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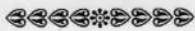
BE GLAD

FOR THE SONG HAS NO ENDING



AN APPRECIATION OF
THE INCREDIBLE STRING BAND
PAST AND PRESENT

News...News...News...News...News...News...News...News...News...



There will probably be ISB footage on one of the Woodstock films or TV programs this year, tying in with the 25th anniversary of the fest. Also there will be something ISB on the new triple Woodstock album which will feature people not seen in the original film. Can't wait.



John Wood, original engineer on many String Band albums, has been back in the studio remastering them for American release on Rykodisc in May/June. *Wee Tam* and *Big Huge* will be reunited as a double and *I Looked Up* and *U* may be out in the US before here. Consult a good importer. When WEA in the UK sell out of the current pressing of *Spirits*, *Hangman's* and *Wee Tam* they will use the new remasters for future pressings. There will also be a box set *History of the ISB* on Ryko in the autumn.



Joe Boyd tells me that the once-mooted 'tribute' album of ISB covers done by 'name' bands is on hold. Robin Hitchcock is the only person to have recorded any tracks so far. His offering? *Nightfall*.



The first episode of *Roughnecks*, the new BBC1 drama which features ISB music and Mike Heron's Incredible Acoustic Band in the final episode, is a double length episode screened on Saturday 14th May at 9pm - just about when Mike will be going on stage at Southport Arts Centre!



Robin Williamson will be playing and speaking on Radio 4s arts round-up, *Kaliedoscope* on May 11th.



ISB in books. Check out page 200 in the paperback edition of Elmore Leonard's *Freaky Deaky*. Also new fantasy author Phil Rickman has used some lyrics from Robin's *Job's Tears* in his latest book, *Crybbe*. There was a book published in the USA last year by Sharon McCrumb entitled *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, a "magical realist novel set in the Appalachians", apparently.



Be Glad contributor Grahame Hood and his band, Walking The Witch, have a new cassette out at £4.50 inc. p&p some songs on which have, according to Grahame, "a bit of an ISB feel". From 41 Bromley Gardens, Bromley, Kent, BR2 OES



It had to happen.....the Shiny Gnomes, Fit and Limo's alter-ego have recorded an ambient electronic thing called *Techmystical* which featured the sampled voice saying *Amoebas are very small*. Maya in dub next perchance?



Demon Records are releasing Robin's *American Stonehenge* sometime in June and TMC will be putting the *Music for the Mabinogion* on CD by October - with added new material.



Masses of hitherto unreleased ISB stuff has been discovered in the vaults at Island Records. This includes several live recordings and 'new' songs such as *My Own Bone*. Unique Gravity Records hopes to have something mined from this sonic seam by the October Convention. In the meantime, perhaps you could help us? One of the recordings pertains to a *Festival Of*

Fools - anyone got any info on this - where was it, when was it, what did they play? Also listed is *Mime Play* - anyone got any ideas? Editorial address as usual please.



More info from Joe Boyd. Having had lunch a few years ago with Silvio Rodriguez, the 'Cuban Bob Dylan' he was intrigued to find that it was a bootlegged copy of *Hangman's* which first got Silvio into songwriting. Apparently he took it with him when he was drafted to fight UNITA in Angola and listened to the album in a jungle hospital whilst recovering from being shot in the leg.



Talk of cover version albums got me thinking and I thought we might try to put out a String Band fan tribute album. I know there are a great many excellent musicians out there so if you already have or can do an ISB cover write and let me know what it is and we'll see what we can put together, possibly as a freebie in a future issue or at nominal cost. It could be interesting, but it depends on YOU!

Also on the cover version front - what 'name' bands do you think should do ISB covers for Joe Boyd's album? Write who and why in a sort of 200 words type situation and we'll forward all suggestions on to Mr. Boyd and also run it as a competition, printing the best pieces of writing in the November issue and, yes, don't worry - a fantastic prize will go to the winner - as determined by a panel of sad ISB obsessives. All entries to the editorial address please. Do it now. Thanks.

Network Mail Order

A full catalogue of Incredible String Band CDs, tapes, videos, books, etc etc can be obtained by sending an sae to Network Mail, 196 Old Road, Brampton, Chesterfield, Derbyshire, S40 3QW

Hi. Another issue. The main topic this time round is the October event - *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending*, the Incredible String Band Convention to be held in Leeds. All of you should be aware of it by now through our mail-shot but if not then it's basically two days of ex-ISBers showcasing the material they perform now. Robin is playing on the Saturday (29/10) as is Malcolm Le Maistre and on the Sunday we have Raymond and Kate, Dr. Strangely Strange and Mike Heron's Incredible Acoustic Band. Besides which there will be all manner of other things happening. Info from me if you haven't heard. Tickets are selling fast. Don't expect reunions or things like that - it's just not going to happen.

Instead come expecting hear some exciting and widely different material.

This issue I've tried to alter the layout a bit, make it more clear and visually attractive. More photos too. Does it work? Let me know please.

Several articles I was promised didn't turn up in time for publication, hence anything you were promised last issue, such as part two of the ISB at the BBC, which isn't in this issue just didn't turn up. Shame on you all. This means I have to write more stuff myself, which I don't mind doing but it makes for a more rushed job and I, and I suspect you also, get sick of my style of writing.

We still need material - if you want to write an article on any aspect of ISB

or related stuff please do so by all means. I'm always pleased to discuss people's ideas for articles. Get those brain cells working. I'm keen too to receive reviews of Robin's gigs whether solo or with Renbourn this year, photos etc etc.

The featured album next issue will be, oh, alright then, due to popular demand, *Changing Horses*. Let's have some contributions please. Copy date for the November issue is no later than September 1st and I'd really like it before that if possible.

Albums, new and old, I've been listening to and been excited by over the past few months include: The Horseflies - *Hush Little Baby*, Pooka - *Pooka*, Richard & Mimi Farina - *Best Of*, Richard Thompson - *Mirror Blue*, Kevin Ayers - *Bananamour*, Tim Buckley - *Live At The Troubador* and Robert Crumb & His Cheap Suit Serenaders - *Chasin' Rainbows*. The first three are of special interest to String Band fanciers.

The November issue will, all being well, be

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out in time for the October Convention so you'll be able to pick your copy up there. And we should have a feature about the ISB at Woodstock, and loads of other things.

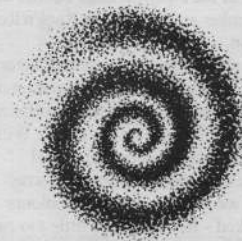
NEXT ISSUE MAYBE

ISB at Woodstock
Malcolm Le Maistre interview
Rose interview
Reviews from the summer's gigs
New recording news
Part two of the lp sleeve article
Part two of the ISB/BBC article
And the usual goodies

Lastly, if your sub. has run out with this issue please renew promptly. It helps keep costs down. Thanks this issue go as usual to all the contributors and the ubiquitous Mark Anstey. Special thanks to Adrian Whittaker for the motivating conversations. *Be Glad* is published by Minotaur Publishing and edited by Andy Roberts. Make contact with 84 Elland Road, Brighouse, West Yorkshire, HD6 2QR. Tel: 0484 721993. Have a fantastic summer!



Perhaps sir would like to try this one then? Robin helps Malcolm adjust his apparel in an off-camera still from the film *Be Glad*. Malcolm looks pissed off.



Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

Firstly, in answer to Jenny Pudding's query in the last issue about the three songs from the first LP missing from the songbook - they *were* in the first edition, to be replaced by the three 'new' *Wee Tam* songs in the second edition. For those keen to know, *Empty Pocket Blues* is in D (with the odd A sharp 7th)!

From *Wee Tam* onwards up to *Hard Rope*, sheet music certainly exists for the songs. Somewhere. For copyright purposes 'lead sheets' were produced for each track, consisting of lyrics, melody line and key instrumental phrases and the chords. Some have gone astray owing to publishing companies changing hands, lack of clarity about who owns what etc., but basically Warner Chappell can provide lead sheets for all LPs up to and including *I Looked Up* and Polygram for *U* on to *Hard Rope*.

All Writ Down

More stuff on ISB songbooks and sheet music
by
Adrian Whittaker

However, the files are so jumbled that if one hasn't got the song you're looking for, it's worth trying the other. This is what you do!

Warner Chappell (up to *I Looked Up*)
129 Park St. London W1Y 3SP
Tel: 071 629 7600

Ask for copyright services, name song and composer and you'll get a

'lead sheet number'. *The Iron Stone*, for example, is 04453. You then ring archives in Woodford on 081 550 0550 and speak to Brian who looks to see if the number required is actually there - in which case you will get sent a photocopy. It costs £6.95 per song, plus postage (on the understanding that it is not for professional use).

Polygram (*U* to *Hard Rope*)
Polygram International Music
Publishing Ltd., Bond House, 347-
353 Chiswick High Road, Chiswick,
London W4 4HS.
Tel: 081 742 5600

A simpler system - ask for the copyright desk, name the song title and composer and a photocopy is yours for £5.00 per song. With thanks to Mark Anstey, and David Carroll at Polygram.

BE GLAD - THE VIDEO SAGA THAT HAS NO ENDING

Adrian Whittaker goes from reel to reel

Most of you have probably got your own copies of the *Be Glad* video by now. I hope it was worth the wait. As you may have gathered, there were considerable technical problems to be sorted before the video transfer could be carried out. Having found the 'negatives' (actually they were 'reversals, a bit like a colour slide), there was a frantic search for 16mm film stock to make a new print of the film. It's not manufactured in Europe any more, and eventually one roll was located in the States. There was another cliffhanger when this turned out to be too short to reprint the entire film - the eventual solution was to cut in a small section of the original battered print for the very last bit of the film (can you see the join?). The resulting reprint was shown in all its glory at the National Film Theatre last December as part of their Rock'n'Reel season.

In mid-December I joined director Peter Neal at a video post-production suite in Soho to watch the transfer to video (a 'tele-cine' in the trade). With the aid of state-of-the-art digital machinery specks of dust and stray hairs were disappeared and colours tweaked - Robin looks a little *too* pale

and ethereal - no problem! A couple of keyboard strokes and he looks like he's been on vitamin megadoses for years! As the scenes flickered by on the monitors I discovered, rather disappointingly, that what I had taken to be a leafy forest glade was actually a municipal park somewhere in South London.....

At the same time, a superior version of the soundtrack taken from the original magnetic reel was synchronised and dubbed on - which means, for example, that you can now hear Rose's bass playing in all its glory. The resulting master was rushed up to Mark Anstey's media empire in time for copying and distribution before Christmas.

The re-release got good press coverage in *Q*, *Record Collector* and *Vox* and has already sold several hundred copies. Currently Mark Anstey has plans to distribute it in Japan and Europe.

Record Collector review
Feb. '94 >

INCREDIBLE STRING BAND: "Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending" (no label given)

Straddling the folk and acid-rock genres wasn't uncommon during the late-60s, but in retrospect, the Incredible String Band sometimes get overlooked in both categories. And while this film, shot in 1968 and never before available, accurately portrays the band's ambition, its limited, mail-order only release probably means that only confirmed fans will get to see it.

Directed by Peter Neal (of Hendrix's "Experience" film short fame), "Be Glad" finds the Incredibles - basically Mike Heron and Robin Williamson, with a little help from girlfriends Rose and Likky - on stage, at home, in conversation, producing surreal theatre, reciting poetry and shopping for exotic instruments. Its scope mirrors the group's boundary-busting instincts, an instinct that whispered, 'let creativity flow wherever it may'.

There's intercut footage of tribal dances and mystic images, and shots of the aforementioned girlfriends sewing (yes, *sewing!*) while their men wriggle out of any firm answers ("If I could describe them, I wouldn't sing them," says Heron of his songs), which makes this very much a product of its time. But, musically, particularly on "The Iron Stone", where the Eastern influence is heard loud and clear, the band do skate exciting territories.

The climax, a "fantasy fable" titled "The Pirate And The Crystal Ball", might stretch the patience of the less committed ISB fan, but there's no doubt that this is a priceless piece of documentation of a band - and an era - which firmly believed in unleashing creative expression, and in any direction. (MP)

Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

"A potpourri of Taoist tongues voiced in infantile innuendoes - the Incredible String Band. Through living the 'timeless life' Robin Williamson and Michael Heron have suspended folk music in their lyrical abandon spinning dual, dissident webs for the non-hearers. Their songs are nursery-rhymed soliloquies radiating nature and encompassing a cultural homogenation of musical styles - from calypso to raga. There are no riddles, only ripples; their experiences are our associations: 'O, wizard of changes, teach me the lesson of flowing.'" Rolling Stone, 15/3/69

The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter - catalogue no EUK 258 to its matrix, but something vastly different, bearing no relation whatsoever to letters or numbers, to the people who know and love it for what it is, and what it has become over the years.

Of all the String Band albums *Hangman's* seems to give something the others don't, to touch places only hinted at on the other albums and if any album ever made you want to give renounce temporal obligations and head for the wildwood this was the one.

Maybe it was the times, maybe the chemicals. Maybe it was just the right people at the right time, tuned in and turned on, waiting to receive, to receive a transmission from *something*. The zeitgeist was never ensnared better than on *Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*.

Gil Murray's and Dave Barrett's articles which follow on from this piece exemplify the personal response to music which is by far just as interesting as the factual side, and in Gil's case at least is probably representative of many reader's encounter with the musical entity which is *Hangman's*. But that's for later, here's some surrounding 'facts' and, quite possibly, a few fictions....

Hangman's was the album which finally catapulted the ISB from being quirky post-Dylan folkies to psychedelic stardom, in both sales, live performances and critical appraisal. Prior to its release the String Band had played a few London clubs and concert venues up and down the country but mainly as support to the

likes of Pink Floyd at UFO for instance. Witchseason's Joe Boyd had a masterplan which was to change all that for ever....

"The week that *Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* was released I had gone to Roy Guest and said I want to put the String Band on solo in Edinburgh, Nottingham, Liverpool, Manchester and London.....these gigs were supposed to have been the month after the album was released but because of production delays it ended up the album was released the same week.....and Roy thought I was completely mad and refused to do it, he wouldn't promote the concerts, so I agreed to take the risk, to hire him for a fee for him to make the arrangements. It never worried me, I just knew it would be fine.....and the second week the album was out it was at number three."

The name? Karl Dallas interviewed the band just prior to the album's release and queried the title, "It was an interview filled with sudden, reflective silences in which I sometimes felt that my questions were like rocks being thrown into a deep, clear pool, disturbing its calm".

We can only imagine.... but: Robin: "In a way you could say the title thought of us. What does it mean? You can explain it at several levels."

Mike: "The Hangman is death and his beautiful daughter is what comes after. Or you might say that the hangman is the past 20 years of our life and the beautiful daughter is now, what we are able to do after all these years. Or you can make up your own meaning. Your interpretation is probably just as good as ours."

