

THE MAGAZINE OF THE  
INCREDIBLE STRING BAND

2001—a String Odyssey

be  
GLED  
19  
Winter 2001



Casablanca—it's coming your way!



When the ISB were square

PETER NEAL interviewed  
MIKE'S LOST SONGS  
PICTURES IN A MIRROR  
—in pictures!

# HELLO THE *Invisible* BRETHREN

They'd bantered, blustered, billed and cooed on the ISB internet chat site; now, summoned by String, they met for the first time. A touching tale of the cybernauts who fell to earth.

Photos by assorted brethren



Brothers (and sister) in String—Clockwise from right: Pipo, Glyn, Monica, Paul, John



Representing the Emerald Isle: Mick and daughter Aoife



Israel, Italy, Germany, USA—and Leeds and Nottingham: Mr Heron attracts a cosmopolitan crowd in the Thistle Hotel lounge



Reunited! Lawson and old chum Nick, over from Noo Yöik... first meeting in twenty years, folks!



Pan-American bonding: Pipo and Monica



The Great Nepalese gathering

Winter 2001  
**19**  
**beGLAD**

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# GLADitorial

**H**ope you enjoy the new magazine and thanks to Raymond for his great help! Over the last few issues *beGLAD* has of necessity changed focus; when discussing the ISB we're now talking about a living entity rather than a series of shared or individual histories. And whilst it's easy to be overwhelmingly positive about the band in their heyday, the variable quality of their post-millennial gigs has led to some editorial debate about the magazine's role—just how critical can/should a "fanzine" be?

In their solo gigs, Robin, Mike and indeed Clive always turn in creditable sets which can still deliver spine-tingling moments; collectively though, as the "new" ISB, they are often so much less than the sum of their parts and we shouldn't shy away from pointing this out. The *beGLAD* readership has a broad spectrum of views on the re-formation, and I feel debate is always healthy. The tour coverage in this issue reflects this, covering the full range of responses from very positive to actively critical.

I'm happy to acknowledge that the band live has certainly become more polished than when they started out, but what's missing is the feeling of an active, vibrant "creative core". My guess is that both Robin and Mike are torn between committing more wholeheartedly to the project (which implies spending creative time together dreaming up new material and working up arrangements for each other's songs) and their own well-established solo careers which, if anything, have served to emphasise the musical differences at the root of the original split. Clive played an important role in the early stages of re-formation but now has become rather marginal in the new line-up and would be much better off returning to his wonderfully eclectic solo gigs. It's a period of transition—at the moment the band is a slightly uneasy compromise in which each individual's best qualities are submerged. Things could go either way—let's wish them luck with the decision-making process!

Adrian

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# Pieces STRING

## On the road again

Scarcely has the dust settled from the String Band's November tour of (bits of) England, than plans are revealed for at least three concerts in the New Year. Prior to the band's much-requested return appearance at Glasgow's Celtic Connections festival on January 20th (the Fruitmarket again), they'll be doing two warm-up gigs at The Point in Cardiff on the 17th and 18th. It'll be home from home for the Stringpersons, as The Point is their preferred place of rehearsal—as, before refurbishment and rebranding, it was the rehearsal space for Robin and the Moving Being dance troupe in the Eighties. The Point holds only 150, so an intimate couple of evenings is expected. Booking details below—ring now to avoid disappointment.

March 17, 18 **The Point, Cardiff** 02920 230130  
20 **Celtic Connections** 0141 353 8000

There are vague noises about the odd festival gig in the summer, but Pig's Whisker confirm that they'll be touring again come autumn: a larger and more ambitious itinerary than November 2000.

The Mike 'n' Lawson spots on the last tour have proved so popular—with the chaps themselves as well as with audiences—that plans are being laid for some duo concerts around March/April. Robin's projected live collaboration with Martin Carthy is taking shape, with the following dates already announced:

March 18 **Fibbers, York** 01423 522245  
19 **Telford's Warehouse, Chester** 01244 390090  
20 **Pacific Road Arts Centre, Birkenhead** 0151 6665023

May 8 **Acorn, Penzance** 01736 365520  
Expect more around May; check the ISB website for updates [www.incrediblestringband.com](http://www.incrediblestringband.com)

### Studio of String

A healthy handful of String-related studio albums are earmarked for New Year release. In addition to the promised *I Looked Up* and *U* reissues, we can expect Robin's second ECM album *Skirting The River Road*, a selection of his settings of Whitman, Blake and others—no release date yet set; his third offering in the *Gems Of Celtic Story* series, *A Tale Of The Deeds Of The Tuatha De Danaan* should be out by the time you read this; and, right out of the blue, a de-luxe double-CD reissue of Mike's long-lost and sedulously sought 1979 Casablanca solo album. The second disc will group together four high-quality promotional demos of songs recorded in 1982 with a view to interesting producers and song publishers. Titles are Heart To Stone, Filling With You (aka So Tender), and two versions—a UK and a US mix—of Squeeze The Minutes. These demos were recorded at producer Hugh Murphy's 24-track home studio, and—whoa!—don't actually feature Mr H's tonsils at all. Betsy Cook, who sings backing vox on Casablanca, takes the mic for these demos (for promotional purposes, it was felt she had a more boardroom-friendly voice!). Mike will be supplying some liner notes to complete the package. Out in January!



Mike and Lawson are so chuffed with the quality of the demos of the six duo songs they prepared for the autumn ISB tour that they're releasing them as a limited edition CD on Unique Gravity. The songs are: Residential Boy, Singing The Dolphin, Worlds They Rise And Fall, Don't Kill It Carol, The Falling In Love and Portraits (the last was never performed). Title will be *Futurefield*; it'll be on sale at the ISB January gigs, and thereafter by mail order only.

The word on the street is that an independent US label, Sepia Tone, has licensed the first ISB album and *Liquid Acrobat* for Starterside CD reissue. Expected in April/May.

A brace of videos are heading your way. The DVD version of Peter Neal's 1969 *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending* film is now available from Pig's Whisker ([info@pigswisker.com](mailto:info@pigswisker.com)) and from Wienerworld, who are publishing it on licence from Pig's W. ([wworld@wienerworld.com](mailto:wworld@wienerworld.com)). A US release date is currently under negotiation. Each frame has been digitally cleaned and enhanced, and the soundtrack restored to sparkling clarity. (And the music for the closing sequence, we hear, has been changed by Peter Neal.) There's also a 20-minute filmed interview with Peter, recorded at the time of this summer's Bloomsbury concerts.

The second video release will feature Mike and Lawson performing the six songs they rehearsed together for the November ISB tour. Additionally, Mike was filmed performing some songs solo, which may also be included. There's also an interview with the Smiling Man. Earmarked for January release on Unique Gravity.

### Photo call

A small but valuable piece of the great String jigsaw puzzle turned up recently in the shape of photographer and film-maker Irving Bastin. Pyrenees-based Irving offered his services as wielder of the Camcorder on the recent ISB autumn tour, an offer Pig's Whisker were more than happy to take up. Much footage of the shows—both artistes and audiences—now lies in the PW archive, and may well reach the public eye in some form. Irving has also been filming Mike and Lawson in

Albany Studios (see the *Studio of String* item).

Irving, it turns out, was also the man responsible for the photos of Robin and Mike that we reproduced in last issue's In Person Tonight feature. According to Irving, they were taken in the summer of 1968 just outside of Oxford, where the ISB had been playing the previous night (and not Penwern, as we erroneously claimed). Two shots from that same reel had been used by Elektra on the cover of their 1971 *Relics Of The Incredible String Band* retrospective, without (it transpires) credit, permission—or payment. In fact, Irving had never seen the album sleeve until we at Be Glad Towers dangled our dog-eared copy in front of his wondering gaze last month.

### Windswept and irresistible

Billy Connolly's new biography, *Billy*, authored by his wife Pamela Stephenson, has been sitting at the top of the hardback sales charts since its publication in October. Given the Big Yin's fondness for the ISB, it comes as no surprise to find a reference to Robin and Clive in the chapter *Windswept And Interesting*, which recounts his early exploits on the Glasgow folk scene.

"Clive...was the coolest man on earth," we learn, "with a very pale face and waist-length [sic] straight hair. He was afflicted with polio in one leg so, as he limped, his hair swung out to the side like a pendulum... He frequently keeled over, but... would just pick himself up and walk on down the road." We hear about the tent nailed to the floorboards, and Clive's habit of slicking his hair down with paraffin to deter lice.

Robin, for his part, "wore a red velvet cape and had a pet fox. Women were crazy about him, for he was the most beautiful-looking man they'd ever seen... He also had a lovely manner and a beautiful voice. Billy reckoned [Robin and Clive] knew special things about life that came roaring across whenever they sang."

The ISB were faithfully namechecked when Billy C turned up on Radio Four's *Desert Island Discs*; and his final choice of record, remarkably, was Clive's and Bob Devereux's rendering of *The Morris Room*, from the Pig's Whisker CD reissue of the duo's 1977 *Suns And Moons* album. With friends like that, who needs a PR department?

### Malcolm plays road for police top brass shock!

Malcolm's been very active on a variety of fronts, as usual—the reformed ISB could use some of his dynamism! Firstly, his long-mooted *Animals With Attitude* songs and animation project is currently under consideration by Hit Entertainment, the company responsible for *Bob The Builder*. Watch this space.

He's also developed a working relationship with Rocket Visuals, a company which produces CD-Roms for schools. Their first joint venture, on road safety, included a specially written *Le Maistre* song and went on to win the annual road safety award. This led, at the presentation ceremony, to Malc doing a particularly frenetic performance (playing an all-singing, all-dancing road) in front of the Scottish Chief Constable. Other CD-Roms are in the pipeline; the next will be about birds' migratory habits.

Currently, Malc has a proposal in connection with next year's Earth Summit in Johannesburg. If it comes off, he'll be facilitating six different projects centred around bio-diversity in partnership with local South African groups, leading to performances at the Summit.

Last but not least, his long-awaited collection of new songs has completed the demo stage. Standout tracks include *Sense Of Wonder* (about that point in childhood where everything seems possible), *Solace Never Lasts* (with a downbeat alt country feel), *Why Does It Have To Be Like This?*, *Millennium Blues* (which boasts an epic extended chorus), *Passengers* (premiered at Back Again), and *Why Is Love So Strange*, another in the Le Maistre tradition of melancholy love songs. An older tune, *Lost In Arabia*, has been completely reworked and there is now a very North African, almost String Bandy feel to the arrangement—which features Malc on bongos! There are 14 tracks in all, and a couple of independent record companies in the States are interested. If anyone in the UK would like to help put a CD out here, they should contact Malcolm via *beGLAD*.

#### Hapless hack bites back

There's been much discussion about Malcolm's seeming invisibility on the Island *Here Till Here Is There* CD retrospective (see Adrian's review on page 34, and also page 22). Some feel this hints at a deliberate "airbrushing" of Malc out of official String history. Not so, say all concerned in the package. No Malc songs featured, we're told, because, in view of the space constraints, it was decided to highlight the development of Robin's and Mike's songwriting through the period of their Island sojourn. As for the photos being all of the pre-Malc, pre-Island line-up, insiders blame "a cock-up in the Island art department". And as for the Malc-less liner notes, let the culprit take the stand:

"Not guilty, m'lud," pleads Raymond Greenoaken (85) piteously. "I received no instructions from shadowy figures in underground car-parks to exclude Mr Le Maistre from my account of the Island Years. Rather I attempted to illuminate the songs selected for the CD by reference to the salient changes in the band's music over that period. Reference was made to Graham Forbes, whose recruitment into the band, in my view, marked significant alterations in the ISB sound and style (and I ought also to have alluded to Gerard Dott in this respect...). Mr Le Maistre's inclusion in the line-up, by contrast, simply enabled the 1971-period ISB to be even more like they already were. Even so, I accept that to omit all mention of Mr Le Maistre in my effusion was careless and misleading."

Mr Greenoaken was sentenced to ninety days hard labour transcribing the lyrics to *Ladies* from a 10th generation live bootleg cassette.

#### Mondegreenoakens: more flak for hapless hack

In last issue's Mondegreens article Raymond perpetrated a couple of his own. The relevant *Come With Me* lines are: "O speak on sir" (not "O speak answer") and "the greeny-gold wheat your incense sweet" (not "greeny-mossed peat"). Mind you, perhaps there's a new song idea! And Robin's farming job in *Waiting For You* is "guava farmer".

Sulky hack replies: "Since 'Speak on sir' and 'Speak answer' are phonetically identical, I demand proof. And if I wanted a nice smell about the place, frankly I'd be likelier to burn peat than wheat."

We'll get back to you...

#### "Imitators steal me blind"—

#### Erratum

Zero marks to both Paul Cassidy and Raymond (see last issue's letters column) for failing to notice that the Dylan interview quoting Puppies was *fictional*. So we have Michael March (who wrote it) to thank for that ISB reference.

"I'm outa here!"—Raymond

#### You win!

A hefty total of six entries for last issue's Mondegreens competition: a light froth on the ocean of apathy that is Stringfandom!—Or maybe you're just opposed to competitive practices...

We invited you to send in examples of String Band lyrics that you'd misheard to absurd or comic effect. Chris Kearns lobbed us a couple:

"Look in the index, see my secret rhymes..." (Mr & Mrs) and "It's of a strange and furious time, when men did speak to pray..." (When You Find Out Who You Are)

We're not holding our sides, Chris...

Eeva Olberg from Norway excuses herself for the following howler by pointing out that English is not her first language.

"I was reading a book about India (*A Suitable Boy*, by Vikram Seth) and at the same time listening to *U* for the first time in my life. This could be a possible explanation to my mondegreen. I loved the book and almost thought that I was in India..."

"At the end of Rainbow Licky and Rose sing 'I have seen you there'. I heard it: 'I'm a Sikh Bear'. Even now that I know what it is supposed to be, I hear it like 'I'm a Sikh Bear' if I don't concentrate."

Keep taking the tablets, Eeva...

Jonathan Church was unsure whether the ISB were espousing the cause of feminism or simply enjoying their dinner when he heard them chanting "Spare rib, spare rib beautiful..."

Adrian Whittaker claims he used to hear "a puppy a-trembling" in Little Cloud. Nice try, Adrian, but you're disqualified for being Editor of *beGLAD*.

Mike Swann reportedly wasted the most important years of his life believing that Robin sang in *Waiting For You*. "I'm off to market with a nose-roll basket..." You can still get 'em, you know...

And keeping our finger of fun firmly in the nasal region, Nick Boyes scoops our grand prize of a copy of the Second ISB Songbook (guaranteed mondegreen-free) with this frankly shameful admission:

"My claim to fame comes near the end of *A Very Cellular Song*. I always heard 'Turn your quivering nose in my direction', and continued to sing along using that line long after my partner pointed out the error of my ways!"

More mondegreen merriment elsewhere in this section...

#### Mike's van: a true story...

Following our discussion of homophones in last issue's Mondegreen feature, Mike Swann assures us the following account is genuine...

"I'm sure the naming of *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending* came from an actual experience. I wonder if Mike or Robin once had occasion to travel on the Central Line of London's Underground. In the winter of '81 (just after we'd moved to Sudbury) there was an inevitable rail strike (I was still commuting up to London at the time), and had to drive down to the Central Line terminus, which was then at Ongar in Essex. There was quite a layer of snow on the ground. Where the station is located is quite rural and right next to the platform is a small chicken farm. The backs of the coops are very near, and on this particular morning the chicks were making a fearful row. To save costs on the driving, four of us (all sizeable gentlemen) travelled up to Ongar together in a different car each day, and all four of us were on the platform one morning marvelling at this incredible noise, thus:—

*Big lad four, this Ongar snow hen din!"*

Kindly leave the planet, Mr Swann...

#### I have seen the future—and it rocks

Stringfandom is holding its collective breath in anticipation of the long-awaited CD reissue of *U* next spring. Elektra, we hear, were sorely tempted to bring the release date forward when word seeped out that *Simpsons* creator Matt Groening had cited Robot Blues as the original inspiration for his 'toon sci-fi fantasia *Futurama*. He reportedly declared in a magazine interview that Robin's song was: "a

ballroom singalong full of fun, sex, power struggles and human fragility." (Or words to that effect—our informant Pipa Lernoud has unfortunately mislaid the original article!) Does that sound like *Futurama* to you? If so, Mr W should be getting the lawyers in...

#### Kindred spirits

News of two performers whose oeuvre should be of interest to students of String. Peter Stampfel, late of *The Fugs* and still occasionally of the Holy Modal Rounders (see our feature on the Rounders in issue 15), embarked on his first ever tour of the UK and Ireland in December, as one half of *The Du-Tels* with ex-Beeheart sidekick Gary Lucas. *The Du-Tels* are described as "an acoustic alternative Big-Little band whose repertoire ranges through the entire corpus of American music, and then some... a veritable two-man jukebox riffing through the collective unconscious." Barry Mann over in Brooklyn has been keeping *Be Glad Towers* up to speed with some live *Du-Tels* bootlegs. They really are a cracked, class act. Hope some of you caught them; you'll find a review on page 45.

Vivian Stanshall, late of the Bonzos and late of this life, has had a posthumous biography just published, retailing his merry adventures in the demi-monde of Sixties music and his later curatorship of the life and times of Sir Henry Rawlinson. Mad as a hare and twice as frisky. Track down *Ginger Geezer—The Life Of Vivian Stanshall* by Lucien Randall and Chris Welch, published by 4th Estate at £17.99. "Blimey—that's nearly 18 quid!" as the Old Viv himself might have said.



Mark Simos, one-time Williamson sidekick in the LA days (hear his accordion on the *Fiddle Tunes* flexi-disc, now of course a CD), is still active on the West Coast scene. Visit his web page at: <http://www.devachan.com>

There is a very slim connection between Robin and Kaleidoscope (US) band (writes Stephen Robbins) as Stu Brotman played bowed bass on RW's *Merry Band's American Stonehenge*. He played bass for Kaleidoscope on *Incredible, Bernice, When Scopes Collide* and *Greetings From Cartoonistan*. Feature on Kaleidoscope pencilled in for issue 20.

Words reaches us of another cover version of *Cellular Song*, following the esteemed efforts of The Delgados and Neil of *The Young Ones*: chalk this one down to Alisdair Roberts from Scottish band *Appendix Out*.

US band *Beachwood Sparks*, latest in the curious cavalcade of fruit-bowl-coiffed '60s pasticheurs, revealed their current listening preferences in *Mojo* 96: "Fairport Convention, Gene Clark, the first *Incredible String Band* LP and the *Wu-Tang Clan*".

On *St Agnes Fountain*, a recently-released CD of Christmas carols in the modern folk style, Fairport fiddler Chris Leslie is listed as playing a dulcitar. Any relation to the instrument of that name hand-made by Clive and featured with COB? Could it, indeed, be the very same instrument? Keep an ear open for Mike's sitar—it could turn up at any time.

Spotted in the *Railway Modeller* (we're too discreet to reveal which of our subscribers studies such periodicals: Hattons of Liverpool are offering a scale model of the locomotive R2110 Class 90 "Sir Michael Heron". Yours for only £45. String completists...

# The clan in the van

## From Bloomsbury to Birkenhead in words and pictures

photos by Jean Hussein, Jenny Bolders, Alan Mawdesley  
and Felix Reut

I missed the summer mini-tour, writes *Adrian*—the Bloomsbury concerts always seem to take place when I'm on holiday abroad—so my first news of the gigs was a tape of the Eden Project gig. I realise now that this benefited from being some way into the tour, so the band were “played in”, but I found some encouraging signs of renewal.

Most importantly, Mike's rediscovered his voice—a little wobbly here and there but he's singing loudly and confidently again. With his harmonica playing, he's also found a way of embellishing some of Robin's songs (his keyboards stick to a background part). Robin was as full-on as ever—in fact the problem is often how to stop him overshadowing the other, more reticent members! Clive has managed to identify a second banjo rhythm part, thus avoiding the permanent on-the-beat clunk which made everything rather leaden. Bina is less out of tune than she used to be and Lawson fills in the gaps and smoothes over the uncertainties.

New material is creeping into the set, and I was particularly impressed by Robin's *Doorways...* song, which has been arranged very much as a group vehicle—he's written a new ISB song here, I feel. There's a lot more work for them to do until they really gel all the way through a set (and fulfil their potential), but I feel they're slowly moving in the right direction.



Reading some of the reviews from less partisan sources (and some from subscribers!) I've been thinking what a gulf there is between the way "we" regard the reformed band and the way everyone else does. By we I mean the *beGLAD* readers/e-listers who've watched the Mike/Robin reconciliation slowly develop, move unsteadily on to some joint concerts, and culminate in a full-blown reunion under the ISB banner. In other words, we've approached the whole thing with fairly low expectations (plus much well-wishing)—which were usually exceeded.

The broader groups who turn up for festivals or large-scale concerts know little or nothing about the difficulties which have been overcome to get to this point, and come expecting something which picks up from when they last saw the band some time in the early Seventies. Either that or they're people who were too young the first time round, know that the ISB were a seminal band, and want to check out what all the fuss was about. These two groups come with high expectations, which are often not met.

But if the "new" ISB is to grow and fulfil its potential, they'll need to continue to play larger theatres and festivals where there will be a

broad cross-section of types in the audience; if the gig is too rosy, most of them (bar the faithful) won't be back again.

Having seen them live at November's Sheffield gig (see reviews elsewhere this issue) I feel what's missing is the feeling that there is a "creative core" in the current band—they all play their parts competently enough now, but there's no real spark between the three founder-members, no real excitement beyond the pleasure of hearing a favourite song live again. None of the shivers down the spine Heron and Williamson can still evoke individually in their solo gigs.

As many people have observed, the Mike/Robin interaction was what made the original band more than just an aggregation of two good songwriters and that, I feel, is what they need to develop now—spending musical time together, not just rehearsing but actively contributing to each other's arrangements and rediscovering their shared musical language.

Bit of a crossroads, then, and I feel the coming year is crunch time—either the band develops to the point where they can retain any new audiences they might attract, or return individually to the club scene—with maybe an annual Bloomsbury gig for the faithful. ☞

# We're Getting There

## Raymond Greenoaken

### says keep the faith

**F**ourteen gigs in the course of a year is hardly a punishing schedule; compare, for instance, the 40+ concerts the ISB performed in 1970. But that was thirty years ago, and the fact that, in 2001, an act bearing the Incredible String brand is travelling the miles of Britain and calling in at a theatre or arts centre near you is not only a cause for celebration—it's a source of wonder.

As Andy Roberts recalls on page 21, when *beGLAD* was launched in 1992, a reformed String Band was on nobody's agenda. The band were no more than a footnote in the history of rock; none of their records had graduated to CD; "the Incredible *who?*" was the commonest response whenever we ageing Stringheads raised the subject in polite conversation. But *beGLAD* showed there was still a constituency of String, widely scattered around Britain, Europe and more remote and improbable parts of the world. The interest was still there: but "interest" hardly describes the intense, passionate absorption that characterises the typical Stringhead. It's the sort of "interest" that sends people halfway across the world to see and hear their heroes in action.

Moreover, unlike many of their Sixties counterculture peers, Robin and Mike were still active, making music that related gracefully to their String Band past without being defined by it. And we knew the whereabouts of at least some of the other ISB alumni: Malcolm up in Central Scotland, Rose on the west coast of Wales, Clive deep in the green heart of Brittany. But a reformed Incredible String Band for the late Nineties? It seemed as likely as Jeffrey Archer going to jail. Robin himself had deflected the question more than once. "We talk about it every few years," he said. "But me and Mike have pretty much reverted to type, and I can't see how our musical approaches would be sufficiently compatible any more." So that was that.

Then events suddenly took on a momentum of their own. Between them, Joe Boyd and Mark Anstey wangled CD reissues for most of the String back catalogue. They flew off the shelves. Admiring pieces began to appear in serious music journals like *Q* (historical note: *Q* was once a serious music journal). And then, out of the blue, Robin and Mike decided to step out on stage again together—ostensibly, it seemed, to demonstrate that, contrary to some overheated reports, their relations were not characterised by "fathomless loathing" (that serious music journal again...).

The two "reunion" shows (which carefully avoided use of the String brand) were exuberant, good-humoured but decidedly ramshackle affairs which seemed to confirm that, musically, Robin and Mike were ploughing pretty dissimilar furrows. With the strains of *You've Been A Friend To Me* still ringing in the roofbeams, they promptly returned to their opposite ends of the country. Nevertheless, Stringdom now had the bit between its collective teeth. We wanted more...

Enter the Catalyst. When Clive emerged from his Breton retirement in 1999 to link up with Robin for the critically-acclaimed *At The Pure Fountain* CD and the tie-in tour, the possibility once again emerged that some sort of String-driven thing might be on the cards. All that was needed was to haul wee Mike on board. Which duly happened, aptly enough in Edinburgh on the brink of the Millennium, when the Smiling Man joined the *Fountain* touring cast for what was intended as a collective tip of the hat towards the high times of the Incredible Folk Club. The promoters naughtily sold the event on the String name ("Robin Williamson and Clive Palmer with Mike Heron" being the band's preferred option), and assembled Stringheads were somewhat perplexed by an evening of ancient foot-tappers sparingly sprinkled with selections from the first ISB album. Back in the old days, you never got quite what you expected from a String Band concert. In this respect, at least, the lads were entirely faithful to their own legend!

The Rubicon had been crossed, however. There were a group of people up on stage who had an incontrovertible claim to the ISB name, should they choose to exercise that claim. And why not? We guessed that Mike and Clive would be up for it: they had time on their hands and songs in their pockets. But would Robin want to divert time and energy from a still-productive solo career for a wholesale re-engagement with his legendary past?

Well, readers, you know the answer to that. In August 2000, Robin, Mike and Clive joined with Lawson and Bina under the ISB banner for a double-showcase at the Bloomsbury and an opening night slot at Fairport's annual Cropredy beanfeast, with a set-list groaning with top drawer material. These were not the silkiest of performances. To say the band were well-rehearsed is to say that Kylie Minogue is over-dressed. Nor did they attract the indulgence of the "Okay-show-me-why-you're-living-legends" atelier of metropolitan critics. "Shambling ineptitude,"

frowned *The Guardian*; "Deadly dull," sniffed *The Times*. And, to be frank, such epithets accurately described a creaking, half-hearted Painting Box and the enervated drone that was Air (described by one commentator as the sound of old men falling gently out of their deckchairs). But that was less than half the story. There were moments of genuine, hair-raising majesty: Eyes Of Fate, spooky and sinuous in the classic fashion; a fragile but heartfelt This Moment; an awesome Waltz Of The New Moon, which even *The Times* allowed was "as evocative as ever". Peter Neal's camera (see page 33) caught Sir Robert of Plant hanging out backstage with the band at Cropredy, bestowing the benisons of the rock aristocracy. Later in the year, they felt sufficiently confident to accept an invitation from The Delgados to support the Scots indie rockers at the Royal Festival Hall (scene of the triumphant 1968 concert featured on Neal's *Be Glad* film). A risky enterprise, facing a hallful of lean and youthful Delgados fans for whom the ISB were either ancient history or a mysterious name occasionally evoked in Delgados interviews.

Well, they got out alive. *beGLAD*'s Steve Pilley reported that some rust had formed since the summer, but there were sublime moments withal. Your editor Adrian was also present, nodded approvingly at the set list and commended Mike's singing (which had been a target of press criticism at the Bloomsbury). "The big (and yet unresolved) question," he noted, "is whether the band can now go on to put a collective stamp on new material."

2001 dawned to the lowering chords of *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and a short String tour culminating in two concerts at Glasgow's prestigious Celtic Connections festival (the second as late replacements for the age-stricken Dubliners). The opening gig at Cardiff's Coal Exchange was as wayward as ISB first nights traditionally are. The atmosphere, however, was wonderful, the sell-out audience swelled by massed cheering members of Bina's family. Bina beamed, glowed and looked gorgeous in an ankle-length black number, and for the first time took a lead vocal—on Clive's crepuscular Land Of No Return.

Since the String Band's re-emergence, certain pockets of Stringfandom have been muttering darkly about "the Bina problem". Her gaucheness on stage, her unambitious unison lines, her hit-and-miss pitching: all advanced as evidence that she's not up there on merit, but merely by virtue of the ring on her finger. It has even been suggested—extraordinarily, in the light of ISB history—that there is something unStringlike about her inclusion in the band. We'll return to this by and by...

The following night at Milton Keynes was enthusiastically reviewed in these pages, though reviewer Stuart Taylor reported a half-time conversation with a disgruntled punter: "My wife and I thought it was terrible. We're going home... I'm looking forward to seeing The Strawbs when they perform here..." Well, I wouldn't dream of questioning the judgement of a *beGLAD* reviewer, but for the first time since late '72, the String Band just didn't cut it for me. There was a general flaccidity to their performance that was exacerbated by an appalling sound system and a dodgy mix.

