

“The Incredible String Band were an inspiration and a sign.” So wrote Robert Plant in his programme notes for Led Zeppelin’s 1979 tour. A surprising assertion, on the face of it: the bluster and bombast of Zep’s stadium rock would seem to have little in common with the delicate pastoral whimsy of vintage-period ISB. But Zep had their quieter, acoustic moments, as well as a keen interest in Eastern drone-based modes and subject matter that drew on myth, magic and the rhythms of the natural world; all of this is directly traceable to the influence of the ISB.

Nor were Page and Plant alone in this. The Beatles checked the ISB out whenever they played in London in the late ‘60s; the Stones tried to recruit them to their abortive Mother Earth label. Syd Barrett, Marc Bolan and Donovan were also keen students of the unique musical vision of ISB main men Robin Williamson and Mike Heron. Even Bob Dylan spoke of them approvingly, if with typical terseness: “Quite good,” he mumbled into a *Sing Out!* reporter’s microphone. For two or three years at the end of the ‘60s, the ISB were one of *the* names to drop. For good or ill, they became indelibly associated with getting-it-together-in-the-country and with an altogether more intimate approach to performance. There was something *not quite* rock ‘n’ roll about their muse, and perhaps as a result they have been largely written out of more recent revisionist histories of popular music.

Until now. When the three original members of the band, Williamson, Heron and Clive Palmer, reformed on the very brink of the new Millennium, the media’s collective amnesia seemed to evaporate. Suddenly the ISB were turning up in the national broadsheets and heavyweight music mags like *Mojo* and *Wire*, playing again (after an absence of 27 years) on that Radio One institution *The Peel Show*, and generally enjoying a higher profile than at any time since the wilting of Flower Power. It all comes round again, or, as one of their songs has it, the circle is unbroken.

Clive Palmer arrived in Edinburgh sometime around 1962. An eccentric banjoist and jack-of-all-trades (he was also, *inter alia*, an instrument maker, a watchmaker and a glove maker—though he allegedly only made single gloves, never a pair...), he quickly found his level in the lively folk club scene there, and fell in with the likes of Bert Jansch and Robin Williamson. The three of them shared a squat in Crown Buildings, in which Clive had erected a boy scout tent as a means of getting some privacy. Before long, he and Robin were playing as a duo, mixing Celtic trad with old timey and Bluegrass. After a couple of fairly successful years on the Scottish and North of England circuits, they expanded to a threesome, bringing in Mike Heron on guitar and vocals. Thus were born the Incredible String Band.

Elektra talent scout Joe Boyd tracked them down and signed them up for a groundbreaking album. Released late in 1966, it was largely composed of Williamson’s and Heron’s original songs. Even before the album hit the shops, however, Palmer had decamped to India and Williamson to Morocco. “We never expected anything to come out of the album, really,” recalls Palmer. By the time Williamson returned in the autumn, laden with ouds, gimbri and Arab flutes,

the album had created quite a stir with its quirky songs and left-field arrangements. He and Heron linked up again (Palmer remained in the subcontinent and returned eventually to form his own band COB) and started to pour out songs by the bucketful, each more remarkable than the one before. At a stroke they “invented” World Music, pulling in influences from India and North Africa, from the Mississippi Delta and the Bahamas, from Scottish and Irish folk, and beyond. Their second album, *The 5000 Spirits or The Layers Of The Onion*, was released in August 1967 and was declared “an acoustic Sgt Pepper” by astonished critics.

Boyd was managing the duo by this time, and, sensing how faithfully their songs expressed the zeitgeist of the time, began booking them into big municipal halls, where they played to full houses of rapt hippies and faintly mystified folkies. TV exposure via the new “cultural” channel BBC2 further raised their profile, and an appearance at America’s prestigious Newport Folk Festival gave them a toehold across the water.

When their third (and many say their finest) album, *The Hangman’s Beautiful Daughter*, came out in March 1968, Williamson and Heron had critics and public alike eating out of their hand. “Better than the Beatles!” was the cry, and though the ISB never had the Fabs’ mainstream appeal (the mums and dads could hardly have been expected to hum along to the likes of “All rivalry and confusion still cast their wild spells / Effort and contrariness change the directions of Time”), their status as the thinking fan’s darlings was not in doubt. A stunning double album, *Wee Tam And The Big Huge*, followed within six months on the back of a major American tour. At the same time, film maker Peter Neal was following them around with his camera; the resulting film, *Be Glad For The Song Has No Ending*, brilliantly captured the String Band onstage and in the studio, as well as performing a zany costume drama in the woods near their communal hideaway in West Wales.