String Band researcher Steve Blamires came across another possible reference to the title in an obscure biography of Dylan Thomas. Apparently the young Thomas spent his childhood holidays at an aunt's house deep in the country. Local legend recounted how this house was once the dwelling place of the area's hangman. His daughter was, of course, beautiful! So beautiful in

The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter

Being the story of
one of the most
influential and
important albums
of the psychedelic
era

Intro by:
Andy Roberts

Personal views by:
Gil Murray
Dave Barrett

Music by:
Mike Heron
&
Robin Williamson

Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

fact that he hid her away from the sight of any man lest she fall in love and leave him. She became depressed and whilst in this state took her own life - by hanging. Robin, a big fan of Dylan Thomas, was unaware of this. The plot thickens!

The cover too has its secrets - refer to Raymond Greenoaken's excellent ISB album sleeve article elsewhere in this issue. Q magazine (June '93) did an in-depth feature on the cover of Hangman's and I suggest you get hold of that for the full details, but briefly the people on the sleeve besides the band are, Roger Marshall (ISB friend - with chain), Nicky Walton (friend of RW). All the children are the offspring of Mary Stuart at whose house the ISB were staying. The dog is Leaf, Robin's faithful hound who, legend has it, was cremated at the Row after her death.

Hangman's was and still is often regarded as the acid album, though Williamson claims to have given up psychedelics by then - "by that time I'd probably stopped taking drugs, it was very much what was going on at the time but I'd pretty much lost interest in drugs by then".

It certainly was what was going on and, drugs or not, the ISB looked to be living the psychedelic lifestyle - the timeless life. In fact, whether *Hangman's* was created with or without psychedelics is largely immaterial as once the viewpoint is attained it tends to manifest itself in your life and really the drugs become, to a large extent, superfluous.

However, their presence and influence cannot be denied or ignored. A definitive discussion of the influence of psychedelics in music and musicians lifestyles has yet to be attempted. Sadly in later years it seems that many musicians whose work was grounded in psychedelics try to play this side of things down somewhat, whether through embarrassed hindsight, to hide their pasts from their offspring, or whatever. But the simple, stark, fact remains that *Hangman's* was written and sung by people who at one time at least were involved in psychedelics and who seemed to have formed a world-view based on those experiences. A fact to be acknowledged in our dealings with their output from that time.

Whether listener or artist is drawn into the labyrinth that psychedelics

provide is a personal choice. Humour and awe were and are the key I suspect. I'm always interested in readers' views on this most sensitive of subjects and how psychedelics have seemed to them personally and in the 'underground' culture of the last thirty years or so.



A Very Cellular Song is a specific case in point here. Heron has often alluded to the fact that it had close connections with the LSD experience - as if we hadn't worked that one out - and in June '93 told me, "All it was was a trip, and that was the music I was listening to, that and interspersed with Radio 4, bits of plays, people talking to each other, and I happened to be listening to the Pindar family before I started..." (The Bahamian Pindar Family did the original version of *We Bid You Goodnight* from *A Very Cellular Song* - it was also, trivia delvers, done frequently by the Grateful Dead at the end of concerts). And you thought it had meaning?

We could quite easily fill the entire magazine this issue with reviews of *Hangman's* - and all of them praising the album. Some are worth quoting from at length as they show the almost universal acclaim with which such a strange album could be met - a measure of its true worth - and also that critics could, when they wanted write some pretty good descriptive stuff about music.

The Sunday Times' Derek Jewell was well impressed, making Hangman's Record Of The Month on 31/3/68 but ever mindful of the growing urge for instant spirituality among the more tired and devotional of the music fraternity noted that, "Quasi-poetry and phoney mysticism now cling to the skirts of popular music, but the *Incredibles* are not pseudo. Their work is convincing, beautiful, idiosyncratic, yielding more with each playing."

The Observer's Robin Denslow also rated *Hangman's* highly: "Together with the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* it seems, in my view, to be the most important disc to have been produced in Britain for several years."

Melody Maker ran a *Hangman's* preview in early March '68, opening with, "When poet Pete Brown, lyric-writer for the Cream heard the new ISB LP *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, he said: 'That's what the Rolling Stones have been trying to do.'"

He was right, and on the under-rated *Satanic Majesties Request* you can hear several Hangman's-isms. But the Stones' media-hyped association with the dark forces (did you know Satan was originally known as just plain ol' 'Stan' until an extra 'a' was added by a mushroom added desert scribe?) was transparent when compared to the far deeper source that the ISB were tapping into on *Hangman's*.

Robin Denslow again: "Taken as a whole, the songs are a plea for wonder at existence, a sometimes mystical, sometimes pantheistic involvement in a very live universe. In many ways it's a Wordsworthian romanticism, pro-nature, pro-imagination and anti-urban....The expression of awe at being alive, and the sense of organic connecting between all things comes, at times, near to religious statement."

Praise indeed from the establishment. Even more praise came in the reviews of the ISB concert at the Festival Hall - a showcase gig for the album - on 31st March 1968. In the F. T. on the following Tuesday Anthony Thornecroft penned a perceptive piece about the both concert and band, "The ISB are the nearest thing to godliness among the art school set: judging by the Establishment figures scattered among the audience they are about to be taken up by a more hard-bitten public."

Hangman's is.....

"Dark, mysterious and as alien as an enchanted forest. Like drinking from the black lake at the heart of the Wood Beyond The World. No one comes out unchanged. That's how I felt the first time I heard it, on a winter's evening in 1970, in a room scented by joss sticks and lit by candles".

'Be Glad' cover artist and contributor, Allan Frewin's view on the matter.

You can just imagine Marc, Syd and the rest in the audience, furtively scribbling notes under their afghans!

But!....."It is doubtful whether the delicate flavour of the *Incredibles* will make the transition. They compose their own mystical songs around melodies which ebb and flow with butterfly brittleness, and lyrics which link poetry and nonsense in an unholy marriage. The principal sources are Eastern and medieval music and, after a first hearing of disbelief, those prepared to accept the *Incredibles'* magical world, can get on terms with the most unique talent to come out of the current song-writing revival."

Americans were no less enthused, and Richard Goldstein, writing in the *New York Magazine* (29/7/68) hit the nail on the head, describing Robin's voice as having a "reedy whisper that sounds like water seeping out of ancient rocks", exhorting his readers to go out and buy *Hangman's* so they could be the "first (on your block) to worship at the universal church of magic". 'Cos that's basically how *Hangman's* hit - like a spell had been cast

over you. Lets have some more Goldstein, it's nearly as good as the album! How about:

"Each song is a tone-poem etched in filigree; delicate yet sturdy. Each lyric is an utterly disarming cross between a hymn and a nursery rhyme."

I couldn't find a bad review and the ones that weren't full of superlatives owed more to the reviewers lack of imagination and skill with language rather than any dislike of the album.

Everybody knew, to some degree or another that, in the words of Buffy St Marie, "music is alive, magick is afoot". Or something like that.

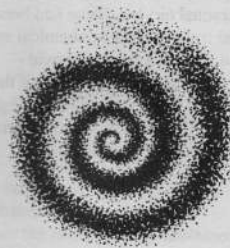
And so it was. Switched-on people all over the country were rushing home to their danettes and hand-cranked His Master's Voice phonographs and turning on to *Hangman's*, their minds scarred and certainly scared by it's austere, cold beauty to such an extent that we have to write pieces in magazines like this some twenty four years later. The power of music eh?

Critical acclaim was such that *Hangman's* was nominated for a Grammy award in the USA in 1969. The February '60 issue of 'Cash Box'

listed the Grammy nominees and there, in the 'Best Folk Performance' section along with Judy Collins' *Both Sides Now* and Dylan's *John Wesley Harding* is *Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*. Strange days indeed.

Those are just a few surrounding views and facts to the release of *Hangman's*. There is much more that could be said, drawn from cuttings, interviews and the minds and experiences of the millions of people who have now heard the album. Me? I love it, find it always challenging, always rewarding, always refreshing. If you haven't listened to it for a while I suggest you prime yourself by a long country walk, preferably in wild weather, slip it onto the turntable (or whatever) and connect with *something*. But remember:

"The opposite is also true."



Mike and dog Leaf. West Wales 1968

Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

The Hangman's Beautiful Mother

by
Gil Murray

The walls on the inside of Dave's flat had long since receded into some dusky twilight shadow of the mind and were forgotten, along with just about everything else that I'd been carrying around with me. Several disembodied and newly-risen Glasgow University students were glowing quietly, scattered around the room, vaguely aware of each other but mainly oblivious, each being given over to the rapt experience of his own vast personal nirvana. Time had been well and truly opened by chemical agencies, but we had a musical movie - projecting onto the rafters of the head in great frames of sound and light out of a little portable stereo cassette - to mark out the passing ages.

And what music was this? Well, I remember earlier musical conversations with Dave, my dead-head friend from America, who now that I think of it was a dead-ringer for Robin Williamson, with his mane of golden hair and beard. He was a peaceful and amiable Questor, who had flown on many's the coloured wind. He loved the Dead, the String Band, King Crimson, Gong.... One of his eyes was always half-shut, from the time a girl had dropped liquid acid suspension into it at a Dead concert. He said it was an almost instantaneous hit, but I digress.

Up until that evening, I had heard only the *5000 Spirits*, which I had developed a real love for. Dave on the other hand had been further. Sometime during the evening, a tape went on with *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* on one side and *Wee Tam* on the other. I looked on from my balcony and

enjoyed. Straight, like Dylan, the String Band lyrics could seem difficult and incomprehensible - some of the *5000 Spirits* was like this - but from this altitude, EVERY LINE MADE SENSE. By the time of *Waltz of the New Moon* I was shearing off into the timeless zone big time - make no mistake. Living the timeless life. Certain lines still link me directly into the spiritual and emotional richness of those moments. How about these lofty lunar heights:

The new moon is shining,
the angels are washing their windows
above the years whose jumble sale
goes spinning on below.

Or these exultant Earth scenes of hazard-free spiritual abundance:

In the floating pan pipe victorie-tee-tes
o-o of the go-oldden ha-a-arvest
safe in the care ooooooof
the deeeaar mooooooooooooooooooooo

This was surely and certainly Home. Where else would a person want to be?

So that was the first time I ever actually heard *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*. I had read about it and the String Band at the age of sixteen in a chapter of the book *The Electric Muse* (an extension of the 4 album boxed set of the same name). The chapter was written by Robin Denselow, and at that time my main interest was in the sections on Bert Jansch and Fairport Convention. However, the section entitled "Crazy British Individualists 2: The String Band" caught my eye, and I really liked the sound of what I read. He

began by saying:

"Unlike Roy (Harper), they peaked after a couple of years, after a period in which I felt they could match even the Beatles in writing ability and sheer inventiveness...."

He went on to describe the definitive (as they have become for me) first four albums. I found myself dwelling on the album titles. *The 5000 Spirits* or *the Layers of the Onion* appealed to my sense of strangeness and humour, but there was something particularly beguiling about *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*. I chewed on it for a long time. The phrase was traditional and yet not. I had never heard it and yet it seemed straight out of British folklore. It still haunts me and I'd love to find out how the title came into existence! Anyone?

There was the matter of "What did it mean?" to mull over. Whatever way you cared to look at it, it appeared to contain Death or Serious Potential Danger, coupled with Life or Strong Attraction - *The Hangman* and his *Beautiful Daughter* - but what exactly was the relationship, you kept wondering?

1. Did the *Beautiful Daughter* actually like her father *The Hangman*? Could you run away with her? If you did, would the shadow of the *Hangman* stalk you, always lurking in the darker parts of your mind?
2. If you tried to be smart and make friends with *The Hangman*, would his *Daughter* despise you for it? Can you make friends with a *Hangman*? Would he hang you for your audacity anyway? (Bummer.)

3. Could it be that you had to face The Hangman and die before you could truly achieve The Beautiful Daughter?
4. Ahem... pardon my pomposity, but does it mean that you can't have Life without also having Death?
5. Like, uh, must we be Bound before we can be Free?

are looking at an incidence of a very powerful magical enactment - a vastly ancient Rune cast at some incalculably aged time? The arrival on Planet Earth (a Garden Fair) of ourselves in the form of spiritual beings, and our subsequent union with the physical

"Baskets bound with Skin", or physical bodies. An Existence superior to all constraints, FROM WHICH WE HAVE COME, and into which we may pass again. Maybe we've forgotten that the Hangman also had a Beautiful Mother....

The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter.

There were many possible meanings, and layers of meanings. The emergence of Enlightenment after dull grey years in Conformity and British Schooling. Morning born of Night, Spring awakening out of Winter, Life after Death, Suffering begets Creation. Purging and Cleansing is required to attain Freedom. Um, every Cloud has a Silver Lining?



At this point, if there's anyone out there still reading, may I just say "Koeeaddi There!" and "Thanks for sticking with me," and move on swiftly to the next bit - the second coming of *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*.

It was on a hot autumn day in 1979 that the natural cards revolved again. This time I had

You couldn't get away from the fact that the Hangman and his Daughter were inextricably inter-locked. Maybe this very fact was the Great Puzzle. It was a four-word description of Life on Earth as we know it. If you could just find a way to pick it apart, you could undo some of the Chains that Bind us, and penetrate the Mystery. Perhaps we were looking at the very Light and Dark that are alloyed within us - the bitter sweet Human Condition that is our greatest challenge. The theme is picked up in the opening song *Koeeaddi There*:

Earth Water Fire and Air
Met together in a Garden Fair
Put in a Basket bound with Skin -
If you answer this Riddle, you'll never
begin

So what is this all about? (Or maybe I shouldn't ask!) Could it be that we

humanoid life forms that had evolved on the planet (Baskets bound with Skin) and in which we are largely still trapped? ("Woah!" I hear you cry, but I've started so I'll finish...)

The last line is the heaviest of all: "*If you answer this riddle, you'll never begin*". At first it seems like a heavy penalty designed to deter inquiring minds from penetrating the mystery - who wants to be totally Undone, such that they have never Begun? I remember shying away from pursuing it under certain heavily fungal conditions. But you could look at it differently. Exactly what are we talking about Undoing here?

Perhaps this state of "never beginning" is a desirable one - and doesn't imply "non-existence" at all! Perhaps we are talking about a native personal Existence, so Pure and Essential that it transcends physical "realities" such as Time with its "beginnings" and "endings". This highest Quality of Being would of course be entirely free from reliance on

actually bought my own copy of the record, because it was time to. I remember the process being explained to me by Mike, my dealer friend, a couple of years before:

"Hangman's is my favourite. It's really trippy and mind-blowing, but you should get the 5000 Spirits first, because it's easier to get into. Then get Hangman's!"