Was it just an off-night, or evidence of a deeper malaise? No firm conclusions could be drawn from the Glasgow gigs, as most of the band took to the stage at the Fruitmarket and Royal Concert Hall in the grip of a particularly virulent 'flu'-like bug. Troupers that they were, they played on regardless, and—according to trustworthy witnesses—did pretty well in the circumstances. Mike had spent the day between gigs in the hotel's steam room, to get his voice back for the evening—rock'n'roll, eh?

The by-now-traditional Bloomsbury two-nighter in August went a long way to allaying any gnawing doubts that lingered from Milton Keynes. Improved versions of Ducks On A Pond and Painting Box, a delicious arrangement of a Fifties Bollywood song, Whether Near Or Far, sung solo by Bina with grace and panache, Mike picking up guitar for killer renditions of Singing The Dolphin and Don't Kill It Carol, and—NEW SONGS from his and Robin's hitherto-idle pens! All this and, at last, a half-decent performance of Air.

But Nemesis was lurking in wait at Sidmouth International Folk Festival, where the band were booked to play the headline Arena concert two days after Bloomsbury. Their concert was the chief talking-point for festival-goers for the remainder of the week-long event. Put baldly, it was a disaster, a Woodstock-style meltdown for the new

Millennium. It's no secret that the 2001 ISB are not the most robust of bands. Their lack of road-miles makes it hard for them to adjust collectively when things start, for whatever reason, to come unglued. And things, it seems, came unglued big-style under an iron-grey Devon sky that evening.

There's an immutable law of the universe that every band should recite daily after breakfast and again after lunch: never *ever* put yourself at the mercy of a sound engineer you've never met before, and who doesn't know the Incredible String Band from The Yetties. Witnesses to the Sidmouth debacle speak of painfully off-key vocals, erratic timekeeping and a sound quality akin to a river of sludge. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to detect at the heart of this a sound-man who, whatever his professional credentials, basically hasn't a clue what he should be doing. One report speaks of Bina being "a foot off-tune and [missing] cues by half a beat". The first thing you learn at sound-engineer kindergarten is that, if someone's singing palpably off-key or out of time, the likeliest reason is that they can't hear themselves through the on-stage monitors. Solution: turn up the monitors. It really is as simple as that. A lesson too late for the learning?

Well, thankfully, no. When the ISB convened in Cardiff this autumn to prepare for the November mini-tour, it came as no surprise to hear that they were rehearsing, for the first time, with their own sound-engineer, who would accompany them for the duration of the tour. The difference was breathtaking. From the opening night at Salford's Lowry Centre through to Basingstoke at the end of the month, the sound quality was crystalline, shimmering, *sympathetic*. It was like hearing the ISB for the first time. Every instrument was as clear as a bell, every voice burnished to its best advantage. And it was plain that the band could hear themselves on stage too: miss-hit notes were at a minimum, and their time-keeping was dangerously close to being tight. At last, the Incredible String Band were playing to their full potential. Much as I'd enjoyed their earlier gigs (Milton Keynes excepted), this was what my heart ached for. No river of sludge but a pure flow, glancing, dancing from the fingers and throats of the old Wizards of Changes themselves. My thorny 50-year-old self turned to my 17-year-old self and said with a purr of pleasure: "They're back."

## EVERY INSTRUMENT WAS AS CLEAR AS A BELL, EVERY VOICE BURNISHED TO ITS BEST ADVANTAGE

**W**ell, it's been a rocky road from Edinburgh 1999 to here. At times the ISB have flattered to deceive. At times their artistic judgement has been questionable (Air, lovely song though it is, should have been put out to pasture much earlier). They've lost a few friends along the way (see, for example, Andy Roberts' review below), and the flintier class of critics have uncorked the vitriol with undisguised glee. They'd be forgiven for thinking: is it all worth the tallow?

Cynics may prate about the lure of easy lucre, but it takes a brave man or woman to lay a hard-won reputation on the line for the sake of a few grand in the hand. It may pay the mortgage but as a bribe to posterity it doesn't wash. The truth is that Robin and Mike have potentially much more to lose than they have to gain by re-Stringing their bows. Leave the legend untouched and you leave it inviolate. Dust it off and you have earned it all over again, not in the security of the chicken-in-a-basket circuit but under the hard glare of a critical community who don't owe you anything.

So if it ain't quick profit, is it a matter of overweening ego? Hardly. I'd say, given the caution with which Mike and Robin have addressed the notion of a reunion over the years. Paradoxically, artists are not noted for their resources of self-belief; and, let's face it, you'd need industrial quantities of hubris to believe that you'd written some of the most astonishing songs of the last hundred years. That's our job: to make such vaulting claims on their behalf, not because we're in the business of ego-massage, but because we believe it to be true. But there's many another commentator out there just itching to take them down a peg.





At ease...

It's no coincidence that, several times in recent concerts, Robin has stepped to the mic and asked: "Are you enjoying it so far?" And for the best part of a year he's been spinning sardonic variations on "We're just back from six weeks in Las Vegas—that's why we're so tight!" Most tellingly, at Birkenhead, towards the end of the most richly satisfying concert I've witnessed from anyone since the high days of the Merry Band, he remarked wistfully, "You know, we've always had wide tastes in music, and we've always liked to just have a go at them..." And, in an oblique riposte to Disgusted of Milton Keynes, he added, "The Strawbs we ain't!" (Proof, if you need it, that the String camp are diligent students of our august journal.)

The Strawbs they definitely are not. The String Band they emphatically are, despite the fact that certain factions of Stringfandom seem to have a proprietorial interest in the brand, and continue to insist that the likes of Lawson, Bina and even Clive are cuckoos in the nest and that the call should go promptly out to Malcolm and Rose (Likky being inconveniently out of touch). Then we'd have a *real* String Band, one worthy of the name.

Here's something to reflect upon. Whichever way you tilt the glass, the ISB are back on the road because we wanted them to be. If we hadn't been baying for years for a String Band Redux, Clive would have gone back to his Breton bean-rows and Mike to hoeing his own Row, and you wouldn't be reading this today. (Unless of course you're reading it tomorrow, or next Tuesday...) But does it fall upon us to dictate the personnel of the re-formed band, based on some abstract notion of what the Incredible String Band connotes to us? It should be clear to all that the present line-up came together in a satisfyingly organic fashion, completely true to ancient String Band practice: rope in an old mate, a neighbour and one of the family. But, you protest, bands don't work like that in the real world. Sorry, pal, this one does—and always has done. Question: when was the last time the ISB actually *auditioned* someone, from outside their own social circle? Answer: in 1965. The (successful) auditionee? James Michael Heron, "Strummer" of this Parish.

The bottom line is, whoever takes the stage with Mike and Robin *are* the Incredible String Band. That duple presence defines it thusly. Sure, it would be nice to have Malc and Rose and Likky... And Gerard and Jack and Stan... And why not genial Joe Boyd at the wheel of the tour van? But Mike and Robin together are the acknowledged custodians of the String heritage; why else did the name go into decades-long storage when Robin jumped ship in '74? The least we can do, I'd suggest, is honour their choice of fellow travellers, in 2001 as in 1969.

Which brings me to the so-called "Bina problem". The charge sheet is roughly as follows: she doesn't always sing in tune; she can't or won't sing harmony lines; she has a full set of teeth (unlike the illustrious ex-Bandswoman with whom she's habitually compared by dint of her gender and her relationship to Robin). Well, let's take these one by one.

*Singing out of tune.* Well, there's out of tune and there's out of tune, don't y'know? It was a rare occasion when either Robin or Mike got through a concert without hitting a bum note or three. Why? Because they'd go for notes, *just because they were there*. Sometimes they got them, sometimes they didn't, but they'd have a go because (as Robin says, above) having a go was core String Band philosophy. Having caught the band four times on consecutive nights this autumn, I was well-placed to notice how infrequently either Mike or Robin would sing a song the same way four, three or even two nights running. They'd vary it subtly, and sometimes not so subtly; they were recreating and redefining it every time they sang it, like folk singers or soul singers (some would argue that they're both). When you're pushing the

envelope vocally like that, you don't always hit the note you want smack between the eyes. So we veteran String watchers are well used to instances of less than perfect intonation; it's part of the experience.

What's different about Bina? Simply put, she's not a singer like Robin and Mike are singers. She follows a predetermined melodic sequence unvaryingly. When she wanders off-key, it's for the same reasons we mere mortals go off-key: nerves, and an inability to hear herself clearly amongst the other sound sources. How can I be so sure about that? Simple: you only have to compare her performances at Sidmouth and at, say, Birkenhead or Newcastle. When your sound-man's doing his job, you can hear yourself and you can hear everything that's going on around you. You can then do the job that you're up there to do, and your confidence surges accordingly. The change in Bina's on-stage demeanour just lately is dramatic. Where once she looked like a rabbit in the headlights, clutching the mic-stand like a security blanket, now she stands statuesque, serene; she looks like she wants to be there, like she *belongs* there. Which she does.

*She can't/won't sing harmony.* Well, from where I'm sitting, this is a canard. Who says she has to harmonise? We're not talking Beach Boys here. Dig out that old vinyl, and listen to how often Likky and/or Rose are singing authentic harmony. The answer is: rather less often than you think. For much of the time, the female voice simply shadows the male vocal line, which, given the difference in pitch and timbre, is all the contrast the ear needs. And, as it happens, there is no more a tradition of harmony singing in music from the subcontinent than there is in Celtic music. Not many people know that...

As I've said before, Bina's voice supplies what many of us feel is one of the quintessential elements of the sound of String: the texture of the female voice. When Likky upped sticks in '72, a little light went out in our lives. The String Band were a boy's club again. Well, not any more...

Ah, yes—Likky. On the third count, that Bina is not the gap-toothed waif of fond memory, the verdict must be guilty as charged. Bina is Bina: a mother in her forties with no performing background who has been swept up into the curious harlequinade that is the Incredible String Band. Classic *Women's Hour* material: housewife superstar—well, nearly...

Is she there merely as Robin's marital appendage? If so, then so what? Frankly, I'd sleep with Robin myself for a seat in the ISB. All right, if she'd stuck with backing vox and occasional tambourine-shaking, there might have been a case to answer. However, lest you hadn't noticed, she's now taking the odd lead vocal, and, in the case of her Bollywood number, stamping her personality beguilingly all over it. What some of our glum chums decry as nepotism and financial opportunism, others might describe more convincingly as empowerment. The same sort of empowerment that transformed the lives of Rose and Likky when they stepped blinking onto the concert stages of the world and audiences took them seriously (and fell in love with them, but let's not go into that in case Allan Frewin starts writing soppy poems again...).

Vocally, Bina will never be Sandy Denny. Or Licorice, come to that. That's not the point. To watch her unfurling eloquent Indian hand gestures as she croons out *Whether Near Or Far*—a song she remembered from her childhood in Dar-Es-Salaam—is to savour the unique magic of the ISB as vividly as hearing Mike belting out *Worlds They Rise And Fall*, or Robin invoking the lustral beauty of the *New Moon*. From Sidmouth to Sainthold is a short mile in the geography of Stringland.

Throughout this unfolding drama, there have been the raven-croaks of those who feel the ISB should never have re-formed. However good or bad the new version might be, the ISB are anchored in a rosy-hued past which we can visit only in our dreams or our scrapbooks. You might as well re-form Laurel and Hardy. "Thanks for the memory—let us keep it there," as a Sidmouth reporter tartly remarked.

This point of view deserves respect, for its proponents are being as protective of Robin and Mike as they are of their own formative experiences. Nevertheless, the deed is done, and if you can't find any magic in today's String Band, then maybe it's because the magic has simply seeped out of your life, and not all the Grateful Dead bootlegs within the orbit of Neptune will whistle it back for you. As for the rest of us: all aboard the painted chariot, and set the dial for 2002...

No place for what the cautious say, when the music starts to play. ☺

# Caught i ...Bloomsbury...Eden...N



# ...in the Act

Newcastle... Birkenhead...



**Job's Tears**  
GRAMINEAE (POACEAE)  
*Coix lacryma-jobi*

---

A minor grain crop of S. E. Asia whose large, hard, shiny seeds are sometimes used as necklace beads.



Big Ted—he's not dead...

# Bloomsbury 2001 Norman Lamont was there...

I hope this will help give a taste of the show to the Brethren who weren't there.

*The audience:* the usual showing of white hair and bald spots, but I think there may just have been more under-40s around this time than previous times. The band come on, Bina looking particularly fetching in black T-shirt, rich orange and gold Indian skirt and scarf. The rest of the band look like tramps as usual.

#### Ducks On A Pond

"It's not about ducks, it's not about ponds, it's about life the universe and everything. It's about Why? In particular Why me?" Mike taps his foot and plays one-hand keyboards. Clive stares balefully. Lawson plays a harp-like sample on his keyboard. On the final section, Robin lets rip with some vocal Williamsonisms, Mike is subdued in his singing but the harmonica playing is good.

#### Painting Box

Nice mandolin from Robin. Mike slurs the vocal a little, but gets stronger towards the end—it's really quite good by the last verse.

#### About Doorways And Weather

If this is a reject from Robin's forthcoming album, the rest must be scorchers. Bina sings lead over a nicely flowing chord sequence. Mike contributes some unlikely but pleasing harmonica lines. "Yes and best to avoid those who're sure they're right. Yes and best to avoid those who're sure you're wrong... deeper surrender... God has not left us nor have we left God." Best thing I've heard from him since Four Corners Of The World.

#### Don't Kill It Carol

Mike introduces this as a spot where he plays some items from his "more robust" past. "I was a lot younger when I wrote this—that's no excuse really, but I kind of like it anyway." Acoustic guitar worn round his neck rather than his shoulder in that unique Heron way, still sitting. YESSSS! The voice is back. I really doubted if Mike could still sing like this, but he can, friends, he can. Loud, full-throated, Mike at his very best and seeming to enjoy it. More like this, please!! (I guess Warm Heart Pastry will be another night..)

#### Air

On the other hand, this seems to me to descend into self-parody. They seemed to fall into it like old people falling off deckchairs, and it creaked on like vaguely orchestrated yawning. A far cry from the warm version of last year's Bloomsbury. Nope.

#### The Storm Is On The Ocean

Simple and warm unison performance from Robin and Bina. Mike's wandered off somewhere backstage.

#### Big City Blues

Over the few times I've heard this, Robin's bottleneck guitar has moved up a notch or two from "Robin jamming along with a slide" to "Robin playing really good slide guitar". Not a favourite song of mine, but well played by everyone. I begin to see how the current ISB works: Lawson and Clive are the rhythm section, providing a stable structure for every song. Mike plays barely audible keyboards, and presses his volume



pedal only when he's got something to say, so his main contribution to others' songs is harmonica and some singing. Bina sings but only lead or unison, never harmony. And Robin—well he's Robin: MC, comedian, dancer, general improviser over Lawson and Clive's bedrock. (Piss-poor writing, this I know but you'll get what I mean!) The band leave for an intermission (he didn't call it nocturnal for once), but Robin stays to urge us to buy CDs in order to "contribute to our happy retirement".

#### Second half:

#### Maker Of Islands

Mike singing quietly but confidently, but not always on-mic. Robin violin, Clive guitar, Lawson a cello sound. Robin and Bina sing the "rested in the golden sunlight" bit.

#### Land Of No Return

Clive's new song based on Babylonian afterlife imagery. Bina now sings lead instead of Clive. A dark minor chord sequence, a bit melodramatic in places with Lawson attempting to be the London Philharmonic. Mike may have been playing but I couldn't hear him. Robin plays mandolin tastefully in his best ISB style, but can't resist hamming it up a bit and miming actions to some of the lines.

#### Chinese White

Probably the first time tonight there's been a proper intro where everyone came in at the same time. Lawson plays harpsichord, Robin a fiddle variation on the familiar gimbri line. Nice ornamentation and vocals about as together as the recorded version.

#### Eyes Of Fate

Excellent performance—the best I've heard Robin do this. Perfect guitar/voice unison in the Arabic oud style, much of it improvised. I'd prefer the Ory Ory bit to be a bit longer and slower but you can't have everything. This and Chinese White are probably still the songs on which the band is most integrated—actually playing as a band.

#### Clive's tunes on Northumbrian pipes

Clive shakes with laughter at Robin's introduction detailing how Clive made every last component of his pipes from a wild range of materials including bones salvaged from dog food! Clive and Robin play this but not quite in tune.

#### The Falling In Love

A new song from Mike, accompanied by Lawson. A delicate song. I was trying to find a similar one to give you an idea—probably somewhere between *One Of The Finest* and *Down On My Knees*. Would have fitted nicely on *Conflict Of Emotions*. Not sure how I feel about Mike doing these duet spots—why not have everyone, or at least Robin? It's as though the job of integrating Mike into the Cardiff gang has a bit to go yet. Robin and Bina sit watching proudly like parents at a school concert and applaud warmly.

#### Love Will Remain

To celebrate their linen anniversary, a simple pop ballad, not far from *Journey's Edge*, with syrupy strings from Lawson. "Love will remain when we are gone". The best thing about this concert is that the new material is good—really good.

#### You Were Meant For Me

Clive introduces this as being about busking in Paris with Wizz Jones, so I thought it was going to be Paris which I don't really like, but it's not at all, it's quite airy and light, and Robin plays very nice violin in Stephan Grappelli mode (OK I don't know any other jazz violinists!) [*Jean-Luc Ponty—helpful Ed*]

#### Strings In The Earth And Air

One of the best songs in the new ISB repertoire, more akin to the *Strangely Strange* arrangement than the *Myrrh* one, with Clive doing an arpeggio, Lawson a harp voice, Mike a strings sound and Robin and Bina unison vocals.

#### Facing West From California's Shore

Just Robin and Lawson on acoustic guitars, a collage of unrelated Walt Whitman lines over a chord sequence very similar to *Love Letter To My Wife Bina*. Dazzling wordplay, nothing that couldn't be mistaken for Williamson's own. "What voice of all in you... you fluid vast immensity... why is it yet unfound?"

#### Whether Near Or Far

A treat. I prefer Bina doing this to singing in unison all the time. Lawson throws in some tabla sounds, but I'm glad they didn't go the whole hog and try to recreate the ISB sitar sound; that would probably have failed, while this didn't.

#### You Know What You Could Be

Bit of a plodding rhythm from Clive and Lawson, nice unrecognisable fiddle intro. Mike a bit overwhelmed by Robin and Bina, but putting a lot into it nonetheless.

They leave without saying anything and almost immediately return for the encore:

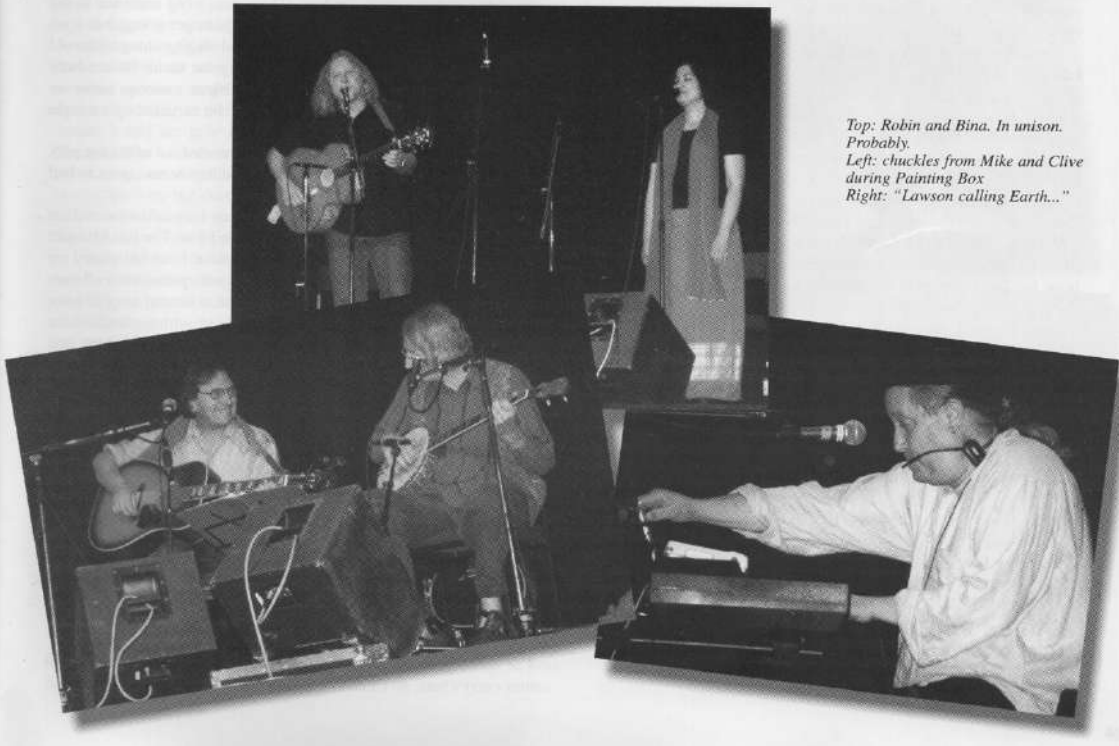
#### Waltz Of The New Moon

Robin sings this with love and respect for the song. Mike listens swaying, not playing much. Dynamic, varied and very satisfying, a quiet and controlled last verse. Hush.

#### Now Is The Hour

Robin expresses his delight that there is still an audience for their music forty years on and thanks us all for making the effort to come. He says it's typical of Clive to come up with a song of "unimaginable obscurity". He says it's Maori but it's just a music hall singalong. Lawson throws in a Hawaiian steel guitar sound and Mike rocks with laughter. After *New Moon* this is like the vaudeville absurdities at the end of *Creation*.

For me the high points of this show were hearing Mike sing at the top of his voice, and the new songs, all of which promise good albums to come. I'd like to see *Air* either dropped or tidied up, and I'd like to hear Mike and Clive talk more. We all know how witty and amusing Robin is, but I'd forgotten how funny Mike can be in an understated but clever way. The last time I saw them was the 'flu'-ridden Glasgow gig, but I also remembered last Bloomsbury. This wasn't just a retread of last year's show, good though that was. As other reviewers have said, the new ISB is becoming a band. ☘



Top: Robin and Bina. In unison. Probably.  
Left: chuckles from Mike and Clive during *Painting Box*  
Right: "Lawson calling Earth..."

# Backstage with the Incredible String Band (well, almost!)

Jenny Bolders gets mingling...

I was quite overwhelmed when my good friend Jo Tagney invited me to join her band Caracana, supporting the Incredible String Band at their 7th August concert at the Eden Project, near St. Austell in Cornwall. Caracana are a Cornish band, playing mostly Cornish and some original and Celtic music, with a lively mixture of songs, instrumentals and dances.

Opening for the String Band, the stuff of dreams! An honour, a privilege, thrilling, terrifying... "Incredible" was the only word for it.

Before that, though, were the String Band concerts at Bloomsbury and Sidmouth. One of the great things about following the String Band is how many wonderful people I have met and got to know, especially since Robin's weekend at Hazelwood House last year. There were lots of familiar faces at Bloomsbury, and it was great to see them all again.

After the Friday concert, quite a number of us made our way down to the bar of the hotel where the band were staying. Clive and Gina were there, so there was an opportunity to ask Clive about his pipe tunes, and to compliment him on his new song, You Were Meant For Me, whereupon he began to wax lyrical about ninths and jazz chords. I showed them my photo album, and Clive seemed quite tickled by my pictures of him, so I gave him the best one and promised him some copies of the others.

Jean (Hussain) and I were a little bit shy of intruding on the "inner sanctum", where Mike, Lawson and Mark and Linda Anstey were sitting, but after a while we did sidle round the corner. Lawson was telling funny stories about their trip to Bergen he had only taken £40 worth of currency with him for the 24-hour trip, and was taken aback when Clive worked out that the first round of drinks would cost £48! Next day, Lawson went out to buy some toothpaste and got lost, couldn't remember the name of the hotel, nor how to get back to it. Lawson is a very funny man; he could go on stage with Billy Connolly.

Mark was telling us about the headaches of getting the band together. Mike has to fly down to Cardiff from Scotland, and Clive has to fly from his local airport in Brittany to Stansted, to where they send a driver for him. Mark bemoaned the cost of the hotel in which we were sitting for the whole band for three days, and what the ferry would cost for them all to go across to Dublin.

Conversation turned to pets, for some reason, which started Lawson off on an hilarious tale about their dog and the new sofa from Argos, a piece of such inferior quality that the children were not allowed to bounce on it, and the poor dog was banished from the room altogether. After a while, "the sofa died naturally", Argos took it away, so now they were all sitting on the floor, dog and all. This prompted Mark to mention that after the Saturday concert next day, he and Linda would have to drive back to Chesterfield to feed their rabbit! The rabbit had been left with three bowls of food. Were they labelled with the days, we asked? "I wonder", said Mark, "what Robin is doing with the hamster and the canary while they are away?" Rock 'n' Roll, eh?

"I WONDER WHAT ROBIN'S DOING WITH THE HAMSTER..."

Saturday, and once again it was really nice to meet people, more friends from Hazelwood: Alan Mawdesley, Riemer from Holland, and my pen-friend Hartmut Bogen, who had come over from Germany as he did last year, this time with his friend Jorg. Hartmut pointed out Wizz Jones in the foyer.

Back to the hotel again after the show. Jean and I had been itching to get our cameras out the previous night, but didn't like to. Tonight, however, there were no inhibitions. Monica wanted a photo of herself with Mike, so we all had a quick photo-shoot. Mike said he didn't mind. Mike was telling us about his proposed concert with Vashti Bunyan in Glasgow. Vashti, he said, had not sung for years, "not even to the cat". Sadly, this project has not come to pass.

Sunday saw me heading back home to Cornwall for a Caracana rehearsal, and then on Monday, back in the opposite direction (though not so far) to Sidmouth Folk Festival. After the camaraderie of Bloomsbury, the atmosphere at Sidmouth seemed a little frosty, somehow. The officials were, well, officious. The sound quality was not as good as it might have been and the balance of voices was not quite right on one or two numbers. There was a big audience in the outdoor arena, and it took them a little while to get going, but soon there was plenty of clapping and cheering, and singing along to the old favourites. The band were attempting to play the entire Bloomsbury programme, without an interval, but at 10.30pm someone came on stage looking at his watch, and the set had to be curtailed by a couple of numbers.

We were hustled out of the arena, and then hustled out of the car park before it shut at eleven o'clock sharp. Sidmouth, it seems, goes to bed early, even in Festival week.

The next day, with some trepidation, I put my harp in the car and set off for Eden, about an hour's drive from where I live. The Eden Project opened earlier this year, and it is an amazing place. In an old quarry are enormous "biomes": transparent domes filled with plants from all over the world. A stage had been set up in the arena, a natural amphitheatre with seats near the stage, and a grass slope behind, with the walls of the quarry up behind that. This was the first concert to be held there, and we were to be the guinea pigs!

I met up with Caracana at 2pm. We were supposed to be rehearsing on the stage before the String Band arrived, sound checking after them from 6pm to 7pm, and playing at 8pm. Well, that was the plan!

The first problem was that our "dressing room" was a Portakabin right at the top of the site, about half a mile from the stage at the bottom. We were told that a van would take us and our instruments down to the stage, but there was no sign of any van, so we walked down to the stage to have a look at it.

I began to realise what I had let myself in for! I have played and sung in my time in the odd school hall, but I had never played on a big stage like this, never used a microphone, and all in front of 650 people. Being such a novice, I was afraid that I was going to mess it up for everyone else.

The sound people were setting up for the String Band, speakers and cables everywhere, no chance of us rehearsing on the stage after all. So

we walked back up the hill to the Portakabin, to practise in there. I think we all felt better once we started playing. Our set was made up of instrumentals, songs in Cornish and English (including Robin's Woodcutter's Song) and a couple of traditional Cornish dances. Jo had originally invited me to play the harp on one number, but somehow or other she had persuaded me to join in almost everything, including acapella harmony singing, and even dancing in a jig.

The centrepiece of the set was the Cornish "broom dance", with three dancers attired in traditional striped stockings, but here the dance was given a comic twist involving Henry the vacuum cleaner!

The String Band did not arrive until nearly five o'clock. Robin popped in to say hello, gave Jo a hug (which made her day), and then he was off again, down to the stage to unload.

We finished our practice, and as six o'clock approached I began to feel nervous again. We were supposed to be taken down to the stage in a van, do our sound check, then come back up again to get dressed, and be taken down again when it was time to start. This clearly was not going to happen, there just was not time, and we were all getting anxious, so we decided to take everything down in our own cars, and get changed anywhere we could once we had put our instruments on stage.

