primal state, embarking on a Bunyanesque pilgrimage to enlightenment. Scene Four is subtitled The Demons. Our Seeker, if I remember rightly, falls into a demonic ambushcade and is affrighted by Ravana, Lord of Tears, and the Mad Horseman (and his Horse). Lots of stamping and gurning in the manner of Indian classical dance (Malcolm and Rakis had a certain facility in this idiom). As a result of this encounter—I forget the details, alas—the Seeker meets the Beautiful Girl, his companion for the remainder of the journey.

On the evidence of the programme, the songs accompanying these scenes are Queen Of Love, Long Long Road, Light In Time Of Darkness, Beautiful Girl Speaks and Glad To See You. At this point in the performance I remember being confused. The songs had hitherto followed the order set down in the programme, but whatever song followed Sadie, it couldn't have been Queen Of Love—could it? The recorded version repeats the title phrase often enough to ensure you know what you're listening to; I couldn't detect a single reference to "Queen Of Love" at this point. Was it, for some technical reason, or on some artistic whim, not played that night? Adrian, who saw the show twice, remembers it distinctly; nor does Robin recall ever omitting it. Chalk it down to inattention or fading memory on my part. Certainly, a performance of *U* without Queen Of Love would have been akin to *Oklahoma* without Oh! What A Beautiful Morning, or *The Sound Of Music* without—well, *The Sound Of Music*.

Long Long Road, however, was identifiable enough—we got the title phrase in every verse. Light In Time Of Darkness, similarly, was unmistakable. But Beautiful Girl Speaks, attributed to Mike? Conspicuous by its absence. As was Be Close To Me,



## What They Said

Some bite-sized morsels of wit and wisdom, vitriol and vituperation

### The Players

#### Robin

It's called *U* because it's U in shape. It starts off with somebody in some ancient period of the Golden Age in the past, who survives successive lifetimes coming down through lesser and lesser awarenesses and finally gets back to a good state of mind again. *March 1970*

An interesting thing that came out of the project for Mike and myself was that for the first time we had to change our method of writing. Up till now we have always written what came out, what we were feeling. But for the pantomime we had to write something specific to suit the mood of a dance, or convey the atmosphere of a scene. I think that was very good for us both. *May 1970*

#### Mike

It was a complete inter-relationship. Some of the dances inspired songs, some of the songs gave the dancers ideas. The saddest thing about the Roundhouse shows was that against everyone's will it became a practice for America. We really didn't want that to happen, but there was that feeling. *April 1970*

It was a flow, very like our music. *Dec 1972*

I'm not very fond of *U*. It wasn't really my project. I've never been a "mixed media" sort of person. I've always been more interested in writing songs and delivering them. So the mixed media approach of *U* was not something I was creatively excited about, although I thought it was probably a good thing to do at the time. I was fairly aloof from the plot. I just wrote songs for various situations in the plot. So my involvement was purely as a songwriter, and not with the theatrics of it. *May 1991*

#### Malcolm

If we try something like that again, which is quite possible, a director of some sort will be necessary. The experience taught us a lot about that particular problem. *Dec 1972*

#### Rose

The ordinary kid who came to see it dug it fairly much. Some of the critics were fairly nice. But the general reaction was that the music is nice but what are those people doing hopping about? *June 1970*

I wasn't into [the multi-media approach]—not because I didn't like it, but I didn't feel we were the people to do it. I felt that other people could do it better, and that once we started doing that we were stepping into fields where none of us had any expertise. Mike and Robin were good musicians, but that didn't make them good actors, directors, artists or any of these other things, and I felt that once you go into that you either get people who are good at it or you don't do it at all. *August 1994*

#### Joe Boyd

I told them it would be a disaster. No-one would guarantee it and they had to do it on a percentage. I just had no confidence in it whatsoever and I told them that—I was prepared to help them, but against my better judgement. *May 1995*

I felt that *U* was where the Scientology rot had set in, and the material wasn't too hot—it had some good moments, but I haven't dared listen to it for years, because it was such a disaster of an event. *1996* I have plenty of aesthetic objections to the horrible dancing and twee costumes and plot of *U*. The group committed a mammoth slice of its resources to the US tour when I thought it was obvious that it would not be well received and would cripple them financially. Two years before, they had filled Fillmore East for days at a time, but within that short span of time they started losing money on their US tours. Was that because the audiences had changed? I don't think so. *November 1995*

**Tom Constanten (ex-Grateful Dead, orchestrator of Queen Of Love)**

When Peter Grant [session banjo player on *U*, session pedal steel player on the Grateful Dead's *Aoxomoxoa*] suggested to Robin Williamson that I was available for a recording session, things naturally fell together. I have nothing but pleasant memories of working with Robin and Mike, Licorice, Rose and Janet and Joe Boyd, their producer. I'm not saying this to be polite or anything, because I have a couple of choice opinions about people; I'm sure anyone my age does.

Robin has an elfin, patrician quality about him that gives extra momentum to his delivery of a song that makes it almost irresistible...It makes it believable when he sings a ballad, that he was actually there when the legendary events happened, as if he fell into this world from a different age perhaps; and Mike Heron has a smile that has to be broader than a human face can bear. But he pulls it off in some miraculous way and is able to infectiously bring it across also. Their recording sessions were as placid as the Dead's were chaotic, although the results might or might not display that. 1981

## The Pundits

**Alan Smith (NME)**

A weirdly attractive blend of ballet fantasy and the undisputably-excellent music of the Incredible String Band... plenty of colour; a certain magic; and enough unusuality to make it worth seeing... Full marks for imagination to all concerned. April 1970

**Caroline Boucher (Disc & Music Echo)**

Visually it was very exciting at times... but alas, after three hours sitting on the Roundhouse floor [the masks and costumes] ceased to appeal. And though Stone Monkey were fun to watch at first, they tended to annoy with their low standard (except for one man) of dancing... For the most part, the music was nice—very varied, from medieval to Eastern. April 1970