1969 saw the band taking the stage at the legendary Woodstock mega-fest. “We were told it was a little upstate folk festival,” says Williamson. Two further albums, *Changing Horses* and *I Looked Up*, followed in short time, and in early 1970 they relocated to a row of cottages in the wilds of the Scottish Borders to work on their “surreal parable in song and dance”, *U*, on which they collaborated with the dance troupe Stone Monkey. Unlike “rock operas” such as The Who’s *Tommy*, this was conceived from the outset as a multimedia extravaganza, utilising music, dance, mime and back projection. It played for a week at London’s Roundhouse before being toured around the US. Though it was well received by audiences, *U* attracted considerable critical hostility and did a financial belly-flop. At the end of the US tour, they laid down the soundtrack—nearly two hours’ worth of songs and instrumental music—in a single weekend.

There followed a period of re-evaluation within the band, which now included Heron’s and Williamson’s girlfriends Rose and Licorice. (Rose’s departure in early ’71 led to the suborning into the band of Stone Monkey’s leader Malcolm Le Maistre.) Their eclecticism was undiminished, but the incorporation of more

orthodox rock instrumentation suggested that the ISB were trying to broaden their appeal. *Liquid Acrobat As Regards The Air* (1971) and *Earthspan* (1972) saw their stylistic palette enlarged to include jazz, reggae and hard-riffin' rock. When Licorice left the band in late '72, she was replaced, somewhat surprisingly, by Gerard Dott, an unknown Edinburgh jazzier. Bald and owlish, Dott looked alarmingly straight for a paid-up member of the ISB; nevertheless, his clarinet and sax led them into interestingly jazzy territory, as hinted at on *No Ruinous Feud* (1973). *Feud* saw the String sound stripped of its former exotic colouring: the ouds, gimbri and sitars were consigned to a lumber cupboard somewhere in the Borders. By the same token, the band's earlier lyrical themes—inner voyaging, Zen parables, the child's-eye view of the universe—were superceded by more sublunary concerns: the band were effectively “de-psychedelicising” themselves. By *Hard Rope And Silken Twine* (1974), their final album, Heron, Williamson and Le Maistre were working with a standard blues-rock backline of Stan Schnier (bass), John Gilston (drums) and Graham Forbes (lead guitar) and veering boldly if uncertainly between sensitive acoustic arrangements and full-blown stadium rock. The lumber cupboard was raided, and out came Williamson's gimbri and oud, and Heron's sitar; but by this stage such exotic sounds were perceived as limply nostalgic by flinty-breasted critics. It was generally felt that the end was nigh.

That *finis* was not long delayed. The ISB dissolved in the aftermath of an American tour in autumn '74. Williamson fetched up in Los Angeles, looking to establish himself as a writer. The remainder of the band re-invented themselves as Mike Heron's Reputation, an out-and-out rock outfit based around Heron's songs (the name was eventually pruned to just “Heron”). In the course of the '70s, Reputation/Heron released two albums, and Mike Heron himself cut a solo album for Casablanca that disappeared from the racks when the label went bankrupt. Mike effectively retired from performing, apart from a single tour in the mid-'80s, until he formed his Incredible Acoustic Band in 1992. Williamson assembled an innovative Celtic acoustic band in LA in 1976—the Merry Band—, which released three acclaimed albums and toured widely in North America and the UK, until he launched a solo career in 1980. Since then, he's produced forty albums in various formats (vinyl, CD and cassette) and toured incessantly, linking up periodically with the likes of John Renbourn and Clive Palmer. Malcolm Le Maistre formed his own band, Le Maistre, on the demise of Heron, and returned in due course to live theatre; he now runs the Environmental Arts touring company in Lowland Scotland. He released the album *Nothing Strange* in 1994. Clive Palmer recorded two albums with COB in the early '70s, as well as a solo outing on a German label. He lived in Cornwall in the '70s and '80s, and is now based in Brittany. Rose Simpson retired from music after leaving the ISB and now lives in West Wales. Licorice McKechnie moved to LA around the same time as Williamson and performed locally for several years. Her current whereabouts are unknown.

In 1999, as noted above, Williamson and Palmer linked up again for the first time in over thirty years for a UK tour and a brace of albums. They invited Heron to join them for their Millennium concert in Edinburgh and, as much by accident as by design, the ISB were reborn. A live CD of their London concert last August is

due for release this year, and various tour options are being considered. The String story continues...