**The title of this article is** Backstage With The ISB but I have led you to read this under false pretences, because at Eden we hardly saw the band "backstage" at all. Also, there really was no "backstage". At the back of the stage, you stepped down onto a tarmac area with picnic tables, then there was a small lake, beyond which a path led over to the biomes.

We parked behind the stage and unloaded our instruments, then had to move our cars away again. There was nowhere to put anything; we had all our stage clothes draped over the picnic tables. We were lucky that it did not rain! Perhaps the worst thing was that the toilets were quite a long way from the stage, over near the biomes, it took quite a few minutes to walk over there, and there really was nowhere else to change.

The String Band were still doing their sound check; this was 6.45pm! Robin and Bina emerged from the back of the stage, and told us that they had had a lot of problems. A piece of equipment had blown up and it had taken the sound people twenty minutes to fix it. The wind was whistling through the PA and causing problems. The sound guys, Lawson told me later, "were rock'n'rollers—they had everything cranked up when we arrived!"

I walked over to the "ladies" with Bina, to get changed as far as I could. I told her how much I liked her Hindi song, and Love Will Remain. She is such a lovely lady. By the time we finally got our instruments on stage it was 7.15pm—the audience was beginning to arrive, we were not dressed, we had not had a sound check, there were not enough chairs on stage, we did not have all the microphones that Jo had asked for—oh, help!

I tuned the harp quickly, then got dressed behind the curtains. So did most of the others, there was just not time to do anything else. The sound guy started his sound check. There were a lot of people in the audience by now, it was 7.30pm. Because we were doing two dances, all the monitors had to be moved to the edge of the stage, and I couldn't hear my harp on the monitor at all. The sound guy said that I could not expect a harp to be heard above all those other instruments. Silly me, I thought that was what microphones were for. I might have come to blows with him, but it was ten to eight. A quick run through of everyone playing together and it was time to start.

After all that, the Caracana set went very well. The only problem was with the vocal microphones, the balance was not right on the harmonies, and on one song two of the voices were almost inaudible. I could not really hear what I was playing on the harp, but someone taped the set for us and to my enormous relief, it sounds all right.

As we came off the stage, Robin said to me "It's a nice harp", and we had a little chat about harps. It was kind of him to be so reassuring. I said to Bina that I had never done anything like this in my life, and she smiled and said "Well, you have now". Several people in the audience, strangers, told me that they had enjoyed Caracana, and I think it went down well.

## "OH WELL," MIKE SMILED, "THEY WERE FOLKIES...!"

**The String Band set was lovely.** I really enjoyed it. Of course, I could relax by then, but it was a good concert, and I would probably say that I liked it the best of the four I had seen, had it not been that they shortened the set by a few numbers. After four hearings, I was really getting to know the new songs, although Love Will Remain was sadly missing this time. Mike's Singing the Dolphin was sublime.

There was a nice atmosphere at Eden, and the audience certainly seemed to be enjoying themselves. I spoke to Mike after the show, and commented on how much nicer the Eden audience had been than at Sidmouth, to which he smiled and replied "Oh well, they were folkies!" Mark said that they had been expecting Sidmouth to be the most difficult one, which was an interesting comment.

The band were off to Dublin the day, so it was hugs and farewells all round, to them, to Jo and the rest of Caracana, to Jean, Riemer, Mick and his children. I would have some lovely memories to take away with me of five extraordinary and wonderful days. Incredible! ☺



Top: Caracana in harmony  
Middle: the broom dance  
Bottom: the author schmoozes with Bina and a bouncing Vashti

# Sidmouth Hot Spot!

**Stephen Robbins**  
takes the temperature

I went to the Sidmouth Festival this year and worked as a volunteer steward for the whole of the festival and was lucky enough to have the Monday night off and saw the ISB play the Arena showground.

I wouldn't say that the show was a sellout, but about two thousand people turned up; but out of that I have no idea how many paid solely to see this concert.

From the beginning the band were going to be controversial—remember that Sidmouth is very traditional in the English sense—but there was a buzz and they got a good reception when they appeared on stage. However, there were problems with the audience and their acceptance of the musicians.

The opening numbers were a bit shaky and the crowd showed their dislike by not applauding, many walked out, and one person shouted out: "Get the woman to sing in tune". [According to the Sidmouth Herald, about 100 people walked out—Ed]

Robin talked about meeting people and not recognising them and then told a story which ended thus: "Take your fucking leg off my shoulder!" which I took to be a riposte to this crowd.

When people walked out some tried to get their money back on the grounds that the band were tuneless, couldn't play their instruments and couldn't sing, in particular Bina. No money was refunded. [According to the Festival Director, Steve Heap: "A further 1,500 stayed and enjoyed the concert and asked for two encores. Some people don't like dance, some didn't like Irish. You can't account for taste..."—Ed] A lot of the hostility was aimed at Bina. I got the feeling that the band were a bit nervous, especially Bina.

Heron was great; it was wonderful to hear Carol and Singing The Dolphin. Clive didn't speak at all, he just sang his songs and played the banjo and guitar. I heard the soundcheck and it was great to hear Heron's pipes echoing around the empty arena; he has a fantastic voice and Carol sounded great, as did Maker Of Islands.

I noticed a member of the audience video'd the whole gig; the arena is like an amphitheatre and you get a good view of the stage from the heights. Another audience member I met claimed to be working for-

Record Collector and was writing a piece about the re-formation of the band. His name is John Wright and he said that he was at both recent Bloomsbury gigs (his mate kept yelling out for Hedgehog Song). The article, if there was one, should have been published in the October edition. [Anyone see this?—Ed]

I met Ian Anderson of JRoots at a Rory McLeod gig which was part of the festival; he thought that the band were OK but said that people had very short memories ("Remember the girls?") and thought that Sidmouth was the wrong gig for them.

I thoroughly enjoyed the gig and thought that they played really well, and am glad I went to a controversial gig. ☺

## Press Gang We check out the cuttings

The local papers weren't sure what to make of it all. The Sidmouth Herald's reporter felt confused: "The songs were performed with great gusto but not always in tune or in time. A little more percussion would have benefited the set. The songs Air and Doorways and Weather were particularly memorable because of their highly creative harmonies, clashing of notes and resultant dirge. [sic] Overall however, the performance was a success...". Oh, I see. Thumbs down, though, from Rosie Taylor at the East Devon Express And Echo: "...Mike and Clive were shadows, both looking and sounding as if the years have not been kind to them. Robin... has a successful solo career and the question remains as to why he would want to perform with artists who are no longer as talented as he is... Though the audience was generous and keen for them to do well, the general feeling was the band was just not good enough to be the main attraction."

Reviews in the national press were conspicuous by their absence. Colin Irwin in Mojo dismissed them in a sentence: "Slickness was never an ISB strong point, but what may have passed as charmingly shambolic in the hippy dippy '60s can be classed as shoddy and amateurish now." On the web, the Radio Two Mike Harding Show's online reporter revved up ominously: "Let's start this review by saying I'm a Fan. Old hippy, ISB lyrics imprinted on the psyche etc." But after a couple of songs there's "a palpable air of discomfort". Painting Box is "off-key", on Doorways And Weather Bina is "a foot out of tune"; Air is "a caterwaul." Big City Blues offers "a glimmer of hope... It's wonderful; it's the old ISB." But Land Of No Return lurches back into "painful tunelessness"; at which point, exit disheartened hack.

The effect of all this negative publicity on the band is not recorded, but from the evidence of the autumn gigs we can assume that set-list and arrangements underwent a bit of a rethink and some more rehearsals were undertaken. Elsewhere in this issue you'll find assessments of the current state of play(ing) from David Kidman, Andy Roberts and Raymond.





...Salford...Sheffield...Ne

# "We just like to have a go..."

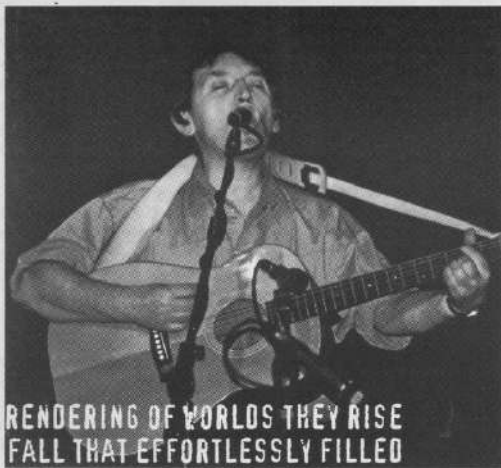
**Raymond Greenoaken  
finds it all very interesting**

**T**ell someone you live in Sheffield and the chances are they'll look at you like you'd just admitted you're in The Crankies fan club. Who, after all, would choose to hang their hat in such a terminally "unsexy" city? (That epithet came from Tory MP Michael Fabricant during a recent Commons exchange about Sheffield's abortive bid to stage a major international sporting event.) It's true that life in the Steel City may sometimes seem as electrifying as a bathful of cold porridge; but geographically it's the omphalos of England, the dead centre of our ancient realm, and it's easy enough to travel from it to places that are somewhat more, well, *interesting*. Salford, for instance; or Newcastle; or Birkenhead—places which, coincidentally, were pins in the ISB's Autumn 2001 tour route. But this year Sheffield was itself an interesting place to be, because the band were calling here too: interesting enough, indeed, to draw travellers from as far afield as Argentina and Michigan US of A. A little dusting of magic silvers the sooty roofs whenever the String Band come to town.

I'd generated enough cash by methodically mugging *Big Issue* vendors to follow the band round the four northern stops on their itinerary, and set off to catch a Manchester train on Friday the 9th of November with my heart fluttering expectantly in my bosom. Time of arrival: 6.30pm. Plenty of time, I thought, to get across from Manchester's Piccadilly station to the recently renovated Salford Quays, where the ISB were stepping out at the state-of-the-art Lowry Centre.

Wrong. The train was over an hour late, and I chased a tram vainly for 300 yards before taking my flick-knife to another *Big Issue* salesperson and flagging down a taxi. Into the Lowry with minutes to spare before the band took the stage...

To my alarm, I discovered someone already occupying my seat, and in high dudgeon summoned a steward to evict the interloper—who turned out to be *beGLAD* scribe Paul Bryant. "A misunderstanding, honest, guv..." he babbled as the Lowry hireling frogmarched him to his proper seat. (At the interval he confided smugly, "My own seat had a much better view...")



...A RENDERING OF WORLDS THEY RISE AND FALL THAT EFFORTLESSLY FILLED THE LOFTY SPACES OF THE LOWRY

I found myself in the upper gallery at a String Band concert for the first time since 1969 at Newcastle City Hall. On that historic occasion my party took advantage of our altitude to propel streams of soap bubbles across the auditorium during the concert. "Great Cosmic Universes!" Robin had mumbled as the soapy spheres winked in the spotlights. Trivial anecdotes—we got 'em!

From my vantage point in the Lowry gallery, I gazed down on alarming numbers of shiny bald heads. It sure wasn't 1969, for all that they resembled pink soap bubbles! Bang on time, the ISB shambled onto the stage, and pushed the boat out with Ducks On A Pond. We learned that Robin had written the song one winter's day after watching the ice cracking against the shore of an Edinburgh lake. As is latterly his custom, he truncated the central section and launched into the "Ain't got no home..." hoe-down with a train-whistle falsetto. Mike blew some snaky mouth-harp and Lawson fetched it all home with a frantic boogie-woogie coda. Hello Salford!

Next up was Chinese White, which had been somewhat rough and unfocused in earlier performances. Not so tonight. Tonight it was a pearl in a setting of finest filigree. Spot-on gimbi-style fiddling, Lawson in harpsichord mode and some heart-stopping harmonies from Mike and Robin. When those two voices ring together, a magic casement opens onto blue and misty vistas beyond the fields we know. Where's my bubble-mixture...?

The first half dawdled delightfully along, closing with Clive's doomy Land Of No Return. Bina took lead vox on this one, in tones as sepulchral as Nico on nitrazepam. The combination of Clive's banjo and Lawson's thunderous proggy chords conjured up in my fevered brain a strange bastard union of ELO and the Clancy Brothers.

Earlier, Mike had stepped from behind his keyboard, strapped on his Fylde and astonished the gathering with a rendering of Worlds They Rise And Fall that, accompanied only by Lawson's discreet piano, effortlessly filled the lofty spaces of the Lowry. We'd almost forgotten that Mike once had a voice that could strip paint and heal a broken heart at one and the same time. To judge by the hairs on my tingling nape, it's back!

At half time, my attention wandered to a family sitting nearby: Mum and Dad and three gothy-punky daughters by the look of it. "Is that what they used to be like?" probed one goth-punk frostily.

"Er... sort of..." mumbled a sheepish Dad, adding with an anticipatory wince, "What did you think?"

"Mmm... *interesting*," came the careful rejoinder. Remember when we took a deep, existential satisfaction in the fact that our parents couldn't stand the String Band? Nowadays, do we feel that same delicious frisson when our kids can't stand them either?

In the foyer, Paul B, Mick Fitzgerald and I compared notes. "Ducks was rough," opined Mr B. "Loved it," said Mick, "and how about Don't Kill It Carol, eh?" Trying to maintain some kind of critical *froidueur*, and still peeved with the timekeeping of Arriva Trains, I declared of the first set: "There were some good bits..." Hey, guys: is it too late to say I loved it to death?

The second half was sadly abbreviated for me by the need to leave early for my last homeward train. There was, however, time to swoon to Waltz Of The New Moon, faint over The Eyes Of Fate and lurk by the doorway as Mike turned out a shimmering Singing The Dolphin. From what I'd seen and heard, it was an unusually steady and assured first night. The sound was better than I'd ever heard it. It all boded well for the following night. And by the way—the train home left an hour and a half late...

## ...Salford...Sheffield...N

**N**o such problems for the Sheffield gig. I arrived in good time with a stack of *beGLADs* to hawk in the foyer, and did brisk business before the two-minute warning sounded and I sped up to the gallery to take my seat. Who should be sitting in the next seat along but that man Bryant! This might loosely be called a coincidence; the technical definition is stalking.

Sheffield Memorial Hall is an agreeable venue with some discreet Art Nouveau statuary, bolted on to the back of the City Hall, where Errol Brown was strutting his stuff that same night. Pah! Sudsy Seventies nostalgia—some people have no shame, eh? It was not, however, the ideal setting for the String Band. The semi-circular stage was barely large enough to accommodate band members and equipment, leaving them severely constrained in terms of movement. And the unusual curvature of the auditorium had a muffling effect on the sound. For all that, both band and audience were in good humour. Robin was amiably barracked for not bringing the gimbri along; and Adrian from Penistone (yes, that's a real place, and yes, that's the real spelling) stepped up to present Bina with a bouquet after Chinese White.

Robin's harp was present for the first time on a String Band tour. He moved to it for a solo instrumental in the first half. At the Lowry he played a haunting Scottish air, *The Wonderful Supper At The House Of Lude*, yoked to a grave modal jig, but with a certain tentativeness. At Sheffield he announced the same piece, then changed his mind. "I'll do *The Blackbird*, because I know it," he quipped, but went for *The Wonderful Supper* anyway and essayed it flawlessly.

Tonight the gods decided to have a little fun at Mike's expense. Halfway through *Worlds They Rise And Fall* his D-string snapped with the sound of a Kalashnikov at twenty paces. He sailed into port on the undertow of Lawson's chaste piano and an extemporised vocal harmony on the final line by Robin. The mischief continued in the second half when a down-sliding mic caused him to finish *Singing The Dolphin* almost bent double.

*Worlds...* had been preceded by a new Williamson composition, *About Doorways And Weather*—"in both of which I've spent too much of my life," said the author ruefully. "Doors of ways, ways of doors," ran one line: the spirit of Captain Beefheart seemed to be alive in this otherwise sombre song.

By the end of the first set, there was a feeling the band weren't quite firing on all cylinders. Those of us that had attended the Lowry knew, however, that the best was yet to come. During the interval I shifted a few more *beGLADs* and flagged down a few familiar faces, including Monica from Michigan and Alfredo from Buenos Aires. Your editor Adrian, up from the Smoke for the occasion, picked up a *beGLAD* and said loudly, "I hear these are dead good and cheap at twice the price!" Punters flocking around the neighbouring Pig's Whisker stall ignored him completely. The magazine's founding father Andy Roberts emerged briefly from the milling throng. What do you think of it so far? I asked. "Mmm...interesting," he said with an inscrutable smile.

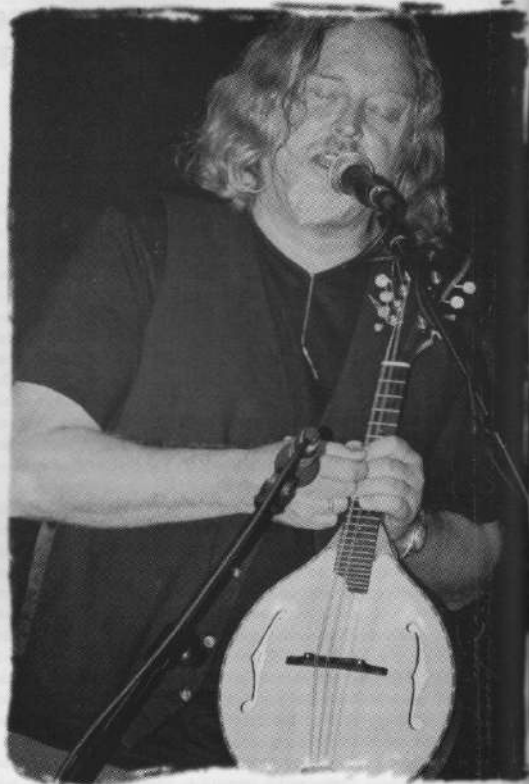
As before, the second set began with *Waltz Of The New Moon*. Robin recalled times he'd spent living under a tarpaulin in the corner of a cornfield, gazing up at the moon, and adduced this as the inspiration for the song. Hmmm—picture a field of swaying clustered cornstalks by moonlight and think of the "floating pan pipe victories of the golden harvest..."

The second set was a procession of highlights, droopy mic-stands notwithstanding. Gold stars for another iridescent Williamson original, *Love Will Remain*, for Mike's two-keyboard duet with Lawson on *Residential Boy*, for Clive's utterly delightful banjo solo *Swanee Echoes*, wherein Niggertown meets Stephen Foster. At Bloomsbury, Clive's solo piece was a tune of such unadorned Zen-like simplicity that some auditors suspected a piss-take; *Swanee Echoes*, by contrast, was tricky, fast and—dear me!—almost flash.

The show closed with Bina's Bollywood blockbuster *Whether Near Or Far*. Her growing confidence as a performer was reflected in a series of hand movements drawn from the vocabulary of Indian dance-mime. Some greybeards amongst us were transported back to the days of Mimi and Mouse...

The obligatory encore was a fiddle-fried *You Know What You Could Be*. A shambolic collective bow, and they were gone—and the fairy dust faded from Sheffield's rooftops. In conversation with assorted

**ROBIN WAS AMIABLY BARRACKED FOR NOT BRINGING THE GIMBRI ALONG...**



Stringheads afterwards, I learned that some had been mildly perplexed by the "concert-party"-style presentation: ensemble numbers punctuated by solo spots (Robin, Clive) and duo spots (Robin and Bina, Mike and Lawson). This, it was suggested, had given the show something of a "bitty", haphazard quality. True, but—what's new? Were String Band concerts ever any different? Maybe in the late-period "we gotta communicate" days; maybe when there were only two of them in the band. If an ISB show ever "flowed" in a carefully-programmed, cabaret-slick fashion, then I must have missed it. Diff'rent strokes for diff'rent folks, you dig?

But such an informal, leisurely approach creates its own problems. If you stay onstage when somebody else is performing, you have to somehow become invisible. You can't afford to fidget, consult your cue sheets or engage in brief *sotto voce* conversations. Such actions irresistibly draw the spectator's eye away from the performance. Just a word to the wise, lads...

**T**he following night's concert at Newcastle Opera House was freighted with sentimental significance for me. Was it not in Newcastle that I first fell under the spell of String? Prior to commencement, I met at least two people who were at that same concert 32 years earlier. "Remember the bubbles in the balcony?" said one mistily.



The Opera House is a wonderful place. Originally a music hall, it was converted into an "adult" cinema in the Sixties, then stood derelict for several years. Sometime around 1982, a gaggle of intrepid young whippersnappers forced a rear door and mounted an impromptu entertainment on the high stage for the benefit of the resident spiders and rats. Readers, I was one of those whippersnappers...

And now it has been restored to its original Italianate splendour. The ISB took the stage, with Robin complimenting the city fathers on the intricacies of their one-way system. By the end of Ducks On A Pond, it was plain that the band were in stonking form, with an audience hanging on every note. A huge patriotic cheer went up when Clive pulled out his Northumbrian pipes. The ensemble sound, too, was perfect: clear as crystal in the upper registers, rich and resonant in the bass. When Robin hit his bottom D on Waltz Of The New Moon, it rippled through my bones like the primeval root note of the world.

Forgive me if I keep returning to this particular song. Has there ever been a song like it in the history of humanity? It just seems to come from somewhere else entirely. It simultaneously distills a pantheistic awe at the teeming wonder of creation and a profound sense of the sheer strangeness of it all. Robin Williamson was born to write this song, and to sing it; and, thirty years down the road, to evoke anew those pan pipe victories, that tablecloth we're all part of, the eagle shadowed against that cold blue Hangman's sky. When you're touched by this kind of sorcery, how can you ever be the same again?

Those who have consistently counselled against the String Band reforming have their reasons. One is the contention that, while the band were once among the most audacious and visionary innovators in 20th century music, now they can do no more than run with the pack and surrender the cutting edge to younger, hungrier talents. This, of course, is predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of human creativity: it's only in the last half century or so that innovation has become the *sine qua non* of art. For the greater part of our history, artists have worked *within* the acknowledged parameters of a tradition that has coalesced around a shared vision of the whatness of things. Radical excursions beyond such parameters were rare; subtle development and variation are the dynamic forces that shape such a tradition. The ISB may not be "cutting edge" in the hectic modern sense, but they've followed and remained true to a particular vision, and are capable of reaffirming it by means of endless subtle variations. "There are truths, but no new truths," as Robin once said. You either respond to those variations or you reject them in favour of an intellect-driven radicalism. But, as Robin once also declared, "I curse all art that fools the heart".

The irony is that, had the ISB not been vastly influential on whole generations of musicians, what they're purveying today would still be viewed as *avant les temps* and either vilified or venerated accordingly. But, to conclude this wee digression, to hear Robin perform Waltz Of The New Moon, whether in 1968 or 2001, is to know that no-one has ever done anything like that before, nor probably ever will again. It stands alone, inexplicable and pure.

### THEY SOUND LIKE A *BAND*, NOT A BUNCH OF EDGY INDIVIDUALS...

**A**nd so to Birkenhead's Pacific Road Arts Centre, the last of the String Band's four-stop northern leg. A converted warehouse looking across the Mersey towards the famous Liver Building, it has a nice acoustic and a well-stocked bar. By this time, the band are on top of their game; song follows tune follows song with a rightness and inevitability that comes only from a collective absorption in the creative process. In other words, they sound like a *band*, not a bunch of edgy individuals jostling to squeeze the teats of a thirty-year-old milch cow. Ducks On A Pond receives a huge gust of applause. From then on it's through the gears to a jubilant, triumphant You Know What You Could Be. Too many highlights to mention, though Robin's harp spot was downright celestial, Mike's lapidary The Falling In Love—the first fresh-minted Heron song we've heard in quarter of a century—a thing of penetrating beauty. The response to Singing The Dolphin was like the nearby Anfield Kop saluting a Michael Owen hat-trick.

A word or two about Lawson here, I think. His light-fingered skill on the old ivories has been justly celebrated, but his real achievement is to breathe authentic life into what is, ultimately, a sequence of electronic noises. That's not just dexterity, that's real *feel*. Each night he's allowed himself a little solo at the end of Residential Boy, and each night it's completely different from the one before. Tonight he spring-boarded from the theme into a sea of dark chromaticism that held everyone breathless, including the rest of the band. He later admitted he'd fluffed a chord change early on and just allowed the resulting dissonance take him wherever it would. A Stringster to the manner born!

When I'd first arrived at the venue and was crossing the road, I happened to pass a camper van parked nearby. Out of the open passenger window floated a familiar cadence: "Down main street I go on a duffle-coat hopping instead..." Now when was the last time you heard the Incredible String Band on *somebody else's* car stereo? The world is full of wonders, even today. ☺

# Sheffield

Sheffield Memorial Hall may have been dry, but David Kidman takes a tippie of Incredible homebrew and declares—

## Shaky but stirring!

**A**fter last year's sporadic reunion concerts, the band's three original members (Robin, Mike and Clive) played a further mere handful of dates with Bina and Lawson this November, with the Sheffield gig almost at the halfway point. I'd missed the 2000 concerts (as opposed to the 5000 spirits!), though I'd seen various factions of the line-up in action on the Robin & Mike and Robin & Clive tours respectively, so I'd a rough idea of what to expect, I suppose—a mixture of old and new material, decked out in genial, mostly charming though sometimes rather rough-and-ready performances, rather than needlessly spotless re-creations of former glories. And by and large, that's what the warm, appreciative and forgiving audience got: a mightily enjoyable two hours or so spent in good company, albeit musically often hit-and-miss (which of course is true to String Band tradition!).

One thought: in the old days, of course, the band would be on stage surrounded by an extensive array of exotic instruments from all manner of distant countries; today, it's more likely to be other bands that go in for such excesses, while the ISB's current instrumental complement is indisputably frugal—just three guitars, two keyboard positions, banjo and fiddle providing the mainstay of instrumental colouring, with Northumbrian pipes, harp, mandolin, whistle, harmonica, tambourine and washboard pressed into service only very occasionally during the course of the evening. Robin took on his customary role of ringmaster, with genial good-humour a-plenty and an unerring ability to ride the inevitable minor catastrophes.

On the musical side too, Robin was undoubtedly the lynchpin on this occasion, typically combining unassuming eclecticism with enviable versatility and displaying the enviable degree of artistic consistency that he's maintained through his solo career over the 27 years that have elapsed since the band's demise in 1974. Mike largely confined himself to keyboard, only occasionally moving to pick up a guitar, but vocally he was on very good form, if maybe just a little staccato in the early stages of the evening. Clive sat hunched over his trusty banjo for virtually the entire evening, and acquitted himself very nicely throughout; he allowed himself just one foray on the set of pipes that he'd built himself. Lawson's role was pivotal (especially on his duets with Mike), with some finely-managed keyboard work skilfully filling out the instrumental texture in just the right proportion for the most part; it needs to be said that he's also a damned fine pianist, by the way!

### "THE RATS ATE MY GIMBRI..."

Curiously, the music playing as I entered the hall was the Eagles (huh?!, I thought); then the ISB's first set started with a defiant, though decidedly ramshackle, version of Ducks On A Pond, with Mike seeming well to the back of the mix and Bina's off-key supporting-vocals not helping an awful lot. Even Lawson's spirited ragtime vamping on the final section seemed a trifle forced into a Jerry Lee straitjacket, I thought, as if trying to save the whole painted chariot from plunging over the cliff. When the next song—Chinese White—was announced, some wag in the stalls shouted for the bowed gimbri, upon which Robin gave us possibly the quote of the evening: "The rats ate my gimbri," he retorted (hey, what a great title for Robin's

autobiography!). This new reading of the song sounded just great, with Lawson providing some nicely judged baroque-style keyboard work (tinkling harpsichord tones providing the rhythm). The next song, Robin's About Doorways And Weather, was completely new to me, and I must admit it didn't strike me—at any rate on this hearing—as particularly memorable; the restrained instrumental scoring was most attractive, though on the debit side it did expose Bina's vocal shortcomings to the point where this distracted from Robin's own singing.

The focus then shifted to Mike for Worlds They Rise And Fall (the first of his duets with Lawson), a powerful reading that vocally arguably all but eclipsed the *Liquid Acrobat* original. It could easily have been compromised by the disastrous snapping of the bottom string on Mike's guitar just after halfway through, but Mike carried on manfully and Robin helped out at the close with an amazing harmonic cadence. Mike then attempted to leave the stage but—in true Eric Morecambe fashion—failed to find the gap in the curtain; what a way to take a curtain call!

Robin and Bina followed with their duet The Storm Is On The Ocean, attractive enough in its own way but I'd really have expected Bina to perform this song better—she's had enough practice! (Am I being unkind? Not judging by some of the comments on the e-group...) Robin then took centre stage for a harp tune, which he first announced as The Wonderful Supper At The House Of Lude, then said he'd play The Blackbird instead "because he knew it better", but actually proceeded to play the tune he'd first mentioned! The set then gained a new lease of life when everyone else returned for a joyous ensemble romp through Big City Blues on which Robin played slide guitar and Clive proved in his element.