**Jerry Gilbert (Melody Maker)**

Some of the scenes were quite brilliant, and the Incredible String Band maintained a high standard of musicianship throughout... But from Stone monkey's mime, it was totally impossible to follow the story, despite their exuberant cavorting around the stage, which frequently tended to end in the same stance... Only Malcolm Le Maistre seemed able to divert the mass of fixed eyes from the stage to the dance floor... It seemed that the audience's acclaim came in acknowledgement of the all-round endurance of performers and spactators rather than in recognition of a good evening's entertainment. April 1970

**Eddie Woods (Evening News)**

Some of the music, particularly in the second half, is inventive and quite beautiful, at other times, with strange atonal harmonies and massive amplification, rather frightening. April 1970



Likky solos on I Know You

attributed to Robin and the centrepiece of the following scene. Robin, when asked recently, couldn't recall any songs carrying either title, but thought they might refer to instrumental passages, inserted into the programme's song list by scribal error.

After the break, Scene One of Part Two featured our questing couple exchanging endearments as the band cranked out *Walking Along With You*, with Mike on fingerstyle electric guitar. In Scene Two they're waylaid by a sorry rabble of would-be highwaymen led by the legendary Hirem Pawnitoff (Rakis in frock-coat and what might be the same false beard he wore in *The Pirate And The Crystal Ball*). More hi-jinks as the ISB go trad-folk with strutting Williamson fiddle and Likky on spoons. Anorak spot: Hirem was the only song on which Mike and Robin collaborated on a lyric—"I wrote most of it," confirms Robin. The scene concludes with much doh-see-dohing to the Fairies' Hornpipe.

Scene Three brings the travellers to The Bridge. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to descry in the *U* plotline references of greater or lesser subtlety to the teachings of L. Ron Hubbard. The early scenes, for instance, recall L. Ron's notion of the arrival on Earth of Thetans in corporeal form, and their subsequent striving to reattain spiritual awareness. One of Scientology's central tenets is the Bridge to Total Freedom, over which the practising Scientologist aspires to cross. In *U*, likewise, the travellers must cross the Bridge to reach the

Act Two, Scene Three already... at The Bridge



## BRIDGE SONG BATHED THE SCENE IN A LUMINOUS, GHOSTLY BEAUTY...

celestial city. It transpires that the Beautiful Girl has collected the required number of spiritual Brownie points to make the crossing. The Seeker, by contrast, is still too entangled with materiality. Hence they part—temporarily, they hope, while the Seeker continues his search for enlightenment. Trite though that may sound in précis, Mike's Bridge Song bathed the scene in a luminous, ghostly beauty, with Likky's ethereal soprano wail sending bats' navigational systems haywire throughout NW1.

Either side of Bridge Song, the instrumental pieces Bridge Theme and Astral Plane Theme will have been played. I remember the latter vividly, an energetic Williamson solo thrash on the Levin. (Sounds like he's

playing a different guitar on the album...) At this point, the Seeker must ascend to the Astral Plane to accomplish the final stage of his spiritual journey. Robin, by this time clad in cape and cowl, clasped a small bell in either hand and ghosted to the mike to perform Invocation, the finest piece of poetry in the ISB canon. I remember being stirred within my very sap by those sonorous tropes. In the gaps between stanzas he turned his back to the house and tinkled the bells with Delphic solemnity. No voice sitar (it was acquired on the American tour), but still a brilliantly effective piece of ritual theatre.

Then, in typical String style, we were swept along from the sublime to the sublimely ridiculous, from Robin's incantatory sortilege to the humming and bleeping purlieus of Robot City to witness a small domestic drama in the lives of three of its automaton citizens. Robin moved to the piano, assuming the persona of "Robot Johnson, blues singer". This was the best joke in the show: Robot Blues is a delicious pastiche of Robert Johnson's Terraplane Blues, in which carnal impulses are urgently expressed in the imagery of the internal combustion engine. "When I see that Number Three, my piston fills with oil..." draws Robot J. We get the picture, I think. Quite what the significance of this episode was to the larger narrative remains, to this day, unclear, other than as an excuse for some bravura blues piano, all crunching basslines and chromatic trills.

A glance at my watch alerted me to the fact that my last train back to Newcastle departed in half an hour. With heavy heart, therefore, I shuffled to the exit as Puppet Song unfolded. I consoled myself with the knowledge that I'd heard it already, on the February mini-tour when the band road-tested a selection of the *U* material. According to the programme there were only two more songs to follow—I Know You and Rainbow, with everything drawn together in "El Grande Finale". A third song, however, turned up on the album—Robin's Cutting The Strings. Anyone remember it being performed? It's safe to suppose from these songs that the Seeker and his inamorata are reunited, the "U-shaped story of love across time and space" concluding with the two of them attaining a mutual state of grace and heightened awareness. "Winged we were before Time was/How we've flown," as Likky tremulously expresses it in I Know You.

Rainbow, of course, was the climax, a classic Heron love song of melting, lingering beauty—his finest, in my view—, playing out with a communal chant (à la Long Time Sunshine) of "I will see you there", which was given a distinct Township flavour on the album. Live, this was Mike and Robin on keyboards and percussion respectively. Rose and Lik pitched in with the dancers for—to judge by the photos on the album sleeve—a shambolic freakout. Rose at this stage was unforgettably clad in a tasseled purple minidress and gold spandex tights. Are they still in some dusty corner of a wardrobe in Aberystwyth, we wonder...? Doubtless the audience were singing along in scarf-waving abandon as the Tube was shuttling me off to St Pancras. At least there was the album to look forward to...



The final freakout!

**Derek Jewell (The Times)**

...that cosy impromptu feel which marks many pop happenings, as well as a less expected quality of worthy banality in the continual dance and mime show. The Stone Monkey troupe were, indeed, touchingly reminiscent of those busy ladies who were once so strong on classic Greek dance.