I knew it was time, and had primed myself accordingly. I got up in the morning to a beautiful hot sunny day, and prepared breakfast. This consisted of a bowl of cereal, and a new dish which I had not yet sampled - two hundred and twenty five (count 'em!) warmed specimens of Psilocybe semilanceata, piled up to overflowing on two pieces of brown toast!

An hour or so later I was sitting on my bed in a doubled-up position, fighting my cramping guts like there was no tomorrow, feverishly nodding my head to Heart's *Little Queen* album

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to try and get my mind off the pain. Finally I gave in, put on *Hangman's* and lit up the large (conical, Stars and Stripes) joint of Columbian that I'd prepared earlier. The result was quite miraculous; I stopped resisting the pain, the pain vanished, the one-dimensional black and white world dissolved and I found myself - or someone I seemed to recognise - dissolving into nursery garden embroideries of laughter and sorrow, looking on with a wide measure of friendly astonishment. The procession of moments eased out into a deep and languid capacious flow. Read the five lines below nice and slowly to approximate the effect. Hear the music, see the pictures, sense the meanings, feel the depth, remember the experience!

The natural cards revolve
ever changitttinggggg... -ching-
seeded elsewhere
planted in the garden fair
gro-ow trees gro-ow tree-eeees...

What WAS this wonderful seventh sense of wet and windy heath, mystical fertility and whispering of trees, gumboots and Christopher Robin? This sunny, damp and familiar magickal folklore of trees, blossom, wind, the little people, the garden wall - sweet forgotten memories running to meet me again from my own Garden of Eden.

The tap of friendly dry bones from the bible black darkness, and the chanting of riddles. The wonderfully unexpected psychological theatre of *The Minotaur's Song* - an ancient Cretan, English opera. Spell bound I watched as the Chinese audience applauded.

Then back to the secret green depths of Nature, Her moss and quiet places. The reverence in Robin's voice as he channelled the Muse. The haunted, far-away, sunset-tinged hills that rose and fell in childhood tongues of "la-las" were beaten out by light dwarfish hammers and strewn with coloured flowers. Extraordinary and impossible wild shepherd note clusters trilled from

Robin's whistle like totems in the sky above. I have never heard ANYONE else play whistle like that!

And how the bowed gimbrì at the beginning of *A Very Cellular Song* got inside me and surely everyone who heard it, like on *Chinese White*. Such a soulful, animal voice. Slowly rising, weaving, speaking without words, using emotion alone to communicate honesty when the clothing was thin, as it was. It was all too poor and too beautiful to bear, but comfort and warmth was in the wings as the organ ushered in salvation with soft friendly harmonies, hand-clapping and bells, and a bit of honest courage to help shore up the newly-bared core. I remember quite well, I remember quite well.

The cellular journey continued with memories of a simpler time flooding back from early childhood in all its amazing diversity. It was a catalogue of pre-school personalities, some very real, some conjured up, each with their own characteristic responses to life. The games and pranks were invoked in all their gusto by earnest kazoo playing. You could feel the pain of remembered childhood innocence through the joyful jumble of living room chairs, dressing-up costumes and, of course, crystallised ginger. Then, with another sudden Minotaur-like complete about-face, we were plunged down into the dimly-lit microscopic level of single-celled organisms, where the Amoeba told his timeless tale - "*Oh ah ee oo, there's absolutely no strife*".

And then Mike gave us a moment in which to remember and rekindle our own basic well-intentioned energy toward other life forms, with Liquorice a tiny whispered singing voice and Robin that deep core gimbrì in accompaniment. With centuries of war and pain laid in, how could you

possibly find such a moment? And yet, here I was, barriers down and giving, open again despite it all. Giving and Growing Together were the natural states after all, not Holding Back and Fighting.

As heart, mind and cell unfolded, the last vestiges of resistance were laid down and washed away. Hammond organ and hand drums fired up to lay down a thumping, mighty, glorious plateau of good feeling. Angelic choruses rejoiced overhead. The little bowed gimbrì sawed in exultation. Birds bobbed and weaved in garlands around the path and the sun shone fully upon the world.

I was woken from this blissful reverie by a "ssssss" and a "clop" from the machine on the table. The black plastic thing with the blue-green butterfly in the middle slowed and stopped turning. Nerves quivering with the life energy coursing through them, I picked it up and turned it over.

And the story of Side Two was just as fine. I'd like to ramble on about it too, and particularly the gems of *The Water Song* and *Nightfall* which I haven't really mentioned, but it feels like time to stop for now. Perhaps I can cover it in a later article. Meanwhile, a final word on the title of this finest of Incredible String Band creations.

I heard Robin tell a Celtic story recently, set on the Isle of Arran on the beautiful West Coast of Scotland, where I grew up. It concerned an old man and his daughter, who played host one evening to the great hero Finn MacCumhaill and his band of warriors. When they awake in his isolated cottage the next morning, the old man reveals to them his secret. His daughter is Youth ("*...and little you cared for her when once you had her.*") and "*My name... is Death.*" And so that particular cycle continues, from Hangman, to Beautiful Daughter, to Hangman again...

May the spirit of freedom live on in all of us.

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This is, for me, quite simply the most important album in my collection, number one on my Desert Island list. How can I even begin to put down on paper what I think and feel about a collection of songs that has been part of my life for a quarter of a century? Well, I suppose the beginning is as good a place as any to start, so I'll take it from there.

I first heard this album in the sixth form common room at school when I was about sixteen, around 1968 or 1969. It was the first Incredible String Band album I had come across, and it was played often, alongside other common room favourites such as the Electric Prunes. My older brother bought it first, and I often lay in bed listening to it on his record player, losing myself in the exotic and strange sounds and images conjured up by the record. So what is it about the Incredible String Band in general, and this album in particular, that is so special to me?

Firstly, *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* was always more than just a collection of songs by Robin and Mike. The title, the cover, the enclosed music sheet, and the songs themselves were all good in their own right, but put together they became a wonderful example of one of life's riddles - the whole being greater than the sum of the parts.

It was very much an album of its time, reflecting the philosophical and cultural melting pot that arose under the banner of the 'Alternative Society' in the latter half of the sixties. The title echoed the Eastern philosophy of the lotus flower, where purity springs from base mud, but it did so in a way that fired the imagination of a Western youth preoccupied by thoughts of beautiful but unreachable women, thoughts heightened by reference to the fire

"Like an eagle in the sky, tell me if air is strong"

Hangman's Beautiful Daughter

Reviewed by
Dave Barrett

king's daughter in *The Waltz of the New Moon*. The influence of the East was further reinforced by the use of sitar, gimbri, pan pipes and other such instruments (I still do not know what a chahanai is, or where it comes from). The lyrics also reflected these influences, but more importantly they captured images of dreams and myths that resonated deep within me. Above

world of the city, the world of magic and mythology, wizards and witches, angels and gods, and philosophical riddles - "life, life, remembering". "Put in a basket bound with skin", the elements that make up the album - the voice of Robin, which combined Celtic power and fluidity with the sensuousness and vocal dexterity of India, the strong and tender voice of Mike, the unconventional song structures, the inspired and imaginative musicianship, and the so-appropriate arrangements, the album is a masterpiece from start to finish.

Robin and Mike were, by the time they came to make this album, well established artists in the vanguard of the Sixties Folk Revival. Whilst they could play other instruments (Robin spent some of his earlier days playing fiddle) they were both primarily guitarists as well as songwriters. It is with *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter* that they really started to expand their musical talents in many directions. The guitar still featured strongly on Robin's compositions, and his use of open tunings and unusual finger-picking helped to create his original style, but his use of other



instruments was almost as important - the sound of gimbri and pan pipes has haunted me to this day. Not to be outdone, Mike took up keyboards and sitar to great effect (although purists may possibly disagree with me on the latter point). As with Robin's compositions, Mike's songs followed their own course, even into and out of someone else's song on one occasion, in blissful regard of the established traditions of songwriting.

all, they captured life itself - the microscopical world of the amoeba, the charming autobiographical world of young Robin and Licorice and the dangerous riches of young Mike's imagination, the world of the birds and the fishes, the choked and polluted

And so to the songs.....
It all starts with three Robin Williamson compositions, each one totally different from the one before it.

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Koeoaaadi There begins in philosophical vein, setting the tone of the album with its opening line - "the natural cards revolve, ever changing", and continuing the theme in the chorus. Interspersed with the philosophy are charming childhood memories ending with Robin and Licorice escaping "across the mournful morning moor motoring away" - a typical example of Robin's playful use of language - leaving behind them the simple joys, fears and restrictions of Robin's childhood and moving into the wilder world, taking with them a child-like love of riddles and wonder.

The Minotaur's Song comes next, a nonsense song sung with pure theatricality, evidence of Robin's growing interest in the other performing arts. Each word is elaborated and emphasised to fullest effect, accompanied by a backdrop of guitar, piano, chorus and sound effects. Theatricality does not often move successfully from the stage and onto vinyl, but this song seems to work, largely because the melody is strong and sounds such fun.

Next comes *Witches Hat*, a song of two parents. It begins thoughtfully, with Robin singing mournfully about "quiet places where the moss grows green", accompanied by effective guitar picking. The lyrics are sad and wistful, and the music has a haunted, magical feel to it, never more so than when the words trail off into a vocal improvisation accompanied by echoey pan pipes and gimbri. The mood changes though, with the second part of song. Originally a song for children, the lyrics start up again, but this time with a collection of amusing images in the form of more nonsense rhymes.

The rest of the first side is taken up by *A Very Cellular Song*, a long composition by Mike, encompassing within a lullaby by the Pindar Family. The song is of epic proportions, starting with images of childhood Christianity and opening out into a wonderful celebration of life, from the microscopic to the cosmic. The song is an anthem to the Hippy Movement, if such a thing ever existed. It is all there, the vibrations, the absurd and amusing imagery - the idea of riding backwards on a giraffe, stopping every so often top laugh, is quite exquisite - the joy, and the philosophy. It is very

interesting musically as well, stylistically eclectic, with the sound of organ, harpsichord, guitar, gimbri, Jew's harp and other assorted instruments blended imaginatively together. The first side ends of a positive, uplifting, devotional note with a chorus about "letting the pure light within you guide you all the way on".

Side two opens with *Mercy I City City*, a Mike Heron song which hits at the soulless, empty nature of the city with unerring accuracy and insight, a powerful ecological song well before it was fashionable to be Green. It works musically, too, with a strong melody and good accompaniments, and the result is, to my mind, Mike's best song.

After that, Robin launches into *Waltz of the New Moon*. Up until I heard this song, I always associated waltzes with the name Strauss, and I had never enjoyed them. I still don't like Strauss, but the waltz has at least been liberated from its classical straight-jacket. The lyrics are obscure, involving floating pan pipe victories, spinning castles, and Lord Krishna's ring amongst other things, but the imagery is rich and the language eloquent. Somehow it all makes sense, even though I could never explain it. Once more, the melody is strong and original, and the music suitably accomplished, flowing beautifully into *The Water Song*, a short mystical hymn to the life-giving element. Robin's tin whistle accompaniment is as liquid as the "dark or silvery mother of life" itself.

Three is a Green Crown follows, an example of Robin at his deepest. His guitar has the bottom E string dropped down to C, an unusual tuning, and it is used to very good effect, providing a rhythmical droning that underpins his singing. The lyrics betray a literary background - with echoes of Blake - as well as the Eastern influences that are so evident throughout the album, the latter being reinforced very effectively by Mike's sitar playing. The song is an inner exploration, sometimes painful (some people think that it is drug related) sometimes profound, where Robin lays bare his psyche in a Faustian attempt to be granted "the tongue that all the earth does sing".

In *Swift as the Wind*, Mike tells us of the wild and wonderful imagination of his childhood, and the attempts of no

doubt well meaning but misguided adults to curb his solitary passions and "spend some time downstairs" with the other kids for his own good. Luckily for us, a compromise is reached which allows Mike to remain true to his inner self.

After all these emotional trials and tribulations, the album ends with *Nightfall*, a wonderfully serene lullaby. Robin's eloquent and elegant lyrics and soothing vocals are set to a perfect musical accompaniment, with Mike excelling himself on sitar, a fitting ending to a truly original album.

The In-Between Bits

Vocal interludes from ISB concerts. This issue - Malcolm introduces 'Indian Tune', Robin 'Circus Girl', at Bolton Town Hall 23.02.73, courtesy of Eric Craven.

Malcolm: "We're now going to play another number which takes us to India, which is somewhere I never managed to get to although in the summer of 1966 many people went to India. The thing to do was to go to India and come back and say 'I've been to India', and nod knowingly in a sage-like manner, but I never made it. I only got as far as Paris, although I had great intentions of going to Australia as well."

Robin: "Well now, this song is called 'Circus Girl' and it's about an acrobat in the circus seen by a young boy. I had the idea that it should be played by a very miraculous kind of band playing music for trombones and ice cream cornets and preferably with those kind of cutest of faces where they have ears coming out of their eyes. We're going to have Malcolm playing percussion in this number and also Gerard's going to do orchestral effects of the organ here. Maestro, please."

THINGS

Dear Be Glad,

Just to start the letters ball rolling, as it were, a few odds and ends of information which may be of interest. I must mention the very lovely Nigel Schofield who, font of information that he is, provided much of this Incredible trivia.

OK, so first off a couple of matters arising from the *No Ruinous...* issue. The first tune of the set of Jigs, although given its correct American title in the issue is perhaps better known under its pre-migration title, *Speed The Plough*. Other versions can be found by The Albion Band and John Kirkpatrick. I can also confirm that the squeezebox on *Down Before Cathay* is a concertina. If not played by the band (Robin?) a number of possible players spring to mind; check out other Island records of the period for clues. *Second Fiddle* has an interesting story attached. Around that period Island had planned an album (on Help?) which would pair their reggae acts with their British acts and *Second Fiddle* appears to be one of the few recorded pieces for this project. The only other known item being *Johnny Too Bad* by John Martyn (the 12" single version, not the one on *Grace and Danger*).

Another interesting story regards the first song book and Mr. Traum. You will all remember Robin's painted acoustic guitar, as seen on Julie Felix and in the songbook. It seems that in an unspecified accident Traum destroyed the guitar and by way of recompense offered to do the tablature for the songbook, an offer obviously taken up. I still thank the songbook for my introduction to the world of open tunings (and the String Band for my ending up playing 30 or so instruments).

Finally, we believe the voice sitar was used for a TV advert. Anyone know which one?

Love the mag etc.

Tim Moon

Letters Letters Letters

CONTROVERSY?

Dear Mike, Stuart, Dave and John,

There's currently furious recording activity on the ex-ISB scene - Robin's got a new CD, Malcolm's in the studio, Clive Palmer continues his cassette releases (coming soon - the Licorice McKechnie Campfire Tapes?). But an ominous silence from you lot. Why?