Mike's impressive new song The Falling In Love followed, which had a lovely simple twin keyboard arrangement, complete with fluty organ sounds in the manner of Air, to offset the intriguing lyrics. One I'd like to hear again soon. The first set drew to a close on what seemed like a bit of an anti-climax, Clive's Land Of No Return, with Robin and Clive on whistle and banjo backing Bina on the first of her two lead-vocal numbers of the evening. So, a patchy first set, but with enough high-points to convince me that the band members can still cut it (and how) when things go right.

### THE INVOLVEMENT WAS TANGIBLE

The second set proved more coherent, with stronger performances generally. It opened well, with a fine Waltz Of The New Moon (Lawson coaxing those rippling harp sounds from his keyboard, echoed by Clive's equally rippling banjo). Mike and Lawson then gave a standout rendition of Mike's Singing The Dolphin, all in spite of the misbehaviour of Mike's microphone, which seemed to have a life of its own as it distractingly drooped lower and lower! Then came Clive's turn for the spotlight, with his pipe tune medley accompanied by Robin on fiddle—sure, it was good, but I can't quite work out why it got the biggest round of applause thus far. Robin's strangely elegiac love song Love Will Remain followed, and scored by staying on the right side of the line dividing sentiment from sentimentality.

The second of Mike's second-set duets with Lawson, Residential Boy, was another highlight, with superb vocal work and sympathetic keyboard backing. We were then treated to a tremendous new reworking of Eyes Of Fate, with good use of growling keyboard timbres and Clive's banjo to punctuate the ostensibly awkward transitions. The involvement was tangible, and there was a frisson in the air to be sure. Clive's banjo solo Swanee Echoes continued the pace in style, and garnered deservedly hearty applause. Robin then moved over to mandolin for a solid Strings In The Earth And Air, Clive's banjo interpolations again proving unexpectedly effective (though I'd question the necessity of Bina's accompanying vocal line). Then, horror of horrors—had time passed so quickly?—, the final number was announced; this turned out to be (again, a curious choice for a set-closer) Bina's rendition of a Punjabi film song, Whether Near Or Far. It's been said (with some justification, I must say), that Bina's vocals often tend to be the weakest link in the present ISB incarnation, especially when she's following a largely redundant unison part; but when she's on form, as on this final number, she can be a pretty good singer.

The encore was a rousing You Know What You Could Be that sounded as though well and truly impregnated with the spirit of Black Jack Davy. Somewhat amusingly, Robin introduced the number as "a song from our very first album" (which seemed specially bizarre, given Clive's presence)! This romp brought the evening to an all-too-abrupt close (wot, no October Song?... To be sure, the punters were a bit miffed at this omission as they wended their weary way out of the auditorium—I know I was), but despite some undeniably wobbly moments the evening had clearly not been the major disappointment it might easily have been.

I like to think that us String devotees aren't so misty-eyed in our idolatry (or so out of touch with reality) that we'd expect the current line-up to merely reproduce our favourite songs in the time-honoured fashion. And so it proved—and with not a kaftan in sight (*pace* the advertising!)—for the evening was more a celebration that they're all still here (no-one has gone away!), still making music, and capable of making music together, in the spirit of the ISB of old; yea, it's different, but it is now. ☘

**Our founding Editor Andy Roberts also casts a cold eye over the proceedings and concludes (in plain-speaking Yorkshire mode)—**

## Nothing was delivered

**S**top! Look! Listen! You're a String Band fan from the old time, dreaming your way through the streets of Sheffield at tea-time on November 10th 2001. The strains of a familiar tune assail your senses from a nostalgia-vendor's stall. A small crowd are gathered, looking three hours into the future. You too peer in and there, cast in an amber light, moving stiffly like a Victorian automaton, is the Incredible String Band, doomed to endlessly attempt the recreation of creation itself. Driven by profit, haunted by their past, worried about their future. All memory and fate are most certainly not driven deep beneath the waves here. The vision looks quaint, sounds tinny and not quite right. Parody or pastiche? You're not sure. You feel—what's the word?—"uncomfortable". You withdraw and turn for home and the comforts of some *real* music, a shiver running down your spine for how it once was, how you'd imagined it could be again. A voice echoes behind you: "Want a free ticket, dearie? They're not sold out, you know." The gig might not be sold out but, from what you've seen, they have done.

Someone, not a million miles away from this review, once wrote about the "mystery of history". The mystery of the present is that the String Band ever re-formed at all. When I started *beGLAD* in 1992 a reformation seemed impossible. When it happened, Stringheads were split into two camps. There were those who believed it to be a good idea simply because they'd always wanted it to happen, because it *had* to happen. Then there were those who wondered if any reformation was just the ISB (Inc.) pension plan fund being cranked into action, and wondered how—if—the exigencies of money and management would balance the need for rehearsal and forethought. I fell into the second camp. But would we begrudge them such a pension in any case? Not at all, for the way they have individually and collectively

enriched all our lives and provided a soundtrack for so many moments. But we're hard-core String with critical faculties which shouldn't be dimmed or obfuscated by the golden glow of those mythic times. And pensions have to be earned.

So, anyway, after a hazy Dead-fuelled drive to Sheffield we gain our seats in the formal, dry surrounds of the Memorial Hall. Not sold out. No bar. I rarely drink but the older I get the more convinced I become that live music should be performed where people are at liberty to stand, wander about and smoke or drink if they choose. Intoxicants and movement liberate both music and the audience. The static performance/consumption of music is artificial and deadening, making it hard for either side to engage with the other in any way but the purely intellectual.

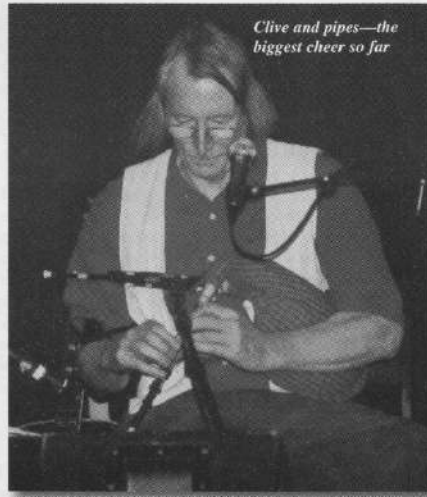
### NO LAWSON—NO STRING BAND 2001!

The band appear on stage and off we go. What do we notice first? Well, the stage layout is the first problem. Where once Mike and Robin—in the real String Band—had been in close proximity, an equality on stage, now it's all very different. Essentially it's three sets of performers each in their own space. Robin and Bina occupy stage right with Mike tucked away with his Bontempi at the back and Clive sandwiched between him and Lawson. Doesn't look right, I'm afraid. There's an old saying, "There's no show without punch". Well with the current String Band there would be no show without Lawson and we should all bear that in mind from the start. His presence adds to almost every song and his musicianship can't be faulted. No Lawson—no String Band 2001—FACT! Both Mike's and Robin's voices were in fine form and Robin seems to have lost that "bellowing" quality which could creep in sometimes. Mike seemed powerful and confident—hell, he even stood up at some points!

All songs were OK (someone else will tell you about them, a grown-up, probably) in their own right but they often seemed arid and emotionless, unable to achieve lift-off. But it just wasn't either *a* or *the* String Band up there. However you slice it, it was a group of disparate performers held together by a session man. The only time for me the band sounded like one cohesive unit playing a song that actually went somewhere and had purpose was *Maker Of Islands*—a great arrangement and a genuinely moving song.

### CLIVE STUDIES THE FASTENINGS ON HIS BANJO CASE...

The tickets told us we were seeing The Incredible String Band, and yes, some of those people on stage had indeed been in such a beat combo. But the performance suggested to me that there was some implicit understanding among the band that they too knew it wasn't the



Clive and pipes—the biggest cheer so far

photo by Jean Hussain

String Band in anything but name to gull the punters with. This seemed to be reflected in the song programming, which lacked any relationship to the word continuity. One minute we're asked to go into Heron/Lawson mode (and let's face it, it's a long way from Williamson mode) for songs such as Residential Boy, then we lurch back to a Robin song, or maybe a Clive tune. Too jerky by half; just when things started to warm up they changed and we went back to square one. Far better would be to start with the songs requiring the least number of people on stage and build up personnel through the first few songs until the final songs are all ensemble offerings. That way momentum would be established and we'd be focused more on the strengths rather than the weaknesses in the band. As they swapped between performers and songs it gave endless opportunities to watch the group dynamic. See Robin smile beneficently when Mike plays his stuff. Gasp as Mike gazes dolorously when Robin does his thang. Thrill to Lawson keeping an avuncular eye on the proceedings. Cringe as Clive studies the fastenings on his banjo case in Albert Steptoe style when not actively employed. Clive eh? ("Go Clive" as some wit in the audience persisted in shouting—Clive looked as though he hadn't "gone" for quite some time!). I really like Clive's post-ISB stuff, but here he seems tacked on as a marketing afterthought, to make the "Incredible String Band" that little bit more "real".

Yet if we're talking about the line-up, let's talk turkey. Putting Clive in was not going to make it any more the String Band than bringing Gerard Dott back. Face it chums, we may not be able to have Likky ('cos she's not available) or Rose (because she's got more sense), but why on earth no Malcolm? Revisionist histories of Malcolm's place in the band notwithstanding, it's all down to String politics I'm afraid. Notice how Malcolm has been subtly airbrushed out of "official" String History in the *Here Till Here Is There* compilation; airbrushed to such an extent that even Raymond doesn't acknowledge him in the sleeve notes [see page 5—Ed]. Say what you like about Malcolm, but for a few years and a few good albums he was an integral part of the String Band, physically and musically in a way that none of the other "comers-in", even the girls, were. Nor has Malcolm had to trade on his past to make a living in the same way Mike and Robin have. He's still out there, still involved in a wide variety of projects, still writing good songs. Those involved in his Talibanic excision from the String Band should be well and truly ashamed.



The String Band email list had murmured for some weeks about the "Bina problem", and from what I'd read I was expecting some seriously bad singing. Bina wasn't that bad at all though, passable even. But she is extraneous to what is being done on stage in the name of the ISB, and whilst a song sung in Punjabi may delight our multi-cultural sensibilities it just didn't fit in the repertoire. Sorry. [Not at all—think *Raga Puti!*—Ed] The cynical may view Bina as anything from Likky-lite to a pawn in a power struggle to weight the band's configuration Robin-side. The really cynical may suggest that the distribution of wealth per household also comes into it. I'm sure all concerned would heartily deny this, but then denial is usually the job of "all concerned" in whatever situation. So, Bina, not bad, not essential, shouldn't be there. No need to start your own line of vegetarian foods just yet.

## WE CAN'T EVER HAVE THE INCREDIBLE STRING BAND BUT THE ONE ON OFFER COULD BE RADICALLY IMPROVED...

So, what did I expect? More, obviously. Why couldn't I expect what I got? Because I didn't get the Incredible String Band, that's why. Once at the cutting edge of whatever genre you cared to call it, the String Band were evocative and moving. Tonight they barely rose above the mundane and appeared cold and sterile, a once vibrant culture now barely alive in the petrie dish marked "ISB". Yet the audience seemed to lap it up, making me question what the average middle-aged professional audience want. Faithful re-plays of old hits? They could have gone to see Errol Brown next door at City Hall for that. From what I saw of the audience it's tempting to suggest that the nearest some of them have been to cutting edge recently was a new set of sabatiers for the kitchen.

We can't ever have the Incredible String Band but the one currently on offer could be radically improved. What's needed is a dream team of Mike and Robin, underpinned by the mighty Lawson, together with John Rutherford on guitar and Dave Haswell on percussion. That way a full, genuine ISB sound could be conjured, sustained and built on. Mike and Robin should be together on the stage and Malcolm and Clive should be featured accordingly (this may mean less gigs due to the finances—but surely better and better-attended gigs). But most of all, for this venture not to just be a "tonight, Matthew, I'm going to be the Incredible String Band" ersatz talent show we need new songs. Songs written in total collaboration with the weight of the past to anchor them and the prospect of the future in mind. Songs written and rehearsed to be performed with enthusiasm and passion. And if we're going to have oldies, then damn it all man, we want Painted Chariot and Creation, The Circle Is Unbroken and Red Hair. Songs of power and emotion, not the poncified post-folk fireside reflection music offered tonight. In both new and old we want to see men and women working together up there on stage, taking chances, earning their money and our continued respect.

Prior to the gig I decided to listen to some String to get me in the mood and selected Robin's *Journey's Edge* album. What a *fine* album that is. His best work without a doubt, innovative, captivating and out on the edge. I listened to it again the day after the show and found it to be even better. Then I moved back through the solo and ISB albums to hear what Robin and Mike and the Incredible String Band *really* sound like. They were truly something else, something so completely different that comparison shouldn't really be brought to bear with the ossification I'd witnessed in Sheffield. Unfortunately it had to be done.

The ISB 2001. A re-formation—arguably. A renaissance? Most certainly not.

You know what you could be. ☘

# i say...

The Voice of Stringfandom!

## "No magic," claims 'jaundiced' reader

Dear beGLAD

I was at the String Band concert, Bloomsbury 2001, and have to say I was disappointed. Sacrilege, I hear you all gasp. The band were more together, the music less disjointed than last year's concert and the songs were great. Yes, the songs differed little from Bloomsbury 2000 but the performance was much better. So what was the problem??

Let me first say that I have been a Stringbandophile for a long time. My sister and I bought *Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* when it first came out, and I have avidly collected all their output, group and solo, ever since. I have been entranced by their concerts, gone to far-flung places to catch the Merry Band and was privileged enough to see *U* at the Roundhouse. So I'm not a new recruit and certainly would not willingly wish to slander my heroes. So back to the original question. What was the problem??

Well, to my jaundiced mind, something was missing and that little something was *magic*, an ingredient not in short supply in the pre-split days. I would leave those concerts in a non-drug infused world of beauty and clarity, feeling good to be alive. The world was a better place, free from drudgery, full of joy. To me, that magic was generated by the chemistry between Mike and Robin and that chemistry was notable by its absence at Bloomsbury 2001. Mike sat behind his keyboards all evening and looked like he didn't really want to be there. No duets with Robin, no guitars together and not a lot of communication between the two. All the others seemed to be in pretty good harmony but Mike seemed a lost soul apart, joyless.

I don't know the internal dynamics. My own feelings are that Mike still harbours resentment for some ancient reason and can't let go. But surely, there's no point in just going through the motions for the dough and some bespectacled Stringbandophiles. I doubt if Robin would want that either. He's got enough stuff of his own going on. (I wonder what Robin's reasons are...) There is no doubt that Robin is a genius, a mystic. His musical skills, his penmanship and his otherworldly air place him apart. I'm sorry Mike, but that's the way it was and always will be. He was the sorcerer and you were the sorcerer's apprentice. Maybe things are different now but not too much. So please Mike, enjoy, because there ain't much point if you don't or won't.

Yours in love and friendship,  
Charles Prendergast.

Hmmm—sounds like Charles slept through Don't Kill It Carol! Personally I feel Mike's on the up at the moment—Ed.

## Maine points

Dear beGLAD

On his spoken intro to *Battleship Of Maine on the Old Fangled Tone* album, Robin says that he had never read anything about this incident in any history book. Neither had I, but since I read about medieval history I would not expect to, unless the likes of Ethelred II, Charlemagne or Augustine of Hippo were likely to turn up! However, some years ago, my sister gave me a book entitled *Your Birthday—February 15th* (copyright 1993 David Campbell Publishers), and I hope that I am not breaking the law by quoting:

"1898—*The Maine Was Sunk In Havana Harbour*  
"At 9.40 p.m. on February 15th, America's battleship *Maine*, commanded by civil war veteran Captain Charles D. Sigsbee, blew up at its moorings in Havana Harbour, Cuba. A total of 260 officers and men of the 6000-ton warship's 329-strong crew died in the explosion. The *Maine's* stay in Havana was ostensibly as part of a goodwill mission to the Spanish island, but the truth was that the ship had been sent to protect US interests at the time of increasing instability in Cuba. The local authorities were less than impressed by this gunboat diplomacy. Both America and Spain had the same question: why did the *Maine* explode? A Spanish Board of Investigation (which was not allowed by the US government actually to inspect the wreck) declared the explosion to have been an accident. The US Navy's Board claimed that the disaster had been caused by a Spanish mine. The truth soon became only marginally important. Feeding on the fury voiced by American mass opinion, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst (the real model for Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*) turned his papers over to war fever. His *New York Journal* ran the story on February 17th. Headline followed headline, each more bellicose than its predecessor. Spain may have officially apologised, but the American man in the street was more impressed by Hearst's denunciations and the \$50,000 reward for 'the conviction of the criminals who sent 258 American sailors to their death' offered by the journal. Every Hearst paper broadcast the new toast: 'Remember the *Maine*'. Hearst had always seen Cuba as a potential hotspot. Months before he had sent the western artist Frederic T. Remington to Cuba, demanding suitably dramatic stories of revolutionary bloodshed. Remington cabled home that no war was to be found. 'Everything quiet, no trouble here. There will be no war.' Hearst replied, 'Please remain. You supply the pictures and I'll supply the war!'

"On April 24th Hearst made good on his promise and America's jingoists got what they wanted. After Spain refused to accede to a US ultimatum, issued on April 19th, ordering her out of Cuba, President McKinley declared war. Fighting concentrated on the Philippines where on May 1st Commander

George Dewey smashed the Spanish fleet, suffering only eight casualties and none of them dead. On July 1st in Cuba itself the irregular 'Rough Riders', led by big-game hunter and politician Theodore 'Teddy' Roosevelt, charged up San Juan Hill near Santiago to overcome a tough Spanish defence. That the Riders, bereft of horses, actually ran up the Hill, and that the US lost 1,000 men in the engagement, failed to mar the creation of an enduring patriotic myth—and Roosevelt's presidential future. The Spanish-American war ended on August 12th, when the US overran Manila and Spain signed an armistice. Peace was officially signed in December. America the Philippines [sic], Guam and Puerto Rico; Cuba gained independence, though not before enduring four years of US government."

I do not think that the last sentence makes sense, up to the semi-colon at least, but otherwise I think that this is a good accompaniment to Robin's song. Incidentally, any readers wishing to inundate me with gifts on 15th February are welcome to do so.

Jon Collie

## The write stuff

Dear beGLAD

I was interested to see the piece entitled *Cliff* and the *ISB* in *beGLAD 18*.

Although I never met music journalist Barry Shinfield, I have certainly read plenty of his work, both at the time of his writing (the *Croydon Advertiser* being my local "rag") and again more recently, when I had cause to delve back into the newspaper archives.

I can only agree with your observation that "he'd rather be writing for the *International Times*..." Unlike some local hacks, Barry certainly knew his subject and had great enthusiasm for the music; he may have had his favourites, Fairport for one, but he had no problem with putting a band in their place if he thought their performance not up to scratch. "Hard but fair" I think is the phrase that could be applied.

He joined the *Advertiser* in mid 1969 and soon found his niche in the arts department—what an enviable time to have access to the burgeoning live music scene in Croydon! Perhaps Barry should have aimed higher than the *Advertiser*—indeed his journalism would not have been out of place in much of the national music press—but sadly we will never find out. Barry Shinfield drowned in June 1976; he was 29.

Best regards,  
Chris Groom

# Pictures in MIRROR

Deep in the hollow jail  
Sleeps Lord Randall

The mixed voices speak  
of bread ~



~and of sheets that were scarlet  
and blue are at his head

His heart  
like a  
cat  
drowns  
in a  
well

He thinks of all the girls ~



~ he will not love

He thinks not of the future ~



~ or of the past

Blue lightning spikes the hills above the sea  
Where Kasa's ship sets sail for Otherwhere







There stands the Chief  
with gold on his hair ~

~ two fingers thick  
each link of coiled ore



Speaks to his white-skinned  
wife ~

~ she answers not



He hurls his question  
angry to the gulls

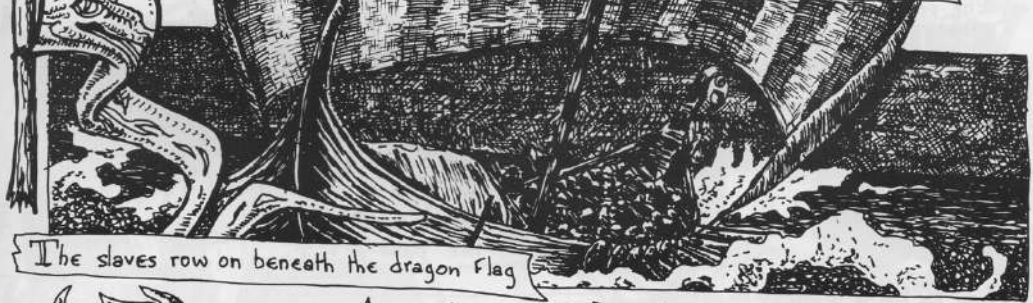


His wife strikes her mouth  
with a skull-like sound



The bleeding image of her loss  
revolves above her mind

With every line in its design  
an accusing eye that pierces Kasa's soul



The slaves row on beneath the dragon flag



His heart's recoils  
recall his red-haired  
son ~

~ beneath the burning walls  
that he razed down



His wife and he  
speak not ~

~ as wine  
is brought



A cup that seethes ~

~ like the  
black blood  
of wolves



His wife's dagger  
is hidden in her dress ~

~ he drinks joyless  
to a dark sleep

The gaoler bangs the iron door



Lord Randall wakes in pain

He shakes his shackles in the beaten gloom



The blood of his wounds is hard as coal

The gaoler leads him out ~



~ upon the blinding bright stair

He feels uneven turf beneath his feet



The priest intones



The sword falls on his neck ~



~ the pain is boiling cold

They lay him in the tomb at break of day



They close the earthen door upon his clay

The birds are plucking worms from the ground



Their feathers grey as mist on a cloudy morn

The white sun turns to stone



My mother lies in her labour nine days long



She called on St Bridget in her time

I look out on the room of my birth



With hangings rich of many strange designs

Nobles stand with their wine cups in the room



Saluting me and she the King's Queen

Already I am forgetting ~

My mother lifts me to her huge soft breast

Her nipple like a berry both hard and brown

Her eyes look on me like waves of the sea



~ who I am



And with small lips ~



Already I've forgotten ~



~ who I've been

~ the yellow milk I draw.

# Sounds of the Seventies

**Bill Allison**

**follows the footsteps  
of the Heron back to  
1976**



**1975** was an action-packed year for Mike and the boys. There is plenty of documentation of various sorts to support this. All three hundred and sixty five days were full of Heron activity. I've brought loads and loads of it to you.

Let's look at 1976. Happy New Year. You can be sure that Mike and band had an action-packed year because there were three hundred and sixty five days in 1976 too. However, unfortunately there isn't that much documentation or indeed activity. But you can rest assured, friends, I'll bring you what there is. So here goes.

The band must have been gigging at the beginning of the year, for we have suggestions of a gig at the Golden Diamond, Sutton-in-Ashfield on March 2nd. The band also played the Marquee in London on March 28th. Dave Sams had joined the band fairly recently. Mike suggested "When Frank came in we kind of re-auditioned the group and we ended up with that funky keyboard player Dave Sams. That had an influence 'cos he was from a Kokomo type band, London club funk."

During this time Mike was living in Notting Hill, West London. He was reported to be singing new songs to people who dropped around to the flat in those early months of 1976, namely Jane, Takes My Breath Away Yet, 15 Glory Road and Favourite Sins. Little songs being popped away onto tape. Remember that idea from Part One of this article? [See *beGLAD 17-Ed*] I pointed out that Mike was always writing. He pointed out that not everything that he writes fits into the current context of what he is doing. Whatever happened to those particular songs?

We know about three of them, anyway. They surfaced twenty years later or more. Only goes to show you can't turn a good song down. Well, maybe you can for twenty years or so. After March it is difficult to find any info until August when the band started to record the *Diamond Of Dreams* album. However, an article appeared in the February 5th 1977 edition of a newspaper called *National RockStar*, called "Heron: relying on the songs". I don't remember the paper; however, I have the cutting to prove it. The paper looks like *NME* or *Sounds* and was probably trying to cash in on the lucrative rock market and write about rock stars like Mike Heron. The article was written by one Paul Kendal, who wrote about Heron in the other weekly rock comics too. It's a good job he did, or we wouldn't have the following information.

In the article he says that Mike's band disappeared from view after playing the Marquee on March 28th last year (1976). It goes on: "We were vaguely practising for a while," says Heron, explaining what's been going on during the long hiatus. "But basically we were sorting out the contractual situation we were in at the time, which wasn't working too good. There was a very hard period when we really couldn't work for about six months until the contracts were sorted out. At that time the band was in a situation where the individuals could do

anything they wanted to, but we had an agreement to get back together again when we had a new contract."

Astute readers will recall that the record industry seemed to work in this stranglehold manner in those days. Bruce Springsteen, you will remember, suffered a similar fate at the same time. In his case it gave birth to millions of Bruce boots. However, nothing as distasteful for Mr. Heron. Mike says that he financed the initial recording for an album and, when they were half-way through, the contract with Bronze came along. Although the band still had the same line-up as the Reputation days they changed their name to Heron at about this time.

Mike said, "We thought that Mike Heron's Reputation was a bit lengthy and it obviously wasn't going to get shortened to Reputation, as we had hoped. Agents consider having my name in there gives it some sort of selling power." There is a suggestion that, during the period of time that Mike was looking for a deal, the Band almost signed to Swansong, Led Zeppelin's label.

This period must have been difficult. The article talks of Mike funding the project but with no gigs this would have been a big drain on resources. Later articles in 1977 talk of Mike's String Band royalties financing this time. What is for sure is that Mike was continuing to write. Eight songs appeared on the original vinyl release of *Diamond Of Dreams*. The album came out in early 1977. The eight songs were:

- Are You Going To Hear The Music?
- Don't Kill It Carol
- Do It Yourself (Desert Song)
- Redbone
- Trim Up Your Love Light
- Draw Back The Veil
- Stranded In Iowa
- Diamond Of Dreams

Three of these songs were already on Reputation's set list: Are You Going To Hear The Music?, Draw Back The Veil, and Stranded In Iowa. In fact, I've already suggested that the last two of these were either performed by the ISB or written during their final days. The other songs were perhaps written during the period from April to August when the Band started recording the album.

**Vivien Goldman, always a great Heron aficionado**, wrote plenty about him in the music press of the time. In *Sounds* for January 15th '77 she writes about Mike recording the title track of the album. She was in the studio when it all happened. She says: "Mike's idiosyncrasy in the studio is that he likes the lights out when he sings. That made for a blessed relief after a particularly trying half-hour while the drummer sorted out his chops with an inordinate amount of difficulty. Maybe somebody spiked the fish and chips that night."

"...A VERY FRAGILE LITTLE FIGURE  
STANDING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE STUDIO..."

"Mike was extremely patient and professional, coaxing the performance that he wanted with a tasteful blend of sympathy, tact and down-home insistence. Anyway the moment arrived, the lights were doused and Mike looked a very fragile little figure standing in the middle of the studio, head up high, hands held behind his back. The lyrics he's adding are simple enough, just 'Diamond of Dreams'. He's adding an extra harmony to the track and he runs through it two or three times until he's got the sound sorted out. Then it's just a matter of injecting more and more feeling into it. He gets hoarser and hoarser, even more plaintive till the climax of the song is a veritable tear-jerker. One of those abstract musical moments that make you feel all human life is there." That's a nice little snapshot of the album in progress.

Mike was writing some stuff especially for the sound of the band. He wanted to make the band work, albeit with a new sound. However, he was still writing about familiar topics—wine and women in Edinburgh, amongst other things. The sound of the album is loud and strident. There are layers of sound. The keyboards swirl. Frank's guitar chops in. The sound has depth. The album belonged to the band. Graham Forbes suggested that that was one of the drawbacks to the *Reputation* album, that the road band didn't feel as if they had ownership. Mike didn't

want to make the same mistake again. To be honest, it sounds good these days. The album was re-released on CD in the early Nineties. It has stood the test of time. Maybe it is my bashed-up vinyl copy that has not stood the test of time. The sound is not my favourite Heron sound but the songs are unquestionably his.

Now, we know there were other songs too. Indeed when the album was re-released it also contained *Baby Goodnight* as an extra cut. The song is copyrighted as 1977 on *Where The Mystics Swim* where, of course, the song could be said to have got its first full release by Mike. This was of great interest in itself. As with many other great artists, time has told us in later years that they had all kinds of great stuff recorded that never appeared on the original album during which it was recorded. If *Baby Goodnight* had appeared on *Diamond Of Dreams*, just that one cut, in my opinion, would have made it a very different album. Most tracks seem to bounce along at great speed. Just one more slower track could have struck the balance and for it to be a song of the magnitude and beauty of *Baby Goodnight* would have been wonderful.