There were a few good ideas floating around. But a smattering of undeveloped ideas do not make a performance. Jokes slowly deflate if they're stretched too long. And earnest derivations from exotic cultures, chiefly Eastern folk theatre and dance, are merely embarrassing when done so mundanely. April 1970

**Miles (International Times)**

After the first five minutes of vacuous hand-waving they began to appear as an animated underwater weed, or a stomped upon octopus, occupying space rather than describing it, revealing their lack of ability rather than expressing their roles. Untrained dancers move too much, have too little control of their bodies and resort to vaguely descriptive hand-gestures (similar to go-go dancers at your local psychedelic dungeon) to justify their presence on stage. A master choreographer would have at least controlled their sad gropings.

...The music of Mike and Robin was masterful. Sometimes their handling of the more exotic instruments (sitar and shehnai) was not as technically perfect as some might like but the sensual and seductive sounds of those instruments made up for it, particularly as they were being used primarily for reasons of colour and texture. April 1970

**Maurice Rosenbaum (Daily Telegraph)**

The musical skill and inventiveness of the Incredibles seem to be limitless. They play and sing together as if music has just been discovered and its possibilities are being explored for the first time.

This is their unique contribution to the folk-based popular music of our time and a recording of the musical sequences, images and combinations they create in this philosophical pantomime would repay close—and delighted—study. All the colour and movement needed to bring their conceptions to life are in the music itself.

Not that the visual element lacks beauty—there are memorable moments and superb costumes. But there are, too, passages of uninspired dancing and mime and reminders that mixed media sometimes means little more than a dissipation of impact and the elaboration of review sketches. The essential magic is still in the extraordinary gifts of the Incredibles. April 1970

**Jan Hodenfield (Rolling Stone)**

On stage over on the left are String Bandmen Mike Heron and Robin Williamson, plus, from time to time, their friends Rose and Likky, with new songs, lyrically introverted. Fifties folk diluted by time, expanded by dope, and derivative.

Not so the work of Stone Monkey. Except for a Sonja Henie bow to the Orient, they appeared to presume they were the first dancers ever to pirouette across a stage.

On the center platform, the six former members of the Exploding Galaxy troupe glide, skitter and bounce about free-form in a series of devastatingly original costumes as might have been thrown together by acid-tripping pupils at a very progressive school. May 1970

**Robin Denslow (The Guardian)**

I watched a run-through in a freezing back room behind a barnyard, after a long and necessary briefing. ...The ideas are an amalgam of world religion; simple (when explained), but powerful enough to impress even a reporter whose main concern during the rehearsal was the biting cold.

...If it is to be the success in London it deserves to be, it won't be because it is intelligible, or because of the dancing, but because it is funny and frightening and the music by Williamson and Heron is among their finest yet.

The music is influenced by folk-song of India, Europe and America, by music hall, Victorian hymns and heavy rock; brooding, passionate and joyous, it is the essence of all the Incredibles have ever done. March 1970



**Tony Palmer (The Observer)** *The infamous diatribe—in full!*  
 Last Wednesday there was this fairy, pouncing about the Roundhouse stage like Isadora Duncan on roller skates. "God's eyebrows," shouted a voice off as the fairy mounted a plastic toadstool. Wearing a costume that looked like a reject from *The Royal Hunt Of The Sun*, it replied, "It's all right, dearie; it's just something to blow your mind away." Meanwhile, Kabuki beasties of no fixed abode trolled with a fairy who was disguised as the Hunchback of King's Road and became deeply mystical. A girl looking amazingly like Mary Hopkin with a twitch toyed with El Rato, a Spanish aristocrat, who also looked like Mary Hopkin with a twitch. The hero, a lad called Malcolm le Maistre, had "ideas" (according to the programme) for the dancing. These were not particularly evident until he impersonated Charlie Chaplin and Ram Gopal—simultaneously.

And if you think I'm joking, I suggest you visit the Roundhouse during the coming week to experience a performance of *U*, devised by the Incredible String Band and Stone Monkey. The Incredibles, Robin Williamson and Mike Heron, nest on one side of the stage beneath a canopy which shelters a clutter of instruments—sitar, recorder, mandolin, gimbri, whistle, gongs and wood blocks. These they bang from time to time in a purposeful, almost spiritual way, whilst on the other side of the stage Stone Monkey, a team of Medieval Leapers, leap and grunt and attempt to perform the ancient parable of love and truth called *U*.

Indeed, it is so ancient that its meaning has been lost to the leapers, most of whom seem not to have leaped much before. As they push out with their hands, they succeed only in pushing out their bottoms. The scenery falls down, the lighting has that special distinction of always missing the action and no one is quite sure when to start leaping. The back projections have a curious originality about them. When El Rato, the Spanish aristocrat, is having his leap, the back projection shows a picture labelled "Venetian Balcony Scene", the subtlety of which has so far escaped me.

Heron and Williamson are from Scotland and have peddled their dirge-like wailings on disc and in the concert hall for some while now and always to the accompaniment of hysterical applause from the trendies. Someone suggested that their performances were like open parties to which all the arts had been invited—poetry, which they mumble, painting, which they imitate, and now dancing, in which they collaborate.

They specialise in synthetic Orientalism and hope that the obscurity of their vision will be mistaken for wisdom. Their musical skill ranges from the G major broken chord played with panache to the single note repeated with such meaningfulness that its effect can only be one of unremitting joy. Godliness is their watchword, they tell us. They sing well with that dying fall forever Scotland and achieve stylistic combinations worthy of the Moroccan Marriage Guidance Council. Pop, folk, rock, blues, calypso, children's songs and Indian ragas co-exist peacefully with lyrics that are as moving as they are silly.