You've got wonderful songs, classy arrangements and a great band. All you need to do is to produce a crystal clear, well balanced studio reproduction of your live sound and you'll be on to a winner. Forget big time labels and producers - just the Haswell percussion experience on the left, beautifully understated sonorous bass in the middle, filigree guitar work from John on the right and the Voice Of The Smiling Man on top of it all - it'll sound brilliant. Get off those chairs and into the studio!

Adrian Whittaker, on behalf of fans too many to mention.

DOES Robin Williamson (Incredible String Band) use the same guitar that he played when he wrote and recorded "First Girl I Loved," and if so, how did he get it so splendidly decorated? (B. Rawlings, Bath). What percussion did the ISB use on "Creation" from their LP, "Changing Horses" and when will they be going on tour again? — L. Edmondson, South Shields.

■ Yes, I've still got the same guitar, which is an old Levin given to me about seven or eight years ago. I removed all the varnish with acetone and when I had scraped the instrument down to the bare wood, I painted it with coloured ink. The percussion used on "Creation" was African talking drums, Syrian drums, claves, tambourine, gongs and cymbals. We shall be touring the whole of October. — ROBIN WILLIAMSON.

Notes & Queries

Questions we get most frequently asked and queries we'd like to know more about.

- Q. Where's Licorice?
A. No-one knows. She was last seen in America some years ago. Since then - nothing. We're working on it.
- Q. Will Mike and Robin ever play together again.
A. It seems highly unlikely - and certainly not at the October event.

Q. What's happened to all the other minor people connected with the ISB - Gerard Dott, Graham Forbes etc.
A. There will be a 'Where Are They Now' feature in the November issue which will deal with this more fully.

The only queries this issue (unless you can answer the one posed by Tim Moon's letter) are televisual ones. We know the ISB did various TV appearances - can anyone be specific about names, dates, times etc? Also the brother of one of our readers remembers a TV play dealing with London which showed a brief glimpse of the String Band playing in a folk club. Any ideas?

If you have any letters you want publishing, ads. you'd like to run or questions you'd like answered on any arcane aspect of String Band-dom please send them to the editorial address.

Rose leaves Incredibles

ROSE SIMPSON has left the Incredible String Band to go to Los Angeles to learn sound recording.

The Incredibles will be adding new members and will be appearing again by mid-March. The group's February/March tour has had to be postponed, although the band will be playing these dates later.

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COVERED WITH GLORY

or: *Wearing your Art on your Sleeve*

Part One

From Folk Clubs To Frank's Garden

by

Raymond Greenoaken

The Compact Disc revolution, it seems, has finally consigned vinyl to the scrap heap of cultural history, prompting loud huzzahs from the record buying public at large and a few lonely ululations of woe from those eccentrics for whom surface noise is the necessary roughage in their aural diet. The demise of the standard 12" vinyl lp has, however, had another consequence, less well noticed but not less significant: the end of the Golden Age of album covers.

The obvious reason for this is the shrinkage of the format. CD covers are only a third of the size of the old lp sleeve, and have proportionately less visual impact. Small Is Beautiful may be a sound ecological nostrum, but in the area of the album cover design, alas, things are never going to be quite the same.

The Golden Age could be said to have been inaugurated by Peter Blake's ground-breaking design for the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper* album. Prior to that, the album cover invariably consisted of an identikit pouting photo of the artiste(s) on the front, and on the back a few paragraphs of breathless PR persiflage, the track listing and the vital information that Clarifoil is a product of British Celanese Ltd. Psychedelia changed all that. Under the influence of mind-altering chemicals popular music rapidly acquired a visual dimension. Any acid veteran will confirm that the note of B flat is a cerulean starfish; or that the E7 chord takes the form of a phalanx of gently undulating radishes. Light shows quickly became *de rigeur* at any psychedelic happening. Poster art transmogrified from perfunctory slabs of print into a gorgeous efflorescence of colourful and exotic imagery. In this climate it was inevitable that the album cover would become a vital medium for creative and

visual expression.

The Incredible String Band were on the cusp of this movement. The covers for *5000 Spirits*, *Hangman's* and *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* were as innovative and arresting as any of the period. Even browsers who had never heard the music were left in no doubt that the ISB were a unique and distinctive entity. This survey is partly prompted by the recognition that the ISB have a pivotal role in the history of album cover art, but it's also a discussion of how their covers reflected the change and development taking place within the band as their careers advanced, and of how they projected their own sense of identity to the record buying public.

When the ISB's debut album hit the shops in 1966, the Golden Age was still a gleam in Peter Blake's paintbox. Plucked out of the Scottish folk club circuit and still neatly barbered, the trio of Clive Palmer, Robin Williamson and Mike Heron must have struck their new label Elektra as unlikely flag-bearers of the burgeoning youth culture; they thought they'd signed a bunch of pale, intense folkies. Joe Boyd's cover photo shows them in what looks like a music shop store room, surrounded by shelves stuffed with music MSS. Clive is clad in a cheap shiny raincoat and lumberjack shirt he's clearly been sleeping in, and brandishes a Turkish fiddle; Robin, though severely coiffed, favours an early psychedelic chemise and plucks perfunctorily at a rustic triangular viol; and Mike, dapper in a white Bri-nylon shirt and looking like a trainee accountant (which, as it happens, he was), wraps his arms round a vast bellied stringed instrument that could be a scale model of a Klingon mother ship. They look a singularly ill-assorted trio. The photo is superimposed on a

black background with thin laser-like red shafts fanning out in various directions, and surmounted by the band's name etched in yellow.

The cover of the American release is, however, strikingly different. On this the lads pose in a scrapyard, crouched in the skeleton of a bus, looking relaxed and affable. Mike's clearly given accountancy the heave-ho, and sports a fur coat (his mum's?) and headband. Clive, by contrast, is tricked out in a rumpled grey suit with matching beatnik cap, and bears an unnerving resemblance to Jack Charlton. It's fairly plain that at this stage Elektra hadn't a clue how to present the band. When Robin and Mike regrouped to record *5000 Spirits*, they cannily took matters into their own hands.

Simon Postuma and Marijke Koger, two Dutch artists and friends of the ISB, were invited by the band to design the *Spirits* sleeve. Simon and Marijke had already come to the attention of the Beatles, who'd commissioned a painting from them for the inside spread of the *Sgt. Pepper* gatefold. But wires were crossed, it seems, and the painting turned out to be the wrong shape and was never used. (The Beatle connection proved fruitful nevertheless: their shopfront design for the Apple Boutique attracted much public attention later in the year.)

Their *Spirits* sleeve became an instant psychedelic classic. If *Pepper*, with its dayglo marching band and ironic juxtapositions, embodied a distinctly English sensibility, all surface glitter and brittle whimsy, *5000 Spirits* reached deep into the dark tarns of the mythopoeic mind to confect a dazzling heraldic assemblage of archetypal, pan-global motifs, all drenched in vibrant rainbow hues.

The composition is dominated by a

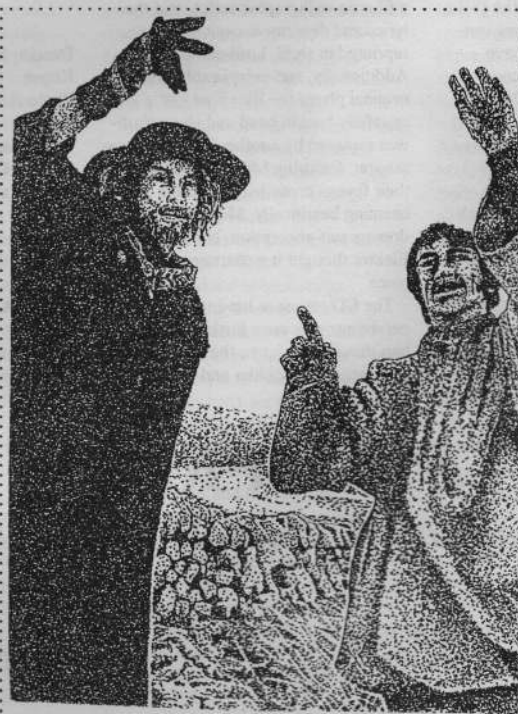
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winged, Janus-headed hermaphrodite, embodying the eternal polarities of dark and light, male and female, life and death. Around this figure surge the great cyclic forces of growth and decay; stars and planets whirl in their courses; and strung across this phantasmagoric scene like a line of psychedelic washing are the swirling letters of THE INCREDIBLE STRING BAND. Whatever else it was (pretentious, chaotic, deliriously daft...?), it was certainly eye-catching.

And, as importantly, it faithfully reflected the music it accompanied: songs that seemed to be coming from everywhere - from myth, dreams, nursery rhymes, bedsits, haunted ruins, oriental souks and foggy Scottish backstreets. The rear cover carried the title *The 5000 Spirits Or The Layers Of The Onion* (The 'L' in Layers is shaped somewhat in the manner of a 'C'; I remember thinking that if the word 'cayers' did not exist then it certainly ought to, and I accordingly used it in several adolescent verses); below it Mike's and Robin's names are edged with flame. Framed by the lettering is a photo (actually a reverse image, trivia buffs) of the two minstrels looking mysterious among shrubbery, Robin resembling a furtive satyr, Mike as expressionless as a herm. You just knew these guys were *interesting*.....

Even in those indulgent times, however, this was the sort of tour de force you could only pull off once, and the sleeve of the ISB's third album, *The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter*, offered an effective contrast. (At this point, such a survey as I'm attempting here is complicated by Elektra's habit of tinkering with the sleeve design when reprinting the albums. In *Hangman's*' case it should be noted that in the early 70s the front cover became the rear cover and vice versa). Robin once described *Hangman's* as a "winter album", and

the cover reflects that brumal mood. The front cover finds Robin and Mike, suitably wrapped in layers of stout winter garments, stravaiging across a snowy moor near Balmore, north of Glasgow, against a backdrop of icy blue sky. The title and the band's name (plus the chunky Elektra logo) are squeezed into the top right hand corner in plain white lettering. The whole album, indeed, is a sort of subterranean journey through labyrinthine passages populated by



minotaurs, demon faces and slithering, fissiparous things; or, if you like, by visions, memories and intimations neglected or rejected by Western scientific rationalism; but certainly, the children have seen them.....

The rear cover photo catches Mike and Robin communing in a sheltered copse with Rose and Licorice, Robin's dog Leaf, two unidentified friends and a gaggle of perplexed-looking children in wacky hats. The picture strongly evoked the communal ethic emerging in the 60s counter-culture; hitherto it

had been usual for musicians to be portrayed in splendid isolation from their social milieu. Another novel feature of the album's original design was the total absence of credits or even a track listing. These were included on the accompanying lyric sheet. Perhaps it was felt that the world wasn't quite ready for titles like *Koeooaddi There* and *Three Is a Green Crown*....

Further complications arise when we come to look at *Wee Tam And The Big Huge*. Double albums were pretty much a rarity in 1968 (the Beatles' *White Album* was some months away from release), and Elektra clearly entertained doubts about the format's sales potential. Thus they hit on the

bizarre marketing strategy of making the album available simultaneously as a double and two singles. Though the band's more perfervid followers, myself included, insisted on buying all three, the majority of buyers were naturally more circumspect. This accounts for the album's virtual invisibility in the album charts, despite *Hangman's* lengthy tenancy in the upper reaches. After a few years the double album was withdrawn, leaving *Wee Tam* forever sundered from *The Big Huge*, a situation that, sadly, even the CD reissues failed to remedy.

The sleeve design, however, was a masterpiece. *Sgt. Pepper* had established the fashion of including the song lyrics on the sleeve. *Wee Tam And The Big Huge* intrepidly broke the mould by blazoning the lyrics across the *front* cover. The message was unmistakable: hey, man, the words are *important*. Against a chaste white background resembling the page of a book the various lyrics were set down in four elegant columns, each commencing with a large, intricately decorative capital borrowed from an Art Nouveau alphabet of 1889. This

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arrangement was co-ordinated across both formats, with minor differences: the double album has half-tone print, with bright red capitals and pale blue decoration; the single albums have strong black print, with wine capitals and mustard decoration for *Wee Tam* and blue capitals and turquoise decoration for *The Big Huge*.

The back cover of each (the inside spread on the double album) is given over to a photo portrait of Mike and Robin. These photos were selected from a session conducted in Frank Zappa's garden in LA during the ISB's American tour in May 1968; we can only guess what Frank must have thought of it all, given his famous disdain for foppish flower children. Mike and Robin were by then in the full bloom of shimmering androgyny, Mike dons a swirly high-collared blouse, beads and cummerbund to deflect attention from his five o'clock shadow; Robin, now beardless, looks impossibly angelic and appears to be turning by degrees into Brigitte Bardot. The Feminist movement in the late 60s was just beginning its project of deconstructing masculinity, and here were the ISB seeming to offer a new

model of manhood, shorn of macho swagger, that helped to shape the mood of the times. (I recall a friend of mine studying the sleeve closely and confidently asserting that Robin and Mike must be a gay couple!)

Regrettably, Elektra's repackaging in the intervening years has fatally damaged the unity and originality of the design. In the late 70s, as with *Hangman's*, the front and back covers were reversed, producing a completely conventional sleeve; the album titles were added to the new front covers in a filigree, calligraphic script, and the lyrics and decorative capitals were reprinted in shrill, lurid colours. Additionally, and inexplicably, the original photo for *Wee Tam* - a tastefully backlit head and torso shot - was replaced by another from the same session, featuring Mike and Robin at their feyest, cross-legged, Robin beaming beatifically, Mike adrift in dreamy self-absorption. No doubt Elektra thought it a charming period piece.

The CD reissues have taken this pernicious process a further stage, banishing the lyrics to the accompanying booklet and thereby

fracturing the design's unity irreparably. There's progress for you. But let's allow Elektra a few Brownie points for restoring Robin's watercolour insert of his poem *The Head*, originally included with the double album and therefore something of a rarity: you can now find it reprinted in *The Big Huge* booklet.

Credit where it's due.....