That, of course, was not to be. Nevertheless, the recording of *Baby Goodnight* for the *Diamond Of Dreams* sessions during August and September of '76 marks the first appearance of one of many wonderful songs that would go to make up what we now call *The Glen Row Tapes*. *Baby Goodnight* is a lovely song. Another major work in the Heron canon. A beautiful lullaby-like love song.

It was clear that this band was going to be a band and that Mike was writing specifically for its sound. He wanted it to succeed. One last interesting musical note. A tape exists labelled "Rehearsals 12/76". It contains Florence. This is an amazing work, drawn across a very large canvas. A complicated attempt to place the high points of Renaissance Florence in a modern song in the pop idiom, as they say. Mike even sings some of it in Italian. Readers will be familiar with the song from *Glen Row Tapes*. There is even the suggestion that Florence was another song left over from the ISB. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. Wherever it comes from, it is spectacular in the true sense of the word. There are certainly precedents from Mike's ISB stuff for a song in this form that attempts something large and different. Take *Ithikos*. And whether it was an old or new song, already Mike is up to old tricks. He doesn't want his music or the band to stay still. One wonders if it was also cut for *Diamond Of Dreams*. It made a concert appearance fairly soon after this, in February 1977. More of that in Part Three of this epic of my own.

On Christmas Eve, Heron fans everywhere received their Christmas present. *NME* December 24th 1976 carried the news that Heron was back with a re-shaped band that had been signed by the Bronze Records label. They were to be called Heron and were to undertake a major tour, after some warm-up gigs and a residency at London's Marquee. Furthermore, a new album would appear called *Diamond Of Dreams* on January 28th.

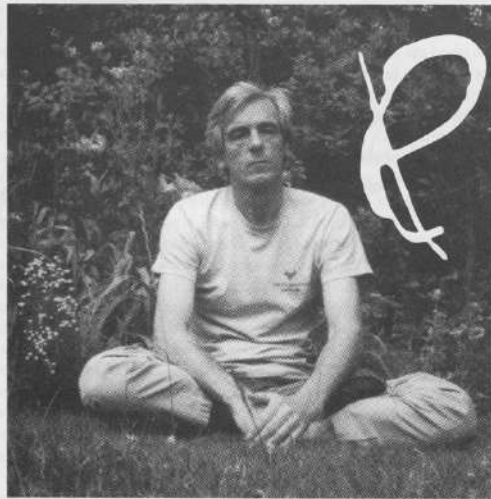
This article is much longer than anyone could have ever guessed. However, the late great John Bauldie used to say about all this stuff that you only get one chance to do it, so do it right. I'm trying ☺☻

Next time. Easter issue. Promise, Raymond! 1977, '78 and '79, all in one go. Yes! Info and comment of any kind please to:

[allisonw@supanet.com](mailto:allisonw@supanet.com)



the Dreams team



# Peter Neal

## THROUGH THE LENS

**Peter Neal talks to Raymond Greenoaken about film-making, his thoughts on working with the String Band, and his new ISB-related project.**

Peter Neal has been working on a DVD of the *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending* movie, for which Raymond did a 20-minute interview as part of the package. For a detailed account of the making of the film, see the article in *beGLAD 2*; the excerpts below focus on some of the surrounding issues and Peter's future plans.

The DVD was issued by Wienerworld on 3rd December 2001 and is available from them, retailers or Pig's Whisker. The film has been "cleaned up" as much as possible; the images are taken directly from a digital master, and the soundtrack has been largely replaced using CD versions of the music from the soundtrack album, *Changing Horses* etc. It wasn't practicable to do much with the original dialogue, says Peter, but it has been cleaned up digitally wherever possible. Below, Peter starts the interview by talking about the origins of the film.

**I** was never interested in making a documentary about the String Band, or an explanation of who they were, piecing together their backgrounds or where they were born. That didn't really interest me. I think what *Be Glad* started out to be was a parallel universe, trying to put over in a visual sense what the String Band were trying to do musically. Obviously, when you make a film—and the film is very much *their* film, I'll say that to start with—I didn't want to interpret the String Band, but obviously, if you're making a film, then part of you is going to be reflected in that film, because at the end of the day you're the one that has the control. However much of a co-operative effort it is, you're in control; and so, in a sense, it's like trying to reflect what they were doing musically, and what touched me musically about them in terms of a film. So I wouldn't call the film a documentary in that sense.

**Had you been aware of them very long before you approached them with the idea of doing a film?**

I guess it was a year or so before I started cottoning on to their music, and I'd not heard anything like it. It was extraordinary. I had been working in film to try to work within the mythological structure of this

country, you know, *The Mabinogion* and so forth. I'd been adapting and working on scripts for films of Alan Garner's books, and got very interested in that whole background. And I'd been doing that for a long time, actually, but it came together at that point a lot. So, when I saw the String Band, I could see that musically they were doing a similar thing. In fact, when I got to know Mike and Robin and could see how well versed they were in all the literature of this country and the background of common mythology, the folklore... but also the way their music really seemed to me to bring alive the landscape and the vibrations—to use a much over-used word—of this country, which had always fascinated me.

**Did you get to know them with the intention of filming them, or did it just come together...?**

It just happened, in that way. I'd only just finished working on the Hendrix film [*Experience*], and once you'd done Jimi Hendrix, you really had to say, what can one do next?, because he was extraordinary. And it seemed to me that the only other people on the scene who were as extraordinary were the String Band, because what they were doing was inimitable. You couldn't have copiers of the String Band, because it wouldn't work—nobody could copy it. What they were doing was uniquely their own, and the way they brought in all these instruments and sounds, influences from all over the world, just worked so well with what one felt to be quite traditional material.

**The filmic possibilities of those instruments come out in the sequence where the instruments are enumerated...**

The Noah's Ark of instruments!

**...and you pan across the stage and there they all are, gleaming in the spotlights... It's a very evocative sight, isn't it?**

I think so, yes. It was quite an inspirational way to start the film. It was John Marshall's idea. He was very much involved in the concepts and things behind the scenes, and the idea of using the Noah's Ark playlet interlinked with the roadies' list of instruments going through customs... As it took shape with filming the Festival Hall and filming all the instruments being unloaded and laid out. It just happened to come together in rather a nice way. And that sets up the whole idea of what a String Band concert was like: When does the concert start? Has it already started? And so on...

**Did the ISB themselves need much persuading to co-operate with the filming?**

They were very easy people to film. They were reticent about certain things... They were very particular about what they were doing, and had an integrity about it, and therefore anyone who was going to come

**"IT WAS A YEAR OR SO BEFORE I COTTONED ON TO THEIR MUSIC. I'D NOT HEARD ANYTHING LIKE IT. IT WAS EXTRAORDINARY..."**

in from the outside and work with them on something as personal as a film, they were obviously going to be somewhat wary of. I understood that, and of course part of the process of working with any band, I think, is politicking—saying “I’m on your side, I’m not going to expose you to anything you don’t want to see”. And I never felt at any time during the making of the film, in either the shooting or the editing afterwards, that there was any problem. They were welcome to come and see what was being done and make comments on it, change things... It was a very kind of free exchange.

**So they were involved in it even at the editing stage?**

Well, they weren’t too interested in the editing stage, actually. I think they had a pretty busy schedule anyway. The major input as far as they were concerned was the fable, which really was something they desperately wanted to do. And that was really a process of me discovering what was going on. It wasn’t like they were going to tell me! [laughs] So it was in the process of actually doing it that I was discovering what was happening, which was quite a nice way of working, as I was exploring all this as we went along.

**They were drawing you in to that point all the way through? Absolutely!**

**Did you feel at any time that they’d taken over the film from you?**

Not at all. It was a very good working relationship—from my point of view, at least; I don’t know what they might say about it... I think that in retrospect they both feel that the film is quite reflective of what the String Band were, which is something that is very hard to capture. If you set out specifically to capture what the String Band were in the Sixties, I think you’d fail. If you try to examine it or take it apart or piece it together in kind of orthodox way I think you’d fail. It was because the film happened organically in this very Sixties way that I think it worked. If we’d tried to make it in a much more formal way, we might have ended up with a film that would not be being seen now, rather than as a real piece of history. It still stands up, I think, as a piece—rather quaint in places, but it has a quality about it which still works, I think.

**The BBC dithered over it for quite a long time, I seem to remember. Reports would appear periodically in the music press saying “It’s going to be shown at last—next Friday!”, and you’d dutifully tune in and get some obscure Bulgarian novelist being profiled...**

...who was much more avant-garde! [laughs] I guess if we’d done some straight interviews in the traditional documentary way and intercut the footage with that, I think they may well have accepted it, but because we never entered that realm at all in the film—every interview in there is a throwaway, used like a piece of music... Robin’s words. Mike’s



Mine’s from Marks & Sparks—Where’d you get yours?

**“MIKE CAME BACK IN WITH THIS BEATIFIC SMILE AND EYES LIKE SHEETS OF GLASS...”**

words, all used as part of the composition of the film. There’s some lovely little asides in there. I remember Robin saying, “Some people say we’re somewhere between Manitas de Plata and Jimi Hendrix...”. And there’s a pause... “...Just thought you’d like to know what you’re hearing!” It was just put in like a pause in the music, in the same way that the music is edited together in different ways. It’s a mosaic of their music as well; there’s quite a lot of bits of music cut up and juxtaposed, as with their words, as with the interviews. The only real interview there is the Dick Steele, the *Newsweek* reporter interview, which we took as a kind of surreal incident [chortles]—which it really was! Poor Dick Steele—he was a nice man, and I’m sure he wrote a wonderful article on the String Band afterwards (see *beGLAD 2 for this—Ed*), but for our purposes, that’s just the way it happened. It was just very surreal. The only way Mike could cope with being interviewed was to go outside and... *prepare himself*. And he came back in with this beatific smile on his face and eyes like sheets of glass... “If I could tell you what it meant, I wouldn’t sing about it...” and all these wonderful answers he gave. It was a very nice relationship, actually. It was very cosy and we were all having a good time. It wasn’t taking the mickey out of Dick Steele at all; it’s not meant to do that, it’s very gentle. But that was this kind of cultural confrontation going on. I like Mike’s answers; I think they’re very telling, they say an awful lot about Mike’s approach to music, because he’s always talked about his songs as being thoughts and dreams, and how can they possibly be explained? Just like talking about *Be Glad*, really: I can’t really explain *Be Glad* just as a film... It was like a creation, the way it happened, and people either enter it or they can’t enter it. I remember showing the film to some neighbours down in Kent a year or two after we finished it, and there was this stunned silence at the end and people saying, “What were you on?”, and I said, “Nothing, actually!”

**Not you personally, at least...**

None of us were... We were all having fun; you don’t have to be on anything to have fun! But I realised at the time that there would be a lot of people who just would not get it. But that’s always been, for me, part of the String Band’s magic: you either get it or you don’t. And if you get it, you can’t explain it: you just get lost in the explanation...

**I guess it’s like dancing about architecture, as somebody once said...**

Exactly!

**Did you feel apprehensive about seeing the film again when it resurfaced?**

I didn’t, in the sense that when you do a film in 1969, by the time you get twenty years on, it doesn’t belong to you any more. As soon as you’ve finished it, it belongs to anyone who wants to see it. I was apprehensive about having to talk about it, as I knew people would have expectations. It wasn’t made with the expectation of being shown twenty years down the line—I thought it might be consigned to an archive somewhere as a curiosity piece, but I didn’t think there would be any life in it in twenty years’ time.

**The critical reaction seems to have been very favourable...**

Well, that amazed me! Maybe things have evened up a bit, because at the time when it was first released, we had a couple of very perceptive reviews, and a lot of mysteriously unperceptive reviews. But there are very few critics that you actually take any notice of, because they’ve all got their own agendas. But it does astonish me that it has been as well received now as it has been. It got into the Top 10 videos in *Record Collector*, and that amazed me because it was sitting next to the likes of Madonna and very contemporary stuff. But then again, it didn’t altogether surprise me, because the String Band are unique and there’s never been a band like them, and their music is timeless. I don’t think there’s any time barrier on what they did then, or on what they’re doing now. I think their music is outside the bounds of time, and this is part of its appeal. I’m glad people can still enjoy music for what it is, without thinking of it as just nostalgia. It’s just as listenable-to and

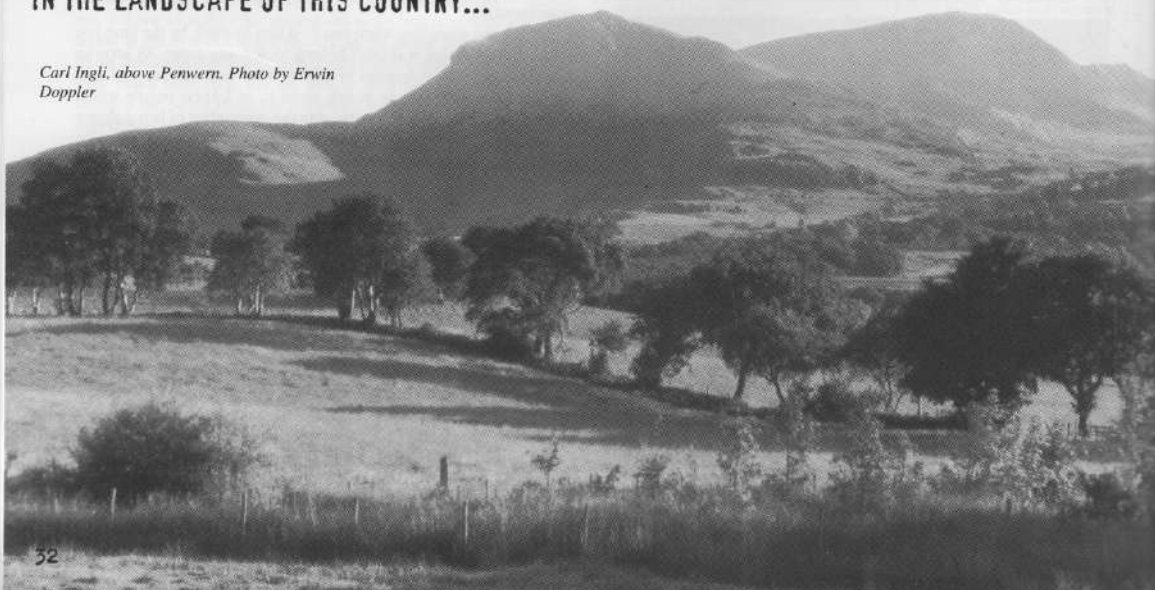
relevant now as when they wrote it, I think. They might not agree with me, because to them it's a very personal experience, but I think that, as an outsider, listening to their music, it still affects me in the same way. It touches areas that other music doesn't touch.

**Being around them must have been quite interesting...**

Yes. The way you might socialise with them... I was knocking around with various odd groups of people, communes and so on, at that time anyway. Though I was a bit old to be a hippy—more of a beatnik. But the hippy movement interested me because it came out of that Kerouac-type thing in some ways. It was very familiar on that level. I remember when [the String Band] were in London—I think when we were doing the music for the fable—and going round to their hotel somewhere near Ladbroke Grove, and going in and seeing how they'd pushed all the beds aside and were living on the floor in this hotel room. Which was very familiar to me, because we all did that wherever we went: we would dismantle the beds and sleep on the floor, and make a kind of encampment. So there was a way of socialising that was very familiar to me, sitting around and smoking dope, talking and falling over each other and ignoring each other... It was very simple and very open. They were very easy to get on with. Yes, they had their artistic protectiveness, but so does anybody that's doing anything. And they were young. They weren't very experienced in fending off that kind of interest... It's very difficult for a band like the String Band not to become scooped up with the business of being icons. But I never had any problem with them. I mean, my relationship with them was obviously based on making a film, so that sets an agenda in terms of a relationship anyway. But it was a very relaxed and unstressful working thing. The only tension ever during the making of the film was when we were shooting at Sound Techniques. That was them: they'd just had some kind of big family row, and we had to wait while they went outside and sorted it out. But it's understandable that if you're living like a family you're going to have family rows. But there wasn't a problem with the filming itself, ever; they were totally co-operative. No tantrums or preciousness about them at all. Which surprised me, in a way, because you kind of almost expect them to be aloof or what have you, but I think that's a kind of misconception that people have. They're just good guys, very friendly. They're very absorbed in what they're doing, which might make people feel that they're aloof at times. But I've worked with a lot of musicians, and quite honestly, they come in two styles: there's the ordinary guys, and there's the guys who feel terribly threatened and who are therefore awful to work with. There are plenty of the second sort!—Very prima donna-ish...

**"I THINK THE ISB CAUGHT THE POWER RESIDING IN THE LANDSCAPE OF THIS COUNTRY..."**

*Carl Ingle, above Penwern. Photo by Erwin Doppler*



**Care to drop a few names?**

I won't drop any names if I just mention the word Yes... [laughs]. Whereas working with Jethro Tull, for instance: they were a delightful bunch, totally unpretentious, no kind of pedestal, nothing, just absolutely natural, really nice people. I met Phil Collins the other day. We made a film about the band that was his favourite band when he was a youngster [*The Action—Ed*], and I went over to Geneva to interview him—a delightful guy, no pretensions, completely straightforward... Which is what I like. And the other thing I find is that, because in my view film-making is very much like making music—I see films as being much closer to being music than being theatre or TV—they're something that works in movement and tones and colours, so to me there's much more similarity between a film and a piece of music than there is between a film and anything else. The closest art form to film is music, and I get on with musicians for that reason: I sort of bond with them, I suppose, on the basis of how we work. It's very hard to say how you work as a film maker, because it's not necessarily an intellectual process. You can intellectualise afterwards, but you don't at the time; you just go by what feels right, whatever happens to come out of you at that particular moment, and then afterwards you justify it intellectually. But I think film, like music—well, first of all it hits you here [points to heart] and it's an emotional, subconscious response, and the intellectual part comes later. So in that way I find it's very easy to get on with musicians. But there are some musicians who are so screwed up... And that's understandable too, because if you are suddenly idolised and surrounded by people who won't say no to you, it's very hard to maintain your sense of just being another human being and not some super godlike being. But certainly Mike and Robin were never like that. I think they were just too interested in what they were doing to bother with any of that. The amount of stuff they turned out, they didn't have time to get precious about it! And their approach to music was very different to a lot of other people's approaches. It wasn't planned in the way that a lot of people plan their music, and that means you have to be on your toes all the time; you can't afford to sit back a bit, you've got to give a lot in every performance. And audiences appreciate that, which is why you get so many faithful fans, because they get such a lot from the String Band and they want to give it back. People adore them for that reason. And you get a lot of people whose lives are changed by it to some extent, as music can do, and as films, for me, can do too. There are certain films and certain pieces of music that I can remember as vividly now as the moment I experienced them, and I know that they effected a shift in terms of my consciousness, in the way that doors opened for me that may not have opened so soon, or at all. And of course the String Band's music was catching a part of the atmosphere of the times that nobody else was touching. It was



pulling together certain threads of things that were happening in the Sixties, the opening up of knowledge... Certain kinds of knowledge that up to that time had been quite hidden suddenly became available to people at all kinds of levels. You could do things that had not been possible to do en masse before, but had been confined to little secret societies and such. And I think that they caught that, and also the power residing in the landscape of this country: the stories and the heritage we've got here, which is very rich. If you'd been brought up in the Forties, as I was, all you might read in this area would be the Greek myths, and then we suddenly discovered that we've got these incredible stories and myths of our own, which are actually very different from the Greek myths. They might be talking about the same things, but because they come from our landscape and embody the qualities of our land, they have a very different kind of power for someone born here. And making [people] value their own soil, their own country, is a very great achievement, I think.

**Did you feel any sense of the power inherent in the landscape when you were down at Penvern?**

Oh absolutely. I'm Welsh anyway, so my heart is always in Wales. That landscape is very much in my make-up. It's this whole idea with shamanic practice that it's strongest where the shaman is born, because the shaman has been brought up in the particular vibrations of that area—the idea that the earth has a tone, but the landscape plays a melody, and so if you were born in a certain area you might have the same bass tone that everybody has, the drone of the earth, if you like, but your particular tune relates to your native landscape, and I feel that very strongly, and I suspect that, instinctively, most people do. And to be able to conjure that up through music is great, and that's what musicians in this country should be doing—certainly some of them! And even though the String Band's music pulled in all these exotic instruments from all over the world, it was still very much from our landscape. Sitar?—It doesn't matter; it fits in perfectly with the old Celtic poems. But forgetting the words for the moment, just the sound they made is for me the key thing. It's like you can listen to the words and understand them, but anybody can say the words, and if they study enough can write the words, or write something saying a similar thing, because it becomes a body of knowledge that can be passed down in words; but to pull out the sounds of it is magic. That takes artistry. So what always affected me about their music, more so than the words, was the sound they made together. Not just the sound of the instruments, but the sound of the voices. And hearing them now, when I first caught them down at Cropredy, I was wandering around the field, having been on the stage and filmed them taking the stage, and I suddenly heard this sound—whether it was Mike's and Bina's voices or Mike's and Robin's, I don't know—and it suddenly took me straight back. This very strange quality they managed to evoke through sounds. That's the magic of the String Band.

**And, thirty years on, you're pointing a camera at them again. The song has no ending...**

Well, we'll see what happens. Again, it's happened more or less accidentally. I'd never intended to make another film about the String Band—there was no point, of course, as the String Band didn't exist. But now they've back together... Actually, that's not quite true. I did have the idea of doing a TV programme about them, for something like the Melvyn Bragg slot [*The South Bank Show*, ITV's sole concession to arts programming—Ed]. And I'd actually written to Melvyn Bragg, saying, we've got retrospectives on the Beatles and the Stones, well, what about the String Band? They were of comparable importance, and yet everyone's forgotten the part they played in the Sixties music scene, and that's not fair. But they never took the bait; they said they were interested, but they didn't have a slot at the moment, which is the way TV companies say no thank you. Which I found a bit disappointing, because I thought it would have been nice to do. I didn't conceive it as a nostalgia piece, because I knew Robin and Mike were still performing, and I would have liked to have shown where they were now and balance that up against where they came from. But in retrospect I'm glad that didn't happen, because it's now happening as the first film happened, which is kind of by accident. You know, they suddenly decide they're going to perform again as the String Band, and I said to Mark Anstey, we've got to film this; even if nobody sees it,

it's a historic moment and I'd just like to do it. And really from there on, getting to know them again, following Robin with his *Carmina*—I went down to shoot the show at Llandaf Cathedral, because it might not happen again and it's something very special—and through these various events and comings-together of various things, then gradually the idea has grown: well, why don't we do it if the String Band is going to go on as a band? Obviously, it'll be very different from *Be Glad*, because we're now living in a different century and dealing with other issues and things that are happening in the world, so I can't tell you quite what directions it'll go in, but I think the kind of things that made the String Band what they were then and what they are now will be in the film, but in a very different way. You know, the concept of globalisation, and concepts of responding to our history and our heritage... those aspects. But how that'll happen, I don't quite know. I'm getting glimpses of it... It's rather like seeing a little thread, and you pull it, and it matches up with something else, and then something excites you and leads you in this direction or that direction, and in that way, I think the film will develop of its own accord. I'm not going to plan it, as there are so many different aspects to explore, with both Robin and Mike individually as well as what they're doing together at this moment, which gives you that kind of tapestry that you can work with. Just going into something like Robin's *Carmina*, and his experiments with jazz and poetry and Dylan Thomas. So many hooks, where you feel, I don't quite know how that's going to work, but you feel yourself drawn towards something. They're so enthusiastic about what they do. It's catching. You can't be with Robin or Mike for long without being caught up in their enthusiasm. It's still the same as it was back then. Of course, they're older and more matured, and very mellowed, I find, in a very nice way, and I think that whatever you get involved with in terms of Robin or Mike's music or playing together as the String Band is going to bear fruit in some way. It has to, because that's the nature of their interests and their experimentation. It depends on them: if they're going to become something else other than what they were in the Sixties, which depends on how much energy they're going to put into their music now, then I think one can make another film in the same way as *Be Glad*.

**"YOU CAN'T BE WITH ROBIN OR MIKE FOR LONG WITHOUT BEING CAUGHT UP IN THEIR ENTHUSIASM..."**

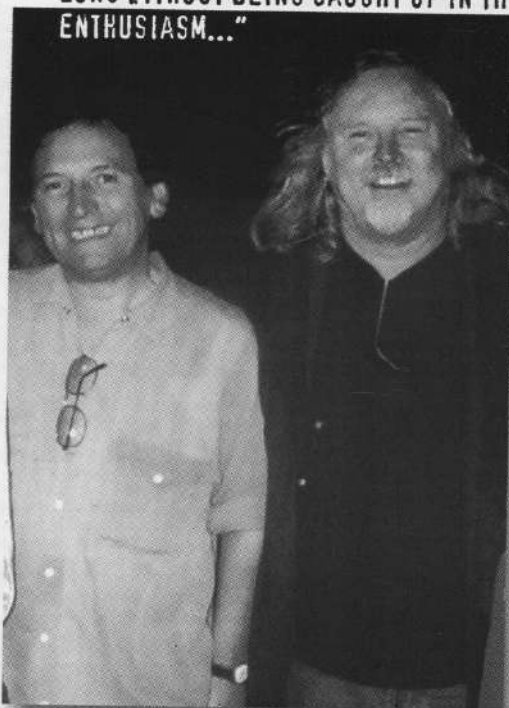


Photo by Jenny Holders

# views

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To The Incredible String Band

Island IMCD 280/586196-2

[The ISB compilations—a missed opportunity? The Elektra and Island collections are the first attempt to compile the ISB's recorded history since their rather uninspiring *Seasons They Change* in 1976. It's regrettable, then, that the two record companies didn't join forces to try something a bit more adventurous—I'm thinking here of a 3-CD boxed set, with a decent-sized booklet, unpublished or rare photos, a broader selection of songs including both Malcolm's and Clive's, and some unreleased or rare material. Apart from whatever demos or incomplete takes are still in the vaults, there are three released tracks yet to make it onto CD—alternate takes of All Writ Down and Big Ted, plus of course Queen Juanita. As the two CDs stand, then, there's very little incentive for any of our readers (except completists!) to buy them. Over to Norman Lamont, who not only provides a thoughtful review of Volume 1 but also sets out very ably the issues that arise with an ISB compilation. A.W.]

*The Best Of The Incredible String Band 1966-70*

1. October Song
2. The Tree
3. Chinese White
4. First Girl I Loved
5. Kooeoaddi There
6. A Very Cellular Song
7. Job's Tears
8. Puppies
9. The Half Remarkable Question
10. Air
11. Sleepers Awake
12. This Moment
13. Queen of Love
14. Invocation

The first thing I discovered when I sat down to write this review was that I couldn't do it in the way I imagined I would—with the album playing in the background. I was left staring at a blank screen as "The bent twig of darkness..." rose like incense smoke from the speakers.

Whatever criticisms of this compilation can be made, it has served its purpose well for this old-time ISB fan—bringing him back to actually listening to the music; music I thought was so deeply embedded note for note in my internal jukebox that the original black vinyl was of no more use than an envelope after the letter has been read and digested. So much so that I never replaced albums that had got lost in my travels and only bought one replacement CD more out of curiosity than need. Listening to this compilation I was filled once more



with wonder for the strange musical and lyrical landscapes these songs chart.

Speaking of envelopes, a few words about the container. I found the jewel case and liner booklet disappointing. I can't believe, as has been said on the ISB mailing list, that there were simply no good, unused, photos from that period available—check out a magazine called *beGLAD*. If the designs of classic albums had to be used, they could have been wound into some sort of collage, perhaps with the concert poster, that would have made it a new piece of information rather than what we have—the cover of *Hangman's* with text lifted from the first album. As for Janet Williamson's El Wool characters, they seem to polarise opinion among fans between those who find them dated and embarrassing and those who find them representative and apt. I can see both sides of that argument, but what I don't see is an artwork credit; presumably she is not being compensated for the use of her artwork—naughty!

Reading Raymond's sleeve notes, I felt puzzled by what seemed to be a leap from a historical account of the ISB back into a review of the chosen songs. Then I discovered that, in my copy at least, some pages must be missing as the track listing begins at 8! The writing itself is informative, seeking to impress upon newcomers how seriously the ISB were taken in the late '60s. While it repeats the oft-held view that "*Wee Tam And The Big Huge* represents a high water mark in the band's fortunes, as well as in the quality of their output", Raymond avoids the cliché of decline from *Changing Horses* onwards that is so often found in potted histories of the band, with girlfriends, electric guitars and Scientology as familiar scapegoats.