Of course it *might* all have been satirical. There was a version of *Annie Get Your Gun*, Pyramus and Thisbe turned up, too. But it's more likely that these musical doodlings are intended to enlighten our complex lives with their naïve simplicity. Heron and Williamson rarely give press interviews. Maybe that's because they have nothing to say and have left it to the fairies. *April 1970*

## The Punters

**A young girl from Bexleyheath**

I enjoyed the whole thing—music, lights, costumes, everything—fantastic! *April 1970*

**A man from Amsterdam**

The jokes—I liked the jokes. *April 1970*



**I**N RETROSPECT, IT WASN'T AT ALL CLEAR to the average fan what a chastening experience *U* had been for the ISB. The band put a brave face on it all in the press. The critical mauling was merely brushed aside, and audience response presented as a fairer measure. "Funny that the only people who didn't like it were the critics," Mike mused. Like many bands of the time, the ISB had reached a point at which audiences would have cheered them to the echo if they'd stood on stage and recited the *Daily Telegraph* Financial Section in Serbo-Croat. Had artistic hubris robbed them of the capacity for self-criticism?

Many years later, Joe Boyd suggested to *beGLAD* (see issue 6) that this had indeed been the case. "It was during a whole period of erosion of my ability to influence them," he recalled. "In the past they had been much more prepared to listen to what I was saying—they'd play me songs, ask my opinion, and were very responsive to that kind of thing... With the first record the process was mysterious, I was the producer and they looked to me to guide them through it. But as the process became less mysterious they were less prepared to ask me what I thought. The whole thing was no longer such an inspiration or challenge. By *U*... I'd kind of thrown my hands up."

That's the trouble with these creative types: they think they know best! Joe acknowledged that "...it was a process I went through with all the artists I've worked with." The artistic temperament is a delicate shoot, easily withered by self-doubt; a healthy measure of arrogance is often necessary to propel the artist into that leap into the dark that all great innovations represent. By the same token, it can also pull down the blinds on the tedious practicalities of getting one's work out to the public.

Joe's opposition to the *U* project was both artistic and financial. He'd consistently viewed the addition of personnel to the working unit as "a dilution of what the fundamental thing was"—the musical genius of Robin and Mike. For this reason, *U* filled him with apprehension: another six people of dubious ability added to the mix. At the same time, he cannily anticipated that the financial outlay would be ruinous without packed houses both here and in the States. "I just had no confidence in it whatever," he sighed.

Today, Robin cheerfully admits that they had little close interest in or understanding of the financial underpinning of the String Band. Asked whether he thought at the time that *U* had undermined the band's viability, he chuckled, "I'm not sure that the String Band was ever that viable...!"

Witchseason paid each band member a weekly wage; in addition, there were record royalties for Robin and Mike. It seems they lived a fairly frugal lifestyle. "Between tours", says Robin, "I made sure I was living the life of a Buddhist monk". It may be, therefore, that Joe had been too successful in insulating them from financial realities.

*U* was also fuelled by the same communistic idealism that led to Penwern and later to Glen Row: a case of "let's get our friends in on this!" And if our friends were not nearly so eminent in the world of the performing arts, what matter? To the cynical, this might sound like a case of small men consorting with pigmies in order to make themselves appear taller. However, as Peter O'Connor, a Penwern and Glen Row veteran, observed in *beGLAD II*, "[a] question that stays with me was why Robin and Mike chose to associate so closely with us. 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... Instead, they chose to associate with a group of unknowns, of whom Malcolm and Ivan [Pawle] were the only ones who were at all serious about their work." Peter probably puts his finger on it when he reflects that there was "...a common quality of naïvete among [us]," which "...may have been the glue that bound [us] together at Penwern and later." Significantly, he adds, "...it did achieve staggeringly beautiful expression in the pantomime *U*, and for most of [us] it outlasted youth itself."

Naïvete and idealism, particularly in the late Sixties, were essentially indistinguishable. The financial basis of *U* could certainly be described as naïve, as could the band's—or at least Robin's—belief that technique was simply not an issue, no more in dance than in music. Nevertheless, it would be harsh not to view the enterprise as motivated essentially by idealism of a generous-spirited and even tender sort. The music of the ISB was an extension of their lifestyle, not merely an expression of it, and therein lies much of its power to charm and move the listener.

The pundits' battering of *U* can, with the benefit of hindsight, be recognised as the first stirrings of a sea-change in popular

culture at the very end of the Sixties. Love and peace had died at Altamont; drugs were no longer a sacrament and a means of self-discovery, but just another leisure choice. The rock industry was being engulfed by rapacious conglomerates. The dream was over... For the String Band, laureates of the hippy dream, there were some hard choices to be made. Living the timeless life would not be an option for much longer. They still had a faithful audience. They still had things to say. But it was clear they were going to have to trim their sails somewhat to stay afloat in the choppy currents of the Seventies. It looked, at the least, to be the end of the beginning; perhaps it was also the beginning of the end...



## It might have been verse...

Purchasers of the Roundhouse programme were treated to the following poetic perorations from members of Stone Monkey

Into the deep valley he singing  
She dancing towards their timeless state  
He dancing now she singing  
I love you

*Malenie*

Sparkling waters weave my dreams  
And my spirit reaches for the sky  
Dancing joyfully for you

*Uiscebo*

Like as the wind upon the field  
Bow every herb and all must yield  
So we beneath the dancers passing breath  
Shall gently sleep for there is no tears or birth  
or death

One is one and all is all and then you may be free  
Beneath the monkey's swaying dance

*Malcolm*

# What We Said

...about *U*, the album. *beGLAD* invited four of its regular scribblers to capture their feelings in 200 words or less. All but one kept within the limit...