First Album

Design: William S. Harvey
Photo: Joe Boyd

5000 Spirits

Design: Simon Postuma and Marijke Koger
Photo: Uncredited

The Hangman's Beautiful Daughter

Design: Osiris (Visions) Ltd
Photo: Iain Skinner

Wee Tam And The Big Huge

Design: Elaine Gongora of Diogenic Attempts Ltd
Photos: Guy Webster

Next issue: Part Two: Changing Horses For Rockier Courses

STOP PRESS

Williamson & Renbourn Tour Dates

JUNE

18th - Beverley, Folk Festival
19th - Beverley, Folk Festival - afternoon
19th - Burnley Mechanics - evening
20th - Bury, Metropolitan Arts Centre
23rd - Norwich, Arts Centre
24th - Jackson Lane Community Centre, London
25th - Horsley, near Stroud, Festival
26th - Glastonbury Festival, Avalon Stage
30th - Leicester, Pheonix Arts Centre

JULY

1st - Totnes, Star Hotel
2nd - St. Austell, Arts Centre
3rd - Bracknell, Festival
4th - Jersey, Arts Centre
6th - Aberdeen, Lemon Tree
7th - Glasgow, Renfrew Ferry
8th - Edinburgh, venue TBA
9th - Redcar, Festival
17th - Birmingham, Arena. Afternoon
22nd - Reading, Womad Festival

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Firstly, we're going to treat the theory that Malcolm was in some way the beginning of the end for the String

Band with the contempt it deserves. An oft-repeated canard dreamed up by various music hacks and old hippies who weren't prepared to accept change. Unfortunately these received ideas stick and opinion all too easily becomes 'fact'. I was more than pleased when I was able to book him for the January event and as many of you know Malcolm and Pete, with the occasional help of Graham Forbes turned in a storming set. Unique Gravity records supremo Mark Anstey was so impressed that he got Malcolm into the studio immediately, the result of which, *Nothing Strange*, is his first solo album (reviewed on p.20) and gone over in slightly more depth here.

In lieu of an interview with Malcolm (there will *definitely* be one in the November issue) I spoke briefly with him by 'phone on the subject of the album and his future plans. Unfortunately I accidentally wiped the tape so all this information is from memory (sorry Malcolm!).....

The songs on *Nothing Strange* date from various times over the past decade and slightly beyond with *Liner*, the song with the longest pedigree, being first performed at the 1983 Edinburgh Festival.

Nothing Strange continues the lines of songwriting opened by Malcolm on *Earthspan*, *No Ruinous Feud* and *Hard Rope*. His choice of subjects for song has become more focussed and now verges on the Zevon-esque and Thompson-like - autobiographical musings coupled with a thoughtful way of looking at the world, not being afraid to say what he thinks or write about what he sees happening. Protest songs were a thing of the 60s, now courtesy of Malcolm and co. we are getting observation songs in the 90s.

Subject matter ranges from the absurd (*Big Boss*, about a factory run by a fox reared human!!!) to the deadly serious, *Sarajevo*, while the title track, *Nothing Strange*, was itself inspired by

Nothing Strange?

The continuing story of Malcolm Le Maistre

a painting by a French pointillist painter. Not your normal choices of song content, you'll agree.

Panama on the other hand, whilst on the surface a prophetic future conflict song, is actually drawn from Malcolm's reading of Lucius Shepherd's book *Life During Wartime* (the title of which, fact spotters, is in turn nicked from a Talking Heads song)

Malcolm's use of a string quartet has made the album markedly different from most things on the market. The strings are used sparingly, too sparingly if you ask me, and throughout their use there is a swirling, cyclical mood to them.

Overall and the upbeat songs notwithstanding there is a feel of getting older, reflection, the loss of youth to wars they didn't create, chemicals they don't want and cultural symbols they can't escape (*Dancing* is the best example of this). Very definitely adult concerns.

As he says, you can't write love songs forever and the eclectic collection here ably demonstrates that, although I think it's fair to say that Malcolm loves life but is distressed by the way things seem to be going.

Sarajevo is a case in point here, brought into being as the result of a holiday Malcolm took in Venice when he realised that there was a serious human conflict happening just a few miles down the autobahn.

It's worth remembering

that WWI started as a result of events in Sarajevo and earlier in history that well known paranoia-

monger Nostradamus indicated that WWII would also start in the Balkans. Far from cashing in on the conflict (Malcolm wrote the song for himself, a long time before there was any talk of record deals), it's just an honest expression of worry and hope. It should be listened to - it should be a single.

If all goes well there may be some American dates later in the year for Malcolm and band, supporting Lief Sorbye's *Tempest*, a single from the album and, who knows, maybe even another album. In the meantime buy the album and look forward to seeing Malcolm at the ISB Convention in October.

I've lived with the album for a week now and it does, genuinely, get better and better. It's not the sort of thing Robin or Mike could or would do, it's not traditional and it's not acoustic ensemble stuff, rather it's bold and adventurous music far removed from most of today's stuff. But isn't that exactly why you bought ISB material in the first place? I could go on.....



Malcolm and Pete at Hebden Bridge

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Above: Mike, John and *Graham Forbes?* Yup, sure is

Left: The Dave Haswell Percussion Experience and (inset) *Tabla Motown* anyone?



Left: "Altogether now. You put your right leg in." Lief Sorbye sees how many things he can do at once

Photo Credits
(in no particular order)

George Bacon
Simon Roberts
Andy Roberts

Right: Tim Moon gets down and, er, plays folk music





8th January '94

No written report because no-one did one! The photos speak for themselves. Around 150 souls attended the Birchcliffe Centre at Hebden Bridge and were treated to a day of music from Mike Heron's Incredible Acoustic Band, Malcolm Le Maistre - in triumphant return situation, Lief Sorbye, Raymond & Kate and Tim Moon. Videos were watched, rare tapes listened to, memorabilia perused. The quiz was a total success and everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves throughout the day. Thanks to all who attended, you made it the day that it was. If you couldn't make it, or even if you *were* there, why not come to the ISB Convention in October?

Above: Malcolm and Pete finish a number

Above right: Malcolm, in the guise of Victor Norbechevsko, picks up a penguin

Right: Kate and Raymond woo the audience with an outstanding selection of ISB cover versions



Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

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S

Nothing Strange: Malcolm Le Maistre

unique gravity UGCD 5401
Release date June '94. Advance orders from Network Mail: Price 11.75 UK 13.75 ROW inc. p&p. 196 Old Rd. Brampton, Chesterfield, Derbs. S40 3QW

Bet you never thought you'd hear from Malcolm again! Well, he's back with *Nothing Strange*, his first and I would think certainly not his last, solo album.

What we have here is a song collection of great variety and tempo led by Malcolm's strong and distinctive vocals. Instrumentally Malcolm's been adventurous and besides a variety of guitars and keyboards he's made significant use of a string quartet, which underpin some of the songs to great effect and provides some interesting end pieces to tracks.

Is it like his ISB stuff is bound to be a question - yes and no I'm afraid is all I can come up with. It's not like his ISB stuff but it is obviously Malcolm. Put simply, if you like his work on *Earthspan* this won't disappoint one bit.

In 1968, the opener is an autobiographical song, a vaguely Byrds-ish jangle to the guitar and reminiscences of seeing Hendrix in Central Park, upbeat and vital. In contrast *Men and Boys* is a brooding meditation on the futility of war. It's got a sort of romantic arrangement and a female vocal that sounds very Likky. *Dancing* is another song of war and lost youth, the quartet waltzing off into oblivion in a nicely repetitive string riff.



And of course there are a few daft songs, *Big Boss* (which is off not one but several walls), *Liner* (remember the opener from Hebden Bridge?), and *Joie de Vivre* with its country'n'cajun guitar, genuinely funny lyrics and word play and sound advice next for time you're feeling a bit pissed off with things. Singalonga Malcolm songs the lot of 'em.

It's hard to pick out a favourite as it's an album which improves with each hearing and I'm constantly able to pick new things out. *Headlines* and the title track itself are constantly revealing things of interest but I think *Sarajevo* has to be singled out for special treatment. Not least for the fact that Malcolm's been the only person bold enough so far to write a song about the Balkans conflict and one which brings the nearness of it all home. Listen to it and you'll know why it should be a single.

Panama addresses itself to a future theatre of war in a world which is ruled by the chemical cartels in one way or another. This track opens with a fantastic ISB style whistle leading into latin percussion and some deft Spanish guitar work towards the end.

Finally we are treated to *This Is Life*, a litany of, er, everything really. Good and bad, ending with a hopeful, "faith".

On the production front the sound quality is striking, it's got a good, clear and strong sound, one of the advantages of it coming out on a small new label which cares - and what's more it sounds great loud!

The CD comes complete with a twelve page booklet with all the lyrics and lots of photographs.

As I've mentioned elsewhere there's a lot of nonsense talked about Malcolm and his contribution to the ISB. Nonsense on stilts in fact. The plain fact is he's still out there writing quality, emotive songs with well thought out instrumentation, and if you don't hear it - especially through ignorance - then you've missed out on another strand of the ever unfurling String Band experience. It didn't just stop in 1974 you know. Basically you're going to have to take my word on this one and make a purchase.

AR

WHEEL OF FORTUNE: John Renbourn and Robin Williamson
Demon Records
FIENDCD 746

Those of us who have been following Robin Williamson around the folk clubs, arts centres and village halls of this land over the past decade or more have addressed many an earnest prayer heavenwards. "O ineffable Mover of all Things," we intone solemnly, "may it please Thee to get some of our hero's live performances onto a commercial recording, tout suite!" And lo, the mysterious being that directs the vast and intricate workings of the cosmos has duly hearkened to our pleas - and thrown in John Renbourn for good measure.

Wheel of Fortune was recorded on a couple of dates of the two men's joint tour of the USA last year, in Chicago and St Louis, (with one Renbourn solo track recorded in Madison, Wisconsin). In many ways it's an unlikely alliance: folk-blues and Early Music guitar boffin snuggles up with neo-Celtic harpslinger and bard. And indeed, they are very different performers. Ex-Pentangler Renbourn, muted, cerebral and fastidious, spins delicate filigrees of melody and sings as though waking from some pleasant dream. Williamson, by contrast, is a master of extremes. At times he wails, thrums and chants like an archdruid on benzedrine; at other times he coos and whimpers as the harp soughs plaintively. Chalk and cheese, the two of them, but somehow it works.

Perhaps the key is the fact that they're not trying too hard for stylistic compatibility. The prevailing impression is of two musicians kicking a few songs and tunes around for the sheer fun of it. High jinks rather than high art, you might say, but even so there are some stirring performances

here. Choicest among these is Robin's solo rendering of *The Rocks Of Bawn*. Chiefly associated with the great Irish singer Joe Heaney, it's a song about "the injustices of the world" and Robin essays it with incandescent passion and intensity to an eloquent guitar accompaniment. Also featured is *The Lights Of Sweet St Anne's*, the first Williamson original to surface on record since *Ten Of Songs*: a poem of longing and loss set to a sturdy, simple melody and deftly embroidered by Renbourn's thoughtful guitar lines.

Other than *Little Niles* (a meandering guitar instrumental) and Archie Fisher's traditionally-inflected *Lindsay* (which has a gorgeous tune and a great propulsive arrangement for two guitars), the remaining titles are traditional, drawn mainly from Ireland. The centrepiece, arguably, is *Finn And The Old Man's House*, eight minutes of Robin in storytelling mode. Mesmeric stuff, consummately skilful and twinkling with raffish humour.

The two of them will be touring Britain together this summer. It may be that they'll be travelling under the collective name John Renbourn wryly suggests on the album: the *Impenetrable String Tangle*. As an alternative, a friend of mine (my junior my some years) offers *The Elderly Brothers!* But these are not ageing 60s dinosaurs reheating old glories or hitching their cart to the latest trend. This is timeless music, old as the hills and fresh as the summer rain. You know these men can hack it. Buy now. **Raymond Greenoaken**

Songs of Love & Parting/Five Bardic Mysteries: Robin Williamson
The Music Corporation: TMC 9403

This is so new I haven't even heard it yet so I can't comment on the sound,

save to say John Haxby of TMC assures me it is vastly improved from the vinyl original, which was a bit weak. And those of you who bought the CD issue of *Glimt At The Kindling* will be aware of TMC's commitment to sound quality. I have received the sixteen page booklet though and for Robin's fans it's a must buy just to obtain this. All the lyrics are included together with quite atmospheric photographs of places in the songs - The Minchmoor, Balwearie Tower - and concert photographs by Jim Hill. Not only do you get *Songs* but that nice Mr Haxby has also added *Five Bardic Mysteries*, previously only available on Robin's Pigs Whisker



Robin at Southport. July 1993. Photo credit: Jim Hill

label. It's small labels like TMC, producing quality material, both sound and packaging, that should be supported, so support this one. **AR**

Across The Borders: Lief Sorbye

Firebird FAM-10040-2
Available from Network Mail. CD only.

Lief is of Norwegian origin but for the past few years he's been playing music in America as leader of the folk/rock/thrash band *Tempest*. *Across The Borders* is his first solo offering. Those who attended the Hebden Bridge event will recall a few of the

songs from here. Lief's got a very earthy, in some places medieval sound (on *Montara Bay* for instance) - medieval contemporary that is because he manages to couple an old feel to modern instruments.

His versions of ISB favourite *Maybe Someday* (folk funk anyone?) and Williamson's *For The Three Of Us* (driven by elemental percussion and haunted by skirling bagpipes - it has to be heard to be believed) are outstanding and there's no getting away from the fact that there is a strong ISB flavour to the album (Lief's a big fan).

Any album that has guitars, fiddles, madola, harmonica, whistles, didgeridoo, bodhran, bagpipes, tar,

darbuka and the usual bass and drums has to be coming from the sort of place we like and *Across The Borders* certainly fulfills the promise of its sleeve notes.

It's all uplifting stuff, well recorded, and in the spirit if not to the letter of the String Band. More ISB covers Lief please. On his own songs perhaps he could do with a lyricist to avoid some of the more

twee lines, but that's just a minor complaint. Well worth a listen and miles better than most of the folk rock purveyed in this country from the likes of Fairport etc etc. **AR**



It was one of those strange incidents that lead to something of lasting significance. The usual ritual, I'm standing in a record shop and can't quite think what to buy. Nothing I really want, so the decision is whether to replace vinyl with CD or investigate someone's back catalogue or.....take a chance.

Spinning the wheel of fortune in Bradford's *Our Price* I come across a strange looking CD under 'P' - *Pooka* - by Pooka, presumably (WEA 4509, CD or CASS). No other name. Weird cover. Buy.

A week later and Pooka is the *only* thing I've listened to, maybe 50 or 60 times, and I haven't done that for years with an album. It got to the stage when I almost erected a small shrine to the album and made votive offerings on a daily basis. Totally, utterly hooked - and you should be too. Why?

Well.....
The ghosts of many different musics flit through Pooka's strange brand of English vocal eccentricity - Kate Bush, Joni Mitchell, Ricki Lee Jones, Susanne Vega, Indigo Girls, Bjork, early 70s John Martyn, Tim Buckley - hell, even hints of the folkier side of Jefferson Airplane. I could hear them all in there somewhere. Added to that there's something palpably String Band about the whole enterprise - I can't quite put my finger on it but if we were to couch it in terms of an earlier decade I think we wouldn't be far from the mark to say that there is a String Band, ahem, "vibe" about Pooka music. You'll see.

I'd certainly like to browse through their record collections if only to find I'm hideously wrong. But like any good haunting when it's investigated there's much, much, more too it and this is certainly the case with Pooka.