And I think he's right to do so. The cycle from *5000 Spirits* through to *Wee Tam* represents the period when the band found itself and laid out its stall—"This is what we do"; the subsequent albums, and the Island solo albums, were not a decline—they just explored different parts of the landscape first painted in those three sets; they

were excellent but they did not announce anything new. Mind you, Raymond, I would be happy with what you call "reckless eclecticism and startling juxtaposition" without obscuring it by calling it "pre-postmodernism without the brittle irony". Come again? Nor, if I were Mike or Robin, would I take it as a compliment to be credited with the "fruitful seeds of much New Age philosophy". I can enjoy and learn from the ISB's strange Scottish pantheism without lumping them with what Leonard Cohen calls "the flabby hairs of the Aquarian Age".

I don't intend to review the individual songs here—that's been done many times before in the pages of this magazine and on the internet, and I don't have a lot to add. When you review a compilation, it's the act of compiling itself that's under review, and with the finished article it's the wood rather than the trees that you are discussing. I think Mark Anstey (credited rather importantly as "Manager of the Incredible String Band") has created a very pleasant little glade here—one that serves the functions of introducing newcomers to the band, serving the interests of history, and creating a set of songs that flow well together. Anyone creating such a compilation is bound to face criticism from those who would have included this song or excluded that song (that's coming later); indeed he himself might have created a different compilation on a different day.

But I feel anyone who didn't know the String Band would, after listening to this, have an idea of their broad sweep of achievements—pushing traditional folk into new idioms, use of exotic instruments, singing that "obeys conventional scales the way birds observe traffic lanes" (Andrew Means, *Melody Maker*), intense mysticism, playful juxtaposition, and the capacity to do all this for fifteen minutes a song. Anyone who does know them will find a selection of jewels that might not be exactly the ones they would have chosen, but which sparkle well together nonetheless.

Consider the factors a compiler must weigh up for each song:

• First of all, are his personal favourites necessarily the best choices? I don't know what Mark's

favourites are, but it can't have been easy to decide if they were for inclusion or not.

• But that wouldn't be the end of his problems—what if the compiler is manager and (presumably) friend of the artistes? Is Puppies there because Mike and Robin both rate it? Is *The Circle Is Unbroken* omitted because Robin prefers his later, harp-based, versions? Then there's the controversial and conspicuous non-inclusion of songs by anyone other than Robin and Mike. It's hardly an issue here—the only contender really is *Empty Pocket Blues*—but it is very much an issue with the *Island* compilation. One can imagine there was also a thorny need to balance Robin and Mike as they did themselves with their albums—seven songs each, boys—count 'em!

• Then there's the question of posterity. Which songs have lasted well and will continue to resonate? With a singles artist it's easy—but with the ISB there are no obvious "greatest hits". It's to Mark's credit that he's resisted some of the obvious fan favourites—Hedgehog, Big Ted, Black Jack Davy—in favour of songs that represent artistic statements, new formulations. But I wonder if *First Girl* is included because it is a great love song (which it is) or because it's the only ISB song that managed to any extent to jump the fence into the wider world of cover versions? Is that why it beat *My Name is Death* or *Juggler's Song* to represent its album at the compilation Olympics?

• Finally there's the need to make it all flow, to make it sound like a coherent album. The previous compilation, *Seasons They Change*, failed in that respect because it jumped around all over the place from the electric *Island* years to the first album. With another band that might have worked, but when the band is as eclectic as the ISB, it just sounded like a "various artists" record. I feel Mark has succeeded well here. The first four songs are like a gradual run-up and take-off for the startling flights of *Koeoaddi There* and *Cellular Song*. Then the "peak period" masterpieces are explored, culminating in the frightening power of Williamson at his peak (or perhaps his youthful peak) in *Queen of Love* and *Invocation*. Robin dominates *U*, which was really his baby anyway, and if only two songs were to be included it had to be these two. (The third would have had to be the first few sections of *Rainbow*.)

So who should and shouldn't have come to the party? Maybe *Empty Pocket Blues*, but that is more for "inclusiveness" and its jovial place in the reconciled *String Band* setlist of today, than anything else. I might have included *Creation*, but that could have sent too many unconvinced listeners' fingers darting to the "eject" button. *Ducks On A Pond* and *Maya* are almost triplet brothers and sisters of *Job's Tears* and any of them could have filled that place. I've always had a soft spot for *Job's Tears* so I'm satisfied. In the end, the only songs I feel have been serious omissions are *Waltz Of The New Moon* and *Maybe Someday*. *Waltz Of The New Moon* because it isn't eclectic, it isn't folk, it isn't rock, it's just on its own out there somewhere—just as focused, pure and awesome when Robin sings it now as it was then. *Maybe Someday* because, as someone else pointed out in these pages, this first track of the first album announces the *String Band's* world music agenda with a visceral impact that the reflective *October Song* lacks. Opening songs are vitally important, and it's interesting that six of the fourteen songs here opened a side of an album (yes, my child, albums used to have two sides—they stopped before you got bored!) and thus bring back memories of those first few scratchy seconds. I think *Maybe Someday* would have kicked off this compilation in the same stirring way it did the ISB's career of mayhem.

Back in '71, when the band were still recording and touring, a non-believer friend said an *Incredible String Band* Greatest Hits album would need to be a one-sided single of *Niggertown* [or *Niggletune* as it is now known in these *PC days*—Ed]. I'm glad the task of creating this compilation was in better hands. Not everyone's choice, but then it couldn't

have been. A good choice? Sure. (Now can I have the proper booklet?)

PS: I can't get used to the fact that the reverential stillness of the end of *Invocation* isn't punctured by those impertinent little piano flicks introducing *Robot Blues*. It's like *Creation* without the vaudeville songs—they don't seem 'right' but they have to be there!

Norman Lamont



Here Till Here Is There

1. All Writ Down
2. Worlds They Rise And Fall
3. Veshengro
4. Talking Of The End
5. Here Till Here Is There
6. Red Hair
7. Antoine
8. Restless Night
9. Banks Of Sweet Italy
10. Moon Hang Low
11. Seagull
12. Saturday Maybe
13. Little Girl
14. Maker Of Islands
15. Dreams Of No Return
16. Cold February

A misleading title to start with—it's really *The Island Years*, which was what this collection was originally called till the spin doctors got at it. The cover, too, is equally misleading, featuring an over-familiar photo of the 1969 line-up taken from an old programme. The booklet photos also present the Elektra-era four-piece band (who only appear on one track): most photos stem from a 1969 *Sound Techniques/Be Glad* film session, and there's one *I Looked Up* era shot. Only one Likky picture conceivably dates from the *Island* period! Sloppy research or an attempt to con buyers into thinking this is earlier stuff?

Raymond's sleeve notes display a laudable conciseness, though he manages to squeeze in a "lambent" here and a "sublunary" there. He mounts a spirited defence of the much-maligned *Island* period, making a connection between "the dizzying range of musical genres" employed with this material and the "different stylistic elements" in the Elektra stuff.

There are some serious deficiencies, though; the departure of cover stars Rose and Likky isn't mentioned—and neither is Malcolm's arrival. The complete omission of Malcolm from the CD (and package) has generated some controversy on the ISB newsgroup and elsewhere, though Raymond has since maintained this was not a political decision: "(His arrival didn't) mark a significant change of artistic direction... it was a logical development, not a radical departure". Perhaps a contributing factor, as we shall see later, is that the collection plays down the wacky/funny side of late-period ISB, in which Robin and Malcolm usually took the leading parts. From my point of view, not

only did Malcolm play a major part in the ISB's live gigs, injecting energy levels noticeably absent in 1970 but he also, ably tutored by Mike and Robin, came to be a much more versatile multi-instrumentalist than Rose or Likky.

A few other more minor disagreements—is *Moon Hang Low* really "audaciously slinky"? It sounds more like a pleasant but unsurprising Williamson cod-jazz effort to me. And Raymond gets it wrong when he says *All Writ Down* and *Veshengro* date from *I Looked Up*—*Veshengro* dates from *Penwern*

days and is probably a July 1968 *Wee Tam* out-take; *All Writ Down* is from the *Changing Horses* sessions.

On then, to the selection, uncredited on the CD but made by Mark with Mike, Robin and Raymond, who each submitted lists. The decision seems to have been to "reposition" late-period ISB by concentrating on the more songwriter/folk tracks, which means odd stuff like *Waiting For You* and electric/rocky material (like *Dear Old Battlefield* and *Explorer*) were ruled out—all three otherwise good candidates for compilation. What we have, then, is a 50/50 split between Mike and Robin, with the bulk of the material coming from (rightly, I think) *Liquid Acrobat* and *Earthspan*. These two furnish nine of the sixteen tracks, with *Be Glad* and *No Ruinous Feud* meriting two apiece and *Hard Rope*, three. The sequence is pretty much historical, though *Veshengro* has been moved so it's followed by *Talking of the End*, which works well—in fact the compilation as a whole has a nice flow to it.

Whilst the proportional split per album is about right, I think some of the choices are contentious. *All Writ Down* and *Veshengro* are undeniably the best two songs on *Be Glad*, and no doubt *Darling Belle* (the standout track on *Acrobat*) was precluded by its length—but I'd have dear *Old Battlefield* over *Here Till Here Is There* any day. From *Earthspan*, *The Actor* (a Williamson/Le Maistre composition, trivia fans) beats *Moon Hang Low* in my book.

Moving on to *No Ruinous Feud*, I think *Explorer* is its strongest Heron song, and why on earth pick the rather unmemorable *Little Girl* when they could have had *Turquoise Blue!* *Down Before Cathay* and *Glancing Love* are Malcolm's best songs from this period, and at least one should have been included—in fact, at 67 minutes in total, there would have been room on the CD for at least two more songs. Again, this was the subject of much online debate. Raymond's response: "I know I'm being contentious here, but I don't feel Malcolm's songs achieved the standard, individually or collectively, of what we expected from Mike and Robin as a matter of course." Mark's view is that both CDs should centre on the work of Mike and Robin, as the core of the band. When contacted by *beGLAD*, Malcolm remained wearily philosophical about "being airbrushed out of history", (to quote Graham Hood's review), labelling the CD "unrepresentative of the *Island* period".

## reViews

The CD ends with the fine late-period trio Maker of Islands/Dreams of No Return/Cold February, which rather aptly show just how much creative life there still was in the band when it split. They also form a suitable link with the reformed ISB's sound—and even repertoire!

Adrian Whittaker

### THE INCREDIBLE STRING BAND

Bloomsbury 2000

Pig's Whisker Music PWMD5024

Various hassles, including the flooding of Albany Studios last winter, conspired to delay the release of this live souvenir for the better part of a year. When it finally emerged, the ISB were about to render it obsolete: six of the nine tracks here are in the band's current touring repertoire, and most are better executed now than they were then.

So where does that leave this little item? Well, those of you who were at the Bloomsbury two-nighter will doubtless want this on your shelves as a memento of the occasion. Those who weren't but who've caught the ISB in 2001 and approved the set list may well be tempted by what's assembled here. And for those who haven't seen them at all since the re-formation, this is a useful aural snapshot of how they sounded at the beginning of the project.

If the above sounds a trifle lukewarm, it's only because of how tentative these recordings sound when set beside more recent performances. There's actually plenty of spiritual nourishment here for those oppressed by global politics and the soaring price of tofu.

Maker Of Islands opens the set, with a suitably drifts, oceanic arrangement and a lovely warm vocal by Mike. Ducks On A Pond is second out of the blocks; Robin's in good voice here, effortlessly hitting those stratospheric high notes. The band moves comfortably through the kaleidoscopic mood changes, roaring home on the final section with jubilant squawks on the moothie and some frantic barrelhouse piano.

Air, it's fair to say, never really came together on stage; significantly, it had been dropped for the autumn 2001 tour. But here it actually exudes a sort of shambling, woozy charm that just about carries it through. When all the voices slide together on "You come right inside of me", the world momentarily seems a gentler place.

Storm Is On The Ocean is a servicable Robin 'n' Bina duet; Big City Blues finds Clive in clear and confident voice, but the mix unfortunately siphons off the louche energy I remember from Bloomsbury.

Waltz Of The New Moon then stamps its antique, otherworldly authority on the proceedings. When Robin hits that premonitory opening note, a key turns suddenly in a lock and you're admitted to the true arcanum of String mystery. Lawson's harp samples, drenched in sustain, conjure a backdrop of ghostly, oracular voices on the "Ask the snail..." sequence. A timely reminder that the ISB can still take you places no-one else can.

Clive's banjo solo, Goodbye, detains us pleasantly if briefly, and before you know it we're onto the Bloomsbury set closer, You Know What You Could Be, which chugs along in amiable fashion with some frisky Williamson fiddle. After the first encore (Empty Pocket Blues, not included here), Robin reappeared alone to face an audience bellowing for more, and sent them home each night with extraordinary performances of October Song. Saturday's version was arguably the finer of the two, and it concludes the album in triumphant style.

So there you go: a bit on the short side, a trifle rough-hewn here and there, and with a deeply unmemorable cover design, *Bloomsbury 2000* probably won't be the most-played album in your

String collection. But it's a limited edition, so it won't be there forever. Buy now while stocks last; it'll keep you warm until the ISB get themselves into a studio again.

Jonas Dalrymple

### ROBIN WILLIAMSON

Gems Of Celtic Story 3: A Tale Of The Deeds Of The Tuatha Dé Danaan

Pig's Whisker PWMD 5025

### ROBIN & BINA WILLIAMSON

Carmina

Pig's Whisker PWMD 5023

Two albums from the more esoteric side of Robin's prolific output. *Gems 3*, hot from the pressing plant, finds him in his Bardic robes, recounting one of the central tales of the Irish mythos. The enmity between two successive waves of invaders, the Fir Bolg and the Tuatha dé Danaan, culminated in the two battles of Mag Tuireadh, in which the magical skills and battle-cunning of Lugh ("shining Lugh of the Ways", as Robin calls him in his *Five Denials On Merlin's Grave*) proved decisive in the triumph of the Tuatha dé Danaan, the people of the goddess Danu.

The Tuatha supplied most of the dieties of the classical Irish pantheon, until they in turn were driven from power by incursions of mortals and into the hollow places of the world; but the story here ends with them still in their pomp. What seems on the face of it to be a straightforward story of warfare and tribal politics has, in Robin's view, a mystical dimension. This is not made explicit in the telling here, but formed the basis of his recent Bardic weekend at Hazelwood House.

In the style of its telling, *Gems 3* is more akin to the first in the series, *The Tale Of Kilwyeh And Olwen*, than of the *Four Healing Tales* that form the second. Like *Gems 1*, it's just Robin and his harp, with none of the dramatic studio effects of the *Healing Tales* collection. The harp, in fact, is sparingly deployed, brought in as musical punctuation and only occasionally as a backdrop to the telling. Everything depends, therefore, on Robin's craft as a storyteller, and our man is well up to the challenge. His delivery is measured and grave, drawing the listener expertly into the intricacies of the narrative. It's noticeable that he's lost the throaty rasp that's been present in his spoken recordings since *Gems 1*. Keep taking the throat pastilles, Mr W!

It should be pointed out that, with most of the names that crop up in the tale, the pronunciation bears only the most glancing resemblance to the spelling. So if you're looking any of them up, it's worth remembering that, *inter alia*, "The Doyda" is The Dagda, "Moytura" is Mag Tuireadh, "Elaha" is Elathan and "Bolar" is actually Balor; and so on... By their very nature, it's unlikely that story CDs will get many repeated plays, no matter how compelling the performance. So with this one, too, in all probability; but as an example of a master storyteller at the top of his trade, it's hard to fault. The harp, too, sounds fabulous: a tribute to the recording skills of that man Dando. A bit more of it wouldn't have gone amiss...

If *Gems 3* won't have 'em queueing up at Woolworth's, then neither, it's safe to say, will *Carmina*. A hour's worth of Biblical texts in solemn medieval Latin, it doesn't exactly have "buy me" written all over it. Nevertheless, it's well worth exploring, for it's a profound and passionate work, uncompromising and uplifting. Robin's voice seems specially designed for the rolling sonorities

of Latin, and he admits to having had a great fondness for the language since his schooldays. (Some of us, by contrast, found all that stuff about ablatives and past historics to be an inducement to catalepsy.)

The settings are consistently apt yet full of little surprises. Bonum Est Conferri Domino (Good It Is To Worship God), for instance, has a gentle Caribbean swing to it, underscored by some buzzy sansa samples. Domini Est Terra (The Earth Is The Lord's), by contrast, has breathy flutes and a flavour of the High Andes—perhaps Robin took inspiration from the line, "Who shall climb the mountain of the Lord?". Caeli Enarrant Gloriam Dei (The Heavens Announce The Glory Of God) has a bardic gravitas, but is spiced with bursts of music straight out of the bazaars of Fez.

Half the pieces are taken from the Psalms, with the remainder drawn from other parts of the Old Testament. The opener, De Profundis (Out Of The Depths), is from the Book Of Job, and evinces a thoroughly Job-like gloom ("Man born of Woman has a short time to live and is full of sorrow..."). It's arranged in alternating passages of unaccompanied song, eerie jew's harp interludes, massed swarms of a distinctly non-Western temperament, song with drone accompaniment, and Moorish trance-music.

The second track, In Principio Creavit Deus (In The Beginning God Created...), is none other than the Genesis 1 account of the creation of the universe. The Good Book tells us that God took six days to bring everything into being; this track seems to take almost as long... No, no, just joking: but at over 17 minutes it's certainly an epic. Try listening to it with an English crib in front of you, and feel the hairs rising on the back of your neck.

Bina gets equal billing on this CD for the first time, and her vocals are well to the fore, whether singing unison with Robin or taking alternate verses (as in *Qui Habitat...*). The sequence properly closes with Benedicite, combining texts from Psalm 148 and the Book Of Daniel. "Let all works of the Lord bless the Lord," it adjures, and the setting is a suitably stirring one, with fanfares and sampled cellos and something of the feel of David Munrow's Renaissance big bands.

There's something in *Carmina*'s feel of echoing spaces and solemn visionary cadences that reminds me of *Hangman*'s. Like that album, it's a door into a world that's alive with a sacred sense of the mystery of being. It's certainly one of Robin's least mainstream works, but it casts an authentically Williamsonian spell.

Jonas Dalrymple

### FAMOUS JUG BAND

Q For Summer

Market Square MSMCD110

As is well known, the four original members of the Famous Jug Band were finally able to be in the same place at the same time long enough to record a new album in the summer of 2000, and here it is at last.

It is impossible to think about this album without being saddened by the death, in August 2001, of Henry Bartlett, but I feel sure he would be proud of the resulting release.

With Jill Johnson, Clive Palmer on banjo, Henry on jug, and Pete Berryman on guitar (plus dobro, bass, mandolin, harmonium and tipples, whatever they are. Timbales? Tiplé?) and all four singing, one would expect a sound somewhat akin to that of their 1969 debut, *Sunshine Possibilities*, but in fact it leans much more towards the sound of their second album, *Chameleon*, recorded in 1970, by which time of course, Clive was long gone.

This doesn't mean that there is nothing here to interest the Palmer faithful. The opening (and title) track is absolutely classic Clive, and indeed classic FJB, with Clive playing banjo as hauntingly as only

he can, and Pete adding delicate lead lines on guitar. Henry's jug has never sounded better, and the group harmonies on the chorus are as impressive as ever.

Much of the material here is written by Henry and Jill, separately and together, and is very much in the style of the later FJB material, with jazzy chords and time changes. On a few occasions, when she double tracks her vocals, Jill sounds amazingly like the McGarrigles.

Henry's *Baby Please Come Home*, sung by the man himself, is as fine a piece of tongue-in-cheek Brit-folk-blues as I have heard ("I'll do anything for you/I'll even sing a happy song!") Remember him this way.

Pete's contributions range from a solo instrumental *Davy's Signal*, (which I assumed was a reference to Davy Graham, but is in fact inspired by a Cornish legend) through the reverb-soaked *Winter Sunshine*, which features wonderful harmonica from Stu Porter, to the penultimate track, *Shells*, which is a lovely open-sounding song that perfectly updates the sound of their second album, adding meaty fretless bass and delicate banjo as it goes. The last track is going to put a smile on a lot of faces. *Danse Des Matelots* is a banjo solo which, even if it doesn't quite conjure up images of cidre-sodden Bretons staggering round Paimpol harbour (oh yes, I've been to Brittany...), is a worthy successor to *Niggertown* and *Banjoland* in the Clive canon. (His Breton bagpipe solo did not make the album...)

The basic tracks were augmented later in Cornwall, London and California, and some may feel a little too much instrumentation has been added to a few of the tracks, losing the essence of the FJB sound, which, particularly latterly, was unique. That criticism aside, and you may disagree, *O For Summer* is a fine album, which grows on you with each play.

The official release date is March 2002, but copies are available now via the Market Square website. [www.marketsquarerecords.co.uk](http://www.marketsquarerecords.co.uk)

Jenny Pudding

## COB Spirit Of Love

Beat Goes On BG0CD534

There is a Chinese proverb to the effect that if you sit long enough on the bank of a river you will see the body of your greatest enemy float past. Which would be a hummer if it happened at night and you missed it. Much the same seems to apply to CD reissues of rare vinyl albums. You have to get them while you can as they tend to get deleted pretty quickly. Anyway, here at last is a legal (there have been bootleg versions previously) issue of the first COB album in all its remastered-from-the-original-tapes-with-full-original-artwork glory.

The artwork is very pleasing: a painting of Clive, John and Mick, surrounded by what looks to me like bindweed, bearing fruit too, though I am open to correction by more botanically-minded readers than myself. Clive (who, due to the sleeve being somewhat darker than I remember it, seems to have become a strawberry blonde) is smiling on John who is playing the dulcitar, while Mick has his eyes closed and his arms full of books—doubtless full of the mysterious subject matter that led German author Horst Pohl to aptly describe COB's music as "mystik folk".

The depiction of the dulcitar on the cover had long intrigued me, especially as the position of the fingerboard in the painting suggested room for sympathetic strings that may have been too fine to show up. I eventually wrote to Clive about it and he explained that in fact the fingerboard ran down the middle of the body, as on a normal Appalachian dulcimer, and that it only had three strings, and no sympathetic or drone strings as on a real sitar. The



dulcitar had been made very crudely from pieces of pine sheet and strip, and the frets were pieces of wire, inserted in pre-drilled holes on the fingerboard. The only real difference between it and a normal dulcimer was the bridge, which had a piece of flat bone inserted in front of the saddle. The saddle slots were gradually deepened until the strings started to buzz. It also had a built-in contact mike to enable it to be amplified. By the by, the COB dulcitar was the second one to have been built. The original one was made while Clive and John were with *The Temple Creatures*, and staying at the Val Baker spread in Golant. It was put on the roof of the band van while they were loading up to go off to a gig... and forgotten about when they drove away.

The tale of how COB came to record *Spirit* is told in Colin Harper's recent book on Bert Jansch. Jo Lustig, who managed Bert as part of *The Pentangle*, signed a deal with CBS to provide them with a stable of "progressive folk" acts, CBS thinking that this genre had a good chance of being *The Next Big Thing*. Lustig seems to have been happy for Bert, John Renbourn and Ralph McTell all to produce a pet project each. Bert produced Anne Briggs' *The Time Has Come*, John did the honours for Wizz Jones with *Right Now* and Ralph took on COB. Actually there was a fourth album too: *Almanac*, a concept album with twelve songs related to the signs of the zodiac, by a trio called *Therapy*. Later reduced to a duo of Dave Shannon and Fiona Simpson, they went on to be one of the most popular folk club acts in the seventies. (The third member was Sam Bracken, who later replaced Dick Gaughan in *Five Hand Reel*.) None of the CBS albums sold particularly well.

Lustig also took COB under his managerial wing and arranged a most impressive venue for their first gig: supporting Bert Jansch on his first solo concert outing since he joined *Pentangle*, on June 30th at *The Festival Hall*. Anne Briggs was also on the bill, and the critics were generally quite impressed with Clive and co, Andrew Means in *The Melody Maker* praising their "highly original approach to music", though deducting points for them choosing to repeat their opening number *Wade In The Water* when they were called back for an (obviously unexpected) encore. Jerry Gilbert of *Sounds* was also impressed with "Clive Palmer's latest brilliant creation". He added: "I only hope that this time he will persist and allow the group to develop logically. If this happens, the band... are going to be a huge success."

Actually Clive's reputation for walking out of seemingly successful bands is perhaps undeserved. In his interview with Raymond Greenoaken a few

issues back, he mentioned that he had been planning to go to India for a long time before the first ISB album, and his leaving of the *Famous Jug Band* needs a little more light shone on it too. Clive described the FJB as "something we tried—the *Stockroom Five* was much more to my taste", and the late Henry Bartlett revealed that he had discovered that Clive had the *Stockroom Five* up and running, and playing one night a week at the *Folk Cottage*, before he left the FJB. The fact that Pete Berryman and Jill Johnston were an item and naturally formed a united faction was also an undoubted factor in his departure.

I have a review of the album from an unknown source which begins by saying: "Whatever Clive Palmer takes in hand, he makes a success of it, then promptly leaves it. However he looks as if he might settle awhile with COB (Clive's Original Band) and their first album *Spirit Of Love* (CBS 69010: £2.30) shows great promise. As the instigator of the *Incredible String Band*, it's easily heard just how much his influence contributed to the *Incredible's* initial success. As they seem to have forsaken what seemed to be a winning formula, Clive has picked it up again, with a few more embellishments... A little of the Indian atmosphere remains with the hand organ and the singing style, but much is original Clive, John and Mick."

The opening title track is a pleasant two chord (G/G7 to C) strumalong, which features quite a few friends. There is a tale that it was seriously considered as a single, and there was some logic in that, as it was certainly catchy. Clive played guitar and sang lead vocal, Mick Bennett also sang and John added organ (which is barely audible) and vocals. Steve Bonnet played bass, plus the uncredited piano part, and, he says, extra acoustic guitar. Steve was associated with Ralph McTell and played on his albums around this time. In a letter to the author he recalled playing on both of the COB albums and says that, but for contractual difficulties, he might well have joined them.

Ralph himself added the simple but effective guitar solo, and further backing vocals were added by Gillian McPherson, Chrissie Quayle, Reina Sutcliffe and Christina Bonnet. Gillian had an album of her own out in late 1971, called *Poets And Painters And Performers Of Blues* on RCA, backed mainly by rock/jazz musicians like Tommy Eyre, Johnny Almond, Roy Babbington, Spike Heatley and Tony Carr. Chrissie Quayle was also signed to RCA at this time as part of the band *Daylight*, with Mike Silver, Steve Hayton (of *Daddy Longlegs*), and, again, the bass/drums section of Heatley and Carr. This suggests that RCA were keen to have a finger in the "progressive folk" pie too. Chrissie

## Views

had been part of the Cornish folk scene for several years and had sung with The Temple Creatures, a connection with Clive that was mentioned prominently in the sleeve notes of Daylight's sole album. Reina Sutcliffe is perhaps unfortunately best remembered as one of the ladies on Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland* sleeve, and Christina Bonnet was married to Steve.

The remainder of the tracks feature mainly just the band members themselves. Ralph McTell did a fine production job on the album, giving it warmth and using reverb to fill out the sound, particularly with John's recorder on *Soft Touches Of Love*. The instrumental track *Banjoland* would bring a smile to the grumpiest face, though it should be credited to Joseph Morley, who wrote many such pieces for banjo. Clive and John play it straight from the sheet music in the old style, with John playing the second part and Mick on washboard. Mixed in the background are the sounds of children playing on a beach. If the tune sounds familiar, that may be because Billy Connolly used it as the theme for his *World Tour Of Scotland* TV show a few years back, and was at one point seen playing it on the ferry going over to a folk festival on the isle of Arran.

Scruffy Black Farmer is a traditional Scottish song, sung quite convincingly by Clive. Despite the air of mystery the band give the song, it is simply the tale of a sailor who decides he would like to try agricultural labouring for a change and gets himself taken on at a hiring fair. He soon finds out he was better off at sea. Evening Air is my favourite track on the whole, and though all the original COB songs were co-credited, if that's not a Palmer song I'll eat my balalaika. And yes, I do have a balalaika. For the last three tracks the trio are joined by cellist Ursula Smith, who was a member of The Third Ear Band at the time of their second album, but had left by the time they came to provide the music for Polanski's *Macbeth*.

Serpent's Kiss doesn't do a lot for me, I'm afraid, with Mick delivering some very intense lyrics about magic, I believe. (Or possibly even Magick, as Mr Crowley was known to greet his devotees with a bite with a sharpened tooth, usually drawing blood, which he called "the serpent's kiss"...).