## Andy Roberts loves it to death

As time co-ordinates in my being, *U* will always be a lush summer, the mindless confused sensation of young love, friends I'll never ever see again and the certainty I was on the brink of a tremendous adventure. I loved and still do love every second of the album from the beyond-Indian pastiche of El Wool Suite to the bittersweet optimism of Rainbow. How many trips seriously kicked off with the end of Time? Just how much more sensuous and romantic could Queen Of Love get even after the millionth listen? And as for Invocation, well colour me gone. Lordy, I even like Robot Blues! Here is where you'll find Likky's best vocals (I Know You), and the most eclectic and evocative set of songs in the String Band's canon. I know, it has its critics, Mike and Robin among them, but what do they know? Even the LP sleeve! Janet Shankman's many faced harlequin acro-jugglers acting as gatekeeper to mad bonkers happy people dancing and cavorting in school pantomime clothes, Robin's fantastic, animistic inset painting—This mixture of humanity and mysticism all signposted something richly satisfying. Just writing about it is enough—every cell in my body has it all writ down. When do we get the remastered CD with more photos and sleeve notes?

A masterpiece. End of story.



## David Kidman goes alphabetical

WHAT DOES *U* STAND FOR, THEN? Well, it's the Ultimate in many ways—Unquestionably the most ambitious of the ISB's big projects, with some Unrivalled highs and lows as far as many of us are concerned. It's characterised by almost Unbounded enthusiasm and inventiveness. But it came out as Unbalanced, Unmanageable and Ultimately Untenable as a concept and a performing entity, Unwieldy in its attempt to be Utterly Universal. Some of its Unabashed experimentation was Unprecedented even for the band, with Umpteen Unorthodox instrumental textures and an often Uncompromising and Unusual sound-world. Unparalleled are the Unimaginable and Uncanny Invocation, the Ululation of Cutting The Strings, the seemingly Unstable Astral Plane Theme... Much of the double album is Unquestionably great music, though individual moments (Bad Sadie Lee, Robot Blues, Hirem Pawnitoff and some of Rainbow) still occasionally make for slightly Uncomfortable listening for many fans (even though for me they're nowhere near the nadirs to come—don't take Umbrage!). Other Undisputed highlights must include Queen Of Love, Light In Time Of Darkness and Puppet Song, but there are plenty of other Underestimated gems Under the covers! Oh, and Ukulele was one instrument missing from the panoply Utilised on the album!

Finally—Ultimately—*U* is Undeniably Umbilical: inseparably linked to the rest of the band's output, and thus Unbelievable that it should remain (Uniquely) Unavailable on CD still. Now that is truly Unforgivable!

## Adrian Whittaker hedges his bets

COPY DEADLINE'S LONG OVERDUE and increasingly insistent e-mails from the Editor are piling up... Here's my no-frills take on *U*.

Given that it's a somewhat overblown album, recorded in a rush by an uninterested producer, with a dodgy sleeve painting and poorly reproduced photographs, it's surprising how much I like it. This is coloured by the fact that the *U* live shows were first come first served and I got front row seats rather than the habitual back of the Royal Festival Hall. I even laughed at Sadie Lee! The musical performances were much slicker than I had been used to; the band had finally thought to have a selection of differently-tuned guitars available to cut down on the infamous tuning breaks (this was before they had Malcolm to waffle on about chandeliers, balustrades and local industries).

The Heron songs on the album don't stand up in the context of the wider oeuvre—though Walking Along... is a lovely little pop song—but are chiefly interesting for the way you can hear him honing the new souly vocal technique which came fully into its own on *Smiling Men*. And, in Rainbow, Mike demonstrates he can always turn out a good set closer.

I never really took to Invocation but there are some really great Williamsongs—Juggler's Song, Puppet Song, Time—but my favourite is Queen Of Love which, bar one duff line ("I must needs walk...") is a spine-tingling tour-de-force.

Overall, then, an album held in greater affection than esteem.



## Allan Frewin exceeds his allowance

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN A SUCKER for double albums. You name it, I got it. *The White Album*. *Electric Ladyland*. *Wheels Of Fire*. *Uncle Meat*. *Wee Tam & thingy*. *Trout Mask Replica*. *HMS Donovan*. *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*. *Tales From Topographic*...—yeah, well, let's not get carried away. And then there's *U*.

The thing with me is this: when I buy an album, I'm affected by the whole package, if you know what I mean. It's a boy thing, my wife tells me, this obsession with album covers. Maybe so. Now, had the front cover of *U* been that picture of Williamson conducting the audience (apparently) in his mystic robes, I'd probably have snapped it up. But it wasn't. It was another Shankman picture. (I digress to confess: the Shankman cover put me off buying *I Looked Up* for almost six months. I nearly screamed when first I picked it out of the rack in my local record shop (deceased). How could they relegate such a great band picture to the back cover, and then... Well, maybe it's a boy thing, you know?)

The whole *U* cover looked as if it had been thrown together by a committee during a coffee break. Bitty. Scrappy. Bear in mind that this was some years before *No Ruinous Feud* and the faux-photo-booth pics. My pal Rob bought *U* almost before the glue had set on the cover. He always was a bigger ISB fan than me, really. I remember him playing it to me in his bedroom in that flat over the shop somewhere between Herne Hill and Brix-

ton, about twenty million years ago, if my memory isn't playing tricks. (Memory: Hey, you! How many years am I holding up? Me: Er...twenty one? Memory: Ha! Wrong! Forty-six! Me: Noooooooooooooo!)

I didn't dislike it. But I didn't like it much, either. I felt kind of indifferent, to be honest. Maybe it was too much information to take in at once. Well, *of course* it was too much information to take in at once. Are you mad? It was nearly two hours long. There's a very irritating little phrase that's cruising the corridors of the publishing industry right now: "The Ronco Effect", they say smugly. "This doesn't have the Ronco Effect." The Ronco Effect is code for a kind of facile simplicity. It does what it says on the can: what you see is what you get. The wonderful and enduring joy of the ISB is that you get a whole lot more than what you see. Now isn't that the point with all music that slowly insinuates itself into your mind, wraps itself around your brainstem and refuses to go away? You have to listen to it! Nothing comes of nothing. Listen to *U* once and maybe nothing happens. Listen to it twice and, lo! small threads of melody come floating off the turntable (sorry, kids—a "turntable" was a thing on which you used to play things called "records". Go and ask Grandad). Listen to it three times and the great glad glittering eye starts to open and to hold you with its mystic stare. Play it a few more times and you're sucked in, body and soul.