Track by track analysis would be pointless as you aren't familiar with it, but so what?. But from the opening bluesy, languid *City Sick* to the curious, closing, *Sleepwalking*, the way they can sing individually but most of all in harmony just draws you in and pulls and tugs at your heartstrings.

Bluebell has a sort of lost and longing about it, all harmonies and piano background. Deceptively simple lyrics deceive and just when you think you've got a handle on it the guitars seem to go a bit discordant and it

Pooka

A new vocal narcotic

*Andy Roberts in new band
astonishment shock*

finishes off with a huge filmic swathe of sound. It's odd, it's strange, it's bloody fantastic.

Graham Robert Wood - what's that about then girls?, simple but compelling, building with linked instrumental breaks that you could easily imagine Robin and Mike playing, dusted with a plaintive harmonica at discreet points. The cool, jazzy, breeziness of, er, *Breeze* follows, Pooka in laid back mode here and the hot, wet, pre-thundertorm summery atmospherics of *Nothing In Particular*, with its breathy sax and glistening piano really put me in mind of John Martyn's *Bless The Weather* album

Dream comes equipped with some excellent, brilliantly timed and understated guitar work and, well the rest of the tracks proceed in similar form. There isn't a duff track, only ones you haven't listened to enough yet - and make no mistake, Pooka is an album that gets under your skin and in your sub-conscious like some strange vocal narcotic in a way that few albums can or do, to the extent that it's likely to make you obsessive/compulsive about it.

The finale, *Sleepwalking*, with its Bjork-ish vocal is just from somewhere else entirely, a repetitive guitar riff underpins some quirky percussion with witchy voices and fades with what sounds like a buzzing insect and a horse blowing. As they rightly say, "*Happiness at last*". Put it back on again.....

Back to the sleeve (I firmly believe in divination by album sleeve). A strangely lit landscape with a horse and the two Pooka girls in the foreground clutching a half damaged umbrella and

arcane symbols at various points. You can see why I was intrigued?

Pooka - you're wondering about the name? It has roots in several different languages from Old English to Latvian, all have the original meaning of demon, devil, spirit etc. In Celtic lore it became *puca* or *pwca*, often appearing as a horse or ass, "*a wild shaggy colt, hung with chains*", the haunt of wild solitary places. Pooka's are shape-shifting creatures able to change from animal to human, matter to spirit. You get the picture, and we'll leave the etymology for now save to say that Pooka is where Shakespeare got his '*sweet puck*' from.

But basically it's a good sleeve, resonating with the music. Turn it on its side and unless I'm turning into a pervert we have the outline of the female form which nicely reflects the sexuality - eroticism more properly I suppose - in some of the songs. Upside down and the umbrella becomes a reversed question mark.

The rear is a composite photo of the two girls who comprise Pooka - no names, they are just, 'simply' Pooka. Press office ploy or personal decision I don't know. Enquiries to the WEA press office reveal them to be Sharon Lewis and Natasha Wood. We're still no wiser. The other photos reveal them to be young-looking and fresh of face, intense like the songs and maybe children of old hippies? If things were really perfect they would have been friends since childhood. Lyrics for all songs are included and reveal the Pooka girls to be as competent with their lyrics as they are on their instruments.

The *Graham Robert Wood* EP was then duly purchased (buy the album before the EP I recommend), and deep joy - *GRW* is a different version, with percussion, a French Horn sounding thing and, muted, electron noises in the background - and the way they sing "*self-indulgence*" in the final verse just makes life in the late 20th century worth living. It's that good. *Stuart Strange* is their namecheck to a singer from Nottingham who seems to be quite a hit with Pooka and their friends - it's pretty funny too - while *Blue Star* is very Airplane-y and *Sex On* an electronically driven outing with some interesting St. Etienne dance style Italian piano in the back of the mix,

dreamy vocals float on the top. Eclectic or what?

More coincidence. The same day I buy the album the weekly trawl through the music papers reveals that Pooka are on at the Duchess in Leeds. Whoopee! Tuesday night and me and Helen are sat in the Duchess' dark, grungy confines with maybe 30 or 40 other Pooka bound souls. The card handed out at the door beckons us to send to an address and "*join the wonderfully strange world of Pooka*". I'm there already pal.

A trying set by a couple of maybe music students under the somewhat wet moniker of Jasmin gives way to a brief two song set by a girl - Wolfwoman (?- yeah, me too), which was powerful and all too short, but we wanted Pooka and suddenly there they are. Two girls two guitars and - joy of joys - a Fender Rhodes piano (I could write a paean to the Fender Rhodes, a beautiful toned instrument which doesn't get used as much these days as it ought).

Natasha's the stropy one on stage -

doesn't like Leeds (it's better than Bradford, as I pointed out), castigates the audience for not replying to her queries and shows us her bruise! Sharon, meanwhile, appears to be the muso watching the musical proceedings like a hawk. It's a good set with those voices in full flow and if I hadn't have been frozen to death I would have been in heaven. Most of the album is played together with some tracks off the EP. It was great

Five days later and I've already converted Be Glad's very own Adrian Whittaker who returns to London with a tape, muttering something about it growing on him, and we babble about what it would sound like if Pooka did some String Band covers (we can dream can't we?).

As you've guessed by now I'm very, very, impressed by Pooka, so much so that I thought it was worth devoting a page or more of the magazine to them. Don't get me wrong, this isn't easy, instantly singalong music. There are dark corners, unsettling moods and atmospheres and it demands your total

attention - and if you don't give it then you'll think it's crap and miss the point altogether. Not really one for putting on when you've got a room full of people all talking - more one for being alone with or intense listening by a group of friends.

They are good, they deserve supporting and if they don't get the respect from the music press and the concomitant sales then there really is no hope for music. Hopefully in the next issue we will have an interview with them and news of further recordings and gigs.

Album debut of the decade so far and no mistake. Buy it and the wonderfully strange world of Pooka is yours for the exploring.



The vocal phenomenon that is Pooka

Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

You might think that an article on ISB related covers would be rather like the old joke about the collected wit and wisdom of Richard Nixon. But from Manfred Mann to Lone Justice, Van Morrison to Garberlunzie and Wizz Jones to Bonnie Tyler, Heron and Williamson credits have been on an impressive range of 35 officially released tracks. I'm sure the list below is not exhaustive - if you have any additions please write in c/o Be Glad and we'll feature an update in a later issue.

Unsurprisingly, it's the L.P.s where the songs follow traditional structures which provide most of the covers - four songs from the first and five from the second L.P.s. Surprisingly, the other 2 records which provide several covers are both solo - 3 from *Diamond of Dreams* and 3 from *Songs of Love and Parting*.

Heron does better than Williamson in cover terms (of 27 titles covered, he gets 15), simply because he follows more standard structures. Williamson tends to write songs which are pretty much unique to his voice (try singing *Pictures In a Mirror!*). Williamson, on the other hand, gets a total of 19 versions to Heron's 15.

The most covered song? No prizes for guessing - *First Girl I Loved*, with 5 known cover versions to date. *October Song* is runner-up with 4, plus of course the unique distinction of being Dylan's favourite ISB song.

I can't claim to have heard all the versions listed, but my favourites to date are the Manfred Mann version of *Singing the Dolphin*, which takes its hymnal quality one step further, and Shirley and Dolly Collins' baroque arrangement of *God Dog* (with the Early Music Consort on sackbutts and rebecs). Leif Sorbye's sprightly version of *Maybe Someday* is also worth a mention.

The 'why bother' award goes to Don (one-man-band) Partridge for his doleful waltz tempo rendition of *First Girl I Loved*, and the 'didn't realise it was the same song' honours go to Manfred Mann again for a butchering of *Stranded In Iowa* - missing all the

COVER VERSIONS ADRIAN WHITTAKER COVER VERSIONS

poetry and most of the lyrics. They also turn in a heavy metal version of *Don't Kill It Carol*. In mitigation, it should be pointed out that Manfred got Mike Heron to write the lyrics to *Sikelele 1*, recently in the South African charts! Van Morrison attempts a drastic pruning of *Mr Thomas*, omitting 2 verses and taking it at a pace which almost totally obscures the lyrical content.

A trawl through the MCPS database (which includes new and re-releases from 1986 onwards) threw up some surprises. Who are Gaberlunzie? They've covered 2 Heron songs, as recently as 1991. And did you know Lone Justice recorded a live version of the "ain't got no home" bit from *Ducks On A Pond* (duly credited to R. Williamson/trad.)?

As well as Fit and Limo's note-perfect four song *This Moment - Fit & Limo Play ISB EP*, mention should also be made of the strangely titled Benjamin Delaney Lion, who pulled off four more ISB covers on a privately released LP (*Ducks On A Pond, Dandelion Blues, Log Cabin Home In The Sky and Painting Box*). They're an English Dr. Strangely Strange, right down to the sense of whimsy and tremulous vocals. Joe Boyd's Rykodisc is still planning an ISB tribute CD - it's been on the back burner for a while but they're hoping to start work on it this summer. The artists involved will probably include Robin Hitchcock and John Cale.

I was expecting the worst when I

discovered that Neil (The Young Ones' Nigel Planer) recorded *The Amoeba Song* on his Heavy Concept album. Funnily enough, it's an amazingly precise copy, with Dave Stewart doing a passable Dolly Collins imitation, and sloshings and squelchings at the appropriate junctures. Even Neil's lugubrious vocal is restrained compared with what he did to *Hole In My Shoe!*

Dave Stewart is not numbered amongst the ISB's greatest fans, but he told me that Nigel Planer's musical tastes are, like his character, genuinely psychedelic -

including Nick Drake and the ISB! *The Amoeba Song* was Nigel's choice and the sound effects come courtesy of Nigel's mouth!

These days you don't get covered so much as sampled; Andy and I are convinced that Ultramarine use a flute sample from *Circle Is Unbroken on Kingdom* (off *United Kingdoms*). Two other 'quotes' should be mentioned here - Paul Siebel uses a few ISB lines in *Then Came The Children* (unfortunately they don't redeem this naff ditty), and you can hear John Cale quoting briefly from the *Maybe Someday* violin riff toward the end of *Black Angel's Death Song* (Velvet Underground).

There are also some tantalisingly unreleased covers somewhere in the vaults; Elton John recorded four Heron songs for use as publishing demos, and Marianne Faithfull apparently recorded four or five ISB tracks in the 60s, including *Painting Box*.

Researching this article proved quite complicated, and I'd like to thank the following people: Mark Rigby at MCPS, Andy Linnehan at the National Sound Archive, Bob Nutbein, Dave Stewart and of course Mark Anstey.



Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending - Summer '94

Heron & Williamson Cover Versions

Song Title	Artist	Original LP CD & Date	Most recent cat. no. or release	Comments
First LP				
Everything's Fine Right Now	Davy Graham & Holly	Godington Boundry (1970)	PTL 51039	Not heard
Maybe Someday	Lief Sorbye	Across The Borders (1994)	FAM 10040 2	New folkie
Footsteps of the Heron	Derek Brimstone	Fire & Brimstone	STL 5478	Old folkie
October Song	The Corries	Best Of	PWKS 4054	Harmony version
October Song	Fureys & Davey Arthur	The First Leaves of Autumn	(on) CCSD 231	"decent" (Bob Nutbein)
October Song	Maggie Boyle	Reaching Out	RRA 3	Not heard
October Song	Kathleen McPeake and Anne Sands	Take Our Past	CSP 1024	Not heard
5000 Spirits O/takes				
God Dog	Shirley & Dolly Collins	Anthems In Eden 1969	SEE 57	See article - wonderful
Lover Man	Al Stewart	Bedsitter Images 1970	(on) CDEMI 511	Adds strange clucking noises!
5000 Spirits				
First Girl I Loved	Wizz Jones	Grapes of Life	RRA 005	Another old folkie
First Girl I Loved	Marian Henderson	Cameo 1971	CPS 65	"undistinguished" (BN)
First (Boy) I Loved	Judy Collins	Who Knows Where Time Goes?	EKS 74033	Florid arrangement
First Girl I Loved	Wizz Jones	Acoustic Routes 1993	Ninety 7	Bang up to date

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No Sleep Blues	Blonde On Blonde	Blonde On Blonde 1969	?	"a trauma in miniature" - sleeve notes
The Hedgehog's Song	Julie Felix	This World Goes Round & Round	STL 5473 1968	Calypso version
The Hedgehog's Song	Gaberlunzie	Gaberlunzie Live 1991	LOC 1064	Who they?
Painting Box	Julie Felix	This World Goes Round & Round	STL 5473	In tune this time!
Chinese White	Fit & Limo	This Moment: F & L Play The ISB	RP 001	Note perfect copyists
Hangman's				
Amoeba Song (Cellular Song)	Neil	Neil's Heavy Concept Album		See article
Three Is A Green Crown	Fit & Limo	See above	RP 001	As above
Wee Tam/Big Huge				
Ain't Got No Home (Ducks on a Pond)	Lone Justice	BBC Radio 1 Live In Concert (90s?)	WINCD 048	Credited to Trad./Williamson
I Looked Up				
Black Jack Davy	Gaberlunzie	Take The Road (1985)	KLP 50	They've obviously been at it some time!
This Moment	Fit & Limo	See above	RP 001	As above
Be Glad				
Come With Me	Fit & Limo	See above	RP 001	As above
Mike Heron - Reputation				
Singing The Dolphin	Manfred Mann's Earth Band	Roaring Silence 1976	LLCD 122	See article
Diamond Of Dreams				
Stranded In Iowa	Manfred Mann's Earth Band	Chance 1979	COMME CD9	See article

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Don't Kill It Carol	Manfred Mann's Earth Band	Angel Station 1978	COMME CD4	See article
Baby Goodnight	Bonnie Tyler	Natural Force 1978	CLACO 232	Much like Mike's current arrangement
Sikelele 1 (Not on any MH LP)	Manfred Mann	Plains Music 1992	KAZ CD902	Not that good, but think of the royalties
Robin Williamson - Journey's Edge				
Mythic Times	Mike Craver	Fishing For Amour 1984	FF 330	Flying Fish label mate
American Stonehenge				
Pacheo	Kate Wolf	Give Yourself To Love	F3000	Californian Singer
Songs Of Love & Parting				
For Mr Thomas	Van Morrison	B side Celtic Swing (83) B side Rave On John Donne (83)	MER 141 ?	See article
For The Three Of Us	Lief Sorbye	Across The Borders (1994)	FAM 10040 2	Earnest version
Verses In Stewart Street	New Celeste	The Celtic Connection (1990)	LLCOM 9036	Iain Fergus & Dave Foister anyone?

If you know of any other cover versions, please let me know at the editorial address (a tape of them would be nice) and we'll run the additions next time.