Which brings me to the subject of the printing of the lyrics. The original album came in one of those semi-gatefold sleeves where the front was only one sheet thick. One felt this was somehow inferior to a proper gatefold sleeve, which no self-respecting album could come without. When opened out it showed a photo of all the lyrics written out (rather too neatly) on various pieces of paper, insides of fag packets etc and pinned to a cork tile notice board. Now that was fine on a 12" LP, but reduced to CD size the lyrics are unreadable without a magnifying glass. It might have been a better idea, authenticity aside, just to have printed the lyrics in the CD booklet. You may disagree, of course.

The closing track is the rather sorrowful *When He Came Home* which features John on the Indian hand-organ, one of those where you pump the bellows with one hand and play with the other. This was a relic from the Temple Creatures. With COB he more usually played a foot-pumped harmonium, which were very common in those days. Usually ex-Salvation Army, or from a church hall where it had been replaced by an electric organ; you could pick one up for around £20 at the time. Towards the end of the song, John starts up a riff, which is picked up on cello by Ursula, who starts to improvise on it and then is joined by Mick on percussion as the song speeds off into the distance.

*Spirit Of Love* really is a special album. I cannot think of any other band, then or now, that has produced music like it. Despite the inevitable Incredible String Band comparisons, COB had something of their own, perhaps because of their Cornish background, or maybe just the collective musical tastes and experiences of its members. I really cannot imagine that anybody who reads and enjoys *beGLAD* would be disappointed with this album. *Moyshie McStiff* next?

Grahame Hood

## LIVE

### ROBIN WILLIAMSON Festival At The Edge, Much Wenlock

22-22 July

After 1999 Robin Williamson was once again one of the main artists at the 10th Festival At The Edge in Much Wenlock, Shropshire. Storytelling was the main theme of the Festival but there was also a lot of music, cabaret, workshops, juggling and a great Bonfire celebration (including fireworks with Henry the Herne, the sound of drums and a procession of costumes and candles).

The programme had many wonderful highlights with storytellers from all over the world. To name a few: Sheila Stewart, Grace Hallworth, Katrice Horsley, Hugh Lupton... There was also the Hand-to-Mouth-theatre puppet show with their famous performance about the rising of the year with main actor "Piggy-wiggy". As well as the above there was a tent with many types of beer, a delight to my eyes run by smiling men with bad reputations (CAMRA for short). Robin performed several times. He was humorous, charming and expressive as ever. He also did a lot of storytelling and sang many of his songs with harp and guitar.

One of the many highlights for me was to hear Robin singing the beautiful song *Road to Holland* ("...all my life and the labour of my heart, find to the smile of a child"). When Robin introduced the song to the audience, he told how he had forgotten the words to the song and how a friend of his from Germany had sent him the music and the lines. I have to say I was very proud and happy to know that the friend was me. However, Robin, please note I'm Austrian...

To see Robin performing six times on stage is not one time too much. For me he is a magician in communication with his audience, an extraordinary artist and a pioneer in humanities. I would propose him for the Nobel peace prize! Robin's words and music guide me through the struggles of my life and give me joy and strength. Although this is my own personal response, I talked with many others there, who felt the same.

It was no accident that Robin closed the Festival. I thought, how will he manage this, following the famous Grace Hallworth? He did it in an indiscribable way. Robin sang a wonderful, simple prayer. The audience repeating each line after him. What we felt is unexpressible. The warmth and enclosure of eternity...

To all this world below God is seen all around  
search hills and valleys through there he is found  
the growing of the corn the lily and the florn  
the pleasant and forlorn all declare God is there  
in meadows dressed in green God is seen  
see springing waters rise mountains flow rivers run  
the mist that fills the sky hides the sun  
then down the rain doth pour  
the ocean it doth roar and beats upon the shore  
so all praise in their ways  
the God who ne'er declines his designs  
the sun with all his rays speaks of God as he flies  
the comet in her blaze but she cries the shining of  
the stars  
the moon when she appears His holy name declares  
see them fly through the sky and join the solemn  
sound

all around

Can you imagine an Austrian *beGLAD*der trying to write this tale for you?! Thank you Jane, who art in Dover, not in heaven.

The Festival was really worth the long journey from abroad ("facing west"). I would like to thank my daughter Sophie and Janie Tolmie for their company and help.

Erwin Doppler



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# Every cell in my body...

photo by Jenny Bolders



...has it on tape somewhere

## Bill Allison

grills Mike on his lost songs and new songs

**It seems to me that there are lots and lots and lots of Mike Heron songs that may be have never seen the light of day?**

I don't know if that's true.

**Songs like Ladies?**

Ladies—that's lost completely. Somebody [me!—Ed] sent me a tape and I couldn't hear it.

**So you've forgotten the words?**

I've forgotten it completely. Not just the words but the whole song.

**Long Long Road?**

Well that's recorded. That's on *U*. [It's on a BBC session actually—Ed]

**15 Glory Road?**

That was kind of dumped as not really making it. It was round about '76, the time when Graham Forbes was still around.

**You talk about it in a Paul Hunter interview in *Liquorice*. You say that it's about growing up and adolescence.**

It didn't quite cut it. I do have a recording of it, a home recording of that, but it's not really all that great, so I just dropped it.

**Travelling Man. It's a song that turns up on the '75 gigs. Do you remember that one?**

No!

**I'll get you a copy. [Mike laughs at this bold suggestion.] It's like an acoustic song. There's a lot of harmony and a twelve-string. It's a song about being on the road.**

It sounds Malcolm...

**No no no no! There's another song from the same period called Let Me In which I think is a Malcolm song.**

[Ed's note—Malcolm has no recollection of this. But there is a good quality rehearsal-room recording of the band doing Nijinsky!]

**We should try and put together a tape of these songs even though it might be very basic in places. Then I can say: Mike look at all these songs. Would you ever consider putting out those home recordings?**

I don't know if there are that many left. I swept up everything that I could for *Glen Row Tapes*.

***Conflict Of Emotions* had a couple on.**

*Conflict Of Emotions* was another mopping up job. We felt that these songs were going to be lost so we have to do something with them.

**In '88 or '89 you recorded a whole album. Songs like *Heavy Feather*, which you were singing on that '87 tour. Other songs like *Not Fade Away* and *Shell*.**

Yeah, I've got copies of those.

**Will they ever see the light of day?**

I don't know. *Shell* is quite nice. *Heavy Feather* is recorded. What else?

**Warmth Dazzle?**

That's not that great. [But it's on *Conflict*—Ed]

**Still Be Here?**

I've got a recording of that. That's quite nice, but not that great. They were rejects really. I don't think any of them are quite good enough. These songs that you're talking about are what I made *Conflict Of Emotions* out of. Those that we thought were good enough we put on there.

**I've also got a letter from someone you wrote to in the mid-1980s. You were talking in the letter about recording an album with Tony Cox.**

That's right. Some of those things are on *Conflict Of Emotions*. I did *Trans-Siberian Express* and *No Burning Down* with Tony Cox. He was an early Mini-Moog kind of guy and he was classically trained, so he worked with a computer score rather than doing it on score paper. He has a set-up where you just write on the computer and using that he really did mostly music for commercials. Now he's moved into classical music scores. He did some stuff on *Smiling Men*—Beautiful Stranger. He did something with me and Robin too but we can't remember what it was. [Ask the experts! It was *At The Lighthouse Dance on No Ruinous Feud*—Ed] He would add a little bit of colour, that kind of thing. Joe Boyd introduced us to him.

**So were there songs in that Tony Cox stuff that you would reckon would never make it?**

What happened with Tony was that he thought that what he was doing had the danger of being a bit mechanical. He would write a big score and do it with an orchestra. It had the danger of not having a human tone to it. So he thought, well, we could get Mike Heron to do dodgy keyboard stuff, which he is very good at, and do his weedy kind of intimate voice that doesn't sound like anything artificial. But it didn't really work. It was slightly dodgy. What happened was I did all the keyboard parts, and then he had the technology that if you played a duff note he could make it perfect. So he had this weedy keyboard playing and like a little intimate voice and everything else was artificial. It didn't really work at all. So out of that came these songs like *No Burning Down*. I then resurrected them and the best of them I did on *Conflict Of Emotions*. Later, when we got to doing a programme for *Where The Mystics Swim*, all these songs were considered. I think we did a version of *No Burning Down*. So we were looking at old songs. Favourite Sins, for instance, is an old song that we resurrected from '76. I wrote that in Notting Hill.

## "RADIO, READING AND FILMS ARE REALLY THE MAIN SOURCES OF INSPIRATION"

### So you think that you've exhausted all that stuff?

I think so. The *Where The Mystics Swim* band and the Incredible Acoustic Band, we went through all the old tapes that we could find and considered everything. That's how we ended up with Favourite Sins and we went through No Burning Down and everything really. Our repertoire was made up of what we thought were the strongest songs that were lying around. And then a few of them were missed and I managed to get them onto *Conflict Of Emotions*, because that was different and I didn't want these songs lost. At that point that we could no longer get viable gigs for my band. We couldn't get the gigs, and I couldn't really support the band but I didn't want to lose the songs. So I went into the studio with a friend of mine, Dottle, who has a studio in Galashiels. He does the drums on the tracks and I did most of the other stuff and Frank [Usher] came in and a friend of mine, Atty [See Mike's piece in the booklet for the BBC In Concert CD for his scout camp epiphany with Atty!—Ed], from early days and we did a little album made up of things that we didn't want to lose. So these are different types of mopping up, and I now have the next lot that I have to mop up. These are the songs that I have written recently but before the String Band got back together. At that point it became evident that we could get gigs for the String Band reunion. So then everything went on hold.

### These are songs from the last two years or so?

That's right. I couldn't really get gigs with my band, but at some point maybe it would be good to introduce some of these songs to the String Band if we do an album. Clive and I would love to do a String Band album 'cos he's got stuff and I've got stuff. Robin has bits and pieces. A lot of mine wouldn't fit 'cos they're a bit too rocky. One of the main differences for me working in the reunion set-up is that there is no kit and in a lot of my writing I work to rhythm. So what I do in the reunion band, I'm like a keyboard drum kit. I sit in the middle and try and keep in time and wave around a bit and try and nod a lot like David Gray. You know that kind of thing that he does, which is obviously to keep everybody in time because he is so used to playing with pick-up bands. So I sit in the middle of the stage and I tend to do that. I've got a new song called Della, but it's is pretty rocky and something like that you couldn't hack without a kit. Eventually we might all come up with new stuff. That would be really good if we did.

### So will all these songs see the light of day as Mike Heron songs anyway?

I'm not sure. What happens is, when you go out in a new direction like the String Band thing, that's where the work is. So we're concentrating on doing that. Other stuff gets left. Then you go back to it after a couple of years and some things you thought were great are not and some of the things that you didn't now sound fantastic. That's probably what will happen. For me right now, I would say that Della is maybe the strongest song. But there's one that Robin really likes from that batch that might end up being a String Band song. It's called Song Of A Bird. I've got a couple of others too: one called Parallel Worlds and another called The Falling In Love [Included on the *Summer and autumn tours—Ed*]. There's also one called Pocahontas. At the moment we're concentrating on the String Band gigs. We've listened to the old stuff and everybody suggests songs that we might do. Robin always suggests the really impossible ones. At the moment he's trying to get me to do Puppies. That would be like the hardest thing in the world to do. So I just say, how about this one instead? He does some really great stuff like Waltz Of The New Moon. Some time after the gig Robin and I did in Glasgow in '97 we did this thing in Edinburgh. The people in Edinburgh who do the firework display parties and the big Hogmanay celebrations and all that kind of stuff called us. In fact one of them, Bruce Findlay, ran the record company that Portland Rose came out on, so we have connections way back. Regular Music, they're called.

### Local boys made good? All of you!

They now do the whole thing, the Hogmanay celebrations... and part of that is that they get a Cathedral up there. It's like an English

Cathedral at the west end in Edinburgh. They get it for a couple of days before Hogmanay 'cos Hogmanay is one big street party with lots of loud rock. They thought that if the String Band reformed they could put us on in this venue. They thought that we were the right kind of music for the Cathedral, 'cos they can't really put loud rock on in there. Robin and Clive had just done their tour. Regular Music called and said if you get Mike to join in and we can call it the Incredible String Band you've got the gig there. So we did it. The way we did it was that we did the material that Robin and Clive were playing when I joined way back. It was great for me. It was a kind of personal nostalgia. It was like when I used to go and see them. It sounded like skiffle and blues and old English stuff. It was like Clive and Robin at the Crown Bar and me joining in. So we did that. The fans came and it was a disappointment to them because they wanted String Band music, but what they got was the music that influenced us to get going but that wouldn't necessarily be of interest to people who wanted to hear Witch's Hat and Cellular Song and all that kind of stuff. So we then decided it was quite a good idea to do gigs but we'd better do it properly, so we went to Wales. Clive came over and we settled in Cardiff where Robin lives and Lawson has a studio. We rehearsed for three weeks and we worked up people's requests and it was kind of a "best of". Clive had left really early after the first String Band album and fitting him in was a bit different. But it seemed really natural to have him sing Air, although he wasn't in the band at that time. So it became like a best of the String Band. So we did that the last time and then we did it again. This time Robin thought that it would be a good idea to introduce Ring Dance, and Clive introduced a new song of his and it works well.

### Do you not want to sing your new songs or do you want to wait and see?

Wait and see, 'cos we've got a live recording of that stuff coming out. Then the logical thing would be an album of new stuff. But we've got to look at the set-up. Clive wrote something pretty recently that fits our set-up. That's what we would end up doing. So some of the songs might survive. Song Of A Bird might survive—and that's the one that seems most likely—and any new writing that might come along. [In the end, it was *The Falling In Love* which made it into the 2001 set—Ed]

### As a writer, if you got an idea and it didn't fit, would you carry on writing it?

Oh yes. If it was a strong idea, like when I wrote Della. I read this American novel and it was about this couple. There were some misunderstandings and she hightailed it to India and he was left there and worried what to do. Should he follow her or was there something in her past all the time that he don't know about? All these kind of things. So I just took the whole plot and moved it to Morocco, and I actually knew someone called Della at the time, so I used the name, but the story is the same story. But it's about someone you're having an affair with—in Britain and suddenly, through her friends, who wouldn't say anything much about it, you hear that she's gone to live in Morocco and you think, what's going on here? Is there somebody in Morocco I don't know anything about or what? That's the inspiration for that song.

### It seems clear to me that you get a lot of inspiration from reading?

Ever since I've started writing, I've always kind of fooled myself that watching a lot of television might be a good idea for inspiration. Listening to the radio is always good but actually listening to the radio, reading and films are really the main sources of inspiration. Television always seems a waste of time!

### Thanks Mike—we'll look forward to finding these old songs and listening to the new ones in whatever shape or form we get to hear them!

You're welcome. ☺

"ROBIN'S TRYING TO GET ME TO DO PUPPIES THAT WOULD BE THE HARDEST THING IN THE WORLD TO DO."





# FAREWELL

# Sorrow

## PRAISE GOD THE OPEN DOOR

### Me & The ISB by Paul Hunter



*Adrian writes:* In 1975 I was running the Reading University magazine, *Shell*. Amongst the coverage of sit-ins, hall-fees boycotts, Vinegar Joe live and “performances” by the Art Department, I squeezed in not a few ISB reviews.

One day I got a short note in the internal mail. “I think you must be an ISB fan,” it read, “So am I. Shall we meet up?” That’s how I first encountered Paul Hunter, whom I rapidly found out knew even more than me about the ISB.

In the late ’70s, he became very much the leading fanzine writer on the band through his work for *Liquorice* (the mag) and occasional *NME* reviews. He was also a valuable source of fax ‘n’ info for the ISB “historical discography” I originally wrote for *Zigzag*, and which turned up a decade later in *Musin’ Music*.

It’s very fitting, then, that Paul should now contribute to *beGLAD*. His first piece—and I hope there’ll be many more—is autobiographical:

**I**n November 1975 I interviewed Mike Heron for a feature article which later appeared in the publication I “worked” for at the time, *Liquorice* music magazine. Looking back at this over 25 years later, I am drawn to one particular quote from Mike about a song he’d just written—one that I don’t think I’ve ever heard him sing. The song was called 15, *Glory Road* and this is what he had to say about it back then: “The song I’ve just finished actually, is called 15, *Glory Road* and it’s meant to be like an address, but it isn’t. It’s two main concepts. First of all, the concept of 15 (years old) as being certainly for me the most horrible year, the isolation year, when it really became very real that I was stuffing food in one hole and getting it out the other and god, there’s gotta be something more. It was the year I really wanted a meaning for life and it caused me a lot of misery trying to find that

meaning. Right in the middle of adolescence, too—a really crappy year. At the same time, that was the year when I first got intimations that there must be something better, so that’s the ‘*Glory Road*’ part of it.”

I guess I included this quote back then partly because I could tell the world (well, a very small part of it) about a new Reputation song, as well as giving a from-the-Heron’s-mouth interpretation. Fat lot of use that turned out to be, given I only know of one person who’s ever heard the song and that was via hearing a demo up at Glen Row. [See Mike’s interview on page 39 for more on this—Ed]

There was another reason, though. I could resonate with what he was saying about the awfulness of being 15, and the happier times that could follow. Back in 1975, I was only 23 myself, and I wasn’t far enough past 15 physically (never mind emotionally) to be able to do much more than resonate. But you must have to see clear some time... And over time it’s been possible to reflect on how much the String Band helped me to find something of the “*Glory Road*” in life. I was 15 and miserable when I was introduced to *Hangman’s* and my life changed for ever. And this is how it happened....

#### From Creation to 1968...

Once upon a time I was born into the baby-booming post-war 1950s, and thought, “Wow! What a beautiful world!” A strange thing to think, and only a few million breaths later (at age 2) I locked myself in the bathroom to escape the apparent awful reality of Protestant nuclear family life, and waited for the fireman (with the stubbly grin?) to bring his ladder and “rescue” me. Well, after being released back into captivity, life went on, as life often does, and dreadful rules and regimes and attempts at spirit-crushing had me hiding and malingering and pleading for help in all sorts of uninterpreted bouts of soul sickness. And yet there were also the inevitable moments of relief. ...

At age 4, I stayed at Portsonachan on Loch Awe and listened to the pipers play, and met the cow-lady who would send me shortbread every year until I was in long trousers. At age 7, I went to a pagan party of wild innocence down at a friend’s place, somewhere in the land of Pan and his pan-pipe palaces. Or maybe I dreamt it all, as back at “home” I was later told There Was No Party, indeed There Is No Party, You Must Stop Imagining This For Your Own Good, Why Don’t You Go And Play Downstairs? At age 14, I had my second spell

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10.

of what wasn't yet called school phobia. I was only trying to say that my occasionally-glimpsed Spirit Beautiful world had disappeared yet again, and I'd rather cry off than attend a soulless event. At age 15, I was given Hobson's Choice of alternative schooling. In place of the hated grammar school, I reluctantly but resignedly went off to a small boarding school of about fifty boys near Thirsk in North Yorkshire: Breckenbrough School for "maladjusted" children. And that's where I was introduced to the music of the Incredible String Band...

#### 1968: You played your strings...

But first, there is another connection. My maternal grand-parents (now no longer with us) used to live in Coldstream, not a million miles from Innerleithen and Glen Row. So there I was with my family back at Easter 1968, taking a day out in Galashiels (near Innerleithen) shopping for woollen items and having familial afternoon tea, when we passed the local record shop. Now residence at Glen Row might not have been taken up yet, but Galashiels is close to Edinburgh, and *Hangman's* was making it into the charts, and my older brother Mike had already seen the String Band in concert in London. "Look, there's the new Incredible String Band album," he said. And I Looked Up and, seeing these two strange figures against a deep blue background, I ruminated on the name of the band and imagined a huge stringed orchestra playing I knew not what.

And then I went on my woollens way, dreaming of forever moving through my beloved Scottish Borders—as I did until it was time to go back to those rules and regimes and boarding-school homesickness, deep blue backgrounds and Things of String all forgotten.

But back at Breckenbrough, someone was putting a record on a turntable (mono Dansette?) and a mysterious but alluring voice was singing, "The natural cards revolve ever changing...". My world was about to change forever. Not overnight, but by fits and starts, gradually seeing a light at the end of the tunnel....

#### 1968: Took a Step Wrong Somewhere?

Sometimes it really is one step forward and two steps backward. I had not long ago been feeling suicidal, hurt, angry, closed, hiding. Now I was gradually opening chrysalis-style, and there was this magic music that was taking me back to dream-of parties, and pipers playing, and the questions that I had been searching for, and nonsensical non-answers, and original discriminating creatures. Yet I heard my mother calling, and I had to be on my way, not really having realised that I had just found something that had brought me home to where I belonged.

And so it was that, before I had really had time to relax into my newborn fur, it was time to leave and go back to my hometown and "normality" and the father-who-thought-he-had-the-answer and the mother-who-was-hiding-from-her-pain, and all I had to keep me going was one piece of vinyl from another world.

By September 1968, I had moved from school phobia to college phobia and hidden behind a bush at the bend in the road, so that no-one could find me and drag me back into "reality". I ended up in hospital, breakdown-style, but my guardian angel had found me a children's ward in a general (not mental) hospital. I screamed the ward down, so they moved me to a grown-up ward where I could watch Joe Cocker sing *With A Little Help From My Friends* on *Top Of The Pops*. And where I could wait and wait until yes, yes, yes, it would be time for me to sing my own October Song: when I could hold the double delights of *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* in my hands, and marvel at the photos, and read and re-read the lyrics, and believe, believe, believe that I would survive to hear the songs they made.

Maybe Someday I would be free of all this. "Farewell sorrow, praise God the open door, I ain't got no home in this world any more." For the moment, I was in between the two worlds, in the shaman's place at Samhain, and all I could do was die. And cry. And pray. And read those words again and again. "Music is so much less than what you are." "All this world is but a play, be thou the joyful player." "All will be one... over in the old golden land."

## I WAS IN BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS, IN THE SHAMAN'S PLACE AT SAMHAIN...

My guide to "Glory Road" came from a surprising place. It was the minister from my (father's) church who visited out of the blue and asked: would I like to go back to Breckenbrough? It was my decision, and mine alone. I didn't really know what I was going back to, and yet it was one of the easiest decisions (and perhaps the first real decision) I ever made.

Suddenly I was back in full and yet ever-growing Stringbandery. Kindred spirits and a record player! 1968 was beginning to turn into 1969, and the hippy culture was finally arriving in North Yorkshire. Hair and beads. John Peel and *Top Gear* on the radio. Music from Tyrannosaurus Rex, The Doors, the Electric Prunes and the Mothers Of Invention. And slowly but surely the Incredible String Band were taking over the school...

#### All Writ Down: It Don't Read Bad

I had been too unhappy at age 15 to keep a diary for 1968, but the dates and details of the joys and fun of early 1969 were All Writ Down, and these inky scratches now aid my ailing memory which otherwise only recalls the feeling and spirit of those special and uplifting times of over thirty years ago. On New Year's Day 1969 it seems I saw two Great Northern Divers in Scarborough harbour. Two days later I got my hands on *5,000 Spirits* at last, and the following week the new term started at Breckenbrough, which was rapidly becoming the School of String. Music requests were allowed at morning assembly, and these would come from boys and teachers and anyone else who happened to be around at the time. And these were some of the gems played at the height of String in 1969:

Sat 18 Jan	Hedgehog's Song
Sat 25 Jan	The Circle is Unbroken
Sun 26 Jan	Greatest Friend
Tue 28 Jan	Cousin Caterpillar
Wed 29 Jan	The Yellow Snake
Thu 30 Jan	Job's Tears
Sat 1 Feb	The Half-Remarkable Question
Sat 8 Feb	Ducks on a Pond
Sat 22 Feb	Lordly Nightshade
Fri 28 Feb	Chinese White
Mon 3 Mar	Womankind
Sat 8 Mar	Air
Sun 9 Mar	The Circle is Unbroken
Mon 10 Mar	Log Cabin Home in the Sky
Mon 17 Mar	Dandelion Blues
Wed 26 Mar	Mercy I Cry City
Sat 29 Mar	Puppies
Sun 18 May	Job's Tears
Sat 24 May	Hedgehog's Song

Unless my memory plays tricks on me, the head of the school, John "Leggy" Ridger, was responsible for at least one of these, for, yes, he too had become a man of String. But there is more....

#### All Writ Down: You Had A Purpose More High... Than To Give A Little Schoolboy His First String Band Concert

On Tuesday 21 January, I played football (is that mouse playing...?)—and I also acquired a promotional display box for *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* at the record shop in nearby Thirsk. It was made out of the album covers: words for the two albums on top and bottom of the box, and then the pictures of Mike and Robin from both double and single albums on the other four sides. I still have this box all these years later, slightly battered and much-travelled! I often wonder whether this is the only one left in captivity... On Saturday 15 February, I watched ISB on the Julie Felix show on BBC2 and rated this "excellent". Two days later I booked my ticket (12s/6d!) for my first ever ISB concert in Leeds as part of a school trip. The School of String was already buzzing in anticipation... On Saturday 22 February, my diary entry includes "ISB music book, at last!" On the waiting, oh the joy on arrival. Already our little Seniors' Room was awash with String, as we tuned ever more valiant and true attempts at recreating the words and tunes we knew so well.

On Saturday 8 March, our String minibus set out from school for Leeds, the strains of Air from morning assembly barely having faded away. I still have my pencilled notes on the concert, later re-written up in ink.

**...THE GONG FELL OVER...A DOG  
WANDERED ONTO THE STAGE**



*They showed the way, says Paul...*

"Part 1: 8pm-9pm" started with Maya, just Robin on lead vocal and guitar and Mike on sitar. Then came a song I recognised from the Julie Felix show, but I couldn't recall its title—my initial attempts "Don't Lean Back" (presumably from "...don't read bad...") and "Don't Look Back" (pardon?) being replaced eventually with All Writ Down. The third song was solo Robin—for which I had written "The Shangrill(?)—(Gypsy for Woodman)". So how was I meant to have heard of "Vishangro/Veshengro". Part 1 then continued with You Get Brighter, Mr & Mrs and finally A Very Cellular Song, with the first appearance in Leeds of the Even Greater Northern Gimbri (plus of course kazoo).

"Part 2: 9.25pm-10.40pm" began with Log Cabin Home..., The Iron Stone and an unidentified "unaccompanied four-part vocal harmony (Sleepers Awake?). There followed a piece then called Reflection (later to become White Bird), Cousin Caterpillar, and finally another unidentified piece of Robin's featuring Mike on gong and mandolin, and Rose and Likky on percussion. This was presumably Creation, as it concluded with a "goodnight song" with Robin on lead vocal and guitar, plus the rest of the band on vocals.

My "random comments" noted that reference was made to a "transistorised organ, with no antifreeze"; that the gong fell over; that a dog (Leaf?) came onto the stage at one point; and that there was the well-known explanation between songs—"This is called tuning up...". Of course this was just about pre-Scientology, so there was plenty of creatively chaotic communication amongst the well-crafted songs—plus of course the Occasionally Spotted (and well-loved) Bum Notes. My diary entry is brief and to the point: "Incredible String Band concert—Leeds (undescribable and brilliant!!)".

**The Half-Remarkable Question: You Don't Happen To Have Any Sitar, Do You?**

We also had a Coffee Club at the school which consisted of Stringfan English teacher, Derek "Rastus" Lloyd, another Stringfriendly teacher and us Stringfreak seniors, including my best friend, Philip Jeck (he who introduced us all to *Hangman's*). This was basically the same group who regularly had Seniors' Room parties (with cheese and under-age wine) and recreated the sounds of String. We had begun to notice that we were short of a few sounds, including the elusive

gimbri, the indescribable oud, and the somewhat-more-well-known-but-still-somewhat-exotic sitar. We had guitar and voice and kazoo, but while this was fine for Log Cabin Home... or the "Farewell sorrow" part of Ducks On A Pond, it didn't quite do it for Maya. So we decided on one of our Coffee Club trips to Ripon (on Friday 14 March 1969, according to my diary) that we would go to the local music shop in search of the extraordinary and unobtainable.

"Excuse me," we asked. "You don't happen to have any sitars, do you?" (If they did, they were lurking in the undergrowth along with the ouds and gimbris of North Yorks). "No I'm afraid we haven't," replied the music shop man, "but you could try in the shoe shop next door." Well, that sounded a fine Stringy sort of suggestion, so off we trooped. And sure enough, in amongst the trade in boots and slippers, they were trying to offload a sitar they had acquired on their last shoe-shovelling trip to India. I can't recall (and haven't noted) whether they wanted £60 or £65. It was one or the other. Now that was a lot of money in 1969, and no shortage of arm-twisting and schoolboy bullying attempts could persuade our beloved "Rastus" English teacher to shell out all his earnings for the month. However... he did manage to do a deal where he got the sitar "on trial" for a week (or was it two weeks? Again, I can't recall.). According to my diary, we also acquired Jew's Harps that day (probably in the music shop and not the butchers next-door-but-three). And so it was that we had "Music session 1 in S. Room (with tape recorder)".