I can't quite understand why Joe Boyd dislikes it so much. I suspect it's not the music that pisses him off—I think it's the whole package: the galumphing floor show and the Scientology and the anaconda length and weight of it. I recall a comment that greeted the release of the original movie of *The Wizard Of Oz*: the fantasy weighs as heavy as five pounds of sodden fruit cake. Maybe the fantasy of *U* weighed on Joe like that?

Speaking of loving music by paying it attention, Matt Groening said he hated *Trout Mask Replica* until he'd listened to it seven times—and now he thinks it's the most wonderful album in the world, ever. ISB albums can be like that: I thought *Hangman's* was a muddy mess for the first few listens. The point is that I persevered. The idea of persevering with music that doesn't "get you" immediately is a nonsense to a huge number of people. When I suggested to my wife that she might get to like *Trout Mask Replica* if she heard it more than once, she pointed out—quite sternly, I thought—that life was too short for listening to that thing seven times. Heigh ho.

I was confronted by another problem when I finally bought *U*, a few months after Rob had insisted on playing it over and over to me until I got the point. My copy didn't have a lyric sheet, dammit. So, what did your intrepid reporter do? He went out and bought a large sheet of cartridge paper. Then he bought a fine-point Rotring pen and a bottle of red ink. Then he borrowed Rob's lyric sheet. Then he cut the cartridge paper to the correct size and very carefully pencilled in guide lines so that he could sit for a few hours with his pen and his bottle of red ink, listening to *U* over and over again and making an exact duplicate of Rob's lyric sheet, that's what he did. All that devotion, and the bastards still won't put it out on CD!

This lunatic endeavour was brought about because I had finally listened to the album carefully enough to love it. I'm not going to dissect it or natter about this track and that track. I'm not even going to raise a quizzical eyebrow in the general direction of Bad Sadie Lee. Nor shall I recall for you now the way I would faint in coils at the sound of Likky's voice on I Know You. I shan't enthuse over the unearthly keening of her voice on Bridge Song, nor comment on the fabulous intimacy of Queen Of Love, nor... nor...

All I will say is that, if *U* were surgically removed from my life, I would be diminished by the loss. Thirty years on, and I wouldn't change a single note, even if I could. So there you go. Me and *U* and *U* and me and both of us together. And do you know what I really like about writing this? It's that it makes me want to rush off and listen to the album again. Right now. Which is exactly what I'm going to do. ☺



Mugging for the Media—the cast ham it up in rehearsal.

(top) "Did you invite these people?" "No, I thought they were friends of yours..." (middle) "We have lift-off!"—Mal as Laoo the levitating mermaid (bottom) "Okay, kids—let's all pretend to be trees"



## Note on the Photos

The photos reproduced with this article come essentially from two sources: the cover of the *U* album, and the music press. The album photos are credited to Francis Loney, Phil Franks and Jon Bloom, though it's not clear which snapper took which snaps. These are a mixture of photos: some were taken during the Roundhouse performances, and others at a photo-opportunity during rehearsals. Curiously, the photos from the press are almost without exception taken from the rehearsal shoot. It's easy to tell: there are no mike stands intruding into the frame, and in some cases the photos are formally posed. The single exception to this rule is the Bridge Song photo on page 39, which is clearly a performance shot, and turned up illustrating an interview with Rose in the *Melody Maker* in June 1970.

Phil Franks, one of the three album snappers, has a collection of slides taken during live performance, most of which have never been published. He was kind enough to let *beGLAD* see some of these, and has hinted that he may in due course be putting them on his website. Check out: <http://metalab.unc.edu/mal/MO/philn/>



# "It was more like communal fireside entertainment..."



## Robin reflects on *U*

**W**HILE PUTTING THE FINISHING touches to the *Robert Louis Stevenson's Edinburgh* CD in Cardiff's Albany Studios recently, Robin was persuaded to cast his mind back to the ill-fated enterprise that history calls *U*. *beGLAD* asked him to describe how the project took form.

Well, fairly haphazardly is the honest answer to that. By the time *U* started to evolve, Mike and me and all the members of Stone Monkey—Malcolm, Rakis, Mal, John and Ishy Schofield—and a lot of other people had moved to Glen Row, and being there together was how it was possible to make it. 'Cause there was space to hop around...!

**Was it a continuation of the *Be Glad* film, in particular of the ideas you were kicking around with *The Pirate And The Crystal Ball*?**

It was a natural continuation of many things that Stone Monkey had been doing really, because all their ideas about how to move and so on were things that went right back to their earlier connections with other dance and theatre groups... David Medalla and Exploding Galaxy—that was kind of a street dance theatre. It was from that background that the whole thing loosely grew.

**You were interested in mixed-media performance well before the film, weren't you?**

Yes, I was. I always liked mixed-media, in terms of mixing up music and trying to do a bit of this and a bit of that. I had seen a few things that Geoff Moore had done early on. The first quotes unquotes mixed-media show I ever saw was one of his, *Alice In Wonderland*, that had dance, film, acting and music in it all hodgepogged together, and was also using the notion of quite a lot of borrowed texts... things that we never got into with the String Band.

**You felt that mixed-media could be incorporated into the String Band's modus operandi?**

Well, I like every kind of storytelling, and I've always had a tendency to go for the most lavish and least financially feasible...ha ha ha!