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The story so far. We left Mike in mid-interview in the last issue and we'll resume and conclude that shortly but first what's he been up to lately? Well, there was no Heron tour as such during the autumn but Mike and his guitarist John Rutherford did two gigs as a duo, at Birmingham Rowheath Roots Club (excellent venue) and some god-forsaken pub in Bath. And boy were they nervous, especially prior to the Rowheath gig.

Both gigs went well, if a little jerkily at times. *Mexican Girl* crept into the set and should be still there for this spring's tour and there were two other old favourites, *Everything's Fine* and *Right Now* seguing into *Log Cabin Home In The Sky*. Both now included because Mike and the boys had been doing them for the *Roughnecks* TV series. November 19th saw the whole band together again for a one-off gig in London at Jackson's Lane Community Centre. Well over 150 people turned out and it was, from an audience point of view, a great gig - the crowd stamping and chanting for a good five minutes for another encore, although Mike was too knackered to come back for more. January 8th brought them to Hebden Bridge, playing before a devoted audience and they headlined the show to rapturous applause but didn't play a full set due to time constraints. We're still promised a new rendition of *Red Hair* and it's

Mike Heron's Reputation?

Part Two of Andy Roberts' interview

entirely possible that *Air* may be performed live again as this was also done for *Roughnecks*.

Sadly, and despite interest from both small and large labels, a recording deal looks as far away as ever and I'm more than a little concerned about the long term future of the Mike Heron Incredible Acoustic Band. Stick with it lads! The spring tour dates are at the end of the article.

Back in the interview I asked Mike about a puzzle from *Changing Horses* - who exactly was the Walter Gundy who played harmonica on *Big Ted*? Was it Mike? "No, I think he was a roadie." Another illusion shattered! "That was during the commune period in Wales, which I was resisting. Rose and I just visited a couple of times and in fact out of that came *The Row* (Ed: Glen Row in Scotland, the row of

cottages which the ISB lived in for a few years) because we weren't going to be happy all living together and others were beginning to moan too. Malcolm and myself were given the job of finding houses."

Between *Liquid Acrobat* and *Earthspan* there seemed to be a major change in both production values and songwriting. *Earthspan's* cover with its melange of cover photos of the String Band looking like smart young men and women about town, features Mike in one picture huddled earnestly over a music score. Cover hype or reflection of his interests at the time?

"That was reality because at one point I thought it was about time I learned to score music and so I did a crash course in scoring and arranging with a guy in South London."

Satisfying?

"Yeah, it was such a luxury, there I was, able to do this for a few months and then have the London Symphony Orchestra and what I did was an arrangement for Sandy Denny with the LSO for one of her tracks, I've forgotten the name. But she commissioned me to do it and another guy who did film scores." Mike also has two songs credited to himself and Licorice. Was this at Mike's insistence? "No, she was very keen. But there just wasn't the time to do more with her ideas."

Late period ISB is represented on celluloid in the James Archibald film, *Rehearsal*. Even to the untrained eye it seems that there was considerable strain in the String Band at that time. Robin looks pissed off and Malcolm distinctly worried by it



Mike and John in a rare duo appearance. Birmingham 11/93. Photo credit: John Little

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Mike (the Lincoln Festival we think) playing with, what's that band's name again?

all. In the rehearsal for *Ithkos* it almost seems like the Beatles' *Let It Be* film, people just not getting on, knowing each other too well and being on completely different wavelengths. At one point Robin shoots a look at Mike and says pointedly, "Is that the intro?". He doesn't look happy. Mike: "Just a normal rehearsal really, Robin was in a bad temper that day for some reason, but there wasn't a rift at that point at all. It was a documentary and we were pawns, the guy probably used the bits where there were arguments or whatever." Methinks Mike doth protest too much. But the end times of the ISB must wait for a later issue and more information from all concerned.

In 1971 Mike was the first of the String Band to release a solo album, *Smiling Men With Bad Reputations*, how did that come about? "That was *Joe Boyd*." Presumably because Mike had songs piling up that wouldn't at that time fit into the ISB scheme of things, "Not really but I was ready to and I took a holiday at Russian River, near San Francisco, with some friends of mine, and I just wrote and wrote and wrote and drank a lot of coffee. It was very rural hippy, very laid back. So I wrote most of the album really on that holiday, a couple I'd had from before but the bulk of the album comes from that holiday." It must have been an extraordinarily prolific songwriting sojourn as other songs, such as the sublime *Turquoise*

Blue also come from that period.

Smiling Men is exceptional in that it holds an almost perfect balance between intricate folk songs such as *Flowers Of The Forest* and out and out rockers such as *Call Me Diamond* and *Warm Heart Pastry*, not to mention its stellar array of stars, Richard Thompson, John Cale, Elton John, Jimmy Page, most of Fairport Convention, Dr. Strangely Strange, Rose, Dudu Pukwana various big name backing singers etc. Mike Heron and Heavy Friends indeed.

"Joe approached me and said I think we should make a solo album and I've got a lot of people who would be interested and I'll introduce you to these people, who'll breathe on certain tracks and we'll make it an album like that. It was never a question of me holding on tightly to what the songs were and they went in the direction of the people."

Was Mike happy with the result? "I was delighted, it was wonderful." Who was the most interesting to work with? "John Cale, I really liked his songwriting at that time, I like the odd touch that he brings to music." The title of the album actually comes from a list of 'people to avoid' given at the back of Tim Leary's *Psychedelic Prayers*.

In the late 70s Mike almost broke into the big-time American music scene with the ill-fated Casablanca album, this is how it came about. "I

did a publishing deal for Chappell and they said toddle off and write all these songs and every time you write a song we'll send you some money to make a demo of it. So we did that and we got a collection of them which became the *Glen Row Tapes* and we got in touch with Hugh Murphy who loved them and at that time he was doing things with Gerry Rafferty. (Ed's note Murphy was 'behind' the Baker Street single and the Station to Station album), and he was being paid to work with people like Leo Sayer and that kind of stuff that he didn't believe in and finally he found a record company, Casablanca, to work with so really the Casablanca album was the one that came out of the *Glen Row*

Tapes." Unfortunately the label went bust and copies of Casablanca were consigned to a warehouse which subsequently burned down. Copies are extremely scarce, but well worth buying. Hugh Murphy's sound though is very dated these days and I would hope that if Mike gets another major deal he doesn't go for Murphy to produce the album.

The future? "Definitely some kind of recording contract for this band."

The past, has it been fun for the past thirty years? "Very much so, it's been wonderful and I've been very fortunate."

SPRING TOUR DATES

May 13th Allendale Hotel, Hexham
 May 14th Southport Arts Centre
 May 15th The Earl, Sheffield
 May 17th Jim's, Colne
 May 18th Telford - venue unknown
 May 23rd Abergower Hotel, Dumfries
 May 24th Adelphi, Hull
 May 25th Hibernian, Birmingham
 May 28th Jazz & Dance Place, Bristol
 Oct 30th ISB Convention, Griffin Hotel, Leeds.



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12 Things U Didn't Know About The Incredible String Band - NOT!

Cunningly researched by Norman Lamont

1. *The Tree of Leaf and Flame*, a show Robin did in the 80s, was a reference to the dog Leaf, which Robin and Mike had in the early days, and its lesser-know companion Flame.
2. Mike's first love after music has always been football. *Mercy I Cry City* was written in response to a particularly bad season for Manchester City.
3. When Rose left, those auditioned included Stanley Clarke, Woody Woodmansey and John Travolta. However, none could manage *Giles Crocodile* with the aplomb of Malcolm, so he got the job.
4. Maya Angelou was only one of a number of celebrities named after ISB songs.
5. The sleeve of *U* is a piece of performance art in itself. If you rotate it clockwise by 90 degrees, keeping your eyes on the centre of the sleeve, both records fall out simultaneously, symbolising the split from matter described in the first songs.
6. Clive Palmer went on to become half of 70s comedy duo Derek and Clive.
7. Dr Strangely Strange is actually a practising gynaecologist at Guys Hospital.
8. Before John Cale worked on *Smiling Men*, there was another Velvet Underground connection - one of the songs on their first album, was Lou Reed's *Heron*.
9. Robin comes from a musical dynasty. His father is storyteller Duncan Williamson, his brothers Roy and James were with the Corries and the Stooges respectively, and his son is the blues singer Sonny Boy Williamson.
10. The ISB rarely wrote political songs, but *Big Ted* was an attack on the Heath administration, uncannily predicting his wilderness years as a back-bencher ("*Ted may be a moo-cow next time round*").
11. Unlikely as it seems, the Sex Pistols were ISB fans, and included a quick tribute in *Something Else* ("*Likky there - here she comes*").
12. *No Ruinous Feud* is the ISBs most erotic album, with several songs dedicated to prepubertal petting (*Explorer*, *Second Fiddle*), phallic symbolism (*The Lighthouse Dance*), and oral sex (*Down Before Cathy*).

Gimmel & Daleth's Incredibly Strung Crossword



14. What B is for
15. It had a slow footed sovereign
16. What's Dott got?
20. Ark man's nephew
22. Promise in 15 across
26. EKS 74036/37 (1st word)

- ACROSS:
1. Tempest's Viking visits Hebden
 4. Mrs Thompson's gift
 7. Last word on the Minotaur
 8. Be Glad man
 10. Autumnal ditty
 14. Archaic name *bandore*
 15. Toirahé - vehicle reversed
 17. Which accessory?
 18. Where is pussgrass?
 19. Aegean odyssey
 21. You machine!
 23. Where shall I look for this album?
 24. A garden's element
 25. Expressive inclusion or position within limits of space, time or circumstance.
 27. Fruity mate.
 28. Where were the ISB sandwiched between Donovan and Al Stewart?

- DOWN:
1. 23 across' opposite (he told sibling)
 2. Painting Box has two
 3. Within the Eyes of Fate
 4. Maybe Saturday's 29th word
 5. Connects watery gymnast with regards
 6. Not an ISB venue for squares
 9. Precious stud
 11. Maya's solar reflection
 12. Relative guardian of sea tower
 13. Where's ricecoil?
- With thanks to Deena & Arlet

First correct completion to the editorial address wins something interestingly ISB-ish. If you want to know the answers send a sac.

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LISTENING FOR THE SECRET..... SEARCHING FOR THE SOUND

Andy Roberts in conversation with Robin Williamson

The title? Nicked from a Dead song but it adequately sums up my approach over the years to the String Band's music. Whether they meant it or not there is always the hint of a secret to be unveiled, a paradox to be considered, a mystery to be cracked.

Time passed.

And then, all of a sudden, I was given the chance to interview Robin Williamson (for a brief piece in Folk Roots magazine). So it was bus/train/taxi and there I am drinking honey'd tea with Robin in his Welsh home. We talked about all manner of things, some of which I've tried to spin together in some coherent way for this piece, bearing in mind the title.

Throughout the interview music, its meaning and uses, was a recurring theme, and I got to thinking, and remembering.....

"I don't mean this in a heavy poncey sort of way, but music is an eternal power that comes from the beginning of time and goes to the end of time and musicians get allowed to play it".

That's a quote from the June '93 Q piece on the ISB, which predictably tried to poke fun at that sort of statement, but Robin's approach to music is a strange one for the late 20th century, and whilst the trite and often glib references to him being a 'Celtic Bard' may approximate the truth they also belittle and

pigeonhole the idea of one man singing about what he sees in the world, conveying meaning through words and music. Robin on music again:

"If you think about a river or the wind or the sea, the way that those sounds are constant, well it seems to me that in the human body there's certain constant sounds as well. Music as played is a reflection of all these eternal and constant background noises...I think also that in India there was the idea that music was a sort of teacher and I think for me it very much has been because if you study just music it predisposes one to see an order and a mathematics in things and it predisposes one to see the same sort of order in the world...so you see the mind of an author at work.....so it's a religious thing to me".

Q would have a field day with that one!

This idea of music as a power, a force to change lives, bring people

together or whatever is now firmly played down in the mainstream music press but it is a motivating factor in why many of us listen to music rather than use it as aural wallpaper. Are we ashamed of the effects that music can have? It sometimes seems that way, but there's a place for that aspect of it, and I think as you get older it becomes more necessary that we acknowledge what lies behind the creation of lasting music and words.

Most indigenous cultures used music as a spiritual device and often banned it from being used secularly due to the disturbing results it could produce. The drummer from Can trained in voodoo rhythms and was expressly forbidden from using them in concert, and the cathartic effect that a good rock concert has is linked directly with ecstatic states of mind, albeit somewhat unfocused. It's also worth noting that when the mythologist Joseph Campbell went to a Greatful Dead concert he



Robin performing live at Northampton, July '93 - Photo credit: Jim Hill

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considered it a significant, ritual event.

Music changes. Robin was of the opinion that a good gig should "enchant" and that's certainly true of his gigs now and, so people tell me, of the String Band in their heyday. To enchant is to alter awareness and perception, and brings to mind a statement Robin once made about music being the "first psychedelic". Still true? "Well, I'm sure it's the first expanding and awareness enhancing thing". Which is, after all, all that a psychedelic is despite its cultural connotations. Bearing this in mind, had music become debased from its original ritual and mind-expanding role down to the disposable pap we see and hear on radio and TV? "Well you can use music for any kind of purpose, people have spent a long time trying to find a music that'll make chickens lay better, and of course you can find a music that will make chickens lay better, but what might be a more worthwhile sort of quest might be to find musics that would make people feel more alive, be better human beings or whatever". So gentle readers, next time you're out shopping watch out for the musak.....

Robin's interest in music and its ability to affect people was acknowledged by others in 1987 when he took part in a conference entitled *The Secret Heart of Music* at Loughborough University and organised by the Wrekin Trust. Its subtitle was, *An exploration into the power of music to change consciousness*, and he performed live there with the Van Morrison band and gave a workshop called *The Experience Of Enchantment: Initiation In The Bardic Tradition*. Another clue?

In writing this piece I kept coming across references in Robin's interviews which seem to indicate the true bardic nature and origins of some of Robin's work. Possible sources for his world view perhaps. In the only published section of his tremendous surreal autobiography, *Mirrorman Sequences* (In *Outlaw Visions* - now out of print in the US) and which details Robin's early days in Scotland where we find Robin "Drumming upon a hollow log 'til the tide returned against the small shores of the island, isolated, singing what the wind sung, horse-music to gull-music in the language of the

earth while centuries paused like oil dregs in an old can or sea noise in a shell" a fairly Bardic, shamanistic act and insight in itself. And how Robin "...used to stare at rocks besieged by blinding whiteness of the surf. Breakers leapt with up-flung limbs, white against blue..... stare until he saw the sea-stones that would spray and after-image of flurrying incessant black somethings in his steady gaze. Gaze on until they became the letters of the alphabet, and read". Read and presumably translated into song and later, story.

This seeing into the heart of nature also come across in many of Robin's songs both with the ISB and his solo work since. Now we're not talking Robin Williamson Urban Shaman here, but I hope you can see what I'm, getting at.