With tape recorder? My my, there's another tape to track down for posterity—me with my choirboy high soprano, still reaching the highest Likky notes on Job's Tears. (I kid you not, and I have a letter written to me around that time to prove it.)

The following day's entry has "More music sessions, Log Cabin, Maya, Etc." followed by "Evening freak out in S. Room". Oh dear, I was a drug-free hippy at age 16. From deepest despair to Glory Road, it could have been All Too Much For Me.

Could have been, but wasn't. I had discovered a road back to myself, to pipers playing, cow-ladies with shortbread, innocence and experience, Jesus and Hitler and Krishna all in one boat together. Riddles and magical nonsense, and children coming out to play with minotaurs and puppies. Unknowable mysteries mingling with certainties such as "You never enjoy the world alright until the sea itself floweth in your veins, and you are clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars."

I had found release from a narrow, functional, Jesus-is-the-only-saviour, sadness-filled world. I was out of a tunnel that I have imagined myself in again since, and then found that the walls are not the walls of This Moment. Hopefully I will always somehow be able to re-find myself, refresh my spirit and feel easy in my soul again. Just as I did Way Back in the 1960's through the music, songs and warmth of the Incredible String Band.

**Postscript: Cutting The Strings via the Long, Long Road**

In my life since 1969, I've had a few ups and downs on the Long, Long Road. And after many more String Band concerts and years of remembering and forgetting and re-remembering, a few familiar lines come to mind....

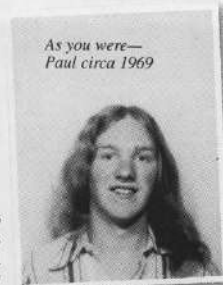
"Who amongst you who has not laid his head beneath some holy awning would think that such a night of tortured travelling could bring such a glory morning?"

And...

"Here to build in worlds of glory  
No-one made my sad, sad story  
No-one, no-one but me.  
Free to make my own tomorrow  
Free to free my heart from sorrow  
Free to hear and smell and see  
Free to be me, free to be free."  
And finally...

Does anyone out there know the words (and tune) to 15, Glory Road? Or does anyone else feel they may have lived the song without ever having heard it? Whatever...

"Sun knows no disgraces, no distastes, nothing wasted at all." ☪



# 101 Views

EXTRA!

## WIZZ JONES Lucky The Man

Scenescof SCOFCD 1009

Wizz Jones, with his billowing nimbus of frost-white hair (given an alarming blue rinse on the CD booklet), has the look of an eccentric Victorian archaeologist; you can picture him in a book-lined study, genially running an approving finger over a Sumerian stela or the hipbone of Philip of Macedon. There's something out-of-time about Wizz. Nothing on this album would have sounded incongruous in 1965, yet there's little sense of datedness or lazy retrospection; he transcends the currents and eddies of fashion, remaining faithful to a timeless sense of, well, Wizzness.

He's roped in a few old pals from the Sixties too, including Pentanglers John Renbourn and Jacqui McShee—and a certain C Palmer, gent.—and revisits a few songs that were going the rounds in those days, like Jackson Frank's ageless Blues Run The Game (a wretchedly plaintive version), Al Jones' In Stormy Weather and the Blind Boy Fuller staple Weeping Willow Blues.

Of primary interest to this magazine are the two tracks featuring our Clive: Roving Cowboy—on which Clive's banjo counterpoints Wizz's guitar and Simeon Jones' harmonica—and Clive's own Paris, following a strikingly different groove to the arrangements on *Pure Fountain* and *Just Like The Ivy*. Here it's a twin-banjo affair, with Clive playing ripply fingerstyle under Wizz's brusquer frailing. Much more of a high, lonesome mountain feel than the spiky jazz colourings we're familiar with.

There's a modest handful of Wizz originals, including the rather lovely title song, a poignant address to his daughter as she prepares to fly the family nest.

Good though Wizz's albums consistently are, they never quite capture his intense, charismatic stage presence, nor the sheer attack—controlled violence might describe it better—of his guitar playing. But until he turns up at a club near you, this'll keep you good company. Kudos to our pals at Rockin' World/Scenescof for ensuring Professor Jones' continuing presence in the better class of record store.

Jonas Dalrymple



## FRANCE ELLUL The Seven Harps Of Avalon

FCLE-CD 01

France has already achieved mention in the hallowed pages of this mag [see last issue's *Live Reviews* section—Ed], for his claim to String fame is that he was taught the harp by Robin, but of his background I know little else, I'm afraid, other than that he's a member of the roots band Vitae.

On this new album his own rather attractive harp playing is variously augmented by a further eleven musicians, six of whom play "named" Celtic harps (these are detailed in the booklet, at the risk of sounding pretentious). It would appear that the collective name Harps Of Avalon refers to a small ensemble which consists of France himself with Nuala Kennedy, Chris Conway, tabla player Tarsem Kalyan and fiddle player Martin Herbert.

The idea for this album came from the annual Winterdrum festival held in High Wycombe. It contains ten instrumental tracks—the last being merely a reprise of the first—, three songs and a recitation. The instrumental tracks comprise four tunes by O'Carolan, three traditional, a jig (Eirian) by Chris Conway and two of France's own compositions. The vocal items range from the title track (a short extract from the writings of Taliesin) and Lament For Arthur, on which a traditional Manx harp tune is given lyrics by France himself (though I find his singing less convincing than his playing here), to Dreamtime by Paul Hodgson and Justine Hoile—a little over-sung, I feel—, and last but not least, the rather fine The Grail, well written and sung by the underrated Elaine Samuels.

I suppose you might describe the mood of much of the album as new-age Celtic, but of a superior kind. I admit that I was inclined to write some of it off as "merely pleasant rather than deeply moving" after just a couple of plays, but closer examination in a more receptive mood began to reveal many subtleties and more than incidental delights and I realise my first impressions were significantly unfair.

The first track, Anwen, maintains a fairly even keel over its nine minutes, wending its meandering way at a fair pace with whistle, fiddle and tabla busily offsetting the rippling harps. The next track sets a Welsh tune to a kind of Indian tal. But actually, every track contains some delightful and individual musical ideas. Anwen and Eirian both meld Celtic and Aztec influences in a very appealing manner, and the tabla imparts an interesting rhythmic slant to Carolan's Hewlett.

The artists' commitment to the project can't be faulted, and the recording is fine, though some unfortunate minor engineering glitches disturb the flow occasionally (as on the well-poised reading of Tip Of The Whistle). It's all well worth a listen then, and not exclusively for those who like harp tunes. 01494 452047 [france\\_ellul@hotmail.com](mailto:france_ellul@hotmail.com)

David Kidman

Clive and Wizz on Roving Cowboy

## NORMAN LAMONT The Budget Collection

A man with an unmistakable lyrical voice—an intriguing mix of unrequited yearning and quirky humour—Norman Lamont is a songwriter par excellence. He specialises in odd vignettes: a man looking back at his life from its fringes; a scary tale of individual redemption; an examination of death and bereavement; the tribulations of a Dylan look-alike; ghosts hungry for vicarious experience. This broad canvas is coupled with a strong pop sensibility and a deft touch with arrangements.

In performance, Norman adds other dimensions—the "Fripptertronics" of accompanist Gil Murray and an esoteric bunch of covers including a haunting Algerian love song (in Arabic!) and a new take on Brel's Jackie (Ricky). If you're lucky he might play you his all-acoustic version of Lennon/McCartney's A Day In The Life. Not to be missed.

(If you want to hear Norman's songs, drop into his website <http://www.normanlamont.com>

As well as his own songs, there are his covers of two Mike Heron songs and an article that appeared in an earlier *beGLAD*. The site also has details of two CDs including Bob Dylan.)

[nlamont@bigfoot.com](mailto:nlamont@bigfoot.com)

Adrian Whittaker

## DAVE EVANS The Words In Between

This release will be welcome to all lovers of fine, idiosyncratic singer-songwriters of the 1970s. It was Dave Evans' debut on the Village Thing label and vinyl copies are now rather collectable. It includes five bonus tracks, taken from his second album *Elephantasia* (1972).

For those not familiar with either album, I would describe the music as quirky, comfortable, imaginative, funny and sad by turn. Dave has a talent for economical but vivid portraits of lonesome figures living outside life's main current: the sad, ageing beauty of Beauty Queen; the vagrant World War One veteran of St. Agnes Park; the rootless merchant seaman (himself in former days) of Sailor. He's also a guitar picker of originality and skill—listen to Insanity Rag. To this day he is a maker of guitars, too.

String Band fans will find much to draw them in here: the dusty warmth of the music, the studied naïvete of the writing, the musical surprises which endlessly renew themselves.

If you should look for this in ordinary retail outlets, I wish you better luck than I had. I ended up buying it at Virgin Mega(buck)store because other places hadn't heard of it and/or couldn't get info. Bad distribution, perhaps. Or perhaps it's all a conspiracy to make me get a computer—the original advert I saw for this CD gave an email address: [beatnik@frosts.demon.co.uk](mailto:beatnik@frosts.demon.co.uk) If you're like me and still write letters, you could write to Rogue Productions, PO Box 337, London N4 1TW.

Alan St John

## POOKA

Fools Give Birth To Angels

Pooka CD

### Shift

Rough Trade

Pooka have taken their broad-ranging musical explorations to their logical conclusion and released two separate CDs. The one their record company wanted, *Shift*, is a full-on midi treatment of their songs by Brian Duffy. Though I've always enjoyed the bass and drum stuff on *Spinning* and their work with Ultramarine, the result here is a very thin, synthetic sound with drum machines on overtime. It's redeemed by Sharon and Natasha's voices, but I still found myself longing for more soul. "It was a chance to experiment," says Natasha, who contributes most of the songs on *Shift*.

*Fools...* bears a stronger Sharon stamp and has a much more organic sound which features (real) strings, piano and trumpet alongside Pooka's guitars. Live staples Don't Make Me Sweat and Come On Over And See My Side make their CD debut and it's great to hear them in such inventive settings. As Sharon says on this album, "Music Is The Light", and I think these arrangements best support Pooka's strongest and most distinctive feature, their combined vocal sound (memorably compared by one reviewer to "a pair of banshees"). Recommended.

*Fools...* is available directly from Pooka by writing two cheques for £7.50 each (including P&P), one to Sharon Lewis and one to Natasha Jones and sending them to PO BOX 67, Wigan, Lancs WN2 4FL. Details are available at [www.pookaonthenet.net](http://www.pookaonthenet.net) where you can also find out about Pooka greetings cards featuring locks of their hair and old guitar strings!

Adrian Whittaker

## CHRIS THOMPSON

Scenesof SCOFCD 1008

The sleeve note describes this release as "a window into a time gone by, evoking both a spatial and temporal quality that contemporary music oft seeks to emulate or revive, but will not come our way again." In modern parlance, a temporal anomaly perhaps. But all credit to the American Scenesof label for realising the value of this artefact and for taking the brave step of reissuing what achieved the dubious distinction of being by far the worst-selling LP on Ian A. Anderson's Village Thing label. Reappraisal is definitely overdue, and while there may be nothing earth-shatteringly innovative or a "great lost classic" to write home about, it's still worth hearing, and more than once, if you've any interest in early '70s singer-guitarist-songwriters.

Inevitably, his compositions contain a small amount of (perfectly permissible) derivativeness, though not as much as you might expect, and the modish "Eastern trimmings" (courtesy of members of Clem Alford's group Magic Carpet) used on some of the tracks were probably past their sell-by date even by the time the album was recorded (1971-'72), though us String devotees are unlikely to be allergic to the sounds of sitar and tamboura!

Now I know very little about Chris—we learn here that he hailed from New Zealand, but came to England and spent time gigging with the likes of Bert Jansch, Davey Graham and John Martyn in the early '70s, appearing sporadically on LPs by Julie Felix and Rosemary Hardman and commuting back and forth between England and Ireland, recording much of what eventually became this album in his garden shed in Dublin!

I'd never previously heard this album, or indeed any of Chris's subsequent work (he released further albums in 1976 and 1977, and apparently still performs and records today), and the simplicity of its arrangements came as a refreshing change from much of the excessively over-produced and/or saccharine early '70s singer-songwriter product. Chris's singing is appealing, much in the soft, gentle style typical of his contemporaries (reminiscent at times of Nick Drake or Al Stewart maybe, but not really derivative of anyone in particular). His guitar playing is more than respectable, and actually makes quite a virtue of combining English with Eastern styles, noticeably on the workout section of Her Hair Was Long. His songs exhibit a credible thematic simplicity, and there's not the embarrassment quotient you might expect from one of his vintage.

As well as the whole (30 or so minutes) of Chris's aforementioned 1973 LP, this reissue also contains six bonus tracks: these comprise one (but annoyingly, not the other) from the rare Irish compilation LP *First Thrust*, two LP session out-takes, and three from his 1977 LP. All in all, I'm glad to have this release in my collection.

David Kidman

## LIVE

## THE DU-TELS

Boardwalk, Sheffield  
5 December 2001

Like Elvis, Peter Stampfel has never played the UK. Unlike Elvis, he's skinny, sharp and, most of all, still alive. The comparison is not inapt, however, for, to devotees of the genre that learned taxonomists call Acid Folk, Stampfel enjoys Elvis-like status. Heck, he *invented* it! His adventures with the infamous Holy Modal Rounders were recounted in *beGLAD 15*, and latterly he's been pushing the envelope again with ex-Beefheart and J Buckley sideman Gary Lucas as The Du-Tels. And at long last he's made it to these shores.

Even as a Rounders student of twenty years standing I was barely prepared for the maniacal energy, antic wit and sheer sonic terrorism that comprises a Du-Tels show. You could call this family entertainment, I suppose, but only if you were a member of the Addams Family. Lucas' feral slide-playing and Stampfel's eldritch howls immediately serve notice that this is not music as we know it. Stampfel and Lucas have a mission to derange, but also to delight; and you go away afterwards convinced that the only people who enjoyed it more than that you were Stampfel and Lucas themselves.

Lucas takes the stage in a black hat as befits his Beefheartian CV, leering amiably through the spotlights. Stampfel, looking uncannily well-preserved for his 62 years (a Satanic pact is not unlikely...), wields a white fiddle and a black mandolin, the yin and yang of his scrape and twang. The old Rounders number Bully Of The Town kicks off the show, fast, raucous and funny. When they take an instrumental break, the two men face each other in a crouch like two alpha-male elk; Stampfel invariably breaks off a bar early to bound back to the mic. We're not talking slick here...

Lucas breaks a string on the opening number, and Stampfel announces with relish his "covering for Gary" solo spot. Dook Of The Beatniks is a hoot, with sub-Townshend windmill thrashes on the mandolin. He's a ball of energy, never at rest. He gets twitchy when Lucas stops to adjust his tuning. "We're very particular about playing in tune," says Lucas drily—proof that the Yanks do understand irony after all; meanwhile, Stampfel cheerfully ignores the quarter-tone gap between the two strings of his A-course.

As Lenny Kaye said at the birth pangs of punk, "Being in tune just ain't an issue." As with the Rounders (and the ISB, come to that), a wee bit of dissonance is necessary roughage. (At one point, responding to a request, they break into Flop Eared Mule—"We've never played this before!"—simultaneously in two different keys. It sounds all right to me.)

There is, indeed, something of the punk ethic about the Du-Tels, though instead of snarling nihilism they dispense sheer glee at the absurdity of the universe. There can surely be no more inspiring spectacle than two men of mature years howling "Tinkie-Winkie, Dipsy, La La, Po / Teletubbies, teletubbies say 'hello!'..."

In less than two hours they get through twenty-five songs, plucked with unerring instinct from all manner of disreputable sources. We get Johnny Cash's Ring Of Fire ("We're channeling Johnny!"), Del Shannon's Searchin', wry old folksongs like Penny's Farm and Little Maggy, a Marx Brothers number, the aforementioned Teletubbies Say "Eh-Oh", an Xmas two-hander of Good King Wenceslas and God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen and an updated Deep In The Heart Of Texas ("Computer nerds run in herds/Deep in the heart of Texas..."). Lucas sings his own Sandman in a voice so deep that you don't hear it so much as feel it through the soles of your feet; for reasons that remain unclear, it's punctuated by a babel of atonal, banshee shrieks.

After the gig, I get a chance to have a chat with the two chaps. It turns out they're both confirmed Stringheads. Stampfel reminisces fondly about opening for the String Band in 1970; Lucas declares that *5000 Spirits* changed his life; appearing on Charlie Gillett's Radio London show three days later, he requests Blues For The Muse. I present Stampfel with a copy of *beGLAD 15*, featuring the Rounders article. He's tickled by the sub-heading describing the Rounders as the String Band's evil twin. "I guess we were sorta evil," he cackles, "and everyone should have a twin." Amen to that.

Jonas Dalrymple

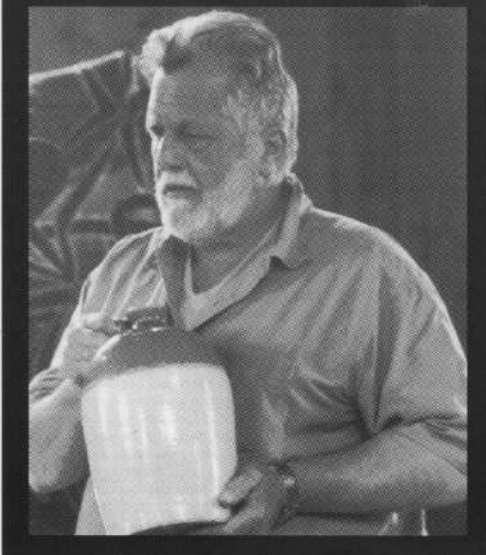




## Michael "Henry" Bartlett

3.6.43—13.8.01

Grahame Hood  
remembers the famous jug man



**M**any people were saddened to hear that Henry Bartlett had died suddenly of a heart attack at his home in Ibberton, Dorset, on Monday 13th of August. Henry is best known to *beGLAD* readers as a member of The Famous Jug Band, but he played a large part in promoting the music he loved from the early Sixties onwards.

I only met Henry twice. I drove down from my in-laws in Bath to interview for a piece on the FJB in January 1997. He looked exactly as I imagined he would, sitting at a table in the front room of his house. In the corner behind him was an ordinary nylon-string guitar, a Fender Precision bass copy and an old amplifier that was unlike anything I had ever seen in over 25 years of hunting in the darkest corners of music shops. He didn't really open up to me on that occasion, and what with frequent attacks by one of his wife Jenny's pack of Jack Russell terriers, and the fact that neither his nor my tape recorder could be induced to work, we soon ran out of time, so it was agreed that I would visit him again. The next occasion was far more productive. He had sat down with Jenny and compared memories, phoning up old friends where necessary to check, and dug out long-forgotten clippings from the *Melody Maker* and *Sounds*. The resulting interview formed the basis of my article on the FJB in issue 10 of *beGLAD*.

Over the next couple of years we kept in touch by phone and one day in 1999 I was surprised to receive a copy of the reissued *Sunshine Possibilities*, along with thanks for my part in rekindling interest in the FJB. Rumours started to filter through that things were stirring in the Jug Band camp, and Henry eventually confirmed that the original line-up of himself, Clive Palmer, Pete Berryman and Jill Johnson had finally managed to find a time when they could all be in the same place at the same time, and that Pierre Tubbs, who had produced their original albums, was available too. With the aid of an ex-BBC engineer who lived just up the road, they recorded eighteen tracks in the Ibberton Village Hall over two days in September 2000. With a few overdubs added later at other studios, sixteen tracks were chosen to be issued on a new album.

In May this year Henry rang to ask if I would be interested in writing the sleeve notes for the new album, which was to be called *Oh For Summer*. Needless to say, I was delighted to accept. I am writing this in mid-October, and the album is due to be issued any day now. It will be dedicated to Henry's memory.

Michael Bartlett grew up in Mitcham, Surrey, and as a teenager became part of a crowd based around The Whitgift pub in nearby Croydon who shared his musical taste for jug band, blues, jazz and folk music. Summer weekends were spent in Brighton, sleeping on the beach, and it was in this period that he acquired the nickname of "Henry VIII", due to his stature, beard and attraction for the ladies. It stuck and he once said that Ralph McTell (an associate from The Whitgift) was about the only person who still called him "Mick".

Henry began running music clubs, the first of which was in the basement of a coffee bar called The Olive Tree, situated on the Brighton Road in Croydon. This ran on Sunday afternoons, and filled in the hours between the pubs closing and everyone heading off to places like Eel Pie Island in the evenings. Later, he ran clubs at The Buck's Head in Mitcham and The Red Lion in Sutton, booking acts like Malcolm Price, Wizz Jones & Pete Stanley, Bert Jansch, John Renbourn, Davy Graham and Alex Campbell.

In 1965 he formed the Levee Breakers with 12-string guitarist Johnny Joyce, joined by Mac McGann on tiple and harmonica, and later the vocal talents of Beverley Kutner, who later married John Martyn. This was the point at which Henry began playing the jug. Seen by Beatles sidekick Klaus Voorman at a club in Tooting, they recorded four sides for Parlophone at Abbey Road studios: *Going To Germany*, *Stealin'*, *Babe I'm Leaving You* and *Wild About My Loving*, the last two being issued as a single.

Henry got Ralph McTell his first paid gig, at Green Street Green in Kent, and also played jug with Ralph and mandolinist Mick North. A later band was The Strimmed Implements, which included future Pink Floyd collaborator Ron Geesin on banjo and piano, as well as several members to-be of the Bonzos and the Bob Kerr Whoopee Band.

In the winter of 1966/67 Henry and Ralph moved down to Bourne-mouth, where Henry worked in a dry-cleaners, a job which required, for the only time in his adult life, that he shave off his beard. In the summer of 1967 Ralph went down to Cornwall and rented a caravan on a farm owned by a Mr Willoughby. Nearby was the famous Folk Cottage club. Henry came down to share Ralph's caravan for his summer holidays and they played around all the local clubs, including Brenda Wooton's club at St Buryan's, near Penzance, which was where he met a young lady by the name of Jenny.

He had hardly returned to London before Ralph rang up and said the opportunity had arisen for Henry to take over the running of Folk Cottage if he wanted. He wanted. He shared the running of the club, and a caravan in the field across the road from The Cottage, with "Whispering" Mick Bennett, who played washboard and percussion and was a pretty good chef too, specialising in soup, pasties and curried shepherd's pie. The Folk Cottage was simply one of those places that perfectly suited the times and the tastes of its audiences. Literally every major British folk artist played there at one time or another.

The resident band at the Cottage was The Great Western Jug Band, which featured Henry, Mick Bennett, mandolinist Bob Strawbridge, Pete Berryman and John The Fish. Pete had been in several folk and rock bands in Cornwall and Henry had met him busking on the beach



at Newquay and invited him up to the Cottage. John was well known as the accompanist to Brenda Wootton. In the winter of '67/'68 they did a tour of clubs in the London area. The summer of 1968 was another busy one at The Cottage, and Henry and Jenny married that year too, moving to Penzance. Clive Palmer came down to Cornwall in late 1968 and moved into the caravan with Mick. Clive, Pete and Henry got together to form the Famous Jug Band (Henry could never quite recall why Mick Bennett did not join too, but he may have been off travelling at the time). On a visit to the Wadebridge folk club they met Jill Johnson, who was singing with her band The Jayfolk, and were mightily impressed with her voice. Jill joined the FJB and they set off on a short tour in early 1969. During the tour Wizz Jones arranged for them to audition for Pierre Tubbs of Liberty Records and he agreed to sign them and produce an album.

The band had a fine live reputation, with Henry taking on the role of front man, telling jokes and introducing the songs. Pete and Clive dazzled with their instrumental skills, and there wasn't a man in the audience that didn't fall in love with Jill. *Sunshine Possibilities* proved to be an impressive and influential album, though, for various reasons, Clive didn't stay for long after its release.

Wizz Jones joined so briefly he doesn't even remember it, but basically the FJB remained a trio and went on to record their second album, *Chameleon*, in 1970. They also moved to London on the advice of their new manager Bruce May, Ralph McTell's brother.

The FJB nearly split up at the end of summer 1970, but recruited John James instead to add new life to the band. Unfortunately it didn't work out, and John left after only two gigs. By this time Henry had acquired a double bass by the name of Bessie, and gradually became competent in her use. Pete was keen to expand the line-up of the band and they actually recruited a keyboard player.

Jill: "When Clive left, I became the lead singer and the straight man to Henry's schtick. I preferred the music we were doing, which was mostly written by Pete, but it was far more exacting, and demanded more in the way of performance than some of the old fun-loving jug band stuff we used to do. By the time we were recording the third album I was really sick from stress. I knew that I had to leave the band

because I was too sick to continue. I was devastated because it was the only thing I had ever wanted to do."

After the demise of the FJB, Henry had his own band in which he played electric bass and which regularly played at The Half Moon in Putney. He formed a duo with John James and also did the occasional gig with Ralph and Whispering Mick as The Garrotty Parrot Band, both of which did radio broadcasts for Alexis Korner's show. He got involved in the antique business, developing a real eye for furniture and greatly enjoying the wheeling and dealing and the characters he met in the trade.

He was the partner in a shop in Kew and later in Wandsworth Road. In 1974 he joined Clive Palmer to form a version of COB to play the gigs Clive was contracted to do after COB Mk 1 split up following the notorious altercation on stage at The Half Moon. Guitarist Chris Newman, who was working with Henry on his van, also joined COB for their last gigs. When Clive got married that year, Henry was best man. He still ran the odd event, booking Stephan Grappelli to play at the Half Moon, as well as Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee on another occasion.

Towards the end of the Seventies Henry took on the shop in Poole, and the family moved down to Dorset. He kept up his music, though, playing in a folk band called Lazybones/The Four-Hand Band

and later in a duo called Last Resort. He was also still called up on occasions to add the sound of his jug to adverts. Plumrose Sausages asked him to play with a forty-piece orchestra, and an advert for Woolworth's had him duetting with Paul Jones on kazoo! Lazybones were booked to play the odd Medieval Banquet event, and on one occasion only he was required to dress up as his namesake. Unfortunately no photographs were taken.

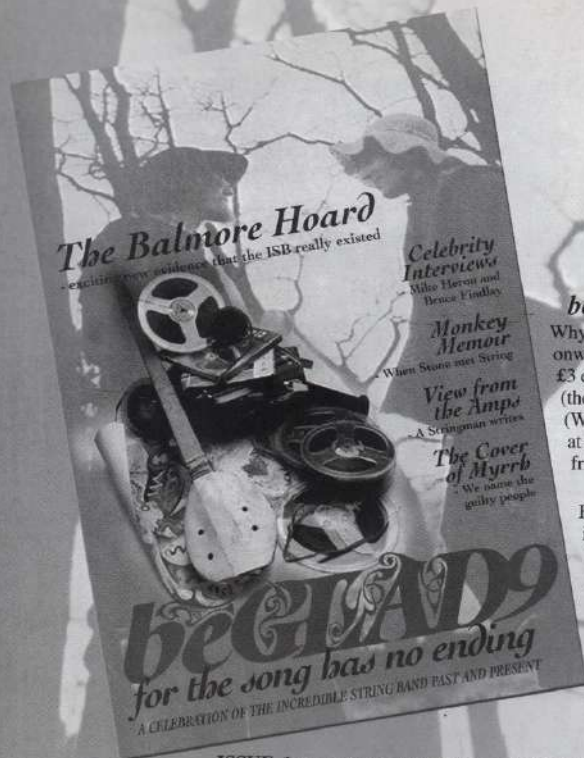
Jill had recovered and gone to live in the USA. She returned to Britain for a holiday in 1994, and met up again with Henry shortly before she was due to return. Henry had made contact with Pete Berryman at a reunion Ralph organised of friends from the glory days of the Cornish folk scene. Clive had been living in Brittany but an album with Robin Williamson, which eventually led to the re-formation of The Incredible String Band, meant he was spending more time in the UK, and the casual talk of an FJB reunion became a real possibility.

On Thursday 23rd of August Henry was buried in a woodland site near his home, attended by his many friends and a large gathering of the many musicians he had played with over the years. Ibberton is not an easy place to find, and at the suggestion of one of Henry's and Jenny's two daughters, mourners were guided by posters advertising "Henry's Last Gig".

Jenny: "Henry was the greatest! He was a large and generous person who enjoyed every aspect of his life." ☺

**PLUMROSE SAUSAGES ASKED HIM TO PLAY WITH A FORTY-PIECE ORCHESTRA, AND AN ADVERT FOR WOOLWORTH'S HAD HIM DUETTING WITH PAUL JONES ON KAZOO...**

The way we  
used to be...



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