**Legend has it that Mike wasn't so enthusiastic about that side of things. Did you sense any resistance from him towards *U* in particular?**

There didn't seem to be any resistance especially, but I don't think it was so much his bag as mine... But he really dived wholeheartedly in there and produced the best songs, I'd say.

**Were you surprised by the press hostility to the show?**

Well, it ran into the usual trap that, if you've got anything that involves dance, people tend to review it as dance and the fact of the matter is that it really wasn't a dance piece as such at all. None of those guys were professionally trained as dancers or actors any more than me and Mike were professionally trained as musicians, but we'd got a niche in the inspired amateur class, you know... So you just run into people's expectations.

**"I'VE ALWAYS HAD A TENDENCY TO GO FOR THE MOST LAVISH AND LEAST FINANCIALLY FEASIBLE..."**

**That was really the first time the ISB had to face the critics wrath...**

Crapola, yeah!

**Did it hurt? Or were you able to brush it off?**

Well, I'd be lying if I said you could just brush it off. But on the other hand, I don't take it that seriously either. I don't sit there and languish for more than about...three days, ha ha ha!

**The serious press in particular seemed to have the knives out...**

I think we got some good press, if I remember. Obviously there was the famous Tony Palmer thing in the *Observer*, which was a piece of vitriol. But, you know, I've met him a few times since and he's hinted that, with hindsight, he kind of liked it.

**Really?**

Well, if he did still hate it, he was being very diplomatic!

**What did Joe make of it all? He's suggested he had serious misgivings...**

He may have done. Certainly he could see that it was going to run into financial hazards.

**But he didn't fly into a swivet and cry "It'll never work!"?**

No, he didn't do any of that. Everyone seemed to be quite enthusiastic at the outset.

**Joe included?**

At the outset, yeah. The Roundhouse went quite well, I think, in terms of attendances. It was New York that was the problem—we were too long in the Fillmore. We were there for too many days, though the first few days were quite good. We were there for six days. There was no way we could manage to finance it after that.

**Did you go straight to the States after the Roundhouse?**

I think so, yes.

**That's a challenging schedule...**

Yes, and there was supposed to be a tour after that as well...

At this point, *beGLAD* produced a programme from the Roundhouse season and directed Robin's attention to the List of Songs, particularly the enduringly mysterious *Be Close To Me* and *Beautiful Girl Speaks*.

**No-one seems to remember these songs. Do you?**

Well, they didn't make it as far as the record, did they? I think they may just have been bits of music. I can't remember anything about them at all.

**There was a good deal of such "incidental" music in the show that was never recorded, as I recall...**

Definitely.

**What I can't recall, however, is hearing *Queen Of Love* as part of the show. Was it ever omitted in performance?**

No, I think I generally was doing it. I certainly remember doing it in America.

**It was a sort of free-floating song, not tightly tethered lyrically to the narrative...**

Well, let's face it, the concept was fairly all encompassing. You could get away with anything in there! If someone had brought a song about...frying eggs, we could have fitted it in there.

**History records that the audience reaction was pretty favourable.**

Oh yeah, it went down extremely well with the audiences, 'cause it had a good sort of feel—if you liked that sort of thing! It was more like communal fireside entertainment than high art. It would have worked very well in later years outdoors at Glastonbury. It was more like... you know, something you might do down on the rocks of West Wales, it was that sort of vibe; or in the woods of Mendicino. But I don't think it should be judged as either theatre or dance.

**How did the Fillmore audiences react to it?**

They loved it, actually. You see, we got very specific audiences at the Fillmore, the sort who would show up with loaves of bread and sackfuls of peyote buns...

**Was it as much of a financial disaster as Joe suggests?**

I'm sure it was a total disaster!

**Did it threaten the viability of the ISB as a result?**

Well, I wouldn't be very well qualified to judge that because my head was firmly in the clouds, so I didn't pay much attention. I'm not sure that the String Band was ever that viable, actually, and whatever money there was was something we never paid any attention to. We were getting paid a weekly wage.

**There was no crisis meeting with Joe saying "We're doomed!"?**

No. If there was, he was saying it to his own office staff, not us! I think all the bands that were in Witchseason were contributing to the survival of Witchseason, and I think the String Band was just one of the irons that Joe had in the fire; so I don't think his entire operation was doomed. Basically, he was getting tired of the music business at that point. He wanted to get into films. He moved to LA shortly after that, but I don't think it was because of *U* particularly.

**Would it be accurate to say that Joe protected you from some of the grosser realities of the music business?**

Hmmm... I don't know. I think we did a pretty good job of protecting ourselves, by diving off into the country in between tours. I know I made sure I was living the life of a Buddhist monk. While other bands were hitting the cocaine I was hitting the brown rice! That's the reason I'm so healthy and vigorous now, ha ha! Prior to Glen Row, Mike would go back to Roman Camps in between tours and I would go back to West Wales. Joe was great in a lot of ways, and he didn't intrude in the production end of things; he let us just get on with it to a large extent. But I know he doesn't like the record *U*.

**What are your own feelings about it?**

It's not one of my favourite ones. It's got a few nice things on it. The thing is, I very rarely listen to records from the past. I find it hard to view them without viewing them as tied up with the times. It's hard to be objective. There are some things on it that I like, but it's not my favourite String Band record of all time.

**Is it true that the whole double album was recorded over a weekend?**

Yes, two days and two nights.

**That must have been intense...**

It was.

**Not only are there nearly two hours of music on there, it's also stiff with overdubs—mainly yours. Were they just cooked up in the studio, on the spot?**

Yes, just cooked up, yeah. I quite enjoyed it, really. I remember sleeping during the day and coming in at night, while Mike did the opposite. We were doing it in shifts. The studio was outside of San Francisco, in a suburb to the south. It was one of those places where there was nowhere you could go except the studio. There was a liquor store and that was about it. The recording was almost like an afterthought, because the tour had been such an intense sort of thing. Mike put down his bits, I put down mine, and I came in and did some overdubs on whatever I could, and that was about the end of that.