Tying in with the above I came across an interview with Robin in *The Crack*, the UK's storytelling magazine, in which the interviewer ploughs a similar furrow in part, asking Robin about the legend of Cader Idris mountain in Wales which states that whoever spends the night on the summit will either be dead, mad or a poet. Robin, "Now, I haven't tried this, but I have tried other things like it, I used to go and catch salmon the traditional way.....I'd go out there into the winter's night and it would be absolutely pitch, pitch dark and you're twenty miles from the nearest road on some tiny mountain river and sometimes I'd just turn the torch off and think about what it was that I was frightened of...Eventually I started to like the sensation. I started to think that that sort of unease was a really healthy thing: 'Here we are, perched on this spinning ball on the edge of God knows what... And it comes back to this profoundly simple truth that nobody really knows what it means to be alive at all or even can put any kind of mental grasp on 'I am alive' and what it means; let alone 'Where am I going?' or, 'Where have I been?' Or any other of these basic questions..."

The elemental input in to Robin's work becomes clearer in the light of his views on music and these experiences with nature. Sometimes this elemental, nature of the songs becomes almost religious in intensity

and feeling and this seems to have surfaced overtly in some songs; the incantatory bit in *Three Is A Green Crown*, from *Hangman's*, "it's a bit like a hymn, that one", *Invocation* from 'U' and the *Song of Mabon* from *Songs of Love and Parting*, the wild panic of *Lord Of Weir*, *Koeeadli* *There* and others. All very strange and 'out there', all hinting at the breadth of Robin's knowledge about matters arcane.

So do you believe in those themes, the old gods Robin? "I do believe in all that and I do believe that the world is a great deal more mysterious than is generally accepted and that we are surrounded by the unexplained. Even down to something as simple as striking a match...it's the sense of the extraordinariness of the very thing that happens is what has always been a big thing for me". "Stranger than that we're alive, whatever you think it's more than that" - as he rightly said in *Job's Tears*.

Robin's interest in and output of traditional stories, various Celtic and Bardic stuff on his own Pigs Whisker label led me to question further: "I sort of believe in that ancient Celtic notion of the Otherworld. It seems to me that there's a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between the seen and the unseen."

Robin's time at the Penwern commune in West Wales, where the *Be Glad* film was shot was yet another Celtic soaked location he has lived in. "Certain places are very significant, when we lived in West Wales there was such a lot of UFO type activity, and also things that for a lack of a better word you'd have to call hauntings, although they weren't unpleasant, they were actually pleasant, and rather beautiful. There is definitely an atmosphere in certain places."

The talk turned to the origins of these and other strange experiences, Robin being in general agreement that they are the "current way in which you see what used to be explained as fairy or religious phenomena."

One story Robin clearly remembers from that time in Wales concerns the writing of *Vishangro*. "The way that song came about was I had a dream with all these extraordinary words in it so when I woke up I wrote the words down - in those days I used to record all my dreams - and that day I

happened to make a trip to Cardigan and there was a library there and I went in and happened to knock a book off the shelf which was a dictionary of the Romany language, and all the words in the dream were of the Romany language so I wrote a song about it. *Vishangro* is a Romany word which means 'woodsman'".

Dreams are another version of 'the Otherworld' - one easily accessible to all and one from which a wealth of material can be extracted. "Most of the early String Band tracks were to do with dreams - *Evolution Rag* was another one. Dreams are funny 'cos they're a mish-mash of things that happened yesterday and things that happened a month ago". I used to keep a dream diary myself and thoroughly recommend it - it makes little sense at first but from a distance it's a bit like a system of divination - like Tarot. Robin had a few things to say about Tarot too, from a storytelling viewpoint. "Tarot is a fascinating thing because tarot and traditional stories contain exactly the same sort of images, and in fact there was a famous Italian writer, *Italo Calvino*, who did a book of tales based on the Tarot.....and it's remarkable how parallel they are, and it seems that the human aesthetic likes those sort of images and that tarot was born of the same impulse that makes folk tales."

Talk of tales brought us to Robin's latest album, *Wheel Of Fortune*, recorded with John Renbourn, which has as its centerpiece the story *Finn and the Old Man's House*, a sort of *My Name Is Death* story. I must admit that I've been a slow convert to Robin's stories but I'm now of the opinion that they convey and carry things through time better than many other forms of transmission, and lets face it were until very recently most people's only way of recording events.

"There's a lot of scope in stories, I see it as a musical form, I improvise the music so it's always fresh for me, and the words, after a while they do settle down into certain patterns but quite often I'll throw things in off the top of my head, local references,

change things around".

The stories, then, are almost bottomless pools of meaning. Make your own meaning up, try to work out what the original author was saying, and so on. Listen. Think. Respond.

"Different people get different things out of the stories and that's why I love stories, being that they're not made by one person and they become the product of people unlike an individual song which you write and has to do very much with your personal experiences but with a story it's not your original creation even though you might put a lot of your life into it"

Robin's stories can be traced back

traditionalbut I think probably I'm a lot more part of the human race than I used to be..in my twenties and so on I was very much interested in the deeper mysteries and the hidden significances of things and now at fifty I'm much more interested in the ordinary facts of what we all partake of" The world? "Yeah, the world and ordinary things seem to be fascinating so I'm very much concerned with being a husband and a parent."

Stranger than that we're alive - still

It's going to be a busy year - again - for Robin. A solo tour in May followed by a tour with Renbourn precedes yet more solo touring in the autumn,



Barnard Castle Oct '93 - Photo credit: Jim Hill

prior to him actually telling them. Think of some of the longer songs on String Band albums, *Darling Belle*, *Pictures In A Mirror*, all early attempts to satisfy the storytelling urge, but in song form. It may also irk some comedians but the sort of story Robin tells are in fact the origin of stand-up comedy. Robin: "they are and they go all the way through into music hall patter and I suppose ultimately into rap". MC Williamson? The mind boggles!

Wheel of Fortune itself, with its cyclical view of life and lines like "Life of man is most uncertain, none can say what may be", would Robin say that was his general philosophy these days? "Well, I wouldn't like to put all my philosophies in one song, and I put some new words in that so it's partly

including two slots at the October ISB convention which he kindly agreed to play at. The very excellent *Songs of Love and Parting* is re-issued on CD in May and *Music from the Mabinogion* should be CD'd in October. He'd like to take a year off to catch up with writing and recording projects but he can't see that happening yet awhile. This is a shame because Robin holds a wealth of songs and stories, "many thousands of songs and probably in the region of five or six hundred stories", in his grey matter. This workload, coupled with his desire to re-record some of his favourite String Band songs, such as *Invocation*, "I still have a go at that one occasionally", *Darling Belle*, "in a less orchestral way", *First Girl*, "slower", means he could probably quite happily spend a couple of years in

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a studio at least. So we can only hope that a even fraction of the work he has planned sees the light of day.

On the subject of the ISB, which must seem awfully distant considering Robin's output in the interim he is unequivocal, "I was very proud of the *Incredible String Band*, but I prefer thinking about the future than the past". Which is exactly why he's still recording, doing 200+ gigs a year and has a number of other projects in mind.

That sort of gig schedule would be hard enough for someone just starting out, never mind a veteran performer, so the question begged itself; how does it feel for Robin to be going into his sixth decade as a performer? "Well, it's very strenuous, there's a lot of travelling but I do love it.....It's an opportunity to relate quite widely to ones fellows. Basically I'm very conscious of time being limited, you have got a very limited time on planet Earth and it's trying to make the moments count."

I suppose this extrapolation has only covered a fraction of the interview, but the main themes are there are I hope I've managed to convey some of what lies behind the performer, or rather what the performer seems to indicate, rather than just talk about who played what and where the songs came from. For many of us, from what I gather in conversations with Williamson fans, it's the sort of thing you want to know. Perhaps we're missing or misinterpreting the point. Perhaps we need to get out more! But it seems that all Robin's work is a reflection of itself and his view on life as being a rather special experience which needs celebrating in all its moods and shadings in song and story. A reiterated statement of the simple fact that we are alive in a mysterious universe, the realisation of which makes all formal philosophies and doctrine pale somewhat..... Maybe.

Finally, I asked if Robin he ever regretted being a musician, "No, not really, I tried to sell carpets once and I had a brief job making new gardens on a Wimpy housing estate, but I always wanted to be something along that line.....Actually I wanted to be an alchemist."

With thanks to Bina Williamson for setting up the interview.

Flower of 60s blooms in Welsh Town

(sorry, thought I was the Sunday People!)

or

What Rose did next

(not much better)

At first it was just a rumour on the 'where are they now' branch of the ISB rumour tree. Then by Christmas, thanks to an informant in, of all places, the BBC Post Room, we knew the truth: Rose Simpson was to be, gulp, wait for it.....Mayoress of Aberystwyth!

Then the May issue of *Mojo* came out with its story on the matter. Scooped? Yeah, but never mind, we knew first anyway.

The facts of the matter such as we can determine are that Rose, now 45 with a grown-up daughter, is to be formally made Mayoress at the beginning of May. This has come about because her partner, Liberal Democrat councillor Bob Griffiths is Mayor elect. Tremendous stuff really and one in the eye to all those people who thought the 60s generation are responsible for the downfall of civilisation as we know it.

Mojo ran the story in its usual light-hearted, laddish way complete with photos of Rose in diaphanous hippy dress, bass playing mode, together with a photo of her as she is now. We can't risk reprinting a photo due to copyright problems but suffice to say that she looks very definitely Rose-ish in a smart dignitary about town sort of way, complete with hat-from-outer-space. *Mojo*'s Marc Ellen must have spoken to her on the 'phone and elicited a few quotes. Rose's professed highlight of her career with the String Band?

"Sitting in this hot spa bath after we'd played Big Sur Folk Festival, black night, the sea down below, on the coast in California, in the summer, with Joni Mitchell, Crosby Stills and Nash, all together, naked, in this sort of natural jacuzzi thing, all singing *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*. It was wonderful. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

The very Big Sur Festival at which Robin accidentally kicked out the PA cable in fact!

The Penny Dreadfuls, in the form of The People newspaper, were onto the story in a matter of days and apparently despatched hack and Hanimex-handler

to the wilds of Wales, presumably to try and catch Rose taking the coal in or something. Happily they failed to invade her privacy too much by the looks of things but ran a story anyway (24/4 issue), replete with photo of Rose and Bob Griffiths. Rose told them, "Some of the locals may be taken aback but I am treating the job very seriously.....I think the people of Aberystwyth will be more shocked about me becoming Mayoress than String Band fans. We were always about enjoying life and making the most of it, but not just for yourself, for others too. I'm still living by that philosophy."

And in response to the question of how had she spent the last 20 or so years? "Oh, just hanging loose, pottering about Aberystwyth and thinking about my pension." One detects a tongue-in-cheekiness here that the People studiously failed to notice. Finally she told them, "My years with the band were so full of hope, and I felt I could change the world. Now I can help to change things even if it's on a tiny scale."

Long-time friend, neighbour and full-time Rock God, Robert Plant will apparently be attending the Mayor-making as a guest.

All this talk of Rose and politics spurred me to wade through the cuttings files again, coming up with a piece from the June 6th 1970 issue of *Melody Maker* where 'pop stars' were surveyed as to their voting intentions in the 1970 General Election. Rose, "I am not going to vote. To vote at all within this system would be to support a system I cannot agree with. But whoever gets in I would like them to do all they really can for the country and not be dictated to by money or any of those other influences that may be there for their own political advancement."

Hopefully we will have an interview with Rose in the November issue.

ROBIN WILLIAMSON

forthcoming solo performances

May

- mon 23 LONDON • Bunjies Folk Club
fri 27 GLASTONBURY • Assembly Rooms

June

- fri 3 BRISTOL • Jazz & Dance Place
fri 10 PEMBROKE • Stackpole Centre
sun 12 BIRMINGHAM • Rowheath Pavillion
thurs 16 CARDIFF • 4 Bars Inn
part of Cardiff Harp Festival

July

- fri 15 WIMBORNE • Ancient Technology Centre
sat 16 WIMBORNE • Ancient Technology Centre
wed 20 CHESTER • Telford's Warehouse

August

- fri 5 LISKEARD • Sterts
sat 6 FALMOUTH • Arts Centre

September

- thurs 15 ALDERSHOT • West End Arts Centre
fri 16 WINDSOR • Arts Centre
sat 17 LINCOLN • The Lawn
sat 24 LONDON • The Troubador
sun 25 LONDON • The Troubador

October

- wed 12 CHELTENHAM • Axiom Centre
fri 14 DURSLEY (Glos.) • Rednock School
sat 15 CIRENCESTER • Brewery Arts Centre
sat 22 EAST GRINSTEAD • Emerson College
tues 25 YORK • Arts Centre
wed 26 RICHMOND (Yorks) • Georgian Theatre Royal
thurs 27 DURHAM • City Hall
fri 28 KENDAL • Brewery Arts Centre
sat 29 LEEDS • Griffin Hotel • ISB Convention

November

- mon 7 EXETER • Arts Centre
fri 18 MILTON KEYNES • Open University
sat 19 CARDIFF • Chapter Arts
thurs 24 SALISBURY • Arts Centre
fri 25 BANBURY • The Mill
sat 26 WINCHESTER • Tower Arts Centre
sun 27 BRISTOL • Hope Centre
mon 28 POOLE • Bricklayers Arms
tues 29 BRIDPORT • Bull Hotel

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A R E - I S S U E T O K E E P T H E D E M O N S A T B A Y

SAILOR AND THE DANCER

BENEATH SOME SHADED PLANET
BEFORE THIS EARTH WAS BORN
WE CAME TOGETHER
AND WE DANCED IN THE EARLY DAWN

FOR MY HANDS CONTAIN TEN DANCES
THAT SHALL BEAR US INTO THE NIGHT
INTO THE SEA
AND THE MOON'S MORNING LIGHT

NIGHT MIMED A BOW
AND BROKE INTO THE DAY
FAIR SAILORS AND THEIR CAUTIOUS FRIENDS
SMILED ON THE SEA
THAT REFLECTED ALL THEIR GAZES
AND DANCED WITH THE AIR
THE BREEZES FILLED THE SAILS
HIGH AGAINST THE QUAY

HIGH ON THE LIMPID WAVES THE SHIP IT DID FLY
RISING AS A CONDOR INTO THE SILVERY SKY
PASSING THROUGH THE ARCHES THAT BEGAN THIS EARTH
THE SAILORS SAW THE SCENIC AIR
AS AIR GAVE EARTH ITS BIRTH

GAZING AHEAD TOWARDS TODAY
THEY SAW THE FIELDS OF THIS WORLD
AND WATCHED THE FIRST NEW DANCERS
AS THEIR BODIES DID UNFURL.....

Malcolm Le Maistre