**"MIKE AND I WERE RECORDING IT IN SHIFTS..."**

**So everything was put down over that weekend—even the orchestral arrangement to *Queen Of Love*?**

Yeah.

**How quickly was that arrangement thrown together?**

Very quickly, a couple of days before. Tom Constanten certainly knows how to write music, and he pulled out all the stops. There's a bit of everything on there!

**What are your own feelings about it?**

It's a bit busy...

**But you knew when you left the studio what it was going to sound like?**

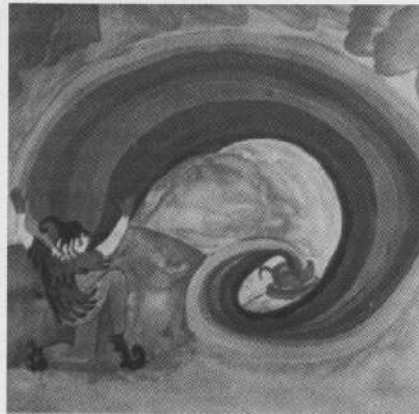
Oh yes. I mean, there wasn't any time to make any adjustments—on anything, not just on that song. It was just one take of this, one take of that...

**Was there any sense, in the aftermath of *U*, that you and Mike were pulling in somewhat different directions?**

Well, I think he was getting ready to do a few things on his own at that time. Shortly after *U* he went for a holiday down in Russian River and vanished into the redwoods, and a lot of the things on *Smiling Men* came out of that. Did he record *How Close Brindaban (sic)* on there? So I think he was getting ready to go and do his West Coast thing, and I think that I was getting ready to come back to Wales.

**You were feeling the call of the Cymric hills?**

Well, the Preselly Mountains to be precise, but yes. I've always loved Wales.



# "We've built a plinth for your mug..."

Robin Bynoe

on souvenirs and second chances

I HAVE A FRIEND WHO IS A CURATOR of art shows. A couple of years ago she told me she was doing one in Winchester. It was rather conceptual. It was going to be about memory and obsession and it was going to feature things collected by fans.

I said, "You'd better borrow my Incredible String Band mug," and explained about it. I got an unexpected reaction. "Amazing," she said. "Have you got any records to go with it?" So I delivered them, and a few weeks later she rang up again. "We've built a plinth for the mug," she said, "and it's under a sort of perspex dome. It looks great, but we need a text to go with it."

So I said I would do a text to go with the mug.  
And here it is.

In 1967 the world was young, our forefathers had yet to inherit the earth, and commemorative mugs were confined to royalty; I never thought to own one.

My first String Band record was their second, *The 5000 Spirits Or The Layers Of The Onion*. It was 1967, in Colletts Folk Record Shop in New Oxford Street. I remember being faintly embarrassed having to produce the garish cover art for inspection by the Stalinist folkies hanging round the counter. Stalinist folkies were the norm in Colletts Folk Record Shop in 1967, but were not to be, to some degree because of the String Band, for much longer. Not having ever heard of the group, I bought the record partly for the garish cover and partly because one of them was called Robin.

They became an obsession. I caught up on the first album and bought the next as soon as it came out, followed shortly by a smock like Mike's on the cover. I went to see them whenever I could and bored my friends and family on the subject. A girlfriend told me that I was welcome in her house only on condition I didn't mention them or her brother would hit me, and he was at Sandhurst.

At one concert they played *You Get Brighter*, which hadn't yet been released on record. Such was the almost religious concentration we brought to their music that my friend Kevin and I learnt the song, tune and words, from that single hearing, and played it in the folk clubs; and when it finally came out on record it turned out we'd got it pretty much right.

The high point was *Wee Tam And The Big Huge*, which was originally released as a double album in England. A succession of release dates was announced in the *New Musical Express*, but for some reason it was delayed. Each day I walked to Robert Maxwell's music shop in Oxford (Stalinist record shops becoming unconsciously a theme) and I got it at last. I thought it was breathtaking, and I still do, although these days I feel able to express more openly my reservations about Puppies.

## IF I MENTIONED THE STRING BAND IN HER HOUSE HER BROTHER WOULD HIT ME— AND HE WAS AT SANDHURST...

It is hard to explain how what they did was fantastic, particularly since you have to distinguish them from the mass of fey hippy bands around at the time. It is, I suppose, the outrageously strange musical combinations: the bowed gimbri, banjo and sitar together, the Moroccan arabesques on guitar; then the words: Celtic mythology and an allusiveness worthy of, but not as self-satisfied as, Eliot; vertiginous wordplay; overall an

absurd optimism, "waiting for the world to begin".

Anyway, it didn't last. The next record was *Changing Horses*. It came out on the same day that I received my first ever hurt letter from a bank manager. The bank manager suggested that further expenditure was out of the question, but I bought it anyway. It was horrible. I felt betrayed. Everything was graceless, curdled, wrong. In the unforgiving way of youth I fell immediately out of love and crossed them off my list. It was my loss. *Changing Horses* is still unlistenable, just as *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* grows in stature with the years, but there was other stuff which was good, as I discovered twenty years later.

Since this is art and not nature, I got a second chance. In the 1980s I was in the Highlands of Scotland; I saw Robin Williamson doing one of his solo concerts and fell in love all over again. He was in his forties, tubbier and wearing corduroy, but as hieratic as ever. All sorts of new directions for me, musical and otherwise, started with that gig.

Since by this time the earth has long since been inherited (by entirely the wrong people, incidentally), I was older and wiser and knew the score. I became a fan. I grubbed around for the records I had scorned at the time. I met men with bootlegs to sell, who said, "How many have you got? I've got thirty-five." And in 1994 I went against my better judgement to Leeds for a weekend for String Band fans, where I bought a commemorative mug. It reminds me of an impossible golden age and it annoys the hell out of other people, which is more than you can say for most mugs.



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